

Wilmar Johnson
Narrator

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KMRS
Interviewer

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- LT: 00:00 This is Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KMRS News Feature. Today, we have with us Willmar A. Johnson from the Key Row Apartments in Morris. And thank you very much, Wilmar, for taking time to speak with us today. And to start off our talk for today, why don't you tell us a little something about your parents, where they came from, where they settled?
- WJ: 00:26 Well, my parents both come from Sweden. My dad, when he first got here, he worked in Lowry for one season, and then he walked to Graceville where his brother was, and they lived in a sod shanty. They lived on codfish and milk the first winter. My mother, she worked for Matt Larson's for a year or two before they got married. I don't remember what year they came.
- LT: 00:57 They came all the way from Sweden?
- WJ: 00:58 They came all the way from Sweden.
- LT: 01:02 Do you remember the year they came?
- WJ: 01:05 I think Dad came in 1898. My mother came a couple years later. They were married in 1905.
- LT: 01:20 And when all of the kids were born, you lived on the farm?
- WJ: 01:23 Yes, we did. Six miles southeast of Graceville. Big Stone County, in Moonshine Township. That's where I spent my life until 1938, when I started farming on my own.

LT: 01:42 What about your parents' farm? What did you raise on that farm?

WJ: 01:46 We raised everything. All the feed products, wheat, oats, barley, and flax. And we had livestock, cattle, hogs, and chickens, and sheep.

LT: 02:00 How was the farming back in with your parents?

WJ: 02:03 Well, it was good but you had to be careful, so you didn't go too far, go too far with the money you got. It wasn't as bountiful as it is now. But it was more taken care of.

LT: 02:22 And then when you started to farm, what did you raise?

WJ: 02:25 Well, I raised the original grain products, and cattle, and hogs, and chickens, I milked a few cows for a living.

LT: 02:37 How was the farming then when you finally went on your own?

WJ: 02:41 Well, it was pretty good. I had my ups and downs. I bought the first A6 case combine that came into Graceville. That was in 1946.

LT: 03:00 What did that combine cost back then, a new A6?

WJ: 03:05 It cost \$1,200. And when I started farming in '38, I bought a three bottom plow and Z Moline tractor for \$1,100. That's what I started farming with and through the winter. I went to sales and I picked up a drag for four and a half bucks, a drill for \$10, and a disc for \$6, and that's the machinery I had the first year.

LT: 03:41 What about crops, and your dairy products like milk, what did they go for, do you remember?

WJ: 03:47 Well, I don't actually remember. I think eggs were around 20 cents, 24 cents. Cream was about 46 or 47. But your grain, it wasn't too high. Well, we should have started in with the Depression in the '30, let's go back to the '30s, when we sold oats for 10 cents a bushel, wheat for 15, and we burned corn for fuel. But dad didn't believe in burning corn, because he thought that was for the livestock instead of being burned.

04:42 We shipped hay from up north to keep the livestock in the winter of '33 and '34, spring of '34, we had to sell the

cattle to the government because we didn't have enough feed to feed them. So, we kept a few cows for milking, and that's the way we lived. As far as price of anything, it was cheap. Between your garden and everything, we still lived. It wasn't easy. Today, when they get hungry, they go to the grocery store and that's it.

- LT: 05:32 What about the farmers back then, did you have any kind of insurance, or any kind of loans like we have today from the government, or any agency?
- WJ: 05:41 No, there was no government loans of any kind. You had to make it by yourself. And you borrowed from the banks what you could and get along the best way you could. Of course, we didn't have the expenses. It was all horses, the horse, machinery.
- LT: 06:12 If you had a chance to take loans and that back then, do you think you would have done it or do you think it would have been the best thing to do?
- WJ: 06:20 Well, nobody knew anything about government loans in those days. I don't think the government would have come out with money, either. You had your local banks. That's the only way you could get any money.
- LT: 06:43 Going back to your personal life, when were you married?
- WJ: 06:46 I was married in '37.
- LT: 06:52 And that was by, was it, Graceville?
- WJ: 06:55 That was at Graceville I was married.
- LT: 06:58 How many children do you have?
- WJ: 06:59 I have five children.
- LT: 07:02 Where are they located right now?
- WJ: 07:03 I've got two boys in Racine, Wisconsin, a daughter in Danville, California, one daughter in Cyrus, and one in Lowry. And I've got 14 grandchildren, and they're all doing good.
- LT: 07:21 Any great-grandchildren to speak of?
- WJ: 07:24 No. I ain't that far along yet. [laughter]

