# OJALA, WILLIAM KEITH ("KEITH")

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BRIAN HODUSKI, MUSEUM CURATOR
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SHAPTON: Okay. Now I have to say an introduction on the tape. My name is Wil Shapton, talking with William Keith Ojala, he goes by the name Keith Ojala. And it is the twentieth of July, two thousand, we're at the Calumet High School Reunion and we'll get a little background first of all. You were born in Kearsarge?

OJALA: Well, actually born in Calumet.

SHAPTON: Born in Calumet.

OJALA: And then moved shortly after to Kearsarge and lived with the grandparents.

SHAPTON: That was nineteen thirty-three.

OJALA: Thirty-three.

SHAPTON: Moved to Kearsarge and moved in with your grandparents.

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: Were there any reasons for that?

OJALA: Oh, just pure economics. That was during the Depression years and actually, my grandmother on my mother's side died when she was quite young so they had a housekeeper who raised her so we moved in with that gang for a couple of years. I still remember as a very, very young child almost freezing to death. We'd go to sleep at night and we had this one little kerosene heater in the bedroom and piled on all of our clothes and coats on top of the bed. I stayed between my folks. It was a cold winter.

SHAPTON: So the whole family moved in with your grandparents? Or just the kids?

OJALA: No, just my mother, my dad and myself.

SHAPTON: Okay.

OJALA: And then there was my grandfather, the housekeeper, and her stepson.

SHAPTON: Were you the only child?

OJALA: I was the only child until nineteen forty-seven. I had twin brothers that lived about a day, and had another brother that came along in nineteen fifty-one when I was in college.

SHAPTON: So you were the only one for quite a while.

OJALA: For a long time. He died in seventy-five. He had a salvage company and he got killed right over here by the Armory in a salvage accident.

SHAPTON: Right here in Calumet?

OJALA: Yeah.

SHAPTON: So you moved in with your grandparents. At that time your father was working?

OJALA: He was just a laborer for Lakeview Cemetery. My grandfather was a superintendent at that time.

SHAPTON: Superintendent of --?

OJALA: Of Lakeview Cemetery.

SHAPTON: Okay. So you went to Kearsarge. Now you currently have a place in Calumet.

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: And another place downstate.

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: So you live summers up here?

OJALA: Oh, I've been spending a lot of time last year, we're building a new house in Hancock.

SHAPTON: Hancock, right, you said. So you'll be moving to Hancock?

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: And living there year-round?

OJALA: Oh, probably. We'll see how that comes. How the winters start.

SHAPTON: Okay. And graduated Calumet High School. Class of –

OJALA: Calumet High School. Nineteen fifty. We had the fiftieth reunion last night.

SHAPTON: Last night. Great. You also in between, though, went to Morrison School?

OJALA: Right. I started at Morrison through the sixth grade and the seventh grade here at Washington School.

SHAPTON: And went to Michigan Tech.

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: Worked as a engineer.

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: For a long time.

OJALA: Almost thirty-seven and a half years for Ford Motor. I went to Ford after I left the Air Force.

SHAPTON: Right, the Air Force. We'll come back to some of this and we'll add it into your file to be kept with that, too. You did note on here also that you have some photographs you may be willing to share.

OJALA: Yes, they're buried in boxes right now.

SHAPTON: We can get that stuff scanned so it's just a matter of – you can have them right back, you likely want to take the originals, so. In any case, let's get into this a little bit more. Let's start off with some of the really

early history. What was sort of your first memory of living in Kearsarge?

OJALA: Well, I really don't remember a whole lot but I spent so much time there as a kid going back and forth and –

SHAPTON: Between Calumet and Kearsarge?

OJALA: Yes. And the thing to remember there is that it was the Depression-era so people had to make their own entertainment and playing horseshoes and bocce ball and other things was big and us kids would go down to that concrete boat up in Kearsarge and we'd play up there and play ball. Spent a fair amount of time just wandering around there and of course, Dick's gas station had ice cream and pop so that sticks in my mind. But I had a lot of friends there in Kearsarge.

SHAPTON: You played ball, you said, up there?

OJALA: Oh yes, baseball.

SHAPTON: Any other sports or anything?

OJALA: No, I really didn't get too involved in sports and when we moved to Calumet, we lived right across from the big Finnish church there on Waterworks and Pine Street and that was kind of interesting. The kids had a lot of fun. We did things and today it would be – not too

politically correct but we all had B.B. guns and we'd go out target shooting, and we had these big, tall, poplar trees down by the railroad track and we had big ropes that the older kids put up for us and we'd swing from tree to tree on them. The Pine Street gang then had put up the skating rink and they maintained it for the little kids to skate. But then I remember a lot about that and then I moved just up to Cedar Street which is just one block up, that you could take off in the morning and…I spent time, for instance, going down to Frederickson's Blacksmith Shop and watch them shoe horses and build wagons and stuff. I was interested in that sort of thing. Sometimes they'd let you hold the tools or do things. And then when we were tired of that, we'd go up to the slaughterhouse and watch them killing, butchering cows. Then you could go to Crystal Ice on a hot day and they'd chop off hunks of ice and suck on that and get cool and Lord knows, that stuff came out of the lake down there in Keweenaw, I don't know what kind of bacteria was in that ice, but we survived that.

SHAPTON: So you just kind of roamed around and visited places?

