FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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1. This is an interview with Mr. and Mrs. Charles Niska. They reside at 106 South Iroquois Street in Laurium. This is conducted in his home and the interviewer is Anderson.

Well Charlie to get the interview started let's get a little bit of background information. What year were you born?

1896 I'm sorry 1894.

Where were you born?

In Swedetown.

Mrs. Niska where and when were you born?

1896 in Calumet

So you lived here all your lives then?

Yes. With the exception of the time I was in the service

Which war was that?

First World War.

Were your parents born here?

No.

Where was your father born?

My father was born on the border of Finland and Sweden.

Near Finland and Sweden. Up near _______________ that's up near the border.

Yes

Do you know what year they came to this country?

That I don't know

Do you have any idea why they left Finland to come to this country?

Well there was work here and out there, there wasn't work

Basically for work.

Yes.

Mrs. Niska were your parents born here?

My father was born in Finland and my mother was born here.
I: Do you know why your father came here too?
R: To seek employment.
I: The same reason then.
R: Yes
I: Do you know what area of Finland he was from?
R: I don't remember all those things.
I: It's funny because one of the common stories is the reason the Finnish people came up here is because it looked so much like Finland.
R: Yes.
I: But I don't think that's true. It may look like Finland but I think mostly the reason they came up here is because this is where the jobs were.
R: That's the real reason they came up here.
I: It wasn't just because the country looked so much like Finland. I think people here were working and they wrote back and told the others that there's a lot of work here.
R: There was a lot of mining here and that's all they could do because they couldn't speak English so that's all the kind of job they could do.
I: Okay Charlie where did you go to school.
R: I went to school right here and now that's school is torn down and then I went to the Kearsarge school.
I: They must have had quite a few schools up here?
R: Oh yes. There have been many schools that have been torn down.
I: I suppose all those schools had quite a few kids.
R: Oh yes.
I: Okay where did you go to school?
R: In the Calumet School.
I: Right through the school system? Through Washington.
R: Yes. There was a Grand School in Yellow Jacket just across the road from my home and that's torn down too.
I: Do you think mining will ever come back up here?
R: Well it will in Keweenaw.
I: Do you really think so?
R: Well I think so because they have been drilling out there and they have found copper.
I: Well that new outfit up there called Homestake has been going down.
R: Yes
I: Do you ever think it will be booming again like it was before?
R: I doubt it.
I: When did you start to work then? How old were you when you start to work?
R: Oh, I don't know, about fourteen years old
I: Who did you work for?
R: I started working first on Pine Street at a store, called Piikarainen.
I: I never heard of that one, what kind of a store was that?
R: Then they moved to Fifth Street and closed up then I worked at the store in Laurium on Tamarack Street.
I: Was it a big store, or what kind of a store was it.
R: Grocery, meats, paints and hardware stuff. It was a good sized store. They had four guys delivering with horses.
I: Did they use the horses in winter and summer?
R: Winter and summer
I: What kind of work were you doing?
R: I worked delivering and then I started working in the store. I was cutting meat and then finally when the boss died, I took over the management.
I: Did the store go out of business, it's not there now is it?
R: No. I don't remember.
I: Well it's been quite a while hasn't it?
Oh yes

What was it like delivering groceries in those days?

Hard work. Yes, we had a horse with a frame and I used to go on the last street in new Rambultown, there's four houses there. I would go to every one of them. When I got to the last house and got the groceries off the horse would turn around and go back down the street I'd cut through the next yard there.

And meet him over there.

He was really well trained.

Oh yes.

How many customers did you have to deliver to?

128 customers.

In how long?

Every day. Well I delivered every second day and then I had a lad delivering with me.

What did these people do order from you ahead of time?

They would order from me and we would deliver the next day.

So you had to stop at their house every time to see if they wanted anything?

Yes.

What was a typical order? Were they big orders of groceries or just a few things?

Well what they needed and then after they paid their bill then a big order.

Was it a charge?

They'd have to pay every month?

Did you have to deliver a lot of cattle feed?

Oh yes.
Well they had quite a bunch of cows up that way too.

Everybody had to raise their own them times.

Yes. About a week before Christmas they had an apple sake and I delivered 28 barells of apples in one day.

