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- LT: 00:00 This is Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KMRS news feature. We're talking today with Emma Varnum of Morris who lived for many years in Hancock and lived in a few other areas, too. Well, Emma, let's talk just a little bit about the state where you originally came from. What state were you born in?
- EV: 00:21 Illinois.
- LT: 00:23 Okay. And was your dad involved in farming?
- EV: 00:26 My dad—well, he farmed at that time when I was—he farmed quite a few years and then he had to—his health got poor, he had to quit farming because he was too—caught cold so easy and he had pneumonia, the doctors made him quit, so then he went to town.
- LT: 00:46 All right. And tell us about this little town that you lived at. They had quite a few little businesses going on at that time.
- EV: 00:53 Oh, little—Munson, Illinois, it's a little town they call Old Berg. They called the little town there Old Berg. The railroad was going to go through there and they had it all ready to go through there, ready to lay the rails. And all at once, they took a new shoot another direction. So I left that little town there, they had a hotel building in it and had a cheese factory, and a blacksmith shop, and a little grocery store, and a cider presser. Everybody was raising a lot of apples and besides, and they—that's what they had there.

01:36 And then there was a family lived there by the name of Edisons lived there, working there. And I says—then there was an old man come out, a man come out from Chicago or someplace to visit his brother. And while this—when I was a little girl, I'd run over there, but this Mr. Edison, he was the one that electric—one that invented electric lights, and I said, I used to sit on his lap and he used to tell me stories and he used to bounce me up and down on his lap when I was a little girl.

LT: 02:06 So you knew Thomas Edison and he was pretty famous when you knew him, too.

EV: 02:10 Huh?

LT: 02:11 Thomas Edison was pretty famous when you knew him.

EV: 02:14 Sure. I knew him. Oh, yes, I knew him. Yeah.

LT: 02:18 Well, then, you got married and you decided to move on down to New Mexico. How did you get down to New Mexico?

EV: 02:27 Oh, a wagon, covered wagon.

LT: 02:31 Covered wagon. Now, is that pretty fast going or pretty slow?

EV: 02:34 Oh, that's slow going.

LT: 02:37 What did you have pulling the wagon?

EV: 02:39 We had a team of horses and an extra horse. But we made—oh, I don't know, I suppose we made 20 miles a day, maybe not that far. I don't just remember, but I said—they never trot the horses, they just always walked because trotting would make them too tired.

LT: 02:58 Okay. So what did you do along the way for food and for fuel and that type of thing?

EV: 03:04 Oh, we bought some stuff along where we could get some—basically buy some stuff. And then for fuel, oh, we burnt buffalo chips for fuel.

LT: 03:15 Price was right on those buffalo chips anyway, I suppose you could pick them up along the way.

- EV: 03:20 Yeah. Pick them up along the way, the buffalo chips. They were all nice and dry and hard, and made of grass. It was a good burning.
- LT: 03:33 Well, you ended up around Albuquerque, New Mexico. What kind of a town was that when you ended up there in about, what, the early 1900s, I guess.
- EV: 03:43 Oh, that's a—well, it wasn't too big a town at that time, it was a nice little town.
- LT: 03:50 So one of the problems, of course, in going by covered wagon is certain obstacles along the way like some of these big rivers, that used to be a problem to get across those.
- EV: 04:00 Yeah. We went—going across the river once and the river would take the new channel. It does that out west there, it took a new channel.
- LT: 04:10 So in other words, instead of going where it was supposed to, it started going where it wanted to.
- EV: 04:14 And where the river had been, there was a bridge stood there right out in the open, way up high, great big bridge over the river, nothing there. Then I said, we had to go down a little ways down the river. And I says, we—they took the wagon apart and put the wagon in a boat and put I and the children on the boat, and they swam us—took us down the river, but we landed about a mile down the river on the other side.
- LT: 04:43 The river must have been pretty strong.
- EV: 04:45 And then my husband and another man, they swam the horses across. And then we got across the river, then we got—but [inaudible 04:57] start out again. Well, we hit Mesa, Arizona and we stayed there about a week. Well, then that was a—Mesa was a Mormon town, everybody was Mormons. And they was what they called Daddy Metz there, he had seven wives, that was the law at that time, seven wives. And he was a nice fellow, he was city mayor. It was a nice little town, the people were very nice, too. We stayed there quite a while. Then we went on and got into New Mexico in Albuquerque. We got into Albuquerque and we went there a while, lived in a house.
- LT: 05:36 What kind of a house?

- EV: 05:38 Oh, just a wooden house. But we lived in adobe house after that once because the adobe house—well, the adobe, I don't know, it's—they have some kind of a pressed weed, leaves, or trees or something. I don't know what, but it's all pressed lumber.
- LT: 05:57 Okay. Well, you talked a little bit about the train robberies. Now, they used to be quite a few of them?
- EV: 06:05 There were several train robberies, and we was out in the mountains once going out there, and during the night, some men drove up, a posse of them and, well, we see anybody go by here and we told them yes, and they won't know about [inaudible 06:20] but we told them [inaudible 06:22]. They was after—they were train robbers, they was after my horseback. Well, on horseback, they wouldn't do much catching all those going up those canyons all over. They knew where to go them fellows, didn't get them.
- LT: 06:36 Well, we think about Minnesota and all the snow and the cold and the blizzards and this type of thing, was the weather all always perfect and nice and sunny when you lived in New Mexico?
- EV: 06:48 We didn't have no snowstorm, but we had great, big dirt storms. The dirt would come up flying, and we had fences up—dirt fences just like you have so fences in Minnesota.
- LT: 06:59 The dirt or sand or mixed, a little bit of everything.
- EV: 07:02 Yes, sir.
- LT: 07:04 Okay. When you lived down there, now, I would imagine that you didn't have all the conveniences of home as we think about them today.
- EV: 07:13 Heavens no. Well, in order to have fuel we burnt buffalo chips, and then the mixes would come down from the mountains to have what they call wood mesquite. And I says—and we'd buy the wood, then have mesquite wood, and I said, we had to buy the water. I said, we had no water had to buy the water, drink it. I says, we didn't wash the dishes and throw the water away, we washed the dishes and let it settle and then pour the water off again and wash dishes over in the same water.

