

Interview with Thomas Prophet
December 3, 1998
by Mary Wikman

Me: I interviewed Tom Prophet on December 3, 1998.

Me: What is your full name?

Tom: Thomas Francis Prophet

Me: Did you have a nickname as you were growing up?

Tom: yup

Me: What was it and why did they call you that?

Tom: I was called Tweek all the way through school and when I was little there was an old neighbor he used to call me Tupalio _____-.

Me: Where were you born and when?

Tom: Ishpeming Hospital on 7/23/39

Me: Who is the oldest person you can remember in your family as a child? What do you remember about them?

Tom: My mother. As far back as I can remember it would be my mother

Me: What do you remember about her?

Tom: Well I just remember ah, well I don't know. I remember being in the back seat of the car one time. Me my sister and my mother and dad were in the front seat. I must have did something. I remember my dad (laugh) got mad at me. (laugh)

Me: laugh

Me: What would be the most important invention that has been made during your life?

Tom: Invention?

Me: Like the computer or...

Tom: Well, I can remember when the television came out and ah, the computers will probably be the most greatest invention. There's new things on cars with computerized engines.

Me: Is that it?

Tom: yeah

Me: How is the world now different from what it was like when you were a child?

Tom: When I was a child it was a pretty slow pace, the transportation was very poor. Not everybody had automobiles that were trustworthy. The roads were

really poor. And it was a slow and original pace. Life was slower and now it's much more hectic and you can do more things.

Me: Do you remember not having enough food to eat because times were tough for your family?

Tom: Yeah, well I remember growing up probably in the early 40's and I don't know if I should say but my dad had left and um, we were living on very small wages. I remember sometime we only had oatmeal or bread to eat and we used to get raw milk from the neighbors so we always had milk. I think it was probably right at the beginning of World War II and _____.

Me: What were your favorite childhood games?

Tom: Well, we used to play a lot of baseball around the neighborhood in the summertime and basketball in the winter time. I guess those were the most favorite games to play for the kids around the neighborhood. We would always play together. All the kids in the neighborhood.

Me: What were your schools like?

Tom: Well, I guess when I started school, it was probably the most modern building around. If you ever went to big cities back then, the schools were probably really good, when I went to school.

Me: What school did you go to?

Tom: National Mine. 12 years.

Me: How did you get to school?

Tom: On the bus. Otto Anderson used to have a bus and he'd pick us up and bring us home.

Me: How long was the ride?

Tom: Oh, 6 miles. It depended on what route you would take. Sometimes, ah, you'd be on the bus for almost an hour.

Me: What subject in school was always the easiest for you?

Tom: One of them, I used to like shop class (laugh) I wasn't always the best student.

Me: Did you do any big projects?

Tom: Yeah, we did, made a lot of little things in shop classes. I remember making a cupboard for my mother. An end table with a lamp with a lamp on it. Different things.

Me: Do you have a college degree? If so, what was your field of study?

Tom: No I don't.

Me: Did you like school?

Tom: Not always. I always thought school was boring (laugh) I didn't like homework so.. I was probably kind of a poor student. Now that I'm looking back, I think I should have studied harder. (laugh)

Me: Yeah (laugh)

Me: What did you usually wear to school? If you remember.

Tom: Well, it was always hand me down clothes, jeans, and shoes with goulashes in the wintertime. ___ caps, and probably some kind of a shirt, pull over shirt, whatever.

Me: Did you have to, could you wear anything?

Tom: You could wear anything you wanted.

Me: Were there any fads during your youth that you vividly remember?

Tom: Like what?

Me: Like bell bottoms or some kind of style.

Tom: Oh! I remember when jeans first came out. I was probably 14 years old or something like that.

Me: What did you wear before them?

Tom: We used to wear kind of like ah. Well we had jeans but they weren't um, they weren't real jeans. They used to be, I can't remember what they were called. Levi's or something? They were low on the hips and tighter pants. You know, tighter legs. I remember when those came out. It was quite a big fad. The girls wore black and white shoes. When I was younger.

Me: Younger, like when you were in your teenage years?

Tom: Yeah, then the Elvis Presley hairstyle started to come out. That was popular. It came out when I was in high school. I remember some of the kids would have the Elvis Presley style haircuts with the zip on the top. Crooked on the tops and on the sides.

