

Interview with Martha Wiljanen
Date of Interview- December 2nd 1998
Interviewed by Erin Wiljanen

Me: This is Erin Wiljanen and I'm interviewing Martha Wiljanen at her home on Dec. 2nd 1998. OK What is your full name and why were you called that?

Grandma: My name is Martha Johanna Lapinen/Wiljanen and I was called, named from my Mother. My mother's name was Johanna.

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

Grandma: It was Mart M-A-R-T, shortened from Martha.

Me: Where were you born and when?

Grandma: I was born in Negaunee, Michigan on March 24th 1915.

Me: What were your favorite things to do when you were a child?

Grandma: We'd go sleigh-riding, and in summer time-, and skiing-riding, skiing. In summer time, we'd pick berries and go for picnics and that's about all..

Me: Did your family ever go on any trips when you were younger?

Gram:No, just as far as Negaunee. We lived in Michigamme, just as far as Negaunee.

Me: What would you do at Negaunee?

Gram: Visit relatives, that's all.

Me: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Gram: Yes, I do. I have 5 brothers and 3 sisters.

Me: What kind of chores did you have to do when you were younger?

Gram:I had to make butter and turn the separator, wash dishes, make the beds, that's about all there was.

Me: Did you have to do that, make everybody's bed or just your own?

Gram: Just my own bed, yeah.

Me: OK I was gonna say...

Me: OK What..never mind... doot dee doot dee doo... Where did you attend school?

Gram:I first started school at the farm school, a two room school house. In the fifth grade, I went to the Imperial Heights School, and I went there through eighth grade, and then I went to Michigamme High School, through my senior year, ninth through twelfth.

Me: And how many people about were in your class?

Gram:In high school there were 23 in my class, and in grade school there must have been about 10 or 12. (When she was in the 8th grade, 10 freshmen flunked and ended up in her grade.)

Me: OK. Who did you marry?

Gram: I married Arthur Wiljanen.

Me: How did you meet him?

Gram: He was a local boy and I, we just met casually at those parties.

Me: OK, What kind of job did he have?

Gram:When I first met him, he was working for the Illinois Railroad Company, then he's, he went to go work on the railroad, and he was conductor of the railroad, the Sue Line Railroad.

Me: When was the marriage?

Gram: December 24th 1932. (she was 17!)

Me: OK, and where was it held?

Gram: Bethel Lutheran Church, in Ishpeming.

Me: Did you have a honeymoon?

Gram: No, we didn't.

Me: OK. What sorts of entertainment did you use before the invention of appliances like radios and televisions?

Gram: As I mentioned before, we just had those school parties and we went to the shows. We went to shows in Michigamme. We'd walk the 3 miles to the shows. They had silent pictures in those days. That's about it. Yeah

Me: What kind of parties did you have for school?

Gram: Birthday parties, mostly.

Me: Oh, OK. So, no dances or anything?

Gram: No, no.

Me: Do know what it was like without cars?

Gram: Oh, yes. I remember that. We used to walk to school. My father got his first car in 1923. It was a model T ford.

Me: OK. Let's see... How did you do the laundry?

Gram: We did it by hand. On the scrub board.

Me: That must've taken a long time.

Gram: Yes. And then the ringer machine and it was a stand with two, uh, with water and then you'd ring them with put them in the rinse water hang them on the line

Me: What would you do when it was winter?

Gram: Well, we'd bring them... They'd freeze on the line then we'd bring them in. My mother had what we called a summer kitchen and we'd put them over there to dry, yeah, on the lines.

Me: OK. How did messages travel without telephones?

Gram: Telegraphs. Telegraphs.

Me: Describe your first telephone.

Gram: It was a party line. It was very nice to have. (laugh)

Me: How many people were on your party line?

Gram: There were 8. But then, eventually, because of my husband's work at the railroad, we got a party line, I mean, a private line.

Me: OK. How was your house heated?

Gram: At first, we would heat it with wood and maybe fuel oil.

Me: OK. Did you have electricity?

Gram: Not until '53.

Me: And did you ever not have running water, if so, what was it like?

Gram: Yeah. It was hard. It was hard.

Me: Would you have to go out to a well?

Gram: We would go to a pump and put it in a pail, yeah.

