Transcript of Taped Interview

with

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Interviewed by

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Sponsored by

DeMotte-Kankakee Valley Rotary Club

Oral History Project

THE SETTLING OF THE GRAND MARSH OF THE KANKAKEE RIVER

Interview by Laverne Terpstra, Transcribed by Shirley Zeck
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I was born one mile from here, they owned this property at that time, but they moved a mile from here because they had to cut hay with horses. It was a mile farther for the horses to go. So they just took a bed and a table, some chairs, a stove and stayed there for six weeks while they cut hay. Then they came back here.

I have lived here ever since, except fourteen months when I first got married. I was born in 1893. I will be 100 years old this year. I have a real bad heart and take oxygen. In the afternoons I lay with oxygen two hours. I try to every day because the doctors said it would be better for my old heart because it's getting pretty rusted.

My father after his mother died, there were seven children, and my father, my grandfather (my father was eighteen at that

time). They had two covered wagons and they were going west to take up a claim. Each of them, my dad was old enough, and my grandfather would take a claim together.

They got this far traveling with that many (four kids). There were two daughters, they were sixteen and seventeen. Some of the neighbors told my grandfather they didn't think it was a good idea for these young girls to be traveling in this covered wagon.

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They would take care of them and somebody kept them. Then they had four little ones yet. The baby was two years old, one four years old and eight and nine. They came here on their way to Kansas because a cousin of my fathers lived here and he said to my father "stop right here, you can buy land here now cheap and we know it's good land, stay here". So I think they had such a hard struggle coming this far that they were glad to stop.

So Grandpa lived in the covered wagon with these kids and my dad got a job working for a farmer until he got enough to make a down payment on this forty acres. Then they had a house to live in. The first land he bought he paid $700 for eighty acres. But it took him a year to make a down payment because he only got $1 a day and board. Of course, they all had to be fed.

The kids were growing. There never was a week that went by that one of those kids didn't need a new pair of overalls or new pants or a new dress of something, he said. There was one little girl four, the baby was two and then there were two other boys that were eight or nine or ten or somewhere in there. There were two girls that stayed in Michigan and then my dad. Oh, they had a hard struggle. And they led two cows so they had milk and butter for the kids.

The cows feet would get so sore that they'd have to stop and layover sometimes for a week in one place until they would quit bleeding before they could go on.

When they got here, my dad and this cousin, they camped over where DeYoungs live now. My dad worked across the river about one quarter of a mile. Then he'd work all week and just

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draw enough money to get the groceries. Grandpa would give him the list the week before, you know what they needed. And then he had to walk five miles to Kouts to get the groceries after supper. He said he had a fifty pound sack of flour on one arm, package of other stuff on the other, coffee, sugar and stuff. And Grandpa had to bake bread almost every day with five of them. It's probably what they lived on mostly, you know. Because they didn't have anything else, only what they could buy. So, he had

to bake bread almost every day or every other day. And it took a fifty pound sack of flour almost every week.

They ate lots of bread and gravy, too you know. They had milk to make gravy. He worked for nine months and never drew any money and then he drew what he had coming. He had enough to pay down enough on this place here so they could move in a house. That was a wonderful thing for them.

The farm is now eight hundred and eighty some acres, more or less (16345 N 100 W). That was before he died he had one hundred eighty some acres. He owned from this road straight through to state road 49, all of this in here for a mile. Only down here there were 2-40 acres. Bushes somebody else owned eighty acres in there and my dad owned almost the whole section. At that time of course he didn't own forty acres for a while and then he'd buy another forty to join, another forty to join, another forty to join.

There were no banks closer than Valparaiso. You couldn't go clear to Valparaiso if you had any money. So my mother made some kind of little pocket she had right inside under her dress.

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She'd fold those bills over once, slip them in there and hang them in there. Sometimes she'd have three or four hundred dollars. Then pretty soon he'd have enough to buy another forty. That's the way it went.

They had some awful hardships. They had to have, you know. Two little kids were crying for their mother who had just died. Where's mom? I don't dare think about it because I get teary sometimes.

