

Interview with Robert Kekke  
May 13, 2015  
Ontonagon, Michigan  
Interview by Gabe Logan and Kathryn Johnson

#### START OF INTERVIEW

Gabe Logan (GL): Ok, May 13, 2015, Gabe Logan, Department of History, Northern Michigan University, Kathryn Johnson, Department of History, Northern Michigan University. We're interviewing Bob Kekke in Ontonagon, Michigan on his recollections and memories of growing up in Green, Michigan, and other aspects of his life he cares to speak about. Also, Bruce, if you could introduce yourself since you tend to weigh in that's always helpful.

Bruce Johanson (BJ): Yeah, I'm Bruce Johanson, Ontonagon County Historical Society.

GL: Ok, and then Bob, just to start us out, if you please tell us – I have to see what I'm looking at – the spelling of your name and your date of birth for context.

Robert Kekke (RK): Ok, Bob Kekke, that's K-E-K-K-E, originally it was K-E-K-K-I, some word, nothing, I haven't found anything legal that changed it, but that's –

GL: Someone changed it [laughs]

RK: Somebody changed it [laughs] and March 29, 1941 date of birth. Ok, the community of Green when I grew up was mostly farming, if you go up the roads now you'll see nothing but brush or trees, they were all farm fields. Small farms I think, what would you think, 40 acres?

BJ: 40s and 80s.

RK: 40s and 80s, so nothing big, but they could, people could survive on them –

BJ: In Green you sold most of your things off of tractors.

RK: Yeah, what do they call them? Stump farms when they bought them because they were cut over. And Green itself had one large store, the Green Store, had a gas station in it, and the post office was there, and an ice house in the back where they sold ice. Then across the road was another smaller store, but that was also a gas station. And my uncle, August, ran the Green Store for several years, I think in the '40s and '50s.

BJ: That would be August Ruutila?

RK: August Ruutila. And next door to that he had a big workshop for his logging crooks, so I think that's why he – I don't know who owned that store, if he actually bought it, but I think Orville Lane [spelled phonetically] is the one who originally –

BJ: Well Lane, his parents had it.

RK: Lane's parents? Ok. So I don't know if August bought it or whatever, but –

BJ: Jack Hagala [spelled phonetically] had in the end, didn't he?

RK: Yeah, Jack was the last, Jack Hagala was the last owner.

GL: Was this pretty much a general store then? He had a logging company and this store?

RK: Yeah. They sold canned goods, there was a butcher shop with big, one of those block cutting tables, so –

GL: And you indicated an ice house, was the ice coming off Superior?

RK: I don't know where they got the ice, but I remember August's wife, Viola, saying that the summer people, the people who came up for the summer, I think a, I don't know what size the blocks were, and whatever they charged, but they would say they wanted 15 cents worth of ice for their afternoon toddies or whatever. So she'd have to go and try to chip off what she thought was 15 cents worth [laughter] that's how that, yeah. And I don't know who all these summer people were, but a lot of them were doctors and whatnot from, that came up here. And they lived just along the lakeshore down that way.

Katherine Johnson (KJ): You said that was your uncle August?

RK: Yeah.

KJ: Can you spell his last name?

RK: R-U-U- Ok, the family spelling is R-U-U-T-T-I-L-A, and he spells his R-U-U-T-I-L-A.

KJ: Is that your mother's side?

RK: Mother's side, yeah. She was a Ruuttila. [Speaks with an accent] Ruuttila.

GL: Before we leave these farms, I have this weird fascination with agriculture [laughs], so were these self-sustaining farms?

RK: Yeah.

GL: And so what was grown?

RK: Now, on the Ruuttila farm, they had 80 acres, they peddled milk, beef, and I think that might have been it, but hay for the cattle, and, oh, and probably eggs. And in the milk house they did have like a bottling system where they bottled their own and they had a, some old Ford truck, I suppose it may have been a Model A, Model T that they, Ted and August both. Yeah. But no, nothing big like corn or anything, I mean it really doesn't grow up here that well.

GL: Doesn't seem to.

RK: Yeah, in places. Yeah, and that's my grandmother, [seems to be looking at picture] is that the one where she's washing clothes?

KJ: It looks like she's on the base, yeah, \_\_\_\_\_ some water there, washing clothes.

RK: Yeah, yeah.

KJ: Great picture [laughter].

RK: Yeah, that was –

BJ: That oral history we had was done back in 1976, I think?

RK: Yeah, I think so.

BJ: I forgot to bring that out earlier.

RK: And we keep saying they homesteaded at that place, but another family actually had been there, was it - ?

BJ: Lamary [spelled phonetically]

RK: Lamary, and I think they moved eventually, I think the Mrs. ended up in California.

BJ: There's an interesting legend about that, the Lamarys [spelled phonetically] moved to Wyoming, you ever hear of Laramie, Wyoming?