OJALA: Yeah, one of the things I always looked forward to is Vienna Bakery was on Pine Street and old man Meyers did the deliveries with a horse-drawn bakery wagon. So used to always try to sell scrap metal or something and get some change, and then we'd buy Napoleons and jelly-filled doughnuts, there was always something going on. During the war years, one of the ways I made my money was copper, scrap was in high demand. So when the sun got down that low angle,

any copper nuggets in the roadway would reflect, so I'd just go down the road with a screwdriver and pop the copper out. And then I had thirty-two bucks to buy a new bicycle, just destroying roads bit by bit. And another thing I remember, 'cause it relates to my career, when I was about eight I used to hang around the Ford garage. And first they just let me watch and pretty soon I was chipping oil pan gaskets off. I remember one time I was watching them work on Dr. Winter's Lincoln, they were doing a valve job, so they put me to work, pulling valves out. It was like an all-day job. I came home and I smelled for deisel fuel, we used it to try to degunk the parts, and I came home, and I was filthy and smelly. My dad asked me what I'd been doing, I told him. And his typical remark was, 'did you learn something?' And that's basically, you know --.

SHAPTON: And you were about eight years old.

OJALA: Yeah, around eight. At that time, my mother ended up in a hospital, in the TB sanitarium, so my dad essentially took care of me, and then my grandparents who lived up near the cemetery raised me. So I spent a lot of time at the cemetery, with my grandmother in particular. I think the thing that was kind of neat is that my dad would turn me loose with the workmen, and one of my jobs was to carry their tools and work, or turn the crank on the forge or hold stuff while he was trying to hammerforge something or whatever the job was, plumbing or whatever. And also I'd take my bike and run around and deliver messages, go tell a workman that he needs to go from here to here,

or something. So I spent a lot of time with older people. Even though I had cousins who were spending the summer there, too, I spent more of my time with the workmen. I think I learned a lot. Got a lot of respect for older people. My dad was one of these people who, I had to do every job at least once, to learn something. Whether woodworking, plumbing, forging, whatever. And the other thing I appreciate is that my dad never had much money, he only had an eighth grade education. He, like many Finns, were rather voracious readers. He subscribed to Popular Science, Popular Mechanics, Science Mechanics, all that stuff. When I was about four years old and just starting, when he got his new issue of the magazine, we sat down and read it together. And we did the projects together. We built saws, we built little racecars, we were always into projects. I still remember over on Cedar Street, he spent a month's salary and bought an encyclopedia from the gardener's society and every night, we had to read from it for one hour.

SHAPTON: You think all that, the reading and the hanging out with the workmen, and your dad, this all kind of led you into engineering, you think?

OJALA: Yeah. I've always been interested in – we didn't have much money, so if you wanted something, you built it. We'd go down to the dump, for instance. Take apart old bench frames and wire, use it to make things, and make tools, and everything we wanted we made. Virtually. And I did that with my kid. Even though I could afford to buy stuff for

him, he had to make it from what was in the basement or in the garage, and he's an engineer, too.

SHAPTON: You were talking about going around to the blacksmith shop and watching them shoe horses and the horse delivery wagons. This was in the late nineteen thirties and forties?

OJALA: Yeah.

SHAPTON: People were still using blacksmiths and horses?

OJALA: Yeah. We had a horse at the cemetery until nineteen forty-one, and he was replaced by a farmall tractor when I learned to drive. I still have the horse blanket. It's in my van right now.

SHAPTON: And then your grandparents were living at the cemetery.

OJALA: Yeah. And then my grandfather died in forty-three and my dad took over as superintendent.

SHAPTON: He was the superintendent of the cemetery.

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: So he lived there. And you lived there, too.

OJALA: Yeah. So we all moved down there. And I think it was kind of interesting. Grandpa and his brother had a store in Hancock, and after World War One the store went bust during the Depression, so grandfather was looking for a bulletproof job, he didn't want the farm anymore. So this job at the cemetery opened up. He applied for it because he figured that people died and you had to bury them, you had to pay to bury them, and you couldn't let them lay around, so it had to be a Depression-proof job, and it was.

SHAPTON: And then your mother got TB.

OJALA: Yeah.

SHAPTON: And she was in a sanitarium. Where was that now?

OJALA: Well, first she was in the Houghton sanitarium, and then in forty-one, she went to Lansing, and they had an experimental operation at the time, and they says, 'it'll probably kill you, but it might cure you.' So she survived that against pretty tall odds and they told her she'd have to take it easy for the rest of her life. Well, pretty soon she was back and we'd carry her down to the trout stream and pitch a tent and she'd just tend the fire and rest. But she recovered fully and some of her friends did also. But she went at full throttle until she died in eighty-one. And she said, 'I'm gonna wear out, not rust out.'

SHAPTON: Were you visiting her at all downstate?

OJALA: I could only visit her from a distance. I wasn't allowed to get within fifty feet of her.

SHAPTON: Was that pretty scary for you? You were still pretty young.

OJALA: Yeah. I think the important thing was that I had my grandparents, my grandfather and then the housekeeper, the family was pretty close and I had uncles and aunts to look after and take care of me and it was – I never felt any insecurities, I had a good support system.

SHAPTON: Sure. Now go back a little bit more to your family. Ojala is Finnish.

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: And your mother's maiden name was --

OJALA: Rowe.

SHAPTON: Rowe.

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: What nationality was she?

OJALA: English. Cornish.

SHAPTON: English. Cornish.