Me: Do you remember any stories about your school years?

Tom: Stories?

Me: Yeah, like did anything happen?

Tom: I remember when I first started school I was in first grade, I was scared to go because the seniors used to eniciate the freshmen. I was only in first grade and I was afraid because they would drive them under the water pump and pump water on them. Eniciation in school. I remember I was scared silly over that happening. Most of the days in school were pretty good. We used to play basketball outside and baseball in the summertime.

Me: How long have you been married?

Tom: 36 years

Me: How many children did you have?

Tom: 3 boys.

Me: What were their names and birthplaces?

Tom: The oldest is James Thomas and he goes Ishpeming and John Francis, the second boy, he goes in Ishpeming, and Jeffery Richards, the youngest goes in Ishpeming.

Me: Where do they live now?

Tom: Jim and Jeff live in Ishpeming and John the middle one lives in..

Tom: Where's that place in Wisconsin that John lives in? (to his wife)

Margie: Appleton

Tom: Appleton.

Me: What did you find most rewarding about being a parent?

Tom: It's fun to see your children grow up and be adults and go to school and get good jobs and grow up to be a decent person.

Me: How did you first hear you were a grandfather and how did you feel about it?

Tom: My youngest boy got married and he had a first child, grandchild, I could hardly believe it. I have a grandson. It's kind of exciting.

Me: As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Tom: Oh, I don't know. I think I wanted to work on cars and things like that. Like mechanic work and that type of work. _____.

Me: What was your first job? Do you remember what you did?

Tom: Yeah, I worked at a body shop 2 weeks before I graduated from high school and I was looking for a job and a body shop in Ishpeming where Globe Printing is now. There was a body shop there. I was looking for work and I went there and he said he was looking for someone that I could start that evening and to this day I'm still doing bodywork. That was in 1957.

Me: What kind of jobs have you had?

Tom: Well, I've done mostly body work and in 1978 I was having back troubles so I thought I'd find something easier so I bought an insurance agency. Which is still have but I still work at my insurance agency and my body shop. I started my insurance agency in 1978. It was a few years before I switched from my insurance agency to my body shop again. I'm also a caretaker at our church camp each summer. I'm still working.

Me: How did you decide your career?

Tom: Just by chance I just started working and I never quit it. I started my career as stopping at my cousin's OK AUTO plant. It's close like a body shop. Get a job and make some money _____ my uncles. I like doing that so I find it kind of exciting to do body work.

Me: What wars have been fought during your lifetime?

Tom: I remember World War II was going on. I remember my uncle was in the army. Roy and Ted were in the army and I remember when Roy came home. I used to write letters to the soldiers. I didn't even know how to write but I would be sending letters out to the soldiers. I'd hand them to the mailman. I'd be excited because I was sending letters to soldiers. He probably just threw them away. I remember when Roy came home from the army. I was sleeping and he crawled into the same bed that I was in. I woke up in the night and I was going to get out of bed and he reached out and grabbed my arm. He had been wounded in service. I remember that. I also remember when I was at the train station I just remember a man walking in a uniform. I don't remember who he was though. I remember when the war ended everyone was banging on pots and pans with spoons and everything. And the Korean War was fought in the 50's if I remember right. And the Vietnam War. I vividly remember the Iraqi War.

Me: How did you feel about them?

Tom: Well, I just thought that whatever the government thought had to be done had to be done. I figure whatever you have to do to protect our freedom. That's what you have to do.

Me: If you served in the military, were you hurt in the line of duty?

Tom: No I never had to serve in the military. I stayed with my mother, right before the Vietnam War. You were supposed to go, married men, even though you didn't have children. Then when they decided to take married men who didn't have children, I turned 26 so I never had to go. (laugh)

Me: laugh

Me: Where have you lived as an adult? List the places and the years.

Tom: Well, I lived out on county road 581 from my very little youth until October 15, 1962, when I got married and I lived in Humbolt and I've lived here ever since. How's that for exact? (smile)

Me: pretty good

Me: What kind of illnesses or health problems do you remember having as a child?

Tom: I remember having chicken pox, those aren't major but I had my tonsils out in 2nd grade. I was in the hospital, I remember them putting something over my face. I was fighting to get it off and the next day, I was really sick. I had my appendix out when I was a senior in high school.