In one day?

Yes, of course I had help. We had a hay cart that we put them on.

Youmean you just had the barells and put them on the cart?

Yes.

Did you ever have any interesting things happen to you when you were delivering?

I can't remember.

Any funny things?

It was a long time ago so I can't remember.

I suppose basically they were all people working in the mines?

Ya, prettynear all of them.

Were there different sections, like some sections Italian, some Finnish and other's?

Ya, they were apart like that.

They weren't all just mixed up?

Well in new Rambultown they were mostly Finns but in old Rambultown they were all mixed up. I had to laugh one lady gave me an order and she couldn't talk too well. She wanted three pigs or pork so she grunted three times.

I suppose it was quite a problem to have people who didn't speak English. Could you speak Finnish?

I couldn't hardly speak English.

You couldn't.

No.

Didn't you learn it in school.

No, I just picked it up here and there.

Well what about the other people like the Italians for instance how did you get their orders?
Wellmost of them could speak English.
I I suppose there were alot of boarding houses around here then.
R There were some
They must have had big orders.
R Yes. Can't make out rest.

I I suppose lots of those people didn't trust bank then.
R I guess not.
I They would take and hide their money somewhere. I know this is true
when the Depression was on, they would take and hide their money
someplace. Alot of people after the Depression wouldn't trust a
bank at all, they just kept their money at home. How long did you
deliver Charlie, quite a few years?
R Yes. Oh maybe four or five years
I You worked at the store all those years?
R Ya, till they closed up and then I went to work at the Quality.
I When did you retire?

R
I Well you should know the merchandising business pretty well then.
R Oh yes.
I What was it like around Calumet in those early years?
R Well when you'd walk on some of those streets there were no cars in
those days, only street cars.
I Were the Calumet streets and Laurium streets paved?
R Well some of them were paved but some of them had brick.
I I think Mrs. Isola was telling me thatone street in Calumet was
paved with wooden blocks.
R Ya, I think there was.
I don't know whether it was ________ or Sixth Street or one of them over there.

R I think it was Eighth Street

I It had wooden blocks for paving over there

Boy if you went sliding on that you'd end up with a bunch of splinters. That's for sure.

How did the different nationalities get along together?

R They get along.

I There was no fighting.

R Not that I know of

I I suppose once in a while they would get drunk at a dance or something?

R Oh ya

As far as I was concerned all the nationalities got along pretty well.

I How about during the Depression Days what happened to your grocery business then? Back in the thirties when the Depression hit.

R We kept delivering to everybody.

I People eventually recovered and paid their bills.

R Oh ya

I What did they order when they gave their orders. They didn't have the selection that you have today did they?

R Oh no. Well especially can goods and sugar, rice, beans, and things like that. We had to bag them in the store, the would come into the store loose.

I Were they dry, like dried peas and beans?

R

I How about bread, did people make their own?

R They mostly made their own but there was a baker shop on Pine Street.

I What did they basically do for entertainment then?
There were a few movie houses, the People's Theater in Laurium and the Calumet Theater in Calumet.

Well the Calumet Theater had some pretty big stars come up here I
You bet. We used to go to almost every one when they had plays.
Did they have alot of picnics and things in the summertime?
Some, but not lots.
I know we'd go down to the lakeshore maybe once a summer
It must have been a tedious ride just to get there.
Oh yes
I guess the streetcar went as far as Mowhawk that way and then down to Hancock and Houghton in the other direction.
Yes. It went to Lake Linden also.
Did it go down the steep hill also?
It followed the railroad tracks.
Where the Keweenaw Central was?
No,
I don't know exactly where it was.
The end of the line was in Lake Linden. Then of course Hancock and Houghton was on a different line.
Did the streetcars run very often?
I don't know. I think years back they ran oftener
How much did they charge?
They didn't charge too much.
I think it was ten cents wasn't it?
How did the big strike of 1913 affect the businesses up here?
It affected it some.
Did business tend to taper off after the strike, did people leave this area?
There were quite a few that moved out of town.

Oh, there were some of course, sure. But when the mines opened up some of them came back.

Some of them went down to work for Ford in Detroit because they heard Ford was paying big money, well big money at the time.

Yes.