OJALA: Came from Burriper. I still maintain contact with my English cousins, and they're in Cornwall, England, in the southwest.

SHAPTON: Still there.

OJALA: Yep.

SHAPTON: Okay. Now do you know when your family – let's start with the Ojalas – when they first came to America?

OJALA: About – my grandfather, great-grandfather, came over around eighteen ninety. Great-grandfather. I don't know a lot of background on him but he was in the Finnish Army, he was important in the church, educated, did several public bonesetter, sort of, he was a lay preacher, he has to go out on skis and from farm to farm in the wintertime and baptize babies, you know.

SHAPTON: In Finland.

OJALA: And in here, too.

SHAPTON: Here, too.

OJALA: Yeah. He brought the family over in the eighteen nineties. I have a document from the bishop with all the names of the family and the kids, dates of births, everything, and they're recommending him highly to whoever he is presenting the paper to. I have that with the wax seal and I can find that someday and then bring it to you.

SHAPTON: And he came over here to find work?

OJALA: Well, remember in those days things were pretty tough in Finland. People were dying of starvation. It was like the potato famine in Ireland. And he got permission from the Russian government to leave the country and came over here and he and his friends formed a couple co-ops and they built the Salo Grain Mill in Salo Location down here. They also formed a cooperative brick factory over in Oscar but the only word I have on that is that the bricks weren't very good. Then they bought a farm over by the lily pond and I have a family picture on the front porch of the log cabin with grandparents, great-grandparents, my dad, his brothers and sisters.

SHAPTON: So they built a log home there.

OJALA: Yeah.

SHAPTON: And he had a farm.

OJALA: Right. And I'm building a log home right now that's about five miles away from it.

SHAPTON: That's where you're moving?

OJALA: Yep.

SHAPTON: Now, do you know why they came to this area specifically?

OJALA: Oh, the emigration of the Finns, I think the first batch ended up like in Massachusetts and the Northeast. Then another wave hit this area and Minnesota. Some went on to California. But there were several groups I've heard about. But of course, like anything else, they came here and they were lumberjacks, they were farmers, and they were miners. So they had occupations here.

SHAPTON: And there were jobs here.

OJALA: And they clustered and they formed various groups, they set up their own insurance companies, they had their own cooperatives for selling their produce and everything.

SHAPTON: Is this something you remember from your childhood, this sort of Finnish cohesiveness, so they worked together and hung out together?

OJALA: Yeah. In fact, I still see that because MJO is supplying my labor for building this house and practically everybody that works for them is related or a Finn.

SHAPTON: Okay.

OJALA: And they're good people. They stick together, they do good work, they get along well.

SHAPTON: They watch out for each other.

OJALA: Yeah.

SHAPTON: Were there other ethnic groups that were important in the area at the time?

OJALA: Yeah, the English always had a strong presence, and there again is another interesting thing, because that emigration was fueled by the fact that the copper and tin mines went down in Cornwall, and at the same time they were hiring over here for the copper mines. And what happened is that the English came over, and unlike the other immigrants, they spoke the language of the bosses so you had miners who came over that became mine bosses. For them in England where there was essentially a caste system to come over here and now to be escalated into a management position, that was a big step up. But the fact that they could speak the language of the management, they

could read and write, they got some of the better jobs in the mining system. So it was a natural fit. Another group, my grandfather's sister, went to Grass Valley, California, they were gold mining out there. But again, it was hard rock mining, and that's another pocket of English – you can get pasties out there.

SHAPTON: And that's when your mother's family then, the Rowes –

OJALA: Right.

SHAPTON: Came over as part of that.

OJALA: Right. And that's about the early nineteen hundreds. Very early nineteen hundreds.

SHAPTON: Okay. Do you know any more about their family?

OJALA: My great-grandfather on my mother's side was a mining hoist engineer. I went back to the mine and they're reconstructing it right now.

SHAPTON: In England?

OJALA: In Cornwall. He was there for fifty years. And like I said my cousins over there on both sides I still see, I visit and write to them. We keep

in contact still with Finland, I have cousins over there, I visit and they come here.

SHAPTON: What – when you were growing up then in the home was there a Finnish language?

OJALA: No, because my mother didn't speak it.

SHAPTON: Right.

OJALA: And my dad spoke it with his brothers and sisters, but my grandfather says, 'we're in the U.S., we speak English.' So I didn't get much of it.

SHAPTON: Did you pick up any at all?

OJALA: I took a couple courses.

HODUSKI: I'm curious what church you went to?

OJALA: Right up the street. Calumet Methodist.

HODUSKI: Methodist?

OJALA: Yeah.

SHAPTON: Is that more of an influence from your mother's family?

OJALA: Yes. But my folks were very active in the church, both of them.

SHAPTON: Is it a pretty large part of your life then?

OJALA: Yeah, I'd say so. I was active in the youth fellowship. We did a lot of things. I went to Methodist Camp in Michigamme six years.

SHAPTON: When you were a kid?

OJALA: Yeah.

SHAPTON: Was it social? Did they have events? Part of the social life?

OJALA: Most of it was social life, getting the kids together. We had even Catholics come to those, because the strange thing at that time was the Catholics didn't sing, and a lot of the kids liked to sing so they came to youth fellowship meetings and they could sing.

SHAPTON: Any other events that you had? As part of that youth fellowship, did they organize events, picnics, similar things?