Me: Did any of your other brothers or sisters have any health problems or illnesses? Your sisters?

Tom: I don't think my sisters had any illnesses.

Me: How were you chicken pox cured? Like what kind of medicine?

Tom: We used to put some kind of gel on them. I don't remember what it was though. I remember standing on a chair and my mother was putting something on my chicken pox.

Me: What things have made during your lifetime that others have enjoyed?

Tom: Make anything?

Me: Your necklaces?

Tom: (laugh) Oh, well I've made some jewelry out of birds eye maple, necklaces, little birds, knives, butter knives, some bigger knives, just for cutting things. I just keep them or I give them as gifts. I liked to make them and I still am making them.

Me: Do you enjoy doing it?

Tom: Yeah, I just love doing it. Making little things, small things. I don't like making big things like cupboards or cabinets, chairs or anything like that. I like to widdle. Make things that you widdle. Carve out.

Me: What's the funniest practical joke you've ever played on anyone?

Tom: There's a lot of them but I can't remember all of them. I remember one time when someone got really mad at me was my cousin. It was my cousin and he was sitting underneath a tree and I snuck up on him and I was real quiet. I picked up a big stick and I was only about 3 or 4 feet away from him, swung that stick against the tree (laugh) it made a loud noise. He almost jumped out of his skin. (laugh) he got so mad. He said if I ever do that again I'd shoot you!

(laugh)
Me: laugh

Me: Do you have any scary stories to relate?

Tom: Well, there was a true happening in August of 1953, I was out at our hunting camp and an escape convict was asleep in the camp when we got there. He _____ us and held us up and he was using me as a hostage. He took me outside and he made the other guys lay on the floor. And he shot 2 times in the camp. Then he took me outside and he said he wouldn't do anything to me if I listen to him. He shot 2 tires on 1 car and he stole the other car. He made me stand up against a tree and shined a flashlight at me and a pistol pointed at me. So that's the scariest thing that's ever happened.

Me: What were your childhood memories like?

Tom: Well, when we were little we didn't have much as we already mentioned. Poor times. I remember when we got our first car. My grandfather made us a little house to live in. The house is still standing. It kept us dry and kept us

warm. We used to help the neighbors and help them cut hay for the cows. The was in the summertime. We would also go swim in the river by our house.

Me: What were your teen years like?

Tom: Yeah, they were pretty much the same. Things weren't quite so bad in my teenage years we had a little bit more things and us kids were able to get our own jobs. I don't ever regret it though.

Me: How many sisters and brothers did you have?

Tom: 3 sisters, Barbra, she's a year older then I was, Faith, she's 2 years younger than I am and Phia is the youngest.

Me: You didn't have any brothers?

Tom: Nope, no brothers.

Me: How did the telephone change throughout your life? Computers or telephone.

Tom: Well I remember when we got our first telephone, there would be about 4 people on the same line. 4 rings is your ring and 3 rings is the neighbors ring and if you thought it was 4 rings and it was 3 rings and you pick it up the neighbors already talking to someone. So it was always a 4 party line. It wasn't always easy to get because someone was always talking on the telephone. You pick it up and their already talking so you hang up. So, telephones have greatly improved. We've got answering machines and fax machines and ID callers or whatever you call them. So they've really changed.

Me: For the telephone with 4 lines, did it ring at all the houses at the same time?

Tom: Yeah, you had to know your ring and listen close. Sometimes it would be 4 shorts and that would be yours. If it was 4 rings and 4 short rings. It could also be 4 long rings and 2 short rings. So, you had to know your ring.

Me: How about the computer or cars? How have they changed?

Tom: Well, the cars, now before to get the wheel out you had to choke on it and pull it out and pump the gas pedal and hope the car started. Now it's all computerized. You just, you don't do anything. You just turn the key on and turn the starter on and it starts. The gas and the air pump is computerized. The ignition timing and everything.

Me: Did you notice anything different about the electricity?

Tom: Well, it's just that it's much more even and they don't fluctuate as much and you don't have as many problems.

Me: Do you have any interesting stories about your hobbies or activities?

