

Interview with Erick Melin

July 24, 1978

Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection

St. Cloud State University Archives

Interviewed by John LeDoux and Mark Stone

LeDoux: This is an interview being conducted for the Central Minnesota Historical Center and the date is July 24, 1978. We are now talking with Mr. Erick Melin. And that last name is spelled M-O--

Melin: M-E-L-I-N.

LeDoux: M-E-L-I-N. Okay, we got it confused with the other pronunciation. Okay, and you have been a life-long resident of this area or you were born here?

Melin: Yes.

LeDoux: Whereabouts—which direction is that?

Melin: Ah, about a mile southwest of here.

LeDoux: Okay, and you farmed here all of your life then?

Melin: Yeah.

LeDoux: Okay. Were your parents born in this country?

Melin: No, they were born in Sweden.

LeDoux: Okay. Do you know about what area of Sweden they came from originally?

Melin: Ah, Vstjotland.

LeDoux: Oh, can you spell that for us? The transcribers going to love this.

Melin: Well, I don't know whether it tart with a V or a W, but it would be V-S-T-J-O-T-L-A-N-D. Something like that.

LeDoux: Uh-huh.

Melin: That's as close as I know.

LeDoux: Okay. Do you know roughly what year or what decade they came over to America?

Melin: Ah, my dad came here in about 1897 or 1898. My mother came here later in 1903.

Stone: And for the record, could you give us their names?

Melin: Yes. Her name was Augusta. My dad's name was Karl.

LeDoux: Okay. And what was the date of your birth for the record then?

Melin: March 26, 1904.

LeDoux: Okay. And you were born on the farm—on your folks' farm?

Melin: Yes, in a little log house up there.

LeDoux: Oh. When your folks came here, did they—did your father move directly to Minnesota, or did he--

Melin: Yes, he came here. He had two relatives here that were here before.

LeDoux: Oh, uh-huh.

Stone: With the same last name—Melin?

Melin: Ah, no. Their name was Palm. A sister that...they had a sister that was married to a man by the name of Palm. So they were—that was their name, Sven Palm.

LeDoux: Okay. And did you attend school then in Long Prairie or was it a country school or--

Melin: No, a country school just a mile north of here.

LeDoux: Okay. Now your wife, is she also Swedish?

Melin: No, she's Danish.

LeDoux: She's Danish.

Melin: Yeah.

LeDoux: Ah, do you know anything about her background? Were her parents born here?

Melin: Ah yes, they were born in southern Minnesota—down around Casson, I think.

LeDoux: Okay. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about the background of the church. Now we were talking with Reverend Owens regarding the fact that Reynolds was a daughter church from Alexandria. Now, do you recall or do you have knowledge of whether the settlers here asked for a church here, or whether the mother church founded one here? Do you have any idea?

Melin: I don't really know. I would presume though that there were a few Baptists who settled right around the Church here, and I think it was their desire to build the church, although they did

get help from the Alexandria church. In fact, we had pastors that came from Alexandria here to begin with before we had a pastor of our own.

LeDoux: Okay. Ah, was your father instrumental in founding the church? Was he one of the founders?

Melin: Ah, he was one of the early members, but not a charter member. That is, there was others that had started it before that.

Stone: Okay. The church was begun in 1896, according to the records, and your father came over you said, either that year or the following year.

Melin: Yes. Somewhere near that, yeah. But he, ah, the time he came here of course, he was a Lutheran at the time, and he worked out at—in different places—went up into out in the prairies and up in the northern part of the state—up in the Red River Valley working before my mother came here.

Stone: Uh-huh. Do you remember him relating anything about Sweden and the—the State Church, the State Lutheran Church there?

Melin: Yes, ah, he was glad to get away from it. (Laughter)

LeDoux: So that was the major reason why you came over then, to—for religious freedom, do you think or--

Melin: Well, I don't know. For one thing, they were just ah -- they didn't have any land or anything or they just worked for bigger landowners you know. I think it was mostly to try to get something for themselves, you know, to make—to make a new home.

Stone: How much land did he claim here, then?

Melin: Just 80 acres.

Stone: 80 acres. And do you know where the land for this church came from? Was it a member that donate it?

Melin: It ah -- I'm not just positive. There was another Palm that lived on this next place here. His name was Andrew Palm, but I wouldn't say for sure. It might be that ah—that there was somebody else that lived there before that. I wouldn't know, that of course was quite a while before my time. But it came off from this farm that is to the west of us here. And it was donated, I'm sure, at the time.

LeDoux: Uh-huh. Ah, who were some of the families in this area that most probably would have founded the church or started it? Do you recall which ones they might have been?

Melin: Well, there was the Palm family and ah, then my dad's brother – William Melin was here before -- he came to this country before my dad, and he was one of them. And then there was some Larson's and Peterson's, far as I know.

