

Interview of Ron Salme
July 25th, 2014
Naselle, Washington

Interviewers: Marjorie Graf & Janice Bogren

Q. This is an interview for the Nordic Heritage American Voice -- this is for the Nordic American Voices Oral History project. And this is July 25th, 2014 and we are at the Finnish Folk Festival in Naselle, Washington. And I am Marjorie Graf and this is Janice Bogren and we are here to interview Ron Salme. So we're really interested to hear about your story and you can begin telling us.

[00:00:34]

A. Well, I was born in Astoria, Oregon and grew up around here, except for a couple years and lived in Raymond and then back here. So did everything that most people do, go to school, place sports, go in the service, work, you know, and raise a family. But you want more.

Q. That's right.

[00:01:04]

A. From what I understand, the earliest settlers of my family came here sometime in 1870s in Deep River. I don't know if they were the wanderers or a couple of the first Finnish settlers. There had already been four or five settlers in Deep River. And then, from there, they fished and logged. And they also raised a family.

Q. Do you recall where they actually came from in Finland?

[00:01:41]

A. No, no. All I know is my grandfather's dad, if I remember correctly, left Norway in 1871 to come over and he came over in Astoria area. He was looking for farming land. So he found Deep River, but what time in 1870s, I don't know. But then, they farmed and logged around here and fished, you know. And I'm a third-generation timber faller.

Q. That was your father?

A. Well, my father did timber faller and my grandfather, Otto, was a timber faller. Otto was the son of John.

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Q. What was a timber faller? Can you describe that?

A. Fell timber, trees, bucked them up in lengths and they were logged, you know, taken to town.

Q. So how has that changed?

A. A lot faster, more modern equipment, and technology has changed a lot of it. It's changed tremendously.

Q. Any stories from your father about things that happened to him?

A. No, not from my dad. But I remember Grandpa would say that .22 shells were like 15 cents a box, you know. There was so much fish in the river that you could walk across the backs of them. And then, he left for work when it was dark and he got home when it was dark. You know, they didn't talk much about themselves.

Q. So when he did his logging then, he didn't have to travel away from home. He would leave in the morning and then he would come back at the end of the day. So he was basically home every day?

[00:03:41]

A. Right. I would assume so. I'm not -- I just remember him once, you know, saying that. But other than that, he might have been to a logging outfit and lived up the valley further, you know, for a week and then came home. I don't know. A lot of people did at that time. But he might have had work that was closer to the house.

Q. How much do you know about your grandmother, her family?

A. Don't know much about her.

Q. No, not much?

A. Yeah.

Q. So what was it like for you growing up here?

A. Well, we were pretty much had a lot of freedom. You know, we could do what we wanted, you know. We could go hiking,

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fishing, be gone all day, no one worried about anybody, you know. I mean, things back then was a lot different.

Q. Do you know how your mother and father met?

A. No, I don't. No.

Q. Was she Finnish? Was your mother Finnish?

[00:04:52]

A. She was half Finn and half Spanish. My grandmother was Finnish. And my grandpa came from Spain when he was a teenager and my grandma met him in San Francisco. And they got married and moved up here. He went to farming and logging.

Q. What kind of traditions, Finnish traditions or Norwegian traditions, in your family as you were growing up?

A. Coffee at 3:00, cookies. And they went to church. But I don't know. We didn't have much for traditions that I recall very much, helped out people. There's not a heck of a lot I can tell you.

Q. So how many brothers and sisters do you have?

[00:06:05]

A. I have two sisters, Gayle, and then Janna, in that order. And of course, then they have a family of their own, you know. One lives here in Naselle and then back and forth up north. And then, the other one lives in Westport, Oregon.

Q. So you mentioned that you worked and then you mentioned military. Can you talk a little bit about that?

A. I went in the 16th of January of 1968, was in the infantry and was overseas and went and got out of the service the 15th of January, 1970. I was in the Army there.

