

OLD WISE TALES

MINNESOTA
CITY



FOUNDED

1852

*Recollections of Longtime
Minnesota City Residents*

Produced by
Secondary II Students
Riverway Learning Community
Minnesota City, Minnesota

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RIVERWAY LEARNING COMMUNITY

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Students of Secondary II,
Riverway Learning Community,
dedicate this collection of "wise tales"
to the people of Minnesota City

— to their past that we honor

*— to the present to which they
give meaning*

*— to a future that we build
together*

In this sesquicentennial year of
Minnesota City History, 2002

Riverway Learning Community

115 Iowa Street
Minnesota City, MN 55959

The Project

How old are we when we consider and begin to understand the reality of change? In the profiles of this collection, we get glimpses into changes and into the lives of people whom we have asked to reflect on them. We believe these historical anecdotes and this information can contribute to the understanding of change for readers. These tales recount universal truths of the human condition—birth, family circumstances, societal events, influences of schools, churches and politics, individual personal and career choices, and finally, of death and burial. We thank all the individuals, our neighbors, friends, and relatives, who have opened their homes to us and have told us some tales—they are “Minnesota City tales.”

Gathering these profiles has been a life forming experience for the Secondary II students at Riverway Learning Community, the Minnesota Charter School that “resurrected” the community school experience at Minnesota City in 2000. For Riverway Learning Community personnel, watching students visit and interview long-time residents has been a wonderful intergenerational experience, sometimes awkward, sometimes easy, always inspiring. Some technical experiences in conducting the interviews were successful; others were not. We apologize for any discrepancies in information given to us or inaccuracies in material we have reproduced here. We appreciate the patience of the contributors with our first time efforts. In all of these visits, students have been aided by the wisdom and experience of Beverly Mastenbrook, herself a lifetime resident of Minnesota City area, and whose profile is included in the collection. We want to especially acknowledge her contribution to this project. These experiences have helped Riverway students better understand how life changes in both short and long periods of time, and can help them begin their own journeys to wisdom. They are “wise tales.”

There are many other persons in Minnesota City with interesting information; our list was arbitrary and limited by time. We wanted this collection completed in time to honor the sesquicentennial observance in May. To readers who would be interviewed or who know persons who would, let us know; this is a project that can be repeated. Individuals we have interviewed are persons who have recorded some of their history in a variety of forms—scrapbooks, photo albums, crafts they have worked at, and others. We invite all of our readers to become historians. Write your own record!

Students of Secondary II, Riverway Learning Community, 2002:

Jessica Singer	Alec Lilla	Gary Bambenek
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Produced at Riverway Learning Community

115 Iowa Street
Minnesota City, MN 55959

The Overview

Roger Church

"When you came to the store you didn't have a cart. You had a list and George or Elmer would fill your list. If you wanted bananas, they would take a knife and cut them off a big stalk. They served ice cream that was out of this world."

Gerald Cisewski

"I think growing up in a small town really made me a better person. Lots of enjoyment—beautiful things out there. There was a challenge to be the best, but not a nasty fight like the Packers vs. the Vikings—it was a friendly challenge to do the best you could do. Successful hunting made people proud and confident. You would see the beautiful scenery and watch your dog retrieve well."

George and Gloria Denzer

"His mother (Esther Denzer) was superintendent of the Baptist Church Sunday school for 35 years. We were married in November and she said to me that the meeting is the first Thursday of the month and you are going. And I have for 61 years."

Mildred Jessie

"Everything on the railroad was done by hand with picks and shovels. Now it's all machines."

Delwin Tschumper

"You had to be creative to create recreation. There was no recreation department. At night we played Moonlight, Starlight. My mother always said that our backyard had no grass because grass and kids don't grow up together."

Dolores Gallagher

"I know I am old fashioned in a lot of ways, but I have the feeling now that kids today are pushed too much. Everything is expected of them. I think there should be a growing up period that kids should be allowed to experience."

August Jilk

"In the end there were no more threshing crews. That's why we bought our own threshing machine. I'm going to pitch bundles into one of those next year if I'm still living. I'm going to get into that. I talked to a guy about it."

Ray and Lola Denzer

"Last year Dallas went through a million board feet of lumber. He's always got about three hundred thousand board feet of lumber here. You buy a board, you pay ten dollars a board. Imagine how much three hundred thousand board feet is worth. What are those pine trees worth?"

Eleanor Whetstone

"Everybody in the community attended PTA meetings, not just the parents and students. They would have elaborate programs and lunches afterwards. I could play the piano so it seemed like I was in demand for everything.... It was a very close-knit community at that time."

Ralph Evanson

"The original part (of his home) which happens to be the kitchen, was purchased with a federal land grant in 1855. The requirements for that land grant were that the building had to be at least twelve by fourteen feet. The door hinges and front entrance are still here. Everything was made in cast iron in those days."

Jean Gardner and Dorothy Gardner Brom

"Some of us just loved to read, and if you got your work done, you could get a library book. Sometimes you would just go get an encyclopedia and take that to your seat to read." Jean Gardner

"The inner city is practically deserted now. The Anderson's addition built up. This was just farm land before." Dorothy Gardner Brom

Lydia "Pearl" Singer

"They had ration books, which were little stamps used for food, gas, meat, sugar, and so on. After your stamps were all gone you were out of luck. If you didn't use the food stamps, you gave them to people who didn't have any."

Gladys and Howard Volkart

"There is not too much activity in Minnesota City anymore. We sometimes wish there were more. One thing, there is not much trouble with rush hour traffic."

Kateri Hall Mueller

"Across Highway 61 and the train tracks and then up and around the bend was the city dump. We would go with my dad to take our garbage there in the evenings. This man's name was Louie. I don't remember him ever saying a word. You just tossed your junk over the hill where Louie pointed and he would burn it when the weather cooperated."

Beverly Mastenbrook

"I've always farmed. I always wanted to be a cowgirl. Then one day I was riding my horse chasing cattle and I figured 'You are a cowgirl.'"

Neil and Clare Denzer

"D. Q. Burley had homesteaded in the mid-1800s and built a stagecoach station there. There was a barn for hay storage and a livery stable to house the spare stagecoach horses. The stage would change horses there and leave the others to rest up."

Marge Kowalewski

"There was a swinging bridge where you could walk across to get to the Oaks. The big thing was to walk across the bridge, get to the middle, and try to make it swing. Our parents told us not to, so of course we did."

Ruth Peterman Mrozek

"I have lived in Minnesota City all my life. This house is on the land I grew up on."

The Interviews

Roger Church	13
Gerald Cisewski	17
George and Gloria Denzer	22
Mildred Jessie	26
Delwin Tschumper	30
Dolores Gallagher	35
August Jilk	39
Ray and Lola Denzer	45
Eleanor Whetstone	48
Ralph Evanson	52
Jean Gardner and Dorothy Brom	55
Lydia "Pearl" Singer	60
Gladys and Howard Volkart	63
Kateri Mueller	67
Beverly Mastenbrook	72
Neil and Clare Denzer	76
Margaret Kowalewski	80
Ruth Mrozek	84
Quilting	87

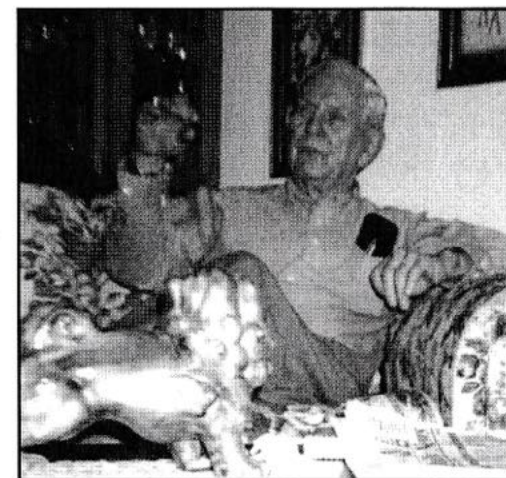
Roger Church

The Minnesota City sesquicentennial button designed by three Riverway Learning Community students, Sierra Singer, Lexi Wozney, and Logan Prosen has special meaning for Roger Church. The general store that is pictured on the button was owned by his father.

Roger was born on February 8, 1922. He lived in Minnesota City for 54 years; most of his family lived there all their lives. Although he and his wife, Ruth, now live in Winona, Roger has a long family history in Minnesota City. "My grandfather was about seven or eight when he came up here from Virginia. My dad was born on a farm up in the valley. He lived

to be over a 100 years old. The Church family homesteaded in 1856. The farm is still owned by a Church family member, my cousin Russ. My grandfather retired and bought that big house on the corner. I would stop there after school and eat supper with my grandparents. When my grandfather died in 1930, we moved down to the big house to keep Grandma company. When she died we moved back to the little house on the hill behind the cemetery." Roger remembers moving into the house on the top of the hill near the cemetery and "ladies in long dresses taking my brother in the wicker buggy up and down the street."

"The store that my dad and my uncle ran was owned before by C.C. Smith. That was built when the town was built. There was a house up from our land and that was his house. He built that when he settled in Minnesota City. Dad (George Church) and Elmer (George's brother) started the store about 1914. These two men ran the store. They sold coal. They had a big scale that weighed the straw and hay. They had everything pertaining to farm life for sale. For the women they had bolts of



Roger Church describes the Church Brothers Store, a Minnesota City landmark featured on the sesquicentennial logo.

cloth. The post office was in there. Groceries and a meat market with a walk-in cooler. They had an icehouse out back and used a horse to bring it up and used sawdust to insulate it. When you came to the store you didn't have a cart. You had a list and George or Elmer would fill your list. If you wanted bananas, they would take a knife and cut them off a big stalk. They served ice cream that was out of this world. At one time they had a soda fountain there. There was a gasoline pump there in front of the store. An old fashioned one. It had a glass thing on top and it would just run out into the car. Minnesota City at that time was pretty isolated. It was pretty self sufficient. It was kind of like being pioneers."

The ins and outs of "Main Street" in Minnesota City are familiar memories for Roger. He remembers being about three feet from the workers when they paved Mill Street for the first time. "We had ball teams in the summertime. My brother Curtis, who died in the Korean War, he used to be the business manager for all the ball teams. That was the main activity. We liked to roller skate up and down the street. When I got to be old enough, I used to go to my uncle's place on my bicycle. He used to grow vegetables for stores in Winona. That was Harry Saehler. He needed help weeding all those vegetables. We worked by hand. We would get about fifty cents a day. Harry would allow us a couple of hours in the middle of the day to go swimming in the pits."

"On Minnesota Street there used to be a Methodist Church that was abandoned when I was a child. The town used to throw Halloween parties for the children in that abandoned church. There used to be a cast iron bridge crossing the street joining Dakota Street. Before my time this was a road to Rollingstone. When my dad started the store, there was no highway to Minneiska, just a path. When they put the railroad through there, the access was put in."

"The Catholic church was across the street from the store. Before that, it was a dance hall. My dad and Uncle Elmer ran dances there. Dad and Elmer would stay open on Sunday morning when it became a Catholic church; people would go to church and then do their shopping. Those days are gone forever."

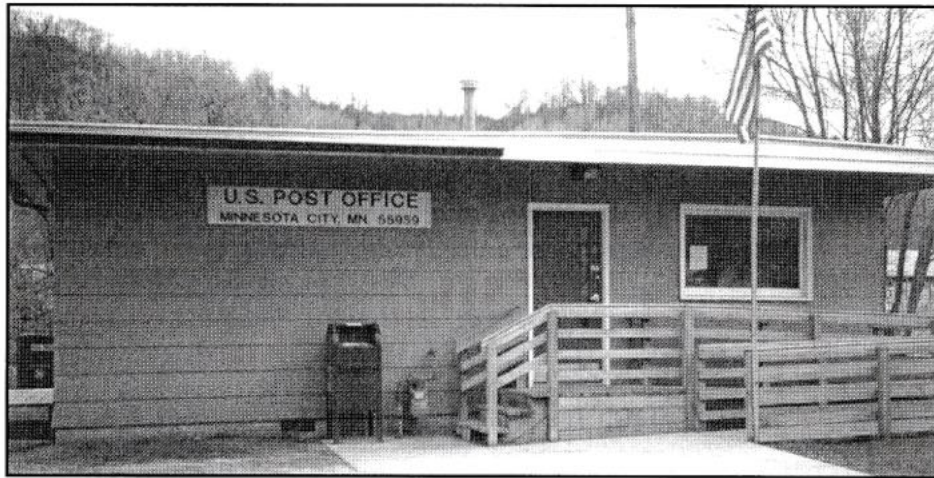
When Roger was fifteen or sixteen he got his driver's license. "I used the old pickup truck they had. Now it's owned by Ed Maus. It's used to pull

the calliope around. Dad used to send me up to Stockton to get butter for the store from the creamery in Stockton. I used to have to haul coal from the shed by the railroad, where the fertilizer plant is now. In the winter they sent me and another guy named Bud Witt to unload a forty-ton gondola of coal. It took us all day to do that. When we came back to the store, we were cold. What you won't do when you are young and able to do it. My dad brought a bottle of brandy out and gave us a shot out of it to thaw us out." The building still stands on Mill Street, but it is not nearly as interesting from the outside as the inside of the store that Roger describes.

Roger is an authority on the schools of Minnesota City. "When my dad was a young man, there was a school in Stockton Valley, but he didn't go there. He rode his horse to the blacksmith on the corner and boarded the horse. Then he would walk to school in Minnesota City. That would be the old Minnesota City-Stockton Road. There is part of it there yet by the Oaks. When we were kids we used to go down and swim at the water hole there. We used to walk up to the top of the bridge and you could see the city of Winona from there."

"The first school in Minnesota City was my parents' house. I remember watching them build the new school. It was a WPA (Works Progress Association) project. This new part was built when I went on the school board. To you it is the old building, but it is the new building to me. It was built when I was going to school then. The old building for me was the old two-room brick building that was torn down. The bell from it is at the fairgrounds in St. Charles. At one time I ran dances up at the school. We had the place full of people. It was supposed to be for the kids, but everyone came. We had them down in the cafeteria in the old school. Mrs. Whetstone and Mrs. Hohensee were the cooks for a long time. The school had a cement roof. We used to practice with the ladder with the fire department. It was the only building in town you could practice on."

Roger went to high school in Winona. "We had to pay tuition there. We had to rent our books there, too. After that we got transportation. I would stop and get my cousin, Bill Saehler. He went to Teachers College here. I graduated in 1940." Roger went to work for Lockheed in California until World War II. He and his brother enlisted in the Army Air Corps.



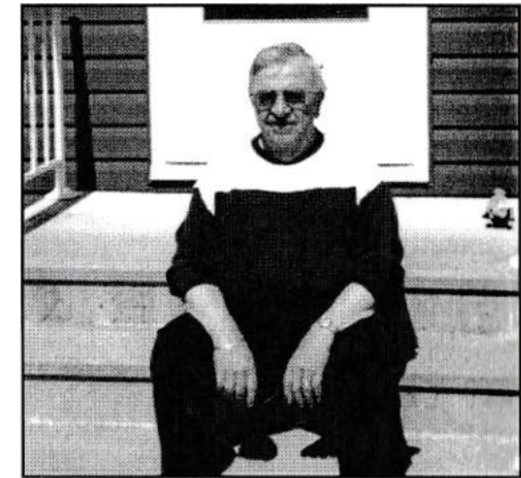
Building constructed by Roger Church.

After the war, he married and went to four years of classes on the GI bill and worked for nine or ten years in the automotive business. When the post office job in Minnesota City became vacant, Roger applied for and got it. He was the postmaster for thirty years. The post office was established in Minnesota City in 1952. "My dad had it for 41 years, and I followed him. When I took over, it was in the old store. There were 116 boxes on the rural route. Over the years there were more and more because everything was building here from Winona. There were over 400 when I left. That didn't include the Hidden Valley Trailer Court."

The Church family, including Roger, will be in all the histories of Minnesota City.

Gerald Cisewski

The words "It takes a village to raise a child..." cross the mind when listening to Gerald Cisewski's account of growing up in Minnesota City. He described for students the connections of friendships, of church, of home, of neighbors and neighborhood businesses in his growing up experiences. Many Minnesota City people have seen Gerry walking along the Minnesota City Road and Highway 61, "up to six miles a day." Gerald's first wife, Alma, died in 1994; he later married Janette Shaw, and they live at 121 Minnesota Street in Minnesota City. Gerald is not one of the oldest Minnesota City residents, but as a lifelong resident, he communicates a real understanding of "the way it was" resulting from living on the main street of the city and as the son of one of the owners of the Cisewski-Wockenfuss garage. This garage was the hub of activity for many residents. Along with Sanstede's bar, it was the ice cream source for all the kids in the summer.



Gerald Cisewski in front of his home at 121 Minnesota Street.

