

Voices From Minnesota

Short Biographies

From Thirty-two Senior Citizens

by Jerry Abraham

Elk River, Minnesota

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This book is dedicated to the people of Minnesota and the United States of America who grew up and led productive lives during the twentieth century. In the process, they influenced the lives of sons, daughters, and many other relatives and friends. They are to be commended for making life better for those who followed.

About the Author



Jerry Abraham was born and raised in Minnesota. He and his wife Lois have been married since 1968. They have three grown children; Michelle, John, and James. Jerry taught social studies in the Elk River School District for over thirty years. Most of his tenure was spent teaching American history at the junior high school and senior high school levels. During the last few years of his career, Jerry taught mainly on twentieth century American history. His experience as a teacher played a major role in fostering an interest in the historical roles of average American citizens.

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Preface

According to *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* (second edition), an oral history is "an account of what happened, narrative, story, tale." Oral histories have been important for passing on information from one generation to the next since the beginning of time. These "stories" spread and perpetuate historical information, culture, language, philosophy, and more. If we lose historical accounts of those who came before us, we lose important connections with our past.

All of the above brings us to the contents of these pages. Thirty-two senior citizens, residents of Minnesota, have told the stories of their lives. These stories can be seen in light of the historical context of the last eighty plus years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. The tone of the stories emphasizes the human element in the realm of history. This human element is important as we recognize that history is a record of events, most of which are driven by people. History is alive and ever changing.

During our lives, we become part of history as observers and actors. Whether a person is rich or poor, powerful or weak, famous or anonymous, that person helps shape the time in which he/she lives. By recognizing and recording the individual histories of our fellow people, we may be better able to see how we are touched by others and in turn touch people ourselves. We may be better able to see our interrelatedness in history and develop a better sense of our importance on one scale and the importance of history on another scale.

The interview process used in obtaining the histories was quite open ended. One of the primary objectives of each interview was to encourage the person to speak freely with as little interruption as possible. However, at the beginning of each interview, each person was told of the parameters of the interview. Each person interviewed was encouraged to discuss

parents, childhood (especially in relation to the 1920s), adolescence and young adulthood (especially in relation to the Great Depression of the 1930s), life during World War II, and life after World War II to the present. The purpose was to create a story that had a sense of chronology. As such, questions were asked only as a guide to help get a more complete lifetime picture of the person.

Results of the interviews varied greatly. Some people were quite detailed in describing their lives, while others spoke much more generally. One reason for the differences had to do with sharpness of memory. Another important reason had to do with how much information the person chose to share. Some people were more cautious in what they wanted the public to know about them and their families. In addition, some people chose to dwell more on a specific part of their lives. Some, for example, spent more time talking about their education than about their adult life. Others spoke in greater detail about war experiences or their vocations than about family lives. Some left gaps in their stories, while others were more consistent in discussing each chapter in their life histories. While such differences may leave some questions unanswered in the minds of the readers, they project the personalities and humanity of the individuals who were interviewed.

To give a better picture of the environment of the interviewees, a thumbnail description was given of the geographical areas in which they live. Thus the reader can get a sense of a person growing up in a rural or city area, or in some cases both, and get an idea of the cultural and economic tenor of the area.

In addition, an effort was made to cover a variety of ethnic groups. The goal was to obtain representation of western European, eastern European, African American, American Indian, Hispanic, and Asian American people. In some cases, it meant interviewing someone who was new to the state, but newcomers are always part of our population. While many residents of Minnesota have lived most or all of their lives here, the state

does have a significant number of recent immigrants. Some groups may have been over or underrepresented. This was mainly due to the fact that participation was voluntary.

This effort will be considered successful if it leads more people to seek out our senior citizens to find out about their lives. It would be especially helpful if sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, and other extended family members would talk with their elders. What a great way to experience how our ancestors helped build the United States into what has been termed a “superpower”! What a great way to help us learn who we are and how we fit into this ongoing story! What a great tribute we pay to our seniors for leading the way for us and for being important contributors to our society! We need to understand that it was not just leaders like Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King who shaped the country. It was not just state leaders like Alexander Ramsey, Floyd B. Olson, and Hubert Humphrey who shaped the state of Minnesota. It was also the cumulative efforts of the many so-called “average citizens.” These citizens may not think of themselves as heroes, but they certainly can be described as hard working, strong willed, and sometimes even courageous.

It is equally important for our senior citizens to be willing to share their lives. They are important people and their life experiences are important. All people experience successes and disappointments in life. When these experiences are shared, they can help others gain new insights into contemporary history. Our seniors have contributed much and continue to contribute. These contributions should not be diminished.

Acknowledgments

So many people have contributed to this effort that it will be impossible to thank them all. Obviously, all the people who chose to share their life histories were important—this is their book. However, in each community, other people helped in making this an experience that will not soon be forgotten.

In September 2002 I knew in a general way what I wanted to do, but did not have a very good plan to carry it out. I knew that I wanted to interview people from different parts of Minnesota, so I made the first of many telephone calls to the Polk County Historical Society in northwestern Minnesota. From that call, I was able to contact Alta Hermodson. Alta was kind enough to supply information about the senior center in Crookston, which led to the first set of interviews. I regret that I did not get the opportunity to meet Alta in person.

