

Interview with Minnie St. Onge
December 3, 1998
Interviewed by Jacob Carlson

Me: What year were you born and where?

Minnie: I was born in 1903 in Ishpeming.

Me: What is your full name and why were you named it?

Minnie: My full name is Whilamina, that's why I'm called Minnie because my name is Whilamina.

Me: Do you know why you were named that?

Minnie: Yes, one of my grandmothers was named Whilamina.

Me: Who is the oldest person you remember in your family?

Minnie: Helga, Helga Smeltze

Me: How old was she when she died?

Minnie: I don't know, I think she was in her 70's or 80's.

Dad (interrupting): the oldest one who lived you mean.

Minnie: No because Innie lived after that

Me: No I didn't mean that.

Dad: Oh because Inny lived to be 100.

Me: What would you consider to be the most important inventions made during your lifetime?

Minnie: Oh dear

Me: You can name a couple if you want to?

Minnie: I would say the airplanes, because we didn't see any when we were small.

Me: Why do you think it effected the country so much?

Minnie: Well, I think people traveled more because they could get there faster than a train or car.

Me: What were your favorite childhood games?

Minnie: Well, outdoors hopscotch on the sidewalk, well what else was there, well mostly there was indoors and the card games, children's card games.

Me: What were your schools like when you were a kid?

Minnie: Well, I can't see anything different in schools. I was in the central school all the time. I don't know, I just don't know any different. Of course the higher education.

Me: Was there just one classroom or a couple?

Minnie: No just one, just one.

Dad (interrupting): You went to central in Ishpeming?

Minnie: Yes

Dad: O.K.

Minnie: I started there in kindergarten and I went through fifth grade there and I went to Rich street school for one 6th year and 7th and 8th grade up at the Grammer school. Then Grammer school burnt down.

Dad: Then you went to Ishpeming High School.

Minnie: Yes then I went to Ishpeming High School after.

Me: What was your favorite subject in school and why?

Minnie: Arithmetic and Geometry, those were the things I liked best.

Me: Did you get good grades in school?

Minnie: Yes I did, especially those grades.

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

Minnie: I didn't get a college degree.

Me: Did you like school?

Minnie: I loved school.

Me: Why?

Minnie: I don't know why I just loved school.

Me: Did you get married and who was your husband?

Minnie: My husbands Aurthor St. Onge.

Me: What was your husbands job?

Minnie: At the time he died he was working at the prison.

Me: Did you have any kids?

Minnie: I had two boys.

Me: What was your first job?

Minnie: Teaching.

Me: Where did you teach?

Minnie: What do you call that North of Ishpeming, on the North camp road

Me: What kind jobs have you had?

Minnie: After that well I worked in grocery stores and I did house cleaning and washing and ironing because I didn't have any money. And in the ladder years about 25 years know I worked in selling furniture and I did the bookwork.

Me: Which job did you like the least?

Minnie: I don't know about that.

Dad (interupting): When you were selling that was for Kemps furniture.

Minnie: Yes

Dad: I always remember that, he was a very nice guy hey.

Minnie: Yes, he was a real nice guy

Dad: He was good to you?

Minnie: Yes, he was real good to me and his wife and his daughters still good, always on christmas day or on my birthday they'd send me \$50, they always remember me.

Dad: He was kinda like a humanitarian hey.

Minnie: Yes, and give to everybody and at christmas time you'd be surprised you know those people who are poor you know, he'd send them chickens and stuff like that, oh hole bunches of stuff he delivered all over, he gave and gave and gave to church a lot, and gave to a lot of people lots of money but we weren't aloud to tell him about that because he didn't like that spread.

Dad: He liked to keep things quiet.

Me: What kind of hobbies do you like.

Minnie: Well I like reading best of all, that's my hobbie.

Me: Which book was your favorite book?

Minnie: Autobiographies.

Me: Did you go on many vacations in your life?

Minnie: No, very little, I went to Florida a few times after Buddy (her son) was married, and then once I went to New York and I went to Washington, and I went to the library and where they made the money and all that stuff. But that was in these ladder years.

Me: Do you remember when the T.V. came out?

Minnie: Well, upstairs got theres a couple years before I got mine, did you have it when you were young?

Dad: I was real young when they first started.

Minnie: Well they first bought it at your house (my dads old house) because they were saying when am I going to get one, and well whatever, shortly after his birth anyway (my dad's)

Dad: That was when they only had the one station and it only be on for a short while. In fact a lot of times they'd just run the test pattern, we'd still watch it.

