

Emil Anderson Interview
R.R. Maynard, Minn.
July 17, 1975
Carol Swenson, Interviewer

Q: I'm Carol Swenson, the date is July 17, 1975, and I'm in the farm home of Mr. Emil Anderson, R.R. Maynard, Minnesota. First could you give me your name, date of birth and place of birth please?

I'm Emil Anderson and I was born near Wegdahl, Minnesota on October 11, 1895.

Q: Have you been farming most of your life in this area?

I've been farming until I was old enough to retire.

Q: What other things have you done? You were County Commissioner, what years were you County Commissioner?

I was County Commissioner from 1941 until 1965.

Q: Can you think of anything else that would give a brief biographical explanation?

Well, of course, I was on the church board and the local school board and on the town board for 7 years before I became County Commissioner. I was also a director in the Linville Farmer's Insurance Company at that local company.

Q: What town board were you on here?

Leenthrop township here.

Q: I would like to talk a little bit about the Swensson family and what you remember. First of all, when do you remember first having contact with the Swensson family?

Well, really in 1901. I'd heard about them before, but I was too young to know.

Q: What happened in 1901?

We were asked there for dinner, my family, and Mr. Swensson being a lay preacher, he asked us to come to the service at the... 10:30 in the morning, and we got there and he started. He had invited other people there and they came late, so he said, "well, these people haven't heard the service," so he started all over again. We sat there until 1:30 until he got through, and we were some pretty hungry young people there before he got through. At that time they lived in an old log house. That's before they built the big house that's there now.

Q: Was it your whole family that went?

Yes. We were 6 children, and mother and dad.

Q: And you said that the girls had to wait dinner until after the sermon? Before they even started it?

Yes, see, there was no refrigeration those days.

Q: How did they divide up the work? Do you remember at all?

Well, they had certain jobs they had to do. The women worked as much outside as inside. Katie was the oldest, and she did the field work to begin with, and then the others as they got older, why, then they took over. They had a lot of cows and chickens, and Martha, the one that got married, she was more the home girl, I never saw her out in the field. But the rest of them were out there.

Q: Was it kind of unusual to have the girls working out in the field at that time?

Yes, it was. It wasn't unusual for somebody maybe to milk a cow, but out in the field it was most unusual.

Q: What sorts of things did they do in the field?

Well, they did everything that any man would do. Plowing and harrowing, and then at harvesttime, they were out there chopping grain and then, Kristine, she stacked the grain, then the other girls would fill up the wagons, and the other girls would pitch it in.

Q: Do you remember anything about the flour or grist mill that he had?

Yes. I never saw them make flour there, but I saw them make...grind feed. I saw the steam engine fired up and John grinding feed, not flour.

Q: I saw it over at the house, don't they have wheat sacks or something?

Swensson...I think it's whole wheat flour.

Q: Did you hear rumors of him starting up this company?

(97-5 min.)

Well, there was some talk, not much. See, most of the flour at that time was ground locally, most of our wheat was ground locally at Granite Falls.

Q: Was it like every farmer would bring in so many...

They would bring in so many bushels and get so much flour back.

Q: What was the attitude of other people toward their family? What did they think of the girls working out in the fields so much?

Nobody ever thought anything especially different about it, it was taken for granted. Mr. Swensson was a little bit odd in ways, but nobody said too much about it.

Q: In what ways did people think that he was odd?

Well, he could...he had a grass mower and he had made that out of different parts of other mowers, he made it work. So, it was a small mower, a 4 foot cut,

Q: So he was a man for putting together his own machinery?

Yes, he made all kinds of other stuff too, he was kind of a handyman.

Q: Did you have any contact with him when he was into politics?

No, I was too young for that, I've been interested in politics all my life, but I had a lot to do with him. When I was 14 years old he needed help to thresh, and I handled grain for him from the time I was 14 till I got married and came out here. Or as long as he lived anyway.

Q: Do you remember him talking about politics or remember hearing anything?

He would just say a few words, not anything special.

Q: Did he agree with how the government was running the country at the time?