Gerald's parents were Celia (Lejk) and Leo Cisewski. Leo's family lived on Oak Ridge; he was one of thirteen children. In 1917, during World War I, Leo worked on a grain farm in Canada, keeping the tractors working. After he married, he borrowed \$7000.00 from his wife's mother to start up the Minnesota City garage, probably making about two dollars an hour for his work at the time. When his business took off during the war (World War II), prices for parts went up, and he raised his prices for work to about \$2.50 an hour. Gerald showed us a service charge slip listing prices from the \$2.50 per hour down to eight minutes for \$.40. Leo paid back his debt right away by the time the war was over. He ran the garage with Emil Wockenfuss who was married to his sister, Mary. In 1974, Leo died at the age of 79. Celia died in 1994.

Gerald "Gerry" Cisewski was born on January 27, 1932. He was a printer for 20 years at Leicht Press in Winona, and worked for the last 26 years before retirement as a custodian at Winona State University. We were visiting him just days before his seventieth birthday. His recollections of his early years in Minnesota City were immediate and definite. His first memories, he said, were "basically of family life, of sitting around the table, the five of us." Gerald had two brothers; Leonard (who died in 1988 of cancer) who worked as a teacher, principal, and superintendent in the Wisconsin school system, and Arnold, now retired, who worked in Minneapolis-St. Paul as an engineer connected to air-conditioning and heating businesses. The family lived in the big white house at 101 Iowa Street, now owned by Brian Ebbinger. Gerry said his father brought the house from someone named Milton for \$1600.00, which was cheap, "but nobody had money back then"—in the late twenties.

The first pay that Gerald received was seventy-five cents for an eight-hour day, weeding onions on a truck farm of Bill Saehler's father.* He played baseball in high school, although "I was never very good." Minnesota City had a team with Ridgeway, Rollingstone, Rushford and other small towns called the Hiawatha Valley League. When he was ten or twelve, he was playing football and softball with the neighbor boys. One girl, "sort of a tomboy," beat him out of a position for softball, Gerry recalled. None of the kids in the neighborhood were really trouble makers. "Eddie Verdick can tell you those stories; he was the town constable.



The Cisewski-Wockenfuss Garage, a Minnesota City "institution."

He always said he kept me out of trouble." All the Cisewski boys were in the service. Gerald was in the Army, his next brother was in the Navy and his oldest brother "was an Airborne," and those two entered in World War II. His oldest brother "was shot at a couple times." Gerald was a cook and spent most of his time in Oklahoma.

The typical interests of young people were the Cisewski's also—cars, hunting, fishing. Gerald's first car was a 1948 Pontiac. Then he had a Model T, 1931, bought for \$35.00 with his brother, from Lawrence Whetstone. This family later lived at Stockton with their daughter Darlene. Leo Cisewski had a '26 Buick, and later a 1914 Cadillac that he made into a welder. One of his older brothers trapped muskrats, and Gerald did lots of trout fishing in Rollingstone. He had several dogs; his first dog was "Tippy," used for duck hunting. Kids used to gather and play cards, "Schafskopf," at Sandstede's tavern by the garage. Sandstede's was right across the street from the Cisewski house. There was another house right north of the tavern, but according to Gerry, it was moved when the road went through. The city night club had a dance hall. Gerry and his mom worked at the Oaks where they had live music. "Guys would come up from Camp McCoy to try to meet ladies. To us, the Oaks was a big deal."

The Northwestern Railroad coming from Stockton, stopped in Minnesota City, and then went on to the NW Depot in Winona. President Truman came through on the train when he was running for reelection. He stood on the back of the train, it stopped in Minnesota City, and he talked to everyone. Gerry was told that in 1936 President Roosevelt came down Main Street in a limo, past the tavern. "He didn't stop to talk, he just drove through."

The "new school" opened in 1938, and Gerry was in first grade. He remembers his teachers, Mrs. Harland and Mrs. Fletcher. At about this same time he remembers helping Father Berg dig out the basement of the old Catholic Church in Minnesota City (now the home of the Schoens). "You'd get a scoop of dirt, drag it behind the horse, then dump it after the horse pulled the buckets out." Gerry continued to be involved in the new Catholic Church and said he remembered lots of weddings and funerals there, including his own two weddings. His parents were founding members of the Catholic Church when it was organized in Minnesota City.

The church was first established as a “mission” in 1925, and the present building was constructed in 1957.

It is when Gerald talks about the activities of the young people in Minnesota City that we hear his value for small town living. Hunting was one of these enjoyments. “It is the best way to go,” said Gerry. “I think growing up in a small town really made me a better person. Lots of enjoyment—beautiful things out there. There was a challenge to be the best, but not a nasty fight like the Packers vs. the Vikings—it was a friendly challenge to do the best you could do. Successful hunting made people proud and confident. You would see the beautiful scenery and watch your dog retrieve well.”

“Life was so much simpler back then. It was a good neighborhood. Everyone thought going to a movie was a huge deal. Once a week was about right. On a Sunday afternoon you could get on the train to Winona for 11 cents, pay about 12 cents for a movie. You’d get a hot dog for a dime at the Knick Knack on Third and Main. There were two theaters; you’d go to two movies and then take the train home.”

“There were no TVs. After school, me and my brothers would go out and play ball until dark. We listened to the radio. You couldn’t get many stations. We’d listen to Captain Midnight, to Gangbusters on Saturday nights. Sandstede’s would get ice cream in May. That was a big deal. They had it until it got cold.”

When asked about lifestyle—how they “lived”—Gerry had a number of memories about his home. Yes, he knows his mom made soap—not exactly how, but “something with lye in it and grease. Everyone had gardens of vegetables, and we’d can our own stuff. My mom was a great cook. Her beef roasts, potato pancakes were the best. Sometimes she had to stretch food because there wasn’t much money. We were poor people,” Gerry said. Many houses didn’t have indoor plumbing; the Cisewskis did, and also had electricity, although, according to Gerry, “lots of people were scratching to make a dollar,” as did his family. They always had enough, but not to spare. “Dad would send me to Church’s store—I’d get round steak for five people for a dollar. Mom patched clothes when needed. Kids always wear the knees out. I remember for about \$15.00 she bought a first communion suit, two pairs of pants, a black vest and a black jacket.”

Nearly every discussion of the history of Minnesota City in this sesqui-centennial preparation includes mention of the Cisewski-Wockenfuss garage. It is easy to understand why Gerald and Janette are still living in Minnesota City, not far from the place of Gerald’s birth—it is still a good life in a small town.

*Bill and Rose Arnoldy Saehler live in Minnesota City next to Lyle’s Floor Service on Highway 61. The Saehlers maintained a greenhouse and sold plants for many years after the farming operation that Gerald describes had ended.

Winona with my grandmother so I could go to the doctor every day. I'm still going though at 87."

Church activities are part of the Denzers' life story. "Before we went to Sunday School, they would look us over and see if our ears were clean. These were the good old days. A minister from the Baptist Church on West Broadway would walk out here each morning for services."

Mrs. Denzer talked about the church beginning in 1852. "I found a box of the original Christmas decorations on a shelf in there. His mother (George's) was superintendent of the Sunday School for 35 years. We were married in November and she said to me that the meeting is the first Thursday of the month and you are going. And I have for 61 years. There were fourteen members of the ladies group. Once a year, years ago, we had a strawberry social. We would get all the strawberries together and make cake." The Denzers are members of the First Baptist Church in Winona. They spend a lot of time at the nursing home. "It gives us something to do."

Mr. Denzer went to the original school (the Maybury building) starting in the first grade. "During the first years they built toilets along each side of the steps going into the school. Girls and Mens. That was that way for quite a few years before they decided to build a new schoolhouse there." All of George and Gloria's children (John, Kay, Delton, Corrine, and Orlan) went to the Minnesota City School.

George remembers the road going right through Minnesota City, the main drag. "It went over there by the night club. That was a fun night life—all those bars."

The Denzer family hunted. Gloria told us, "Hunting was our meat for the winter. Squirrels, eighteen to twenty in an afternoon. We took them home, canned them, and that was our meat for the winter. We smoked some of the meat. We had a wood stove. We laid up vegetables, we canned everything. I still do dill pickles and tomatoes. I got a man from Minneapolis who comes each year and gets forty-four jars of pickles. Comes back every year."

George and Gloria Denzer

George Denzer has lived his life within ten miles of where he was born and because all the locations of his homes were near the Mississippi, he talks with detail about how the lay of the land has changed through the years. George and Gloria Woodard Denzer live right at the turnoff from Highway 61 to County Road 248 at Minnesota City. They can see from their front doorsteps the railroad and the river in the distance. George reminisced that "The first steamboats used to come up along the railroad tracks. That's where the river was years ago.

The main channel was right across from the railroad tracks. The steamboats would come up here. There was an Indian graveyard across the tracks. The mound is still there. The Burley graveyard is right up on this knoll (up Highway 61 on the John and Esther Denzer family farm). You have to go above the farmhouse. It was in the railroad property and they took and dug the graves up and moved them up the hill and put a fence around it. It's still there today. The Indian burial ground is still there. This was all lake out where the highway is now, years ago."

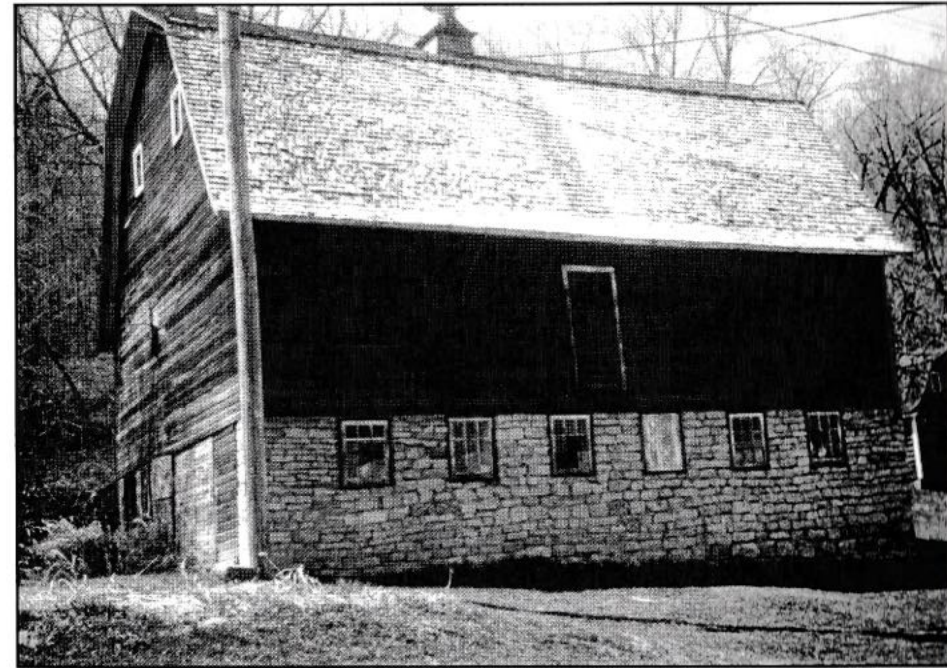


George and Gloria Denzer in front of their Minnesota City home from where they can see the Mississippi River and the location of George's childhood home.

George had a number of childhood stories to tell. "When I was six years old, I went to talk to my older brothers and cousins. There was a road up around the hill all built by hand. They (the road builders) had left a case of dynamite up here in the pasture. I had to hurry up and see what I could do with the dynamite caps before my older brothers got there. I took matches and tried to stick them in the cap. They wouldn't go off, so I took them and hit them with a rock and they blowed me all to hell. A lot of my fingers had nothing but bone sticking there. I stayed in

George worked as a carpenter all his life. He worked in the foundry when he was sixteen. He helped build the Whitman Dam. "I would work there all day and then go home and cut wood. I would get \$5.00 for a cord. It wouldn't take long; I would rick it all up so I could handle it. I had an old gasoline engine and would hook it up to a saw and then run it through them. I would get my brothers to help me. I brought one of the first chain saws they had around here."

Home, church, family, work. The Denzers have a busy life.



Barn at the former home place of George, Neil and Ray Denzer.

"Denzer's Meadow is out here (beyond the highway and railroad tracks). We plowed that and planted corn in it every year. It was work land. I set on a corn cultivator and watched the horses going up there. Sometimes I fell asleep. Sometimes it was a little sideways. That was when we did it the hard way. The horses could have done it by themselves. We used to take the horses down and take a little swim, and then go back up and cultivate some more. Right where Burley's take the turn, there is a place called Farmers' Point. All the farmers came to fish. It went all the way to Schneider's Lake. People still park their cars along the road and go out there and fish. All the old fishermen used to go out during the day when the sun was shining."

At a recent sesquicentennial celebration event at Riverway Learning Community, George and Gloria Denzer were honored for their modeling of family and school connections; the connection was with a long-time Minnesota City teacher, Lillian Holland. "Mrs. Holland was a dedicated teacher. When she said to do something, you did it; there was no getting away with anything. She told us that if our son wasn't on the school bus, not to worry. She was keeping him. She told everyone not to pick him up; he would walk home, five miles. By the end of the month, he was getting A grades. Mrs. Holland used to put on Christmas programs that lasted four hours. She had forty students. She would come right out on the playground and play with all of them. Once, although threatened that she could lose her job, she took a child home who had appendicitis; he was taken to the hospital and lived."

When Mrs. Holland became ill and had retired, George and Gloria cared for her, helping with her physical needs, doing her lawn work for the next forty years. "At the nursing home, she didn't want to stay in her room," Gloria told us, "so they let her go to the kitchen and wash dishes or load the dishwasher." She was ninety-eight years old when she died in 2001.

The Denzer house has "a moving history." It was moved from about five miles farther north on Highway 61 to its present location because of highway construction. Further highway construction for the four lane required another move. The Denzers lived in the old house while the present house was being built right next door. "The state gave us enough money to build this house," said George, "so we weren't taken. They took a match to the old house and burned it up."

Mildred Jessie

Ninety-nine years old at the time of this interview, and with a computer-recall kind of memory, Mildred Jessie has many hobbies, including her favorite, playing cards. She especially likes “500.” She pursues these activities at the Lamberton Home on Huff and Fifth Street in Winona, where she has resided for the last eight years. Photos of her husband, Harry, and her children and family adorn her residence. She was born in 1902 in Hillsboro, Wisconsin, and attended school up to eighth grade in a sod school house. In 1909 she went from Oklahoma to Colorado in a covered wagon. In 1919 her family moved to Sparta, Wisconsin where her parents farmed. She had three sisters and three brothers. All the girls lived past ninety years old. In 1921, Mildred married Harry Jessie who was born in Sparta in 1900. Harry was from a family of seven boys. One brother died as a baby and one died when he was 8 years old. Both of their family backgrounds included farming. Harry worked as a laborer for the railroad in Sparta, and moved to Minnesota City in 1938 to take a job as section foreman for the railroad. He lived with the Allemans until Mildred came in March of 1939. They rented two different houses in Minnesota City before they bought their house near the railroad depot in 1950. Harry died eleven years ago; he is buried in the Oakland Cemetery at Minnesota City. Mildred was a housewife for many years. She also worked as a Sunday School teacher for about sixteen years, and as a school secretary.



Mildred Jessie at her Lamberton home.

The Jessies lived right across from the Minnesota City train depot. There were two or three trains that passed on the Minnesota City railroad each day; one was the Milwaukee and another was the Chicago Northwestern. Some were passenger trains, and many were freight trains. There was one passenger train called the “400.” Harry worked on the railroad for thirty-nine years before his retirement in 1965, getting paid 56 cents an hour

when he first started and usually putting in ten-hour days. If there was a bad storm, Harry had to patrol the tracks to look for flooding. Mildred also remembers flooding, with water covering the tracks. “Everything on the railroad was done by hand with picks and shovels. Now it’s all machines.”

Mildred said there were lots of special neighbors in Minnesota City, and there were many card parties. Asked about any connections with the Oaks, she remembered that the Oaks and Vill Brewery had a connected basement. Many Minnesota City residents comment on this; the basement is the site of much of the lore that grows out of Oaks stories of gambling, women, card parties, gangsters and the rest.

If Mildred needed to go to Winona, it was always free, because Harry had a free pass for working on the railroad. Otherwise it cost twenty-five cents to go to Winona. Mildred said, “During war times when gas was rationed, this man worked for my husband, and one week we’d take the car and go grocery shopping, and the next week, he’d take it. Just to save gas. You could only get so much.”

Harry had many hobbies, including gardening, deer hunting, baseball games, and fishing on the river, plus he loved animals. Garvin Brook runs right by their house but she said they never went fishing there. They usually went fishing at the



Cemetery where many long-time residents are buried.

Minnesota City boat harbor, where they had a boathouse. Mildred and Harry had a big garden, especially red raspberries. The Jessies always had one cow for milk plus a calf. They butchered one and the other would



Mildred Jessie discusses historical clippings with Tina Losinski.

grow up. They furnished all their own meat. "One day Harry looked out of the house at the cow and said, 'If someone offered me \$250.00 for that cow, I wouldn't take it.' That was a lot of money in those days. The next day she was laying dead in the pasture." They also had three goats, cats, dogs, and chickens.

