

**Ernie & Tillie Kellenberger
Narrators**

**Lee Tempte
KMRS
Interviewer**

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- LT: 00:00 This is *Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota: a Saturday, KMRS News Feature*. Today, we are talking with Ernie and Tillie Kellenberger of Morris. Ernie, tell us about where you came from? What state were you born in?
- EK: 00:17 I was born in Fort Scott, Kansas, and lived in northeastern Kansas until I was 12. Then moved to Iowa when I got out of school and started on my own.
- LT: 00:26 You eventually ended up in Illinois, then?
- EK: 00:29 Then we ended up in Illinois and worked in the Elgin factory for, I think, 19 years. Then we moved to Minnesota and started our business here.
- LT: 00:38 What year was it that you got married?
- EK: 00:41 In 1925, at Winthrop, Minnesota.
- LT: 00:48 You mentioned about the Elgin factory. People who know you know that you were a watchmaker for many years and still involved somewhat in the business. How did you ever get your start in that?
- EK: 01:01 By working in the Elgin factory, I learned to like to work on watches very much. So I worked hard to get some promotions and succeeded and got some good training in the delicate parts of the watch: the hairspring and the escapement, and to just make them run good. From there,

of course, I went to the watch college and picked up a lot of the technical background and blueprint and so forth—reading them.

- LT: 01:29 How long a course of study is this watchmakers college you are talking?
- EK: 01:34 Up to three and four years if you get into the deep part of it, which, of course, means cutting gears and making a whole watch.
- LT: 01:44 Was this Elgin Watchmakers College a part of the Elgin company?
- EK: 01:50 Yes, it was sponsored and supported by the Elgin Watch Company; however, there were tuitions to be paid and so forth.
- LT: 01:58 What kind of traits or qualities are important for somebody that's going into watchmaking or has been in watchmaking?
- EK: 02:07 Well, I think that a mechanical interest is of great importance and, of course, good vision and just normal health. Certainly, a deep interest in what makes things tick.
- LT: 02:20 You were at Illinois and then you had the occasion to move to Minnesota. What time was that and why?
- EK: 02:31 In 1944, the freeze was lifted from my type of work. I was working on the watches that went into navigation for navigational uses in the Air Force and in the submarine service. So when that was lifted, of course, then I had a pretty strong urge to go into business for myself. We did that move then to Morris. Finding out that the [Gross Liden 02:54] Jewelry was for sale, we bought it out and landed in Morris.
- LT: 03:00 During the Depression, you had come back to Minnesota a little bit earlier and had a place. Tell us about that business.
- EK: 03:07 In 1932, we were laid off in the Elgin Factory due to the economic conditions. So we got the idea of moving to Hancock where my wife was raised from a little girl on—got through school there—and we started a little repair business in Hancock and learned to like Minnesota real well. So that's what happened.

- LT: 03:26 During the Depression and some of those bad years in the early '30s, it seemed that not too many people had money. How was business conducted if nobody had money?
- EK: 03:39 Well, the first thing that strikes my mind after that nearly a year of time—we had four children—money came so slow that I averaged it out and it was \$37.50 average per month that we had to live on with four children. We rented a house for \$10.00 a month. We traded our services, or my services, for anything from edible beans to potatoes to beef, and some kind people would bring in a gallon of milk—which they couldn't probably sell too well anyhow—and a little beef and a little meat here and there. We just made it go; we never went back, and we never went hungry.
- LT: 04:21 You even had a barter system for your rent for your business.
- EK: 04:24 One young man—this is an interesting story, it is to me—came in. They had just graduated from school, and his folks had said you can have a watch when you graduate. He says, "We just can't afford it." He had his mother's old watch that we now put on the lapel—that women wear on their lapel—and it needed a new mainspring for which I thought I should have a dollar-and-a-half. He says, "I got to ask to see if they can do it."
- 04:49 So finally when he came back, he said with a very sad face and says, "I can't. I'm afraid I can't do it. I can't afford it." So I says, "Can you afford 50 cents in cash, and the rest in something?" I said, "What have you got to eat?" He said, "We just butchered." So he brought in 20 pounds of meat for the other dollar, and I had 50 cents to buy the mainspring.
- LT: 05:07 You did a little or a lot of fishing those years too.
- EK: 05:11 Yes, we did. We went fishing—I had plenty of time, so we went fishing. The perch were biting real good in Minnewaska, and we had perch in about three different snowbanks during the winter. We just never went hungry for anything good.
- LT: 05:25 1944, you arrived in Morris. Where was your first shop?
- EK: 05:30 My first shop was what was known then as the old Wunsch Building. What's it called now?

