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Narrator

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Interviewer

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- LT: 00:00 This is Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KMRS news feature. Today, we're talking with Thomas Riley of Morris. And Tom, were you born around this area or where were you born at?
- TR: 00:15 I was born in Murray County in Slayton, Minnesota, in Murray County.
- LT: 00:21 Was that a lot different than in Stevens County?
- TR: 00:26 Well, not all that much. The farming was about the same in both places. The only difference was, well, I guess land was a little cheaper in Stevens County.
- LT: 00:39 That's one of the reasons that your family moved up in this area?
- TR: 00:43 Yes.
- LT: 00:45 You—as a young man, you remember a stage coach. When I think of stage coaches, I think of the wild old west and the stage is going across country type of thing. It was a little bit different. Why don't you explain just exactly what you had down there in Murray County?
- TR: 01:03 Well, it was transportation between Slayton and Iona. There was—the trains—no trains between those two towns, and it was the transportation between the two towns.
- LT: 01:19 Okay. So how big a vehicle was it?

- TR: 01:26 Well, I think it was about a three-seated, on kind of a platform buggy or a platform wagon. I suppose they could take probably six, seven passengers.
- LT: 01:39 More of a horse-drawn taxi cab, then.
- TR: 01:42 That's right.
- LT: 01:44 So when you moved up here, where did you go to school?
- TR: 01:48 St. Mary's.
- LT: 01:50 Now, you lived in the country then, were there a lot of people that lived on the farm that came into town?
- TR: 01:56 Well, there was some, I suppose, within a radius of a few miles. I know different families out in the country that went in. A lot of them, they had a—they drove a horse into town, and then they had—there was a lot of barns around town at that time, and they'd keep the horse in the barn. And when the school was over, they'd take the horse and go home again.
- LT: 02:20 There were a lot of kids who—that boarded in town with their families.
- TR: 02:24 Yes. There was some that boarded in town, too, yeah.
- LT: 02:28 St. Mary's today is just basically grade school, but at that time, when you went to school at St Mary's, it was a little bit bigger school.
- TR: 02:36 Yes. They had 12 grades there and then they had an advanced class, too. I don't know if it was normal training or just exactly, but there was an advanced class.
- LT: 02:50 Living on the farm, back in—a few years ago, used to be a little bit, oh, I hate to say it, but probably a little bit more work than some of the farmers today. What types of things do you remember as being especially difficult or trying working on the farm?
- TR: 03:09 Well, I don't know. I guess of course then in times you cut the grain with a binder and it all had to be shocked. And then you had to haul the bundles to the threshing machine or else, either stack them and thresh them later, one or the other.

- LT: 03:26 That was because there weren't enough threshing machines or you just had to wait your turn for one?
- TR: 03:32 Well, there weren't as many threshing machines then as there are combines now. At that time, I think one—there'd probably be one threshing machine that threshed five, six, seven, eight farms.
- LT: 03:45 When you were growing up around here, who used to have the threshing machine?
- TR: 03:51 Well, the first years, to the best of my knowledge, why, there was a fellow in town by the name of Bill Stevenson. He worked for Cartwright Company, and he used to—he come out, I think they had two machines and he ran one that they had to run out in our neighborhood. And then outside of that, later years after we moved up here, why, [inaudible 04:18] done our threshing.
- LT: 04:23 Milking cows, too, was always a difficult job, or it wasn't a—it took a lot of time, but where—did you used to sell the milk, sell the cream? Or what type of things did you have when you got your own farm?
- TR: 04:39 We sold the cream, yeah. We had to milk cows them days to buy the groceries. That was our bread and butter.
- LT: 04:49 All right. And they weren't the fancy milkers and that type of thing that they have now.
- TR: 04:54 No, no, we done it by hand.
- LT: 04:58 Okay. The one thing that's always interested me about early farming is picking corn by hand, which used to be common, everybody used to do it. And you're the first person that showed me the type of tool or thing that you strap on that the people used to use, and I guess there were a couple different kinds. Why don't you explain the one that you showed me and what the other kind that they used to have?
- TR: 05:23 Well, what I showed you was what they call the old hook. Well, a lot of guys is, I imagine, familiar with them. And then there was the peg that you put on your hand, and either one of them done the job, it's what you got used to.
- LT: 05:45 And a lot of times, too, that picking a corn kept going probably until middle of December sometime.