The "goat story" Mildred told will be long remembered. "After

Harry retired, he used to take a nap after dinner. He laid down one day and I said, 'your goats are out. You better come and get them in.' And then I went to lay down and he didn't come and didn't come. So I went out there and the barn was locked. There was a window but I couldn't get in it. I hollered to him and he said 'you better get someone to come.' So Eugene Pierce came down and he jumped in that window. And if that goat wouldn't have had horns, that goat would have killed him (Harry) but see, that goat's horns were so big that when it would go at him, his horns would hit the wall instead of him. We had three goats. It was Halloween time, and Howard Volkart called. Someone had taken a goat and tied it at Howard's. He said, "Is it your goat?" and Harry said, 'No, but if you want to bring it down here, I'll take it.' And I don't know whose goat it was, but I think that's what made that billy goat so mean. Because he had been among them before and nothing—but that strange goat being there...so they shot the goat—they had an awful time getting that goat to die. They sent the head away, but there was nothing wrong with it."

Asked about some of her first memories, she recalled going to Winona "to do our own shopping. I thought that was the longest street, you know, Broadway, that I had ever seen. I was always in Sparta, and that's a small town. And when we first came to Minnesota City, when anybody had a birthday, the whole city would come."

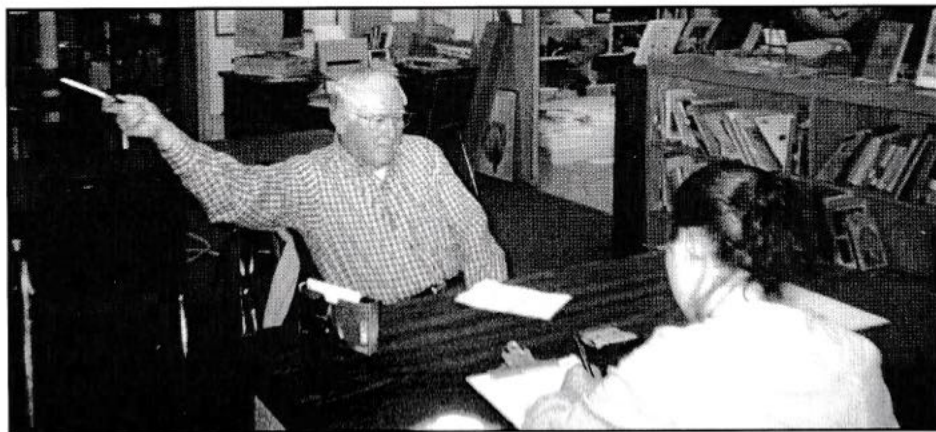
"The Volunteer Fire Department in Minnesota City sponsored buses to the baseball games in the Cities. We went several times." She also remembers the swinging bridge dedication, which several others have mentioned.

Mildred and Harry had three children. Two of them went to the Minnesota City school. Berniece went to Minnesota City from first to eighth grade, and Allen went up until 5th grade. The last daughter, Harriet, went to Winona schools. Today, Berniece is 80, Harriet is 70, and Allen is 60 years old and lives in New Mexico. Mildred Jessie has three grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren. Harry helped build the Minnesota City church (Lutheran) which was dedicated on October 11, 1964, and which they then belonged to. She has been a survivor of cancer (Lymphoma) for twenty-one years. Mildred has experienced much of the history we celebrate in this sesquicentennial year.

Delwin Tschumper

Delwin Tschumper has long connections with Minnesota City. He was born in 1932 and lived at Minnesota City for the first nineteen years of his life. He went into the army, came back and lived here for three years around 1955. Then he worked in Kentucky until 1974 when he returned to Winona where he and his wife, Sherrie Leininger, now live. Delwin has a brother, Beryl, and a sister, Grace. Another brother was tragically killed by a car in Minnesota City. "He was walking with my dad and his hat blew off. He ran from my dad and was hit." Delwin's father, Allen, was the rural mail carrier in Minnesota City for many years. He is listed as the Cub Scout leader on the charter document that is preserved at the Historical Society in St. Paul, and his brother Beryl was the assistant leader. Delwin's mother and father were active members of the Minnesota City PTA.

Allen Tschumper's father, John Tschumper, had a farm where the Delwin Tschumper family lived during World War II. "The house did not have a furnace in it. There were registers and the heat that came upstairs came from two holes. In the morning the windows would be all frosted over. It was cold up on the second floor. You got dressed under the covers and stayed in bed for as long as you could." Later, Allen built a home on this property on Highway 61. Delwin's first memories of Minnesota City date from when he was about four years old. "I can remember how every



Delwin Tschumper indicates locations of important Minnesota City sites.

spring the creek would rise up to the railroad bridge. The railroad bridge that goes across Garvin Brook would sometimes have fallen trees across it. You could stand on the bridge and feel the water under it." Delwin said that when the Stockton farmers began to practice conservation, the runoff became less.

The Tschumpers first lived in the house to the right of the First Baptist Church. The house did not have a full basement, but did have a fruit cellar. "My mother did a lot of preserving and we stored it in the fruit cellar." The house also had a cistern. "We didn't have running water in the house. The cistern collected the water off the roof and ran it through a funnel and a screen to sieve off the junk. We had a room off the kitchen where you could pump water out of the cistern. It was all soft water. We would have to get in there and clean that cistern off every once in a while. My dad would keep an eye on the screen to make sure nothing got through the screen."

Delwin's school age years involved teachers and friends and the village. "We played a lot of baseball and football." Delwin had a long list of names of friends he remembered: Jack Sandstede, Harold Dickman, Gerry Cisewski, Richard Newman, Phillip Streng ("he was an excellent marbles player"), Clayton Maxham, Arnold Cisewski, Jay Alleman, Beryl Tschumper, Allen Whetstone. "One of our main areas to play football was right behind the school. This was our football field. There was more land out that way. We had a softball diamond on one end and a football field on the other. Girls also played with us. We played marbles. We used to dig a little pot in the ground with our heel. We threw marbles in the pot and put a line down and then would shoot the marbles into the pot. The first person that shot the marbles in got all the marbles. We didn't have lights at that time, so we would play under the streetlights at night. It was a good time."

Delwin remembers that the school at this time was a county school, and Glenn Alleman (who lived next to the school) was on the school board. They helped raise the taxes to run the school. "The school was the hub of the community. Just like now; I would come here every Christmas to see a play. The place would be filled. Everyone would come to see his or her children in the play." Delwin remembers that in first grade he did something that caused the teacher to shut him in a closet and turn the light out.

“Ever since then I have been claustrophobic. Kids were kept after school and had to pound erasers and clean the chalkboards. Some kids were tough kids, and things went on just like now,” according to Delwin. He is glad to see the school back at Minnesota City. “The school becomes the hub around which the community functions. Everything went around the school—the activities, the social activities.” Delwin’s dad and Leo Cisewski contracted to tear down the old school in 1938. “My father fell from the second floor onto a pile of bricks. He didn’t get seriously hurt, just banged up. I am happy to see them (Minnesota Citians) have their own school in the town again. Students that came out of this little school were all types of people including factory workers, farmers, architects, doctors, and comptrollers, all levels of management. I was always proud of that,” said Delwin, “because we were just a little country school at that time. Just as many professionals came out of this little school as come out of a bigger school in bigger cities.”

“Our entertainment as children was simple,” Delwin told us. “We didn’t have all of the activities that are available for kids now. We generated our own activities. If we wanted to play a game, we would challenge other little towns around here. You have to be creative to create recreation. There was no recreation department. At night we would play ‘Moonlight Starlight.’ My mother always said that our backyard had no grass ‘because grass and kids don’t grow up together.’ Simple games kept us entertained.” Like other persons interviewed, Delwin recalls Friday and Saturday nights as busy ones at the Oaks. A lot of the business came from Camp McCoy during the war. “We used to go around to the back door of the Oaks to the kitchen and we could buy a hamburger at the door. They were the best hamburgers around.”

During these years, “old-timers” gathered at a garage at the foot of the hill, called the Red Trail Garage (a one-time name of the Cisewski garage, also the Greyhound bus depot). There were some unique people who came into the garage. One guy’s name was Black Bill.* He was an American Indian. He would tell all kinds of stories, hunting, fishing, and sports stories. He was an interesting guy to me.” Delwin himself spent some time on the river, “but I am not a river rat. I fished off the dams. I do remember the Armistice Day storm that caught a lot of hunters out there and a lot of them died. The day started out nice and the weather turned foul. They couldn’t see their way back.”

Delwin’s recollections of World War II were new information for the students. “Rationing,” he said, “was a system based on the number you had in your family. My dad was a rural mail carrier. He would go up Stockton Valley and Rollingstone. During the war, the gasoline was rationed. You were not to make unnecessary trips. We did a lot of walking and bike riding. Shoes were rationed. We had one pair for a year. If you wore a hole, you would cut out a shape and put it in the hole so you could still wear the shoes. That’s how you extended the life of the shoe. Sugar and coffee were rationed. Meat was rationed. But everybody got by. You didn’t eat as well, but you got by. This was necessary to supply the men in the war with food. My dad rented some land over by the new part of the cemetery to raise green beans for the military service. Someone came around once a week and would weigh the beans.” The war effort also involved the school. “We had a scrap drive at the school during the war. We went into every ravine in the area and pulled out machinery and other things farmers had dropped in them to rot. We had a steel pile taller than the end of the building, and it went down the hill. The kids from school collected this steel. We also collected milkweed and the silk in them was used to make life jackets. Old copper wire was very valuable at that time. The United States did not have an abundance of copper at the time.”

One memory Delwin recalled was especially interesting. “I was standing out in the yard and a car came down the road. It was a two-seater coupe. There were two guys pushing the car. They were not speaking English; they were speaking German. There was a prisoner-of-war camp at



Delwin Tschumper (middle row left) stands with his 1945 class in the 1938 school building.

Dolores Gallagher

Dolores Knoll Gallagher has lived at her present home site, 10 Wenonah Road in Minnesota City, since her marriage to Vernon Gallagher in 1935. Dolores was twenty-one when she came to Minnesota City and has lived at this location for 66 years. Vernon was tragically killed in a traffic accident on their wedding anniversary in 1996. Few people have more detailed information about the place they live than does Dolores Gallagher; she shared some of this information about her historic property, the O. M. Lord property, with the students who spoke with her—

Logan Prosen, Alec Lilla and Emily Tofstad. “We were newlyweds looking for a place to live and this property was available,” said Dolores. Dolores and Vernon lived in the O. M. Lord House for twenty-five years before building their current home. Mrs. Gallagher showed the student interviewers the foundation of the Lord House.



Vernon and Dolores Gallagher

“O. M. Lord was one of the pioneer founders in this area which dates back to 1852. Evidently in April 1852, the Western Farm and Village Association was formed through the Macedonian Charter in the O. M. Lord Lumber Yard. In 1852, O. M. Lord, Rev. William Sweet and Jonathan Williams landed on Wabasha Prairie from the Doctor Franklin (ship). They found their way to the Minnesota City settlement the next day. Mr. Lord was not then connected with the association; he was afterwards prominently identified with the affairs of the colony. He had with him the first span of horses brought to Minnesota City. Rev. Sweet and Jonathan Williams accompanied Mr. Lord on a journey back of the bluffs to view the land. The need for building materials became apparent. They went up the Chippewa River and brought down a small raft of lumber. Mr. Lord opened the first lumberyard ever in Winona County. His stock was soon exhausted without supplying the demand. Mr. Lord became the

Whitewater State Park. Farmers could go up there and borrow prisoners to work. They wouldn't try to escape; they had it too good up there, and they would have been caught. They were pushing the car because the car ran out of gas. Gas rationing caught them.”

“The Winona airport was built after World War II. They didn't get enough passenger service, so it stopped. When the airport was dedicated we had some land there that butted up against the railroad track. The Blue Angels came to town and we parked about 100 cars on the property for a dollar a car. That was a lot of money. After the show, there was the biggest traffic jam Winona had ever seen, trying to get all of those cars out of the area—over a thousand.”

Delwin started working as an apprentice carpenter. He made ninety-two-and-a-half cents an hour. At the same time, a journeyman carpenter made twice that—\$1.85.

After Delwin graduated from Winona State University, he went to work for Trane Company as a cost accountant. “I ended up in Lexington, Kentucky as a comptroller. I came back to Winona and worked for a company that became Badger Construction. I worked for Winona Printing for two years until I retired.”

Delwin would like to see better access to some of the areas around here. He likes the drive from Prairie Island up to Minnesota City. “I like the backwaters there and the hills around here; I missed them when I was away from here.”

*Black Bill is a name that occurs in conversations with a number of Minnesota City persons. Some recall his being in the Whitewater area and being a skilled fisherman and rattlesnake hunter.

first mail carrier. When members of the association decided to disband the colony, Mr. Lord purchased their lots which were close to the area he lived in. After the government survey of the village plot was comparatively abandoned, he made claim of a quarter section on which he was living and preempted it. O. M. Lord bought the Proser Blacksmith shop and tools. He died in 1906 of heart disease and is buried in the Woodlawn Cemetery." Lord and his wife, Martha, had several children, some of whom were first buried in Minnesota City, and later moved to Woodlawn Cemetery in Winona. Martha Lord, Mrs. Gallagher told us, died without a will according to information on the abstract.

During several of their early years at the former O. M. Lord House, the Gallaghers "provided room and three meals a day to depot agents and railroad workers for thirty dollars a month. On a few occasions we had Oaks' entertainers staying with us."

The Gallaghers were active residents of Minnesota City where they owned about forty acres of land, and Dolores knows that "it has changed." "When we came here, this was just a dirt road, and the roads were not oiled. Dust was a problem. and there were times you would get stuck in the roads on your way to Winona by way of what is now Wenonah Road."

Vernon Gallagher was a school board member. Everything was on a small scale then; all of the board members always got along well, and he thought it was a good experience. Dolores said that when their oldest daughter went to the Minnesota City school, "she went one day wearing a pants suit. The teacher did not think it was proper to send a child to school that way. I felt that when a girl went out on the playground it would be better if they were covered up." Riverway Learning Community students could have told Mrs. Gallagher how their school learning leaders appear to agree with her—their family handbook has rules that say "no bare midriffs, no spaghetti straps, etc. Change!" Dolores said, "I know I am old fashioned in a lot of ways, but I have the feeling now that kids today are pushed too much. Everything is expected of them. I think there should be a growing-up period that kids should be allowed to experience."

Dolores talked about the changing of her neighborhood. "All of the old timers we were friends with are gone; the younger generation is busy

with their jobs. Years ago there were connections with your neighbors that are not here now. We all know we are not here forever," she said. These are not all easy changes for those who stay. The Gallaghers were members of the Catholic Church all these years, first at the one on Mill Street. Mrs. Gallagher, as did a number of persons the students spoke with, had heard that the Mill Street building was previously an opera house, and/or a jail. It has now been converted into a residence. Many Minnesota City members of St. Paul's Catholic Church on Anderson Street remember Vernon as an efficient, friendly usher for many services. "Vernon was a devoted Catholic," said Dolores. She commented that through the years people were sometimes judged by their religion. "I think my feeling is that I choose my friends by who they are, not by what church they are a member of. I think people used to be more judgmental when it came to religion."

The Gallaghers farmed for some time. "About 1948 Vernon was told he had inflammatory rheumatism, and he was advised by doctors that the damp in the barns was not good for him. We had an auction and sold the cattle. He did carpenter work after that. We rented out the land for several years. Strawberries were our big crop. Before that we raised cucumbers and cabbage for the pickling plant and string beans for the Plainview Cannery. We sold eggs for hatching to the Rollingstone hatchery, and raised fryers and butchered them for restaurants in Winona."

Dolores had a busy life as a mother and homemaker. "When I got married, a woman's role was to be a homemaker and a good mother. My role was to raise my family. We made dresses out of flour sacks. If the sack wasn't big enough, you would buy another sack of plain material to finish off the outfit. People would tear apart old clothing and make new clothing out of it." We heard about the flour and feed sack material being used for sewing in discussions with several people. Dolores also worked at a number of crafts, and "I read a lot. I enjoy cooking and baking and people coming in for coffee."

Dolores and her family (there are three Gallagher children: Marilyn, Sharon, and Loren) spent a number of winters in Florida. "My parents had a tourist park with cabins. It was the type of place that catered to tourists. My father was fascinated with travel and we made one trip to Florida with them in 1940. Getting away from Minnesota winters seemed

August Jilk

August Jilk, "Augie," lives off of County Road 23 between Minnesota City and Stockton, where he and his wife, Anastasia Monahan, raised eight children, six of whom are living. Ann, who was a homemaker and gardener, died in 1989. August, now eighty-six years old, was born in Stockton Valley, one of fourteen children of August and Sophia Killian Jilk. He lived in Minnesota City from 1942 to 1945 on a farm across from what is now the gravel pit, across the highway from the Catholic Church off Highway 248. The Jilks bought the farm from George Duffy. There was no electricity or plumbing; they couldn't get it at that time. Water, including water for the stock, was pumped by hand. Besides the animals, the Jilks raised garden things to sell and to peddle in Winona, including sweet corn. "Augie," as he is known to most of his friends, also worked in Winona at a full time job at Froedtert Malt sacking grain that was made into malt. They loaded the grain into boxcars. "We worked through the winter. We couldn't wear gloves to tie the sacks. Your hands were cold."