LeDoux: Uh-huh. When was the area settled largely – the area around the church? Now, you mentioned your father's brother had been here for some time. Do you know when it was originally settled here?

Melin: Ah, I would think in the late 1800's or maybe 1900.

LeDoux: Maybe late 1880s – early 1890s.

Melin: Some – Somewhere in there, yeah.

LeDoux: Uh huh, okay. So the church was started in about 1896. Do you have any idea how... of your father telling you how large the church was when it was first started – how many families were in the area that were belonging to the church?

Melin: Well, I would – I would have an idea -- probably 10 or 12 families, something like that.

Stone: Uh-huh. Do you know when the actual church was built? Ah, you were born in 1904. Are your earliest memories of the church in this building or--

Melin: Yes. It was in – in this main part. This part here was built on later, you can see that. But I just mentioned to the fellows, that's the first thing I could remember was that I sat on my mother's lap up in that old building there. My memory goes back that far. So I was probably about 3 – 4 years old at the time.

LeDoux: Now, did ah – did some of the earlier members meet in the home originally before the church was being built or--

Melin: Yes. They started Sunday school, and met in the home – this home that's just north of us here on the west side of the road. That's where they had Sunday school to start with.

Stone: Do you remember their name?

Melin: Petersons was their name, yeah.

Stone: Peterson.

LeDoux: Do you recall the man's name that -- the Peterson that originally lived there during that time?

Melin: Karl Peterson.

LeDoux: Karl Peterson.

Melin: Yeah.

LeDoux: Okay. Ah let's see the church was, and this is the original building that was built in 1896 – this church ere or was it--

Melin: I don't suppose the records show that, do they?

LeDoux: This is the original building though – this church.

Melin: Yeah.

Owens: Did you want to find out from here?

LeDoux: Ah, well, I was just wondering if for example, some churches burned down in the early 1900's and there was second buildings. But this is the one that was originally built?

Melin: This is the original building.

LeDoux: Okay.

Melin: Oh, yeah.

LeDoux: Okay.

Melin: Yeah.

Stone: And when was the addition put on – when was that built?

Melin: Ah, 19 – I would say what – 1964, 1966, wasn't it?

Owens: I think someone said '61 or '62.

Melin: Maybe it was that early, huh. Well, it's ah...

Owens: I don't know

Melin: I'm not sure. My memory -- I'll tell you I can remember way back, but...

LeDoux: What are some of your -- you mentioned your earliest memory of the church. What was the area like in those days that you remember -- this would have been the early 1900s? Was the church any different than it is today -- going to church and church activities?

Melin: Well, one of the things that stands out in my mind -- 'course that carried over from the Old Country -- the ladies all sat on one side of the church and the men on the other.

LeDoux: Oh.

Melin: And that went on for years and years.

Stone: Uh-huh.

LeDoux: Oh. This was a carry-over from -- from Sweden?

Melin: Yes.

LeDoux: Hum. And this was up until roughly what decade -- what year would you say this was done -- into the '30s maybe or--

Melin: Well, until I was a teenager which would probably be close to the '30's, yes. Until it entirely changed. Some couples would change it, you know, from time to time -- go over and sit down together, you know.

LeDoux: Might have been kind of a gradual process then in changing, huh?

Stone: Were you taught Swedish by your parents?

Melin: Yes.

Stone: And did you understand the services going on in Swedish during church?

Melin: Oh, yes.

Stone: Do you recall – we asked the pastor this – but do you recall about what year they stopped using the Swedish service and went to English?

Melin: In the early '30's.

LeDoux: Okay. And you were baptized ah... or became a member in Swedish, then?

Melin: Yes.

LeDoux: Uh-huh. Okay. Do you remember among – oh like among -- with your father or some of the older members of the church at that time, was ah – were they kind of resistant to switching to English, or did it kind of bother them at times or--

Melin: Oh yes. Some of the older members were very, very much against that. They tried it different times, but ah they ah -- in the face they didn't change completely over until the English, and until some of these older members had passed away, you might say 'cause--

LeDoux: Did they hold, like for example, occasional services in Swedish for them?

Melin: Yes, they did for a long time. They had one – one Swedish service a month. But then there was only probably a handful of those older couples that would come out, which proved it was just time to change you know.

LeDoux: I wonder -- oh, excuse me.

Stone: Were there a lot of traditions that were carried on like that, such as the Christmas – specific Swedish Christmas service?

Melin: Oh yes. We always had the early Christmas morning service -- or they called it Julotta at that time of course.

Stone: Julotta.

Melin: That was the early that -- carried on.

LeDoux: I was wondering too, how many pastors as the – as the years wore on were they very well versed in Swedish to be able to preach these services? Do you suppose that might have had something to do with it too, or-- Or did most of the later ones -- were they quite fluent in Swedish also?