RK: Laramie, Wyoming? Is that right, I've never heard that. But there wasn't much there when they got there, I think he said little shack, or I shouldn't say shack, but that's what it was, no, it's not here anymore. There was a lean-to and the cow was, [looking at picture] now this might have been it. The animals were on one half and they lived in the other half until, [looking at picture] this is the first house that was built, and then another one around '36 when they built.

GL: What brought your people to the Green community?

RK: I don't know. I know the Ruuttilas were in Calumet, he tried mining but didn't like it, and I seem to think there were relatives here, somewhere, and that's why they, you know, so they came by train to Ontonagon, I mean, all kinds of stories come out, that they had to take some kind of a raft, but there must have been a road, you know, that they somehow got up there. Yeah, so –

GL: And this would have been in 19-?

RK: Early 1900s.

GL: Early 1900s, ok.

RK: My grandmother was a pastry chef, and nothing written down, but I think it was the Michigan House.

GL: Oh

KJ: I love that place

GL: They're wonderful

RK: Yeah [laughter]. Well, when they were married, even prior to marriage they both had the same last name, because in Finland you took the name of the farm that you moved to, so I don't know who moved to whose farm first, I think Jonas probably, and then Eva, the grandmother, then her family moved there so that, but that was the name of the farm, so he –

GL: And then they came to the United States from Finland?

RK: Yeah, but they were married in Calumet, and they came separate times, but knew each other.

BJ: Didn't Jonas have his parents, also?

RK: Yep, parents were here. Carl and Amanda, I think.

BJ: Did he bring them over, I mean, was he the immigrant that brought the parents over?

RK: You know, I don't know, Bruce, I don't know that. Yeah, I think, it seems to me Frank Kangas [spelled phonetically] was here before, so I don't know.

KJ: Do you know how Frank Kangas was related?

RK: Frank Kangas's wife was Eva, Aunt Eva. Eva Ruuttila and Mrs. Kangas were sisters. Yeah. Ida and Eva. So that's...And they had adjoining farms.

KJ: In Finland?

RK: Here, in Green.

BJ: Where does Gus Till [spelled phonetically] come into all this?

RK: Gus Till –

BJ: Ralph's father

RK: Yeah, I don't know. I don't think they're related, but just to, you know, farm family.

BJ: They're kind of off the back of the Ruuttila farm.

RK: They're, the back of the Kangas farm. Yeah. Kangas and Niskas [spelled phonetically] were right, and those two ladies were sisters, and whatever their names were I don't know. John Niska would know.

GL: They relocated to Green, then, and began farming away, one of the emphasis of this project is the political, the left is political persuasion of Green, and can you speak to that and how your family was or was not involved?

RK: Yeah, the Ruuttilas, you know, how I see Green when I was growing up, and what I heard, there were the church Finns and the hall [?] Finns. You either went to the Green church or you went to the Green hall. Whether this is true or not, maybe some, you know, intermingled, but the Ruuttilas were the church Finns, and the Kekkes were not, although my grandfather Andrew died in '29, so that was way before any of this, although the hall may have been there already, but my dad's mom Olga remarried to a Henry Wuori, W-U-O-R-I, and I don't, you know, I obviously saw him but I don't remember him at all, but, so I don't know just what the, who influenced whom, or what. But, and the story is that in the '30s my dad's family was thinking about going to Russia because of the economic conditions.

GL: To Karelia? The Karelia province?

RK: Probably would have been, if all this is on the up and up. Yeah. And he was engaged, or he was going to get married to mother, and she said she wouldn't go, so they had decided then that if one doesn't go, nobody would go. So maybe mother influenced where I'm living [laughs]

BJ: \_\_\_\_\_ stopped the whole thing

RK: Yeah. So, whether that's, that's the story. So it's interesting. And, you know, I never talk to folks about this because I don't know if it ever came up, but the Green hall, a lot of people will say, "No, it was not Communist." Others will say, "Yes, it was." Some will say it's socialist, communist, both, whatever, and I honestly don't know. When we were in 4-H, in the '50s, we would have 4-H doings there, and I remember, who was that accordion player? Viola?

KJ: Viola Turpina [spelled phonetically]

RK: Turpina. Hearing her at a dance there, yeah. And I, even as a kid I thought, "Boy, she's pretty old," [laughter] to be, but she was, God, she was –

BJ: [Holding up picture] is this the Green hall?

RK: Yeah.

BJ: Ok. We've got that one nailed down then.

RK: Yeah, that's –

BJ: Where was that actually located?

RK: Ok, do you know where Angie Coiston [spelled phonetically] lives, lived?

BJ: Yeah, and where she had her mobile home, you mean?

RK: No, no, no, no, not – Angie.

BJ: No, I don't know.

RK: You know Coacher's [spelled phonetically] cabin, or the cabins? No? Ok...The town line creek?

BJ: Yeah.

RK: Ok. If you're heading to Silver City, the first driveway on the on the –

BJ: Toward Chocolay Township, then.

RK: Yeah. South side, used to be Coacher's Cabins, I don't know who has that now, and the next place, that's where the Green hall was.

BJ: Ok. Then through a little ways?

RK: Yeah, on 64. Then there's a little road -

BJ: It was right on 64?