The corn on the Jilk farm was cultivated with horses. The Jilk kids did lots of hoeing—"got out quack grass with a fork. There was no such thing as spray to kill the weeds. Now Haase (a neighbor to Jilk) plants in the spring, sprays—that's the end of the work until the fall."

Augie's niece, Gen O'Grady, told us before we went to visit him that "he knows the river and the woods around here as well as anyone." This proved true. Mr. Jilk had an endless store of tales about river and woods that reflected his intimate connections with the land around Minnesota City. Augie



August "Augie" Jilk shows students one of his bird feeders at his home.



Historic O. M. Lord house as it appeared before removal.

like a good idea, so we continued to spend many winters there. We also traveled to all of the states, including Alaska and Hawaii, and many places in Canada and Mexico."

Many Minnesota City newspaper readers remember an article in the Winona Post recounting the Gallaghers' visit with George Burns in Las Vegas, Nevada. Mrs. Gallagher said a friend arranged the visit; they were invited into his dressing room for snacks.

Mrs. Gallagher shared her thoughts about a long life: "I never smoked; I don't drink, and I try to eat right. And I trust in God." Sounds like a good way to live. We are wishing Mrs. Gallagher many more visits with friends who come over for conversation and coffee.

is still hunting. Three weeks before this interview in January (2002), he had been to the Whitewater. He went by himself that night and didn't get any coon. The dog didn't want to hunt and Augie was disgusted with it. "I'd get close to the car to leave, and the dog would disappear. I didn't want to go down by the main river—so I thought 'one thing I can do'—I sat down a ways away from the car. I had the leash; the dog came back and I grabbed him." Dogs know when you are getting ready to quit the hunt, and if they're not ready, they'll try to hunt longer, according to Augie. He told the story of the dog he has now that he got from Jule Mastenbrook. When they (Augie and his son) picked him up, he was so shy. "We were almost afraid to ride with him—you couldn't touch him. Months later, I got up one morning, heard this commotion and found the dog caught in the electric fence. That was awful, terrible. But ever since I got him off of that, he's been my best friend."

"There were close calls on that river (the Mississippi). One day, my Dad and I were fishing. I had this little rowboat. The kind of a boat you should have is one with a pointed front. But this one was flat. We were fishing above Whitman Dam in that area there way across the river. We were tied up to one of those markers they've got, and were fishing there. A storm came up blowing right down the river. I said to my Dad, 'We've got to get out of here.' We just lucked out—we made it out. That was a close one. Another one, my brother and I were set lining. We were supposed to have a marker, but there wasn't much place to put a marker—we'd throw 'em right in there and then we had a drag to haul 'em back. It was about nine thirty in the morning. We were way across the river. A storm came up from the northwest. Luckily we had a gallon pail in the car. My brother was dipping all the way across the river."

Augie was not on the river during the famous Armistice Day storm.* "I lucked out on that," he said. "I was living at 1014 East 9th in Winona. My neighbor went fishing that day. That morning, I can still remember it like today—it was so warm in the morning that angle worms were crawling around on the lawn and that was the day—it was terrible, terrible. There was a guy I worked with at Winona Industries. His dad was out in that storm. He froze to death standing up."

Asked about changes in the river, Augie said "lots of changes. You know where the Minnesota City Boat Club is? Before that was a boat harbor, I

had my boat tied up there; there was hardly any water; I was the only boat there. Other changes have been in laws and the like. You know about that limit of ten on sunfish. I'm against it. That Dan Dieterman was here and I told him I and my boys are against it. And you know it is a ten-year thing. Years ago when I was a kid, we could hunt all the way to Minnesota City—there was nothing like trespassing."

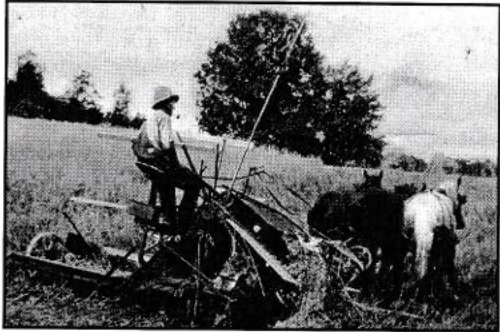
"I can remember when Church Brothers had the store. It was a store and post office combined. And then there was another store—Trainors. They had groceries. We never bought a lot of stuff. Our family was great for toothpicks. We'd get them at Church's store. There was a shoe store. When Trainors went out, the shoe store came in. We went to church across the street—that was before they built the new church."

August Jilk couldn't think of anybody he knew that is buried in the Oakland Cemetery at Minnesota City, but he said "I was thinking about that fellow who lived not too far from the cemetery, Chris Ludwigsen. That house is moved now—it is a big two story house moved to where you go toward Prairie Island—past Gallaghers, the second or third house on the left. I should remember more about Chris Ludwigsen, but I don't," said Mr. Jilk.*

"I want to show you the threshing machine. I wish I had some pictures of the shocks. With this kind of binder you made it (the oats) into bundles—little bundles. Then you shocked that up, ten bundles to the shock. I shocked grain down here for the neighbors one of those years, besides our own—where Church, Reid Church, lives now. It was Winczweskis living there at the time. I shocked for them—a big wheat field. I was so proud of those shocks. My daughter went up on the south forty to shock—they all fell over. You have to have them braced right. And on the side hill, that's a different story."

"In the end there were no more threshing crews—that why we bought our own threshing machine. I'm going to pitch bundles into one of those next year. If I'm still living. I'm going to get into that; I talked to a guy." Augie showed the interviewers a picture of his two brothers, Leo and Joe Jilk, threshing on their farm north of Minnesota City. Marvin O'Grady, who had accompanied the interviewers, remembered that Joe was pretty upset about the photo showing his pipe. His pipe had fallen out of his pocket,

and so as not to lose it, he put it in his mouth, BUT IT WAS NOT LIT. "I'd never light up a pipe around a rig," he had remarked when the photo was published. Augie said he had noticed the pipe, but didn't know what "the deal" was. Not smoking around hay barns or straw was definitely one of those unwritten, common sense rules. "One guy," said Augie, "drove his team too close to the threshing rig. The horse got caught in the flywheel, and tore half the hide off the horse—terrible, terrible."



August Jilk Sr., father of Augie Jilk, cuts oats for threshing on the Jilk farm in Stockton Valley. Horses were used for all this work.

And then came the deer hunting stories. Erin asked Augie about the first deer he saw. "The first deer I ever saw—there weren't always deer around here. Father Tibesar had deer in a pen—we thought some of those deer got out, and that's where deer got started here. I was on the home farm (Stockton Valley). I went around the bluff to get the cows to milk in the morning. Our land

ran around the hill toward Steinbauers—where the old brick school house use to be—here I found the cows. There was a deer laying next to them. First deer I saw in my life. And we heard later—we figured someone cut the fence at the priest's, and they got out. And then later, they brought some from up north. I don't know how they really got started in this area. Our neighbor had twelve hunters this year—hunted ours and my son-in-laws—they took twenty-two deer out of here, out of this valley. I know they got some of my pets, Betty and Susie. I'd say, 'Come on down here' and they'd look at me and keep on eating. I guess I had those two tame."

Augie showed us a picture, not a photograph, but a painting done by his son of two people bringing in a deer. "It looks just like him and me," he said. He hadn't had the camera along when they brought the deer home, so his son captured the memory in a painting.

Pointing to a mount on the wall, Augie said, "That buck I shot on O'Gradys' farm. My two boys and I used to go hunting up by Stewarts.' I saw this apple tree where the deer had been feeding. I got where I liked

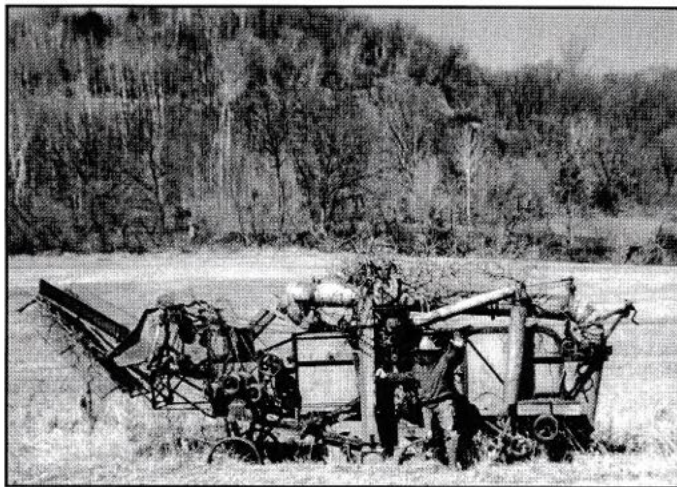
to sit in a white oak with a bow and arrow. This apple tree was all grown up with brush. I trimmed it up for a twenty yard shot and crawled up in my oak. Pretty soon here comes this doe in the spot where—and stands right there, but at the same time, here come a big buck in that alfalfa field. I thought, 'I'm gonna wait for that buck.' There was another—I don't know where it went. He (the buck) got behind a big oak tree. I could see him—I thought, 'I think I could get him right in the heart.' He turned around just a little and I shot and caught him in the neck. He ran down the hill a ways and looked back at me. Anyway, I went and looked. I couldn't find any blood or anything—after a half hour or so it got dark. That night it rained. A week later, Joe or Sonny (Jilk) called and said, "We found your buck." He was lying in a pond over there, froze into a pond you know, but they figured sure it was my buck. We took their rig and went up there with their tractor and I thought 'that deer won't be any good to eat anymore. I'm gonna take the head.' I got out my knife to cut the head off. I said 'There's nothing wrong with this meat.' So we took the whole deer, and I took him down—Bill Gannaway was the game warden that time, got him tagged. Well anyway, he said 'Where was he shot?' Somebody had found the deer ahead of us and got the broadhead out of it. I was thinking, 'I'd like to get that arrow, that broadhead yet.' We brought that deer home and it was the best deer we ever ate. Unbelievable. That's a fact."

"And this one here, that was shot with a shotgun. I always tell everyone I cheated on getting that deer. That particular morning it was blowing, pretty much straight from the west. I went around the hill over here. I thought, 'I'm going to walk right up this point, because it was pretty cold you know. They'll be coming down to get out of the wind.' And I got up there, pretty well on top of the hill. I couldn't figure out which side of the hill to stand on. Finally I got way up on top. Here I see this buck. The thing of it was, the sun was on my back, but it was shining in his eyes; that's why I say I cheated him. I shot and he went right down."

Asked whether he preferred bow hunting or shotgun hunting, Augie said, "Well, I don't know. I really used to love bow hunting. My boys all hunt with guns here now and that's how I got going. I'm thinking about going bow and arrow again this fall because I like to get in on the best part of the mating season, or the so-called "rut." That's what I used to like to hunt. I shot a lot of deer with bow and arrow, more than with guns, but

with a bow you got to be close. With me, twenty yards was my favorite shot. But the best shot I ever made was over in Wisconsin. I was hunting both states that year, and I went out early in the morning and there was fresh snow on the ground. And there were two deer tracks going up the valley and I started following them, and it thought 'this is no good to follow them—it's going to scare 'em.' So anyway, I thought, 'I'm going to take a chance and walk up the hill here.' Walked up the hill, got about halfway up the hill and I don't know what it was, must have been a dog, I heard a farmer's dog—scared 'em, and there they came toward me and the buck was quite away up the hill. He was out of range. But the doe was—I stepped it off later—fifty yards away and running. I up and shot and I couldn't believe it. She run about half a block, I guess. It was across a ditch. I thought she acted kind of funny, you know. I waited a while and walked up the ditch and she lay dead—shot thought the heart—a running shot at fifty yards through the heart is luck."

"There are a lot of stories—I goofed up—did the wrong thing. When the deer is there, you make one slip, forget it. I could write a book on all the deer hunts I had." Before they left, Augie showed Jennifer, Erin and Maggie his threshing machine and some of the bird feeders. The promise of a great storyteller had proved true. Mr. Jilk knows the river and woods around here "like the back of his hand."



August Jilk stands in front of the thresher he explained to students.

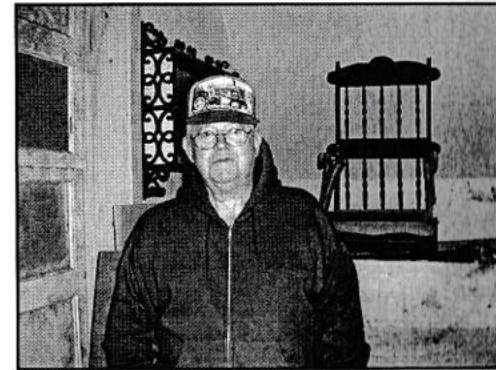
*November 11, 1941

*Chris Ludwigsen is a person whose name surfaced in a number of interviews. He is buried in the Oakland cemetery with his wife and son. Someone told us he farmed.

Ray and Lola Denzer

The Denzers live on land about two miles north of Minnesota City. Ray and Lola Woodard Denzer have been married for sixty-one years. Lola was from Pickwick, Minnesota. They have eight children: LaRay, Laurel, Raymond, Aloha, Nancy, Robert, DeAnne, and Dallas. All the Denzer children attended the Minnesota City School.

Ray's parents farmed two miles south from where he now lives. It was a four hundred acre farm. There were eight boys and one girl in his family. When he was young, all boys worked for neighbors on farms—"there was nothing else to do." The work paid about twenty-five to fifty cents a day. When he was thirteen, Ray got his first job, working for the farmer from whom he later bought his land, Art Mastenbrook. Once he worked all three months of the summer for him; Mastenbrook couldn't pay him, but he gave him two heifer calves. "That was okay. Times were tough then."



Ray Denzer has constructed walnut rockers for many family members.

Ray and Lola were married in 1940. That's when he bought the land on which they now live. He worked at a Winona foundry for thirty-seven cents an hour, which he said was not enough to live on. When their first baby was six weeks old, Ray asked for fifty cents an hour. They said no, so he went to work in Milwaukee, getting sixty-nine cents an hour piece rate, not a daily rate. He worked there for a year and a half. Ray was drafted into the army in World War II in 1944. In 1946, after the war was over, he then came home and built the house that he is now living in. He built every inch of it out of solid oak, and also built the barn and shed. He then bought two cows and started farming. It didn't take long to get sick of farming "two decks," as Ray described it, meaning the land on the ridge. He didn't like the bluff road, so one day he brought the corn picker down the hill road and said "we're going to plant that hill to trees." That was about 35 years ago. He planted Northern Pine

trees, which today are seventy feet tall. Ray and his son, Raymond, just finished building a cabin on that land by the pines. They started it about thirty-five years ago and worked on it their spare time. They'd go up the bluff road on a 4-wheeler.

"We peeled all the logs by hand. They were cut out of the woods up there," he said. The cabin is used for the kids, the grandkids, and great-grandkids. Asked by the students about conveniences at the cabin, Ray said to get electricity up there would cost a small fortune. It took about one-hundred-and-fifty-hours to build the cabin. Raymond is going to finish the inside after Christmas. Besides oak and pine on the Denzer land, "There are walnut trees all over," said Ray. "I never cut one of them and I never will."

A special tree that Ray did cut and still has lumber from is a ginkgo tree, an import from China that is unusual in this area. The tree grew in the back of Dr. Tweedy's house in Winona. He wanted to build a tennis court and asked Ray if he wanted the tree. "It was about a foot-and-a-half across. We got a whole load of logs from that tree. I don't know what I'm going to do with that lumber."

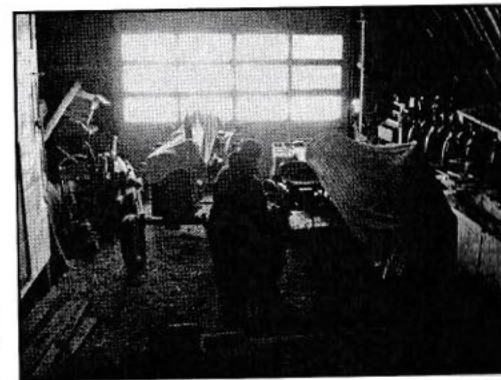
Ray worked for Standard Lumber Company for over twenty years. The sawmill, he said, was a wonderful business that he had wanted ever since he was a kid. He started a sawmill and has had the mill for 30-35 years. now. About three ago, it burned down but was then rebuilt, and Ray sold it to his son, Dallas. Ray said, "I won't sell anything off this land that is mine anymore, that stays here." Ray wanted a mill ever since he was a kid. Some vehicles he owned to start his business were trucks—two 4x4s, two forklifts, and 2 tractors. He bought more equipment as he went along. In the sawmill they make a pallet a minute. There are a couple of workers that work 12-hour days and have been doing it for 15 years. Except for nails and saws, everything is automatic. The automatic nail machine has 3,000 nails in one coil. The building where it all happens is 90 feet x 160 feet and they are in the process of adding on now. Ray also added on to his barn a few years back. They get their wood for the pallet making from Canada, Georgia, and Michigan. They use scrap wood to heat the buildings. "Otherwise it would cost a fortune to heat." The pallets go all over the world. "Pallets—the stuff going overseas— shouldn't get wet." They are building a cement slab for this purpose, Ray told us.