Tom: Well, I've got thousands of deer hunting stories to tell but I've, the biggest buck I've ever shot was in 1976. I keep telling this story and it seems like it keeps getting better, and better each time I tell it. (laugh)

Me: laugh

Tom: The buck keeps getting bigger and it's getting harder to get it each time. (laugh) So, I've always been a great fan for hunting. I turned down a real great job one time so I could get deer season off. So I will always remember that I always have to get deer season off. At least I always had fun. The deer camp was always an exciting camp. I will always be a die-hard deer hunter. A die-hard deer hunter.

Me: Do you like to fish?

Tom: Yeah, I like to fish but I used to do a lot of fishing but when it comes to _____ I have to make sure I have time for hunting. _____. We have a camp north of Champion I like to hunt and fish up there. It's a log cabin.

Me: Do you have any stories? (? I think that's what I said ??)

Tom: _____ a big buck. Well, it was the second day of hunting season and there was this big buck in this one area. It was there for 4 years so the second day of season, it was a really cold morning the snow was crusty so I waited for it to warm up so it would get soften it up and I started sneaking after him. About 3 o'clock in the afternoon I saw another deer. I shot at it and knocked the horn off of it and 15 minutes later I shot the biggest buck I ever did see. I crawled under trees and everything and I finally got him. Not only was it exciting that I got him but it was that it took me 4 years to get him. I crawled on my hands and knees and walked in swamps and I tried to sneak up on him. but he was always smarter than I was. (laugh) So, that's the biggest buck I've ever shot. You really have to work on them. That's all.

Me: Have you retired?

Tom: No, I haven't retired. I always say I'm never going to retire until they throw the dirt on my casket.

Me: (laugh)

Tom: (laugh) we'll see as time goes.

Me: What do you do now?

Tom: I work at an insurance office and I work at my body shop the other 4 days of the week. In the wintertime and in the summer time I just work at the church camp.

Me: Do you like what you do now?

Tom: Yeah, I've had too much fun to retire.

Me: Tell me about how your job has changed throughout the years.

Tom: Well, when I first started fixing cars it was just metals. I used to put the metals on the _____. Now if the metal gets wrecked, I have to replace it. Things have really changed throughout the years. They're 2 time better then they were. I remember in

1957 _____
_____. Even the office has changed now with the

computer. You used to look up everything in books now we just have to look it up in the computer. Whatever we need.

Me: What kind of equipment did you use when you first started your job?

Tom: Well, I pretty much use the same ones when I first started, I still have my first hammer and my first metal dolly block. I've replaced all the other things, new wrenches. Now I have power sanders and power _____. You don't tile by hand. Heat lamps.

Me: Is there a lot of new tools?

Tom: Well, they're constantly coming out with new tools but basically it's the same as usual.

Me: How have cars changed mechanically?

Tom: Well, I remember my first car was a 1936 ford and the breaks on it you had a cable running through it. You had a rod going to the breaks. It's a little newer than having cables running to your breaks. Then they came out with hydrolic breaks. They still have hydrolic breaks but now they have disk breaks. Cars stop a lot better and they got breaks that won't lock up your tires. The cars now are much safer. They got padded sun blizers and they have door handles and they have air bags to blow up in case you crash it'll protect you. It's on the steering wheel and on the dashboard. They have energy absorbers and the front bumpers and the frames are made so they fold up instead of the passenger trying to _____ and the pushing. So they're much much safer. They don't explode in accidents. The tires are better. When I was younger, we used to get at least 1 flat tire a week. Now it's rare that you get a flat tire.

Me: What was a typical problem with a car?

Tom: Back then it was tires and starting and a car many years ago had 30,000 miles on it and it was a lot. Now you have 100,000 miles and it's not that much. So, they made the engines, tires, and everything better. The cars are really good. Although they made the roads better too. They used to have a lot of dirt roads and now it's pavement.

Me: What would you describe a major job?

Tom: Major repair was some kind of car that was really dented. Sometime has I interial damage, engine damage. What I do mostly is front end collisions if they hit a tree or hit another car.

Me: How long would it take?

Tom: I've worked on a car for a month. That'd be 120 hours maybe. 460 hours on just one car. Well, a major job would probably take about 80 hours. That's it.

Me: Do you have any further comments?

Tom: Not too many. I wish I was young enough to be back in school. Start all

over again. Time flies so we just have to except it that we're getting older.
(laugh) All in all, life has been pretty good. Just one last comment,
I calculated out of all the years I've done bodywork, I've fixed
approximately 4,000 cars. In the 41 years that I've done bodywork.