RK: Yeah, right on 64.

GL: Is it still standing?

RK: No. All, the think woods or whatever, yeah, Angie's husband Neil, Neil Coiston, bought the property when it closed, had it torn down, and I think then burned.

BJ: Is Angie still alive?

RK: No, she died a couple years ago.

BJ: See, you're too late. If you'd been here three years ago we'd have had this all taken care of.

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GL: Only thing I've been on time for is my wife [laughter]

RK: Yeah, no, and, you know, and Angie was a war bride, so she would have had, I don't know what should would have –

BJ: Where did she come from?

RK: From New York.

BJ: I know she didn't talk, she didn't have the Upper accent, you know, the Yooper accent.

RK: No, she was [New York accent] New York. Yeah.

BJ: Being a war bride, you see, and coming from New York into the U.P., that's a war bride. [Laughter]

GL: I was going to ask for elaboration on that one [laughter]

RK: Those poor gals that came here, outhouses, they had no idea, it's like Elmer Kangas's wife –

BJ: Oh, Rose?

RK: Yeah.

BJ: And she was British, wasn't she?

RK: She was British, and then Betty, Betty Hunkle [spelled phonetically] –

BJ: Yes

RK: She said when she got here, she asked her husband Dwayne “Where is the bathroom?” and it was out in the back [laughter]. You know, they were pretty civilized already, you know, compared to up here, because we were the frontier. [Laughter]

GL: How did, so, let's digress here a little, that's a fascinating story, did, how did the community respond to these war brides?

RK: I think they were fine, I remember Elmer and Rose getting married in the Green church, and –

GL: And she was a war bride?

RK: Yeah. And Rose is still living, isn't - ?

BJ: I think she is, yeah. Elmer passed away a couple of years ago.

RK: Yeah. She's in Marquette.

BJ: And we saw the Japanese lady here in town.

RK: Yeah.

GL: As a war bride?

BJ: Yeah. \_\_\_\_\_

RK: But, yeah, I think they were, although, Angie, you know, I never, I think she was with the ladies', what they call sewing club or whatever, those things where, I think she went to those, I couldn't be sure. You know, Janet Coiston, her daughter lives in Marquette, and she would probably have some –

GL: Remind me to check on that.

RK: Because she stopped in last summer and we were talking about –

BJ: Is that her name now, Janet Koistinen?

RK: I think it's, or does she, I don't know if she goes by her married name or not. I wouldn't even know what it is. But we had talked about Green and she had mentioned that Neil had that building raised or whatever, or whatever it was, so, that's the only reason I know that. But, again, I think they were well accepted, the war brides.

GL: So, back to the community, so there was this Finn hall, and your, one side of the family was affiliated with it or supported it, and the other side, family lore suggests –

RK: I, yeah, yeah, yeah.

GL: And the other were church Finns, as you put it. What religion? Lutheran?

RK: Lutheran.

BJ: What else?

GL: What else, right.

RK: Yeah, started playing the organ in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade on the pump organ. It was old Finnish hymns that were just God awful. [Laughter]

BJ: That was in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Green.

RK: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: There's a picture of it in there.



RK: They're almost all in the minor key, and they would just, the Finnish term is *vesa* [spelled phonetically], they would never sing it, you know, one, two, three, [vocalizing sound of song] they'd just drag everything [laughter]. And you know, for a seventh grade kid, let's get this over with [laughter], you know it's just –

GL: You said this would be conducted in Finnish, with the ceremonies and the songs?

RK: Yeah.

GL: Ok. So you grew up bilingual? Religiously speaking bilingual? [Laughs]

RK: Yeah, and I think until about maybe three, but I can speak some, my brother is much better, he's older, but when my folks married on the Ruuttala farm for the first four years while the house was being built, so Dave, my brother Dave, spoke only Finnish, basically, until almost starting school, so he –

BJ: Now Dave imported a bride, didn't he?

RK: Well, she lived in Woodspur, Onaway, and she was from Finland, and I think she came and she was in about the fourth grade, fifth grade, and then after graduation, you know, Dave somehow got, who knows how, but.

KJ: Can I ask a question real quick?

RK: Sure.

KJ: So, with your parents, with the Kekkes being Hall Finns and the Ruuttalas being Church Finns, when your parents made that commitment to each other to join in this matrimony and this difference of the ideological split, did your mom then convince your dad to start going to church? Did he attend, or was there still - ?

RK: No, no. He would attend periodically, but I would say reluctantly [laughter]. They were married in the Green Church, and I believe the reception and dance was at the Green Hall.

KJ: What a great compromise [laughter]. That's great, the best of both!

GL: What do you remember about the leftist parts of the community or hearsay about the communities, what set them apart from...Let me try and articulate this. Were the political persuasions of the leftwing community of Green that remarkably pronounced than the rest of the community?

RK: I think they may have been more in the, let's say in the '30s, during the Depression. But '40s and '50s, I think it was just, I don't think we, you know, as a kid I don't recall that. I think I'd hear, well, you know, you know they didn't go to the Green Church, so, ok, you just sort of, well, whatever. But yeah, I don't, I don't think there was, there may have been animosity between the two.