No, he didn't. He thought they spent too much money, and I guess there weren't too many that disagreed with that.

Q: Did he say how he would rather see the country run?

No, he didn't, but of course, Swensson was a man that believed in work, and he never was a fellow that asked a big price for anything-he was very fair in his dealings with people. I know, with us, my father passed away when I was 12, and he helped us out with a lot of things.

Q: Was that the custom at the time, helping others?

Yes, but of course, at that time a lot of people were busy and they didn't have time to help always. I know that after dad died he came over and asked if we were short of seed or anything, and to come over and get it if we were.

Q: What do you remember about the children?

(192-10 min.)

As they grew older, the only thing they really took in was church services, they didn't go around very much. They were getting older and they tried to farm and they couldn't farm and so their income was very limited.

Q: When Mr. Swensson was alive did he seem to do quite well?

He was considered, I'd say, well off. When he started to build that house he had \$5000.00 in cash and that was a lot of money in those days.

Q: Do you remember them building that house at all?

Oh, yes.

Q: What do you remember about that?

Well, they built when ever they had the time. They started to plan years ahead, because when this part...we had a big rock on our place that he wanted for the foundation. He blew that and something happened and he got crushed rocks in his eyes, and my dad run and took him to the doctor, and he never forgot that. Part of that rock in the foundation of that house, and it made a hole about as big as this room here, so I guess it was a big one.

Q: Did he use dynamite then?

I don't know whether it was dynamite or blasting powder, but he used something powerful. He knew how to handle rock though, because you can see at the house how the rock is cut square.

Q: Do you remember any rumors about him being a stonecutter in Sweden?

No, no, but there isn't any question that he learned the trade somewhere and he didn't learn it when he was here.

Q: Did he teach anybody else, did he show others how to cut the rocks?

No, no, I don't remember that.

Q: Was he quite active in community affairs?

Well, he got around all right. Of course he was getting to be an older man when I got to be a man, so he didn't get around as much as he used to. He never drove a car, he tried to, but he couldn't manage.

Q: He never learned how to drive?

No.

Q: Do you remember if they went to the doctor much? Did they use the medical facilities or were they people who had their own home remedies?

I don't think Mr. or Mrs. ever went, I don't know for sure. Of course, the girls, when they got sick they went to the doctor. Mr. and Mrs. they passed away at home.

Q: Did you go to that funeral?

When Mrs. Swensson died, that was before they had funeral directors and they hitched up a team on a sleigh, which I had the honor to drive to the cemetery.

Q: Was that in the winter?

It was in March. There wasn't much snow, but we went on the sleigh anyway.

Q: Did he believe in doing things the way they did in the old country or was he quite Americanized?

(288-15 min.)

He had new equipment, he had one of the first tractors in our county.

Q: How about the way he raised his family? Do you remember his kids talking about the way he treated them?

No, the only thing...Katie, the oldest one, she was engaged to a fellow named Ibsen, and Mr. Swensson said she couldn't get married until the house was finished, and Ibsen didn't want to wait that long, so she

didn't get married.

Q: You dont know why he didn't want his children to get married?

No, he felt that she should stay at home and do the work, so they could build the house. That house was built over quite a number of years.

Q: There was no specific reason why they never got married?

No, no.

Q: Do you recall any other incidents with the family, like when you were working with them or over there?

He had one good idea. Every building was locked, had a padlock on it, and he had a big ring with the keys on it. After I'd been there 2 or 3 years working for him, he gave me that ring, and told me I knew what keys fit where, and I was supposed to open things up. I wish I had the one key he had....you stuck that key in a little way and then turned it and then stuck it in a little farther and turned it and then stuck it in farther again and turned it and it opened. It was a relic. I never saw that in the house, it must have got lost.

Q: Was that something he had brought from Sweden or Norway?

I couldn't answer that. They had an old car and they had a shed that they kept grain in too. And they kept the car on one side and the grain on the other. He had the chain around the springs and the spokes and in order to get the car out of there we had to take the chain out of the spokes and every night he locked it up.

(364-15 min.)

