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

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I: Your name is Nick Popovich, right?

R: Yeah, Nicce...in Europe difference

I: In Europe it was different. What was it in Europe then?

R: Nicce...

I: Nicce...you were Nicce Popovich, I see. And where did you come from? You said you came from Croatia?

R:

I: Which is in Yugoslavia

R:

I: Um huh, do you call yourself a Yugoslavian or a Croatian?

R: Yugoslavian.

I: You call yourself a Yugoslavian, um huh. When did you come here to the United States?

R: Oh, 19...1902.

I: 1918?

R: Yeah, I see.

I: I see. How come you came here?

R: No, not 1918...1902.

I: Oh 1902, I see. I see, why did you come here?

R: Do mine work.

I: To work in the mine, I see.

R: I get away so they wouldn’t get me in the Army.
I: You didn't care to go in the Army, I see. What kind of home did you come from in Yugoslavia? That is to say, were your people, your father and mother, were they farmers?

R: They was farmers.

I: I see, had a small farm?

R: Yeah.

I: Were they poor?

R: You betcha we was.

I: Really poor, un huh.

R: Yeah.

I: I see.

R: Doesn't produce enough for yourself throughout the years.

I: Is that right.

R: Yeah. Had to buy some more.

I: They actually had to buy more food

R: Yeah, you bet.

I: They didn't... did they move to this country or did you just move to this country?

R: Only one came in this country. My mother my father, my sisters, my brothers, everyone different.

I: I see, did you come to Ely?

R: I come in to Ely.

I: How come you came to Ely?

R: Live here my uncle.

I: Your uncle lived here?

R: Yeah.

I: Oh, I see.

R: But he was here working but then after he went home.

I: He went home, I see, and you stayed.

