

Interview with Roland H. Bramer

One tape, Side A

No Date not name of interviewer given

Interviewer (Int): Okay Mr. Bramer, could you tell me just a little bit about yourself, possibly how long have you lived in the Village of Nahma?

Roland Bramer (RH): Well, I was born in this village in the year 1923, and I lived here all my life excepting for military service when I was away and some brief periods of time. But mostly all my life I've lived here. And now I've been employed as Postmaster of this village for the past twenty-three years.

Int: Okay, going back to you early childhood, the 20's and 30's especially. What type of employment did your father engage himself in?

RH: Well my old father, he was working for the Bay de Noquet Lumber Company here in the sawmill as a millwright and also he was a part-time commercial fisherman

Int: Okay now, a millwright, could you explain what that is

RH: Well a millwright is one like a maintenance man and they keep the mill in operation and there's a lot of night work involved there after the sawmill is shut down for the day, then these millwrights, they're going to repair what needs to be done so that mill can get into operation the next morning.

Int: I see.

RH: So a lot of nights there he'd be working till two, three o'clock in the morning to get the job done.

Int: What types of repairs are we talking about, generally speaking, _____?

RH: Well they was a lot of machinery like the, the _____s that the machinery set on and the vibration would maybe jar that loose during the day. Well, they'd have to have to be repaired, timber work, and all sorts of stuff as that, and the machinery and the saws and all the complete, the complete operation of the mill. That was a millwright's job to keep it running.

Int: I see. And you also said that your father was engaged in the commercial fishing industry?

RH: Yes. He did his commercial fishing through the ice in the winter months, and sometimes the mill would be shut down for two or three months when, after the spring break up, they couldn't get the logs out of the swamps anymore, and there would be a period of time when the mill wasn't in operation. Well during that time he would be engaged in some commercial fishing.

Int: I see. Were other people in the village at that time also fishing?

RH: There was about four or five fisherman at that time.

Int: I see, and were these people also doing this much as your father did? What I mean, working at the mill part-time?

RH: Most of them worked at the sawmill when they didn't have any fishing. There was always work at the sawmill, anyone that came in around the village, that is drifters or anyone, they always had a job from the Bay de Noquet Lumber Company. There was always work there and anyone that came along looking for a job, they were hired.

Int: I see. Now you said that you were born right here in the village, does that mean here in Nahma or in Escanaba?

RH: Right here in the village. At that time the women, they had midwives and they didn't go to the hospital to give birth, they had midwives in the village and they gave birth right in the homes.

Int: To the best of your recollection what type of a medical setup would they have here? I've been told that they've had a hospital and things like this...

RH: The Bay de Noquet Lumber Company employed their own doctor, and they had a small hospital probably about four beds, and they took care of their employees in case of accidents or something like that. And this doctor was also on hand for all the employees of the sawmill. They probably paid a dollar or two a month out of their wages, which went for this doctor, doctor's service.

Int: I see. And this applied to anybody who worked at the mill?

RH: That was all the employees of the sawmill and even some people who lived in the village, if they needed medical attention, they could get it from the company doctor.

Int: Okay, let's go back to, let's say when you were eight or ten or twelve. You probably had a part-time job in those days, as I would imagine most people did. What type of work did you do around this town to make extra money for yourself?

RH: Well when I began around ten years old that was right in the depths of the depression, and there was very little money to be made, especially for ten-year-old kids. But there is a golf course within two miles of this village...

Int: Yes.

RH: ...and we were out there at that time, there was no such thing as power golf carts or even pull golf carts, so the kids would carry the golfer's golf bag on their shoulder for thirty five or fifty cents a round, or a nine-holed round of golf. And that was about the only way that we had to earn a little extra money during the golfing season.

Int: I see, this was basically then during the summer?

RH: Yeah, that was during the summer months.

Int: What about your family now? How many people did you have in your family, including your mother and father?

RH: I had one brother and four sisters, or three sisters. One brother and three sisters.

Int: And they all were born in the Village of Nahma?

RH: That is right.

Int: All delivered by either midwife or the company doctor?

RH: Right.

Int: I see. Okay, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions concerning the mill. To the best of your recollection, what type of an operation was the mill? What did they put out? What was their finished product?

