

Fritz Lueck

Interviewed by: Ann Nelson 5-25-2000

Transcribed by: Jennie Hakes

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Note

This interview was done on location not far from Lueck's home on the Mississippi. This is a transcription of a cassette tape made from a videotaped interview.

Side A

Introduction

Ann: ...May 25, 2000. And my name is Ann Nelson, from the Aitkin County Historical Oral History Program. We're here today to interview Fritz Lueck – to tell us about the Mississippi River, and the important part it played in his life.

Growing up

A: Fritz, when did you become acquainted – maybe I should say acquainted with the river, when did your parents come here? Grandparents?

Fritz: My grandparents came here in 1880s, and just a short distance up the river, right here – they homesteaded right over here. You can't see the buildings from here, but that's where they lived, my grandparents. Right there.

A: And your parents?

F: My dad homesteaded up in Aitkin... in Crow Wing County – excuse me – in Crow Wing County just across the county line, where my grandfather lived with my grandmother and their family. My grandfather was the first mining fatality on the Cuyuna Range in 1908, and after that my parents married and lived in various places, and eventually lived down river... up the river about 2 miles.

A: OK. And when were you born?

F: I was born in 1926 out here in the farm home with Dr. McHugh attending my mother.

A: And in what year was that... you said 1926?

F: 1926.

A: Where do you fit into your family, and how many brothers and sisters did you have?

F: I had 9 brothers and sisters. I was the youngest of the boys - third to the youngest in the family. We have kind of a unique family in that, from the oldest to the youngest, every other one was left-handed! (Laughs)

A: That is unique! That is unique. And who were your parents?

F: My parents were Fred and Rose Lueck.

A: And they farmed...

F: They farmed about 3 miles northwest of Aitkin, right on the bank of the Mississippi.

A: And can you tell us about what you remember as a child? And where you went to school?

F: We were on the edge of School District #1 – Aitkin school district. We were on the very edge of it, at that particular time. So we were bussed into the Aitkin schools. So I went to the Aitkin system 12 years. We hunted, fished, swam in the river, we did just about anything that normal people would do when they have water in front of ‘em. We splashed around in it. Some things were good, some were bad. Just a short distance from where we are now, I had a cousin that was 11 years old that drowned in the river. He fell into the river and it was quite deep, and no one was around and he drowned.

But there was... the log drives were over by the time that I can remember. But this whole Mississippi area was used to drive logs clear into Brainerd from all over the timber country up north of here.

A: OK. What else do you... what year did you graduate from Aitkin High School?

F: I graduated in 1944.

A: 1944.

F: Um hm.

A: Did you play a part in World War II at all?

F: No, I didn't. My brothers were in the service during World War II. But I didn't go into the army or navy. And near 1950, ah, 1948, my wife and I were married and we were living in Aitkin at the time of the 1950 flood.

Life on the river

A: OK. And you said there was also a flood in 1938?

F: In 1938, the river came up to, and got out of its banks pretty good, and the farmers didn't have to move out. There was still enough land so they could keep their livestock at home. The Coast Guard brought in a boat that brought feed and supplies down the river, and took the cream to the creamery, and so they got by, but they still had enough land to keep the cattle on, so they didn't... it was a hardship, but it wasn't totally unbearable.

A: What else do you remember about the early years on the river? Did your father have anything to do with the river, as far as occupation went?

F: My father worked along the Mississippi, the Big Willow, the Pine River, and all those in the logging areas in the early 1900s. And I wish he were here to either write a book or be interviewed, because he had a terrific memory and he experienced a lot of the logging area era of the early 1900s. And he drove logs on the river. He drove supply teams for the logging camps and worked in the logging camps for many years.

The flood of 1950

A: What do you remember about the early '40s on the river?

F: Well, between 1938 and 1950, the river was fairly stable. I don't know if that was due to the moisture content of the snowfall or what, but they didn't have any appreciable danger of flooding along the river until 1950. And then it all hit at once.

A: What do you remember about the 1950 flood?

F: My father had an auction sale on the 7th of April, if I remember correctly. We still had about 4 feet of snow on the level, and it was getting quite late. The ice was still in the Mississippi, it hadn't gone out yet, and all of the sudden the weather turned extremely warm. We got just downpours of rain, torrents of rain. And it thawed the snow with a runoff that was just unprecedented. The ice jammed up the river, so the water couldn't get away, and consequently it rose quite rapidly and flooded a lot of the area.