You worked away somewhere for a farmer. You got a dollar a day and your board, that's it. Of course, groceries were cheap then too. I remember my mother used to walk in and buy 100 pounds of sugar and never bat an eye, you know, because it wasn't very much when she was canning. Everything was cheaper. She used to go to Valparaiso twice a year and buy supplies, blankets, underwear, shoes, and stuff.

The she would always buy a bolt of calico. Calico, you know is about like this and she would buy the whole bolt. She got it for four cents a yard. We'd all have dresses of it. Grandma would have a dress. The men would all have shirts she made. You couldn't afford to buy shirts at that time if they had any, so she used to make all of them. We always had two or three hired men and she'd sew that whole bolt up during the winter. We'd all have enough for a dress, every one dresses alike. She probably had a pattern or an old dress or something to make a pattern. Those were hard times.

I remember of course everybody burned wood, there wasn't any coal. There wasn't any press a button and get your

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electricity. You had kerosene lights to clean every day. Oh, I used to hate to clean those kerosene lights. But we had to do it every day.

We had a big garden and dad used to bury a lot of that stuff for winter. The potatoes, they'd dig trenches and put straw in there and bury them. Come a nice day in the winter you could dig in there and get your bushel or two and close the hole up. And he also used to dig, I remember helping him, dig a long trench, maybe as far as from here to the road, in the dirt, like a little ditch. Then he'd put straw on that and then he'd take the heads of cabbage and pull them up root and all and put the head down in that straw. Then he would put some more straw and dirt over the top and that would keep all winter. As it got colder he'd put a little more dirt. The trenches were about one and a half feet deep.

They'd put turnips, onions and everything in there. We had all of our stuff buried like that. You'd take a head of that cabbage and bring it in. It would crack like a pistol when you put a knife in. It was real crisp and hard.

It was a hard way to live but I think, Oh I'd just give anything in the world if my folks could come back and live for one year with all the conveniences we have now. Press a button and you have lights, press a button you've got a toilet flushing and everything.

Of course, we had electric lights before my folks died. We had a Delco system. Then they put the high-line through. We had that. We had the inside toilet with the iron and Delco. We could

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wash with the washing machine. But you had to have the motor running when you washed or ironed because it took too much. Otherwise, we could do just about the same as we do now. But it wasn't quite as good a light as we have now.

I got married in 1916. That was my first husband. He died in 1948. We were married 32 years. We were out in Montana when he died. Oh such a terrible time to get home.

We used to get our garden seeds in the mail. We would get a catalog. I don't know what they did before that. They probably just borrowed from other people or saved. I know a lot of my aunts saved their own seed up until the time they died. They were used to that.

My father used to raise melons. He was called the

watermelon king of Jasper County. Saturday's we'd have the yard full out here. Sunday people would come and buy truckloads and all they could haul in their cars. Sunday night we'd have a lot of money laying around the house. We would hide it.

They used to have different sizes. Smaller ones would be maybe a quarter, the big ones would be maybe seventy cents. I was old enough at that time when he was selling melons that I stood in the wagon and team and a man on each side would pick a melon and throw it at me. I had to catch them and lay them down. Some of them were pretty heavy for me. I hardly ever missed one. Once in a great while I did but I didn't very often. I'd catch one from this guy and then one from this guy and we

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had about five or six wagon loads of melons out here Saturday. By Sunday night they would all be gone.

At that time on these sandy hills we raised corn, wheat and oats. Course, a lot of ground was still woods when my father bought it. He had to clear a lot of it you know. But he got enough cleared so he could raise enough corn to feed seven or eight head of horses. We had to have about five or six head of horses to farm.

Then my father put up a big ice house. He sold ice. He'd start out at three o'clock in the morning to Wheatfield to about three stores. They would all take ice. He would cut ice north of us a ways. There was a bayou. He would cut it down there in the winter time and put it in sawdust.

We had a great big old icebox. It took a great big piece of ice. We girls couldn't lift it. Dad had to pout the ice in. We always kept our butter, milk and everything nice. We always had a couple of toads that lived under there, singing and croaking all the time.

