

This interview with Mrs. Herman Stahlberg took place September 5, 1978, at the Senior Citizens Center in LaPorte. The interviewer was John Brennan.

JB: Mrs. Stahlberg, what year were you born?

GS: 1891.

JB: And where was that?

GS: July the 18th, 1891.

JB: What part of the county was that?

GS: Wills Township, LaPorte County.

JB: Were you born on a farm?

GS: Yes, I was born on a farm. My dad used to work for a dollar a day. We only had to pay five cents for sugar then. Everything was... a dollar was the wages were paid them days. And we lived there until I was fifteen years old. He got a job as mail carrier--my father did, and then we moved into Rolling Prairie. He was mail carrier until he died.

JB: Do you remember any stories about his mail carrying?

GS: Yes. One day my dadit was a terrible storm, nobody was out. He waded through the snow. He called a neighbor and told him he was coming... to look for him. He says, "If I don't get there will you come and pick me out of the snow bank". So that neighbor called the next neighbor, and he made his route that day. That was the worst ever.

JB: Did he have a horse and buggy?

GS: He had a mail wagon. And that mail wagon I don't know what ever became of it. I've often wondered what become of it. It was a regular mail wagon. He had a beautiful horse, a wild western pony. He took the route alright. But my father he loved his horses; he was so good to animals. And that horse came around, come through the...from the stable-he got out of the stable, come through the back door yard, around to the front door, and banged on the door with his feet. My dad got out of bed and my mother said "OH". He said "Mother let him alone." And that horse came in and my dad got up and petted him. My husband was a fireman. I remember once when the J street mill burned down here one morning. It was on a Monday morning, and I washed. In them days the fireman wore flannels. He called me up and he said "Gertrude, bring me up my flannels to the station". I said, "Why, I just washed them. They're hanging on the line." He said, "Well, they'll be better than the ones I got on." So I went into Lewis clothing store, bought him a new pair, and took them over.

JB: Did you say your father earned a dollar a day?

GS: A dollar a day. That was high wages then.

JB: Did that buy a lot of food?

GS: Yeah, that's all ya made them days. The sugar was only five cents a pound. Calico only five cents a yard.

JB: Where did you do your shopping then?

GS: well, sometimes we--the horse and buggy days, you know--we'd come to LaPorte, and sometimes we'd go to South Bend, or New Carlisle. It was just according to what they wanted to buy.

JB: What did they come into LaPorte to buy?

GS: Well, they'd come to LaPorte to buy their grain, and staple goods. If they wanted to get dry goods, Oh, some in LaPorte, if they couldn't find what they wanted here, they'd go to South Bend.

JB: Did you ride into LaPorte with them?

GS: No. I had to stay home. I had to stay home and keep house. I uh.... Mother would bake the bread, and I'd have to take the bread, and I felt so proud that I could take that bread out of the oven when it was done.

JB: Did you have brothers and sisters?

GS: Oh, that's a long time ago. My father was constable, and then he was Justice of the Peace. One term was seven years, and the other was fourteen years.

JB: Where was that?

GS: In Wills township. We lived out there.

JB: What were some of your chores as a girl on the farm?

GS: Look after my little brother ...mainly. You see, Dee Brown was my brother. He was a policeman here you know. Maybe you knew him.

JB: I've heard of him yes.

GS: I'd mainly look after him. Our father was very strict with us. If he said no, that meant no. We didn't ask him again. He said that after you find out that ...you'll thank me for being strict. Well I've thanked him many a time. Yeah.

JB: What church did he take you to as a child?

GS: I walked two mile and a half to the Baptist church...Sunday school to Sunday school. But see, when we moved to Rolling Prairie, then we had our church there, the Methodist church. I was secretary in our Methodist Sunday school for a number of years--then I was working in the telephone office. I had to put in such long hours, I couldn't stand it any longer. So I had to give that up. Oh, I've had a nice childhood.

JB: Was your farm close to other farms in the country?

GS: Our telephone? In the country there we didn't have a phone. There wasn't so many phones then. When we went into Rolling Prairie then we had a telephone put in. Telephones, when you're making only a dollar a day, they're kind of a luxury.

JB: I imagine.

GS: I worked in a telephone office out of Rolling Prairie for about seven years.

JB: When was that?

GS: Oh, that was in uh, now let me think. Oh, it's been so long ago. I was fifteen...twenty. I was twenty years old, and I'm eighty seven now. Well, you figure it out.

JB: Was telephone service a little different in those days?

GS: Oh yea. Art Jones was the manager of the Rolling Prairie telephone exchange there. It was upstairs, and then we moved downstairs, right across the street from where I lived. And I was there ...til finally I had to get out. It got the best of me. We had one...two switchboards in there, and I'd run both of them. Well, one and a half. They only used about half of that one switchboard. A switchboard and a half. Then the testing: I had to test the wires in the back and like that.