BJ: But the farmers cooperated with that combine?

RK: Yeah, and I think they were all, you know, either-or, you know, on that, and who ran that, Neska [spelled phonetically]?

BJ: I think so, the Green Farmers' Cooperative, they jointly owned a threshing machine, went from farm to farm.

RK: Yeah, and there were non-Finnish farmers, too, like the Whites.

BJ: Yeah, the Whites.

RK: And I don't know \_\_\_\_\_ farm, Homer and Lila?

BJ: You got me on that one. Well Lila was a Koistinen [spelled phonetically], wasn't she?

RK: Lila?

BJ: Yeah.

RK: No, she was a Koistinen.

BJ: Yeah, Lila was.

RK: Yeah. Is that a Quaker? I mean the \_\_\_\_\_

BJ: No, if Lila was a Koistinen, she would've been a Red [spelled phonetically]. Were all the Koistinen's Red?

RK: Well, you know, I don't know.

BJ: I wish Donna, well, I couldn't get ahold of Donna, she can't get here.

RK: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: But we still gotta trap her! But her mother just passed away just a few months ago.

RK: Yeah, she would've been good because I have pictures of her mother at Green Church gatherings. Elsie.

BJ: Yes.

RK: So, you know, Koistinens may have been, I really don't know.

BJ: Verna May is coming in next week, we'll nail her on that one.

RK: Yeah, yeah, she's, you know there was almost a difference between, and they say like for, we live on the Cranberry or whatever LP Walsh now. There's almost a difference between living on that road, or living on the, what is it, Talfry?

BJ: Oh yeah, the Talfry road.

RK: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: Now it's all part of the LP Walsh. Was Talfry basically a red community then?

RK: No, not Talfry. But I mean the, from the highway going up the Talfry road. There seemed to be a division.

BJ: Oh, really?

RK: Yeah, between people who lived on the Cranberry and the Quarterline Road, then you get to Green, which is the Talfry road.

BJ: The old Kekke homestead's on the –

RK: LP Walsh. That's where the Deans are.

BJ: So they were on the wrong side of the track then in other words.

RK: Yeah [laughter] sort of, yeah. And I don't know, like Jake Hills [?] going up, she, they went to the Green Church. Neil Stores [spelled phonetically]. Now the Kivelas were also there, that's the one that Phil bought, that's just down from the Kekke farm. They never went.

BJ: Ok. And the Kivelas, that's the one that Bill Fisher's got now.

RK: Yeah. And I have feeling that –

BJ: Raising hops out there now.

RK: Yeah, Kivelas, who is in our state senate from Marquette, I think he's a relative of this Kivela, because they moved to Marquette.

GL: John Kivela?

KJ: Yeah, John Kivela.

RK: You should ask him, if you –

BJ: Whether he had Green roots? [Laughter]

RK: No, he may have some, if that's the case.

GL: Yeah, I see him a couple of times a year, yeah. Alright, so there's this, a little bit of a cultural divide, and you grew up in the '50s, and what was that like growing up in rural Green, Upper Peninsula Michigan in 1950s?

KJ: And '40s, right?

RK: Yeah, '41, yeah. I really remember 1950 coming in because it was a whole new, I remember that, thinking about it, five zero. Everyone was pretty much in this, I guess everybody was poor [laughs] at that time, and, you know, outhouses and some people had water pumps, you know. Almost everybody had a sauna. In I think about '51 we had a house built, or a cabin built next door to ours for my dad's mother, because both her husbands had died. And she specified for the house, there was no bathroom inside that was to be outside. And there had to be a full wood range kitchen stove, even though we did put in a little electric apartment-sized thing. But that was, those were, eventually a bathroom had to be added, that was just, and she chopped her own wood. Just a tiny little bit of a lady, but with 11 kids, how they ever... I think what really, really pulled us into the 20<sup>th</sup> century would've been White Pine.

GL: How so?

RK: All of a sudden there are jobs that are paying, roads are getting redone, rebuilt, paved, in fact, because we couldn't get out of Ontonagon on a paved road. Greenland, Rockland, and the White Pine road were all gravel or mud. Yeah. So it really, you know, when there's that influx of money and all of a sudden things are just, you know, so I keep, things I don't like about White Pine, you know, the ecology, but they pulled us screaming and hollering into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

GL: Was there train service available as well?

RK: Oh, yeah. In fact, we took the train several times as a kid to Detroit, had relatives living there and quite often we'd spend the night in Chicago. It was the Chippewa.

BJ: A black passenger train run by the Milwaukee Road.

RK: And I remember black conductors on there, and the last stop "On-ton-a-gun" [laughter] Yeah, that was, those were –

GL: Did the bus, would Greyhound or Trail Ways come through prior to paved roads?

RK: No, I don't think they ever did because we're so off the beaten path here.

BJ: You catch Greyhound in Ironwood.