Some years dad would have some corn to sell. But what he did at that time – Nelse Morris owned acres and acres of land west of us. Pence was the headquarters in DeMotte. The boss lived there and he had these cattle in different places. He'd put them in your corn field in case you left some. You got a little pay for that. If my father had any extra he could sell it to this guy and they would just take it out there in a wagon and throw it off for these cattle. He always fed those cattle for about a month, maybe twenty-five or thirty, and he had a form built when they

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thrashed and put the straw on top of that so they had shelter. I used to go with him lots of times out there in the wagon with this

corn. He would feed them for a month or so till the corn was gone, then they had to move them on someplace else.

My dad always said to me "Oh, that's good I get all that manure free". And that was good for the sandhills. Oh, they had hard times making a living I'm telling you. It just makes you feel kind of bad when you think about it.

We had an Indian that came down the river and camped on our land (Oxbow). Dad always called him Oxbow. Then he went on around here and it took him a half a day. When it got noon he thought he'd better cook him a rabbit or something. So he gets out to cook his rabbit and he finds the fire he had the night before.

So that river almost came back together again. But then it went straight on again. Nobody could figure that out, the way the vein of the water underneath went or something at that time. I don't know. There had to be some obstruction there to make the turn so abrupt. And here too where it came to the river down here. When you drive along that road you drive on that old river bed. It goes straight north and it takes in another big thirty or forty acres on Clayton ____?____ property. Then it comes back just about even with that and goes straight again to the Kankakee. There had to be some obstacle there, maybe rocks or something. I don't know.

Of course, I believe Indians got rid of it whatever it was. There were a few Indians who lived here over the other side of

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SR 49 and County Road 1500 N in that big woods in wigwams. And my dad said he'd meet them lots of times in the woods. They didn't talk our language very much. You said good morning or hello or whatever and then you'd sit down with them. You'd take a couple puffs off their pipe and you were friends.

There was an Indian doctor who lived over there. When I was born you'd have to go with a horse and buggy clear to Kouts to get the doctor. By the time you got to Kouts, probably the baby would be born. So my dad and mother thought they'd have this Indian doctor come. My uncle jumped on a horse and he went over there and told him that they were going to have this baby. And he came right away on horseback. He took care of the naval string and did what they were supposed to do and charged $2, now it's $2,000. That's all the attention they had. Of course I imagine Grandma was here a lot of the time helping my mother and giving her pointers on what to do.

My grandmother and grandfather came from Germany, and my mother was three weeks old when they started. They came by sailboat, took them I think, three weeks to come across the

ocean. They made a bed for her (my mother) in one of those little clothes baskets. She always said she came across the ocean in a clothes basket.

My grandfather had a brother in Chicago and they stayed there a day or two then they came, (of course it was horse and buggy days) to some relatives that lived here. They bought a little place over by LaCrosse and then they got to Kouts and they liked it better.

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So they sold that and bought land near Kouts just across the river from us. That's where they lived all the rest of their lives. That must be an awful undertaking for people to leave their own country and come to a strange country where you don't know hardly anybody. It wouldn't be for me.

My mother used to say, lots of times they'd have to sit idle wherever they were, there was no wind. And the wind had to be in the right direction for them to turn things on and move on. That's why it took so long. I suppose they had compasses. They knew where they were going. It was a passenger boat. Sometimes the water gets pretty wild you know with the bad wind. And then they had to sit pretty quiet and put down anchor. They would have a load on the boat when they came. It would be a pretty big boat to get on the ocean. My mother said you could walk all over it.

After landing they had to take a train to Chicago. My grandfather's brother lived in Chicago. He had come earlier. He had more money than my grandfather did so he could come a little bit sooner than my grandfather did.

You saved every little thing that you had to make ends meet. Nothing went to waste. I'm still like that. I don't throw anything away I think I might ever use.

I think there were cousins that lived over by Wanatah at that time and they came to visit and then they bought a little piece of land near LaCrosse with buildings on it. They got down to Kouts and liked Kouts better. So they sold that land and

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moved just across the river almost straight across from here (my grandfather's farm). My aunt's son has it now, no grandson.

The nearest store for us was Lowenstines in Valparaiso. A couple of years ago my niece, Cindy Van Keppel, came over here and she went up in the attic. She found a little table about this big of square, had four legs on it that came down about two foot square, the old fashioned kind. So she said to me "Can I have this table?" She was going to go to school or something. So she

took it. In the bottom of it, it said compliments from H.A. Lowenstines.