R: Yeah, I stayed.
I: Did you ever go back to Yugoslavia?
R: 
I: You've never been back there.
R: No.
I: I take it you consider yourself an American now.
R: Yeah
I: I see, really an American now. Do you speak Creation?
R: Well yeah.
I: Do you use it a lot yet even?
R: Only sometimes I speak Creation and Slavanian too.
I: Slavanian too, um huh.
R: 
I: When you mean Slavania, you mean these are people that came from where?
R: Slavania and Creation is different kind of language between them.
I: I see, um huh.
R: Creations are around (?) and Slavarians are (?)
I: Un huh, and these are entirely different peoples then, I mean. In other words, you make a distinction between a Creation and a Slavarian.
R: Yeah.
I: They're not the same kind of people. They're very different peoples
R: Yeah, difference there.
I: Were there Czecheslovakians in Ely?
R: Well, there's a difference again
I: Yeah, that's a different group entirely again and then there were quite a few Austrians up here in Ely too.
R: But they're all Slavik people here
I: They're all Slavik peoples, yeah...speak Slavik languages.
R: Yeah, they're all the same but yet they're different
I: Yeah. Did you then start to work in the mine? What mine did you work in?
R: I work in Twin Cities Mine, Savey Mine.
I: Where was that? The Savey has been closed many years, hasn't it?
R: Yeah.
I: After you worked in the Savey mine, where did you work?
R: Then I worked in the Sibley
I: In the Sibley, un huh.
R: That's along side it.
I: That's right next to it, un huh. When the Sibley closed down, where did you go?
R: I didn't work Sibley very long. I work there couple of years then I quit there and went Pioneer Mine.
I: Then to the Pioneer Mine, un huh, that was a different company then.
R: Oliver.
I: That was Oliver, yeah. What did you do in the mine? Were you a trammer or a...
R: Miner
I: You were a regular miner. Where.
R: Yeah.
I: Were you on contract?
R: Yeah.
I: I see. What was work like? Was it difficult work?
R: It is work all kinds down in the mine. Some of the miners they made the dirt and blast and other come and two or three men shovel up.
I: Shovelers, yeah
R: And then take it in and put the timber.
I: Yeah, those were the timberers then, yeah.
R: Yeah, they call them timbermen.
I: Yeah, it was real difficult work though. It was real hard work. terribly hard work.
R: Yeah, un huh.
I: Did you buy his books?
R: Yeah, I bought what was fifteen cents those days.
I: I see, yeah oh yeah. Did you learn to read Croatian then also?
R: I read the Croatian first.
I: I see, and then English.
R: And then English.
I: I see, un huh.
R: Croatian and Slavonian same time.
I: Un huh. Did you want your children to go on to school then? I suppose you decided it was important for them to go to school because you didn't have any.
R: Want children go everyone in the school.
I: They went through the (?) system? (Ely Public School System)
R: Right.
I: They go through Junior College too?
R: Yes, Junior College then State... two girls and one boy.
I: I see, un huh
R: ...two boys.
I: Un huh, two boys.
R: Two boys go college. There's another boy too but he passed before he make it. When he was eighteen he die... have appendix. Those days doctors don't understand much.
I: What was he sick... appendix?
R: Yeah, appendix. He goes to doctor says, "Hurts me here" and I say go quick to doctor. Doctor give him something I think for stomach.
I: Yeah, and he died. That's terrible. Of course, I've heard about doctors... they started learning about it then, appendicitis, but they didn't know how to do the operation. Lot of people died because of that even.
R: Yeah.
I: That was way way... how old did you say... eighteen?
R: Eighteen, yeah.
I: Oh boy, that was a terrible less. A real tragic less for you.
R: Un hum.
I: What newspapers did you read? Did you read Croatian newspapers then?
R: I do.
I: Un huh, what newspapers did you read?
R: I read most whatchacallem... (?) mostly
I: And what was that, a church newspaper or was it... or what kind of a newspaper was it? Just a general newspaper.
R: Yeah
I: I see. They still publish that newspaper.
R: Yeah
I: Where is that published?
R: Pittsburgh
I: Pittsburgh, I see. There's a lot of Croatians in Pittsburgh.
R: It's older too... it's older there.
I: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, so there's a lot of the elder Croatians still alive in this country...
R: Oh sure.
I: First generation.
R: Quite a few yet.
I: Did you teach your children how to speak Croatian?
R: I do but they didn't want.
I: They didn't want to speak it, huh?
R: They hated language.
I: They hated it.
R: Oh! (Chuckle)
I: They just wanted to speak English.
R: Yeah, un huh.
I: Is that right! That's very very interesting.
R: Now when they grown up and got their own child...
I: Now the children want to learn.
R: Each children learn, father-mother doesn't know.
I: Is that right?
R: Yeah

Unable to understand.

I: That's with the Finn kids, the same thing happened. You know, the grandparents spoke Finnish and the parents never spoke any Finnish at home and so the kids didn't learn it. Now the kids in the third generation want to learn it and they study it at the University and this sort of thing.

R: Yeah.
I: That's kind of a strange thing that happened, wasn't it, yeah. What were working conditions like in the mines when you first came here? Were the wages pretty low in the Ely mines?

R: Yeah, was a dollar eighty cents.
I: Dollar eighty cents.
R: Un huh.

Break in tape.

I: You work for a dollar eighty a day in the mine. Were you able to live on that?
R: Those days easy. Those days make a money.
I: Yeah, in those days that was pretty good money then, is that right?
R: Yeah...sure, pound and a half pork chop was fourteen cents
I: Yeah sure, that's right.
R: Beef was eight and nine cents
I: Yeah, that's right. How many hours a day did you work?
R: Twelve.
I: You worked twelve hours a day?
R: Twelve...every day, twelve hours.
I: And how many days a week?
Six week asked Saturday too
Oh yeah
that terr yong week
Saturday work was six hour
Six hour Thursday
Yeah
That terr bl yong week though wasn't
Yeah yeah
must gotten awful tir working twelve hour day though
day was like that though
Yeah now back those days well for example 1906 907 you
el ed the strike when they had the big strike here
strike 905 906 the strike
05 06 that strike though
You 't that strike How about the 91 strike
went work for mine her and went home know
see how about 91 Da strike
No they didn get strike
There wasn't strike here 91 huh you ever join the
for the Western Federation of Miners these two unions did you join
either of them
had join but not then
joined the union later then he 940 when unions
came
That right
But didn join the union back 91 91
No bother than anything
I: Were there other miners who became Socialists and joined Socialists unions up here in Ely?