OJALA: No, we would have day trips, we'd go out skiing and that sort of thing. Then I belonged to youth fellowship when I was in the Air Force. It was a senior type thing for twenties and we did things with the churches and the hospitals, visiting the sick and so forth.

SHAPTON: Back to yourself again. In terms of the schools here, you did go to a couple of them. Let's talk about some memories you have from school. Anything you remember?

OJALA: Oh, I can remember the first day I sat in kindergarten. Taking the eye test, the hearing test, and all that stuff. And Miss McLain, there were two McLain sisters.

SHAPTON: Both teachers?

OJALA: Both teachers, and they were outstanding. The second and third-grade teachers, I'd rather forget. The first-grade teacher, I remembered last night, her name was Lennie Bant, and she had come back from some experimental teaching thing. She was quite young at the time. She let us do a project. And we built a little house, about eight feet by eight feet, in the classroom. She supplied the lumber and we had to bring tools. And we built this little house, had a gabled end, covered with butcher paper and stuff, and we brought orange crates and stuff, we stocked it with books, so whoever got done with their lessons early could go over there and read, one of the privileges. But that class had stayed together for sixty years.

SHAPTON: Your classmates were close.

OJALA: We're close.

SHAPTON: What about at recess times and stuff, games you played.

OJALA: Basically, at Morrison School, we usually played ball. Another thing that was – you know, schools today would go white – we all wore high-topped boots with a knife pocket and we'd play knife games. And the teacher would come out and play with us. And if you spilled marbles in the classroom, the teacher would scoop them up and you had to get them back so they'd come out and play with us.

SHAPTON: You played marbles against your teacher?

OJALA: Yeah. That was the only way you'd get them back, you'd have to win them back.

SHAPTON: That's unfair. They'd have the privilege of being in charge.

OJALA: And then a couple of things that came up at the meeting from last night was that just to the south of Morrison School, we had a little building about five feet, five stories high, and when the snowbanks got a little high, we'd start testing the banks, we'd jump on the first floor, second, we'd work our way up to the roof. Go off the roof of a five-story building into the snowbank and of course, the teacher turned us in to Miss Edward and she had a fit. So she'd say, 'you've got to do something a little less hazardous' so we went over to the village barn and we'd get big icicles. We'd pretend we were knights on horseback

and we'd try to spear each other, jousting with icicles. So we would invent things to keep ourselves amused.

SHAPTON: Did you skate at all?

OJALA: Never used to skate. One of the big things, this was during the war years, building model airplanes was big. We built all kinds of models and flew them. And the school would have displays for us, they'd put all the models up and hang them from the ceiling. The older kids would teach the younger kids how to build them and stuff. We used to have to knit, a six-inch square that looked like hotpads, and then the teachers would sew them together for blankets and they'd send them to the soldiers. Of course, we all had Victory gardens. Come February, we'd get seed catalogs. We'd pick out our catalogs and bring money to school and then we'd plant our gardens.

SHAPTON: So the war had a definite effect here – the gardens, the blankets, the picking of the scrap metal.

OJALA: Oh yeah. And the kids used to get off of school to go pick potatoes. Because we didn't have enough workers to pick spuds.

SHAPTON: When you were in high school, did you have any extracurricular activities?

OJALA: Like many of my friends, we were involved in the Air Force R.O.T.C. I had a bad knee so I didn't play sports but I was on the rifle team and we shot at most of the matches, and we drove to Ironwood and various places to compete. I was on the drill team. We also had, our class was pretty active, we started a teen center which started in Calumet and it went to Laurium and that ran for many years. But we ran a little teen center for dancing and everything. All the money went to charities. We started a tennis club. We started the yearbook. We had a school paper. So our one class was extremely active.

SHAPTON: The teen center, they had dances, did they do anything else? Any other activities?

OJALA: That was about it. They had dancing and obviously mild beverages and once in a while at parties they'd have cake and doughnuts and stuff.

SHAPTON: You had chaperones and stuff for that, didn't you?

OJALA: Oh yes.

SHAPTON: Who did you get to be chaperones? Parents?

OJALA: Parents, mostly parents. That was another thing that I think was interesting. You could go into any of your friend's house and get a meal there, whether they were there or not. I had friends that used to

stop at our house and stay the night. My grandmother, when we moved out of the cemetery, she went to Hancock. And my friends would go down there to visit her and she sent them up to go shopping for her and when they got back, they'd have a big feast. But you could go to anybody's house just like you were one of their kids, and the parents took an interest in what you were doing, and if the family went camping or fishing or boating, you know, a whole bunch of kids would go along. So the families were close, and the kids stuck together.

SHAPTON: Strong community.

OJALA: Yeah.

SHAPTON: Did you ever have your own car or anything? How did you get around?

OJALA: Well, my principal transportation from age fourteen to literally my senior year at college was a Whizzer motorbike. I won a war bond at a drawing at the Rex-all Drug Store and I cashed it in to buy a Whizzer, and I put about twenty-five thousand miles on that thing. I had to use that in the summer. In the winter, I got to drive the car.

SHAPTON: Family car?

OJALA: Family car. I started driving when I was nine. I was driving alone when I was ten, and I got my license at fourteen. And another thing my

father did, I had to drive everywhere with him. If some situation came up like snowdrifts or out in the woods and the rutted roads, I had to stop, tell him what the situation was, tell him what I was going to do, he'd critique it, and I'd do it. I had many, many miles on me by the time I got my license, and never had an accident.