Q: Do you remember anything else about the family?

They were nice to work for. The going rate then for threshing work was \$3.00, and so he came over and said, "well, you did a real good days work," and he gave me an extra quarter. We stayed late in the fall one day and Mrs. Swensson took me up to the loft so I could sleep there and she said, "we'll be calling you early in the morning, now there's no railing on the stairs, so be sure and light the lamp when you come down."

Q: Did they talk mostly in Norwegian or English?

I'd say mostly in Norwegian.

Q: Was that mostly around the house?

Yes. John didn't talk much Norwegian, but the girls and their mother talked mostly Norwegian.

Q: After Mr. Swensson died, who took over as the head of the family?

I think it was Katie for about 2 years after that, but then it was Kristine and Emma. In the meantime Martha had been married so she was gone.

Q: Was John the youngest son?

Yes.

Q: So the girls were more the head of the household than John ever was?

Yes.

Q: Did many of the businesses around the area at that time conduct their business in Norwegian?

Not an awful lot. There was some.

Q: Do you remember a lot of homesteaders coming into the area at that time or were they already settled?

Oh, they were settled. You see, our home farm where I was born and raised was homesteaded in 1869.

Q: So it was pretty much already settled?

It was settled around, there wasn't any that I know of. Of course we were in the Norwegian community and when we got a little north, why then it was Swedish...we were pretty well separated.

Q: Do you remember any rivalry between the communities?

Well, there was, more or less. They... one thought they were the best and the other the same, but there wasn't any serious rivalry. There was a German that came through and bought a farm and he had a little hard time in the Swedish community for a while.

Q: Was there much intermarriage between the two communities?

They had intermarriage. We ended up with two Swedes in our family.

Q: Did you ever go to bible school over to the Swenssons when they used to have that?

No, see we were Lutherans and they were Baptists. We didn't go to bible school there. There were Lutherans later on that went to their bible school.

(481-20 min.)

Q: Did the families get together much at that time for afternoons of just visiting?

Oh, yes. I think that there was more of that then than there is now, really. Between close neighbors.

Q: What did you do when you visited?

Oh, the old folks would sit down and talk, and the young people would play around like they do today.

Q: What sort of games did you play?

Pom-pom-pole-away, and in the wintertime we did a lot of sliding and skiing.

Q: Did you have homemade skis?

Yes.

Q: What kind of wood did you make them from?

Oh, from barrel staves. We had some that cut trees down and kiln dried them and formed them so they were as good as the boughten skis.

Q: Did you use skis for transportation in the winter?

No, they had to be...well, once in a while. But there were very few.

Q: Then you used horses for transportation?

Yes, mostly horse.

Q: Did you ever go to Norwegian school?

Yes, I did.

Q: What was that? Can you tell me about it?

Oh, sure. In Norwegian school, that was a church school, as Lutherans we had catechism, then bible history-some of the main characters out of the bible, and then we had a Norwegian reader-we had to learn to read Norwegian. In this reader there were stories about characters and we'd have a chance to read it, and then the teacher would read it to us, and then we had to write what she said. That got to be a little complicated, although I got to where I could read and write Norwegian pretty well.

Q: Who usually taught this school?

It was someone who had had a normal training and taken some christian studies.

Q: When did that start then in the year?

In the month of June.

Q: Did it go for 2 weeks or...?

Well, sometimes it went for 4.

(583-25 min.)

Q: It was quite a big deal then?

Well, you see when I was a youngster, I never went to school for more than 6 months a year.

Q: I suppose there was work to do on the farm?

Well, there wasn't anymore school than that. I never did go to high school. Dad passed away and I had to make a living.

Q: Did you go all day long then, or was it a situation where you went for just the morning?

No, we went all day.

Q: Where was it held?

Our school was held in the old Wegdahl church, that's been gone for 30 to

40 years. Havelock Lutheran Church up here they bought it and moved it.

Q: When you were growing up in your family, were there certain things that boys did and certain things that girls did?

Yes.

Q: What was the division?

