

## **Alan Cummings**

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Transcribed by: Jennie Hakes 11/22/00

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### ***Introduction***

Jack: ... to interview residents and document their memories of their life and happenings in Aitkin County. We're here today at the Maryhill Manor. Today is November 4, 1999.

Our video crew for capturing our oral history, is Lael Carlstrom Ferlita, and Roger and Ann Nelson, and I'm Jack Christianson.

And our honored guest and supplier of information is my friend and shirt-tail relative, Allan Cummings. And Allan will, I know that your grandparents and so forth were early residents of Cedar Brook. You might start with your grandparents and when they came and anything, their names, and we'll take 'er from there. And then we want to get into the Cedar Brook and then into the creamery - one of the main things I hope to document today, because there's generations don't know what a creamery was. Or they don't even know why they were there. We're going to get into this, because you worked in one for a number of years.

### ***Family history***

Jack: But let's start out with, I think, it's A. F. Cummings, was Grandpa?

Allan: That's my grandpa. He came here from Glencoe (*Minnesota*) in the '80s. He drove up from Glencoe to Aitkin with a team of oxen.

J: A team of oxen.

A: Yeah. And my grandmother came later. They settled in, on a homestead in Cedar Brook. And they was here for quite a long time. In the logging days, they was lots of early floods in the spring. And floatin' logs down the river, and Cedar Brook was getting' flooded. And that kinda drove my grandpa out of Cedar Brook after a few years. (Laughs) But he was there quite awhile. My dad was a young fellow there. Went to school in Pine Knoll (?). He had to go across the river to go to school in Pine Knoll. Finally, grandpa donated a piece of land for the school in Cedar Brook, and he taught the first, taught in the school there. And, of course, then my dad was getting' to be a young man about that time. Finally my grandparents, my dad's folks, moved to Cass Lake.

And I, my mother was here in Aitkin. Her folks came from Iowa. W. H. Oppa (?) was her dad's name. He was a Civil War veteran. And my dad and mother got married in Aitkin. They lived here. And finally, they went to Cass Lake, and that's where I was born. And then my dad decided to take a homestead in North Dakota. So they went out to North Dakota on a homestead, and my mother said she wouldn't live there if they gave her the whole state! (Laughs) So they come back to Aitkin in a covered wagon. I was three years old. I can remember that.

J: In a covered wagon back...

A: A covered wagon.

J: That was Billy Cummings and your mother.

A: I. W.

J: I. W. Cummings.

A: One thing I can remember about that. I got so mad at my dad. I had a little pup, and he threw that pup in the creek where we were going camping, and I figured that pup was gonna drown, but he was to shore right away. I remember that as well as it was yesterday.

J: Uh huh.

A: Yeah. Well, then, they came to Aitkin, and then my folks settled here in Aitkin. And then I've been there ever since. I was gone for a little while, I worked in Duluth for awhile. I finally bought a farm in Cedar Brook and stayed.

J: Now the Cummings place that I always refer to as the Cummings, because my grandparents lived on that same place, but that was your dad, that was Billy Cummings – but originally Shuffles (?)

A: Yeah. Originally Shuffles.

J: Originally Shuffles.

A: And right close to that were, the Jensen place was.

J: Right.

A: That's where your dad lived as a boy. (*unintelligible – perhaps he says 'near the Ellis'*).

J: Oh, yes.

A: And it's, your grandpa's mother was Cameron, and my dad's mother was Cameron.

J: Cameron. That's where we're tied in.

A: That's where we get the Scotch! (Laughs)

J: You bet! Yeah, that was, I know that the Janzen place was the original Donald McGillis homestead...

A: That's right.

J: ...on the river. Or on that lagoon there.

A: Yeah. (*unintelligible*) have lots of stories about those days. You know, there was a lotta, there was a lotta relatives to the McGillis', and to the Cummings that lived at Cedar Brook at that time. Finks (?), you've heard of the name Finks?

J: Oh, sure.

A: See, that was (*unintelligible*).

J: Um, hm. They said originally, you know, now, they always refer to Cedar Brook as German. But originally, it was all Scotch. It was MacDonald, Cameron's, it was mainly Scottish.

A: That's right. McGillis.

J: Uh huh. McGillis. Right.

A: I can just, I can remember them talking "Scotch"!

J: Uh huh. Gaelic!

A: Gaelic, yeah.

J: Right!

A: My grandma and your grandma, John McGillis, he knew his prayers in Scotch.

J: Oh, yes.

A: Oh, yeah. That – if he was gonna pray, he prayed in Scotch. Gaelic.

J: Gaelic. Yup. Right.