Q. In --

A. Vietnam.

Q. Vietnam?

A. Yeah. I was a grunt, which is an infantry.

Q. Did your parents speak Finnish in the home? Did you hear Finnish being spoken as a child?

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[00:07:16]

A. Not as my parents, because my parents divorced when I was young. But my grandpa and grandma would speak Finn, but most of the time, they would speak English, that I knew, because we didn't know Finn as us kids.

Q. So who did you live with after your parents divorced? You were small?

A. Yeah, yeah, with my mother. Then she remarried to another fellow by the name of Bob Ziesmer. And then they were married until she passed away here a few years ago. And she's the only girl and her two brothers. They have passed away also.

Q. And your education experience around here -- what was that like?

[00:08:14]

A. Just high school. Then right after high school, I went in the service, came back, and went into the woods for setting chokers and eventually became a timber faller.

Q. Can you describe a day in the life of a timber faller?

A. Well, in order to fall a tree, you'd have to figure out which way it leaned, which everybody pretty much understood how to do that. And where I grew or where I got my experience was in old growth for helped in the Weyerhaeuser, Grays River Camp, out of Grays River.

[00:09:09]

A. And I had a lot of timber fallers there that were Finnish, Swedes, you know, a lot of nationalities there that could teach us younger guys how to fall, which was a good place to learn because everybody had their own way and you learned how to get an idea of how to figure out how to lay your trees. And then, of course, you had to buck them up a certain grades. But you usually had one or two saws, gas and oil, a couple gallons of gas, gallon of oil, wedges. And you packed quite a bit of equipment with you.

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Q. How old were you when you started this?

A. I'd say I was probably 22-23. I did it for about 35, 36 years, falling timber anyway. But I worked a couple years setting chokers and chasing on the landing.

Q. Chasing on the landing? Is that getting out of the way?

[00:10:19]

A. Well, it's when the logs from down on the hillside would come up to the landing, which is a flat spot. The yarder would yard them up and then bring them. And they'd set down on a landing. And you can go out there and unhook the chokers. And then chokers will go back out to the men out in the brush.

And in the meantime, you'd go cut limbs off of them and, make sure the logs are clean, then wait for the next turn to come in. The whistles would blow and so you knew that the turn was coming in. So everybody worked hand in hand. I mean, if you had a good crew, everything was like a well-oiled machine. Everybody knew what they were doing.

Q. It sounds like you enjoyed that.

A. It was good. Yeah, I enjoyed it. And in the fresh air, of course, you know, you kind of grumble a little bit about the snow and the rain, but we wouldn't have what we got if we didn't have it.

Q. It sounds simple to figure out which way to fall a tree, which way the tree is going to fall, or the natural way. Can you tell us how you learned that? What do you look for and what are the --

[00:11:41]

A. Yeah. You look at the top of the tree and you can tell which way the top is leaning. You kind of get an eye after a while. But then, you also carried a plumb bob. You would get a piece of weight with a string on it and hold it up like that and hold it up to the top of the tree and that plumb bob would

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go like that and you knew that top was over the center of the tree like that. See? If the tree was straight, that plumb bob would run straight down the middle of that tree. But if you use your plumb bob, if it leaned that way, it'll lean out. So you had an idea, because the tree would go up and it just kind of curved like that, but sometimes with the naked eye, you can't see that. Then, you'd take into account if it's got limbs on one side and how big the limbs are, what you're going to have to do.

Q. Was there ever a tree that you saw that was just straight?

A. Yeah.

Q. Then what do you do?

[00:12:42]

A. You wedge it, put wedges in the back. And so you're forcing it to go one direction or the other. But most of the time on hillsides, trees lean one way or the other. On flat ground, they'll have more of a tendency to grow straighter. And there's optical illusions. There could be a tree that looks straight, but there will be another one off to the side that has more of a dramatic lean and you go well, that one's straight and that one's really leaning, you know. So you've got to be careful. You've got to plumb bob that, because that could also have a lean that way, but you wouldn't know that because of the optical illusion. So there's things that you learn over time. You gain experience working with other guys too. If you want to learn the craft, you listen to what the old timers will tell you and just keep that in mind.

