Oral History with Wes Morris

Interview conducted with Barb Livdahl October 7, 2011

My parents were Wesley Whitcomb Riley Morris and Edna Morris. My mother was from down near Rochester (MN) and Dad was born on the Morris homestead up by Hare Lake in 1919. He was the youngest of the Morris sons. I was Wesley Whitcomb Riley Morris, Jr. When he died, I dropped the junior. Then later I dropped the Whitcomb. There was Abraham Lincoln Morris – I forget all the ones that were there.

I was born in Two Harbors. They stopped in Little Marais at Merle and Bob Connor’s post office to get coffee and stuff. They come out of the woods and they made it to Two Harbors so I was born in Two Harbors. February 14, 1941.

We were living up on the hill. It was a two-room shack with a small kitchen and a washroom attached to it – kind of a shed washroom – and we had a spring out there that Dad dug down to a well, so we carried water from the spring – winter and summer. We took our baths out in the washroom in a tub. I remember one year living out in that shack – I had to sleep with my two older half-brothers because all we had was two beds – their bed and our bed.

And then every time we would misbehave – of course we wore clothes with suspenders on them – every time we misbehaved we’d get hung on a nail out in the washroom. And we would stay there until we could behave ourselves. I can remember hanging on that nail quite a bit.

As we grew older, the two older boys were leaving home and Mom was pregnant with Edison – that was five years later – Dad took me up to the Morris Homestead and I helped him tear down – actually all I did was pull nails – he tore it down – pull nails out of the boards – he tore down the Morris School. We used a lot of that lumber to build a house and a bunkhouse next to it because Dad was into logging and he had to have somebody else there to log. When Edison was born – we lived in the shack when Mom went to the hospital with Edison. When he came back, he was the first one to move into the new house Dad built. It was a lot bigger but it wasn’t finished yet or anything. That’s where we lived until we moved to Little Marais.

In 1952 we moved to Little Marais because Dad got his first real job there. He had had jobs before, running bulldozer and stuff, but in ’52 he got a job when they started building the townsite in Silver Bay. He got a job running ‘dozer and stuff, clearing the townsite, working down by the highway. So he sold all the lots. The house, I think, he sold to Ellis Lewis. He saved one lot for me. In 1968 when our youngest daughter was being born in Jacksonville, Florida, my aunt Vivian (Johnson) really wanted to come down there and see our youngest daughter being born. So I sent her that deed and power-of-attorney. She sold that lot and she used the money to come to Florida and see our youngest daughter being born. She got three hundred dollars for it.

In 1968, I was home on leave, not long after Tam was born. Tom Allard was selling – he had thirty-eight acres there. Vivian had one acre of the thirty-nine acres. Below the road there is a little V where Gerald Parent had one acre down there. Vivian asked me what I should do. Tord had died and they didn’t have any children.
I said, “Let me go talk to Tom Allard.” I hadn’t thought anything about it – I was going to stay in the Navy forever. I went up and talked to Tom. He said, “Well, I can see – I’d never move Vivian.” I said, “Can I buy the thirty-eight acres?” He said, “Let me figure out how much I’d need for it with the taxes and everything.” I said, “I don’t have that kind of money but I’ll send it to you.” “Sure, whenever you send it.” So I kept sending him money and I bought the thirty-eight acres from him.

The next year I come home on leave and Vivian said, “What am I going to do with this house when I die? I don’t have any children or anything.” I said, “I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You tell me what you want for it and I’ll buy this acre and your house. I’ll give you a lifetime lease on it so it is yours as long as you live. But then there’ll be no argument once you die.” I said, “Get a lawyer – talk to a lawyer – and let me know.” So she did and she said, “The lawyer thinks that’s a great idea.” So then I sent her money and I bought the house and acre from her. Then I called Bill McKeever and I said, “Bill, I need a well drilled out there.” So sure enough, he went out there and he drilled a well. Next time I come home on leave, I put in a sink and stuff for Vivian. Oh, she was mad. “I’ve gone sixty-some years without water. I don’t need no running water.” About two weeks later, she called me. I was down at Washington, D.C. She said, “You know, Riley” – they called me Riley because Wes was Wes – “You know, Riley, I don’t know what I ever did without running water.”

By the time I had retired and come back she had moved into the assisted living in Grand Marais. I said, “I’ll fix it all up and you come back. I’ll build a house.” She said, “No, I’m perfectly comfortable up here. I have friends. I’ll come and visit” – so –

In about ‘88 or ‘87, we tore that house down. It was built about 1916 – I don’t know who it was built by. People weren’t happy about that at the time because it was one of the oldest houses up here, but down it went. As soon as I retired and got back here that summer, come back and started building the house. That is what we did.

