FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family history</td>
<td>1,2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education--Iron River</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibition</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's games</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boarding houses</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Funny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas</td>
<td>8,9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home remedies</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early doctors</td>
<td>9,10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diseases</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mine accident</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron river--Oldest mine</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal Falls--Iron River feud for county seat</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klu Klux Klan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SUOMI COLLEGE
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Folklore Project

Life in Iron River

MILLCENT MARIE ODGERS
Interviewed
by
Catherine M. Kessler
on
July 1, 1973
SUOMI COLLEGE
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE: Millicent Marie Odgers
INTERVIEWER: Catherine Marie Kessler
SUBJECT: Life in Iron River and the Copper Country
Dated: July 1, 1973

C: What is your national origin?
M: American!
C: Well what ethnic group did you come from?
M: English and German.
C: Do you remember where your parents lived?
M:
C: Or where your grandparents lived?
M: When my grandparents came, on my father's side, they came from England, and on my mother's side they came from Germany.
C: What was your occupation?
C: What is your husband's occupation?
M: A blacksmith.
C: And what about your parents?
M: My father was a master mechanic and my mother was a housewife.
C: Where did your father work?
M: My father worked in the local mines in the Iron River area
C: When did your family arrive in this country?
M: My grandparents arrived in the late 1800's.
C: For what reasons did they come?
M: On my mother's side they came to farm and they lived on a farms and on my father's side they came to mine in the local mines. Not in the local mines but the mines in the Copper Country.

C: Did they experience any special hardships?

M: Well my grandmother was born on Isle Royal and she had a hard time living there. The mail came in on dogsled. It wasn't to easy.

C: Did they experience any especially good times?

M: I imagine so

C: What do you view as the biggest accomplishment in life?

M: I've had a good life. A full life. And happy

C: How do you feel about life today, is it changed?

M: Yes it's changed. (laughter)

C: How?

M: Well everything is more modern. They have more cars. Easier ways of travel. Communication.

C: What schools did you attend?

M: The Iron River High School.

C: Is that all?

M: That's all

C: What about grade school?

M: Roger's Elementary School

C: Do you have any recollections of your teachers?

M: Yes. Not to much. (laughter)

C: How did the different nationalities get along in school?

M: There was a feeling underneath of ethnic and religious.

C: A feeling of what?

M: Well a feeling of hatred, well I wouldn't say hatred. There was a feeling between different nationalities.
As for instance the Swedes disliked the Finns and the Finns disliked the Swedes.

C: Why?

M: They just had that feeling. That was just a sample, there were others.

C: Did you learn to speak English in school?

M: No, I spoke English at home.

C: What was the attitude of your parents toward formal education? Did they want you to?

M: Yes, I think they did. They didn't push it

C: But they wanted you to finish?

M: Oh yes.

C: Were your parents strict in the home?

M: Yes. Well we weren't allowed to run around. We got our spankings.

C: What newspapers or books did you read earlier, compared to recently? Well what was the name of the newspaper in your home town?


C: Are there any books that you remember that stand out in your memory? That you read a long time ago? Maybe that were popular at the time?

M: No, we didn't have books. Well we had Shakespeare and that sort of thing and I read a little bit of that.

C: What jobs have you held?

M: I was a secretary for a short time.

C: Where?

M: In Iron River.

C: Oh, for who?

M: Smith and Company.

C: What did they do?

M: They were in the lumber business.

C: What were the wages?
M: Very low. (laughter)

C: Do you have any idea of what they were?

M: No I don't remember.

C: What were the working conditions like?

M: Fine.

C: Do recall any incidents or did anyone ever tell you of the 1913 copper strike?

M: I remember hearing from my parents that it was a long strike and full of hatred against the company and it got quite—they fought. That's all.

C: Did they ever tell you about the Italian Hall disaster or bringing in the militia?

M: No, yes there were the soldiers.

C: But nothing about the disaster?

M: No.