Me: How did you do most of your cooking?

Gram: On a wood stove. All of it on a wood stove.

Me: What was your favorite thing to cook or bake?

Gram: I liked to make cakes and bread came out delicious on the wood stoves.

Me: What did the roads used to look like?

Gram: (laugh) They were muddy. Gravel roads in the spring they'd be all mud.

Me: What did you think of computers when they first came out?

Gram: I thought they were marvelous.

Me: Didn't the first one take up a whole room and it did the work that one calculator would do today?

Gram: Yeah, yeah.

Me: Did they have refrigerators when you were growing up?

Gram: No, not when I was growing up, no.

Me: What would you do with meat and stuff?

Gram: We had a cooler in the basement and in summer we'd put them in the cooler and bring it down there.

Me: OK. Do you remember when you would get milk when you were a kid?

Gram: We had cows.

Me: Did you live on a farm?

Gram: A farm, yeah.

Me: How was the house lighted?

Gram: with kerosene lamps.

Me: Did you use candles anywhere?

Gram: Just at Christmas time.

Me: OK. When you think about your life what...okay, never mind. How many children do you have?

Gram: eight children.

Me: OK. When were the oldest and the youngest born?

Gram: The oldest was born in 1944 and the youngest was born in 1953.

Me: OK. What was it like raising that many kids?

Gram: It was hectic. (laugh)

Me: Where are they now?

Gram: 4 are in the area and 2 are out of town.

Me: Do you still communicate with them?

Gram: Yes.

Me: Would you consider yourself a strict or lenient parent?

Gram: Strict.

Me: How did you first hear about when you became a grandparent?

Gram: On the phone.

Me: And what was your reaction?

Gram: I was thrilled.

Me: How many grandchildren do you have?

Gram: I have 21.

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

Gram: I always wanted to be a nurse.

Me: OK. Are you or were you involved in the community?

Gram: I was on the PTA and the American Legion Auxiliary.

Me: Are you in anything now?

Gram: Not right now, no.

Me: What church do you attend?

Gram: The Lutheran Church in Champion.

Me: Our Redeemer?

Gram: Our Redeemer, yes.

Me: OK Did you go there when you were younger?

Gram: When I was younger, we went to the Bethel Lutheran Church in Michigamme.

Me: OK Do you remember anything about the wars?

Gram: Oh, yes. I remember when the war was just starting. I remember the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Me: Did you have any family members that were in any of them?

Gram: Yes. My brother Arvil. He was in there a few years.

Me: Did you do anything special during the war?

Gram: I don't think we did anything different.

Me: Were there a lot of announcements about it?

Gram: Oh, yes.

Me: OK. Do buildings look different than how they looked earlier in time?

Gram: Oh yes, they look more modern now.

Me: What did....

Gram: They were....

Me: What kind of material were they made of? Wood?

Gram: Wood, yes.

Me: OK. When TV came around, what were your favorite shows?

Gram: Jack Benny, Major Bows

Me: And what are some of yours now?

Gram: Now I like to watch ER and my soaps of course, you know, and then Law and Order, and Diagnosis Murder. Those are my favorite shows.

Me: OK. What were your favorite activities when you were a kid, teenager and now? I think I already that question.

Gram: When I was a teenager I went to school dances and basketball games and that's about it when I was a teenager.

Me: OK. What about now?

Gram: Now, I, I'm older now so (laugh) I like to play Scrabble and I like to read the paper and do crossword puzzles. I like to go to shows and visit my children.

Me: Shopping, probably.

Gram: Shopping too, yes.

Me OK. What were the major world events when you were growing up?

Gram: World War II, the death of President Roosevelt, and the death of President Kennedy and the Impeachment of Truman, President Truman, all that was on TV.

Me: OK. Have you seen any former classmates recently?

Gram: Sorry to say, I've only seen one. The rest are gone. They're all dead.

Me: What one did you last see?

Gram: A year ago, yeah. I think it was in Michigamme.

Me: OK. What kind of grades did you get in school?

Gram: I got good grades.

Me: OK, and what was your favorite subject?

Gram: My favorite subject in grade school was Geometry, I mean, Geography, and then in grade school ... uh high school, it was English.