The boys never did nay house work. We had to feed and milk the cows, feed hogs, and cut wood and carry it in. The girls had to cook, clean and sew.

Q: Were you ever punished by having to do what the girls did?

No. I've always followed that division. When I got married, I told my wife, "you take care of the house and I'll take care of the barn." My wife never did get into the barn much.

Q: Why do you think it should be that way?

Of course there's one thing. The time that you worked when I was young, it was longer hours and more physical labor, more than there is now. In the summertime the farm puts in just as many hours now, but that's all. The horses had to be taken care of then, because if you didn't take care of them they weren't any good, and milk cows and everything. Now, you just walk down to the tractor and step on the gas and away you go.

Q: So you feel that there isn't enough free time, that there has to be a division between taking care of the house and family, and taking care of the barn?

I think so. Of course, the girls took care of the garden too, but we haven't done...now that I'm older, I take care of the garden here and the fruit trees, but that's about all.

(696-28 min. End side 1)

Side 2

Q: What years were you County Commissioner?

1941-1965.

Q: How did you come by that position?

I was on the town board, and they got after me to file for County Commissioner, and I did, but I lost out that time, but 4 years later they came after me again, and I told them they'd better get on the ball and get me elected. So they did and I was elected. Then I didn't have much trouble getting the job more terms. A lot of people didn't want me to retire, and I said no, I'm 69 years old and I want to enjoy my life.

Q: Is that affiliated with any political party?

No, that's non-partisan.

Q: Were you elected at large by the county?

No, districts. I had Stoneham, Leenthrop, Sparta, Granite Falls, East Granite Falls, and Maynard in my district.

Q: I see, and you take care of that district?

Yes, I represent the district. You take in and vote on anything that goes on in the whole county, though.

Q: What were you responsible for when you were a county commissioner?

You'd set wages for the people that work for you, and you raise both the money for roads, bridges, and of course, you've got to look after ditches and you're also a member of the welfare board. We still weren't out of the depression by 1941 when I got in.

Q: What sorts of things did the county have going that was related to the depression like the New Deal, and the WPA and other such things?

Lac Qui Parle Dam was one of them. Some of them built roads by hand where they had too many day laborers, like our township here, we graveled many roads with WPA labor.

Q: Did you find that with the labor of the WPA laborers that they were the stereotype of the men leaning on the shovel, not really working for the money they were getting?

Well, some of them, you don't find the perfect county because there's some of them that just didn't want to work, and if you've got a poor boss, then they didn't do anything. When I was boss on a crew on our township, before I got to be county commissioner, some of them didn't want to work in Sparta township in the grove where they were digging up trees root by root. I went up there to get the time of the fellows that worked for our township and the boss up there says to me, "you got to honk you're horn before you come in here." I said, "I didn't know this was a secret thing." And he said, "well, if someone comes in, we can't have these fellows sitting around." There was about 2 fellows there out of thirty that were working.

(90-35 min.)

Q: How were these programs run?

Each township had their own set-up, and we'd change off being the boss, in our township, and we got a lot of work out of our crew here, and later on they did some tree cutting and cleaning up parks. I think that was some of the nicer things that were done.

Q: How did you receive your funding? Was it given to the county and from there to the township, or...?

No, so much for anyone you had, you were certified at Montevideo to work. Then you got 55¢ an hour and the list came out every week how many hours you could work, Then saturday morning you got your pay. Here, we in Leenthrop township, had to go to Maynard at 6:30 in the morning to get our pay. And there wasn't nobody there late either.

Q: Was there a limit to how many workers a county could have?

No.

Q: How did you qualify?

Most of the people just didn't have anything, if they had something, they were stuck with a mortgage and they had to pay on that. Most people just couldn't have survived.

Q: Going back to when you first started as County Commissioner, what else was your responsibility besides working for the welfare board and taking care of the roads and so on?

You had to buy equipment for the county, for highway maintenance, and mowing and there was always maintenance men. We had one bad year in 1957, we had rains here-there wasn't hardly any bridges left.

Q: Do you remember any controversial issues that were going on during your terms as County Commissioner?