C: What happened to the local community you lived in after mining slowed down this was after World War I?

M: A lot of the people—in this community or the copper country? I remember the copper country. In the copper country a lot of the people migrated to Detroit.

C: Why?

M: Well because there was no work in the copper country anymore.

C: What about up there?

M: You mean locally?

C: Were you just talking about up there?

M: Yes.

C: Well what about locally?

M: Well not to many left they found other jobs, in the woods, logging. I imagine they left for the cities if they couldn't get a job.

C: During the depression in the 30's were you on WPA?

M: Yes.
C: Was your husband unemployed?
M: Yes.
C: Can you tell us anything else about it.
M: And he worked for the city on the garbage detail, picking up garbage to make things go. We had WPA food orders. And we—that's about all I remember about it, we didn't have much money.
C: Was it a particularly hard time, was it really hard?
M: Nobody starved, it wasn't that hard for us. We got along, it wasn't good living but we got along.
C: What does this area need in the future?
M: The Iron River area about all I can think of is tourism.
C: What about new industry?
M: And new industry.
C: But do they want it in here?
M: Yes, they're waiting for new industry. They developed an area outside of the town for new industry.
C: What do you predict for this area in the next ten years?
M: Tourism and perhaps mining will come back but I don't think in ten years. Someday it will.
C: When did you first vote for a U.S. President?
M: I don't remember.
C: Don't you remember who it was that you first voted for?
M: Probably Franklin Delanor Roosevelt.
C: Did you ever run for public office?
M: No, my husband ran for county supervisor. He was chairman of the board for four or five years and he was president of the union.
C: Didn't he run for state representative too?
M: He ran for state representative but lost. I think that's about it.
C: Did the Depression of the 30's change his political affiliation?
M: No he's been a democrat most his life.
C: Who ran the local town?
M: Right now?
    Well who did?
    I don't know who ran the town then but the mayor was—I don't
    know, I don't know his name.
C: Who runs it now?
M: I can't remember.
C: Who runs it now?
M: Who is it?
C: Wouldn't you say the Angeli's have a big part in it?
M: Oh, I thought you meant as mayor of the town
C: No.
M: Oh, the Angeli's have the biggest holdings in the town and
    they've been developing right along. They're putting up
    new buildings. They're an asset to the town.
C: Were there any incidents that riled the people, politically?
    Keeping the roads open in the winter, tax problems.
M: Oh yes, that goes on every day, people complain. The usual thing.
C: What has been the attitude of the local community toward law
    enforcement?
M: Good
C: How did different nationalities get along?
M: Well as I said in earlier days there were feelings. Nothing that
    came to a head. There weren't fights or anything. But they
    had feelings against each other. But it's disappearing. People
    no longer feel that way.
C: Were there any mixed marriages in the neighborhood?
M: You mean blacks?
C: No, ethnic backgrounds.
M: Oh yes, different groups married.
C: Why are there so many saloons?
M: People are hard drinkers up in this area
C: Do you think that's the reason why?

M: Yes.

C: Why do you think they drink so much?

M: Well I suppose they have time on their hands and there's a lot of older men that are unemployed and retired and I guess that's about why.

C: Were there many fights?

M: In the taverns? Nothing. Oh yes up in the Virgil once a man was shot over a card game.

C: Why?

Well his partner accused him of cheating and took a gun out and shot him.

Do you remember anything else about the Virgil?

M: They had a Rum Rebellion where all the local Italian people made their own moonshine and wine and the government came in and ripped up the barrels and smashed the stills.

C: What did you and your friends do for a good time?

M: We played games and we walked when we went swimming we walked.

C: What kind of games?

M: Oh, what were some of them?

M: Pump, pump, pull away. What was that witch one? Something about a witch and the usual old-time games.

C: Don't you remember anymore?

M: For fun? Oh we played with dolls, and we made sand piles, we played house, we'd get into an old barn and fix it up into a house and we'd play in there. We played in chicken coops and coal sheds and barns.