Q. The Finns who were loggers in this area -- were they loggers in Finland as well? Did they have logging there or was this just --

[00:13:54]

A. Well, they had logging there, but I don't know if they

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all did that. Now, like according to what I read about my relatives, they were sea-bearing people, like John, the fellow I was telling you about came over here in the 1870s. Well, he was a captain on the ship. He was the captain. Now, I don't know anything about him. I don't know. I imagine they had to do some logging to get homes, but a lot of them from where my family came from, I think, were fishermen.

Q. Interesting.

A. Yeah.

Q. So tell us a little bit about your own family. Did you marry?

A. Yeah. Yeah, I'm married. Okay. Yeah, I married my wife, Jennifer. Let's see. When was that? Now, you had to ask a hard question here. Let's see. 1971, I think. I got married in 1971 and still married, so that's 40-some years.

Q. And how did you meet?

[00:15:06]

A. Downtown Longview, Friday/Saturday night, just what teenagers do or young people do.

Q. Well, what did your group do in your peer group? What did you do on Friday and Saturday night to meet each other?

A. Well, drive up Downtown Longview. I mean, that's where kids went up and down, kind of like down there in Tacoma.

Q. Yeah.

A. Yeah. That's it. You met and then there's of course dinners and dinners was a big deal then. You'd ask her a girl out for dinner and then you catch a movie, so that was pretty much entertainment at that time.

Q. Is your wife Finnish?

A. No. She's actually English. She has some English in her and some Irish and her family background is more interesting than mine. It goes way back because she's a descendent of the Pilgrims that came over here and she goes back quite a bit, a

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lot further than I do. Then let's see. And then I have a daughter, just one child. And then I've got a grandson right now and he's Samuel and my daughter's Crystal. And my grandson, Samuel, is four years old, kick in the pants.

Q. Fun?

[00:16:45]

A. Yeah.

Q. Have you gone back to Finland?

A. No, no. No. Don't really care to travel too far or too much anymore. I'm kind of a homebody, I guess.

Q. That's okay. Yeah. Is there anything we may have omitted to ask you that you'd like to tell us, that you'd like to have recorded?

A. Go Seahawks. Big Seahawks fan.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. But, of course, I'll probably think about it later and I could have said this or that. But right now, I've actually had a pretty boring life. Well, we fish. My wife and I fish and hunt together. We used to duck hunt together quite a bit. And then --

Q. Where do you fish and hunt? Where do you hunt?

[00:17:44]

A. Here, around here. Yeah, and she doesn't necessarily hunt. She'll tag along with me, you know, but she doesn't shoot a rifle for a deer or an elk or whatever. But we duck hunted together and she did use a shotgun to go grouse hunting. But now, I buy tagging for an excuse to go deer hunting, so we can go out in the woods and look around. You never know when that big one might pop by. But I enjoy elk hunting, but it's getting to where there's going to be less area to hunt anymore.

Q. How has Naselle changed over the years where the Finnish community when you look back on it?

A. Well, there's a more different nationalities move in

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this community. It's more, I think, a retirement area anymore. You're quiet. You don't have a lot of traffic, crime rate, and you got Astoria just across the bridge, only 20 minutes, 25 minutes, and you're there.

[00:18:56]

A. And it's a pretty drive. It's a nice scenic drive to Astoria. And I think some of the people, they move away. Of course, they get out of school, but some are moving back. It's more of a quieter life, but then there's a lot of people from Seattle and Puyallup and they're moving down here, too.

Q. When was that bridge built?

A. Let's see, 1963, 1964, maybe 1962. I know it was around 1963, 1964, I believe. I don't remember the exact --

Q. What was traveling like before that bridge came?

[00:19:50]

A. We crossed it on the ferry, which is kind of cool. You can sit there and watch other people, which is interesting and all, but you had to time everything. Of course, for us, we could walk on the ferry and then when you got to Astoria, the shops and everything are right there. So you could walk wherever you wanted to, if you want to shop, or go to the doctor, dentist, or whatever. But now, everything's spread out over there and it's kind of nice having that bridge.