Minnie: I would have to figure 19 something.

Me: Describe the first cars you can remember.

Minnie: (laughing) The only one I know is Hermans old wrecky's one. Oh, I don't know, we never had a car

Dad: Herman just had that one old Plymouth I think it was that red one.

Minnie: Yes, and I paid for that thing but then he used to haul me around too, he used to take me out the camp however, and the funniest thing about that was I have to tell ya that was when the Fords came out that year and my father was saying he was going to buy a car and he was saving for a car and you can imagine when you have nine kids in the house you know, and he said he was going to buy himself a car that's the first thing he's going to do, and he died before he ever got that car, and he was saving for that car.

Me: What church are you a member of?

Minnie: Trinity Lutheran

Me: How long have you been a member?

Minnie: Maybe about 70 years or more, that's when I left that other one because he didn't want to go Finn church (laughing), you know he said I 'm not going to go Finn church so I said lets take the Swede one, well I said were not changing.

Dad: Actually was Norwegian wasn't it.

Minnie: Yes, this is a Norwegian church.

Dad: That why I could never understand.

Minnie: Norwegians and Swedes never got along.

Dad: I could never understand how I wound up going to a Norwegian church when I was Finn and Swede.

Minnie: That's why we went there because we were close by there anyway and of course another reason anyway is because everybody in our location was Swedes, and they were all by us the Sundblads and the Hendricksons, and they were all Swedes and they went to that church, and they were Buddy's friends.

Me: Did you have any war experiences?

Minnie: Yes, plenty of them, I was in the first worlds war, at that time Herman was called in but he didn't pass that time or whatever happened there or what is was, but we never got in on the first war, but everything was so expensive at that time anyway, and it was hard to make a go with lots of kids and not much money, see those days you didn't get money like people do know.

Me: Was any of your family in the war?

Minnie: In the second worlds war there was.

Me: Esther was in there wasn't she?

Minnie: Well, my two sons were there and Billy was there and William was there and I'll say Squint was there.

Dad (interrupting): Buddy joined before, he was underage.

Minnie: Yes, 17, see when Franny joined, or he didn't join, he was 18 years on May the 3rd and he was going to be in 12th grade next year, and he was in the service, so all of those kids in Franny's age group were all had to go that summer, and when he came back from the service he had to go to high school, he didn't have to put a full term in, but he had to go there and see in the mean time when they were 17 and of course a couple of those kids, the Hendrickson boys joined the navy, and I said no you have to go to high school got one more year, no he said I'm not going to go to school anyway so he joined the navy.

Dad: So Franny and Buddy both went in around the same time.

Minnie: Yes, 17 and 18, and then Esther went and then Billy went, and he was the first one going.

Dad: Did you know pretty much what area they were fighting in, like Bill and that?

Minnie: Oh yes, he was in Italy, and then Smeltz was in Italy too but he was a prisoner, so he didn't fight anywhere because he was in prison camp.

Dad: We have a picture at home when Bill and Sunny when they met in Africa.

Minnie: Oh yes, then Bill was in Italy and Africa for a long time, and then he went back to Italy.

Me: What did kids usually wear to school back then?

Minnie: Well they don't wear these kinda stuff, I don't know what ever was in style.

Me: Did they have uniforms?

Minnie: No, just overall and regular clothes.

Me: What made you decide to go into teaching?

Minnie: Well I always liked it, I loved it, but after the first year I hated it, I would have liked to have gone but every night there was so much studying to do because one class was in second grade and you had to study what your going to give them for tomorrow and all the time, and every one you had to study, sometime you'd stay up till midnight, Mrs. Copalla would say its time to go to bed know, see and you had to be preparing too far ahead you see and that's why I didn't want to teach there anymore in the country school I wanted to go to Northern but I didn't have the money, see that's how come I said, and another thing you know how far that is out there you know where it is don't ya, I used to walk and ski in the winter time and on Sunday afternoon I'd ski across that lake there and on the other side and I used to come home, but we didn't have any.

Dad: You stayed right at the school then.

Minnie: I stayed right there and come home on weekends, but once in a while my father used to, you see right down the street know where that whatcha call it is, Toppallas right across the street you know where that V.F.W. is, that was a liver stable there, a liver stable was where you rented horses out, well see once in a while on Sunday afternoon my father would rent that and take me out there, and at that I think it was \$3.50 or \$4.50, so we couldn't afford that neither, but once in a while when it was bad he'd take me out there with that.

