FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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Henry Snabb
August 7, 1973

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Interviewer: Wallace Anderson

This is an interview with Henry Snabb at his home at 15 Pernell Street on Michigan on the 7th of August, 1973, and the interview was conducted by Wally Anderson.

I: Well, Mr. Snabb, let's get a little of your background first. You were telling me that you were born in Sweden.

R: That's right.
I: What year were you...?

R: Well, I was... I don't know just how old I was... I think maybe two or two and a half year old...

I: When you came here?
R: ... when we came over here.
I: What year were you born?
R: 1906... on Christmas Day 1906.
I: So then you came to this country in 1908 or 1909, something like that.
R: I think so.
I: Did your whole family come over together?
R: No, my dad come here first.
I: Was he here for very long before...
R: No, I can't say... oh maybe a year.
I: Well, one of the things we've been trying to find out is why these people came over here... whether it was conditions in Sweden or was it because they had heard that there were lots of jobs available over here and they could make money. Did he ever tell you?
R: No, I don't believe I ever asked my dad. But I suppose it must have been economic... well like I said, I never did ask him, but I think this is what it is. I can't see anyother reason for them coming, you know.
They figured there was money being made here...I suppose they got letters from people that came before them and said they were making bigger money than they were making over there, so I think this is the reason for all these immigrants or most of them coming here.

I: Yeah, I think so too.

R: You know, financial reasons.

I: You hear a lot of stories among the Finnish people here, you know, that the only reason they came over here was because the Copper Country looked so much like Finland. Well, they're not gonna come over here just because the country looks so much like Finland.

R: Oh no...no...you gotta have a better reason than that...because if it looks the same why come here.

I: Yeah, why move. But if you talk to a lot of these Finnish people, that's why they tell you.

R: Yeah...looks to me/that doesn't make much sense.

I: Not to me either.

R: If I figure the place looks the same, I'm gonna stay there because there's no change there. No, I think it's because of the money made here. I suppose there was a little more money made here than in the old country.

I: Yeah, I think maybe one or two people came and the letters started to go back to the old country.

R: That's what I say, I suppose they wrote letters back and said they were doing pretty well.

I: What kind of work had your father been doing?

R: He mined...was a miner for most of his life

He hadn't been mining in Sweden, had he?

R: No, I think the family owned some pine forests there and I think they made pine tar. In fact, some of this land was owned by myself and my brother for many years...it was left to us and of course I never figured on going back there and neither did my brother so we turned it over to our relatives out there because I signed for the thing and my brother signed. So, they were in the tar business...making tar because they owned quite a bit of forest land, pine.

I: You know it must have been kind of strange for him to come over like this and then get into an entirely different kind of work like mining or something like that.

R: Of course, it doesn't take too long to adapt to mining. It's...I
know when I went on machine...I never run machine...all they done they give me a machine but I've seen how it was done and, you know, in a couple of weeks you're able to mine. You're not as good a miner as somebody who mined for five or ten years, but you catch on to mining quick...it's not a very complicated job. Just use your head a little bit.

I: Well, I think perhaps for somebody like me who's never been down there in a mine or anything, you get kind of a wrong picture of what it's like. Well, did the family then come directly here to Ahmeek?

R: No, to Wolverine.

I: Wolverine...right up to the Copper Country

R: Oh sure, right to the Copper Country.

I: And then did you go through the local schools here?

R: Yeah...I started school right in Ahmeek.

I: In Ahmeek itself. And when did you first start to work?

R: Well, I went to high school...I went to high school three years, I never finished the four years...must have been about eighteen years old when I started working in the mines and this was in the Seneca Mine.

I: Seneca...and what kind of work were you doing?

R: I was motor boy

I: Motor boy?

R: Yeah, was running motor

I: What did you do in that job?

R: Well, you had to haul out the dirt from the drift...drift miners would do the mining, jammers would fill the cars and I would haul them out an dump them and then bring the empties back.

I: Did you have to push them out by hand?

R: Oh no...motor. They had a motor on the car.

Stop in tape.

I: Well, when you came over you naturally spoke Swedish and that, was there any formal chance to speak English or did you just have to learn it as you could? When you went to school...had you learned English by the time you went to school?