SHAPTON: First of all your father, it sounds like he was pretty strict, but you were pretty close.

OJALA: I was close. Strict was not the word, well, I wasn't a troublemaker. We did so many things together, projects and whatever, and we just got along.

SHAPTON: But you were very close. But he had rules, he had a way of doing things.

OJALA: Oh, he had rules. If I come home drunk, I'd walk 'til I was twenty-one, you know. It was that simple.

SHAPTON: And then with that driving again, too, you mentioned earlier you were driving the tractor out of the cemetery to do work. What kind of work did you do?

OJALA: Well, it didn't start out as work. What we would do, my cousin and I, is that when folks left on a Sunday afternoon, we'd run down and get the tractor out and go racing and pulling trees.

SHAPTON: Oh, I see. I assumed you were working.

OJALA: But later on, I started working and of course, formally, I started getting paid when I was fifteen. I wasn't sixteen but my Aunt Vi wrote in the book sixteen so I was legal to work.

SHAPTON: What kind of jobs were there for you?

OJALA: The worst jobs. My dad's intent I think was to make me think seriously about going to college. We dug graves there and the worst job I ever had was scraping and painting that white picket fence.

SHAPTON: All the way around.

OJALA: All the way around. And I decided I'd better go to school. That was not the way to make a living. But whatever jobs. Digging trees. I used to work with a little guy by the name of Jack Boyd and he was an ex-logger and digging out and cutting up big maple trees. And the thing I learned from those old-timers, you know, they didn't have unemployment, they didn't have medical plans. If you got hurt, tough luck, you were on your own. Nobody to pay your bills but you. So they were extremely safety conscious, and they'd watch me like a hawk, you know. Basically I learned my safety and thinking ahead from these people. And of course they'd supply me with candy and

goodies, but still, I learned a lot, I worked hard and benefited from being around them.

SHAPTON: Did you see much? Do you have any memories of people, like you said, when they got hurt or whatever, they were out of work, basically. Did you know anybody like that around? Who had been injured maybe in a mine accident or something?

OJALA: Well, my grandfather had a mine accident. He had a bad hip and a bad elbow. And he had a number of jobs. My dad hired him as a foreman for the lumber crew and I guess as an artifact of having the boss' father-in-law, he had to cut the crew in half because the work went so much faster. But his job was to keep track of all the repair work that had to be done and so forth. In general, these guys were really safety conscious. I can't think of anybody who really had a problem. Because usually, if they had an accident or a problem in a mine, you're dead. That's the nature of the work. Logging, you know. So they weren't around to say 'look what happened to me.'

SHAPTON: Were you ever married?

OJALA: Yep.

SHAPTON: You were married.

OJALA: Yeah, I got married in fifty-six.

SHAPTON: Fifty-six. And did you meet your wife downstate?

OJALA: No, I met her here in the high school. She was in high school, I was in college. Her name is Claire Baroni. Her father started Baroni Spaghetti Sauce Ravioli business, now in the third generation.

SHAPTON: So you mixed some Italian in there.

OJALA: Yeah, and Croatian. And we had one son who came along in seventy-five, so we've been married over twenty years and lucked out. He's in the Air Force and he's also a Michigan Tech graduate, as is his wife. And I have one grandchild right now, four and a half months old. He's a big Finn, he's six foot eight. I taught him the same way as myself. He had rules, and we did a lot of projects together and if something broke, he had to fix it. He couldn't buy a new one, he had to fix it. And he had to build things with what was in the house. We had a lot of fun. And he loves it up here.

SHAPTON: Okay. One question we had here. Based on some information you provided earlier they came up with a list of questions. I'm asking about this cemetery again and who it belonged to. Who did you actually work for?

OJALA: That's the Lakeview Cemetery Association. It was just a private cemetery. They got the land from C&H. Probably about eighty acres

now, it was sixty-three earlier. And like I said, my grandfather was there from about nineteen nineteen until he died in forty-three. So I spent a lot of time there as a child, you know.

SHAPTON: But it's a privately-owned operation?

OJALA: Privately owned association. Board of directors, yup, stockholders.

SHAPTON: And they were the ones that hired then your grandfather?

OJALA: And my dad.

SHAPTON: And your dad.

OJALA: Yep. The cemetery was formed in eighteen ninety-four. Olson was the first superintendent.

SHAPTON: Okay. We talked a little bit about some of the work you did at the cemetery. What about at home? What kind of chores did you have?

OJALA: Well, I don't know if this was a plus or minus, but a lot of those trees I was cutting down we'd cut up and split and that's what heated the house. So I had to cut the wood, split the wood, stack it, throw it in the basement, and haul out the ashes. So that was one chore. I had to help my folks with housecleaning and so forth. One of the artifacts of being in the house, in the wintertime was slow, so my dad was able to

get lumber from one of the board members who ran the Tunman Lumberyard so all the upkeep we did ourselves. So I learned how to saw and hammer and whatever so we built big doorways, we built cabinets and redid the house and originally we had kerosene lights. We had plumbing, indoor plumbing, but we had kerosene lights until about forty --.

SHAPTON: And did you build the house that you lived in?

OJALA: The Cemetery Association built the house. It was a 10-room house, but small rooms. It was un-insulated at first, and I can remember one of the jobs my dad and I did, we got some of that insulation, and what a difference it made. When I left home, they converted to oil, so you didn't have to worry about wood anymore. But one of my other jobs as a kid, we used to put the bodies in the mausoleums, you know, for the winter down there. And being small and slender, sometimes I'd have to go down between the rough boxes to put faces underneath like a track with rollers on it that we would slide the bodies on. And I had to go and put those in place because sometimes my dad couldn't fit, you know, so I was involved with helping.