R: Nobody was far as I understand that time. Nobody was in union then

I: Nobody was in the union at that time.

R: No, but around '05 and '06 they talk around here about join the unions, join the unions, so that make the union come. Then is two union local and they're still separated and secretive.

I: I see.

R: And so secretive and they get some workers and these workers gonna explain the union boss...quit the local and go with the local and they just stir up the company.

I: I see.

R: And the company want it to go.

I: What was life like in Ely during the Depression? Did you have a job during the Depression?

R: I have a job.

I: You had a steady job then

R: I was for contractor then and I go where need for contractor.

I: What do you mean, a building contractor or what?

R: In the gravel pit

I: Oh, I see, so that's where you worked during the Depression then.

R: Yeah.

I: You weren't in the mines at the time.

R: Yeah, not in mine.

I: I see, you had enough money then during the Depression.

R: Oh yeah.

I: Were a lot of people out of work in Ely during the Depression?

R: Oh sure, everybody.

I: Everybody, yeah, un huh.

R: I don't know how they get along...get by.
I: Un huh, I see. Were ever active in politics?
R: No, I didn't
I: You never were active in politics. You're an American citizen though, aren't you?
R: Oh yeah.
I: Yeah, you voted and all that sort of thing.
R: Yeah.
I: Did your sons ever become interested in politics?
R: 
I: There are a lot of the Slavanians and Croatians did become interested in politics though.
R: Yeah.
I: For example, well, Blettinik is Slavanian and Purpich's out in Hibbing are very interested. my daughter
R: Blettinik and / / were together in school.
I: There were together in school...is that right!
R: St. Paul
I: Un huh, down in St. Paul, I see.
R: My daughter goes for teacher and also Blettinik took a teacher
I: I see, at the University.
R: Oh yeah.
I: I see.
R: University...was a teacher for awhile St. Louis.
I: St. Louis County School System?
R: Yeah. Then he go for office what they get there and he hate it
I: Un huh, yeah
R: Good politic man...he's a good politic for his own self.
I: Who, Bettinik you mean
R: Yeah.
I: I suppose so, yeah, I suppose so.

R: Yeah, Blettimik is a good political man.

I: Tell me, did all of the nationalities in Ely get along? Did you get along with Finlanders? Did you have a lot of good Finlander friends?

R: And Italian, all kinds friends...French, German, all kinds people Slavanian, all kinds...we were together like one.

I: You were altogether like one.

R: Un huh.

I: You had to work together, I suppose, and for that reason you had to stick together and be friends.

Yeah.

I: Lot of Slavians, I know, used to marry Finn gals too...there were a lot of intermarriages and so on.

R: Yeah.

I: But how did you feel about intermarriage? Did you think it was a good thing that Slavians married Finns because of religion or...

Why not?

I: Why not, un huh. Yeah, of course, your daughter...no, your grand-daughter married a Finlander, so I suppose mixed marriage are very very common thing then, wasn't it.

That's right.

Un huh, did the churches get along in this community pretty well?

Church people pretty good. They go and visit other ones.

I see, so there were no big fights them in the churches.

R: No.

I: Did all the Slavonian groups get along with each other?

R: Yeah...belonged to what's called...sometimes when I was in the church, here is the Priest...minister hollering, you know, "Don't go so far. Is so far now we keep on to get in first in our church."

I: Yeah.

R: Make 'em understand what we get and this is before...cannot understand.

I: Yeah, I suppose.

R: People's self that smart, you know.
I: Sure. What organizations did you belong to? You belonged to the church, St. Anthony's Catholic Church?

R: Yeah

I: I see. You were a good Catholic then.

R: Oh yeah.

I: You belonged to the church then, St. Anthony's Catholic Church.

R: Yeah

I: Did you ever belong to the Socialists Society?

R:

I: You never belonged to that.

