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Narrator

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KMRS
Interviewer

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- LT: 00:01 This is Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KMRS news feature. Today, we're talking with Jacob Schmitz from Wheaton. Jake, I know that there are lots and lots of Schmitz around the Wheaton and Dumont area, how about the first ones, the first Schmitzs that moved into this neck of the woods, how long ago was that?
- JS: 00:21 It was 1876, just a hundred years ago.
- LT: 00:30 Okay. What about the Schmitz from the old country, which country and how long ago was that they moved over to this country?
- JS: 00:37 Well, they came here in—they left in the spring of 1856 from Germany. And my dad was three months old at the time they left Germany and they boarded a sailboat out of—and came over to America, and he was 90 days on the water. Some days they run into storms and he tell—his father told him that they had many days they lowered their sail and they'd drift back further one day than what they went forward the day before. That was the reason for the trip taking him so long.
- 01:24 They had three people die on the voyage across the Atlantic, which were naturally buried at sea. And by the time you landed in America, they were out of—practically out of water and food both. But they used to supplement their water supply once in a while when a rainstorm would come up, they would use every available container possible and set it out and catch what little rainfall they got because

it was impossible to use the ocean water for drinking because that would make them sick.

LT: 01:59 Okay. They came over then and, what, landed in New York Harbor or where?

JS: 02:03 They landed in Boston and they immediately moved on westward until they got to an area north and west of what is now Wayzata. And the neighbors immediately took them in and they started helping them cut down trees, there was a lot of woodland around there. And they started cutting down trees and help them build a log house. And next they build them a log barn and they bought some cattle and some horses from the neighbors. My folks never used oxen, they always had horses.

LT: 02:53 Okay. Now, what kind of occupation did your dad—when he was living down there by the Twin Cities as we know them today, did he get in any trade at all?

JS: 03:02 When he was—my dad was—lived on the farm with his parents until he was 16 years old and he got a job working in a blacksmith shop at St. Anthony, that was their closest town. Minneapolis was not there at that time. St. Paul already was starting to build up, but not Minneapolis. He spent much of his boyhood time around Minnehaha Falls when he was staying at St. Anthony, and he often told us about the Minnehaha Falls and different places of amusement where he used to go to.

03:49 When he was working for this blacksmith, he was getting \$10 a month and he worked there four years. And during the time he worked there, he always had the ambition of wanting to come out west. And in the fall of 1876 [1876], just—of '75, excuse me, was opened up for—in Minnesota territory, as Minnesota was a territory still at that time, didn't become a state until 1878 [1878]. When he had his 21st birthday in December, him and his brother, Pete, they come out and staked out a homestead out in what is now known as Dollymount Township.

04:51 They were the second families that moved into that area. The first family that came there was a Henry Doll family from the same area down around Wayzata where my parents—my father came from. And they came up in 19—or 18, excuse me, 1875. My dad and his brother got a emigrant car in the spring of 1876, and they loaded up their

machinery, which my father had built while he was in the blacksmith shop. He built his own wagon, his own sled and drag and a walking plow.

- LT: 05:53 I don't suppose there's too many implement dealers around here at that time
- JS: 05:56 There wasn't anybody here at that time.
- LT: 05:59 Jake, tell us what the land was like around here. You look today and you can't see any place hardly that doesn't have some sort of civilization. What was it like back a hundred years ago?
- JS: 06:10 Well, there was no trees, whatever, and they used—the first year he was up here, he moved—used what they called Buffalo chips and twisted hay for feed for his horses and the buffalo chips for fuel. And occasionally, he had to twist hay and use that to heat his little cabin he had built. His first house out on this open prairie was 12 feet wide and 14 foot long. He lived in that for several years. And the first spring that he was here, it was all nothing but solid prairie, and the water level was so terrifically high.
- 07:02 When they shipped as far as Morris, which was their closest town, they started across country to where his homestead was. And it was in the spring of the year, naturally, and the spring thaws had the creeks and ravines all flooded, and they swam their horses across with all their earthly belongings on their wagon and their cow tied behind.
- LT: 07:30 Now, these animals they swam and the wagon floated then?
- JS: 07:33 Then the wagon floated and the horses swam across with the wagon and the cow would be tied behind, she'd naturally have to swim along. Several years before this land was opened up for a homestead, the Indians were all moved off this area and moved over into Fort Sisseton and also up into the Cass Lake Indian Reservation up in the northern part of the state. The families were—the Indian families were split up. The mother and dad would probably be living at Sisseton, the young folks would be moved somewhere else.
- 08:14 And dad often mentioned when he was breaking the sod on his first few years on his farm, that you'd look down across to the horizon you'd see someone coming and it would be

an Indian from up in the northern part of the state, going down to the Sisseton area to visit with some of his relatives or else it'd be from Sisseton going the other way. And when he broke his first crop, he only got six acres into crop the first year due to the high water. When he would go down across the prairie, the water level was so high that he had to wear—at times he'd have to run barefoot behind the plow because the water would follow him down through the burrows.