Vivian – the oldest girl in the Morris family – she was a schoolteacher. When my grandpa homesteaded up there, with all the siblings coming and stuff, there was other homesteaders back up in that area too, he sent Vivian to Duluth to teacher’s college by rail. That’s all they had. There were no roads back there at the time. When she was gone getting her degree in teacher’s college, he built the Morris School and he had it sanctioned by Lake County. Then she came back and taught the siblings and whatever homesteader’s kids could get in there maybe once a week or four times a week or whatever. She married Tord Johnson – actually Conrad Johnson – Tord Conrad Johnson but he was always Tord. He was the first male schoolteacher in Cramer. All the guys had heard there was a schoolmarm coming to teach school at Cramer and all the homesteaders and loggers were waiting for that train to come in. Here’s this red-headed Norwegian walk off the train. But then the two of them being teachers, they got together over school matters and stuff. Then when Cramer went downhill, the Morris’s moved out. They quit teaching. They got married and they moved up to Wilson Lake and homesteaded up there. I think it was 1921. In 1927, that burned down so in 1927 they moved over to the big lake – Wilson Lake. They built what they called the Cedar Chest. They just got a cedar they cut in the woods and stuff.
There are a lot of fond memories. I was with Vivian and Tord as much as I was with my parents, I think. They were great teachers. From the time I was about five years old, I could tell you every type of tree there is up there – how they grew, where they grew. When I was about eight or nine, I guess, they took me up on Kelso River – she was the first woman fire tower guard up here. Wilson Lake – I remember them telling me about Wilson Lake. When I was two years old, I was playing on the dock. They looked out and I wasn’t there. They all screamed and ran out there. They said I was under the dock, just playing in the water. Vivian reached down and put her hand over my mouth and nose and doped me out and brought me back. I was fine. I didn’t drown that time.

Dad used to pull me out of school, ever since I remember, for at least a week and usually two weeks every spring, to go beaver trapping with him. So he would take me back in the woods and we would go beaver trapping. He would tell me, “You know, son, you can learn more out here in two weeks than you can in the whole damn year in that school.” He’d only gone through the third grade. I did – I learned a lot about the woods. He showed me a lot about the woods. And we trapped everything – not just beaver. We had a buyer that would buy anything whether it was in season or not. We got fisher and otter and beaver and he let me trap muskrats. He showed me one time – he said, “I’ll show you how to trap muskrats one time. Then you are going to set your own traps and skin your own muskrats. Then you’ll get the money for them.” I used to catch muskrats. I think we got a dollar a pelt for muskrats. That was big money back then.

I went to school at the Tofte School until ’52. Up there I think it was Gertrude Linnell who was my schoolteacher. Glen and Florence Austin. Glen was the school bus driver. Florence was cooking and so was Mrs. Monson – Priscilla Revier’s mother. I was in the second grade for two or three months and Gertrude told my mother that I was bored and I knew the stuff, so she put me up in the third grade for the rest of the year. I made it there and entered the fourth grade the next year. So I actually kind of skipped the third grade. Then in ’52, I went to what is now the Green Door in Beaver Bay. That was the Beaver Bay School. That is when they were building the [Silver Bay] townsite and stuff. And from there to Two Harbors. So I went from Little Marais to Two Harbors every day all through high school. I graduated in 1958 which was the last class from up on this end of Lake County to graduate from Two Harbors. We were one class ahead of the classes that graduated from the Silver Bay school. So we were the last class from up here to graduate from Two Harbors. I was the first one of the Morris boys that graduated, so I thought that was pretty good.

I worked that summer up at the forestry, planting trees. I worked with Floyd Peterson and all kinds of people -Red Gervais. Then I seen an ad in the paper that said, “See the world. Join the Navy.” I thought that might be all right. I had a friend in Little Marais – or more toward Silver Bay by Illgen City – Stanley Sundae. We got together and we decided that would be a good thing. We’re going in the Navy. So I went into the Navy the first of December 1958. And I seen the world – a lot of places. I had my twenty in. I retired the fifteenth of June in 1977. They would have moved me anywhere in the free world I wanted to go and I knew where I wanted to go. I come back.

There are 19 pages to Wes Morris’s wonderful oral history. To watch the entire oral history go to Minnesota Reflections website reflections.mndigital.org and search Schroeder Area Historical Society Oral History.
New News

Minnesota Quilter of 2017 Karen McTavish shares her exquisite quilts at CRHC on July 29

Sponsored by Arrowhead Electric Cooperative Operation Round Up

2017 Quilt Raffle

Rainbow Dreams quilt creator Nancy Hansen. The quilt drawing is November 18, 2017 at 2:00 pm at the Holidays in Schroeder event at Cross River Heritage Center.