RH: Well they had basically lumber, rough lumber, but they also had a finishing mill in the village. After the lumber was dry, then they would run it through the finishing mill and it was planed and ready for, to make furniture, whatever out of them.

Int: I see. A finishing mill now, would it come out sanded and squared up? I'm not sure actually ____.

RH: Yes, all sides would be sanded and then if it was going to be for some kind of siding, it would be tongue-and-groove or ship-lap or they would fit together for siding. They did have some flooring, made some flooring here too, a tongue-and-groove flooring, finished, ready for the job.

Int: At that point in time now we're talking, at this point let's say early 30s when you can probably, your memory is very clear from here on in when you were ten or twelve years old. What was the population of Nahma, approximately?

RH: At that time I think there was about 950 people in the village.

Int: And how many would you say there are at present?

RH: Right now there's possibly a hundred and fifty.

Int: That is a very, very, a very large drop. At what point in time did we, did Nahma start to lose these people?

RH: Well in July of 1951 when the last log went through the saws of the mill, the towns began to die, right at that day.

Int: What do you mean die? I'm not sure I understand.

RH: That was because the mill was shut down and there was no more employment for the men, so they had to go where they could find employment. And they picked up and moved out of the village, all different points. Some of them went to the west, west coast and lumbering out there. Others went to the city to find jobs in the automobile industry, they scattered to all points of the compass.

Int: After the Bay de Noquet Lumber Company shut down, what firm took its place here in Nahma?

RH: Well they sold the old Bay de Noquet Lumber Company sold all their holdings, all their land holdings, the cut-over land, and the complete village of a hundred and five houses, all the main buildings, company store, hotel, boarding house, and a nine-hole golf course. And they had a big advertising campaign to sell this to some concern that would come in with some employment, for to employ what people was left in the village. And they, they felt that it was worth about \$2 ½ million dollars, their holdings. And they said they would sell it for ten cents on the dollar to some company that would establish an industry here.

Int: I see, and what company was that?

RH: So there was a company from Anderson, Indiana that wanted to set up a branch plant somewhere, and they were interested in Nahma, and they finally ended up buying all the holdings of the old lumber company. And they came in and used the finishing mill from the old Bay de Noquet Lumber Company to make their factory. They enlarged the old finishing mill and they did the woodwork part of their business, like at that time they had diving boards were all made out of wood, and picnic tables and swing sets, and all the likes of that they made here.

Int: And the name of this company was?

RH: The American Playground Device Company of Anderson, Indiana.

Int: And this company is still in Nahma?

RH: They're still in Nahma on a small scale, but they still have some operations here in village.

Int: And approximately how many men are employed at this time?

RH: Right now I think they only got about a dozen or fifteen men on the payroll. It's a very small crew.

Int: Do they still have a branch operation in Anderson, Indiana?

RH: Anderson, that is the home plant and they're still in operation there. They do all the metal work, the woodwork is assembled in Nahma and then it's shipped by truck to Anderson, Indiana to have the metal work attached to it there. Like a, like a large merry-go-round, all the wood, base sections are wood, all the top are pipe. That's finished in Anderson, Indiana.

Int: And the gentleman who owns this company, do you recall his name?

RH: That's Warren P. Miller, he is the president of the company.

Int: I see. Okay, let's go back just a little bit back to the 30's and 40's. With the war coming on and things were getting _ just a little bit hairy in Europe, and I imagine the newspapers here in Nahma, at least whatever was available insofar as the media was concerned, the people knew the war was coming. How did that affect the town or did it effect it at all?

RH: Well during the Depression years the demand for lumber was down. They, there wasn't a whole lot of building going on, so this old Bay de Noquet Lumber Company had their yards stacked full, I mean millions of board feet of lumber, stacked full in their yards. And when toward the later 30's when demand for lumber grew because of building Army barracks and everything for this here, toward the start of World War II, then they unloaded all the lumber that they had in their yards, all the dry lumber. It went out by ship, it went out by boat, it went out by rail. And they got everything out of the yard dry and they finally were taking right from the saws, wet gripping wet from the saws and right in the boxcars, the demand for it was so great.

Int: And this was basically to support the war effort?

RH: That went for building of Army camps toward the late 30s.

Int: I see, so apparently the people in Washington suspected war was coming or at least?

RH: Oh it was getting a buildup.

Int: I see. Okay, did you at any point in your life ever work for the Bay de Noquet Lumber Company?