Now these farmers along the Mississippi had lived here most of their lives, and they had never experienced that kind of water. They didn't believe that the water could get that high. So they didn't move when the river started to rise. But it rose so rapid that it trapped many of the animals in their, at their farms, and they couldn't get 'em out because the water was over the roadway, and they couldn't get in with trucks to remove them.

A: So what kind of help did you get at that time?

F: Well, over at the old – we call it the old Chris Lyckoff¹ place, Terry Bentley lives there now – we used that as a focal point for people to bring their livestock. And we attempted to ferry them in to Aitkin so they could get away from the water. Seems to me over a hundred cattle were brought in there, I'd say – I'm just guessing at that. And first, we tried to remove them with a wagon with a cattle rack on it with barrels tied to the side, but when we tried to pull it in towards Aitkin with an Army duck, it tipped over, and the cattle went over the side – none of them were hurt – but they all swam back to where they came from. So we gave up that. We went into Aitkin to the Lambert Lumber Company, built a loading ramp, and made a pen on the duck itself, and we loaded the cattle into the duck and then took 'em out, like, 4 to 6, 8 – depending on the size – at a time into Aitkin. And we did this all day and most of 2 days, and all during the night, too.

A: What about a particular cow that your father had?

F: Oh! While we were doing this, we had a large milking shorthorn cow, and she was about to give birth to a calf. And she wanted to be home! She broke loose at the farm and swam about a half mile back to the barn, went in the barn, which had about a foot of water. And we had a built-up manger in the barn. And the calf, when it was born, it dropped into the manger and survived. The next day, four of us went back out there with a punt - which is a john boat type of thing that the Navy used a lot of, and still use them today, I think; they're quite a large boat, flat bottomed. We floated it into the barn, and we hogtied the cow – and when I mean hogtied, we tied all four of her feet together – and we tipped her over into the boat, put the calf in beside her, and we had a 25-horse motor, and we motored up the river and back into Aitkin and we pulled up right in front o' Charlie Lowry's house on the very west end of Cedar Street, or 4th Street, in Aitkin. And untied the cow. She got up, stepped out of the boat, and Jake West was waiting with his

¹ Not sure of spelling.

cattle truck, and we loaded the cow in the truck and put the calf in behind her, and that night, we milked her! (Laughs)

A: (Laughs) Quite and experience, I would say! Then you also talked about a pig.

F: Right here, if you look – you can't see with the camera – but right here there's a barn over here. And I. W. Cummings lived there at the time. And he had a large boar pig. And everything was flooded around, and they didn't know what to do with him. So they... a bunch of the farmers got together and they made a makeshift raft out of some logs and fence posts, whatever they could find. And they had a few boards on top, and they put this old pig on top of it, and that's the last they ever saw of him! The current took him away and he went down the river and nobody ever saw him again. So we don't know what happened to Mr. Bull Pig.

A: It must have been a terrible hardship for all the people.

F: It was, but people were very durable and resilient. They could, they were used to living a, not a hard life in a way of life they love, but they were able to take care of themselves quite well. The Red Cross did some work in the area, but it helped some of the people – they built one new home for one family along the river out here. But the people mostly took care of their own needs and did their own, what they had to do to survive the whole thing.

A: Was nearly every house under water at some time?

F: I only know of two houses between Aitkin and the Crow Wing County line that didn't have water over the floor. One was my folks' house, and it was right up to the floor. It bulged the linoleum off the floor. And George Craner's² was the other. And it was just about as high there.

A: Can you remember anything ever like this since then?

F: No, nothing.

A: What did they do to help prevent this from occurring again?

F: Well, after that happened, they put a lot of pressure on the United States Congress, and they got a grant to build a diversion channel, which is approximately 7 miles long. And it's up north of Aitkin. And it cut out, oh, a great many miles of the river, when the water got so high, it would go out through the diversion channel in a straight line. And it relieved some of the pressure of the slow-moving current in this crooked area of the river. And the water could get away much faster.

Fun on the Mississippi

A: What do you remember about some of the fun times on the river?

F: Oh, I caught a lot of... I caught more walleyes by the time I was 13 years old than most people do in their lifetime! And we had a flowing well, and a really big family. And we had a large stock tank. And the water just flowed steady all the time. And so, that's – I'd catch my fish, and run up to the house and put 'em in the stock tank, so we

² Spelled phonetically.

always had fresh walleyes swimmin' in our stock tank whenever we wanted to have walleye to eat.

A: Did you... and you said you swam on the river? Were there other things that people did on the river?