Last year, Dallas went through a million board feet of lumber. He's always got about three hundred thousand board feet of lumber here. You buy a board, you pay ten dollars a board. Imagine how much three hundred thousand board feet is worth. What are those pine trees worth?"

Ray has two antique tractors, a 1937 Farmall "B" and a 1949 John Deere "M." "They are totally restored," Ray said. "Just like new tractors." Ray has other John Deere equipment: cultivators, diggers, a plow. He will be bringing his tractors to the sesquicentennial celebration in May.

Woodworking is another hobby of Ray's. He made four antique solid walnut rockers, but he's not finished. The doctor said he had to quit working with walnut. "It took me a year to get that dust out of my lungs."

Ray pointed out a number of artifacts in the house: "There's lots of stuff from Africa here. I've been in Japan; I got that in Tokyo when we were there. I've been all over the world. Got that in England." The Denzers have traveled the world, but home is Minnesota City.



Ray Denzer shows students his restored tractors.

Eleanor Whetstone

Eleanor Whetstone told us a most interesting incident of her early years in Minnesota City when the Whetstones lived near Harbor Drive. "The water used to stand in the early spring between our



Eleanor Whetstone tells students about changes in land and roads around her Minnesota City home.

house and Harbor Drive. I never really knew why. Allen (Eleanor's brother-in-law) probably could explain it. It would, I suppose, be melted snow. The day Stan (Eleanor's oldest son) was born, I had to go by boat from our front door out to the Winona road because of the high water. At that time they kept you in the hospital for ten days, so by the time I came home, the water was down. It was scary enough to be having a first baby," according to Mrs. Whetstone. The boat ride added to the apprehension.

Eleanor came to Minnesota City in 1935 when she was sixteen. "The first thing I can remember is getting off the train at the old depot, which is no longer here. We were met by a cousin, Gilbert Stewart. We were taken to his home for dinner and we proceeded from there to the house my mother and I would be living in. We looked it over and then were asked to take the evening meal with somebody in the area, a shirttail relation, I think. We moved from Rochester."

Eleanor's mother was going to teach at the Minnesota City school. "We had to look the school over. There were only two teachers at that time. It was a two-room school. My mother had the upper grades in the upstairs

part of the brick school." Like other persons we interviewed, Eleanor Whetstone said that everybody in the community attended the PTA meetings, not just the parents and students. They would have elaborate programs and elaborate lunches afterward. "I could play the piano so it seemed like I was in demand for everything. It was a way to get acquainted with everyone in Minnesota City." According to Mrs. Whetstone, it was a very close-knit community at this time.

Eleanor and her mother lived in a house three houses away from the Oaks. Then they moved to another house across the railroad tracks. "At that time, all you had to say was you were living in that house and everyone knew where you lived."

"My mother didn't have a car when she came, but shortly after she came, she did. We bought a brand new Ford for \$900.00 That was quite an amount from her checking account." Mrs. Whetstone told about one trip when the roads were icy and she and her mother were lost. "A cattle buyer imbibed just a little too much and hit the back of our new car. That was something. The first dent always hurts anyway."

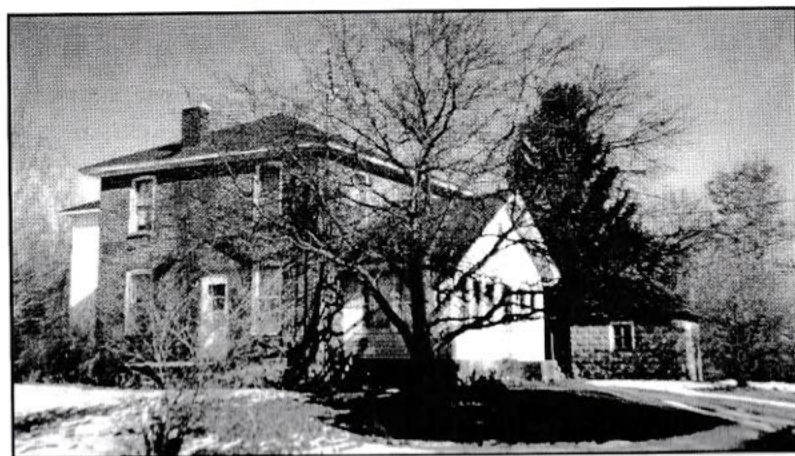
"When I was twenty-one, I was married to Glenn Whetstone and we lived on what is Harbor Drive now. We lived in a little three-room house. It's been remodeled and been made much larger now." Mr. Whetstone worked on the railroad a bit, at Schuler Chocolate Candy Company every winter for a few years, and he farmed. "Then my husband decided he wanted to be a farmer and wanted his own farm. We went into Deering Valley and lived for a while on what later was the Jilk farm. We had dairy cattle. As I remember, we had about ten or twelve. That was all the stanchions there were in the barn. We used to fill ten-gallon cans of milk. We took them to Winona Milk down in Winona on Mankato Avenue. That was grandpa's job, to take the milk to town every morning. Then we bought a farm in Knopp Valley and lived there until 1961, I believe. Then we moved to Trimont, not far from Fairmont and farmed out there for seven years. Then we came back to Minnesota City and decided that was the best place to live of all."

The work of men and women was interestingly varied. "The men in the area would get together to cut ice for the icehouses. They would go down to the river with their bobsleds, five or six of them, to Tschumper Creek.

When they decided the ice was proper, they had this big saw and sawed big chunks out of the river. It was always my husband's job to pack the ice in the icehouse. He had sawdust to pack around it so it wouldn't melt during the summer. I don't know why it worked, but it did. We always had ice until late in the fall." And she has good memories of her mother-in-law's cooking. "My mother-in-law was a good cook. She could make something good out of nothing. She was an excellent bread baker. She'd turn out eight loaves at a time like nothing. They just fit in her oven, and they were so good. Mine would be good sometimes, not so good the other times. I do like to cook. I can remember my mother-in-law entertaining the Baptist Auxiliary, the whole community. There were huge pots of coffee. She would take two cups of coffee and stir in a raw egg. It was the best coffee and clear as could be."

Beside the Auxiliary, Eleanor remembers birthdays as special events in Minnesota City, as did other people we interviewed. "If someone had a birthday, everyone would come. If you got a handkerchief, you really had something. Grandma kept track of her handkerchiefs and would save all of them. Sometimes there would be a quarter in the birthday card. Those are very pleasant memories."

"I did quite a bit of gardening. I enjoyed being out-of-doors. I grew vegetables and canned them. I used to do a lot of craft work in the wintertime. I would give it to various organizations, so when they had a sale they could sell these things. The ladies in the community were big on



Minnesota City home of Susan Altoff, Eleanor Whetstone's daughter.

quilting. They would come over about 10:00 a.m. The hostess would serve a big dinner and they would quilt until about 7:00 in the evening. It was quite fun." And, Eleanor added, "Quite gossipy."

The Whetstones had three children and now have five living grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. Mrs. Whetstone's husband, Glenn, died in 1970 and is buried in the Oakland cemetery, along with Eleanor's in-laws, Grandma Whetstone, and Allen's (her brother in-law) wife. In about 1981, Eleanor moved into Goodview where she lived for a few years with her youngest son. After Mr. Whetstone died, Mrs. Whetstone was a home health aide for about twelve years and also worked as an Avon representative, "just to fill the time." Mrs. Whetstone's daughter, Susan, lives in the house they lived in—"the Whetstone mansion—at least we thought it was special when we lived in it." Mrs. Whetstone is an especially gentle, thoughtful woman to visit.

Ralph Evanson

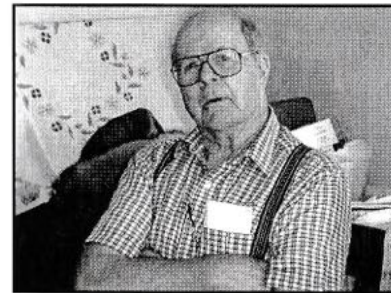
Jennifer Evanson, whose great-grandfather, Elmer, is a brother of Ralph Evanson, was one of the students who interviewed him. Ralph is a second generation Minnesota City area Evanson family. He was born on December 10, 1919, and has lived at 124 Minnesota Street for forty-four years. His parents, John and Randi Evanson, were both “full-blooded Norwegian immigrants.” His wife, Marjorie Nagle, was born in the southwest corner of the state of Minnesota. At four years old, her parents moved to Montana. “It was a barren country, no trees in that part of the country. I met her through an aunt of mine.” Ralph has two children who live in Hidden Valley and he has ten grandchildren. His two brothers, Elmer and Jarl, went to the Minnesota City School. “There were school districts at that time that had boundaries. When my folks moved from Stockton Valley, it (their property) was just across the line. My dad had to pay tuition for my brother Elmer; he opted to pay it so he could be with his classmates until he finished school.”



Ralph Evanson stands in front of the home he constructed around the homesteaded original kitchen.

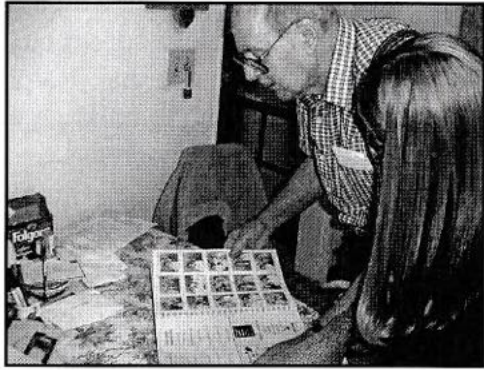
Ralph Evanson’s detailed history of the house where he and his wife live at 124 Minnesota Street is impressive, as is the home itself, constructed around the original kitchen. The home is almost 147 years old. Ralph purchased it in 1958. Unfortunately we have no photo of the building at that time. “The original part, which happens to be the kitchen, was purchased with a federal land grant in 1855,” Ralph told us. “The requirements for that federal land grant, better known as the Homestead Act, were that the building had to be at least twelve by fourteen feet. You had to live in it for one year in order to homestead the land. The door hinges and front entrance can still be seen. Everything was made of cast iron in those days.”

Ralph’s family has always lived within the boundaries of Rollingsstone Township. “Minnesota City is the subdivision; it is section two of the township.” “One thing I’d like to change is the street right out here (in front of his home). It doesn’t have any egress. It is a dead end street. The railroad has closed the north crossing and took control of our street. If a train stalls, there is no way out, unless you call a helicopter.” Not likely, we thought. “Another point is, this is the main drag out here, off the narrow street. You can’t see out into traffic until it is too late.” We couldn’t imagine how this could be “fixed.” Looking at the road situation later made clear Mr. Evanson’s frustration with the design.



Ralph Evanson explains the requirements for homesteading.

Mr. Evanson has early memories of the general store and of the train depot and the trains coming to Minnesota City. “This was one of the most important receiving and disposing docks for my dad. He even at one time baled straw to ship to Chicago. He thought there was a better market for it. I never saw that billing, but it ended up the receiver on the other end was owed \$3.00. The baled straw didn’t cover the shipping bill.” Ralph talked about farming. “Before the advent of the gasoline engines, the threshing farmers had a crew of half a dozen farmers. One of the farmers had a threshing outfit—some people called it a separator. You threw the bundles into the feeder and it went into the cylinder and knocked the kernels off the straw. The fan against the sieve booted the trash out and the clean grain went



Ralph Evanson shares family photos with his brother Elmer's great-granddaughter.

into the wheelbarrow. That's the kind of threshing power I grew up with or started out with."

We asked Mr. Evanson about places of employment in earlier days of Minnesota City. His first occupation was farming. "Myself, well, I have had my hands in foundry labor, at Badger Foundry in Winona, and at mechanical work. "Yes," Ralph said, he did like his jobs. My one

brother was an employee of a tobacco store in Winona. Before that he worked for what is now Froedtert Malting Plant. My other brother worked for a well driller and became a plumber himself. I started out at ninety-seven cents an hour. I enjoy working with wood and gardening. I still like messing around in the dirt."

"In 'the old days' in years gone by, I used to enjoy going to the old time dances, card parties and house parties." Mr. Evanson belongs to First Lutheran Church in Minnesota City, and he remembers the previous building that was torn down. Mr. Evanson's interest in things historical is reflected in his former presidency of the Winona County Old Settler's Association.

Mr. Evanson also owns ninety-nine acres of land on Township Road #5, between Stockton Valley and Middle Valley. There are two houses on the property now. One is the homestead of his father, where he was raised. "My great nephew is putting up a dwelling of his own close by." It looks like additional generations of Evansons will continue to live in the Minnesota City area.

Jean Gardner and Dorothy Gardner Brom

These two interesting women, valuable Minnesota City history resources, were interviewed at Jean Gardner's home at 3950 West Eighth Street in Goodview. The students asked them first about memories from their childhood and activities they remembered. Jean and Dorothy belonged to a 4-H club. Many of their clothes were sewn for them when they were children by their grandmother and by some Gardner aunts who sent clothes for the girls. In the thirties, telephones were wall phones—hanging on the wall. They had a mouthpiece and a receiver. Rings were all different. "Ours was two longs and two shorts. You knew who else was getting calls by the rings. People listened in—it was called 'rubbering.' There were about six people on a line," according to Jean.

After Jean graduated from Winona State, she went to Milwaukee to teach. "It was a chance to advance salary-wise and in other ways." When asked by Kaitlin if it seemed like a culture shock, Jean said, "Very much so, the stores, the community, the social life, everything was different." Jean returned to Winona to take care of her mother, and then stayed here where she currently lives in Goodview.

Jean said "We went to church every Sunday; never missed. We never had a regular minister. One came from Winona." And Dorothy recalled, "Sunday School was at 10:00 every Sunday, and services were after that."



Dorothy Gardner Brom and Jean Gardner visited with students at Jean's home in Goodview.

The sisters recalled neighbors who attended the church: Raymond Reps, Lucille Pierce, the Spaags, Betty Westerman, Phyllis Maxham, and all the Denzers.

A lot of activities centered around the church where they went every Sunday. They had programs there, and the church was a center of community social life. When asked about Oakland Cemetery, Jean said she knew a number of people buried at Oakland, although none of their relatives are buried there. Dorothy recalled that O. M. Lord was buried first at Minnesota City and then later removed to Woodlawn. Other Minnesota City persons have recalled this same process—the circumstances or reasons for the removal aren't known.

The students were interviewing Jean and Dorothy before the presentation on the Native Americans that was being presented at the school for the Sesquicentennial Lecture Series. Jean, who is a volunteer at the Winona County Historical Society, formerly worked in the schools to present some of this history to students. "I always taught a unit on Native Americans when I was teaching. Then when I moved here, my niece was working at the Museum and she did programs on it. I went with her for some time to do the programs, and then I did it myself. There was a big box of materials that we took with us."

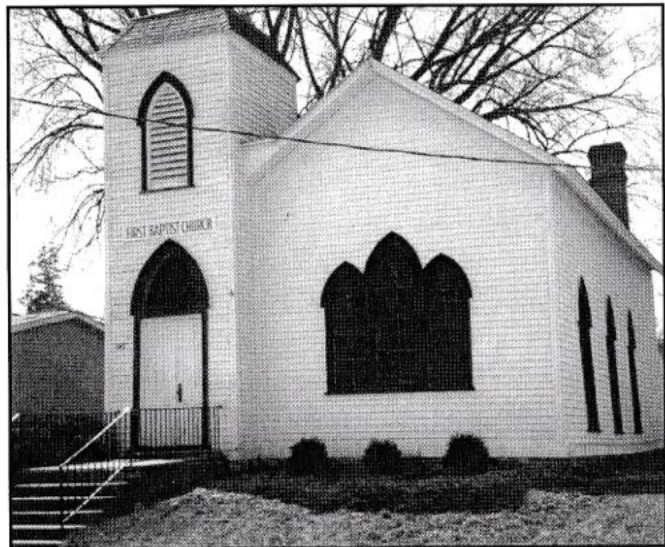
The location of the Gardner childhood home is on County Road 23, between Minnesota City and Stockton. The Gardners farmed, growing wheat to sell at the Stockton Mill and oats and hay for their cattle and horse. Childhood chores of the Gardners included picking blackberries and selling them for fifteen or twenty cents a quart including delivery. But the money was an incentive. "That's how I got my first perm," said Jean. "We had to go up in the woods a long ways because our house was a long ways from the woods, and it was hot. Chiggers would bite, bees were around, branches would almost scratch your clothes off. And there were snakes, all kinds, bull snakes." Their mother canned a lot of the berries. Blackberries were Dorothy's favorite. The Gardner farm was on the boundary line of school districts. Jean and Dorothy went to Minnesota City, District 29. Theirs was the last land in this district. On the other side of them, people went to the Stockton Valley School, which was only a short distance from the Gardner home. "There was no choice. We had to go to Minnesota City."