RK: Yeah, and let's see, also, was it in Houghton or Baraga you could get the, but I don't ever, I did take the bus once to Grand Rapids, but I think that also went around Chicago, I don't think it,

I don't know if the bridge was even there yet. I think, because that was '59 I think when the Mackinaw Bridge...

GL: What about recreations growing up in the Green community, the sports and activities and dances, or did you just milk cows all the time? [laughter]

RK: In the summer my cousins from Superior, Jack and Ted Koskee [spelled phonetically]

BJ: That'd be Walt Koskee's kids?

RK: Yeah. And Walt was the manager of you'd call the white, you know the Ontonagon Co-op?

BJ: Midland Co-op

RK: Midland. He was the central manager. And their two boys would come up and spend most of the summer at our place, and our cousins from Waukegan would come up, and our upstairs was just an open, you know, attic, no rooms in it, so it was just full of beds and we just, that was the summer. We'd make treehouses, I don't know how Mother ever did it, we were close, right across the road from the lake, and then we'd go to swim, we'd build rafts or diving boards, go to the farm, help make hay, or whatever. Just, it was, you know, you could just make sure you're back for lunch or dinner. And there were no phones then, so we had no telephones.

GL: So on the other side of that, what were winters like?

RK: I skied, probably starting, I don't know, when did the Porkies open? Bruce? Well, when he gets here. But we would ski down the hillsides, toboggan sled, but that was about it. We really didn't get into town. We'd see a movie once in a while but rarely because I think that probably was a little pricey, and to get into town you know that's not the....

GL: Would automobiles be used in the winters still?

RK: Yes.

GL: Would you augment that with sleighs at all or horse-drawn –

RK: No, no. Not in my generation. My parents, I think what they did then was they rolled the highway, or it wasn't a highway, it was still dirt, but I think so sleds could go on it, they had big rollers that packed the snow down.

KJ: What was your father's profession?

RK: He drove truck for the county, and graters or whatever, and he also, I have a picture of him in front of the old Mass Co-op, he worked there for a year or two delivering. And that's the Eagles' Hall now. And I looked at that picture, Bruce, of the Eagles' Hall and what it is now, and it's the same building, that's where Dad was in front of that one. When did the ski hill open?

BJ: Back in the '40s.

RK: Yeah, so when that opened –

BJ: '41

RK: Oh, well I wasn't skiing then.

[Collective Laughter]

GL: Put you in your baby carriage.

RK: But I remember when G. Mennen Williams came up here, and I remember shaking his hand, I do remember that.

GL: Who?

BJ: G. Mennen Williams, Soapie Williams, Governor of Michigan. Democratic governor of Michigan. Built the Mackinaw Bridge. Fought the Republicans against it to get it up.

RK: The Mennen Aftershave Company. That's why they called him Soapie. So he had lots of bucks there. Yeah. Polka dot.

BJ: That was his trademark.

RK: So yeah, that was about it in the winters. So sports, like in the high school, they would drive us back from football, I only went out one year, and I don't have a football body [laughter]. Now you see some of these, I was skinny skinny skinny. My brother used to call me "Prairie Chicken" because I, you know, at that age you can't put weight on, and I couldn't. So, sports I didn't participate. We played, you know, neighborhood baseball and that sort of stuff up the road at some of the places, but, yeah.

GL: In 1950s, before we get out of that, of course that's when television makes this boom into the United States, and do you recall getting your first television?

RK: Oh yeah, yes.

GL: Did that change the family dynamics?

RK: I think it did. It was black and white, we had this huge antennae so you could get either Marquette or Duluth and Superior, and most of the time it was snow [laughter]. So that would be the conversation on the bus going to school: "How was your reception last night?" [Laughter] And I don't think we got, that would have been in the, I don't even know when that would've been. '50s? '55, '56?

BJ: Well the transmitter tower up at White Pine went up in the early, early '60s, '61 or '62.

RK: Ok, see that wasn't there when... Yeah, and we got our telephone about the same time. There were only certain places, the Green Store had a telephone, Verna May may know if the tavern, the Go In [?] had one.

BJ: Verna May's husband ran a bar out in Green.

RK: And I worked there one summer. Morning shift. Started at 7, I think. [Laughter]

KJ: In a bar?

RK: Yeah, well that's when Boyle [spelled phonetically] Brothers was drilling that, putting in that new shaft, and that's when –

BJ: Morning shift came off.

RK: And at first I thought, "My God, this is terrible," then I went, "This is their evening," you know. [Laughter] So that was a, the swinging Go In. But where was I on the – oh, in the telephone, and the telephone we did get, where the dial should be there was a crank for the operator. And there were I think two dry cell batteries, two in the corner. Heavy, heavy. And we didn't get a dial phone until '63, the year I graduated from Concordia.

BJ: \_\_\_\_\_ put in dial service at White Pine first.

RK: Is that right? And that was something.

BJ: The telephone company here was family-owned, privately-owned, until just a few years ago.

RK: But the first phone company in the state of Michigan.

KJ: Really?