R: Oh yes...I couldn't speak it fluently, but you know, I got it from
the kids, from the other kids... I was two and a half years old... even if you were born here you're not speaking the English language then too well.

your folks speak Swedish in the home?

R: Ah...some...not.

I: Or had they already learned and picked up English?

R: Oh yes...you had to in order to get along. You hadda be able to speak some. Of course they like I say never learned to speak it fluently, but enough to get along with.

I: Then they passed the Swedish language down then among the children. Do you still speak Swedish?

R: No...oh I could say a couple of words, but both my mother and dad spoke Swedish and Finnish.

I: Finnish and Swedish, huh?

R: 

I: You know, it's too bad really that the children of these people have lost this.

R: Yeah, it's benice to know how to speak many different languages. Like my son, I think he speaks six or seven different languages...my oldest boy.

I: Did he learn them in school?

Yeah, he was in the Air Corps and he learned them while he was in the Air Force...and he picked up languages.

I: What kind of a job did he have in the Air Force?

R: I really don't know. He used to fly...he went...he was over in Europe and they used to fly around the borders of the countries out there; but he was an interpreter in the Air Force.

I: I retired from the Air Force.

did?

I: Yeah...twenty years.

Yeah, he went to school while he was in the Air Force...he was in there five years and he took up languages; but then he came back here and he went to Michigan State and that's where he got his sheepskin.

I: Well, when you were growing up...you know you talked on the telephone the other night, you were in that Italian Hall during the Italian
Hall disaster. Maybe we can get into a little of that before we get into where you were working and the rest of it. How much of it really do you recall?

R: Well, I was seven years old the day after...I was born on Christmas Day and this was Christmas Eve...and I recall quite a bit of it, you know afterwards. There might be a little foggy in my memory of the total thing, you know, but I remember quite a bit of it, what took place there.

I: Something like that's bound to make a, you know, a lasting impression on you.

R: Oh yeah...yeah...I very seldom think of it. You know, I've been interviewed several times on it; and I don't think of it daily or even yearly, you know, but when ever anybody mentions it, it comes back to me. Yeah, my cousin and I, my dad took us there...this was on Christmas Eve, of course everybody knows this; and I remember quite a bit as to what took place there.

I: Well, what do you actually recall as to what took place? Did you tell me that you were in the back of the Hall playing?

R: Well yeah, my cousin and myself we were in the far end of the hall and of course the staircase where all this then took place was on the far end and lucky it was because I'm sure that if we were any where near the stairs when whoever done it hollered fire and we would have been down there for sure because a kid will panic...they would be the first to panic. But us being on the far end and of course there were some other kids there too, not just my cousin and myself...and for quite some time I didn't know what was taking place. People running around and you know, just didn't know what was happening. I do remember somebody on the stage trying to quiet the crowd down, you know, that there's nothing wrong, you know, trying to get them from panicing. But we started to run, my cousin and I, but my dad got a hold of us...both of us. Of course my dad wasn't as excitable as we'd be...or a kid would be...so he held us back; but we were on the stairway where all this was taking place and the screaming and hollering of course everybody heard this. But I think we were on the third step down...was either the second or the third step on the stairway where all this was taking place. But then they finally got the thing quieted down...we stayed there for some time. I had one of these mesh stockings...we had some candy and fruit...all the kids got one and I hung onto this and I still had this when I come home. I had this stocking of candy and fruit that were in it. We stayed there for some time after and I remember people laying around that they had hauled up from the bottom of the stairs...a lot of them dead I suppose and a lot of them just passed out and lot of people were working on them. I remember it pretty well. You know, when you're seven years old you're already beginning to realize things...so I remember quite a bit about it.

I: There's sure a lot of controversy about it isn't there? About somebody hollering fire and who.

R: Oh yeah...of course this controversy is still in effect today. I don't
know if they ever really did find out who hollered fire although there's been names mentioned, people mentioned; but I don't know if anybody knows for sure who done the hollering.

I: Well, at this late date there's no way to even prove it either.

R: No, I think the only one that knows is the man that done it and, you know, I don't imagine he's living anymore; of course there might have more than one in it...maybe a couple of people; but it's never come out as to who may have done it as far as I know; although I think they've had some suspicions of some people...but of course there was never anybody brought to trial. But for most people, I guess it'll always be a mystery as to who and why it was done. I just can't understand any man doing something like this.