RH: I did when I was going to high school one summer, I think I probably was a junior in high school. One summer I worked in the lumber yard for the Bay de Noquet Lumber Company.

Int: And what type of a job was that? What did you do, actually?

RH: Well it was, lumber was being, the dry lumber that was stacked out there was being loaded. At that time it was still horses drawing the wagons that was loading, we were loading the wagons for the, bring to the finishing mill to be surfaced, to be planed. And they had a lumber grader on the pile, I remember and a man loading on top of the wagon, he was loading that lumber on the wagon. And I was a sixteen year old kid that was handling the boards that weren't quite good enough for that scale that they were after, that scale of lumber that they were after. If there was number ones or number twos in the pile they were loading from, they would probably be every fourth or fifth board was rejected. It had to go into another pile. And then they had what they called an out-man to take care of them outs. And then I had that job as Outman.

Int: I see. Okay now, I'd like at this point to take you back to sometime during the 1930s when Nahma was possibly not at its peak but growing fairly well, as far as the lumber industry was concerned with this buildup for the war effort, etcetera. What, let's place ourselves down by the store, by the post office in that general area. And let's walk down River Street towards the church. What did the town look like?

RH: Well it was a kind of a busy little town as all the men had jobs and the pay they got was not big, but it was steady work and they had a company store right in the town square.

Int: And what was inside that store?

RH: That, inside of that store was everything that you can imagine. They had a full line of groceries and fresh meats, they had hardware, they had clothing, they had tools, they, it was the old time general store. They had stovepipes, they had horseshoe nails.

Int: And was this all reasonably priced or was it, were they trying to gouge money out of people or?

RH: Well it might have been a little bit higher than you'd go to Escanaba to, of course at that time they didn't have supermarkets, but the stores were much bigger and there was more competition over that way. So the prices we paid here might have been a little higher, but nothing, nothing outrageous, you know.

Int: I see. The company was then, thoroughly fare?

RH: Yes. I would say.

Int: Going down towards, from the store to the Catholic Church we, you and I both know what that street looks like presently. What did it look like then?

RH: Well there, that street was full of houses and it had a three story boarding house. And next to the boarding house was the cook shack, you had to feed all the people in this boarding house.

Int: And what was the boarding house used for?

RH: It was used for the single, the single workers that worked, was employed by the lumber company, they lived there. And also in the spring of the year, all the lumberjacks that came out of the timber holdings, all the numerous camps up there, they came down in the spring of the year when the swamps thawed out. And at times there possibly was a hundred lumberjacks in that building, besides the ones that permanently lived there.

Int: I see. Now I want to ask you a couple of questions concerning this fire that we had in Nahma here in the early 20's. This I believe was before your birth, do you remember people saying anything about that?

RH: Yes. That was the last major fire that took a lot of the homes from the village was, I believe, in 1921 or 22. It was before my time. But the fire, the way I hear'em tell about it, it started in around the boiler room of the finishing mill. And it was in the late summer, early fall and there as a high southwest wind blowing and so that the flames from where the fire originally started cut a path through the village, took out the store building and the community building, what we used to call the Club House, and then several houses beyond that in the direction the wind was blowing.

Int: Now, let's talk just for a minute about this Clubhouse. What was the Clubhouse all about?

RH: Well the Clubhouse was a community center for all activities. Now, the high school had the gymnasium in there, so all the, all the, all the high school basketball games were held in there and any, any wedding receptions or any gatherings of any kind, card parties, were all held in the Clubhouse. It also had a bar room, a large bar room. It had a, what we called a candy kitchen or a soda bar part of it, and large rooms, lounge rooms and a full bowling alleys were also part of that building. It was everything there, all the recreation of the village was like under one roof there.

Int: Who maintained this building?

RH: That was the old Bay de Noquet Lumber Company, they owned that and they had their own employees that was operating it.

Int: On what type of a schedule was this building open to the general public?

RH: Well it used to open, like about three o'clock in the afternoon they would open. And then it would close around ten thirty in the evening. They didn't believe in late hours _____ in them years.

Int: I see. And it was run and operated, as far as profits were concerned, by the Bay de Noquet Lumber Company?

RH: Yes.

Int: Okay. I'd like ask you a couple of questions about the shipping that would come in and out. What are you recollections about boats coming into Nahma?