My folks would buy a couple hundred dollars worth of stuff when they were there because they wouldn't get back again for six months. He would always give them something like that table.

I remember mother used to buy a couple hundred pounds of green coffee. Not roasted, just coffee. I can see my grandfather yet setting there by the oven storing that. They put it in big dripping pans and put it in the oven for so long. Then it would get brown. He'd take a little bite and know it was ready to take off. He knew by biting it in his teeth.

The Pinter store was the first store I remember. They didn't have things like we do now. They had a sugar barrel and flour barrel. We bought ten pounds, or four pounds, or whatever you wanted. About the only kind of candy they has was this sugar candy that you buy now. I never saw chocolate candy until I was twelve or fourteen years old.

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Yes, I can remember they had a few canned things and you couldn't buy bread. My brother, if he went to town, if he had any money, he'd get a loaf of bread for ten cents. He'd come home with a loaf of boughten bread. It was just a big treat for all of us. Everybody baked their own.

I remember when I was ten years old. I was nine years old in August when my sister was born the following January.

My aunt lived over across the woods here and they were building this house at the same time in 1902. I came here and watched the carpenters a while. Of course, my mother had all the carpenters to feed besides the hay men. The hay men were cutting hay. there were probably four of five carpenters. They would stay all night, too. Some of them had to sleep in cots. We didn't have beds enough.

Every day I'd take this baby and go over to my aunts. My aunt would be so glad I had come and brought the baby. And I was so glad to get rid of her for a few minutes. I had all the tending of her. Only my mother would sit down long enough to dress her and I'd have to take care of her. I'd take her flat on my hip and away I'd go. There was a lot of woods between here and there then. We had a path we used to go through in the woods.

In the winter we had to go to school. We had a schoolhouse down here about three-fourths of a mile, a one room school. We walked. The people that lived across the road had about seven boys when I first remember going to school. They had sleds and they would pull me to school and home every day,

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(some of them boys). They always had a little thing for me to sit in to cover up my feet and everything.

We never had any homework. The only thing we would ever bring home was if we didn't understand it. Then our parents could explain in our language where the teacher didn't. She would tell you maybe something that wasn't what you understood. They would explain it in our language and then we could get it.

One woman teacher we had walked from Wheatfield clear out here. So the second day of school my mother went down there and said to her, we knew them you know, "Now if there is bad weather or you don't feel like walking home, you just come home with me. You'll have to sleep with me" and she said "You have to put up your own lunch. There will always be something there to put up but you'll have to take care of that yourself".

She came to visit me years after that and laughed. She said "Gee, I could look up there in the sky and see a rain cloud. Nobody else could see it, only me, but I'd go the Morehouses to stay at night." My mother said she stayed here more than she did at home. We always enjoyed having her.

At that time we had two or three hired men that were cutting ice or doing something, pressing hay or something. and they would play cards at night, not for money, just to play cards. She'd play with them and she used to be here a lot. She is long, long time dead now. Her name was Bea Langdon and she lived in that house where Arnold Brown lives now. You know that church right in Wheatfield, then there's a big square house on the

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corner, the next house is Arnold Browns. It was a long walk, four miles. She was always pleasant, always had a smile.

There were probably about twenty or twenty-five children in our schoolhouse. It was grades one through eight. She had a long bench up in front, she called first grade. They had their little diddy and then they would go back and then she'd have the second grade, all the way through. You hardly heard you were far enough away. There was quite a little space in there. It didn't seem to bother any of us. We all would go ahead and get our lessons.

I went through all eight grades and two years of high school. I went to Wheatfield High School and had to drive a horse and buggy. It was right there where the library is now (Grace and South St). They tore it down. It was about six rooms or something like that. I hated to see them tear it down.

The last year I went to school, oh, I'd get some bad colds,

and we had a doctor, a little Irish doctor that lived in Wheatfield. I was down with this cold just coughing my head off. So he would come with a horse and buggy. They had him come out and he said to my dad "Keep her out of that schoolhouse or she's going to die. That schoolhouse is cold all the time." So I got to quit school. I always patted him on the back. I wear this thing now, a lifeline.