RK: It was in Rockland, but it's the Ontonagon –

BJ: Telephone company is the oldest one in the state. There were telephones operating here in 1877, 2 years before \_\_\_\_\_

RK: But it didn't have Green until –

KJ: Took a century to get to Green.

GL: That was a hard 20 mile stretch! [Laughter] What do you recall about the co-op stores that were, the white co-op stores or maybe the commodities that were part of that?

RK: The Ontonagon Co-op, I don't remember ever going into that Eagles' Hall –

BJ: Do you remember ever coming into this one when it was a red store?

RK: Oh yes, yeah. And I thought it was much better, had more produce, or not produce, but more products, because it was bigger. And it was the new building and it was pretty nice. And the other co-op, good butcher, and I always used to cringe at my dad ordering, you know, a piece of beef, and have it ground up, and then he would take that home and eat it raw with egg and whatever, and I thought it was not civilized until I went to Switzerland and taught there for a little over a year and a bunch of the teachers are going to a restaurant and here this one teacher orders steak tartar, I'd never heard of it, and here comes this raw hamburger, I thought, "Well, Dad wasn't too far off!" [Laughter] Yeah, so it must have been something that maybe from Europe, if his parents, I don't know, but we never ate it, he's the only one that ate that.

KJ: So would your dad come and do the shopping and you would come with him, or would your mom go, or was it both?

RK: Usually it would be mom and dad, I remember that. And then he did shopping with her, he was on the Ontonagon Co-op board for a while, I think, I don't know, until they closed maybe, I really don't remember. But since he spoke both Finnish and English and he could write both, I think he took quite a few of the notes, or minutes or whatever. You're coming up with all your –

BJ: Ah, once in a while \_\_\_\_\_ grocery stores.

KJ: We're looking at a picture of \_\_\_\_\_

BJ: Not unlike it would've been. That picture was taken from this back corner shooting toward the front door.

KJ: So this is from 1963, so the co-op would've been closed by then, is that correct?

BJ: Right

RK: That would've been the IGA or Red Owl or whatever.

BJ: \_\_\_\_\_

RK: But it was –

BJ: This is the grand opening of 1963 \_\_\_\_\_

RK: Yes, so I think we did most of the shopping at the other co-op because Uncle Walt was the general manager for the whole, it was called CCI, was it CCI first, CCW, and then they merged with Midland? Central Cooperative Wholesale and then Incorporated and then they merged with Midland.

BJ: \_\_\_\_\_



RK: So, and Walt would come periodically on his tours of the co-ops –

BJ: Well, Walt was married to your mother's sister?

RK: Sister, yeah.

GL: So back to kind this narrative, the 1950s is often seen as this time of prosperity, was your family sharing in this prosperity, the Green community sharing in this prosperity?

RK: Yeah, yeah, in fact Mom taught for a couple of years at the Cranberry School before she got married, and that was with a two-year degree.

BJ: Did she come out of County Normal?

RK: Yeah, County Normal. When she got married, then she quit teaching. I don't know if that was still the rule that you couldn't be married and teach in '36, I don't know.

BJ: \_\_\_\_\_

RK: Something like that

GL: That and ice cream parlors [laughter]

RK: When White Pine opened, she was working, went to work up there, what the heck was she doing at the inn, I think she was, you know, like a maid, and we knew the superintendent, Elmer Roneo [spelled phonetically], does that name ring a bell?

BJ: Elmer Roneo, yes. He's one of the founders of the Ontonagon County \_\_\_\_\_ Association, and also he was superintendent of White Pine at the time.

RK: Right, and he knew the family well, and he said, to my mother, Bertha, he said, we need teachers, we can't get any, you have two-year degree, I can get you to teach as long as you start going back to Northern. So, I remember that summer we went out west on a trip, and I kept bugging her, I think I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I said, "Why don't you go?" So she started teaching then, and she, a bunch of elderly ladies, well, they weren't old then, but they always called themselves the retreads [?], they would go to Northern every summer for summer school, take the night classes until they got their –

BJ: Your mother was subbing into the early '70s, 1970s.

RK: Subbing?

BJ: Yeah, here in Ontonagon.

RK: No, my mother never subbed a day.

BJ: She came in on a couple of occasions –

RK: Or Olga?

BJ: Olga! There it is \_\_\_\_\_

RK: Another sister

BJ: \_\_\_\_\_

RK: Yeah, no, when mother retired she said, Olga was another sister

GL: You mentioned White Pines, what was the industry that brought it in, the mining or –

RK: Yeah, copper.

GL: So that's the mine. The copper.

KJ: As opposed to the lumber or something.

[All talking at once]

RK: That's what really –

GL: And so why would they need teachers, for the children of the miners?

RK: Yeah, they built a whole new town. And they built, first a new elementary, and when it was built it won the school of the year design award.

BJ: Yeah. Now it's a garage.

RK: Now it's a garage. And I think they were some of the highest paid teachers in the state.

BJ: They certainly were.

RK: So, from one income to two, and as kids we could see, "Ok, things are happening."

BJ: And your dad worked at the mine?