09:16 But as the sun beat down to this overturned soil, it naturally dried out some, and he was able to get in six acres of crop, which he planted wheat and some oats. The oats, he just cut that with a scythe and piled it up and fed it to his horses as it was cut. And the wheat, he had to flail that out, and he had himself a small grinder which he would fasten on the table and grind his own wheat up for meal, where from which he would make some bread and also any other uses that he could put to it for his own use.

LT: 10:01 At one time, they decided they'd make some money and they started collecting buffalo bones. Now, how many of these buffalo bones are out here? Where, which area were those in?

JS: 10:11 Well, those buffalo bones were—the buffalo bones were laying about all over the open prairie out here as years before, the buffalo hunters came out here and slaughtered all these animals just only for their hides and left the meet and lay out on the prairie to rot. And the bones were laying so plentiful, and after Herman got the railroad, father found out that there was a market for buffalo bones down at Chaska, Minnesota where a sugar mill had started and they were using bones in their refinery work, refining their sugar.

10:59 And so him and mother take their team and wagon and go out on the prairie on Monday mornings and pick up buffalo bones between his homestead and Herman. And they'd stay in and live out on the prairie until Saturdays. And about five days of good work, they figured he always got enough to fill a carload of bones, which they would ship to Chaska, and they would get \$26 for a load of bones.

LT: 11:33 I know \$26, it doesn't seem like a large amount of money, and for five days work, that's a lot of work, were there other people doing the same thing?

- JS: 11:40 He never mentioned that anyone else was doing it, but I imagine there were because it was some extra income. In them days, \$26 was a lot of money.
- LT: 11:52 And we'll continue our interview with Jake Schmitz of Wheaton, Minnesota next week. Jake, incidentally, is 81 years old. Next week on Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, Jake Schmitz's part two, Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KMRS news feature.
- 12:14 This is Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KMRS news feature. This week on Reminiscing, Jacob Schmitz of Wheaton part two. Last week on Reminiscing we talked with Jake about his grandfather coming over from Germany in 1855, landing in Boston Harbor and finally setting near Wayzata, Minnesota. In 1875, his father came to the rural Traverse County area near Dumont and homesteaded on his 21st birthday.
- 12:45 We also talked about the early prairie days of West Central, Minnesota, no trees at all. And finally, about his father and mother out collecting buffalo bones that were shipped down to the Twin Cities area to be used in a sugar milling process. We'll continue now with Reminiscing with Jake Schmitz of Wheaton. One of the things, too, that your dad was very instrumental is his education. And you've got kind of an interesting story to explain how the—now, this is a school at Dumont, I think you're talking about the first one.
- JS: 13:17 The school out in the country.
- LT: 13:19 Well, this is in the country.
- JS: 13:20 This is out on a—after a few years, more families moved in as homesteaders and would bring their families along. And some of them had boys as old as 26 years old that came along with their families, and none of them ever had spent a day in school. So my dad had a fourth grade education from where he was raised and he figured that education was essential. So he called a bunch of neighbors together one evening at his home and asked them to think about building up a school out there and hiring a teacher.
- 14:02 And he said he'd give him an acre of land on the northeast corner of his quarter, which was about centrally located among the homesteaders at that time, and they'd get a school and they agreed to that. So they hired a teacher,

which she got \$15 a month for her salary at that time. And she'd stay with—one of the neighbors would keep her for a small fee, and those boys, 26 years old, had never had gone to school, and those that were younger, they started school. And after my dad was married, he figured, well, what's the use having a school here, maybe I can pick up a little bit, too.

14:44 So after he was married, mother would stay home during the day time and she would go to school. While my mother was—mother lost—I believe I mentioned my mother had lost her mother. When my mother's mother had died, her aunt took over and raised them up until grandpa was able to find a place where he could make a home for them. And my mother never went to school at all, she never had went to any school, but she was a sort of aggressive sort and tried hard to learn. And it wasn't long that she was reading both in German and in English, and her biggest hobby was reading story books.

LT: 15:41 She had kind of the learn-at-home program, huh?

JS: 15:43 That's right. She could read and write, and she could use words that she had picked up and learned the meaning of them out of her—all her reading. And she could drop a word in its place, which meant exactly what she had meant it to be.

LT: 16:05 Well, some of those early days, there used to be some problems that are probably a little bit more bigger problems than we have today like health problems. There used to be some pretty big diseases and epidemics back in the olden days.

JS: 16:18 Oh, yes. Dad told us about the time the smallpox epidemic one, too. They called it at that time, the black smallpox. People just practically turned black when they got badly infected with it. And he said that there was about a third of the population that had died. And those that did survive carried scars, deep scars from it. Then we had a neighbor, should I mention his name? Mr. John Zabel, he was a homesteader. He had a little training along this line and he figured he knew how to vaccinate people for smallpox.