A: He was a great guy.

J: And getting back... I was interested when, I know when we did that other research on the school that your grandfather actually started, that's the Cedar Brook School that continued right up until, well, it was World War II, and Cedar Brook, there...

A: Yeah. They finally moved that school into Aitkin.

J: Uh huh.

A: And that was it. (*unintelligible*) And my sister taught in that school, and my first wife taught in that school.

J: By your sister, your talking about Leslie, who married Fred Ferguson.

A: Leslie. She taught that school for awhile. And then my wife, Margaret Hold (?), my first wife...

J: Margaret Hold, your first wife.

A: ...taught that school.

J: Now your brothers was after, it was Kenneth and your give me the names of the others. I can go with ya.

A: My oldest brother was Frances.

J: Frances, right.

A: Next brother was Kenneth.

J: Was Kenneth.

A: Then Shirley...

J: Shirley.

A: ...then Leslie.

J: Then Leslie.

A: Yeah. There was five of us. And I was right in the middle. And my mother's folks came here in the '80s, too. She was a young girl when they came here. And they came from Iowa. But they were Irish and Dutch, Pennsylvania Dutch. (Laughs)

J: Uh huh. (Laughs)

A: And they had a big family and they all stayed around here.

J: Um hm.

A: (break in tape) ...trades, and stuff, and so on like that. My grandpa was a war veteran and he got a pension, and he didn't work at any other (*unintelligible*) been a farmer.

J: That would have been the Civil War that he was...

A: Civil War, yeah.

J: ...and they received pension?

A: He got \$40 a month.

J: \$40 a month! In those days, that wasn't too bad.

A: Him and grandma lived on it. Sure, sure. Yeah. It was kinds tough times then. There was lots of snow, and no cars and no roads. You walked when you went someplace.

### **Flooding on Cedar Brook**

J: And like you say, those floods occurred just about every spring at Cedar Brook.

A: Yeah, until they quit loggin'. After they quit loggin', dammin' up the little streams so they could float their logs out. It went along that way until about 1931 before we had another flood. About 1916 until '31. And in 1931, they got a bill through Congress to raise the minimum levels of Pokegema and Leech Lake and Winnibigosh. They raised it from zero, the minimum from zero, to seven feet.

So when we had our flood in 1938, I was home down river with Shipstead, and he says to me, "Do you know what's causin' these floods?"

I said, "No, but I wish I did!"

"Well," he says, "When they raised those minimum lake levels, they lost fifty percent of the storage. So now we've got the floods."

"Well," I said, "We gotta change that." Well, actually, I started on the drainage board for many, many years after that, but you couldn't do nothin', because the people from Chicago and all these cities and nice homes on Pokegema, Sandy, and Leech, and Winnibigosh – had more power than the whole area here, see, with the Legislature in the State, in the Congress. So you couldn't get those levels changed back down. So we continued to get the flooding. Until we got the diversion channel.

J: Until that diversion channel. I remember, when I grew up, there was a flood every, just about every spring, I'd be out with the duck boat there, right in Aitkin.

A: I put in many years on the drainage board, workin' to get that channel. Worked with Knutson and Shipstead and those guys, and we finally got the channel, and that helps, you know.

J: Oh, yes. Yes.

A: It's really remarkable, you know, how... I remember when they was getting' that bill through Congress to change those lake levels, and I (*unintelligible*), "So what?" Let 'em change 'em so they can set from their dock and boats... But it didn't work out...

J: But I can say that's where the clout was, and here all the people that make their living and had, it just...

A: It got out of hand, and in 1950, we had a good one (*flood*). I had sixteen inches of water in my house, on my farm, in 1950. Yeah. And I had fourteen brooder houses, sun porches and all the other equipment, and I watched it all float away.

J: Oh.

A: And you know, I was a darn fool, and I started up again. I shoulda quit! (Laughs)

J: Yep!

A: Yeah. 'Cause I was in pretty good shape, financially...

J: Uh huh.

A: ...when that flood hit. And I was foolish enough to (*unintelligible*)... I had to borrow money before I got any turkeys. It took me a long time to get it back.

J: That would be... I think to have your home, and especially like yourself, in the business of turkeys, have all that, with that water, and the mud... to...

A: Yeah, I tell you, it was really (*unintelligible*) me. I had fourteen houses with brooder turkeys in 'em, and my haymow was empty in the dairy barn. We packed it all up there. It was all piled up in there, and finally, we moved 'em out and took up to where Mike Grand's (?) place is now.

J: Oh, yes.

A: Chuck Fraley.

J: Bunker Hill.

A: Put 'em up there on... it wasn't any fun!