RK: No, at the county. And they were, I don't think they were paid very well at that time.

BJ: It was steady.

RK: It was steady, though, you know, that's, so.

GL: You mentioned the advent of television and telephone coming out to Green, electricity was, I would assume was probably before your time, but was that service fairly consistent, the REC?

RK: We were on U.P. power where we are. Yeah, I don't, it did go out at times but I don't really think it was a big issue.

GL: Ok. So this prosperity then in the 1950s – [to Kathryn Johnson] do you have any questions on that?

KJ: No

GL: Ok. So from the 1950s then, you graduated in high school?

RK: '59.

GL: And from there did you stay in the community?

RK: Went to Suomi.

BJ: Now Finlandia

RK: Which is now Finlandia, from there to Concordia in Moorhead, Minnesota. Oh, boy. Chapel every day.

BJ: \_\_\_\_\_?

RK: No, no –

BJ: That's a Norwegian.

RK: That's all Norwegian, Finns, one fellow from Suomi, two of us went up there.

GL: Why did you go to Suomi?

RK: Finnish. It –

GL: Was that vocation stressed in the family, that you're going to go for a higher degree?

RK: Yeah, mother stressed it. Dad really didn't. Yeah, it was a –

BJ: And your mother was a teacher.

RK: And I remember dad, when I was finishing my Master's he says, "Why do you have to keep" you know, I suppose like most parents would say "Why do you keep going to school?"

BJ: Get married. Get a job!

RK: Well, I was working then, but, you know, just different lives. Yeah, and I had to, didn't have, I was shy, I think one credit to graduate like in June so I had to spend summer school at Concordia, and mother and I graduated with our bachelor's degrees the same day. I from there, and mother from Northern.

KJ: That's exciting.

RK: So that was –

GL: And then you indicated after graduation that's when you left the Green community?

RK: I taught in Rockland, I lived at home that first year and taught in Rockland. Then from there I went downstate to Mount Clemens in Saginaw, then came back and taught for two years in Alton, that school has burnt down. And from there I went to work, I was here a year and a half, and then I went and worked for the intermediate school district as a consultant in special ed, and I don't know how many years of that, well in between I had gone to Switzerland for a year and a half, teaching over there.

GL: What did you notice about the education, what stands out in your memory about the education process that was offered to the community of Green and Ontonagon and Rockland that the teachers were instilling in the students, of course there's basic knowledge, but.

KJ: Was there anything distinct or unique?

GL: Bruce had mentioned that one student had indicated that it prepared them for a life in Ontonagon.

KJ: As opposed to \_\_\_\_\_ travel to Switzerland or to be successful moving to Detroit –

[Woman walks in, talking]

RK: I don't know.

KJ: Maybe there wasn't anything distinct about it?

RK: I think was gave me the travel bug, you from \_\_\_\_\_ it was the music.

GL: Is that what you taught?

RK: I mean, I did for a little bit, but mostly social studies and special ed. And then I think history class just really, and geography, I was into that, that's why I wanted to go and see things other than Green [laughs.]

[People talking to other woman again]

GL: Did you notice, I'm not quite sure how to articulate this either, so you had these experiences teaching in other school districts, maybe this is a better way of putting it, was there anything in particular emphasized in Green academically that might not have been emphasized in these other school districts?

RK: You mean like in the Ontonagon, because we didn't have a school –

GL: I was saying that you said you went down, yeah, correct, in Ontonagon, but I thought you said you were in Mount Pleasant for a while?

RK: Mount Clemens, yes.

GL: Were there specific curriculums that might have been specific to the Upper Peninsula? How to survive in the winter? [Laughter]

RK: No.

KJ: Can I take you in a slightly different direction? Working for the ISD, especially in special ed, being that resource for all of the schools who would come to the ISD for that support, were you kind of in the first wave?

RK: The first wave?

KJ: Of being in that position in special ed?

RK: Yeah, it was all new. The whole regional REM-C – are you familiar with those terms? Regional Educational Media Centers, and there had been that special education media center, and now it's all merged into, but there are still districts, and I'll be honest, it was pretty rough at the beginning, because nobody from the bottom up knew really what's going on. You're basically paving new, making new pavement.

KJ: Did the ISD, or REM-C, should I use that term? Did the REM-C get federal funds that then you had access to that you could distribute to the teachers to conduct professional development for them?

RK: I think it all came from Lansing, and I think some of it may have been federal, and then funneled, but through Lansing.

KJ: Ok, sure. Did you conduct trainings for special ed teachers out of the schools?

RK: Yeah

KJ: Ok, and then did they come in to see you, did that work both ways?

RK: Yeah, and then I had to go and visit the schools at least weekly or whatever, because a lot of the special ed teachers are brand new also. We were all shooting in the dark.

GL: You'd mentioned that there was a, you said one of the most well paid school districts in the state, why was so much educational money coming up here, what was?

KJ: I think that was White Pine, where his mother was working.

RK: Yeah, yeah.