Dad: That was quite expensive back then.

Minnie: Yes it was, I think it was \$3.50, but you only went out there and trotted you and it was only four or five hours. After that I said that's I'm not going to put another year in like that.

Dad: You were the only teacher out there.

Minnie: Yes, that's all just one at a time. That Lorene was there for a long time two or three years, and asked me I didn't even apply for a job they knew that I was going to try to go to school and I thought that I could save enough, because I had to pay up at Northern too, and father couldn't afford that with all the kids.

Me: What kinds of rules did teachers have?

Minnie: I don't know, because you only had that one that would expect you each year, they gave you the notice when you were coming, its pretty much the same.

Me: How were children punished back then?

Minnie: I don't know I never punished anybody (laughing), they were well behaved in the country school.

Me: Were women teachers aloud to marry?

Minnie: No, that was put in later, much later, I think in the 20's.

Me: What subjects were taught?

Minnie: Kinda hard to say, it all depends, in the first year you'd do kindegarten things, and first grade you'd have to learn to read and learn to write, and see and the next year you'd have to start with a little bit of arithmetic, and you'd start with that stuff, but when you got to 6th, and 7th, and 8th grades then you'd have to start in with geography and all that stuff.

Me: What kind of special activities did the school have?

Minnie: Nothing, they left you out for recess time but you couldn't do much out there but fight and throw the ball around. That's why its so advanced know.

Me: Who has been your best friend throughout your lifetime?

Minnie: I can't tell you that one, I don't know that one. I got some of these old good friends but there not around.

Me: Who has been a big influence on your life and why?

Minnie: I don't know about that, I had those older sisters but they didn't influence me, and I think I had it so hard that I didn't depend on anybody because see I got left with a bunch of kids. All of them got married but I was left with Elaine, and Esther, and Helen, and Alice, and Herman, and Squint. I don't think there was anybody who influenced me because they didn't know my cercumstances.

Me: Do you remember someone saying something to you that made a big influence on you life?

Minnie: Not my family, do you have any suggestions.

Dad (interupting): Is there any pastor or doctor, or school teacher.

Minnie: Some were kinda crabby. (laughing)

Dad: They were quiet crabby back then.

Minnie: No they stricted you, because they were all those old one, you didn't dare to because those were the days they could slap you, you didn't dare to do nothing, as soon as you got into the class you had to be quiet.

Dad: Did any of the kids get disciplined when you were in school?

Minnie: I don't know, I imagine some did. They had to call the office like they still do. There was always a few of those Cleveland way kinda toughy boys at that time. They were tough boys and they'd be fighting after school and they'd be called into the office.

Me: What U.S. president have you admired the most?

Minnie: I think that one that, that one that was so religious, Carter was the one, he's wrote some good books, and I really like him as a president at that time.

Me: What was the most important event that happened in your life?

Minnie: The most important thing was when my mother died and my husband died and my son was born, and at that time they were the most important things to worry about.

Dad(interupting): They were all around the same time.

Minnie: Buddy was born on Sunday, my husband died on Tuesday, and the week after that my mother died, and I was left with all those families. And trying to figure out how I was going to manage.

Dad: There wasn't any government assistance back then.

Minnie: No there wasn't nothing, some people from the poor pots or something, I remember one time when I went down to ask them for a load of wood, he said no, that's the only time I ever asked them for anything, but then see Squint hadn't got any wood and everybody was getting wood and food, you know how they get it know, there to lazy to work.

Dad: Where did you ask for that?

Minnie: The county or whatever it was, downtown there was a place were you could go, I forget that guys name, that's the only time I ever asked.

Me: What most stands out in your mind that has changed in all the years that you have lived?

Minnie: Well, lots of things have changed, and one thing is the children, I raised up two boys, and they were never in trouble, upstairs raised all there children they never got in trouble, at this time and age, that's the worst thing that I have to worry about, why the children are the way they are that's what I'm worried about, there's something wrong in there home life, it's the family, it's the parents

After the interveiw Minnie added that there were 2 trains in Ishpeming, Chicago Northwestern that went to Chicago, and L&L that went to Marquette to places. And on the westside of the post office there was a street car that took college people to school in Marquette from 1890 to 1925. It cost 10 cents to Marquette and 5 cents to Negaunee.