SHAPTON: And they didn't do any burials in the wintertime.

OJALA: Well, it was kind of interesting because I have, my mother was a writer, among other things, and she wrote about Christmas of nineteen thirty-three. At that time, it was before the vault went in so

they were digging graves in the winter. Christmas Day, my dad had to work and dig a grave, because the burial was the day after Christmas. And my grandmother put together like a picnic basket full of Christmas dinner and my mother carried it out to where my dad was digging and she was pregnant with me at the time and they had Christmas dinner sitting at the edge of a grave. And I've got that story.

SHAPTON: Did you have a sauna in your home?

OJALA: No, the neighbors had one.

SHAPTON: Neighbors had one.

OJALA: Had to go through the barn to get there.

SHAPTON: Was that part of your family get-togethers, too?

OJALA: Oh yeah, yeah.

SHAPTON: Did they do that Wednesdays and Saturdays?

OJALA: Mostly Saturdays. Yeah. I used to work for a neighbor once in a while, too. Picking up hay. His horse almost killed me once, so I figured I'd stick to a tractor. If he wants to use a horse, he can use it himself.

SHAPTON: This was the neighbor while you were living at the cemetery?

OJALA: Yeah. Just across the street.

SHAPTON: Did you grow food? Did you have gardens?

OJALA: My grandmother grew things in the gardens. My mother didn't, she wasn't the gardening type. But they used to plant potatoes. One of my jobs was to cut the potatoes in half, dig a hole, throw it in, take a shovel and then pick the potato bugs, you know.

SHAPTON: What other kinds of plants did she grow?

OJALA: She grew beets and carrots and lettuce and I still remember she had rhubarb and rutabagas, real big, and radish.

SHAPTON: All just for the family?

OJALA: Just for the family. Then grandma was big on picking berries so we had to pick a pail of berries before we could go swimming. So that was the thing.

SHAPTON: Just wild berries.

OJALA: Wild berries.

SHAPTON: So you'd go out?

OJALA: All over.

SHAPTON: Yeah, and then you'd get to go swimming?

OJALA: Yeah.

SHAPTON: What else did your family do?

OJALA: Well, my dad was quite a fisherman. During the war years, he had a little boat. He was exempted from the draft because he was my sole support. My mother was in the hospital. So he used to do stream fishing plus Lake Superior trolling. This was about a sixteen-foot boat with a two and a half horsepower motor on Lake Superior. We had some close calls. We'd camp and my dad told my mother when I was a boy, 'you guys can come fish with me or you can stay home.' So we had a tent and mother and I camped right along with Pa and fished all over the Keweenaw, also Bond Falls, Agate Falls, Falls River Dam over by Baraga. But we did a lot of things and one of the things that amused me, I had my own rifle when I was six years old. So during the war years, it was tough getting ammunition but he'd get it for farm pest control and so I got to carry my own rifle and do a lot of shooting. So that was one thing that almost all my friends had their own rifles and we got good supervision, good training. Nowadays it's politically incorrect which I think is stupid but it's another time.

HODUSKI: Well, on the topic of politics. Was politics discussed in the home much in your experience growing up? Was it part of the social fabric of life?

OJALA: The thing I remember most at my grandfather's house. My dad would be down there and that was in the days of the John L. Louis, United Mine Workers and he was always on the radio, and they'd listen to him and argue on into the night. Not much was said about C&H at that time. I left home about the time the troubles with the Union were brewing up here. They had got along pretty good, it was between the nineteen-thirteen disaster. Basically that and FDR's policies were the big discussions at the time. But people up here were so self-reliant that intrusiveness of the government hadn't made its way into everyday life like it is now. I mean a farmer could literally survive by himself and people bartered and traded, 'you give me a bag of potatoes and I'll fix your truck for you.' That's the way it went, because people didn't have money. It was in many cases a barter society.

HODUSKI: Was your family Union then, when they first came over?

OJALA: No, no. In fact, most of the roles in my family have been management. My great-grandfather came over and they had the cooperative and he was active and my grandfather, in the winter the way he made his money was jury duty. But they were active in the local government, and friends were involved in the Finnish society, one of whom was the local counsel. In fact, I have a knife from him, a Finnish buku, that's a ceremonial knife that the counsel gave my father. They were more

concerned with the good will of the group and less with the national involvement. But I remember during nineteen thirty-nine, forty, a big discussion item was the Finnish Winter War.

HODUSKI: Do you know of any men from the Copper Country that went back to Finland?

OJALA: Nope. But like I said, we've been corresponding ever since they left. And it's been interesting. Great people. But politics, per se, not much outside of the local issues. Life was tough here in the Depression years and even after the war. People were less interested in what happened over there. Now, I said that the Winter War in Finland consumed them because they all had relatives back there. They were involved. And the funny thing is, I recall, during the war, care packages went to Finland and came back via the Red Cross or whatever the organization was. And I have clothing, boot socks, I've got a Finnish buku, stuff that my great aunt gave me from Finland, and all they wanted over there was real coffee and sugar. Nothing else counted except coffee and sugar, if we could get it.

SHAPTON: I think we've pretty much covered stuff here.