17:03 And what he done, he would take some of this mucus or whatever was draining out of some sores on someone that was affected, and he would take a sharp instrument or a

piece of glass and scratch your arm right below the shoulder, and he would inoculate you with that.

- LT: 17:28 Did it work?
- JS: 17:30 Absolutely. I got scars in my arm to show where my— where he vaccinated me.
- LT: 17:37 Well, today, if we have a blizzard that lasts more than one day, it gets to be almost unbearable for people. What were some of the blizzards back in those earlier years?
- JS: 17:45 I often heard my folks talk about the blizzard of 1880. They said that for three weeks that you was unable to go out— get away from the place. They said that he went—dad and his brother and one of the neighbors, they put their team on a sled and they'd start driving all over the area to where other homesteads were living to check on them and see how they come through—if they came through, everything okay.
- 18:19 And two—they went as far as two miles west of where Dumont now stands. And one mile south, there was a homesteader there living in a log house, and that they didn't see the house until they got almost on top of it because there was—all that was sticking out of the snow bank was the stove pipe. And they got their shovel out and dug out his door so he could get his door open. And this man had been in there for three weeks and he was perfectly okay, and they found him in good health and perfectly okay.
- LT: 19:01 Could've been bad if the snow had covered the whole thing completely though.
- JS: 19:04 The whole thing was completely covered, it was only the stovepipe that was sticking out of the snow drift. And this was snow on the level, it's not on a drift. We had no trees to stop the snow that time and build up drift, this was open prairie.
- LT: 19:25 Now, you were involved in farming at, what, rural Dumont when you started farming on your own?
- JS: 19:31 That's right. I started farming in 1917 out in the Dumont area.
- Lee 19:37 And you and your wife had a pretty big family, so you must had lots of help on the farm.

- JS: 19:42 Well, after the children grew up, we had plenty of help. I went into other things like, I was on a shipping association for a few years, and I used insurance as a sideline. My father used to write insurance for the Tara Mutual, he was one of the people that helped organize the company and wrote for several farm tornado insurances. And so I had a few sidelines, and then later years, when we was only farming a couple hundred acres for—supplement my income, I done custom butchering for the neighbors. The boys would be doing the field work and—
- LT: 20:32 Kind of a Jack of all trades in other words.
- JS: 20:34 Well, you either had to do it or go hungry.
- LT: 20:38 Well, now, I mentioned that you had a big family. Will you tell us just how big it was?
- JS: 20:43 Well, we had 15 living children and we lost five at birth. We had 20 children.
- LT: 20:51 And one of your children made national fame back in the '30s.
- JS: 20:57 Well, in 1936, we had—according to the medical records at the John Hopkins Hospital at Baltimore from information that they dug into, he was the largest baby ever born alive since 1895 up to 1936.
- LT: 21:22 Yeah, that was Jacob, Jr. How big was he at birth?
- JS: 21:26 He weighed 16 pounds and he was 24 1/2 inches long. He still holds the record for being the tallest baby that was ever born. Guinness Book of Records has called me this summer and they mentioned that if he was 24 1/2 inches long, he still holds that record, but there is several other babies that have been born since 1936 that were heavier than what he is.
- LT: 21:57 Well, I'm sure that it brought quite a few reporters around this neck of the woods back there in the '30s. In fact, he got national publicity in the cover of Life Magazine and everything.
- JS: 22:07 That's right. At the date of his birth, Nat Finney and a pilot, and also a newspaper corresponded by the name of Fraser flew out from Minneapolis and they bought exclusive rights to the story on this big baby. And the Minneapolis Tribune

sold 1,200—they had the story copyrighted and they sold 1,200 copyrights to different magazines and newspapers throughout the nation in Canada.

- LT: 22:51 That's amazing. And still a record for the longest baby born.
- JS: 22:56 Yeah. He still holds the record for the tallest baby that was ever born. And Nat Finney, he was a newspaper correspondent, which later—he later became a Washington correspondent, he was just working his way up in journalism, and he wrote a story on the birth of this big baby. And he got the prize from the—on journalism for that year. And he got a—he told me that he got a prize for \$1,600 for being the most outstanding story. It was considered the most outstanding story for that year.
- LT: 23:44 Well, Jake, I know that you're still active and you're not retired yet, you're still working?
- JS: 23:50 Oh, yes. I'm still holding down a job at the Traverse County Courthouse as a radio dispatcher. My duties are to take care of the police calls and operate the teletype machine. It was a little hard. at first, I was 69 years old when I first started to learn how to run a typewriter. I do think that this is one subject should be taught in our schools today.
- LT: 24:25 Yeah. I agree with that. My job needs it, too, and I wish I could type a little bit better. Jake, there's one question I always ask and that's, how old are you?
- JS: 24:33 I'm 81 now, and I will be 82 my next birthday.
- LT: 24:36 We've been talking with Jake Schmitz of Wheaton on Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KMRS news feature.