Soon after that contact, Michelle Reichert provided information about the “how to” aspects of writing oral histories. As a social worker who had worked with seniors, she had an understanding of how to elicit information from seniors.

A couple of weeks later I arrived in Crookston, walked into the Chamber of Commerce, and met Jeannine Windels, the president and CEO. She graciously supplied background information on the area. In addition, she gave me clear directions to the senior center. Ms. Windels was even kind enough to supply specific names of people to contact as potential subjects to be interviewed. Dee Myerchin, director of the Golden Link Senior Center, did a great job in helping me contact people for interviews.

After the first set of interviews was completed, it was time to find seniors in a western Minnesota town. After several misses in several towns, I contacted the Historical Museum of Stevens County. I talked with Tami Plank who gave me information about the senior center in the town. Later, I talked with

Randee Hokanson from the museum who gave me the lead to contact her father-in-law. Judy Nord and Coleen Dogotch from the senior center were very helpful in allowing me to talk with the seniors and get some great interviews.

Then it dawned on me that if I wanted to get this bountiful information published, I had better get each person to sign a release. I enlisted the help of Cindy Fennig to come up with a legal release form, which was accomplished. Then I revisited the people I had already interviewed. I made sure they had the opportunity to read their stories and approve what was written. Then they were asked to sign releases. At the same time, I needed to continue the interview process.

So, it came time to find a town to represent southern Minnesota, and it turned out to be New Prague. Mary Vacarro referred me to Lucine Wendorf, who gave me the opportunity to speak at the senior center. Later, I was able to talk to Mary Whitmer, Housing Director at Mala Strana Assisted Living. She was very helpful in all stages of the interviewing process. She introduced me to wonderful seniors living at Mala Strana. She also helped coordinate interviews and the signing of release forms. I am very thankful for the use of a case study written by Kathy Huber for her master's program. The case study was helpful in reinforcing information and filling in gaps from an interview with Anne Juni.

I made several different contacts in the Twin Cities. John Abraham, an assistant professor at the University of St. Thomas, introduced me to two colleagues who had great stories to tell. Janet Stately from the Office of Indian Ministry was very helpful in helping make contacts with American Indians. I am especially grateful to Barbara Bester for allowing me to interview her while she was recovering in the hospital from injuries suffered in an automobile accident. She exhibited a good deal of patience and grace. Two more people who were very cooperative were Annie Turman and Judy Dworsky from the Jewish Community Center in St. Louis Park. Annie gave me names of possible contacts and Judy allowed me to make

my presentation to seniors at the center and to set up interviews. I also want to thank Kris Niebler and Diane Knutson from the Coon Rapids Senior Community Center. Kris helped set the stage for my presentation to seniors at the center and introduced me to some wonderful seniors. Diane followed up with many other referrals. She not only gave me local referrals, but also gave me names of contact people in other parts of the Twin Cities and greater Minnesota to help me obtain ethnic and cultural diversity among the interviews. Two people from Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church helped a great deal. Artemio Alvarado did well in lining me up with two wonderful Hispanic women to interview. Corinne Bruno was very helpful in the process that allowed me to complete paperwork. Finally, contacts with Dean Potter and Tom Hara were very helpful in helping obtain the interview with Kimi Hara.

Last of all, I would like to thank my wife Lois for ignoring my protestations and overall stubbornness in getting her to read every page of this work to help make it more readable. She quietly went about reading very carefully, doing the best job she could. I hate to admit it, but whenever we disagreed about sentence structure or clarity, she was right the vast majority of time.

Northern Minnesota

Crookston



Downtown Crookston at Main and Robert Streets

Crookston represents the economic and cultural nature of northern Minnesota.

This community is located in Polk County in northwestern Minnesota on the plains of the Red River Valley of the North. It is the county seat, about 290 miles northwest of the Twin Cities, with a population of 8,192 as of 2000.

According to the *Crookston Membership Directory and Community Service Guide* (Crookston Chamber of Commerce, 2003), Crookston was named after Colonel William Crooks, a railroad man. Colonel Crooks was credited with bringing the first steam locomotive to Minnesota. People of Scandinavian descent made up most of the early population in the area. Scandinavian heritage seems to dominate present day Crookston as well.

The economy is based mostly on agriculture and related agribusiness. Leading agricultural products in the area include wheat, barley, sugar beets, and potatoes. In fact, Polk County leads the state in the production of those crops. Other important crops in the area include sunflowers, rye, flax, soybeans, and corn. The strong agribusiness nature of the area is reinforced by the presence of agricultural processing plants. There are four processing plants in Crookston. Most have national and international markets.

There are other major industries that are important to the Crookston area. Some of the major industries include a fiberglass fabricating company, a maker of aluminum castings, and a manufacturer of buses.

In addition, The Crookston area is a regional educational center in Minnesota. A new high school was completed in 1997. The school, which includes grades eight through twelve, has been described as “state of the art.” A branch of the University of Minnesota also is located in Crookston. It is a well-respected school that offers associate and bachelor degrees. It also offers outreach programs for citizens through workshops and provides information referral for a variety of subjects.