F: Yeah. We had, we usually had an old boat of some kind, and we pulled deadheads from the river. Deadheads, when I talk about deadheads, these are the logs that sank to the bottom during the early 1900s when they had log drives on the river, and some of them got waterlogged and sunk to the bottom. And even today, there's still... the bottom of the river is still full of many of these old logs. And as long as they were covered with water, they were preserved quite well. So we would... they were free for the taking. So if you had means to get 'em up... We did pull some out and had it sawed into lumber, and use it around the farm. So that was one thing. It was kind of fun to do. And anything to get out of milkin' cows, you know!

A: (Laughs) Has the river changed a lot?

F: I think it has. I don't think... I used to catch more walleyes than I can now on the river. I think the flood had a lot to do with that. I think, I don't know where the fish went during the flood. Because you couldn't tell where the, hardly where the river bed was, because the water was goin' right across the country.

A: Were there a couple of famous boaters, or canoers, from the Aitkin area?

F: Oh, yeah! The Heineman brothers were in, oh, I don't know, I think it's Stockton, in 1960s. Minneapolis Aquatennial used to sponsor a canoe race from Bemidji to Minneapolis. You might say, from the source of the Mississippi to Minneapolis, down the Mississippi. And we had two fellows by the name of Heineman that won the Aquatennial Derby. They had a canoe race. And they used to go right by, right where we're at here now, they went right down the river. They went right by our house. We used to go out and wave to all these canoes as they went by. It was quite a thing. That was back in the days when you didn't do a lot of motoring or anything.

A: It was more quiet.

F: It was quiet, and these were pretty hardy folks. That was a long ways to paddle a canoe.

A: Yeah, it was.

The future

A: Do you think the river's going to be here for your great grandchildren, and great great grandchildren? Or do you think there's going to be a lot of changes?

F: No, I think it's going to be here. One thing about... most of the land along the river is in the flood plain area, and it's got some good – I think it's good restrictions on the building. So that people can't build along and erode the banks or cause it to, environmentally hurt it, you know? I think that we're in the right, goin' in the right direction. The headwaters board is taking a pretty good stand on some of the issues regarding the river.

A: Do you have any fears about what might happen? As far as the river goes?

F: I guess my greatest fear that I've had over the years is that pesticides and different chemicals that are being used. I know it can get to be an issue with rice farmers, which we don't have as many as we used to. Where people are overspraying crops, pesticides, and different things that get into the river. I'm a little concerned about that. But it's, it's being watched a little closer now.

A: Do you have a favorite spot on this wonderful Mississippi River of ours?

F: Well, I have, but it's not right here. It's way up north of Palisade. It's called Sander's Ranch. And my dad talked about it back in the... about Sander's Ranch, and it sets by the old Wold ferry landing north of Aitkin. And every time I go by there, I kinda get goosebumps. I just love it. I'd like to live there. I know all the folks that lived there. I went to high school with Doris Dody³ And they live there now, and her folks lived there. And it just does somethin' to me. I just love that place!

A: What do you see as the future of the river? Is it going to play a role, still, in...

F: No, I don't see, except for its historic beauty. And a lot of people have realized how beautiful the Mississippi is. I've canoed it literally every bit of it from Jacobson down through the whole thing, and I've canoed in the Boundary Waters and everything else, and it's great in the Boundary Waters, but it's nice to go down the river when you never know what's going to be around the next bend, you know? I've always liked that.

More flood stories

A: Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

F: Not in particular, except there's a few stories about the flood in '50 that have a little human interest in 'em. There's one fellow that lived just below us, that had about 8 head of cattle. And he became quite frantic when the water came up, and he called my folks and he said "Fred!" he went to my dad, and he said, "I'm gonna shoot my cows! They're gonna drowned anyway, so I'm gonna shoot 'em and put 'em out of their misery."

And my dad said, "Don't do it! I think we can still get a truck through."

So he called up Jake West, and Jake said, "I'll give her a try." So he came out with his 1936 truck with the cattle rack on it. They got down there just in time. Because the neighbor already had a deer rifle out and was standing on the road gettin' ready to shoot his cows. But they did take the cows and got 'em to safety.

Then there was another fellow that lived down there, he had a brand new Chrysler car, and they tried to get him to take it in to town. But he said, "No." He was afraid someone would steal it or somethin' in town, so he left it there. And consequently it flooded and just about totally ruined the car.

And there were a lot of things that happened, you know. A lot of people don't realize, when you have a herd of cattle - these are dairy farmers. And if the water came up, and you had to move 'em, you still had to milk those cows! Wherever they were, no matter where they were. Because if you didn't, they would be miserable, and you didn't have

³ Not sure of spelling.

any income, and everything, and they had to be fed. And a lot of people didn't realize the inconvenience it caused, let alone people with families and children – they had to look out for them at the same time, you know. It wasn't easy. It was real tough.