When asked by the students for more information about the school and their experiences, Jean said the old school was getting pretty damaged and a lot of the parents thought there should be a new school. "Our father (Blanchard Gardner) was in the group that worked for the new school," said Jean. The description of discipline in the schools was interesting to the student interviewers. The teacher had a rubber hose. It had a stick on one end, the other end was loose. "She would slap you on the hand. If somebody did something and no one would tell who did it, everyone got hit." Asked if it hurt, Jean said, "Not really. If you were really bad, you got expelled. You had to be pretty bad for that to happen." Jean has many historical resources at her fingertips: records from when her father was the school treasurer, newspaper articles about Minnesota City, other historical celebrations, and class photos.

One of the "ordinary" but particularly fond memories about school was Jean's recall of lunch time. "The way we ate our lunch was interesting. There was no such thing as hot lunch. It was never heard of. We had to bring our own lunch in some kind of container. So we had a little lunch box. I can still remember the sandwich spread that would get warm by lunch time. At noon we'd just go outside if it was warm and sit down in the woods or someplace and eat our lunch. It was nice." Recess was described by the sisters as a time to go outside, although "the teachers didn't come out. You were outside on your own." It was a fifteen minute time when students played ball or used the playground equipment. The schools discussed are the old Maybury two-story school, and then the 1938 building.

"There was a big Waterbury wood burning stove on first floor and a furnace in the basement. You couldn't have a stove upstairs. We thought it was wonderful when we got in the new school. It was such a change." Jean remembers that the library was not very large. "We had the 'Little Dutch Twin' books, I remember those books vividly because sometimes we read them more than once. Reading was a reward if you got your work done." Dorothy graduated before the 1938 building opened. She was four years older than Jean. Jean graduated in 1940 from the eighth grade, went to Jefferson in Winona for the ninth grade, and then to Winona Senior High and Winona State University. Dorothy and Jean readily recalled names of early teachers—"Mrs. Steenberg (she was from the Cities), Martha Stedbacher, Violet Williams, Fern Nelson from Homer, Verna

Jensen.” Jean said the teachers boarded at Minnesota City. “They boarded with Mrs. Deering (this home was on Minnesota Street across from the current O’Neill bodyshop). I don’t know if they even had cars.” Asked about pay by Interviewer Kaitlin Prosen, Jean said she thought they got about eighty-five dollars a month. “Dad was a treasurer. I just came across an old book of the different expenses. They bought supplies from the St. Paul Book and Stationery Company.” Dorothy Brom agreed with the



First Baptist Church, long time connection for many Minnesota City residents.

salary figure.” I taught for eighty-five dollars a month at Hart. The salary was the same at that time.” No “specialists” teachers came to the school like today. The teacher did everything. A sweeping compound, like sawdust with oil in it, was used to clean the hardwood floors.

Valentine’s Day and Halloween were school party days. “We had a big Valentine’s box. We cut it open. Everybody would put their Valentines in there and then we picked a kid to pass them out. You always counted how many you got. The Halloween parties for several years were in the Minnesota City Cisewski–Wockenfuss garage. Christmas programs were important. They were a big event. They would be packed. There was a burlap curtain they would pull across. It took a lot of rehearsal. We didn’t have a lot of parents involved, but they all came once or twice a year; the Christmas program was one of these times. Everybody came to the end-of-the-school-year picnic.”

Questioned by the interviewers about their musical tastes, a big item for today’s teens, Jean and Dorothy said they listened to the radio—whatever was on. Peggy Lee, Frank Sinatra. “He was on the Saturday Night

Lucky Strike Hit Parade. We wouldn’t miss that for anything,” said Jean. Both women took piano lessons. A teacher, Hattie Morrison, came to the house, stayed an hour. Lessons were fifty cents. “I played piano for school when I was in the eighth grade, so the whole room could sing.” There were no curfews—there weren’t that many places the Gardners went without their parents. “Our hangout was the store. We’d go there after school and wait for our dad to come and get us. There were no buses. Later on, Dale Denzer had a bus and brought kids from up where Mastenbrooks live.” “We used to go across the swinging bridge. Then some bully would get on and swing it from side to side. It was scary.”

Responding to questions about changes in Minnesota City, the sisters agreed that the village had changed. “The inner city is practically deserted now. The Anderson’s addition built up,” said Dorothy. “That was just farm land before.” “When the school closed, the people were bitter about it, and the community was not cohesive after that. The community spirit isn’t there now, although the new school, Riverway, is building up some of that spirit again,” according to Jean. Dorothy and Jean speak with affection about the church and school memories of their lives in this community where their family played an important role.

Lydia "Pearl" Singer

Pearl Singer was interviewed by two of her great granddaughters, Sierra and Jessica, who are students at Riverway Learning Community. Pearl is an eighty-five-year-old Minnesota City resident who lives in a home on the property where she has lived since leaving her family home in Minnesota City near the Vill Brewery. The home site, which she and her husband, Joe Singer, farmed until his death is off of Highway 61 about a quarter of a mile, two miles north of Minnesota City. The farm is surrounded by hills, and overlooks the Mississippi River. Pearl has a keen memory and was a willing respondent to the many questions.

Children "in those days," according to Pearl, made their own fun. They went sleigh riding at night using a team of horses. Sometimes a bunch of kids would just get together and go walking for as far as four miles or more. They liked to climb the hills. Everyday activities were housework and play. Pearl walked with her sister, went to the creek, and visited friends. They had no car, no TV of course, no radio, really no source of amusement in the house. "There was a swinging foot bridge with chicken wire on the sides so you wouldn't fall off," remembered Pearl. "We used to rock it after school. One kid went and rode his horse across it on a dare. We used to also go horseback riding in the moonlight." In later years, Pearl raised her children on land near where she herself grew up. "It was nice; the kids got into some mischief, but ordinarily just played around, went up by the hills and down by the river. They did a lot of fishing and had a lot of fun doing it." Pearl's grandkids did the same.



Pearl Singer explains barn equipment to visiting students.

Holidays weren't much different than other days. Christmas was like every other day; you didn't get anything special, maybe something small, or somewhat of a nice meal. "Your birthday was nothing," Pearl told us.

"Fourth of July was always fun; they had fireworks, people baked pies, and they cooked pig. It was the best day of the year." Asked about clothing styles, Pearl said they wore long underwear and stockings in the winter. They hated them and the way they bunched up under their pants. They didn't have snow pants or boots. "You had two dresses, one that you were wearing and one that you were washing," Pearl said. "Many people used flour sacks for their underclothes, sheets, and dresses. After a while, they came out with flour sacks with patterns on them, such as flowers. It was more fancy."

Pearl didn't really like school. She attended the old two-story building with not very many kids. The teachers were strict, and you sat in your seat and kept quiet. You did your work and you didn't look around or whisper. If you threw any notes to each other and got caught, the teacher made you stand up in front of the whole school and read the note. When Pearl was eleven years old, she was at school and a boy was poking her in the back with a ruler. She got "fed up" and turned around and slapped him on the face. "I whopped him a good one," Pearl said. She got scolded for it. "I was not a lady; I had to apologize to the fool." The boy never poked Pearl again.



Doris Marker, former sister-in-law of Pearl Singer, stands on famed Minnesota City swinging bridge.

World War II time was hard, remembers Pearl. Everyone had a garden, so there was no lack of food. There was plenty to eat. Kids went down in the fields and collected milkweed fluff for school. They planted beans for the army and would spend whole days picking them. Singers had a big strawberry patch from which they picked berries and sold them. There were ration books, which were little stamps used for food, gas, meat, sugar, and other things. "After your stamps were all gone, you were out of luck. If you didn't used the food stamps, you gave them to people who didn't have any," said Pearl. If you

had torn or ripped clothing, you patched it up; you did without a lot of things back then.” Joe drove a milk route (picked up milk in cans from farmers) and had all the gas he wanted for free. “We were never really out of anything. We did all right,” said Pearl. She always made big meals and baked bread.

“There were little stores in town that had everything in one store. Even the post office. The grocery store was a lot different compared to now. You went up to the counter, told the clerk what you wanted and they went and got it for you. If you didn’t have any money, they would keep it all on a tab and you would pay it at the end of the month.” Pearl would walk all the way to Winona for groceries because they were cheaper. During the winter, the kids would walk along the railroad tracks and pick up coal for heat. “Houses didn’t have heat like we do. As for jobs, there weren’t any around. If you would have a job, you would work an eighteen-hour day and you would make a dollar a day. If you were a boy coming out of the eighth grade, you would be shipped out to work for someone on a farm. You worked for your room and board.”

On the students’ return visit, Pearl showed the students the inside of the barn and described some of the farming operations—all the familiar experiences of her many years on this land.

Howard and Gladys Volkart

The Volkarts, who married in 1946, built their present home. They first lived in a house across the road from where they are now. Howard has lived at this location since 1934. The family of Gladys Church Volkart has always lived in Minnesota City. Howard was born in 1918 and Gladys was born in 1922. They remain active and involved in family, church and community. “We belong to McKinley Methodist in Winona ever since we were married. We have been married, what, 95 years?” asked Howard. “No, not really,” he chuckled, “fifty-seven years next fall.” Gladys went to the Baptist Church for Sunday School and belonged to the Minnesota City Baptist Church Society. Although he hasn’t worked at it for a while, Howard is an accomplished wood carver.

As a young person in Minnesota City, Howard hunted and fished, also played baseball and basketball. Although many of the people he played with have died, some are still living; Bill Saehler and Calvin Whetstone are names he remembers. Minnesota City organized a softball team. “We had a softball field, a manager. We bought our own uniforms. There were ten communities in this league. We played almost every Sunday in the summer.” For three years during World War II, Howard was a mechanic and then a pilot in the Air Corps. They were paid fifty dollars a month, or two hundred dollars a month for an officer with flight pay.



Howard & Gladys Volkart, longtime area farmers, at their Minnesota City residence.

The Volkarts had a very busy life caring for children, animals, and land. “We were so concerned about our first child. We were so afraid something might happen to him. We had a wood furnace at the time. We put his bassinet up close to the furnace so he wouldn’t get cold.” “I think his mother even put a thermometer in his bassinet to make sure it was the same temperature,” said Howard. All the holidays, Christmas, Thanksgiving, New Year’s, Easter

are important holidays for the Volkarts. "The family used to gather on Christmas Eve to open gifts. We still do it like that most of the time. When the grandkids were small, we used to have a Santa come. They really enjoyed that." The Volkarts have three children: Bruce, Greg, and Nancy.

The Volkarts are well known as successful farmers of the area. Howard said, "I have farmed all my life except for when I was in the service for three years. Agriculture has changed a great deal. When we first moved here (1934), we did not have electricity. We did not get electricity until 1939 when they brought a line from Lewiston to Silo and down into Stockton Valley. Our farm was the last on the line. In 1946 they built across to the John Staley Farm. In 1947 they built the line to Bass Camp."

"Before having electricity, one of the things we had to do was harvest ice that was used for the ice box and milk tanks. They would cut the ice into big squares called cakes. They would haul them to the farms. Sometimes they harvested ice in the sloughs and the gravel pits. A lot was harvested from Lake Winona and the river. This was very heavy work. There was a special building called the icehouse. There was sawdust on the outside and between the cakes of ice to keep it all summer. Gladys' dad hauled ice for us and for quite a few farmers. He also helped build the wing dams."

"Getting electricity changed agriculture a great deal. We started using milking machines and silo unloaders. We always had dairy cattle. That was the main enterprise for the farm. It was a steady income." Dogs and cats are part of the animal collection also. "The dog we have today is extra special, his name is Sonny. We have four kittens left. We used to have all kinds of them," reported Gladys.

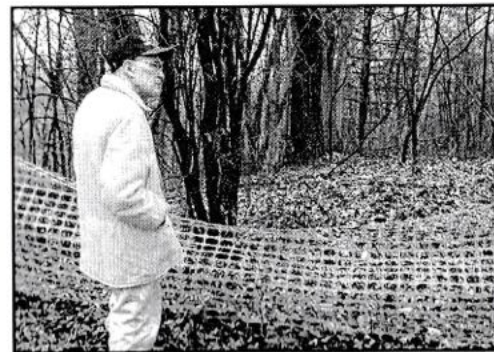
Another change in the area was when they cleared the woods at the river bottom before the channel went in. It was during the Depression and a lot of people were out of work. That work was all done by hand. Big crews cut down the trees. People could go down and get their wood supply. What was not used was burned. "We got a dollar a day for a man, and a dollar-and-a-half for a man and a team," said Howard.

Volkarts know a good deal about the earlier inhabitants of Minnesota City. In June of 1953, a professor from the University of Minnesota, Dr.

Lloyd A. Wilford, with three anthropology students explored four mounds on the Volkart land. They found some pottery and part of a skull, some flint chips, and a flint knife. "He said the soil is so acid here that the bones were dissolved. The mounds were from 2000 years ago. I saw a map at one time and there were quite a few mounds here at one time, in the garden. I found some arrowheads in a field. In the field here we find rocks similar to the types they used to make their weapons." On a return trip to the Volkarts, the students gained additional information. They talked with Howard about the mounds and where they were located, and they saw an impressive rock garden constructed by Mrs. Waterman who came to Minnesota City in 1852. The H. P. Watermans homesteaded the Volkart land in 1855. A sesquicentennial garden!

Marvin O'Grady, who accompanied the students on one of the trips, remembered bringing a rattlesnake to Mr. Volkart years ago for the bounty payment accorded at that time. Another change in the times—rattlesnake numbers have reduced to the point that they are now on the endangered list.

Howard's quick humor is interspersed with his comments. "There is not too much activity in Minnesota City anymore. We sometimes wish there were more. One thing, there is not much trouble with rush hour or traffic." It does seem like there were more activities of memory in previous days. "The most interesting event was the big celebration when they dedicated the big swinging bridge. There was a bridge that went from the Oaks to the City Nightclub. The new one was built in about 1950. It was always fun to walk across that. We used to like to go to the Oaks to dance



Howard Volkart tells students about this Native American mound site on his property.

on Saturday night. Most of the time it was free, but you paid for your meals. They had delicious food. Great buffets. People came to the Oaks from a great distance. There was a couple who came down every week from Minneapolis to eat and dance. This fellow used a cane but when the music started, he put the cane under the table and got up and danced."

Howard was also a Boy Scout Master for about fifteen years. "The PTA started a scout troop in 1940 and asked me to be the scoutmaster before the war, and when I returned, I was scoutmaster again. The first troop had fifteen boys in it. Walt Kelly was one of the scouts. He became an Eagle Scout. Scouts met every Monday at the school. We had camping trips; every year we went to Jamboree in Whitewater. One year a tornado had gone through a short time before we camped there."



This elaborate rock garden on the Howard and Gladys Volkart farm was constructed by Mrs. H. P. Waterman, one of the oldest settlers in the Minnesota City colony.

"It used to be that neighbors worked together and depended on each other for harvesting crops. The neighbors would get together and go from one farm to another to help harvest. Farming is dangerous. I know your Uncle Jim (Stewart, uncle of Beverly Mastenbrook who was accompanying the student interviewers) lost a hand in a shredder. There was always a

great meal during the harvest. The women worked very hard to prepare all the food and meals for the men who were harvesting."

The role of the school in the activities of the community was affirmed by the comments of Gladys and Howard. Howard said, "I think of the school as the center of activities for the community. The PTA was very active. We belonged to the PTA before we had kids going to school. The grandmas and grandpas always came into school. The PTA put on several plays. There was always a big turnout. I was in one of the plays, and we put it on in Minnesota City, and then put it on in Houston and Altura. You could feel like you were part of the community."

Many people have passed through the lives of the Volkarts. "Our parents are buried in the old Minnesota City Cemetery. Mrs. Volkart's grandparents are buried there," said Howard. The student interviewers appreciate the welcome in the Volkarts' home.

Kateri Hall Mueller

Kateri Hall was born in Wabasha, Minnesota in 1954 to Alice and Fay Hall. Kateri had seven sisters and brothers: Becky, Carol, Marcia, Monica, Richard, Margaret and Jim. Kateri was second oldest. Her family moved to Minnesota City when she was about five years old. In her narrative she takes readers on a paper walking tour of Minnesota City in the fifties and sixties. Readers will envy her childhood.

"One of my first memories of living in Minnesota City was probably around when I was five. I remember being in front of our house on a warm spring evening on my bike and riding up and down the sidewalk and my parents and a few neighbors were raking leaves and burning them. I loved that smell."

"Minnesota City was my own little world when I was young. My memories are mostly of the late fifties and the sixties. Highway 61 ran right through on the edge of town. Both sets of my grandparents lived up Highway 61 in Kellogg, Minnesota, so I knew the highway was going places, and I knew of the city of Winona, but other than that, my world was Minnesota City. I was raised in a house right on the main street (Ferdens live there now), and I knew everything I needed was right there. We had a large backyard and there were a few neighbors with yards butting up to ours. I remember the 6:00 p.m. siren sounding at night from the fire station just down the street. This was just about the time our family had dinner."

"On warm evenings, the neighbor kids always had things to do. We could gather in the backyard for croquet, badminton, running through the sprinkler, running through the trees, play kick the can, or just ride our bikes up and down the streets. On especially warm afternoons, my friend and I could always be found down



Kateri Hall Mueller works with students at Riverway Learning Community, the site of the Minnesota City School of her own childhood.