Medical facilities are extensive. Riverview Hospital was expanded and updated with state-of-the-art equipment in 2003. The city also has a modern clinic, two nursing homes, and centers for treating mental health issues and chemical dependency.

Crookston also boasts a fine cultural environment. It is home to the Polk County Historical Museum which has a great selection of historical items that include old buildings and railroad equipment. The Ox Cart Days Festival is held each August and commemorates the Red River ox carts that came through the area as they traveled between Winnipeg, Canada, and St. Paul. Other cultural events are presented during the year by the Crookston Community Theater, the Civic Music League Artist Series, and the University of Minnesota, Crookston.



Eliza (Liz) Weiss

Liz began her narrative by talking about her parents, stating that they came from Germany. Her mother was five years old at the time and her father was “a little older.” They came over separately. Their families both settled near the town of Sabin, which is a small agricultural community a few miles east of Moorhead, Minnesota. Her parents met and married in Minnesota. Liz was born on August 21, 1906.

The family was tied to the land. Liz’s parents were homesteaders, starting out with 160 acres. They began with a small house; however, the family grew. Eventually there were six boys and seven girls, and the family outgrew the house. Liz said that when she was eight, “Dad built a new house. There were four bedrooms upstairs and four rooms downstairs.”

As farmers, her parents raised cows, chickens, sheep, and pigs, and grew a variety of crops. This type of farming was typical for the day, in contrast to the specialized farming of today. Over time, Liz's father bought more land. In fact, rather than asking his own wife, her father asked Liz if he should buy more land. With a smile, Liz said she used a Ouija Board, and from that, encouraged her father to buy the land.

The children also were called upon to help with the farm work. Liz remembered threshing and shocking grain in late summer. She noted that when harvest time came, neighbors helped one another. Neighbors gathered at one farm, did the harvesting, and then moved on to the next farm and so on until the area farms finished their harvesting. Then Liz remembered that potatoes were one of the main crops when she was growing up, and she joined the rest of the family in picking the potatoes. Digging the potatoes, putting them in a basket, and then dumping the basket into large gunny sacks was hard work.

Liz was never bored in her childhood years. She loved to play games, and neighbor kids often came over to play ball games. Playing cards was a favorite winter pastime. The family also had a player piano that was played for family entertainment.

However, household chores were required too, and Liz often helped do housework. She also took care of the smaller brothers and sisters. By the 1920s, Liz worked outside the house and voluntarily helped her neighbors.

The family was among the earliest in the area to have some of the newest conveniences of the time. Liz said they had their first telephone before she could remember. The first car, a Ford, was purchased when she was ten. Liz said it was nice, but "you had to be careful driving because of the roads." Electricity came into the home when she was thirteen. Liz said they had a Delco plant that produced enough electricity to light lamps in the living area. This was a primitive system for producing household electricity before major power plants came into being.

Since the family was among the earliest to have electricity in the area, neighbors often came by to socialize.

Times of rationing, such as during World War I, did not greatly affect Liz's family. The family always had enough to eat. Her mom was not only a good cook, but did canning. They always had enough sugar for making baked goods, and a large garden helped provide vegetables for canning. They churned their own butter, and wheat was taken to the mill in town to be ground into flour. Her dad made graham flour at home. This was a very self-sufficient family.

Liz was married in 1932. She and her husband established their first home in the small town of Sabin. Soon they moved to Moorhead, where her husband got a job driving a truck. He was able to keep this job throughout the Depression. In 1940 they moved to Thief River Falls, and in 1943 they moved to Crookston.

Liz also worked during this time. She got a job candling eggs at a company called Peterson-Bidekk in Thief River Falls. Candling involves holding an egg to a light to see if the egg is fertilized and if it is fresh. She worked there for thirty years. This first marriage ended in 1959 when her husband, a diabetic, died. Liz enjoyed farm life. However, like most other wives of the time, she followed her husband when they married. Since he was a truck driver, and since it was the Great Depression, this took them to Moorhead. A transfer took them to Thief River Falls. When the company went out of business, the move to Crookston resulted.

Life must go on. Liz got a job as a second cook at the country club in Crookston. She continued this work until retirement. She remarried in 1964. Her second husband, who worked for the city, died in 1998.

At the time of the interview, Liz believed that having the University of Minnesota, Crookston, had changed the town; she said there were more young people around the town. She was proud that two grandsons attended the university and a great grandson started in the fall of 2002.

Life is still full, though sometimes confusing. Two daughters live nearby, so there is much opportunity to talk and visit. Liz still does volunteer work, such as sewing for the hospital and fixing “trauma bears” at the Senior Center. Besides that, there are the regular lunches and card games at the center. With all this going on, Liz does not have to worry too much about the latest technology such as computers and cell phones. She said, “A lot of times I wonder just what is what.” Liz does not have any desire to learn about the new technology.

Finally, Liz mentioned that her parents’ house was purchased in 2002 and moved a few miles northwest to the town of Perly. She said the house still looked pretty good, and the land on which the house originally stood was still in the family and was being farmed.