A: This flood was known to be a hundred-year flood.

F: It's been referred to as a hundred-year flood. And I often wonder. They talk about back in the middle of the last century they had a... they say they had a flood. But before Aitkin, about the time Aitkin was organized, around in the 1870s to the 80s, something like that. That's many years before my time. It would have been interesting to know what really went on then. And it would be interesting to see what, down the road, sometime or another, we're gonna get these same conditions together again. And you may see the same thing, within the next centennial. We're half way there now. We've gone 50 years beyond this one.

A: And you talked about building a barn.

F: Oh!

A: Or were going to build a barn.

F: My father with the help of us boys, we had cut some logs, and we had a fellow by the name of Roy O'Neill at a sawmill across the river. And we had him saw 20-some thousand feet of lumber. My dad was going to build a new barn on the place. And we had it all piled behind the barn, behind in the yard. And when the flood of '50 came, it all floated away! There wasn't a board left! And so, consequently, he kind of gave up. He was getting up in years a little bit, then, too. And he gave up, and the barn was never built. And I think the flood had a little to do with that, too. Took a little of his heart away.

A: I can imagine it must have, for those people.

F: Yeah, it was hard for the people. But they were pretty tough. They all, pert near every one of them without question came back where they came from and dug their heels in, and went back to work again.

Importance of the river

A: When this river, you say it provided water for everybody and all these important things... what would you have done if you didn't have the river?

F: Well...

A: You had to have it in order to survive, basically.

F: It was... it not only served as... I can remember during the '30s, I was just a child or a youngster then, I remember when it was so terribly dry. And the river was a real source. The garden was real important when you had 9 brothers and sisters. It was one of the big things. You bought sugar and salt and maybe part of your flour – we even ground some of our own flour – but, you had to raise a big garden. And I remember we had to carry a lot of water to the garden to make it grow. And so we'd get the vegetables and the things that we needed.

It also acted as a fence. A lot of people don't realize it, but if you had a herd of cattle right here, you didn't only need a fence across there, and a fence across there, and the river acted like a fence on the other side. And then it also watered the cattle. You didn't have... we didn't have electricity, when I was a child. We did after about 1938. But we didn't have electricity, so we had to hand-pump all our water, so it was nice to have the river so the cows could go drink. You'd have had to pump a lot of water by hand.

The 1916 flood and more on the 1950 flood

A: Wow. It's amazing. You talk about the 1916 flood.

F: My mother lived – I don't know if she actually lived on the place where I grew up at that particular time, but my granddad did. And she remembered that the barn – we used to call it the horse barn, 'cause that's where we kept the horses and some of the cattle – and they had to use... that was a real high flood. It was one of the highest floods that she could remember, ever flooding land. And she said they had to use a plank to get into the barn. And I took some photos during the flood in 1950, I measured the water in front of the barn, and it was 4 feet deep there, where there was none in 1916, and the river raised about 1 foot after that, after we took the photos.

A: That is amazing. So the river's been good and bad to all of us, I guess, has it not?

F: Yeah. I think it's been more good than bad. You gotta... no matter where... I lived 10 miles southeast of Aitkin. In 1950 I bought a place out there. It come in kinda handy. My folks could move their cattle out there. But I lived 10 miles out of Aitkin, but in order to get there, we had to drive clear down 169 to Mille Lacs Lake, go east to Wealthwood, come north from Wealthwood up to County Road 28, and travel almost 40 miles to get that 10 miles to where I lived now, so.

And then was... some of the people on the Mississippi that got flooded that spring. People along the tributaries of the river. Cedar Brook was flowing backwards into Cedar Lake. And when you're going west of Aitkin and you cross over where the railroad trestle is? The water, there's a rapids there now. The water was going the other way in 1950. It was going into Cedar Lake.

Where I lived on County Road 12, there's a little fishing bridge along the road as you go out there? The water was over the handrails on that. That's the Ripple River. It was over the handrails. You couldn't drive that road. You had to go around by Diamond Lake and Ripple Lake in order to get into Aitkin. And so it was real hard for people all over the area, there was so much water in the area.