Me: And did you enjoy attending school?

Gram: Yes, I liked school.

Me: And what was the average dress code at school?

Gram: Dresses. We weren't allowed to wear slacks.

Me: Did the dresses have to be a certain length?

Gram: They were all just below the knee when I was going to school, yeah.

Me: Do you remember any fads from Junior High?

Gram: No, there really weren't any in those days. People all wore the same kind of clothes.

Me: OK. What age were you when you first started dating?

Gram: I was 15.

Me: 15?

Gram: Yeah.

Me: And who was the first person that you dated?

Gram: My future husband.

(Laughs.)

Me: OK. Who was your favorite US president and why?

Gram: Roosevelt. Because when he became president, he got us out of the depression and people got work and we got a greater food supply for people in the community. He was a good president.

Me: OK. What color was your hair as a child?

Gram: Dark brown.

Me: Did you ever dye it like people do today?

Gram: No, no.

Me: Have you ever been in any kind of accident?

Gram: No.

Me: Have you ever had surgeries?

Gram: Yes, quite a few.

Me: And alright I just kept on hopping subjects. If you could change anything about you, what would it be?

Gram: About myself, you mean?

Me: Mmmm Hmmm.

Gram: I wish I were more outgoing. I'm kind of shy.

Me: OK. Did you ever have any pets?

Gram: Yes. We had pets. We always had a cat and dog at home. I liked cats especially.

Me: Do you remember any of your favorite ones or...?

Gram: We had Poopsy. That was one cat. Yeah, yeah.

Me: OK. Do you have any favorite cars?

Gram: My favorite car? We always had a Chevrolet.

Me: OK, and what was your first car?

Gram: A Model... My first car?

Me: Yeah. Or did you have a car?

Gram: No, I didn't have a car. I used the boys' car. A Dodge Dart was the first one I bought.

Me: Can you describe how cars have changed since then?

Gram: Oh, yes. They have computers and easier to start. Years ago, when the headlight burnt out, you had to put a bulb in there. Yeah.

Me: OK. What was your favorite store as a child?

Gram: Penney's, in Ishpeming.

Me: And what is it now?

Gram: Still Penney's.

Me: What's your favorite time of year?

Gram: Christmas-time.

Me: And why is that?

Gram: Because you can feel the joyfulness in the air, and the people are all happy.

Me: Christmas lights, too.

Gram: Lights, yes.

Me: It's mine, too. What type of music do you listen to?

Gram: I like some classical.

Me: Did you used to listen to a different kind?

Gram: No, I don't think my taste has changed.

Me: OK. What do you think of kids today?

Gram: (Laughs.) Good question. They're more mature, I think than when we were younger. More outgoing. They're more mature, I think so.

Me: What advice would you give to them?

Gram: Be honest. Be kind.

Me: And you mentioned earlier about the Depression, do you remember anything in particular about that?

Gram: Oh, yes. There were people I, in fact I know one family that had it very hard. They barely had enough to eat, and then Teddy Roosevelt started giving out those food baskets, you know, that's how they survived.

Me: OK. Well, thank you for your time, and that's the end of the tape.

Gram: You're welcome.

Me: Bye!! P.S. (Laughs.) 'Kay, did your husband have any other jobs?

Gram: He was a deputy Sheriff of Baraga County for many years. He was supervisor of Spurr Township, clerk and treasurer another time. So he has, he was in politics almost all his life.

Me: OK. Can you describe the handcuffs, or Dad, do you wanna come over here and describe them?

Dad: The handcuffs were a length of chain on one end. It had a half a piece of pipe, on the other side was a piece of round stalk, and they would put the round stalk ... or, they would wrap the chain around their wrist. Then they'd put the round stalk into the piece of pipe and you were supposed to come along peacefully, and if you didn't, they'd give it a little twist so that the chain would dig into your wrist, and you came along peacefully.

(Laughs.)

Me: OK. I understand you were treasurer...

Gram: I was treasurer of Spurr Township. After my husband died, I went to work at Herb's and Mary's Restaurant. Then I was elected treasurer of the office for six years. Then I retired and came to live in Marquette.

Me: OK. Anything else you can think of, Dad?

Gram: that's about it, I think.

Me: OK. The end, again.