- LT: 05:40 I don't know. The Seip offices is down there, I think. I'm not exactly sure.
- EK: 05:48 Just about straight across the street from J.C. Penney Company, and the so-called Wunsch Building at that time, we went in there one winter, but it was kind of chilly and cold. There was a store for rent in the old Spooner building, where Radio Shack is now, and that was really nice accommodation. We moved into that then before the next winter. It was comfortable and we did real well.
- LT: 06:13 Watches and clocks have changed. I'm sure there has been many, many changes over the years. Elgin has been known for many, many years as being a very good brand. American Watches and then other countries started for becoming known for their watches and clocks. What is the different progression of the kinds of watches?
- EK: 06:33 Well, the Elgin and Hamilton, and Waltham were the well-known American-makes. Of course the Swiss have always been a big factor in world production of good time pieces. More recently, of course, the Japanese people are putting out some very, very well-made watches. The Swiss watches I handled more of them and I handled, of course, a lot of Elgins. Now, Elgin is own by, I think—the majority of the stock is owned by the Zale Jewelry chain and no longer made in America. It's all imported.
- LT: 07:14 Today, there is so many of these digital watches. If you were in business and somebody brought you one of those, could you fix one of those, Ernie?
- EK: 07:23 Well, I went out of business in '71 and digitals were coming in. Since now they are entirely electronic, I guess you'd call it. No, I hadn't gone into that at all. I confine myself to the old mechanical watches and clocks.
- LT: 07:40 Is it pretty much in the mechanical type of watches that—you know, there are so many different prices—from \$10.00 up to several hundred dollars. Do you get what you pay for or is it a lot of decoration too on a good watch?
- EK: 07:54 Well, you always get about what you pay for. It's true that they can dress up the cheap watch and it looks very pretty, and it has a place in the market. Of course, a fine watch has a place in the market. If somebody wants to give a beautiful

gift to his wife or the husband or children, something that will be a lasting keepsake, then they go into a fine watch.

- LT: 08:13 Is it easier to work on a good-quality watch than a cheap watch?
- EK: 08:18 It's much easier because you come out with a very good-running watch when you are through with the work. I think it pays to buy the good one.
- LT: 08:27 You still enjoy doing some watches and making some clocks now too that you sell.
- EK: 08:34 Well, I really don't advertise, as such, but word gets around and I've had quite an interest in doing some. I do a few watches. I'm not home all the time, so I'm not making a business of it. Nevertheless, I've developed an interest in the antique clocks, older clocks, and they are interesting to work on because to restore an old clock can be a very captivating interest.
- LT: 08:58 Just to get parts, I suppose, is a challenge too?
- EK: 09:01 Parts are not really available in too large apart of the clock. The mainsprings, of course, and such things are. But to put in new gear teeth and to make new pivots and new bearings, that we can do with the lathe right here.
- LT: 09:16 One question, as long as I'm talking to a watchmaker—I never had a chance—do mainsprings ever jump out at you? You see cartoons and movies of watches and that type of thing. Are there really that much pressure on these mainsprings?
- EK: 09:31 There's a lot of pressure on a clock mainspring—an eight-day type of clock—and you've got to be careful of those fingers if one breaks in your hand because it will cut you bad. We let them down very, very carefully and hold them in a big steel circle shape that look like a horseshoe.
- LT: 09:50 You got to know what you're doing in other words?
- EK: 09:52 Yes, you better. Otherwise, something is going to get hurt.
- LT: 09:56 I'll talk just a minute now with Tillie Kellenberger. Tillie, Ernie mentioned that you were born in Hancock. How long did you live in Hancock before you moved?

TK: 10:07 I was 17 when I left Hancock.

LT: 10:10 You went to Illinois?

TK: 10:12 Yes, to the Elgin factory where I worked for over a year.

LT: 10:16 Actually, you started in watches before your husband did?

TK: 10:20 Right. I worked in the timing department where he eventually landed as a watchmaker.

LT: 10:29 I understand you had a little bit to do with him getting a job there.

TK: 10:33 Yes, I did. I kept after my foreman to give him a chance. I guess he got tired of having me come up to him, so he said, "Okay, bring him in."

LT: 10:48 And he did okay, and your boss was happy, I bet?

TK: 10:51 Yes, he was. Very much so.

LT: 10:54 Tillie, let's talk a little bit about your family. How many children did you and Ernie have?

TK: 10:58 We had 12 children: six boys and six girls.

LT: 11:03 Ernie was saying about back in the '30s used to be some tough times. That must be quite a responsibility with a big family, making sure they are fed and clothed and everything like that.

TK: 11:15 We never went hungry and, of course, we did a lot of canning. When we moved to Minnesota from Elgin, I had put up 1,000 quarts of fruits and vegetables.

LT: 11:31 That took several weeks, I bet, didn't it?

TK: 11:33 It sure did. We did a lot of canning at night.

LT: 11:39 You mentioned 12 kids. What about grandchildren?

TK: 11:42 We have 55 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren now.

LT: 11:49 You got a nice big family still, right?

TK: 11:51 We sure do. They were all—when we celebrated our 50th anniversary, they were all here except three grandchildren.

LT: 12:00 That's quite a record. That's real good. Ernie, when I end an interview, I always ask one question. That's when I ask you your age.

EK: 12:08 I am 73 years old, and my wife is 72.

LT: 12:11 All right. Thank you very much. We've been talking with Ernie and Tillie Kellenberger, on *Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota: a Saturday KMRS News Feature*.