R: No

I: Were there a lot of Croatians and Yugoslavians that were Socialists?

R: Well the Yugoslavians weren't much.

I: They weren't strong Socialists here in Ely.

R: No

I: They were in other communities though, weren't they?

R: Maybe

I: But not up here, um huh. What other organizations did you belong to? Did you go to the Yugoslav National Hall?

R: Oh yeah.

What is the Yugoslav National Hall? You know that building they have in Ely...what is that to...

R: That is just to meet, have a meeting in own building and look where we gonna have a meeting next month.

see, it's kind of a meeting building then.

R: Yeah.

I: For all the Yugoslavians in Ely.

R: That's it

I: I see. Did the Yugoslavians have their own Insurance Company too?
Rhythm

A.

What part of your body

is

most

energetic

in the

morning?

My

right

hand.

Do you

feel

energetic in the

morning?

Yes.

What

is

your

favorite

food?

Sushi.

Do you

eat

a lot of

sushi?

Yes.

What

is

your

favorite

color?

Blue.

What

is

your

favorite

movie?

The Shawshank Redemption.

Do you

like

this

movie?

Yes.

What

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Sushi.

What

is

your

favorite

color?
R: Was company doctor. Whoever worked for company, they took dollar a month.

I: They took a dollar a month
R: That was for doctor.
I: That was for the doctor, I see.
R: Un hum.
I: And then you got free medical care for that?
R: You get everything free.
I: Is that right?
R: Yeah
I: So it was kind of a company policy
R: Yeah, company policy.
I: Did you have to pay for the hospital?
R: You didn't have to pay for the hospital even.
R: Nothing.
I: So that is in a way, the company...
R: Little bit...you pay small part for operations such as like that. And you pay little bit. I know, I was for my self for appendix in 1912.
I: 1912, huh.
R: In 1912...
I: I see.
R: And these days all/the work-I was staying three months in hospital... for appendix, yeah.
I: That's a long time for an appendix.
R: And now nothing.
I: Now it's a week...ne, three or five days re something...three to five days.

R: Yeah, those days never heard of such a thing. Yeah, my son went to doctor and doctor never did nothing. Gave him something, you know,
for appendix, you know, thought he was sick in the stomach...something else in the stomach. He went like that for a week and then after that he die.

I: When the big strikes took place here, did you ever get strike benefits? When you joined the union, did you ever get strike benefits?

R: 

I: You never get any strike benefits, I see

R: Nothing.

I: I see. What about how were babies born here in Ely? Were they born at home? Among the Yugoslavians...

R: Mostly home.

I: Mostly home...did the Yugoslavians have a mid-wife?

R: There was one, she was a nurse in Europe coming here and...

I: And she became a mid-wife here in this country.

R: Yeah.

I: And she came to the homes and brought the babies into the world.

R: Yeah.

I: How many...did the Yugoslavians have large families in this country then?

R: Oh yeah

I: How many children did you have?

R: I have born eight.

I: You have eight children in your family.

Yeah.

I: I see. Why was it...because you weren't supposed to use birth control or what?

R: I don't know. (Laughter)

I: Just like to have large families, huh. Yeah, I see. Did you ever develop any illnesses because you worked in the mine? Did you ever get silicosis or anything like that?

R: 