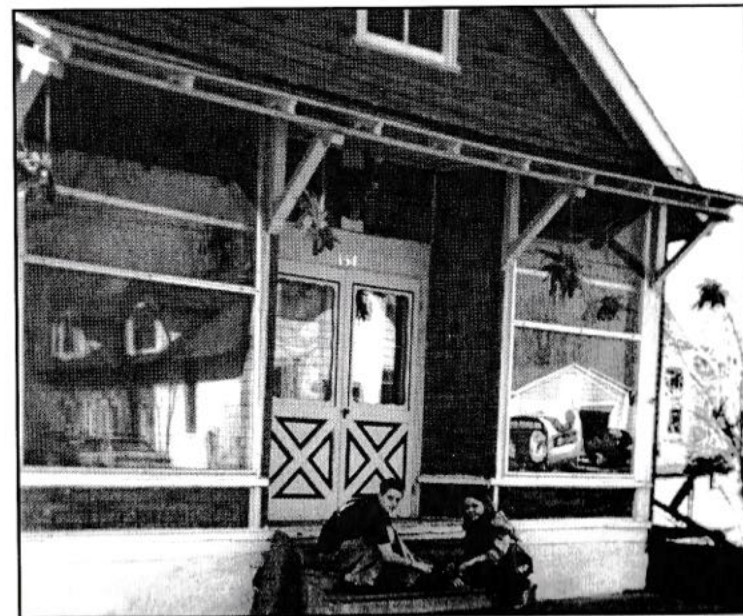
under that swinging bridge that crossed Garvin Brook. The story was that there was once a cement bridge that went over that little brook. I don't know if that was true or if someone had just dumped cement salvage down there, but big cement boulders in the water below were a great place to be. We would jump from one or the other and wade in water up to our knees. It always cooled us off and it was such a relaxing way to spend an afternoon. This was one of my very favorite hangouts and I spent lots of time there with my friend Deb."

"We kept very busy. If the siren from the fire station sounded, we kids would wait in front of our homes until the fire truck pulled away from the station. Then we would race down there on our bikes to see where the fire was as there was a chalkboard right inside the door and one of the men responding to the call would always leave a message for the other volunteer firemen so they would know where to find the fire. These were almost always grass fires set by the passing trains on hot, dry summer days and evenings. We never followed the truck, we were just curious to know what was happening. One time the alarm sounded and only one or two firemen showed up. We went to tell my mom and she said perhaps someone should go over to the Oaks' basement as the men were over there. This was off limits to us children though. They had a room in the basement where they played cards and drank beer. In my memory, these volunteer firemen were great. In the winter months they would flood a skating rink for us right behind the fire station. At exactly 6:00 p.m. on those cold winter evenings, a couple of the men would show up and open the rink for the kids. We loved it and it seemed to always be busy there. The dads would stand upstairs keeping the records spinning for us and chat with one another. I remember the older boys liked to go up there and talk sometimes with the men. My sisters and I and my friends were always on the rink skating or in the warming house down below. Once in a while, we would sneak upstairs and stare in awe at the shiny firetruck and listen to the men talk. These men were also responsible for Bingo on Sunday evening at the Oak's Supper Club. I believe it was a fundraiser for them. We children were allowed to go to this and the enormous dining room would always be packed as the legendary 'Gip Erpelding' called Bingo."

"Down the street from us to the left was 'Gip's Bar' run by Gip and Esther Erpelding. They had a large family, too, and it was a friendly place

where the dads would go and the kids knew where to find them. We could go in there and get candy bars and sodas if our dad happened to be there. Then across the road from that was the garage. I remember the two men who ran that. They always had on their bib overalls and engineer hats, and I remember the heavy smell of grease. Yet it was a welcoming place. If your bike tire needed air or the lawn mower needed gas, we just went to them and they were so obliging. Mostly I remember them sitting in their chairs in the office. Emil and Leo. Leo owned the garage, and I think Emil was his brother-in-law. They always kept a little chest freezer in the garage filled with ice cream treats and popsicles. They had an old railroad tie propped in front of the freezer so we kids could get our own treats and then we would go into the office and give them our nickel."

"Across Highway 61 and the train tracks and then up and around the bend was the city dump. We would go with my dad to take our garbage there in the evenings. This man's name was Louie. I don't remember him ever saying a word. You just tossed your junk over the hill where Louie pointed and he would burn it when the weather cooperated. Louie always fascinated me. He had a little shack by the dump. Sometimes we would see Louie walking through town with his wheelbarrow. He helped people clean their yards. Other than that I believe he was rather reclusive."



Students Maggie Mueller and Erin Edwards examine their own shoes in front of the Martin Shoe Store building.

“Right next to my house on the right was the Baptist Church. I remember Jean Gardner and her mom coming to take care of the place. We never did get to see the inside of it and were always curious about why they took care of it, but no one ever seemed to have a service there. We did love playing on the steps of the church.”

“Down the street a little bit further was ‘Witt’s Grocery.’ This was run by Mr. and Mrs. Witt, and I loved that store. It had a squeaky screen door and wood floors and you could buy penny candy from the big old glass candy case. Mr. Witt was pretty patient with us as we decided which pieces we wanted to add to our little paper candy bags. I remember my dad especially liked the ‘Maple Nut’ bars. There was also a ‘charm’ vending machine and if we had enough money we would put in our money and get a little plastic charm to put on a string. We loved to gather as many charms as possible to put on those strings. Another treat from the store was a cold soda on a hot summer day. We would get one and then sit right out front under the awning and cool off.”

“Down two places from the store was the shoe store. I remember being in there and I remember what it looked like with the chairs and shoes, but I don’t know if it was open for business still, or perhaps we were there for a visit with the people that lived there. Their name is Martin.”

“The post office was just down the street from the shoe store. Mr. Church ran the post office. We had little mail boxes and I enjoyed going for a walk to pick up the mail and being able to dial open our little box.”

“Up the hill from our house was our church, St. Paul’s. We could walk to church through our backyard. I do remember many of the church services from when we were small. The Easter outfits with little white gloves and the bonnets. At Christmas, the dark church and late service.”

“The school was also up this hill. I absolutely loved my school. I attended in the old part of the building still standing. The new part, now occupied by Riverway Learning Community, was being built as I left for the Winona schools at the end of my sixth grade year. I was not happy about leaving this school. I remember the wood floors, the painted staircases and bathrooms. Ladies from the neighborhood made our lunches in the lunchroom downstairs. They were always so friendly and encouraging.

We ate in the gym. There was a stage down there where we would perform for our parents at Christmas time. I really enjoyed these performances and remember standing on the little stage thinking how fun this was with our family and friends here. Once a sixth grade boy rang his bell so hard it landed out in the audience. We all had a good laugh at that. Upstairs were three classrooms. It was first and second grade, third and fourth grade, and fifth and sixth grade. We had a little library that also doubled as the music room. The classrooms seemed so big. High ceilings, wood floors, windows lining one whole side of the classroom and cloak rooms and storage along the back. I don’t remember how many were in a classroom. Perhaps twenty or so. We always had plenty of friends and I don’t recall the children choosing one friend over the other, but perhaps we did. I remember the old thick songbooks in the library. We had to share with one another. Mrs. Nichols would teach us to sing songs such as ‘My Grandfather’s Clock,’ ‘Star Spangled Banner’ and of course, Christmas songs. Recess was always great. We had a ball diamond, a hill for sledding in the winter, jump ropes, 4-square, huge pine trees to run through and a great playground with a teeter-totter, swings, merry-go round and monkey bars. We especially enjoyed it when the teachers would play softball or kickball with us. We had a lot of respect for our teachers and they were always very professional and would usually just stand watch over us with their arms crossed so it was really special if they played a game with us. I hope to someday see that old building back in use as a school and hope the children that attend have many wonderful memories of a ‘community school.’”

Beverly Stewart Mastenbrook

Beverly Stewart Mastenbrook is probably the long-time resident of Minnesota City the students have met who knows the most about her family history and has the most family history in the area. "My grandfather's uncle settled here in 1852 in the farm across the hill. My great grandparents came in 1854 and settled the farm next to their brother. My grandfather's first wife died when they were crossing the Whitewater River, coming from New York. The wagon tipped over, she got water in her lungs, got pneumonia and died. Two years later, he married his sister-in-law. That is how our family got started here. The original farm is still in the Stewart family. I have two cousins, but they have no children, so we're the last of the Stewarts. I lived on the farm next to where my cousins live now. That is where I grew up. We lived on a really muddy road. Dad was an independent trucker—all we had was a truck. Then we got a car. Sometimes we couldn't get through the mud. We'd take the horses, leave the truck by the highway and haul milk with the horses to the truck."

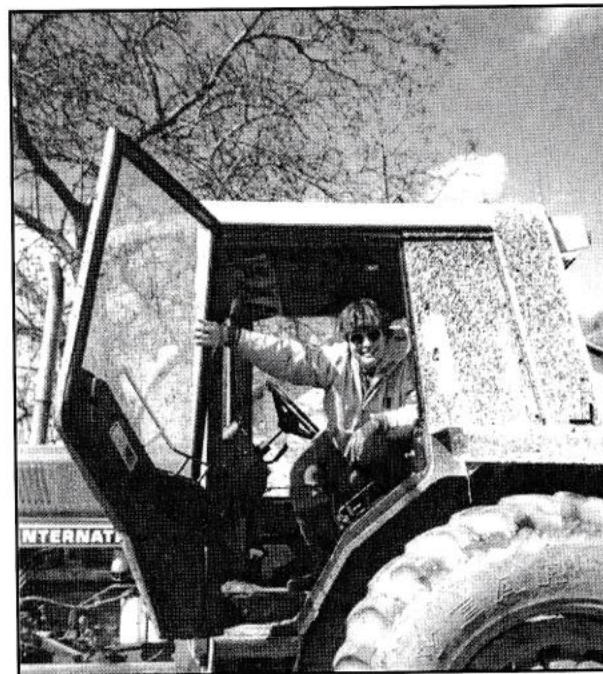


Beverly Mastenbrook stands in front of the barn and silos on the farm where she and her husband, Bill, raised cattle and crops.

Beverly has a half brother and half sister from her mother's first marriage. Bev's mother died when she was ten. Bev and her sister and brother went to all eight grades in the Minnesota City school building next to where the school is now. Her sister went to Catholic High School in La Crosse. Because there was no bus service at that time, "you had to board with a family so she stayed with my grandmother in La Crosse. My brother went to live with my uncle in Kasson and went to high school there." Bev said that Don Evanson recently gave her and her cousin a

tour though the old school. "It brought back a lot of memories. We used to have a lot of plays at school, big plays." Bev said that she thinks the reopening of a school at Minnesota City is the best thing that could have happened. She hated to see the school close; all of her children attended there.

At Minnesota City School, Beverly was in a small class of five boys and three girls. "Most of us are still friends. My very first memories are of



Ellen Mastenbrook breaks from work to greet the students interviewing her mother, Beverly.

my good friend, Faith Ann Schmidt. She was four when I was three. She lived in the house attached to the store. We went to visit her there. I was so pleased to have somebody I knew when I went to first grade."

Beverly talked about church connections. "My great grandparents were involved in starting the Minnesota City Church, but my mother was Catholic. They let me decide where I wanted to go when I was older, but she died

when I was ten. There was a period when I didn't go anywhere. We had a housekeeper who was Methodist. She would take me to Central Methodist in Winona. After our marriage, we had a Christian background, so we looked around. The Baptist Church in Minnesota City closed so we went to the Baptist Church in Winona. I still go there now."

Farming has been central in Beverly Mastenbrook's life. "I've always farmed. I always wanted to be a cowgirl. Then one day I was riding my horse chasing cattle and I figured, you are a cowgirl!" Bev started farm-work at about the age of eight—raking hay. "Grandpa mowed it, and Dad

gathered it. I've baled hay and all the rest—I still do most of the hay.” Bill and Beverly had a milk herd of thirty-four cows and a small beef herd. When Bill Jr. and Ellen started to help, they had sixty cows, and Bill and Beverly started to be the helpers. “When we were partially retired, we'd ride horses after supper.” Horses were a “hobby” of Bill and Bev. They spent a lot of time with it, mostly working with their own horses. Bill had a team that they took to parades in the area. The Mastenbrook children showed their horses at Big Valley Ranch.

Asked about changes in farming, Bev said, “Farming has changed. People had to modernize or get out.” Bev has seen farming go from horse to machinery to diesel—she has seen the whole gamut of electricity, of automated feeding systems. “I was married to Bill Mastenbrook when I was eighteen. His family came into this valley in, I think, 1884.” The Mastenbrooks have farmed on this farm for four generations. Bill died in 1993. Beverly has three living children: Ellen, Kathy, and Bill. One Mastenbrook child died as an infant and is buried in Oakland Cemetery along with Bill and many Stewart relatives—Bev's grandparents, her father, her uncles, and lots of friends. Bev's name is also a reserved cemetery plot.

Ellen does most of the work on the farm at this time. She has a B.S. in Dairy Management from the University of Minnesota. Currently, she is raising one hundred and fifty Holstein heifer calves for a dairy farm in Menomonie, Wisconsin. Bill lives in Witoka and works in Winona. Bev's oldest daughter, Kate, is the Director of Hospice at a hospital in Yakima, Washington. Bev has five grandchildren, four step-grandchildren, and three great grandchildren.

Besides school and church, Bev also remembers the significance of the Oaks for many people in Minnesota City. Her sister worked at the Oaks during summers while she was in college. Asked about the Vill Brewery, she said she knew only what her grandpa talked about. Her family was Baptist “temperance people, so they thought the brewery wasn't right.” The Cisweski – Wockenfuss garage was a place for kids to hang around when they were young. Neighbors were important. The Jilks had the farm next to the Mastenbrooks. “They did things together—threshing, silo filling. Anytime anything happened, they were always there for us. One time a tree fell on my husband. I didn't think twice—I gathered my

small children, took them to the neighbors, then took him to the hospital.” Holidays have changed through the years. “When I was little we never put up the tree. We would come down on Christmas morning and the tree would be up. There were stockings with oranges, and peanuts, and lots of books.” “On Christmas and Thanksgiving we used to all be together and go on sleigh rides with the horse. Now it's all different—the children's spouses also have families; things have to be worked out.”

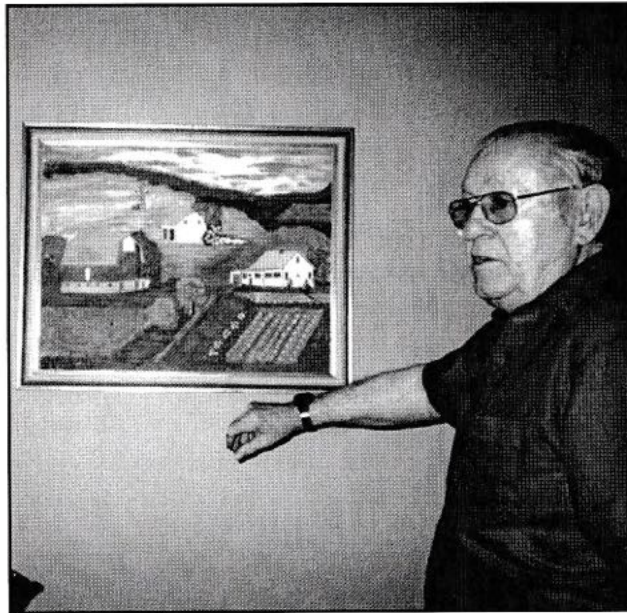
Bev has photo records of her family and land history, and when she went outdoors with the interviewers, the beauty of the landscape around the hills and fields confirmed that it was a pretty good life “to be a cowgirl.”



Beverly Mastenbrook shows photos of her Stewart ancestors to Tina Losinski.

Neil and Clare Denzer

The Denzer name is one of the names researchers discover early on in the history of Minnesota City. The Baptist church history and the farming records include the names of Neil's family or other Denzers. Neil's father and mother, John and Esther, farmed about a half-mile north of Minnesota City on land now located west of Highway 61. A subdivision has grown up around the farm land that is called "Denzerville" by many of the locals. It includes other Denzer family members, among them the family of Neil's brother (Dale, now deceased) and sister-in-law, Jackie. Neil was born in 1927. Neil and Clare Rader, who is from the neighboring village of Rollingstone, have been married for fifty-one years. They live now at 49 Marval Drive; they have two boys, and five grandchildren.