Yes. We had our little courthouse and we tried to get a vote on a bigger one and that went over like a lead balloon, the first time.

Q: You mean people didn't want to put out the money for it?

No, no, they thought that the courthouse was good enough. But you see, we didn't even have a fireproof safe in our Registrar of Deeds office, so that the records of all the land in the county were in a vault that could burn up. Then back there in 1953, then they voted for the courthouse.

Q: Did you get in on the planning for the highway in Montevideo?

Not the #7, where they went around town, although I was in favor of that, though there were quite a few people that disagreed with me. I said there isn't any sense in having all this traffic going through town just to have traffic there. It took you longer to go 3rd St., Montevideo, than to drive all around town. That cost them money, but that was a big improvement. We built a lot of carrier roads in our county by that time I was retired.

Q: Were you in on the planning on the Lac Qui Parle Dam project and when they rerouted the Minnesota River?

(206-40 min.)

No, that was before my time.

Q: Do you remember anything about that? Were the people in favor of that?

I don't know, I don't think there was too much opposition to that, and we had gone through those dry years and there wasn't anybody who had any money and this land wasn't used for anything. Of course, building the dam there would flood some land, but it wasn't worth much. Course, they had bought up a lot of wildlife land for geese and ducks.

Q: Were you involved in much wildlife conservation efforts?

We had quite a bit to do with that. We disagreed with a lot of them. They... people would come in and petition for a drainage ditch to drain their land so they could farm it, and then the wildlife would come in and say, we figured on buying this land. Well, the drainage petition was in motion and we couldn't cut it off, so we had some that should have been left for wildlife although in a lot of cases they reclaimed a lot of good land. Now you take there on Swensson's farm, there's a slough there that could have been drained, but they wouldn't buy it.

Q: Any particular reason?

I don't know, I suppose they figured they would have to pay too much

money for it. They got one deal though, just north here, a mile and a half, that they paid \$60 an acre for, which I thought was very reasonable.

Q: Was it part of your responsibility to develop wildlife areas?

No, that wildlife, that's in a category of it's own. You can get commercial clubs that are interested somewhat, but not too many.

Q: Were you active in any other politics?

I'm a republican, we haven't always been popular in Chippewa County, but that didn't make any difference, the county voted democrat when I was commissioner, so...I guess I got by all right. I lean toward the conservative, and I can say this, today the republican party is not conservative either.

(300-45 min.)

Q: What changes have you seen in the county over the years, like starting when you were a commissioner?

Well, for one, when I started, I was paid \$400 a year, and today they make \$5500, so that's been quite a spread there. They expected a commissioner to do a lot of things for nothing then that they don't do now. I was chosen to represent the Montevideo hospital when they rebuilt, and I ended up working more than I wanted. I went 7 years for meetings without getting a cent-today they get paid \$10 a meeting. And they have a lot more help in the courthouse now, too.

Q: Do you think the county has become more conservative or more liberal?

I think it's more liberal, yes, I'm sure of that.

Q: What do you think brought that about?

The younger generation, they think of this as "our" money, it isn't worth anything, inflation is growing and we might just as well spend it. And that's what they're doing. We had fellows that were real conservative, when I got on the board I was considered liberal. They would fight for a quarter. There's been a lot of change. If I had to do it all over again, I'd still go through the years on the county board, that was good experience.

Q: What sorts of things do you remember about it, what made it such a good experience?

You met people, and when you try to do the right thing, people appreciate and tell you so. It's the same thing today, you hire a man and you appreciate what he's doing for you and he feels good when he leaves you.

Q: Do you think people appreciate what you did for the county?

I'm sure they did.

Q: When you are County Commissioner, is it a full-time job?

No, but it's really hard to get a vacation in without missing a meeting. They have a meeting the first of the month. We did go to Florida for a couple of weeks in the 1950's, but we couldn't stay very long, that was a pretty tight schedule. I only missed one regular meeting in 24 years and then I was on the federal grand jury in St. Paul and couldn't get out.

(417- 50 min.)