Q. Did your grandparents ever talk about Finland in the war? Was there ever a subject in your house with them? Did they ever --

A. No.

Q. Were they concerned about it?

A. No, I never did. I was pretty young back then you know.

Q. Yeah. Well, yeah.

[00:20:47]

A. Yes. But I can tell you one story about my grandpa.

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He was engaged to a woman here locally. Well, whenever the ship came in the Columbia River at the quarantine station, people would go there. It was a big thing to do back then. So people would go to the quarantine station and watch people come off. Well, he said he saw Grandma walking off the ship and he said, "I'm going to marry her." That's what he told me. He said, "And my neighbor hasn't liked me since then because I was engaged to his sister." But he said when he saw her, he says, "I knew I wanted to marry her."

Q. Wow.

A. But they didn't talk much.

Q. That is interesting. We haven't heard that, the quarantine boat. So do you know where it came from?

[00:21:48]

A. Well, they had a ship there, an old ship, they'd use for quarantine station, I guess. It had a dock. There used to be an old cannery and so it took many years for them to go ahead and get this going. But the west coast Ellis Island is what they considered it, since there was diphtheria and all of that back then. So they had to quarantine people so they wouldn't spread the disease and a lot of young kids died back then. Astoria didn't want it on their side of the river, so they found a spot over here. The government said, "We'll find a spot," so they picked down here along the quarantine station. I don't know if you're familiar where it's at. Okay. You ever heard of the Knappton Mill?

Q. So it's still a building there?

[00:22:49]

A. No, it's not a building. There's just posts out there now, posts that go out there. I don't know if you've been to Astoria or not?

Q. Uh-huh.

A. Okay. When you come down the hill, and you first see

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the Columbia River, and then you kind of go around the corner, little sweeping corner, and then there's kind of a bad spot in the road right there, then it will be the first pilings on your left-hand side. I don't know if you noticed those or not.

Q. Are those the ones with the green growing --

A. Yeah, right. That used to be the old quarantine station right there.

Q. Interesting.

A. Yeah, yeah. And I think there's a building just across the road. I don't know, a museum now or something about the quarantine years ago. I just read about it. I mean, I drive by it every day.

Q. Yeah, that's interesting.

[00:23:58]

A. Yeah, but that's where the boats would come in and ships would come in there and then get checked out. And if you're okay, I guess you're on your way, but --

Q. Wow.

A. Yeah. And back then, there wasn't any roads from just to the Knappton Mill there, which is on the corner. When you come down the hill at the Columbia River, there's pilings out there. That's where the old Knappton Mill used to be. But there wasn't any roads the other way. There were just trails and people had to walk from Naselle to there then or horseback.

Q. So when your grandfather saw this woman coming off the boat or the quarantine area who was she meeting?

A. I don't know.

Q. Okay. They didn't talk about that, either.

A. Yeah. He just happened to say that. "When I met Grandma, I knew it right away, saw her coming off the boat," and I asked what he meant.

Q. So that was quite a revelation for him then to say that.

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[00:25:05]

A. Yeah. And I know my mother said that, in all the years that she knew them, she said they never did fight that she knew of. They were married over 60 years.

Q. Wow. That's a very nice story. You have a very nice story. Anything you want to add before we close?

A. No.

Q. Besides go see, what did he say, Mariners or Seahawks?

A. Seahawks.

Q. Go Seahawks.

[00:25:38]

A. Yeah. Well, Mariners are doing better. They're getting there, but still got another level, but yeah. So what is sad is that we never recorded a lot of stuff. Of course, like with my grandparents, we'd go visit them, because they're only not even a quarter of a mile, quarter-mile from us. So we could go to school. I mowed their lawns and stuff, helped him make wood. And it was always coffee time at 3:00.

Q. Great. Yeah.

[00:26:17]

A. My sister would go. She went to get cookies from the store. And so what kind you want? And I don't know, Grandma's cookies. I know what they are. That community was small and everybody knew everybody. So that part is gone now. It's progress.

(Proceedings concluded.)