C: Weren't barns dangerous?

M: Yes they are. Once I fell through from the top floor to the bottom floor and almost landed on a pitchfork. (laughter)

C: How did courtship take place in your youth?

M: Well my husband didn't have a car so he walked three miles to come and see me and he walked three miles back.
C: What did you do?

M: Sit and talk listened to the radio. Take a walk. And we'd go to the show if we had the money and that was about it.

C: Did you go by yourselves or did you go in groups?

M: Well we had a group we went around with and then sometimes we'd go by ourselves.

C: What was life like in the boarding houses run by the mining companies?

M: Well, they were, the boarding houses were mostly for men who came over to mine from foreign countries, like Germany and Poland and they lived a bachelors life. A lot of times they made their own wine. I remember once at the boarding house next to us in Rogers Location they made their own wine and they threw the mash out and they had chickens in the back and the chickens all got drunk and they were laying on their backs with their legs up flapping in the air. But they'd go down town on weekends and get smashed and then come back and work the week and then just like in lumber camps.

C: What organizations do you belong to or did you belong to?

M: The Elks, the Eastern Star. That's about it.

C: Do you have any recollections about local sports, or music, or special events like July 4th?

M: Our band used to go on trips, I played in the Iron River Band. And we would take trips and we would have festivals where they would have a winner. One year we won the top award and that's about all for that.

C: Was there any other music in your family?

M: On my father's side the whole family had an orchestra of their own and they were called The Stevens Orchestra and they traveled around from dance to dance and played. Each member of the family played an instrument and they had their own orchestra.

C: Is that what he did for a living?

M: That was a sideline.

C: Do you remember anything Christmas or how you went about it?

M: I remember we had an old-fashioned Christmas and at the bottom of our stocking we'd have an orange and that was a treat
M: because we didn't get oranges all year. And I remember our tree had candles on it and it would be lit with great precaution, it would be lit for a few minutes and we'd always have a pail of water in case the tree caught on fire and then we'd all take a look at it and Ouh and Ahh at it and then blow out all the candles and that was it.

C: What factors made for social change in social life, in your social life? When you went out and dated.

M: Kids nowadays have cars and get around more. They're freer then we were, we were held down. Just a different way of life.

C: What were the most widespread social problems in the community?

M: We don't have any social problems

C: Drunkeness, loneliness?

M: Oh, there are drunks but it's not that bad.

C: What did the family do when someone became sick?

M: Called the doctor and in those days the doctor would come to the house. You had an old time doctor like a country doctor DR. Libbey his name was and if you called he would come right to your house. Oh, my mother in her early youth had to work to support herself at a very early age, thirteen. She was a nurse girl for a Dr. Tucker in Mohawk and my father worked in the Ojibway railway station at the age of eighteen to earn money.

C: Did your family have any home remedies, like for maybe a cough?

M: I remember having goose grease put on my chest and a big wool sock wrapped around it to keep the heat in. (laughter) Long woolen underwear! And I remember once my aunt made a mustard plaster for my mother because she had a very bad chest cold and my aunt made the mustard plaster so strong it burnt her chest.

C: Were the family members included in the mining company welfare plan?

M: Yes for the benefits you mean? Yes.

C: Did they ever receive strike benefits?

M: No.

C: Did they ever strike?

M: They struck but, the strike lasted three months but they didn't get any benefits.

C: Who were some of the early doctors, do you remember?

Dr. Libbey, Dr. Kofmel and beyond that, I don't remember. I think
there was a Dr. Stevens during the time that Carrie Jacobs Bond lived here. And Carrie Jacobs Bond's husband was a doctor.

C: And what happened to him?

M: He was standing—at that time Iron River had wooden sidewalks and mud roads down the main street and he was standing on the edge talking to someone and somebody came along and slapped him on the back, playfully to say hello, and it knocked him down and his head hit the edge of the sidewalk and he eventually died from the fall.