LT: 07:47 So just like today out west, where they're talking about using the water over? It used to be pretty rough back when you're talking, too.

EV: 07:54 I'll say, boy, it was rough, those days.

LT: 07:57 You didn't have any electricity to plug in a refrigerator. How did you keep your food cool?

EV: 08:01 Oh, I see. We made a frame, probably about three feet square, and had shells in it. Then I says we had something on the top there like a tin box of some kind, I says, and then you'd fill that with water, had the burlap sacks hanging over the side of it. And I says, there's always a wind, and that wind would go back and forth to keep that stuff cool in there.

LT: 08:28 Just by evaporation, it would keep—it wouldn't keep it cold, but cooler anyway.

EV: 08:35 It was cooler anyway, sure.

LT: 08:38 Now, you eventually came back to Minnesota. I think, what, your dad was sick and you came to Minnesota?

EV: 08:45 Yeah. He died here in Minnesota.

LT: 08:49 Okay. What year was it that you moved up to Minnesota?

EV: 08:53 1906.

LT: 08:54 Tell us what Morris, Minnesota was like when you came to town in 1906?

EV: 08:59 It was one of the toughest town in the state, I believe. It was tough. Well, from a merchant's hotel on the corner, there's a merchant's hotel, that was a solid block down to the corner of nothing but liquor stores. You didn't dare go down that side of the street, for fear that men would grab you. They were drunks and everything else.

LT: 09:20 How many bars were in town?

EV: 09:22 There's 13 liquor stores in town at that time when I've come here. There was 11 in that block and then old man Wunsch had a liquor store the next block, and then Trotto had a liquor store in the next block, down near the Morris Hotel.

LT: 09:42 And Emma, I don't know how to ask you this, but they used to have business on the second floor, too.

EV: 09:46 Huh?

LT: 09:47 They used to have some businesses on the second floor, too, up and down Main Street.

EV: 09:51 Oh, yes. Main Street, you didn't dare. If you went down main street, you had to go down the other side in order to get down to Liddy's Bakery. You didn't dare go on that side the liquor stores was, you didn't know when a man grab you and misuse you.

LT: 10:07 What was on the second floor of these buildings?

EV: 10:10 Oh, the second floor right down at the end, that was a red light district.

LT: 10:15 So Morris had everything, huh?

EV: 10:16 Yeah. Morris had everything. Yeah.

LT: 10:20 Now, you think about the bad things that are happening today, when you compare them, the times are beautiful today.

EV: 10:30 Oh, they got bad things nowadays, but they were pretty rough in those days, too. Pretty rough.

LT: 10:36 Yeah. You lived in Morris for a while and then you moved down to Hancock, and you lived down there for most of the—for what, about—

EV: 10:43 '22 in Hancock.

LT: 10:46 Okay. Up until, what, '75, '76 when you moved to the Villa. You hear these kids talking today about how rough they have it. What advice do you have to give to those people that think they're working too hard?

EV: 10:58 Those kids don't know what it is to be rough, they just got everything too easy. The old folks have worked hard and slaved themselves to try to make it easy so the young folks don't have it so hard as they'd have it, but the young folks don't appreciate it.

LT: 11:15 Well, if the young people have it so nice and easy today, do you wish you were a teenager today?

EV: 11:19 No, we didn't have anything like this, they have it best, they do. I had to work a whole week to buy a pair of shoes in those days.

LT: 11:27 How much did you get for wages?

EV: 11:30 Oh, 25 cents a day.

LT: 11:32 And you had to work pretty hard for it, too, I bet.

EV: 11:34 Sure. See, before, you washed the dishes for somebody, bunch of kids, they had a bunch of kids. Oh, sure, 25 cents a day, pair of shoes, that's when I worked in. Then your shoes were—well, of course shoes were as hard as they are now, but everything goes like that. Yeah.

LT: 11:53 Well, Emma, you had a birthday not too long ago, how old were you then?

EV: 11:57 When?

LT: 11:58 Just, what, a few weeks ago you had a birthday party out here at the Villa.

EV: 12:01 Oh, I was 95 years old.

LT: 12:04 Do you have any secret to living to be a ripe, old age of 95?

EV: 12:10 Sure. I didn't do no—I never drank anything, I mean, no hard liquors or no kind. And I done lots of hard work and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed work, I would right now if I was able to do it. I enjoy work.

LT: 12:27 Well, I wish you many more happy birthdays, Emma, it's been very fun talking with you.

EV: 12:31 Thank you.

LT: 12:33 We've been talking with Emma Varnum of Morris who's a resident here at the Villa on Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KM RS news feature.