TR: 05:51 Yeah. That's for sure. I picked a lot of it in the snow.

LT: 05:58 You got married as a young man and moved into your own place. You, what, you lived in a couple different places before you moved here or just one other place?

TR: 06:06 Just one other place.

LT: 06:08 Yeah. That was what, in Stevens County?

TR: 06:10 Yeah. It was six miles south of Morris.

LT: 06:13 Okay. So this is—the place where you live now is pretty close to the home place?

TR: 06:19 Yeah. It's about two mile and a half. Yeah.

LT: 06:23 Did you have a big family?

TR: 06:26 We got nine children.

LT: 06:29 Well, that's a pretty big family, I think. Did that mean lots of help on the farm or did that mean that you had more responsibility?

TR: 06:38 Well, I don't know. I think that we got a lot of cooperation. I think we had a lot of help.

LT: 06:46 A lot of help. Well, that's good. What types of crops did you grow in the early years, and did that change at all over the years?

TR: 06:55 Well, yeah, the first years, I was farming and it was a lot of wheat and—or not, a lot of oats and corn. And then we had a lot of livestock those years, and the last few years, why, it's been soybeans and wheat and corn and oats, little barley.

LT: 07:15 It seems that today, people are a little bit more specialists, they have one crop that—maybe it might be soybeans or it might be something that—whatever. Same thing with livestock that people are either a dairy farmer or a swine producer or something. Back in some of the earlier years, everybody used to grow just about everything and used to raise just about everything. And I suppose that most of the food that went on the table, you probably grew on your own farm though, that made a lot of difference, too.

- TR: 07:47 Well, yeah. Everybody had their own hogs, their own meat, and their own milk and their butter and all that. We used to sell our cream and buy our butter at the creamery, but it was still—he was still producing it anyway, and I guess that's about it then.
- LT: 08:08 Winter is here, we're in the middle of January and then—and I guess we haven't had a really good blizzard this year, and knock on wood, not that I want one because it's been a good year that we haven't had one, but do you remember any winters that were especially tough?
- TR: 08:26 Oh, yeah. There's been a lot of them. I can't just exactly tell you when they were, but I think it was '36 and '37 was a bad winter. And then last winter, nobody—everybody knows about that. We had an awful bad storm, it goes back in the '20s. I don't know just exactly when it was about, around the 12th of February, I think, and that was a bad one. A lot of people was caught out, kids stayed at the schoolhouse overnight at the country schools, it struck just about the time that the kids got to school or some of them didn't get there, I guess. And it was a bad storm, it came up awful quick and there was a lot of snow.
- LT: 09:27 Of course, today, we have some of the big plows for the highways and a lot of farmers have big blowers. And so even though it hits and it might have to wait a while, getting out's a little bit easier today.
- TR: 09:42 Oh, yes, it's—well, of course, the roads has been improved, the roads are a lot better. I don't think they drift in a bad—a lot of places as they used to. And everybody's got lots more to work with to move it.
- LT: 10:01 Tom, I know that you're at least retirement age, but you're still pretty active in farming.
- TR: 10:08 Well, I try to get a little time in.
- LT: 10:13 But still involved in field work, and what about livestock?
- TR: 10:18 Well, I've got a few head of cattle around here, beef cattle, not very many. And, oh, yeah, I get out there and try to keep something going, a combine or a tractor or something. Whatever's in season, I usually get in some time.
- LT: 10:35 One of your son is involved in farming with you?

TR: 10:38 Yeah. Leo's here helping. Yeah.

LT: 10:42 But you have no really hopes of retiring, you enjoy doing what you're doing and you're going to continue.

TR: 10:52 Well, you get now and it's one day at a time, I think. But you don't want to plan too far ahead when you get my age.

LT: 11:04 Well, that's a good point you brought out. That's what I always ask people when I end the interview, and that's when I ask your age. Tom, how old are you?

TR: 11:12 I was 72 last July the 30th.

LT: 11:17 Thank you very much. We've been talking with Thomas Riley of Rural Morris on Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KMRS news feature.