RH: Well I can remember, now this would be back in the early 30s, where there would be four steamboats loading lumber at one time. Now most of them steamboats were taking lumber for, for Buffalo, New York. I remember we used to go there as kids and we used to ask the deckhands and that

where they were going from here. Most of the time it was either Buffalo, New York or Tonawanda, New York. So that's where they had outlets for their lumber, in that area.

Int: What type of docking and wharfing facilities did Nahma have at that time?

RH: They had a very good set of docks, deep-water docks. And these lumber boats used to be able to come in, the docks were maybe, approximately five hundred foot long. And the water was deep enough, they had a, the old lumber company had a dredge, so they would keep them docks dredged out so these boats could come right alongside and right, and take on their loads of lumber.

Int: And this particular five hundred foot dock that you just mentioned, where was that in relationship to where let's say the burner is today?

RH: Well right where that burner sits, that would be, the docks would be south of that. They, we had a bad storm back in Armistice Day of 1940 which washed almost all of them docks out of there. It was one of the worst storms that ever hit this area. And the docks that was butting out that five hundred feet, when the storm was over they only had butted out there maybe fifty feet. The rest was all washed up on the beaches.

Int: I see. Now you've mentioned this golf course. I've been lead to understand that at one time there was something called "The Company Farm" that was in this area. Could you explain that for me, please?

RH: The Company Farm lays right adjacent to where the golf course is now.

Int: I see.

RH: And it was established by the Bay de Noquet Lumber Company as a farm to grow their potatoes and vegetables for all the lumber camps that they had in operation. My old grandfather, before the turn of the century, ran that company farm for the Bay De Noquet Lumber Company. He had about ten or twelve employees, and they raised all the potatoes and all the other vegetables that all the lumber camps is going to need for the next winter.

Int: Was, or rather did some of this produce find its way, let's say to the General Store to be purchased?

RH: Oh yes. All of it was supplied, what they needed at the General Store also.

Int: That leads me to my next point. Let's get back to the General Store just for one minute now. During the Depression when money wasn't plentiful here or anywhere else generally in the country, what type of a system did the company have to enable its people to purchase goods? I don't understand quite what they did with that.

RH: Well that was back right in the deep depths of the Depression. They came out with a system of coupon books. Now the men, they would be working forty hours a week or whatever, I think at that time it was more like fifty to sixty hours a week, but there was no money to pay'em. There was no money available. So what this company did was give them coupon books to trade at the General Store, whatever they needed, according to the size of the family they had. Now take a man and his wife with two or three children would get a coupon book, maybe four-fifty or five dollars worth of coupons in, do to them that week. Of course we're talking about days when you could get a loaf of bread for eight or ten cents and...everything was very cheap compared to what you're going to pay today.

Int: Now these coupon books then basically were just another form of pay then?

RH: Right. It said on there, "Bay de Noquet Lumber Company" and they were from a penny, nickel, dime, quarters, and fifty cents, or one dollar coupons in there. And you would go to the store and get you grocery order there and they would tear out of your coupon book the amount of the groceries, the value of the grocery of the coupon book.

Int: I see. Did you graduate from the Nahma school?

RH: Yes, I graduated in 1941.

Int: Could you tell me something about how, what the school was like, and how it was operated in those days?

RH: Well I think for, at that time we had a fairly good school system here. We had good teachers and I would say anyone that was going through school with any effort to get an education, it was good as any around the area at that time.

Int: What about extra-curricular activities the school provided? Basketball, track, football, things like this?

RH: We have never had any football, but they was, we had good basketball teams here. And we had baseball teams at the time, hardball. And we had track teams.

Int: Was this, this baseball team that you mention now, was this through the school or was this basically sand-lot pick-up games or?

RH: No, it was through the school. And other schools in the area, they would have teams and then they would make up a schedule and we would have baseball, at that time of the year, you know when it was permitting it.

Int: And approximately how many student did you have in school at that point in time?

RH: Well I would say the high school, well the complete enrollment was possibly around 300.

Int: That's K through twelve?

RH: K through twelve, around 300

Int: And how many, let's say in your graduating class

RH: In my class, I think we had around twenty-two of us graduated.

Int: I'd like to ask a couple of questions about the religious setup of Nahma. How many churches did, were in operation at that point in time?