I: No, that's what makes it so strange.

R: That's right.

I: Try to think of something who would do something like this to a bunch of kids.

R: That's right...the reason for it. Or if the man was full of booze or something like this. He hadda be a nut anyway...I don't think any sane person would have done something like this regardless of what the reasons are.

I: No...you can understand like when men are on opposite sides and get angry and the shootings and things that took place between men, but for somebody like this with a group of children.

R: Well, it's hard to understand why man shoots man. This never did make any sense and it never will. Why the Koreas...why Viet Nam...this I could never understand and to me it doesn't make any sense for one man to shoot another man.

I: Yeah, but they've been doing it forever.

R: Yeah, they've been doing it...I guess since time began; but you'd think by now that man would be civilized enough to figure there another way.

I: No, civilization's a little thin, I think. It doesn't take much to scrape it off and get down to...

R: This is right...yeah I think man reverts back to animal. But I can't see any reason to shoot another man unless it's to save your life; you know if he's shooting at you or something, I suppose man will shoot back to same himself. But to fight for territory or kill for something like this, I just don't understand it.

I: This Italian Hall and the strike itself had quite an impact.

R: Oh sure

I: For the whole country up here.
R: For the whole country...the Copper Country it had quite an impact; but later on for a long time I remember there were people that were pretty bitter about the thing, and rightfully so. And the wage in them days were...

I: Not much

R: Terrible wages, working conditions...of course they've come a long way since that because today you have something to say about your working conditions. They're not dictated by one man or the boss can't dictate the conditions and well today, they're pretty descent places to work in. I know all the mines I worked in the conditions were as safe as possible although the pay here hasn't been too good for working underground...of course a few men made money...the miners the trammers, contract miners; but the rest of the men didn't make too much money. And then, there are very little other benefits like pensions, hospitalization and stuff like this.

I: A lot of those early miners they didn't have anything like this.

R: They had nothing

I: You lose a leg and you're out.

R: You're out on your own. If you got killed underground, they tell me way back, that you're on your own. They'd take the body up in the draw and you take them from there. You'd bury them and that was it. There was no compensation at all. So, they have come a long way in this respect that at least today you have pensions, you have hospitalization...so I think the sacrifices the people made years ago have paid off.

I: Yeah, this old fellow I talked to this morning...he said that the wages were forty-eight dollars a month for a timber man and fifty-six or fifty-eight dollars a month for a trammer...trammer is it?

R: Well, there's a trammer and a miner...

I: Miners made sixty-four dollars a month they paid when he was working down there.

R: There was a time when you owed the company money after working a month. This is true. Now, you can ask Patty Jasky about this...his dad and a farmer were mining...they were partners...but them days you had to pay for your collar, you paid for your steel, and you paid for everything. And they figured that if you mined enough copper at the end of the month to pay for all this, you paid. You owed them money. This is true...you ask Patty about this and Patty will tell you.

I: They really had a system, didn't they.

R: They certainly had a system. So, we're a long way from this at least. But this is true and I've heard others say it too where they owed the company money after working a month they owed the company money because for the collar and the steel drills were charged to them.
I: Then I suppose too, they traded at the company stores.

R: Yeah, they traded in the company stores... so the company here they were Gods here at one time, you know, just didn't dare open your mouth, you know, in any protest because you'd just lose your job, this is it. That's one thing you got now, you can protest. You have people behind you, like the unions that I certainly believe in... that I've always believed in... there's good and bad unions too I guess... some are better than others.

I: Oh yeah, you have good and bad people in anything... that's bound to happen no matter what it is.

R: Yeah I believe they're pretty well protected... you've got pretty good hospitalization which is certainly a costly thing if you have to pay the full thing yourself, you know.

I: You just can't afford it.

R: You just can't do it.

I: Yeah, a hundred dollars a day for a room and the rest of it.

R: Like my wife here was in the hospital not too long ago... in a four-bed ward... thirty-eight dollars a day. Now if you didn't have hospitalization, you just can't afford to get into a hospital. But today at least we have this kind of protection... which I've think they've had in the old country for... like in England and Germany...