Conclusion

F: My grandparents... my mother's folks name of Schwab – and they were the ones standing right over here. They came from Waukesha, Wisconsin. My granddad had one cow, a team of horses, and one chicken. And this chicken, my granddad and my aunt came first, and they had this one chicken. They'd get an egg every other day. Each one wanted the egg one day, and wanted to get another. Then Chris Lyckoff⁴, my mother's uncle, moved in about a half a mile away, and he had a rooster. So the marriage was

⁴ Spelled phonetically.

consummated and consequently they were able to produce chickens. So they ended up with more chickens! Now I didn't remember this, but this is what was told to me (laughs), and I don't doubt that it happened that way!

A: (Laughs) Anything else that you'd like to share with us today?

F: Oh, not too much, but it's sure nice to be out here.

A: This is something we've not done before, is carry on an interview on location. Yes. And we are looking in the background of our video today – you can actually see the Mississippi River. And we picked a beautiful day to do this. I'm just tickled that it all worked out right. Can you think of anything else, then?

F: I can remember when I used to be able to throw a rock across it! (Laughs) I wouldn't imagine that it's about – what? 100 yards?

A: Pretty close.

F: It varies in areas here. And it's deep. In front of our house, when it's... it's pretty close to normal now. It's probably about normal now. In front of where we live, which is upstream here always, the water is 17 feet deep in front of the house. This is quite deep.

My mother... Another thing I might tell you about the Mississippi. When my mother was a girl and my granddad lived on the Mississippi here, there's an area right where we lived, the Indians used to travel the river. And they would portage across. And they would carry their boat across... it was 7 miles around. But they could portage across, and they'd portage across right over around this bend here. They'd come from where we lived, and they cut off 7 miles of the river. They did that when they were going upriver. When they went down, it was easier, because they could row with the current. When they went upriver, they would portage across it and carry their stuff across the ½ mile, to save paddling against the current for that 7 miles it cut off from the river. That's one reason they had a flood. Because it's so crooked. The water couldn't get away fast enough. Because it had too many crooks and turns in it. That had a lot to do with the flooding.

Fritz' immediate family

A: And you said that you married Louise. What was her...

F: She grew up out in the Glory community out in southeast Aitkin.

A: And how long have you been married?

F: We've been married it would be next... 4 more days and we've been married 52 years.

A: 52 years! And how many children do you have?

F: Four.

A: And are they all in the area?

F: Yeah. They're all... the farthest one away lives at Merrifield⁵ and the other 3 live between our home and Aitkin. We are quite fortunate. Our oldest son is retired from the Navy, and so... they've gotta contend with us, they're awful close by, and we enjoy that very much.

A: You have grandchildren?

F: Yup. 11 grandchildren, and 1 great grandson, and a new great grandchild on the way.

A: And they all live within...

F: No... our grandchildren live in San Diego (tape cuts off here)

(end of side A)

Side B

F: ... he rode every one of them. He rode 'em all the way from here to Grand Rapids and I could remember him and my uncle talkin' hours on end about their experience on the boats, and which ones sunk where, and got run aground in the river. The riverboats worked good when the river was high, but when the river gets real low, you got a hard time with a canoe on it!

A: (Laughs)

F: So it could be treacherous. It's more treacherous when the water level are low. I don't remember... I remember when the, I believe it was the old Oriole, was up at Sandy Lake when I was a child, and they used it for a big restaurant up there. Right up at Libbie, right below the Libbie dam. And I remember, as a child, we went up there. I think we had a 1926 Chevrolet. And we went up there and I remember seeing it, sitting on the edge of the lake up there. It's kind of interesting.

I love those rivers, and I know a lot of other things about the river, and maybe sometime down the road I can... we can get talkin' about some of the things that went on the old ferry crossings and all the things I've studied up on. I even helped map some of the river up north of Sandy Lake, when I worked for the country.

A: I'm thinking about your childhood days, and swimmin' in the river with 17 feet of water...

F: And every once in awhile you had to duck the body of a cow, because that's where they got rid of their dead animals. Rolled 'em over the river bank! (Laughs)

A: And no life jackets.

F: No! We didn't have electricity. I used to catch the light bulbs. When a light bulb burned out in Aitkin they'd throw 'em in the river. And they'd come floating down, and they'd catch in the windfalls alongside the river, so I'd fish 'em out of there. And I used 'em for fish bobbers.

A: (Laughs)

⁵ North of Brainerd

F: You had to be ingenious when we grew up. (Laughs) We used to play baseball right over there. Not too far over there.

(sounds of the crew walking)

A: Thank you very much for allowing us to interview you today. And it's been a treat to learn about the river and all your experiences. And hope this will be of interest to several people down the road when they look back and wonder what life was like on the Mississippi River. Thank you, Fritz Lueck.

(end of side B)

End of tape