BJ: And this is in the days before Proposal A supposedly equalized pay. White Pine had such a high tax evaluation, there's a little more to that story I can fill in later.

RK: Yeah, they had the money. But talking about educational experience, now this is not, but when we started having these trouble in schools with shootings and locking doors, I remember one summer coming back, telling Mom and Olga that even our schools up there, because of the gun situation, Aunt Olga, I remember her saying, "Well, we had trouble with guns in our school, at the Cranberry School," I said, "You did not, not in the '20s." She said, "Yeah, we told the kids to keep your 22, hide it under a stump until you, so they could shoot their rabbits on the way home, but don't take them to school!" [Laughter] Yeah, and I thought well oh boy, oh boy. The times have changed.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: The school at Cranberry, where was that?

BJ: Frank Raymond's house

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Oh, yeah, way up there, yeah.

GL: We could, if you're, we could just expand this interview at this point if you're comfortable with that.

RK: Sure, I don't mind. I will have to –

[Talking as they move around]

KJ: We would certainly love to hear about Alaska.

GL: Yeah, if you could recount that Alaska story, if you wouldn't mind, about teaching up there.

RK: Yeah, in 1980 I was hired as a special ed teacher for the Anchorage School District, and the gal, or the lady who was in charge of special ed for the school I was in Service High [?] and we had 4500 students in that building, or buildings I should say, had a get together for the special ed teachers, and her husband happened to be there, he was in charge of security for the pipeline, Alaska Pipeline, and he was a retired FBI agent, and so at the house we're having our goodies and we're introducing ourselves and when we're all done he, we talked for a while, he said, "Kekke," he said, "Is that Finnish?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Where are you from?" And I said, "The U.P. You probably don't know where that is." He said, "Oh, yeah. What town." I said, "Ontonagon," He says, "Ah-ha. Are you one of those pink Finlanders?" And I had never heard

that term, and I thought, well, and we talked and he said yeah, and I don't recall if he ever came through or some of his agents or whatever, but he said they, he knew the area very well. And like you said earlier, you go to Alaska to escape. But yeah, it was interesting, and I think that must have maybe been the '50s when that was going on, I don't know.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: That \_\_\_\_\_ almost like when Wally met Ernie \_\_\_\_\_ out in California, he was the head of the just getting discharged from the Navy and so was Ernie, and Ernie was sitting there \_\_\_\_\_ in the back of his Navy jacket and Wally was checking them all out because Wally was the head of the depot and he went there and he said T\_\_\_\_\_ and Wally said Ernie looked up and said, "You pronounced that just right" and Ernie said, "Well, where are you from?" Wally said, "Where are you from?" and he said, "Michigan" and then Wally said, "Well, what part of Michigan?" and he said, "The Upper Peninsula," and Ernie said "What in the Upper Peninsula" he said "It's such a small town you wouldn't even know it," And then Ernie said, Mack City. And then Wally went up to him and he said, "Did you know I'm from Ontonagon" and Ernie about fell out of his chair! And then they got to be real good friends and they went back to their jobs down in Detroit.

GL: So what's, you've come back, you've relocated to this community, what are some of the more noticeable changes you've seen from growing up here, going somewhere else, and coming back?

RK: It's very depressed here, economically. Just look at the main street. Growing up, every building, empty slots were buildings, something was in it. Yeah, it's –

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: It's depressed.

GL: What brought you back, why did you come back up here?

RK: Well, Alaska is remote, I mean, this is remote also. Had the house that I grew up in, so that was probably the big, get closer to family, although had a, most people that we knew in Alaska moved there, so, you know, nobody, very few people are from there. It would be much different now, but when I got there in 1980 and everyone asked, "Well, do you have eskimos?" I said, "No" they're all oil people and yeah, so it's, so, yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Brought you back to all the grandpas and grandmas \_\_\_\_\_.

RK: And that's, it's big thing, you get here everyone's this color –

KJ: He's pointing at his gray hair

[All talking at once]

GL: What would you like to add to the tape, any specific points you'd like to speak about on your observations of the Upper Peninsula?

RK: Well, I think it's a beautiful place, I just wish we could get something going here economically, I don't know what, I don't know. We're so far from everything.

GL: [to KJ] Do you have anything else you'd like to ask?

KJ: No.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Did you tell them all about your \_\_\_\_\_ speak at all  
\_\_\_\_\_

BJ: Well this is Verna Hablen [spelled phonetically]

GL: Sir, what –

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Kangas

BJ: This is \_\_\_\_\_

KJ: Can we stop for just a second? Bob, I think you're going to say something here so I'd like to give you a chance.

RK: Oh, yeah, I'm going to head out.

KJ: Ok. Well thank you so much.

RK: And don't forget to contact Janet Koistinen and the Representative Kivela.

MAN: Did you say Janet Koistinen?

MAN: Janet, what's her married name now?

WOMAN: I don't know what her married name is, no.

MAN: They lived on the Cranberry Road

WOMAN: Yeah, that guy from down here

MAN: That there's a, Kivelas moved to Marquette, and their state senator...

[END OF RECORDING]