I: Yeah, Germany I think was the first to start it.

R: Yeah, England too, you know, they buy your glasses I guess, have your teeth fixed and stuff like this in Germany and in England long before we had it. I think this has come about just because of the militancy of people just demanding these things, you know. I think rightfully so because in these mines they made a terrific amount of money at one time... the C & H shares went up to a thousand bucks a share... they certainly were making dough... absentee owners... people from Boston. I was told how they got this mine grant... I can't prove anything so I won't say anything about it... but I believe it how they got these land grants where at one time this whole peninsula belonged to the people of Michigan.

I: Yeah, it would have been just state property.

R: Yeah, and they were given land grants.

I: Yeah, well somewhat like the railroads when they went out west, they were given grants... blocks...

R: Yeah, they were given grants... sometimes miles I guess.

I: Yeah, well every other mile on the railroad... kind of a checkerboard was given to the railroad to sell or anything they could... wanted to (???) the rest of it.
R: Yeah, that's right. It was my belief for a long time that every pound of copper that was taken out of the Copper Country, that some of this should have gone back to the county and state...or the county I'd say like Keweenaw County and Houghton County which should have been paid so much for every pound of copper...royalty or whatever you want to call it and these people should have this kick-back and we'd really have a good county...hospitals, roads and this kind of thing.

I: That's a good point.

R: I talked with some geologists from Michigan Tech out on a safety board...we were drawing up some safety codes and Professor Bean...maybe you know him...he was on the board...he was on the same board, and he told me that there was just a couple...maybe one or two percent of the copper that's been taken out.

I: Hum...do you think that mining will ever come back up here?

R: Well sure, it's coming back now.

I: Well, Homestake is working up there...

R: No, I'm sure that Homestake will find that it's going to be a profitable business...copper mining...because I've seen the copper like in Centennial Mine where they (?) it and where they expect to do some mining...and I'm sure we'll have mining here for many many years to come...maybe a couple of men's lifetimes. Of course, one thing they'll have new methods of mining so they can leave most of the (?) down in the ground. There should be a real good way to mine. I know this when they started (?)...the fellow who's in charge there...I forget his name, but what he wanted to do was sink the shaft as far as the vein goes and then start mining up. Of course this was war time and they said the initial cost of this was too great, you know, before (?) were getting copper; but this way they could leave the core rock...leave most of it and this would be a real safe mine. Just leave the core rock down there...

I: Just fill up their hole right behind them.

R: That's right. This I think is a real good idea in mining. Like the shaft was build during war time and they wanted the copper fast...he couldn't get his way...but he had the right idea. Of course I think I suppose maybe they have other new methods of extracting the ore too; with today's knowhow I guess they can do it.

I: Oh I certainly hope it comes back.

R: It'll come back...there's no question about that, because copper after all...and we have I think the best copper there is any place. And copper is one commodity that we'll always need. So this vein may go all the way to Canada.

End of Side

I: Isn't there some talk about going under the lake too?
That's what I mean...that's what I mean that it might stretch right to Canada.

I don't know if I'd want to go mine there under that lake knowing all that water was up above me.

Oh, if you know you have real good solid rock over your head, it wouldn't scare me one bit. I was never afraid down in the mines because you know the rock there is solid. Of course after blasting you have some loose, but you bar that down. You make the place safe. I never...I don't think I ever had a scratch all the years I worked underground.

many years did you work underground?

R: Oh, in all I worked I'd say, thirty-five years...I think at least thirty-five.

I: And you've done practically all the different...

R: I've done every job down there...all but bossing.

I: All but bossing.

R: I drove mules...

Did they have mules down in the mines?

R: Oh yeah...all these mines had mules.

I: Did they just keep them underground?

R: Yeah, and they'd take them up...I think it was once a month and take them up for awhile and then take 'em back down. And boy some of them were mean and some were pretty nice, you know. I was always a little afraid of a mule because you know you couldn't trust them...they'd bite...they'd kick. Well then, for many years they had mules until they finally got the motor car; and some places they used to push the car and your track was always on a rise so it was built so the car was easy to push out and (???) the car and push in; then two trammers would push the car out.

I: How did the different ethnic groups get along working down there like the Finns and Swedes and Italians?