J: Well, the turkeys go "I mighta thought well, we're all goin' to heaven, now!" (Laughs)

A: It was a good time to quit! (Laughs)

J: But stubborn Allen...

A: That's that Scotch, you know!

J: That's the Scotch, you bet! (Laughs)

### **Early days at the Cooperative Creamery**

J: Allen, let's - and we can always come back into the Cedar Brook and the floods and everything else, this is wonderful - but like I said, we want to...to me, and to the Historical Society or any of us, (*unintelligible*) like the creameries. You know, yourself, if you talk to your great grandchildren or something, if you mention a creamery - well, of course, they may know something, because great grandpa worked there - but other people growing up and the kids, the generations now, creamery sounds like something with cream! That's about all they would know. And I know that I used to go to the cooperative and saw you every time I was in there. So what I'd like to do is take, and we're gonna take a walk right through that creamery, and the different people that were employed there, the operation of it, the product, and everything. So, let's go, when you started and maybe why...maybe you got sick of turkeys then and decided to work at the creamery!

A: First of all, the first creamery I remember, was (*unintelligible - sounds something like Ireson's?*) and Zoerb's. And they were in this northeast part of Aitkin, just about where you live, down in that area.

J: OK.

A: And I remember goin' there with my mother when she'd take the cream there, you know, with horses when I was a kid. I remember that. And then, it wasn't long after that, that they got the Cooperative Creamery started. And I think I mentioned they came around soliciting people to buy shares or to get interested in a cooperative creamery. I remember Mr. Hoge (?) was my first wife's father, he came to our place, and my dad, and got my dad to sign up for some shares in this cooperative creamery, and they kinda expected the farmers to have so many cows and so many shares. And that's the way they got their thing together and got that creamery built. And they had a good, it was busy. It was a busy place. And the dairy seemed to grow...

J: Uh huh.

A: ...as, you know, as had this creamery here. It was an incentive for people to... because before that, they'd take their cream to the cream station and a lot of them churned. I can remember my mother churning butter and putting it in three pound jars, and take it to the store and trade it for groceries. You know? The people in the country were doin' that. That was pretty nice. And we'd take that cream to the creamery and sell it, and get cash for it.

J: Right. And you didn't have to go through all that labor of making...

A: That's right! It beats turning that barrel churn. (Laughs)

J: Most of 'em, did they... I remember, too, them bringing...but was that usually about once a week, three times a week, or what, depending on their herd, I guess?

A: I'll tell you what. If you had a place to keep your cream sweet and keep it, you'd probably come in about twice, about twice a week.

J: Twice a week.

A: Otherwise, a lot of them would come every day, if they didn't have far to go, you know. But, now my folks, they, before we got electricity, they had an ice house and they put the cream cans in the ice house, and they'd keep it cold that way, see? That way, they could keep it sweet. Because of the difference of about two cents a pound for butterfat, and if it was sweet cream or sour. You know? A lot of people liked the sour cream butter the best. And it was... and then, of course... that creamery was pretty darn busy. People coming through there right along. I think they took cream from about 3:00 in the afternoon.

### ***How they made butter at the creamery***

J: When they came, I remember all the rollers, like an (*unintelligible*) and stuff, they just come in, put their cream cans on those rollers, and of course, they were ID'd, or their name was on it, and then it went in, and then didn't...how did you check for the butterfat?

A: They stirred it up in the cream can with a mixer, and then they took a sample of that in a little bottle, and then that went into the office and Art Chatelle was workin' there. He tested that for the butterfat. And then you got paid for the amount of butterfat was in your cream, see?

J: Um hm.

A: And, uh, so that's the way that was done. Then of course, it was all put together after that, in a big vat and pasteurized. They'd pasteurize it. Had great big vats that'd just hold a lot of cream, (*unintelligible*) they would run steam through that to pasteurize it. And then after it was up to a certain degree of heat – the buttermaker would be checkin' that with a thermometer – and then he'd cut the steam off, and then they'd cool it. They'd run cold water through that coil.

J: Uh huh.

A: And to get that water cold, they had a great bin, and it was salt water, you know, like you was makin' ice cream.

J: Oh! OK.

A: The salt keeps your water cold and it don't freeze. That way, they had an ice machine there that could cool that water, that salt water, and then they run that through them coils, cool that cream down to a certain degree before they churn it, you know. And then they'd pump that into the churn, and churn it...

### ***Buttermilk***

J: How about, you know, I know when they made, I know, when I used to go in the creamery, 'cause it was always steamy, but when they were doing this, there would be just like a rough, skim milk, or buttermilk, or whatever had come out of that...