In September 2015, a “Quilt In” was held at the Lutsen Town Hall, sponsored by Beth Blank who furnished all the fabrics. Ten Quilters participated in the two-day program. Fourteen quilts were eventually completed, all donated for charitable purposes. Recipients included a Grand Marais Veteran at the Veteran’s Home in Silver Bay and a flood victim in Kentucky. Several were delivered to the local Care Center, some were donated to a program for homeless vets, and others were given to the Protect Linus program for children in hospitals.

Annual Meeting and Community Supper June 24

Schroeder Area Historical Society President, Greg Fangel, was the featured speaker at SAHS Annual Meeting. He spoke about the history of skiing and skis in Minnesota.

Beer and Wine Tasting
September 28, 2017
6:30 pm – 8:30 pm
Tickets:
$25 in advance
$30 at the door
Cross River Heritage Center
Voyageur Brewery
and North Shore Winery sponsors
Lundie Tour director Steve Lukas with family and friends and a Lundie home stop.

Another glorious spot on the Lundie Tour.

Darryl and Diane Sannes are enjoying the landscape.

The great view and geology form the foundation of this impressive home.

In Memory of Jim Norvell

Jim Norvell died the morning of 7/11/17. He was on the SAHS board and Finance Committee and worked with the Friends Campaign. He loved SAHS. He used to be the tour guide for the school kids at Baraga Cross. He always had a crisp $5 bill in his pocket and surprised a lucky school kid with the $5 dollar bill if they answered his secret question correctly. Jim Norvell helped with the grilling for the Lundie Tour picnic. His wife, Judy baked the rhubarb pies for the picnic supper.

Peter O’Toole discusses the art of his Ed-win Lundie book surrounded by the art of quilts.
Schroeder Area Historical Society

Fiber Arts and Needlework Gallery
May 26–July 31

A square of Olive Aldinger’s award winning quilt.

Zoar Luther Church quilters created a heritage quilt.

Here are two of Beth Blank’s treasured quilts.

CRHC Artist Gallery August 1–October 21

Bruce Palmer paints Temperance River

With nine sewing machines and as many quilters, Coralyn Koschinska teaches Quilting with Leftovers to an eager group on July 15.

Former ski coach of local Olympian Cindy Nelson, Margaret Rasmussen shared her stories at CRHC on August 9.

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Thursday, September 28, 2017
6:30 pm – 8:30 pm
25$ in advance $30 at the door
Cross River Heritage Center
Voyageur Brewery and North Shore Winery sponsors
Schroeder Area Historical Society

Upcoming 2017 Events at Cross River Heritage Center


September 2 10 am Sandi Pillsbury Gredzens Plein Art Demonstration

September 23 9 am Paint a card with Trish Hunter $10 for half hour session call 218-663-7706 for details

September 28 6:30 pm – 8:30 pm Wine and Beer Tasting sponsored by Voyageur Brewing and North Shore Winery

September 30 11 am Marcia Anderson A Bag Worth a Pony Book Signing

October 21 Closing Day

November 18 10:00 am–2:00 pm Holidays in Schroeder Sale and Quilt Drawing 2pm

Memberships

Name:__________________________________________  Visa__________________Master Card________
Address:________________________________________ Card Number______________________________
City:____________________________________________ Expiration Date ________Security Code________
State:__________ Zip Code:______________
Telephone:_______________________________________ Please make check payable to: SAHS
E-mail:__________________________________________

Annual Memberships run from December 31 to December 31

_____ Renewing Member   _____ New or Gift Membership

_____ Annual Membership   $25  _______ Donation

Mail to: SAHS P.O. Box 337 Schroeder, Mn 55613

Saturday, September 30

11 am

Marcia Anderson A Bag Worth a Pony Book Signing
SAHS Vision and Mission Statement

Vision: Draw from the past, bring to life in the present, preserve for the future.

Mission: The mission of the Schroeder Area Historical Society located in the Cross River Heritage Center is to research, document, record, and preserve the unique history of the Schroeder area and the North Shore of Lake Superior.

SAHS goals are to:

- Collect local artifacts and oral histories and preserve them appropriately.
- Develop and present exhibits that will inform and engage visitors.
- Provide insight and reference for future generations.
- Build community
- Partner with other local organizations
- Ensure financial solvency
- Maintain a strong corps of active volunteers.