

INTERVIEW WITH MS. KATHRYN KOHN
BY CAROL SWENSON AND DENISE BENSON
AUGUST 21, 1975
THE KOHN HOME
BARRETT, MN

Q: This is Carol Swenson and Denise Benson and were at the farm home of Miss Kathryn Kohn outside of Barrett, MN.. She uh, the date is August 21, 1975 and she's going to share with us her experience of seeing Teddy Roosevelt when he spoke at Lurverne, MN. She also going to talk about her early days. She'd like to begin by reading something that she's written. Okay do you want to read...

I wish to share my memories of Teddy Roosevelt and other events of past years. Our parents and we four children arrived in New York City on July 14, 1907, on the liner America. We left from Kiel, Germany and were on the ocean 12 days. I remember being awfully seasick. Two older brothers and one older sister had come earlier. We went directly to Lurverne Minnesota. I was eight years old at the time. The next fall in 1908, someone told us that president Theodore Roosevelt was going to make a stop in Lurverne. He was traveling by train. I think it was a Rock Island Road, that went through Lurverne at that time. As the train came in to the station all the so called important people all ran to the front of the train. We were crowded back. Then right in front of us on the back platform, President Roosevelt stood to give his speech. Since we had not yet learned the English language, we could not understand what he said. I still can see his reddish mustache and his big teeth. He was waving his beaver hat as the train pulled away. We had gotten to see and hear Teddy Roosevelt. Speaking of not knowing the English language, I don't know how our first teacher Miss Reed ever got us to read and write. We didn't know her language and she didn't know ours. But somehow or other she managed to get us started. In 1914 we came to Grant County. My brother Peter and I farmed a hundred and sixty acres of land in Lien Township. We have had a lot of misfortune but also lots of good years. We still think we have had a better life here in America than we would have stayed in Germany. There we owned our home and ten acres of land, but there wasn't much future for the middle class people. I was at the place of my birth, on the Island of Fehmarn Schleswig-Holstein, Germany. A year ago September 21, 1974. To celebrate my seventy-fifth birthday. Several of my school mates I left behind in 1907 helped me celebrate. A grandniece Cynthia S _____ was traveling with me. Besides visiting Germany we also went to Holland, Switzerland and France. I knew the language and Cynthia knew how to handle the various kinds of money. So we had a wonderful trip. On the 27th of this year 1975 I survived a severe heart attack. So the biggest thrill is that I lived to have these experiences taped so they could be shared with others.

Q: Okay. What was the date of your birth?

September 21, 1899.

Q: 1899?

That's a long time ago.

Q: And you came over when you were seven or eight?

1907 yah. I must have been about eight.

Q: Did your brothers and sisters who came over before you, homestead in America then?

Well the homesteading was over. We bought a farm and farmed.

Q: You bought this farm here (uh huh) I see. What do you remember about first starting to farm here?

Oh, there was the depression years. The dry years in 1930's that was bad.

Q: Do you remember any certian incidents during that depression that stick out in your mind? Anything that happened?

Oh, not really it's, it's kinds forgotten.

Q: Were you able to live off the land mostly or...

Oh yes. But it was awful short rations you know at that time.

Q: Did you trade a lot, like if you had produce or...

No, we sold you know, sold and bought back.

Q: Was there, did you have to mortgage your farm?

No, no we just kept on paying.

Q: Did you ever think of leaving?

Think what?

Q: Did you ever think of leaving?

Oh no, no I wouldn't go back to live in Germany.

Q: Or going like into the city. Like during the depression?

Oh, no, I don't like cities. Morris is big enough for me to go to. (laugh)

Q: What sorts of jobs did you take care of on the farm?

Well, we done milking and barn cleaning and haying and shocking and everything that's go with it.

Q: Did you help with all those different jobs?

We worked, worked like a man.

Q: Did you have to take care of the house then too?

Oh yes, sorta here and there.

Q: Did your brother help you much?

Oh, well he does what he can. He wasn't too anxious to do any house work.
(Laugh)

Q: Was that the way you were brought up in Germany? That you should do the, take care of the house and the men in the family be outside?

Well, I think that people done barn work too the ladies, the women.

Q: Could you tell a little about living in Germany?

As we were little we helped glean grain from the fields, we put our hands full of grain in the apron that our mother wore. It was put in the barn, onto the barn floor and flayed out in the winter. We had some chickens that were in a coop in the back of the barn. We had pigs and a goat. And the butter from the goats milk was white. We had a lot of fruit and eat a lot of fish, which were brought through the streets. Also the bakery carts came.

Q: Could you describe the house that you lived in. Do you remember?

I it was a double house our aunt lived in half of it, it was a double house. It was brick and the barn floor that I am talking about was between the two, two houses. But it was all one room and it was a straw roof and when we were there now the same straw roof was there.

Q: Oh, I see. How did you heat the house?

Well, I just don't know, must have been wood stove. But we baked our bread in a, in an oven you heated with straw, and shoved the leaves of bread, know with a wood paddle into the oven. And then I suppose it was closed and when the heat was out, why the bread was done.

Q: What kinds of animals did you have then?

Well the farmers had a lot of cows. It was dairy then. Now it was pigs. When we were there. And now the only animals we had was the goats and the pigs and the chickens.

Q: And you kept them in this barn that was in between the two houses?

No. The pigs and the goats were in a separate barn outside the, back of the house.

Q: Was this kind of like a storage area between the two houses?

Uh huh. The floor and the, well an upstairs where we stored things. I remember a big black iron kettle and I wish I had it here.

Q: Did you grow your own vegetables?