JB: What did you have to test?

GS: The wires that the calls come in when the men were out on the lines. Oh, the telephone lines between Rolling Prairie and LaPorte, all of them were down along the way. Hans was out there. And that was a...that was a time.

JB: How did that happen?

GS: A storm. A big storm come and blew all the lines down. Hans came out there and the board was just mad, every plug was in; I had everything in there. Hans was standing, and Mr. Jones beside of me. I said, "Git back of me". When they were back of me, it didn't bother me, but when they were watching me I couldn't do it.

JB: What was Rolling Prairie like when you lived there?

GS: Well, we had outdoor privies. (laughter) And we had one when I come to LaPorte in nineteen twenty-five we had em here. Now you can't have em, you have to have sewage.

JB: Were the streets paved? Were there many buildings?

GS: No. The streets wasn't paved. Now they're all paved now there. Rolling Prairie has grown since I've been out there. I don't hardly know anybody out there anymore. It's all changes. It changes just like we do ...the towns do.

JB: What kind of shops did Rolling Prairie have?

GS: Well, Gene Adams had the grocery shop, and Bill Ludke had a grocery store. Gene Adams, no ...Gene Adams. John Noble. It was John Noble had a grocery store, and Bill Ludke had a grocery store. We used to go in and pay for our groceries...and you'd get a stick of licorice, or a piece of candy.

JB: Were they general stores?

GS: General stores...everything. Reeses' Hardware was there. My father was mail carrier. My brother, when my father died, my brother got the mail route. It was the first mail route that went through the country. It was the first one. And then my niece lives out there. She's retired now. Esther. That's all.

JB: Where did you go to school?

GS: Center school.

JB: Was it a one room school house?

GS: Center school. It was a mile away, out in the country.

JB: Was it a one room school house?

GS: One room school house...from the first to the eighth grade.

JB: How many years did you attend there?

GS: Let's see. When we moved into Rolling Prairie I was in my eighth grade. That I know ...caused I finished my eighth grade in Rolling Prairie, in town.

JB: How many people would you say lived in Rolling Prairie when you were there?

GS: When I used to live there?

JB: Yes.

GS: Oh maybe. .. I don't know.

JB: Thirty. Forty.

GS: Three hundred.

JB: Was it pleasant living in a small town?

GS: Oh yes. My brother lived down below us, and his little three children. The two would take, and hand in hand would go on to Sunday school. When the other little boy came along, the three of them hand in hand walking to Sunday school.

JB: I imagine that it was a quiet place to live.

GS: Oh yes. It was a very quiet place. Yeah.

JB: Was it mostly a farming community?

GS: Yes, you might say that. There was a lumber yard and a depot. Then finally they built the inter-urban depot down there you know. The New York Central had a depot there. I rode home on what do they call it? In the back wagon. The back car.

JB: The caboose.

GS: The caboose. I rode home in that caboose.

JB: Did you meet your husband in Rolling Prairie?

GS: I was living in Rolling Prairie and I met my husband in LaPorte here.

JB: Where did you meet him?

GS: I met him at amy sister-in-law had a dance, and she invited him. That's where I met him.

JB: What kind of dances were there then?

GS: Well, they were mostly waltzes and square dances--mostly square dances really. Now the square dances are all coming back in again.

JB: What kind of musicians played for them?

GS: Mary and Lou Hickman. She had a dulcimer and he had a violin.

JB: Could you describe one of the square dances?

GS: You want me to call one?

JB: Sure. (laughter)

GS: Well, there are four couples, stand facing each other. And then whatever the caller calls...he tells you that to do. If he says shake hands with your partner on the left, acknowledge her. And then on the right. Doe-see doe. And away you go.

JB: What does doe-see doe mean?

GS: Doe see doe. Doe see doe. Let's see. I have to stop and think how to tell that. I think that's around. You go up and then step back. I forget. I'm getting older; I got a right to forget a little bit.

JB: How long did the dances usually last?

GS: Oh, we generally quit about ten, ten-thirty or something, eleven-o'clock.

JB: Were there refreshments served?

GS: Yes, we served refreshments.

JB: What kind of refreshments?

GS: Well...coffee. Coffee and maybe cookies, something like that. Light refreshments.

JB: When the dance was over did everyone get in the horse and buggies and then drive home?

GS: And then ride home. Everybody get in their own rigs and go home. Sometimes if there was a boy there, and he'd ask me to take me home, I'd let him. (laughter) But not very often. I generally went with the ones that took me, and that was Mr. and Mrs. Lou Hickman. The ones that played the violin and the accordion. Not accordion, the dulcimer. They were our neighbors.

JB: What did you think of your husband when you first met him?

GS: What did I say?