RH: Well, we have a Catholic Church that was built around, around the turn of the century. And also a Episcopal Church which was built not too much longer after the Catholic Church was built, so we have two churches in the village that both's still in operation.

Int: This Episcopal Church, has this always been an Episcopal Church or has it been used by other denominations at any particular point in time?

RH: Well I really couldn't answer that, but it seems like it's like a Protestant Church in the Protestants and the Episcopalians and how if there's some difference in there, I really don't know, but I'm a Catholic myself so I'm not too well versed on their religion. But it could have been different branches of that Protestant religion.

Int: Would you have any idea of when that church was built? The Episcopal Church?

RH: Well I would estimate probably, approximately in 19, around 1910 or 1915.

Int: You're the Postmaster here in Nahma and have been for many years. Could you give me some sort of a brief history on Postal activities of Nahma, let's say going back to the 1800s?

RH: Well we, our Post Office here in the village was established in 1882. And we will have a Centennial now this coming February. And there's been numerous people that's held that Postmaster job there. I wrote to the Archives in Washington D.C. to get a history of it. And the first four or five people that held the job of Postmaster, even the oldest pioneer here in the village has no recollection of 'em. It is before their time and they've probably heard their parents speak of them, they said, when they were children.

Int: I see.

RH: But it's back in too much beyond anybody's memory of the pioneers that's here at this time.

Int: What, in your earliest recollection, who was the Postmaster?

RH: It was a man by the name of Mr. Victor Gustafson, he was the Postmaster here from, I think it was from the year 1928 until 1937. And then...

Int: Who came after that _____?

RH: After '37 when he retired it was a lady from the village took the office by the name of Mrs. Ethel Ruskie, and she held the job until she passed away in 1958. And then in 1959 it was the vacancy was filled and several of us went after it and I was given the job. And I've been here ever since in the Post Office.

Int: I'd like to ask a couple of questions about the turnover from, the transitional period that we saw in the early 50s from the Bay de Noc Lumber Company to the American Playground Device Company that you mentioned early in our session here. What type of a transition was it? What did Warren Miller say to these people concerning what was going to happen later on down the line?

RH: Well there was kind of an agreement between the old Bay de Noc Lumber Company and this new American Playground Company to employ the people. That's what the main point was, so the playground company could see some potential here to turn it into a branch plant to start and then eventually turn it into their main operations, and relocate here from Anderson, Indiana. This was going to be their headquarters of their company. It, they finally moved here full-force in, I think the year was '67 or '68, but they had so many problems with their shipping out of here, there was their finished product was being delayed on the docks from the trucking companies, and they had a bottle-neck here with their shipping. And so eventually they had to return to Anderson, Indiana and then continue here as a branch plant of their business.

Int: What became of the mill itself? That part of the mill that was located down by what's know as the Burner?

RH: Well that old sawmill there, it was a large mill. It was one of the largest in the U.P. It had had two large band-saws and it was a big operation as sawmills went. There was a lot of them they were more like portable mills and they would be, they would set them up right in the timber lands and keep moving'em as the timber got further and further away. But this was one of the largest permanent mills in the U.P. And so when they run out of timber, the company run out of their timber holdings, all the, had cut everything off their lands, they sold the mill and all the machinery to some salvage company from Menominee, Michigan. And they came in here and they removed all the machinery, and I think from here, what I heard, it went to the west coast to be set up out there. It was all very good machinery. And the mill then was dismantled and the lumber was used for salvage or whatever they got from the buildings.

SKIP IN TAPE

Int: Mr. Bramer, as a long-time resident of the Village of Nahma, what do you view as the prospects and the future for this particular area?

RH: Well, it looks to me like the future is going to be like in the tourist for this area.

Int: How so?

RH: How...we have a lot of things going for us, in that line like, a beautiful bathing beach here, and we have good, exceptionally good hunting and fishing, and good harbor for small boats, and then our nine-hole golf course out here has been kept up in very good shape. So all those things there would be good for, like to draw in the tourists in good weather months, you know? And then in the wintergtime, there's a lot of areas here, trails, for snowmobiling and icefishing on Big Bay de Noc is getting very popular. The perch have been biting like mad the last few winters out here. So I would say the tourists, the tourists then, it would be about the only potential we have for the area now.

END OF INTERVIEW