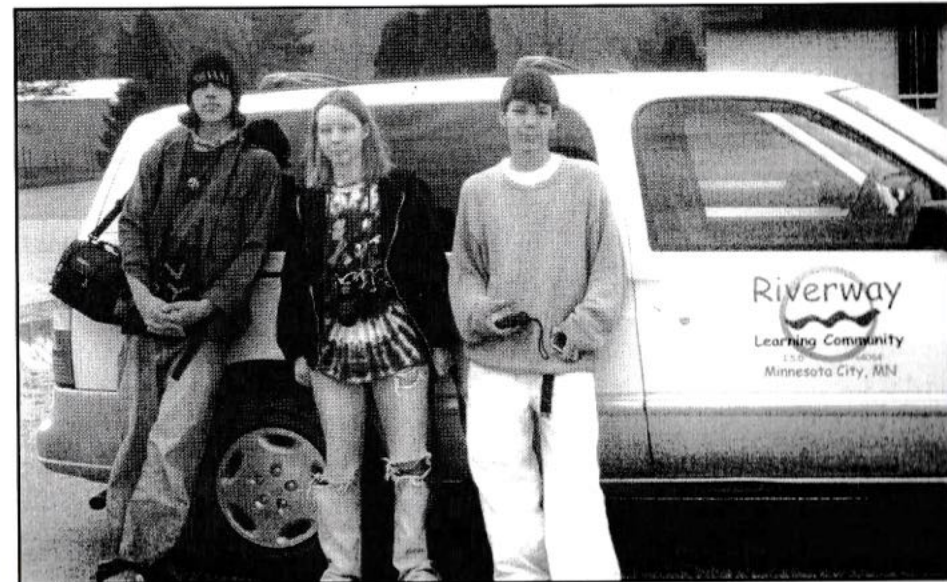


Neil Denzer explains his painting of the John and Esther Denzer farm buildings on the land where he was raised.

Church attendance and activities are among Neil's earliest memories. "I was four when I first remember Minnesota City. I remember going to the Baptist Sunday School. We were at the church every Sunday regardless of the weather. No excuse for not going to church. My mother was the superintendent of Sunday School from before I was born until she died. We used to walk to Sunday School, and my mother would ride. Every month a preacher came in from Winona to give a service. I quit going to church when I was sixteen. I met my wife when I came home from the service and she decided I should become a Catholic." The Denzers are now members of St. Paul's Catholic Church in Minnesota City.

Growing up on a farm, Neil learned early on about work. "We all had chores from the time I can remember, carrying wood for the stove and such. We had to keep the wood box full at night so that you had wood for breakfast. You would have to pump water to carry in. There was always plenty of chores to do. We had lots of animals, cows, pigs, mice, rats, horses. The horses did all the plowing around Minnesota City." The river bottoms have changed since Neil's childhood. Land that was farmed is now under water, and Native American burial mounds that residents talk about are now in overgrown spots. The Denzer farm used to be a stage coach stop.

The neighborhood of Neil's childhood was a large one. "We weren't neighbors in a row; we had to walk three or four miles to get to a neighbor's place in those days. Neighbors used to gather and have parties all the time. It's not like that any more. Back in the good old days, we had neighbors we would play cards with. There were Mastenbrooks, Singers, Phillips, and Hills." Neil remembers the good times with his seven brothers and one sister. "When I was real little we always had fun, sliding down hills, playing with the dogs and cats." The Denzers attended the Minnesota City School. "I went all eight years to the school in Minnesota City. We used to walk to school, that was a mile. Later we got a ride from



Riverway Learning Community students Ian Smith, Erin Edwards and Trey Luby ready to conduct an interview for "Old Wise Tales."

the school bus. My brother (Dale) got the job of hauling the kids to school. In 1938, he started hauling the kids in a small van, or what they called a van in those days." The Denzer family went into different careers as adults—bricklayers, mechanics, builders, and trades.

Neil went into the Navy when he was seventeen. "The war was over when I went into the service. I never got in any action. I was on the atomic bomb test. That was the highlight of my career in the Navy. I was in China and Japan. I served for three years and three months; you got credit for four years." Neil worked at Winona Mills Products for seventeen years and then went into business for himself in the flooring business. "I worked all over the area in that business. When I was younger, I spent most of my time working."

When asked about interesting events in Minnesota City in his lifetime, Neil talked about the dedication of the new swinging bridge in 1952. "That was about the biggest event here. The bridge was washed out and they had to get rid of it. It wasn't fit to use anymore. So they built a swinging bridge to walk across. I walked across it plenty of times. There was a big time ceremony. Parades, bands, just like any celebration."

The "stuff" of legends was recalled by the Denzers. "They used to say John Dillinger would come to Minnesota City and stay in a houseboat. Hide out in a houseboat on the river. He was public enemy #1 in 1932." Some young people's dreams were realities for Neil. "I used to sneak over to the Oaks and take out one of the waitresses." (No name was supplied by Neil!) "And Miss America of 1948 sang at the Oaks. Mr. Kelly asked me if I would give her a ride. I gave her a ride from the Oaks to the Acorn motel where she was staying. It was my fifteen minutes of fame. She was Miss Minnesota first and became Miss America. She was a beautiful lady."

Many of the Denzer relatives are buried in Oakland Cemetery. "My mother and dad are buried in the cemetery, my brother Alvin. Cousins by the dozen are buried there. My Uncle Cecil is buried there." Famous Minnesota City names recalled by Mr. Denzer were of Jake Donehower, who everyone talked about, and Chef Kelly who "was considered a legend." And Mr. Denzer may be on the way to becoming a legend himself. He showed us several of his paintings, activity he has taken up a short

time ago. "I'm trying to be Grandpa Moses," he said. One picture he painted about a year ago is of his homeplace, the way it appeared around 1930 (the John and Esther Denzer land). D. Q. Burley had homesteaded it in the mid-1800s and built a stagecoach station there. There was a barn for hay storage and a livery stable to house the spare stagecoach horses. "The stage would change horses there and leave the others to rest up." Clare pointed out the three story "mansion" that Burley lived in and provided for stage passengers. "It had an elevator in it." Neil said the house went downhill in its later years. We tore it down and built a new home in 1938. We tore down all of the outbuildings and built a new barn and sheds. The Denzer family purchased the property from Burleys in 1921. J. Q. Burley (the son) built his home down on the end of the farm near Minnesota City. That house is still there. Dale Denzer, Neil's brother, remodeled it and the Veloskes live there now.

Neil painted another picture of his home place as it appeared in 1945-1950 with the house and buildings his family built. Painting is an interesting way that Neil is preserving history.

Margaret "Marge" Kowalewski

There is rich variety in the experiences of Margaret Rolbiecki Lilla Kowalewski. She was interviewed at Riverway by a student group including her grandsons, Alec Lilla and Steven Mooney. Her home is at 47 MarVal Drive, appropriately named for Margaret (Marge) and her husband, Valentine Kowalewski, now deceased. Her "roots" are in Minnesota City, and her memories of early experiences are many and fond. "We grew up across from the Oaks. There was a swinging bridge where you could walk across to get to the Oaks. The big thing was to walk across the bridge, get to the middle and try to make it swing. Our parents told us not to, so of course we did. It was taken down in the 1960s because it was a safety thing. It didn't seem dangerous to us as kids."

"Christmas was the big holiday for my family. Easter was special, but Christmas was connected with my birthday so that was special. For me, the most interesting thing was the tree you decorated on Christmas Eve.



Marge Kowalewski lives at 47 MarVal Drive in Minnesota City

You went to bed on Christmas Eve and had no tree. When you woke up, the tree was there. My birthday was on Christmas Eve. Everyone in Minnesota City came to my birthday. I thought it was because I was special. We had the nightclub and the waitresses would fix us a meal. Now I realize that the parents were bringing the kids so they could get their tree decorated and last-minute shopping done for Christmas."

"We would go to Sanstede's for ice cream. Then we would ride our bikes through the garage and think we were riding down a huge hill. We would go across the tracks to a little hill. At the foot of the hill there was a broken sidewalk. You would have to jump across the crack so you wouldn't

fall." Marge went on, "We had a racing car that went two miles an hour that could seat two people. That was a fond memory."

"Mrs. Meyers from the Oaks had three children. They were just about my age. It was almost like they were my cousins. After supper we would take our bath, get our pajamas on and my dad would take us for a ride. We would go to the root beer stand in the summer or we would ride up to the river. If we were naughty that day, we couldn't go. That was hard to see everyone else pile in the car and you didn't get to go."

"Once it had rained and we were going on the night ride and the road was covered with frogs. We stopped and picked up frogs for frog legs for dinner. A game warden came along and said it was against the law to pick up the frogs. They arrested my father and we went to the Justice of the Peace in Homer and he had to pay a fine. All in the same night, and we didn't even get the frog legs. They took them."



Riverway Learning Community, 115 Iowa Street, long time location of Minnesota City Schools.

"I think growing up we had friends in Minnesota City. We had the best kids. Everyone liked everyone else. It was almost like an extended family. It was a nice place to grow up. We had a swing in back of the little white house. It was made like an airplane and two kids could sit in it. You could swing out over the bank and it was like going to Mars. It was special."

A less tranquil memory belonging to Marge is the accident of an individual who lived in back of a farm in a little shack. One day Pete went to

Instead of seeing two kids off to school, I had to see thousands of kids off to school.”

“My children started school here in Minnesota City, but then Goodview opened and they were transferred to Goodview. One day the principal called me to come and get the girls. They were wearing skirts that were too short. I had to come and get them. That was Leesah and Lori.”

Marge belongs to St. Paul’s Catholic Church. “It used to be in the old building across from the post office. Sandy Miller built it and used it as a dance hall. At some point it was turned into a church. That is where I made my First Communion. I had two brothers. When we would go to church, they wouldn’t sit by me. We sat on opposite sides of the church.”

Marge is busy at her many interests. “Well, I love doing cross stitch. I love genealogy. Finding out about my family and people who lived before you.” Some Minnesota City area people remember Marge coming to their door to gather census information, and even more of them encounter her at her continuing work every weekend at estate sales. This “people person” continues to connect.

sleep on the tracks and had a leg cut off. “That was really traumatic to all of us kids because we all knew Pete.” Other Minnesota City individuals Marge remembers as a child were the Ludwigsen family, Chris, Annie and his brother, Jim, who were very active farmers. “There was a man who lived up on 248. Billy Jackson had a pickup and he would park it by the small house at the corner. He would park the car by the house and not put the brake on. He would always complain, ‘I don’t know what’s wrong, but I go in the ditch all the time!’”

Marge remembers many people so well from childhood, but she told the students that it is not like that now. “It’s not like when I was a kid. It used to be a warm, complete community. Kids all liked each other. Families all got along well. It was great growing up here.”

Customs have also changed. Marge said that marriages used to take place early in the morning during the first days of the week. She remembered a wedding clipping from the paper that had a phrase in it: They had the wedding ceremony, went to the Winona hotel for the marriage breakfast, and they went to housekeeping. “That phrase was so strange, ‘house-keeping.’ During World War II, the bride’s bouquet was pinned to their dresses. That is another custom that has gone by the wayside.”

Marge Kowalewski has connections with the Minnesota City school for herself and her children. “I attended the Minnesota City School. The dam was being built (Whitman) and the kids of the dam workers came here. I attended college at St. Teresa’s in Winona, a four year liberal arts college in Winona. The college is now closed and the buildings are used by Cotter High School.” When Marge finished college, she was a medical technician at the Mayo Clinic. After four and a half years there, she met Richard Lilla; they married and went to Germany. “We ended up at Ft. Benning. I learned about data processing and was working into computers. I was in Panama with my husband while he was in the military. I worked taking census in 1957 in California and in 1960 in Panama. We came back here to live when Dick retired in 1968. I got old. Seven months after we were back, Dick and Linda, our oldest child, were killed in an accident.”

“Two years later, I was complaining about the school busses and met my future husband, Val Kowalewski. We were married twenty-eight years.

Ruth Peterman Mrozek

Ruth Mrozek and her husband, Ervin, live at 37 Wenonah Road in Minnesota City. “We lived in the basement for a long time before we finished the house. This is on the land I grew up on; I have lived in Minnesota City all my life.” Ruth was born in 1933.



Ruth Mrozek explains the memories of a furniture piece to her interviewers.

Ruth’s mother died when she was very young and her father remarried shortly after. There were some difficult adjustments. Stories of childhood that Ruth told interviewers were about play and work. The Petermans were farmers, raising livestock and vegetables. “We grew lots of potatoes, mostly. We were poor. We ate lots of raw potatoes and made raw sliced potato sandwiches. We were busy with chores a lot. We did a lot of hard work on the farm. There wasn’t a lot of time to play, but we played Hide and

Seek, and Tag in our Dad’s barn. I played a lot with Gracie Tschumper; the Tschumpers were part of the original families of the area. Everyone didn’t have phones, so people depended on neighbors. Neighbors were important support. They were there for each other—there were big needs. Now, that isn’t the way it is as people can easily get their own needs—there are different places to get what people need.” Ruth doesn’t think of Minnesota City as a farm area anymore; now it is a suburban city.

Mr. Peterman, Ruth’s father, was, she said, “a very honest, fair man and was respected by everyone.” Ruth told an interesting, if unusual, story about a time when they took their dad’s workhorse and were working with cattle in the pasture north of the highway. The horse got stuck in the mud and it actually died. The kids were worried that their dad would be upset.

Another story Ruth narrated: “Once my sister wanted me to keep her kitten from leaving, so I put a wooden board on its head so it wouldn’t move. When I checked on it later, it had died.” These stories, although they are tragedies at the time, have an amusing effect on people later on.

Holidays for the Petermans included presents that came in brown bags, not wrapped. The family went for outings to Farmer’s Park at least once a year if they could. The Peterman parents were two different religions, so Ruth went where she wanted to.

The Peterman family walked to school (Minnesota City) in deep snow. “As kids, we would sometimes pick a day to skip school, and the whole class would sit under the bridge and hide.” Mrs. Jacobs was one of the teachers that Ruth recalled. She would take the whole class to her house for picnics. She lived in Winona. Her husband was a postman. She was an interested teacher. Ruth’s first job in high school was as a dishwasher at the Oaks. This was the experience of many Minnesota Citians—working at some time at the legendary Oaks Night Club.



Student Lexi Wozney sits with Ruth Mrozek in a schoolbus van.

Most moving to the students was Ruth's showing them a table in her living room. "It was my mother's table. When my brother died, his casket sat on the table." This was during the Depression, and Ruth was given the table because she was the youngest.

Asked about hobbies, Ruth said that she didn't have a lot of time for them, but her grandma used to make quilts, and Ruth sews and also makes quilts. When Ruth's youngest son was born, she started driving school bus, including the very large buses. She still drives, but can't lift now because of back trouble. Ruth is a familiar face at Riverway Learning Community; students see her drive Steven Mooney and Alec Lilla to the door on most mornings. She said she is glad the school is open.

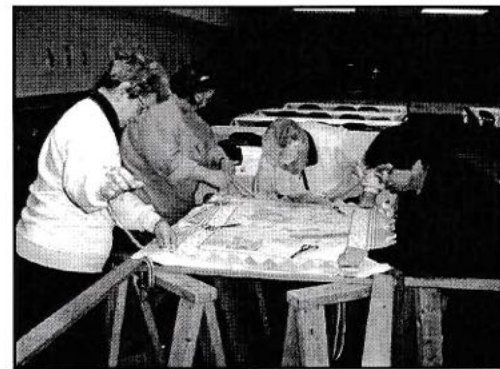
Quilting Tradition Continues at St. Paul's Catholic Church

Jennifer Evanson

Following a long tradition, St. Paul's Church in Minnesota City holds a quilting get-together about once a month. Some volunteers of the Minnesota City area or members of the church meet together in the church's dining hall and quilt for about two hours on these days.

In connection with the sesquicentennial of Minnesota City that will be celebrated in May of 2002, I chose to interview the group of women from the church: my grandmother, Doris Evanson, Jackie Denzer, Clare Denzer, and Judy Hohensee. They were all very helpful to me. I helped with the quilting somewhat, but mostly, I just listened to them talk while I took pictures as well.

The women that I interviewed answered a series of questions about their quilting experiences. When asked about how long they have been quilting, the shortest amount of time was thirty-five years and the longest was fifty years. The women say they get together on the average of once a month. When asked if there was ever a time when they didn't know what to do while quilting, three of the four said there were such times.



*Clare Denzer, Judy Hohensee, Jackie Denzer,
and Doris Evanson continue the long
tradition of quilting at St. Paul's Parish.*

The women say their favorite parts about quilting are visiting with each other, giving their quilts to the poor or to persons who have had fires or floods, knowing that people appreciate the finished product, seeing the finished quilt itself, or even never knowing until they are done what the quilt will look like.

When asked about their interest in quilting, the answers varied.

"It is a hobby, it keeps them busy, they enjoy it, they give the quilts as gifts, they are creative, and they just like the history and everything about it. People have been quilting for many years, forever actually," one woman said. Settlers had to quilt to keep warm. These women enjoy working with the material, looking at the beauty of the quilt, and the time with their friends.

There are many procedures to quilting, but I asked about the particular procedures of these women. They all have pretty much the same procedure. They start by cutting the pieces, sewing them together, selecting a backing, putting in a filler, tying it together on a quilt frame and then sewing the edges.

As for my opinion about the quilting, I think that the quilts are made for a reasonable price. A nice sized quilt is forty dollars and a beautiful baby quilt is only fifteen dollars. These women make any kind of quilt from baby quilts to king size bed quilts. They use different kinds of patterns in every quilt.

The St. Paul's group is constructing the sesquicentennial celebration quilt from squares that have been turned in by individuals and groups. A nice contribution to the community!

Please write your own "Wise Tale."