Yes. We had that little farm and we had grain and we had the garden and we _____.

Q: Was it a big garden?

Oh yah. Lot of flowers. Everyone had s..so many flowers and they still do.

Q: What kinds of flowers?

Oh we had, lot a hollyhocks and prim rose. I remember those so well. Rows along the walk of prim rose. And gooseberries and I still love gooseberries.

Q: How did you store your vegetables through the winter?

Well, I suppose we ate them as they grew and stored potatoes of course.

Q: Did you do any form of canning of any kind?

No, not much canning. Canning days came later.

Q: Oh was it like dried fruit then?

Oh I think so. I think apples were dried. We had apples and red pears.

Q: Were they like in a orchard on your farm?

No. We didn't have orchards, but we saw big orchards on our trip last year.

Q: How was your farm here in Minnesota then as compared to the one you had in Germany? Did you try and make your house here and your farm like the one you had in Germany?

Oh yah. It was about the same.

Q: Did you have any kind of shed or building connected to the house?

No.

Q: What type of house did you first have?

In Germany?

Q: No over here in ~~Minnesota~~ Minnesota?

Oh, it was a nice wood house, square house.

Q: And how did you heat that?

With hard coal and wood and coal heaters.

Q: Where did you get the coal?

Oh, we had to get that from Barrett.

Q: Did they bring it by train?

Well they came by train. But we got it by wagon. Sled in the winter.

Q: Did you have a lot of horses then?

Oh yah, we had horses.

Q: Any particular kind?

Oh, just always good horses. (laugh)

Q: What were, how many sleds did you have?

Sleds?

Q: Sleds yah.

Oh, just one that's all you needed.

Q: What was it like?

Oh you pulled them with horses. Covered up good in the winter.

Q: Did it have a little space down by the feet for a little warming box?

No. Well in ah, years ago they did. An..I think our mother heated oats for us, put our feet on that hot oats and we stood it.

Q: Do you remember any blizzards?

Oh, yes. We had a lot of bad weather, blizzards. But we always managed to survive. One winter I got to town three times in the three months of bad weather.

Q: Did you buy a lot of supplies then when you went to town?

Sure we had the flour and the sugar and our potatoes and meats.

Q: Did you do a lot of your own butchering on the farm?

Then we did, not now. It's a thing of the past.

Q: How did you store the extra meat?

Oh you salted it and you put it in fruit jars and canned it that way.

Q: Was that a big job?

Oh no, no. Not when you've got to. (laugh)

Q: What was the process. How did you go, how did you do that?

Oh you make a brine and put your meat in. Leave it in there for awhile and take it out. Some times we put it in the grain bin.

Q: Did you can it in jars?

Oh huh. No it had to dry, so I think the grain kept it dry?

Did you have any trouble with animals coming to eat it?

No, it was locked up in the, doors were shut you know. No animals, the only thing, mousey could get in but they didn't. (laugh)

Q: Do you remember the Barrett Ice Works Plant?

Oh yes. I think I took a picture of it the last, whatever, the last time before it when down. That was a lot of fun to see.

Q: Did you get Ice from there?

No. Well we did, before you could get culligan. Then we got Ice and salted it, washed our clothes in it.

Q: Oh you got blocks of ice for soft water?

Uh huh and we thawed that down or out and we used that water.

Q: How did you used to wash clothes?

Well first, first you have a board. Then we had a machine where you back and forth with your hands. Then of course came the gasoline, you know Maytag gasoline. And of course now it's all electricity.

Q: A gasoline washing machine?

Yeh. The gasoline engine you know run the washing machine.

Q: Did you ever make your own soap?

Well we did but we didn't like it. So we bought our soap.

Q: What sorts of things did you used to make on the farm. Like for your family? Did you sew a lot?

No, I didn't sew. All I could do was patch. But my neices they sew.

Q: As a family did you do a lot of your own sewing? When you were younger? Did your mother sew?

Oh, our mother was a seamstress in Germany. That way she made extra money.

Q: Did she sew the clothes for the family then?

Uh huh. Yes everything we wore, she made our father's suit. All of our clothes.

Q: Where did you get your material then?

Well I think a lot of it there was home spun.

Q: Over in Germany?

Uh huh. We still have some feather beds you know, that were home spun from flax straw.

Q: What kind of beds did you use here in the United States then?

Oh here we didn't use feather beds.

Q: Which one did you like better?

Oh, I don't like the feather beds.

Q: You don't?

But we did sleep on feather beds in Frankfort when we were there last year. They really haven't changed there. Still had the feather beds. And in the house where we stayed in Germany they still had feather beds.

Q: Did you get to go through your house (yes) when you were there? (uh huh) Did it change much?

No, it still there and....nise brick house.

Q: Is it still in your family?

Well we had second cousins and they came to meet us in Amberg. We went from Boston to Frankfort and take...took a smaller plane to Amberg and there's where our second cousins met us. It was just a wonderful trip. I would go back to visit any time, but not to stay. (laugh)

Q: Why not?

Oh no. I'm rooted here and I like it here.

Q: You said before you felt you had a better life because you stayed in America? Why do you think that?

Well if you work here you can make, you know get ahead. But there the middle class people just stay where they are but it might have been changed now but not then.

Q: So there's not much chance for bettering your position in life than what you were?

No there at all.

Q: Did you have to be born into a...

I think so, be born into a, the better, richer...

Q: Well thank you for telling us about your, oh let's see. About seeing Teddy Roosevelt and everything that you remember and it's really fun talking to you. And if you ever have anything else you come, can remember be sure and let us know.

Thank you.