JB: What did you think?

GS: What did I think of him. Well, I thought he was a mighty fine man. We went together for about five years before we were married.

JB: What was your courtship like?

GS: Oh, we'd go places, and go to dances, and go-out tomy husband was married before, and his folks thought an awful lot of me. We'd go to them, at their place. Sometimes we'd go into Chicago to one of the shows ...and like that. I've led a nice happy life.

JB: Did you take the inter-urban into Chicago?

GS: What?

JB: Did you take the South Shore into Chicago?

GS: No. We took the uh, we took the train...New York Central.

JB: Could you describe the trip in on the train?

GS: Well, it was just like riding on any train...you get there. And then you have tothey met us at the station, and we had to get off of the train and walk about a half a mile into the station, to the depot there, and get on another train and go.

JB: What was Chicago like in those days?

GS: Chicago like in them days. Well, to me it was a great big city and I was lost in it.

JB: Did you come into LaPorte for music? What kind of music was there?

GS: What?

JB: Music. Were there brass bands? orchestras?

GS: When?

JB: During your courtship. When your husband was courting you.

GS: Oh.... I don't want that recorded. You see the firemen had a lot to do with that. They was gonna take us for a ride, and we slipped out on them. So I don't want that recorded.

JB: Was your husband a fireman when you met him?

GS: Yes. He was a volunteer fireman.

JB: What year did you get married in?

GS: Nineteen twenty-five.

JB: Do you remember any good stories he would tell about fire fighting?

GS: No. Only the one I told you about the J Street mill burning.

JB: Was fighting fires dangerous back then?

GS: Very dangerous. Any fire is dangerous. Many a time we'd set down to the table-I'd have dinner on the table, we'd hear the fire bell and he'd have to get up and leave.

JB: Did you come into LaPorte for parades and activities?

GS: Yes. We'd come in once in a while. My brother would bring me in... see a parade.

JB: Going back a little bit, do you remember any games that you played as a little girl?

GS: Well, we'd play Blind man's bluff, and pump pump pullaway...and hopscotch, marbles. I can't think of any others right off hand..

JB: Where in Wills Township was your farm?

GS: Where?

JB: Yes.

GS: Well, one mile east, directly east of the old Center School house. Which iswhat do they call it? Now they changed it over into a public meeting place.

JB: In Wills Township?

GS: Yes. The old Center School house. I don't know the road maps. It's one mile from LaPorte. You go outWell, I can tell you from Rolling Prairie. From Rolling Prairie we would go south to road ...this road here. What is it? 2? Or 20? The highway.

JB: Twenty.

GS: Twenty ...to twenty. There at the five corners, right there. And then you would go, you'd go ...I think it's a mile south of here, and then turn to the left, and go two miles...you'd come to Center school. And one mile farther is where I was born. The old homestead.

JB: Could you describe your house to me?

GS: Yes. It was a two story. Let's see, two ...three, four, five room house. See the folks had a house there. It burned down, a cottage. It burned down; they built this house. They never did get it finished. So when we moved into Rolling Prairie, dad sold the farm. And we moved this house where it stands now. Just New Carlislewhen you come this way, you come to this cemetery, and turn to the left; it's the first house on the left hand side. I understand he had a curios there. I don't know who he is.

JB: You said they moved the house from Wills Township up to Rolling Prairie. How did they do that?

GS: They moved the house from out there to that cemetery. It's New Carlisle. Just before you come to the cemetery ...north there, on the left hand side. That house still stands.

JB: When did you move to LaPorte?

GS: When I got married in 1925.

JB: And your husband was a fireman?

GS: He was a fireman, right.

JB: While he worked, what would you do?

GS: What would I do in the mean time? Cook; go to parties; I joined the- he had me to join the different organizations, and wanted me to get out, go shopping, take it easy.

JB: Could you describe Lincoln Way back in 1925?

GS: Well, some of the jewelry stores are gone there on Monroe St.. Jewel had a store on the south side of the street. Keplin, I believe it was. And then there was the old hotel down in there. I think...I'm trying to think. Weren't there brick pavements then? Til the streetcar went through.

JB: Have you liked living in LaPorte?

GS: I liked living in LaPorte. It's one of the cleanest cities that I've been in.

JB: Of the changes in LaPorte, which ones stand out the most in your mind?

GS: That parking lot on Monroe St. and Lincoln Way. The was a...bus station was there. I remember. And a jewelry store was there ...but now that's all gone. I hated to see that go. And then of course, the overhead. A big change. That's newer. Modern.

JB: When you were married, what activities did you attend?

GS: Well, we'd go to dances. My husband had a cousin living out on a farm. We went out there a lot.

JB: What did you do out there?

GS: Well, my husband and his uncle would help this man. Help his cousin, with a lot of his chores, and like that.