- LT: 07:33 We'll save that question for some other time, then. Do you think farming has changed that much, or the farmer, the American farmer, has changed a lot in the last few years?
- WJ: 07:44 Well, it's changed so much that I wouldn't know where to start if I went back to farming again. I quit farming in '52. I got hauled out in '48, '49, '50, and in '51, cutworms took 120 acres of flax, and I was licked. So, I went and listed the farm for sale, and I sold it that fall and I moved off there the spring of '52. I had an auction sale of 26th of February in '52 and got to Morris March 1. And then, I worked for Ames for 18 years. That's the way I raised my family.
- LT: 08:41 You were talking about land. What did land sell for back then?
- WJ: 08:45 Well, I'll tell you. In 1936, me and Walter, my brother, bought a quarter of land for \$35 an acre. When I left the home place, I sold my interest to him. So, that's the price. That probably wasn't the going price, it was just a vacant quarter. Farms with buildings on the property would have sold for a lot more.
- LT: 09:17 Needless to say, it's come a long way since then.
- WJ: 09:20 It's come so far that it's beyond reach. A young person couldn't start farming today unless he's got a lot of help. Because he's got so much money involved in the machinery, and land.
- LT: 09:39 I suppose the best way would maybe if they inherited the farm.
- WJ: 09:43 That's right. That would be the only way they'd make it, if it was inheritance, and if they had good luck. Because farming isn't all work, you've got to have a little luck with it, too. And you've got a hailstorm in 15 minutes, and you're all wiped out. It happened two years in a row. The third year wasn't so bad, but I struggled through it, borrowed some more money, and struggled through it. then, when the worms took the flax that I planned for cash money, why, I was licked. So, I just listed the farm for sale. I made a little money on the farm. I had a good sale. That's how I got to Morris.
- LT: 10:42 What year did you retire?
- WJ: 10:50 1973.

- LT: 10:56 What hobbies do you have now that you're retired?
- WJ: 10:59 Jigsaw puzzles. I'll show you some of them I have put together this winter. I got kind of laid up last summer, I had an operation last summer, so I painted for a while after I retired from Ames. Then, I couldn't climb ladders anymore, and had arthritis so bad in my shoulders and arms, so I just retired and started working jigsaw puzzles and go fishing in the summer.
- LT: 11:40 I heard that you're a cribbage fan, too.
- WJ: 11:44 Yes, we play a lot of cribbage around here, cribbage and euchre. I'm trying to—I'm going to start Larry playing cribbage. In fact, we played cribbage one afternoon, a couple of games, but we never got any farther since.
- LT: 12:07 For our audience, you're talking about Larry Howard, our announcer at KMRS. Do you think he's smart enough to play that game?
- WJ: 12:15 Well, you've got to be taught it like anything else. It's a good arithmetic game because my granddaughter in Cyrus, when she was eight years old could beat me. It was a good arithmetic game. And then, her teacher stopped in here one evening, she lived in the Key Row Apartments here and taught school in Cyrus she found out that little Paula S. played cribbage with me and she says, "It's no wonder she's a good in arithmetic, she gets 100 every day." She said, "She can do more in her head than the other kids can on the board."
- LT: 13:01 I think Larry's going to have to really brush up, then, if he's going to try to take on this.
- WJ: 13:08 Well, it isn't a hard game to learn. It's the counting, and your straights, and your runs, and your flush. It isn't too hard to learn. You need a little teaching. But eventually, if you've played as much as I have, it comes naturally to you.
- LT: 13:27 Okay, Larry. You heard it, you're going to have to be a good student and behave yourself, and study the game, and you'll be able to make it. Today we've been talking with Wilmar A. Johnson at the Key Row Apartments in Morris, on Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota, a Saturday KMRS News Feature.