Q: What do you think people are most concerned about with the county, roads or taxes...?

Taxes is the big thing right now. It's the one thing that's hurting. Land has gone sky high and they're raising valuation on the farms. They say that don't affect your taxes, but if they see they need money, why maybe they'll raise it a mil, and if you're valuation is up there, you'll pay more. Some with quite a few acres of land-that could get to be quite a burden. I always felt that when your land appreciates you don't get any more grain out of that, and your buildings depreciate, and they take them down when they depreciate.

Q: What do people seem most willing to spend the money on as far as the county is concerned?

That's a pretty hard question. They do demand the roads be kept open and in good condition. The Chippewa County has more blacktop roads than lots of counties. That's getting expensive now.

Q: Do people seem to be more conservation minded or more ecology minded than they used to be?

Yes, and that's for a good reason. After all, you don't raise a crop in weeds. When I was a youngster as well was a well, now it has to be tested.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to say about being County Commissioner?

No, it's hard to remember.

(522-55 min.)

Q: Can we talk about the depression? What were you doing at that time?

We were farming here. We moved out here in 1928, married in 1927, july 16. We came out here and we didn't have too much, cows, chickens, and hogs. On ly my wife's mother, she was an invalid, and herfather died a year afterwards. We were pretty much home folks for a long time. We didn't have any mortgage on what little we had to get along with what we had, and it wasn't easy.

Q: Were there many men traveling through this part of the country looking for work?

No, there wasn't, they didn't come here, they stayed in the cities. We had kind of a funny deal here, what with my mother in law being an invalid and all, I hired a man to help, because I had to help her sometimes. He wanted \$18 a month, and I gave him that, and about the first of June we had a good rain. Well, I had just paid him, and he said, " I can't work for this now, I've got to have more money. " I said I couldn't, and he said he was going then. So then this guy who worked for the farmer next to us, he got laid off by the man and he came over and asked me if I needed someone. I said sure, How much do you want? He said \$18 a month. Then in the fall I told him I couldn't afford to have him any more because we'd only gotten a few bales of hay and little else. Well, he says, " you wouldn't kick a guy out?" I said no, so he worked and stayed for his board. Then this job with the WPA came up and I got to be a foreman on 2 weeks out of every 8 I made about \$30 a month and then I gave him a few dollars anyway, to buy tobacco at least.

Q: Did you live and eat mostly what you could grow on the farm here?

(640- 60 min.)

Yes.

Q: It was pretty dry here then, during the 2 dry years?

Oh, yes, terrible dry. 1933 we had just one rain, till in the fall, after the crops were gone.

Q: Did you lose any money in any of the banks when they closed?

I had a share in the farmers bank in Wegdahl, and I had to pay \$100, but I didn't have anything in the checking account but a few dollars, and I had a C.D. made out to the oldest girl and myself, and I borrowed \$50, so I went to the bank and said, "I'll apply this C.D. to my \$50 loan." They said, "you can't do that," and I said that "that's what you think, my name is on there too. This C.D. is mine." They said, "it's your daughter's" and I said, "that girl is only two month's old, she can't cash it." Well, they wouldn't take it. I said, "well, whenever you're ready to take it, why, just let me know, because that's the only way you'll ever get it." And about some 2 months later they sent a letter telling me to bring it in.

Q: Do you remember anything else about the depression, around this area, how people managed to live through it?

It wasn't easy for a lot of them. Of course, after they got on the WPA, then they got along all right. You could...for a dollar you could hardly carry out the groceries from the store. Sugar was 5¢ a pound, butter was 12-15¢, most of the farmers then had at least one milk cow. So they didn't have to buy milk.

Q: Did you ever consider moving off the farm?

No, when the boy got married, he said, "you'll have to look for a place to live." and I said, "I'm too young to go into town, I'd rather build a place out here and then I can help you." That's what I did. For two years I was a real good help, but then I had a heart attack. That stopped me from working. I just fool around with small things now.

Q: Well, can you think of anything else you'd like to say?

No, I think I've talked about enough.

Q: Thank you very much.

(764-66 min.)