I had Morgan Sterritts and his wife Deli, both taught school. He was the principal. The woman that Billie McNeil married was Vanderberg. She was a teacher too. Three teachers was all we had. There were quite a few students at the high school. they

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came from Tefft and DeMotte. They came from DeMotte on the train. The ones from Tefft had to drive a horse. There were probably fifty or sixty, now there are three or four hundred.

There was a lumber yard in Wheatfield. That's where my dad bought all the lumber for this house. Stembels owned that, George Stembel. It was right down there where all those trailers are. There was a drugstore, Mr. Simon Fendig ran that. The grocery store was next door. Back of the drugstore was a tavern. They always had that you know, whether they got anything else or not. Like down here at the bridge, they got a tavern there, but there are also meals served.

The young people from DeMotte had their classes arranged, the train come through at 10 o'clock and then they would go back about 4 o'clock. There was Clarence Holladay, a couple of girls, I can't remember their names. I remember Clarence, I had contact with him afterwards. He ran the pickle factory in Kersey. I used to take pickles.

They are all dead now. There was one boy from Tefft, no two boys, Barney Fitzgerald and i can't remember the other ones name.

There were other country schools, there was a school over west called the Grube School and there was a Walker School that was south of Wheatfield. They had them all over in different places. River School was the name of the school I went to.

The river is just a mile from here, right straight back through our field. If you have to go around the road, it's about a

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mile and a half. We used to walk to the river lots of times and fish, take a little lunch and picnic.

Neighbors, lots of them would have dances. In one room they would take the rug up and they danced. There were a couple of fellows, they were brother, one played the fiddle and

one played the guitar. Whoever was going to have the dance at their house, furnished the coffee, made a great big pot of coffee. The she said "you bring a cake, you bring some sandwiches". All they had was sandwiches and cake and coffee. At the end of the dance they'd go around with the hat and take up a collection. A lot of people couldn't put in more than a dime. But these players that played the violin and stuff, they got the money. They were tickled to death to get it. Each one would have a dollar a piece when they went home.

We used to have to walk, no matter where it was you had to walk. The crowds would come and they'd begin to holler and when they got down the road close to your house you'd go out and join them and you'd go. Of course, it was all dirt roads and your shoes would get just full of dust, your underskirts and everything. We all wore long dresses, couldn't have your knees showing you know (ha, ha). There were quite a few sandburrs in different places where it wasn't cultivated.

My father had cattle of his own. We had our own milk cows. We had a barn where we could milk about five cows and we had a little surplus butter. We could take it to the store and sell it, also eggs. We had chickens. They would pay for about half the groceries.

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We had a pasture quite a ways back. We had a lane you had to come up and at night after school I'd have to go to pasture on the pony and bring the cattle in. You didn't leave them out there all night. You'd feed them hay and stuff up at the barn and milk cows you put in the barn. They had to be fed of course.

We would bring in a lot of wood because dad would have to get up a couple times during the night to put in a little more fuel. The house would get so cold.

To take a bath, we took the wash tub behind the stove, (ha,ha) heat some water and crawl in there and take your bath. Then that all had to be dumped out. The next guy come along. My mother always put the boiler on when it come time to take baths. A couple times a week we took a bath. When she took out one to give a bath, she put a little more water in the boiler to keep hot water. Everybody had their baths. It was hard getting along in those days, I tell you.

I know everybody on those pictures almost. The threshing machine was owned by my brothers that lived at Malden. They would come and as they turned in your house, it was steam you know, they'd whistle and that scared me so that I'd always hide under the stairway. My mother said I stayed in there one day so long I wet my pants.

Anyhow, then later years it was the tractor and they didn't have that you see. I still would hide when they come. It couldn't toot, you know. There would be the fireman on the engine, the separator man, the water boy, three of them, and all the

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neighbors would help each other with teams and wagons and haul up the grain to run through it.

We would have a big threshing dinner. We always had one or two stragglers that knew when our threshing day was and they were there. Mr. Fendig in Wheatfield that had the drugstore, he was one of them. He always got out where they were threshing.