I: Un huh, a lot of the men did though, didn't they.
R: Yeah.
I: ...back in those early days they'd get lung disease.
R: Yeah.
I: Lot of them would die...die from it and so on.
R: The smoke and dust...lot of that smoke coming out of there
I: Yeah, they'd breathe that stuff in all right, yeah. I guess what they started to do after awhile them is they used te dampen the mines down, didn't they. They used...
R: Yeah...now they get everything right there. Soon as you start, water is right there. One holds water the other holds air.
I: Yeah, so that you don't get any dust at all.
R: Yeah, no dust.
I: Tell me something about St. Anthony's Church here in Ely. All of the different nationality groups belong to that one church didn't they.
R: Yeah
I: They didn't...you knew like some of the communities had like a French church and they had an Italian Catholic Church; but here in Ely they all were...
R: Altogether
I: All together...what was the Priest now? Fr...was it Fr. Booh?
R: Fr. Booh
I: Was he Slavanian or what?
R: He's Slavanian
I: He was, I understand, a very wonderful person.
R: Yeah.
I: The Finlanders even used to like Fr. Booh. They used to call him St. Nicholas because he had a white beard and he'd walk down the street and he'd come to the hospital and he'd come and say hello to all the Finlanders even. Fr. Mohelick was kind of nice too, I guess.
R: Fr. Mohelick, he wasn't like that
I: He wasn't as nice as Fr. Booh
I: What was Fr. Mehelick like then?
R: He was an own self man. He don't like nobody
I: Is that right?
R: Yeah.
I: He was kind of crotchety then.
R: He was awful cross, that fellow.
I: Didn't the people like Fr. Mehelick too much?
R: We don't like it, but in church then nobody want to start. They want to get rid him, but no one want to be first to start.
I: It's kind of hard to get rid of a priest anyway, isn't it?
R: Yeah
I: He was here many many years, wasn't he.
R: He was fifty years
I: Fifty years.
R: Yeah
I: For heavens sakes! Did he die here in Ely then or what?
R: No...Fr. Mehelick?
I: Fr. Mehelick, yeah
R: He's alive here yet.
I: He lives here yet.
R: Un hum.
I: But he's retired now.
R: Oh yeah.
I: Did Fr. Mehelick ever visit homes or anything like that? Or did He just stick to saying Mass and...
R: He went a couple of times here.
I: But did he visit your homes?
R: Not my home, but his home
I: I mean he went to his own home in Europe, I see. Did Fr. Booh visit homes and come to visit the people in the parish?
R: Oh yeah, Fr. Booh visited everywhere. Any place he wanted to go
I: Is that right?
R: Um huh.
I: Didn't he also have the church in Tower and Sedan for awhile?
R: He went to one in (?) and then one in Tower and then Ely.
I: In fact I think he started out in Tower.
R: Yeah.
I: And then from Tower he moved up here to Ely.
R: Yeah. This is, far as I know, this is two building before the one now.
I: I see, they had two buildings before they have the one now. Where was the first building built? Was it up in the same place up there?
R: Same place as it is
I: Same place as the one they have now.
R: This one
I: Yeah
R: And second one was
I: On the other side.
R: Yeah
I: It was a big big building, wasn't it? And it was a wooden building
R: Oh yeah, wooden building.
I: Yeah.
R: Was where parking place is now.
I: Yeah, that's right.
R: And the other side where is now church building was a ministers house and the church.
I: Yeah, um hum, I see.
I: Did the Catholics in Ely get along pretty well with the Protestants?
R: Catholics get along with anyone.
I: The Catholics get along with everybody here.
R: Yeah.
I: So there wasn't any...
R: No
I: ...of this religious intolerance here.
R:
I: But they allowed mixed marriages too then apparently
R: Yeah, they did.
I: Did the mining company give money to the church? Do you know?
R: I can't say nothing.
I: Oh, you don't know about that, un huh, yeah. What do you think about all the changes that are taking place in the Catholic Church today? Do you think they are good changes? You know, the Mass is now in English...you think that's a good idea?
R: Was Mass in English all this time so much; so much in Slav, so much in English all the time since I remember.
I: You mean, they used to actually have some of the Mass in Slav here in Ely?
R: Oh yeah.
I: What did they have, a sermon in Slav?
R: Yeah
I: Which of the Slavic languages was the sermon in then?
R: Slavonian.
I: It was in Slavonian.
R: Yeah.
I: Did you understand it then?
R:
I: Even though you were Creation you still understood Slavonian
R: Yeah, meanings the same.
I: Did the Priest preach every Sunday then.

End of Side A

I: You mean the Priest would also preach in Creation?

R: Oh yeah.

I: So you got English, Slavonian and Croatian on a Sunday morning. Where did the poor Poles go. They didn't understand any of those languages. They just came there and had to listen to all of it then I suppose.

R: Oh

End of