C: Did they make house calls?

M: Oh yes, they made house calls. The doctors would come to the house.

C: And how were they paid?

M: Money, they had a charge.

C: Was the practice of midwifery prevalent in the community?

M: No, Dr. Libbey had a nurse that traveled with him all the time. Miss Fisk her name was and she did a lot of mining company work, took care of sick families and that sort of thing.

C: Was it difficult for the family to get to a hospital?

M: No, we had cars

C: What were the most severe health problems?

M: Locally?

C:

M: There was a lot of tuberculosis but that is left they found a cure for that. Polio was bad here, quite a few people were struck with polio and there were a lot of cripples left from it.

C: Any mental depression?

M: From the polio?

C:

M:

C: Silicosis?

M: Yes, silicosis is prevalent on account of the mines. It's the black dust that gets into the lungs and a lot of men have silicosis. Not a lot but it's happened.
C: Was it considered dangerous being a miner?

M: Yes, underground because men never knew about rocks falling and blasting. Sometimes they would make mistakes in blasting and then water broke into a mine over in Amasa somewhere and killed a bunch of men, they were trapped underground in the water. Off and on there were deaths.

C: Do you belong to a local church?

M:

C: What is it?

M: The Presbyterian church.

C: Do you have any recollections of the early events in its life? Early leaders?

M: I remember going to Sunday school in the old Rogers school, but we didn't have a minister, just somebody who taught, I was very small.

C: Were there any special problems of the church?

M:

C: Travel, lack of funds?

M: No.

C: Do you remember any of the early ministers?

M: No, no I don't.

C: Do you know if they visited the homes or held services there?

M: Oh, they still do visit the homes, but I'd don't remember—oh Seldens an early family, one of the first families that settled here in the Iron River area held Sunday school and church services in their home. In fact, the pulpit is still in one of the bedrooms upstairs.

C: Did the ministers become involved in local issues?

M: Not to much.

C: How did the various churches get along with each other?

M: As far as I know they did.

C: Did the mining company lease land to the churches?

M: In the copper country they probably did but not here.
C: Why not? Or were they already established by that time?

M: Yes. But in the copper country most land is leased for homes and buildings.

C: How did Iron River get established? Was it mining?

M: Yes, the Hiawatha No. I Mine was the oldest mine in the area. Then there was lumbering here, lumbering was a big industry.

C: Before mining?

M: I think it did start before mining. And that was a good industry. A lot of lumber camps.

C: Did you ever attend Suomi College?

M: No.

C: Do you remember anything else about the town?

M: Years ago when the towns were first established they wanted a place for the county seat and Crystal Falls and Iron River fought over where that building should go, so it was going to be in the Iron River area and they had all the records there and one night they got the local officials in a card game, gambling, and somebody sneaked in and stole the records brought them over to Crystal Falls and that's where the court house was built.

C: And that's how it's there now?

M: Yes.

C: Do you remember any stories told about the area? Anything about your youth?

M: I remember they had a Klu Klux Klan in town and I was a very small child but I remember them burning a huge cross in a field and how frightened I was. There was a blazing fire and people standing around. It was a horrible scene.

C: Was this a religious conflict?

M: Yes it was a religious conflict.

C: Between who?

M: The Protestants and Catholics. There were no colored people here, so it was just a religious conflict.

C: Do you remember any of the places you used to go when you were young?

M: At Sunset Lake they used to have a huge pavilion for dancing and they had name bands that used to come up here. It was before my day, dancing days, but I remember my father being musically
inclined he liked to go there and we used to sit there listening to the music in an old touring car until about 9 or 10 o'clock and then we'd go home. And then at Ice Lake, where we live now, they had a huge pavilion where they danced and had bands.

C: What were some of the names of the renown bands?
M: I don't remember.
C: Anything else you can add?
M: That's about it.
C: Well thank-you very much.
M: You're very welcome.