Then I had a friend from Rensselaer, he stayed with Thompson. His wife just died, Faye Thompson. She lived to be 105, I think. He used to drop in, seemed to know when we had threshers. He'd have other business close, but he'd drop in about noon. Mr. Fendig, I don't know, somebody went in and got him every day. I forgot who it was, I think it was somebody who had a car.

We had potatoes. We'd always go to the meat market and buy a great big piece of meat, a roast, then we'd have the gravy with that of course and whatever vegetables we had to have. I remember a couple of times we had sweetcorn. So ma scrubbed the boiler real good and put some water on and cooked it in the boiler. A lot of corn and butter.

We used to have cows enough, we always had maybe ten or twelve pounds of butter to sell every Saturday. She had a little mold to make it, it would make a pound, it had a sheath of wheat on top. I think my niece, Jackie has got that on her cabinet now.

I never will forget one day we had about twelve pounds of butter and seven or eight dozen eggs to sell. We went to Kouts, my girlfriend who lived across the road and I. We wanted to have

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a treat from some of that so she counted the eggs out, pounds of butter and everything. So we told her that we needed a little candy or something. She said I can't do that. You've got to take it all out in groceries. She was an old maid and she was just crankier than an old bear. She would not give us one penny. We were just sick. We went down to my aunts finally and got something to eat. She lived in Kouts.

Then we came home by horse and buggy you know. Took almost all day by the time we got to Valpo, got groceries and back. There was no SR 49. It just came to that corner over here where this house is from our farm and it came this way and then

it went into Wheatfield there. But I can remember it's not been too many years ago that they made 49 across there and put that new bridge in. Of course, it's a highly traveled highway now.

We went over Baum's bridge and kept right on going until we got to Valpo, twenty miles on dirt road. We always went in a wagon. My mother would buy two or three hundred pounds of coffee, green coffee, two or three hundred pounds of sugar and a lot of stuff like that. She'd buy a bolt of Calico, a lot of stuff you couldn't get here.

One day when we were coming home with all this wagon loaded, there were places where you could drive in, in case of rain to keep everything dry. Between here and Valpo tthere were two or three places where right close to the road they had a windmill and a great big tank. You could drive in and water your horse and go on.

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People looked out for other people at that time more than they do now. You could trust everybody, you know.

We used to play aunty-over some building. Then when there was snow on, I forget what that game was. We used to mark out like a ballteam and play in the snow. At that time ___?___ lived across the road. They had seven boys and she was a seamstress. She had a boy that fit every girl in the neighborhood. She could make a dress to fit that boy and it would fit the girl.

We used to go over there and play and we'd take big empty bottles and tie a string on them. That was our horse. We'd make out a little barn and you lived here and somebody else lived over there. You would come to visit and all that stuff.

We always had a Christmas tree. I remember my mother telling, I can't remember his, before my time. After that she'd would always manage to get a little Christmas tree somewhere. But she and a neighbor, they had children the same age as us kids, went out in the woods and cut a little limb. They made it like a Christmas tree and they took a roll of cotton batting and went around all these little limbs and made them white. Then they put some kind of green stuff they had twisted and put around there to trim it. No lights or anything at that time of course.

We kids enjoyed it just as well as they do now. We would usually get one little toy, maybe I'd get a doll, mostly clothes, because they were hard up you know, new shoes, new stockings,

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new guns, maybe a new stocking cap, new coat or something.

You got mostly clothes.

I think probably mother would buy all that you see when they were in Valpo in the fall, because they made two trips, spring and fall with the wagon. At that time, they had to go down Sagers Hill. That was the only road. It was very steep and two men always had to go because the people that lived there had brakes on their wagon but we didn't down here.

So, one of these men would drive and one would get out and grab a hold of the hind wheel and hold the wagon back a little bit so that it wouldn't run up on the horses where it was so steep. Of course, that tickled us kids half to death. That didn't help the horses any, either.

I remember the first time my aunt, (my youngest uncle had died, my father's youngest brother) stayed with us. She was going to have a baby. She stayed with us for three years.

This concludes the interview with Mary Thatcher. (Mary continued talking with Laverne after the interview)