OJALA: If I could make a comment. Like I said, I'd go to work to the blacksmith's shop or I'd go to work at the Ford dealer or whatever and get paid in ice cream and pop. The kids now, all you can do is look through the window, with sheriff's regulations and stuff but for them to

get exposure to these occupations or any occupations, it's very difficult, unless they're in the family business. And being manager for many years at Ford, if I saw a person come in the door and interviewed them and they had grown up in a family business of some sort, that was like a ninety percent recommendation for hire. They knew how to work, they didn't watch the clock, they had initiative, they could fill in the gaps, and you don't see that in people who are raised in this sterile, urban environment. They don't get the responsibility and they don't know how to deal with people, you know. It's a different world, and I talked to psychiatrists about this. They said it's a proven fact, you pull a kid off a farm or a mom and pop gas station, these kids will survive. They'll fit in, it doesn't make any difference if they've ever seen the job before, they've got the confidence and the mental skills to handle anything.

HODUSKI: Now would you say that the kids you grew up with shared those traits with you or was this specifically -- ?

OJALA: I think I had a little more opportunity for experience but some of my friends, like one I was with last night whose family had a bakery, others had some family jobs and I think we all did pretty well.

HODUSKI: I was also curious, a lot of folks left the Copper Country because of lack of work.

OJALA: Yup.

HODUSKI: A lot of them ended up in the auto plants in Detroit. Were there families that moved down there together? Did you keep those connections?

OJALA: Every year for Lord knows, I think, practically every year since the forties, they used to have a big Calumet and environs get-together at Roma Hall in Detroit. There'd be fifteen hundred people show up. And then a lot of them had been about three waves of retirement, large-scale retirements, you look at these old houses up here, new windows, new siding, they're in-the-family homes. I'm in my folks' home that they retired to. They come back.

HODUSKI: Why did you come back?

OJALA: I just don't want to be in the city anymore.

SHAPTON: Is there something about this area? How would you describe this place and what it means to you?

OJALA: I think it's pretty common with most people. You're comfortable with the surroundings you came from. You know the people, you know the businesses. You either like the weather or you hate it. If I want to go out shooting, I go out there to the sand pit, it's five minutes away. If I want to do it down there, I got to go to a range and spend ten bucks a half hour. If you want to go someplace from three o'clock on, the

traffic is at a standstill. Here I can go anywhere quick. You know you're trading off, you know, availability of purchasing things from stores here. Your selections are limited. But what do you need? The things you need are here, the choices may not be here. But you've got catalogs, you've got e-mail, you can take a quick trip to Marquette or Minneapolis. But you know, your friends are here, your family's here, your roots are here. Even Kofi Annan was interviewed and he was asked the same question. He says he's lived in Paris and London and all over, he says, 'I think I'll end up back in my hometown in Egypt.' People like that, they're comfortable.

SHAPTON: We've been asking the same questions all day long and we keep hearing the same things.

OJALA: Well, you grow up in the Keweenaw, and as long as you've got some good eating places. That's the one thing, that if you've got decent food and a good place to go and eat, and you're comfortable and at our age the health care is decent, why not?

SHAPTON: Is there anything else you want to say or add or anything we didn't talk about?

OJALA: I just think that I've had a good career as I've said here, I've been quite involved in the auto business. I've had an opportunity to contribute. I ran the program for Ford on leading the emission controls, environmental, got twenty percent better fuel economy, the

technology's in cars all over the world now. I don't think I would have gone down that path if I hadn't had the opportunities and the background here to get exposure.

SHAPTON: Yes, it sounds like you've had quite a career here. We didn't go into that too much. Our major interest is local.

OJALA: You get that background here. A friend of mine is a doctor, you know, and he got in with some local doctor who took him on and took him all over, even in high school. So you had people mentoring you, and a lot of them had that in common. Either a parent or somebody else who mentored them.

HODUSKI: So adults were very involved in kids' lives.

OJALA: Yeah, I think they really got along well with the kids. They took them along, and taught them, and there was much less parental conflict that I see in the cities now. I tried to raise my kid the same way. He can hardly wait to get up here. But I think it was a good place to go to school. We had good teachers. And if you didn't cut it that day, you had to show up after class for remedial. They didn't push you through. You had to be here and get up to speed. And another thing that was kind of interesting is that most of my teachers for whatever reason I'd go on to see them at church, so they'd meet my parents and I had them for Sunday school and you couldn't quite get into – you couldn't sneak out from under the influence.

SHAPTON: You mentioned some of your teachers before. Are there any other ones you remembered especially?

OJALA: The McLain sisters, as I said…A good example of that is when I was in Morrison and recess time and the cold weather, she'd send me home to stoke the fire for my mother who was bedridden at the time. And McLain used to bowl. She'd hit the bowling alleys at nine o'clock and say 'okay, you guys, go home,' because they were setting pins. She'd say 'go home and go to sleep.' They didn't just walk out the door and say 'that's the end of my class period.' They kept track of the kids. And that was more common than you would expect. One other person who'd be interesting – the stepson of my grandfather's housekeeper, kind of an interesting guy, he was never married, kind of a gruff old character. I don't think he went to church very often. He really spent his life and his money helping all his neighbors. He was late for Christmas dinner one time, he was about eighty at the time. And we said, 'where have you been?' and Brian says, 'oh, these old folks down there, they were snowed in, they didn't have any food and I had to shovel out their sidewalk and get them groceries,' he's eighty and they were in their seventies, you know. He took care of my mother when she had T.B., he took care of her sister. When I was living in town, he'd come up and do the laundry and clean house for my mother and families were much more cohesive and he was outstanding. I don't think he had five hundred bucks in his pocket

when he died. But never sick, just kept on working and helping people.