R: Oh, I've never known of any fights or anything underground. Of course the Englishmen...most of them were bosses...most of the bosses were Englishmen...so you know in the forties we had Finn bosses, Austrian bosses, Italians...of course they were the men that knew something about mining because they had mines in England.

I: Well, do think it was possibly due to the language...the fact that they could speak English and could get along with the big wheels?

R: Yeah...oh sure...the language had a lot to do with it and I think
a little bit...they knew mining, you know...a little better...the job.

I: Did the different ethnic groups tend to do different jobs?

R: No, not really. I guess it was...no, whatever job you were given...no it wasn't...it was all mixed. The English miners, Italian, Finns, Swedes and there was trammers the same thing...mixed in my time anyway. It was mixed...it was no one ethnic group that done thing. You know, you trammer with an Italian or an Englishman or a Finn or a Swede...usually two men trammed together; but there was none of this ethnic thing when I was working anyway...they were all like one.

I: When you think that Finns and Swedes coming from an area that had a lot of forests and stuff and were kind of used to working with wood, you'd think they'd kine of work towards timbering or something like that.

R: No...this wasn't the case. Most of the people that I know of come from...in my time at least...were miners...miners or trammers. Of course this was the hardest kind of work...mining and tramming...because them days you (???)...you fill your car by hand with a shovel. You'd lay down the sawer...what they called the sawer (?) before they'd blast...you'd lay down hardwood planks because it was easy to shovel off and you'd lay them right against the brick and then they'd blast onto this and then you'd shovel this by hand.

I: You got your exercise that day.

R: You bet...this was tough work them days...this was as hard a work as you could find anywhere...this drift tramming; but slope tramming wasn't bad because all you done was open the shute...they used to build a shute and then they had poles and prop the entrance and then all you'd do was lift up the poles and let the dirt go in because maybe you had a forty or fifty degree angle. So slope tramming was a pretty easy job; but drift tramming you really worked because it was...like I say you shoveled by hand, you know you'd fill these cars and you've got a lot of copper in this dirt that was heavy. I done some of this myself and I know what tramming is, especially drift tramming. Slope tramming is pretty nice, but drift tramming is hard work.

I: I can imagine that would really be work

R: You bet. And you worked your eight hours, you know, it took you that long to clean the dirt...and you hadda clean it every day because for the miner that drilled that bottom hole it hadda be clean and then they laid their sawer after you cleaned it out; of course this made it easier shoveling because you had a smooth surface or a board bottom.

I: Well I'll tell you I'd like to go down there once and just see what it's like. I don't think I'd care about working down there, but I'd like to go see it and see how they do it.

R: I wouldn't mind if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't mind
working in the mines one bit. You're out of the weather...your mines like Ahmeek...No. 2 Ahmeek...they weren't cold...some of the mines are real cold and I didn't care too much about working in a mine that was cold; but No. 6 Mohawk, No. 2 Ahmeek, No. 3 and 4, they were nice mines to work in. The temperature was nice to work in. It wasn't too hot, but it was nice. I didn't mind working in the mines at all. The only thing that I didn't like about it was the pay. But as far as working, they're just as good a place to work as any.

I: How come all the French settled down around Lake Linden?

R: I don't know...I never...I suppose a few families come there first and I suppose they'd write to relatives and friends.

I: Did you have many Frenchmen working down in the mine?

R: No, I don't think there was too many French people...in Ahmeek at least nor Mohawk. There was a lot of Finns, Swedes and Croations, Englishmen of course, but not too many French people. The French settled in Lake Linden, Hubbell...I don't know why, but they just did.

I: They worked mostly in the smelts and this type of thing.

R: Yeah, working mostly in the smelts and the mills.

I: I got to thinking about that and I wondered if there was something about the Frenchmen that they didn't want to work underground here.

R: Well, no, I suppose like I say, you know first a couple of French families must have moved there and you usually them days I guess you went where your own kind of people were because a lot of these people couldn't speak the English language too well, so they could speak amongst themselves; so I imagine if I was to move, that's where I'd go myself...you know, where I could get along with people, where I could talk to people, where if you went to a neighborhood where you couldn't converse with anybody, it probably wouldn't be a very nice place to live in. I think this is the reason why you have so many French people and still have them in Lake Linden. Of course now...