A: Yeah.

J: Was that kept, or was drained or sold?

A: What they done with the buttermilk, was to run it up to a big vat up in the upstairs to the creamery, and they had two big drums that heated steam, and that buttermilk came

down on those drums, and knives cut 'er off into powder. So they powdered their buttermilk. And then that was sold for, a lot of it for baking, but a lot was sold for feed, you know. And into chicken feed, and so on like that, to put in a certain protein or whatever (*unintelligible*)...so they used to bag that up, and so that the buttermilk was dried, and that was quite, that was a big saving, otherwise, you know, the buttermilk was kind of a waste.

J: Oh, sure.

A: People got it for their pigs...

J: Pigs.

A: ...or use up like that.

J: I know when I grew up, they said, well, when they did all the separating on the farm, the buttermilk went to the hogs.

A: Yeah, that's right. Why, running it over those drums, and if you... it looked just like a sheet comin' off from there, you know. Yeah. And those knives were sharp, boy, cut it off from those drums. The steam (*unintelligible*)... turned like that all the time. It was quite an operation. Interesting, very interesting.

J: And your butter, then, when it was in these big churns, how did it come out in those nice, little waxed boxes that I used to see as Rose brand, and Land O' Lakes?

A: They had it, ah, put it in a press, and they was wires that cut that butter, and then when it'd go across like that, and cut it into squares. They churned that butter, that buttermaker would take a test of the butter, take a piece of it, and he'd take a heat lamp, and he'd take all the moisture out of it, to see how much moisture was in it. And if it didn't have what moisture it could stand, he'd pour some water in the churn and run it a little more to mix this water up in there, 'cause it'll...if butter was a good price, you could sell a pail of water a month! (Laughs)

J: No, I remember even in the late '30s, butter was 45 cents a pound, or somewheres in there.

A: And you add a pail of water... that all helps!

J: You're darn right!

### ***Drinking a bottle of cream***

A: And you remember drinking the cream.

J: Yeah!

A: He came to me one day, he's getting some cream for his mother. He says, "I like cream." "Well," I says, "If you can drink that, I'll give you another one!"

J: (Laughs)

A: He drank that whole bottle of cream! (Laughs)

J: In those days, if you could get anything in a kid, that was really something! I loved you from that day forward, Allen!

A: I was afraid of you getting' stomach trouble! Or the trots or something! (Laughs)

J: Yep, that was really good. I... whenever Mom says we need something..."I'll go!" Because that was Allen was up in there at the creamery, so...

A: I worked there when I was just getting' started in the dairy business. I had a few cows, and I was just startin'. And I worked there until I got a herd together (*unintelligible*).

J: Then you took your cream back to the creamery. Let somebody else... Well, they did, I know that that was an active (*unintelligible*), of course, there was your cash money.

A: Yeah, that's right. You know the drain I cleaned there, everywhere was a drain, you had to drain every morning you came there, and the back bunks of butter goin' to every store in town.

J: Oh, yes.

### ***Marketing the butter***

A: They got their butter fresh every morning.

J: I know I worked at the Red Owl, I was thirteen, and then when we ran short, or if they, like on a busy weekend, you'd run over there and get so many pounds of this butter and that butter. Like you say, it was fresh.

A: Yeah. Before that, you know, the people that didn't go to Zoerb's Creamery, they went to Wyman Eddy that had that cream station. And my dad and I and my mother used to go in there sometimes, just what that cream was like when they got it to the... I think it went to Bridgeman Russell in Duluth. They loaded it on the train. Shipped it to Duluth, you know. And they used to wire the tops on the cream cans so that they couldn't...

J: Explode?!

A: Yeah. (Laughs)

J: No, you wonder then just what condition that was. And Bridgeman Russell in Duluth, sure.

A: Yeah, they were right there on Superior Street. I think that's where it went anyway, that's what I heard.

J: Oh, yeah. Well, their ice cream was good.

A: After they pasteurized that cream...

J: Sure, that's all right, anything... Of course, across the street, Boyd Hakes had that, the end of Butler's now. Because I remember the runway with the rollers and everything over there, too.

*(Note from Jennie: Boyd Hakes was my father, so this was very interesting to me. Eventually, he took over management of the Coop Creamery, and it was sold out to Land O' Lakes, and he ran it for them until he retired. I, too, have fond memories of that creamery, especially that sweet smell of fresh butter!)*

A: They had, ah, quite a little business going on there. There was always some farmers switchin' around, you know. I don't know if they ever gained anything by doing it, but, you know, that's business, you know.

J: Well, maybe one kinda would put out news even if it was a fib. We're gonna try and get more.