It was big money from what they were getting up here. The wages were lot different in those days than what they are today.

Oh yes

What did you start working for, I'll betcha not very much

Well I'll tell you first of all I started working for $15.00 a month.

That's hard to imagine isn't it?

Ya.

You must have belonged to the church then about the time it got started right?

My parents did.

Oh you're parents did.

Yes. Then ever since we've been married we've been attending church. I don't think I've missed very many Sundays.

Was it always called the Finnish Church?

Yes.

Did it have a very large congregation?

Yes, I think at first it was kind of large.

I went Sunday school there and that was a long time ago.

I imagine it was. How did they get all those people in there, that's not a very large church.

I don't know, but they got them in there.

They must have packed them in there.

They got them in there.

I think lot of the people's activities kind of centered around the church at that time too, more so than today.
R Right
I So you were both members way back then.
R Oh yes, and then if they didn't like certain ministers, they drifted away and then they would come back again. So on and off again they were steady members.
I Do you remember who some of the early ministers were?
R There was Reverend _________________________________
I Were the services in Finnish or English?
R Both.
I Both.
R At first it was all Finnish.
I Then as the second generation and third generation came in, they changed Ya.
R Ya.
I Remember when we were doing that Constitution, the first paragraph of the constitution said that in order to be a member of the church you had to speak Finnish.
R Ya.
I Do you remember that, that was a couple years ago, when we changed it.
R Oh.
I I wondered what I was doing there. I couldn't speak Finnish. I forget what else it had in there that you had to be to be a member. I think you had to pay so much a week. Fifty cents a week had to be paid I think. Well you've seen a big change in the church then too over the years.
R Yes, I guess so. Well they had those conventions too, that was a big time, serving those big meals.
I When did they hold those?
R Which was the last one, I think when the Niemi's were here.
R Ya.
I When was that?
R I think in the 1950's
What were these conventions like?

Well different congregations would come here. Different ministers too and there were quite a few that attended. We had services and then they had their meetings.

Where were these different congregations from.

I guess some were from Ishpeming and Negaunee.

There was some from Ontonagon. __________washere first.

I think he was around the Covington area for a while too wasn't he?

Did the church belong to the Synod?

That was the Missouri Synod at that time?

No, it wasn't the Missouri Synod. I don't remember. Our memories are kind of slow.

Well when they split off from the Synod, that was the Missouri Synod that they split off from wasn't it? The last one.

Maybe it was.

I don't know too much about it.

Maybe it was the Wisconsin Synod.

Was it the Wisconsin Synod?

I think it might have been. I can't be sure.

I know, I don't know either, I never paid that much attention to it. What would you say if the big difference in the church now and way back when you were a young man?

Well there is a big change now that's it's only English only. That makes a big difference. Lot of our Finnish people haven't kept up their Finnish language.

Why do you think this happened?

I don't know.

Do you think the schools should have concentrated more on this?
I think you're right for people to have a tendency to want to get away from their background.

R That's right.

I How about your children, do they speak Finnish?

R No. I think it's the parent's fault not to teach the kids Finnish. Like neither of us two, we couldn't talk English when we went to school just Finnish. So I'm so glad that we could talk and get along with the Finnish people. I'm a slow reader and that but at least I can do.

I You can at least understand it and do it.

R Right.

I I wonder why this happens, the parents talk a language and then the children don't learn. It would be a good opportunity for them and it sure would be easy for them.

R Yes.

I I think this is true of most families up here, they just don't keep it up.

R They only think of keeping on the English language.

I Their Finnish is being lost.

R My wife is the same way now, she speaks it and reads it. She has trouble with it because she hasn't had that much use of it, but she can do it. Yet our kids only know about two words.

R Yes and no and that's it.

I That's right.

R What nationality are you?

I Me?

R Yes

I I'm a French Indian. I'm no Scandanavian at all.

R We always say we're part Eskimo.

I Ya up around ___________you're getting pretty close to that Arctic Circle up there.
I drove through that area when I was over there. This is one of the things we've been trying to find on this project, how much of the Finnish culture is being handed down and why some of it is being lost.

R I think it's in every nationality, I think the Norwegians, Sweds, and all nationalities it's being lost.