SHAPTON: This was your grandfather's housekeeper?

OJALA: Well, the housekeeper's stepson. And he worked for my dad at times. He was an itinerant. He did masonry work and carpentry, built little dioramas, but you know a lot of people pitched in and the sense of neighborhood was strong. And he was outstanding. Brian Shugg was the name.

SHAPTON: Can you spell that last name?

OJALA: S-H-U-G-G.

HODUSKI: So folks in the neighborhood really identified with one another?

OJALA: I think they were a little closer. We rented a house from a good friend of mine's mother who just lived across the street and her husband had died. I was a good friend of her son. So she fed me noontime meals and my dad would pitch in and help her with projects. Circumstances were different then but people did help each other a lot. It was kind of a fun thing. You always got coffee and treats.

HODUSKI: We had heard that in one neighborhood the doors were never locked, you could just walk into anyone's house.

OJALA: It still is in a lot of places. The thing about the locals was a lot of guys were fishers, fisherman, hunters and Keweenaw was the favorite place to go. I've got photographs of my great-grandfather and some relatives out at Bete Gris. We used to keep a boat out there in Lac La Belle. But they would fish when they can, and the Keweenaw's full of decent fishing spots.

HODUSKI: And you still fish?

OJALA: I don't right now but I go out and do a lot of hiking and shooting but I'll probably take up hunting again now that I've got more time.

SHAPTON: Retired pretty recently then?

OJALA: Actually, I retired in one one ninety-five, and then I fixed up the house over here on Boundary Street and then I did some consulting for a couple of years, putting up the new Chrysler engineering engine test center and some miscellaneous consulting work. Looking forward to going back to doing some of that, when I'm through with the house. And I've lectured on aircraft engine development using automotive engines. So I've been trying to keep active, starting an experimental aircraft association chapter up here, so we're trying to get involved and improve the aviation atmosphere locally.

SHAPTON: Good, good.

OJALA: But this is a good place to live. A good place to grow up. And I guess the other thing if I say one thing is that you take a lot of nationalities and put them in a mine in kind of a hazardous environment, they start looking out for each other. And I didn't see any real conflict, except you get an old Italian and an old Austrian and they're fighting or something. But the nationalities mixed here much better than any of the other places I've seen. You didn't see the hard-core ghettos, you know, all the Italians over here and all the Finns over here. The other thing that came out of that is food-swapping. The ethnic foods spread, you know, the better food became staples of all the different nationalities.

SHAPTON: Like the pasties?

OJALA: Yeah, and spaghetti, and you name it, but I think the environment that we were in, like I said, the high-risk environment of the mines where you generally had to work next to –

SHAPTON: People were forced to depend on each other.

OJALA: Yeah, to depend on each other, because if you screw up the rope bed –

SHAPTON: So you never saw any conflict with each other?

OJALA: I didn't see that kind of conflict.

SHAPTON: Because they did have their separate neighborhoods and churches and things, but they also worked together.

OJALA: Oh yeah, but they got along. And they intermarried. Whereas in some areas, you didn't see that. So I think that was a unique artifact of the demographics here.

SHAPTON: So, in the foods, we didn't talk about that much, but did you have a favorite food in your family?

OJALA: Meat and potatoes, I guess, and pasties. And of course, my grandmother was a super baker, my Finnish grandmother. She was funny because she had a dog, a big Springer spaniel, and she said she didn't like animals, but somehow the dog never got too far from her, and she always had a little extra dough left over and she had a little bread…got to the dog.

SHAPTON: Did your grandmother do most of the cooking then, when your mother was ill?

OJALA: Well, she was in the cemetery, still working there with my grandfather, but she was quite a baker and she was a good cook and she made all those good Finnish coffee cakes and stuff and my job was to help keep the fires going. Grandma was probably a key diplomatic type. A

good example was she had a heavy load of baking one day and I was her favorite to take care of things and she says, 'I need wood,' and I wanted to do something else so I filled a wood box and I carefully cribbed it about seven feet high, you know, and she came and took a look at it, she said, 'oh, that's nice, you did a really nice job, but I can't reach that high so you're going to have to stay here to get it off the top.' And of course she got a Maytag gasoline engine for a washing machine and my job, even as a little kid, was that I had to clean the spark plug, mix the gas and oil and once in a while take off the manifold and clean the carbon on the porch, so I was her helper and her last child, literally. But I always got a little extra treats and cakes and stuff. She was a real diplomat. She's got to be a saint. We had a good time. The only trouble I think in my childhood was that it went too quick.

HODUSKI: Um hmm.

SHAPTON: You started working pretty young.

OJALA: Yeah, but it wasn't really work. We try to make a game out of it, you know, who could cut the most wood or whatever, and it was that sort of thing would make the job less onerous, and guys would tell stories about what things were going on in the logging camps and so it was fun. I had a good time.

SHAPTON: That's it?

HODUSKI: Yep. I really appreciate your time. We had you for the longest interview today.

OJALA: Oh.

SHAPTON: Over an hour.

HODUSKI: Over an hour, yeah.

SHAPTON: This was great.

OJALA: Well, I hope it helps a little bit.

[end of tape]

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