A: I knew the guys that worked there. Ben Wiederholt (?) worked there, if you remember, yeah.

J: Uh huh. And at the cooperative, you mentioned like, Art Schettel (?), there were others.

A: Yeah, Art Schettel, and oh, gee I don't remember it, a guy by the name of Groves, and Ted Peterson, was different ones that worked there off and on there. It was quite a place to work, lots to do. You didn't... you had plenty...

### ***The difference between then and now***

J: Do you ever get a little thing in your stomach when you pass - that Cooperative building is still there?

A: Yeah, it's sittin' there idle, and it's kind of sad. Yeah.

J: That was busy in the back there. Of course, all the stores backed up in that area, and Ziske's and the railroad track right there.

A: And you know, it makes me kind of sad when I think about how nice it used to be to go into the small stores and do business, you know. Your shoe stores, two or three butcher shops...

J: Uh huh.

A: ...and all these small grocery stores. Nice place to do business.

J: Right by name, and they meant it.

A: That's right. And you know, if you went in there to get somethin', somebody would wait on you. Try and get somebody to wait on you some of these days.

J: Or even catch their eye!

A: Yeah, that's right! (Laughs)

J: No, I remember in the... and too, there weren't any carts or anything else. People came up, gave you a list, ran around, had coffee, and everything then was bulk, too. Four pounds of sugar, you went to the bin and the big scoop and, but everybody...you knew them if you didn't know them.

A: That's right. That's right. You felt like you were bein', well, I don't know, waited on, anyway. For instance, just here awhile ago, I was gonna buy a pair of rubbers in Brainerd, in a big store up there, and I couldn't find a box of rubbers that had two of the same size! Well, you know, I come back to Aitkin, so I finally got a pair from right here in Aitkin.

J: Right here in Aitkin.

A: Yeah. That's the way it is.

### ***Grandpa tells Allen about the Civil War***

J: You mention about Wyman Eddy, his cream station, and about him being a Civil War vet, you might tell us a little bit about Wyman Eddy.

A: I can remember them tellin' my mother that he, ah, enlisted in the Army when he was fourteen, as a drummer. And he said he wasn't getting a pension at that time, he said he lied to get into the service, but he wasn't gonna lie to get a pension! But he finally did get it, a pension.

J: He did get it a pension.

A: Yeah. He was a kind of a southerner, kind of a southern brogue, quite a guy.

J: Just the name, Wyman Eddy, does sound kind of southern, kind of sugar-like, or whatever.

A: Yeah, he was a quite a guy. He and my grandpa – my mother's dad – were great friends. Of course, by then... My grandpa and three of his brothers were in the Civil War. The whole family was in the Civil War. And all come out of it all right, they all come through it. They had it pretty tough in them days. Grandpa said that some days they were pretty hungry.

J: Oh, I'll bet. Oh, they didn't...you read accounts of the Civil War and what those...

A: Yeah, yeah. He said it was just terrible. He didn't get nothin' to eat, and sometimes you got the best, you know. He ah, it was wonderful for me to sit and listen to his stories about the Civil War. He, ah, told me all about the battle of the Harper's Ferry, you know, you've read about Harper's Ferry?

J: Right, I've read about that.

A: Yeah, well, when I was a kid, I used to sit and listen to him tell some of those stories about that battle at Harper's Ferry. The bridge changed hands between the southerners and the northerners several times, and when I was – I forget how old I was – I took a trip east to Washington, I went to Harper's Ferry, and I could sit there at Harper's Ferry and hear everything my grandpa told me about it. And it was all right there. The hill where the cemetery was, and where the army was, guns were still stacked. They were burned, kind of melted, because of the fire. The guns were still stacked where that armory was at Harper's Ferry. That was quite an experience for me to go and see that after grandpa tellin' me all about it.

J: And that would be just like getting it first hand rather than reading about it.

A: Oh, yeah!

J: To hear about it.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I went up the top of the hill and looked at the name of the graves of the guys that was killed in that battle, and they were buried right there. It was just like Grandpa...you know, Harper's Ferry, there's two or three rivers come together, you know, and uh...some of those things kind of stick in your mind...

J: Oh, you bet! Well, in those days, too, it's just like your grandpa, or the other ones, especially the story telling. You know, that was a time that... I don't think kids now, or parents do, but you know, to sit down, and that was something! And maybe you'd be there, like my dad was peelin' apples, telling about France and World War II, these type of things. And the kids would all... and of course, they could even lie a little, and the kid never knew the difference.

A: Well, I know grandpa told me that he was on guard one time, dark...

*(unfortunately, the tape ends here)*