I: They've scattered out.

R: Yeah, and everybody speaks...at least most people speak one language; you know they can converse with somebody...it doesn't make any difference where one time it did...it made a lot of difference if you wanted to live with people and have somebody to talk to and if you couldn't speak the language you were a pretty lonesome guy, I'd guess.

I: What did most people do for recreation back in those times when you were a kid?

R: Well, I don't know that these people had too much recreation. I think most of them done farming on the side as recreation, I know my dad did all his life. He worked in the mine and then had a farm. So there was...well once in awhile you'd see a ball game...a base-
ball team, you know...but this involved only a dozen men or so, you
know. The rest of them...they used to visit a lot, that's one thing
in them days used to do a lot of visiting. I know, we always had
people over at our house and they used to, you know, visit a lot of
other homes...drink a little brew, I remember that. My dad and a
bunch of other guys would get together Sundays because the only day
they had off was a Sunday.

I: What'd they work a what...a six-day week, ten hours a day?
R: That's right.
I: Probably too tired to really do a lot after ten hours of hard work.
R: They never thought of any recreation, you know, because I don't think
you had enough in you to do anything but rest...you know have your
eight - ten hours of sleep.
I: And the women were pretty busy too because they had their boarders,
didn't they?

That's right...yeah...because if they couldn't bring the families
the man would come here himself and after he made a few bucks he'd
bring his family over; and I guess a lot of...quite a few of the
people wouldn't even bring their families back here. I guess there
were some that just forgot about them. I know a few people that had
families that never did get here.

I: Did many of the people move out...go back to the old country when
things kind of slowed down here after the war?
R: I don't know of any.
I: How about the 1930 Depression
R: No, I don't think any of them moved...went back to their fatherland.
I don't know of any that did.
I: A lot of them moved to the cities I know looking for jobs
R: Yeah, a lot of them went there.
I: I just wondered if any of them just kind of got disgusted...this
wasn't the land of honey and gold, what have you, and had gone back.
R: None that I know of. I think...at least not from Ahmeek here. I
don't know of any that went back to the old country. Back for visits
of course, but back to stay, no.
I: I guess Ahmeek and Alloway they used to be booming little towns,
weren't they?
R: Oh, they were. Not only that but (???) and Central and Delaware...
they were all booming towns. Eagle River, Eagle Harbour...
I: Well, was Eagle River ever a mining town or what?

R: Well, sure...there's mines right near Eagle River. (???) and then halfway down to Eagle River there's another one. I don't know if you remember the trussle that crossed the road up there and they had a mill right back of (???) in there.

I: Oh, right in there. They had a Copper Falls was right back in there too, wasn't it? That's between Eagle River and Eagle Harbour.

R: Hum

I: Copper Falls?

R: Yeah, but Copper Falls is down...

I: Past there

R: Yeah, towards the harbour. Yeah, they had big mines in Copper Falls. They mined all over this place and I still think there's copper all over. That's why they say that there's only one or two percent of copper that's been taken out. I don't know of how many mining companies...I've read of course...at one time knew just how many companies started mines here. There was a lot of them.

I: Anybody who could scrape up a little capital would try.

R: Un huh...of course them days they had a lot of trouble with mass...if they hit mass copper. If they hit mass copper there was very little they could do with mass copper. You take a five - ten ton chunk, it's...

I: Yeah, how did they get it out of the ground? Did they have to cut it out someway or...

R: Well, they did in the later years, they used to blast it. They had fisher veins in most of these mines, I guess...what they called a fisher vein which was a solid piece of copper. So what they'd do, they'd drill with steel bits, you know, drill aline of holes down and then they'd use this ninety-percent powder and they'd fill these holes with powder and then stay up the ends and it'd cut it just like a knife. And before there was nothing they could do with digging that. They'd just have to either quit or go around them...

I: You'd think that that would be the best kind...you know, the purest kind.

R: No, the other copper is pure...it's all pure copper. Like that piece you see up there, you know, it's all pure copper...very little of anything else but copper.

I: It's heavy too, huh?

R: Yeah...looks like a partridge, doesn't it?
I: Yeah

R: I've got some here too. (Unable to hear remainder of discussion)
Stop in tape.