Melin: No, we had one pastor here – about the first pastor that I remember very well, his name was Pombregia. He ah – he could preach only in Swedish. He could talk English, but not to preach it from the pulpit. And ah – then ah he preached in Swedish, and of course he has a pastor, a fellow from Long Prairie and hold English services.

LeDoux: Oh.

Melin: So ah -- and he preached one Sunday a month Swede for quite a few years. He's an older – older pastor; he passed away. He lived right up on this place north of us here.

Stone: Can – can you ah -- was this about the Swedish arrangement?

LeDoux: Yeah. So for a time there were two pastors in effect.

Melin: Yes, yes.

LeDoux: Did this continue for a number of years?

Melin: Yes, up until – I would say about 1930. Then we ah – then we hired a young man together with the Baptist Church in Long Prairie, and he could talk Swedish, but not too well. From then on, it was – it went to the English language.

LeDoux: So this change over would've started maybe just before 1920, or was it later than that, do you think?

Melin: Oh no, about the 30s, I think when they – when they went completely to the -- was the Swedish--

LeDoux: About the 30s.

Melin: That's about the time we changed the name of the church, too. It was – before that it was the Swedish Baptist Church, and then we changed it to the Reynolds Baptist Church. And that of course was one of the things that the older members fought the hardest – to get the Swedish name out of it. But it was – we felt that it was a hindrance to the non-speaking people that settled around us, you know.

LeDoux: I wanted to ask that also. Do you feel in the early days it might have been difficult, oh for a non-Swedish member to have been accepted, or a non-Scandinavian member to have been accepted in the church?

Melin: Oh yes, very much so.

LeDoux: Uh huh. And that was part of the reason that it was changed, then?

Melin: Yes.

LeDoux: Okay.

Stone: We were wondering if you might dig as far as you can to when you were a child and give us an idea of what the -- kind of activities were around here. Now, I would assume that the church was kind of the center for all the families to get together and have a social and things. Do you remember the kind of socials you had and the kind of foods? Were they basically traditional foods, or Swedish?

Melin: Well, I would presume so. We -- at ah -- we had much easier for getting an attendance in those days than we actually do now, because for one thing, people didn't have the cars they do now and most of them either drove horse and buggy or walked. And that helped the church attendance here.

LeDoux: Okay, regarding the change now. Originally it was called the—just the Swedish Baptist Church.

Melin: Yes.

LeDoux: Was that full name of it?

Melin: Yes. Well, possibly Reynolds Swedish Baptist Church. I—I think it was. Yeah, 'cause this is Reynolds Township that the church is situated in.

LeDoux: I see, okay. So there's no actual town of Reynolds then, or was there at one time?

Melin: Well, there was a small one -- town up here. But that actually went by the name of Gutches Grove.

LeDoux: Gutches Grove?

Melin: Gutches Grove, yes.

LeDoux: How is that spelled?

Melin: Oh, J-U-T-C-H-E-S, isn't it?

Owens: G.

LeDoux: And there's nothing -- there's no grove -- there's nothing left there anymore?

Melin: --Grove.

Owens: The creamery is there.

Melin: The creamery.

LeDoux: I see.

Owens: And several homes.

LeDoux: Uh-huh. Okay now, for quite a while then, Reynolds shared a pastor with long Prairie then?

Melin: Yes.

LeDoux: Okay. And this was up until how long ago?

Melin: Well, that was quite a number of years. I would say—I would think until about in the '50s. Then we moved a little building down here for a parsonage, and had our own pastor.

And then we had a past-then we shared this pastor with a little community up—called Clotho, where this pastor here would run over there and preach. But that church has been closed for a few years now.

LeDoux: Uh-huh. Ah, at any time did Reynolds share a pastor with Alexandria?

Melin: No, they've always been a lot larger church.

LeDoux: I was wondering if anyone sent—if the pastor used to come from Alexandria to here in early days?

Melin: In the early days, they did. When this church was first ah—first started here, why there was different ones that came from Alexandria to speak here.

Stone: Ah, I wonder if you -- maybe if you might recall the Depression. Now, you were about 25, 26 when it really hit.

LeDoux: Yeah.

Stone: How did that affect you and your friends and your father, and how did it affect the church directly as well?

Melin: Well, it affected all of us of course, in the 30s there. And ah... financially. I don't think it affected us spiritually any, but it ah -- we had a pastor together with Long Prairie at first at that time and of course they were the bigger of the two churches, although they were not of the same Conference. They are a Conservative Baptist Church there, where we are Conference Baptist, we call ours, of course. But it was difficult even to find money to pay the pastor, naturally.

Stone: Uh- huh.

Melin: Because there wasn't any money.

LeDoux: Has the church here remained fairly stable as far as the number of members through the area, or were there times when it declined sharply or grew sharply or--

Melin: Well, I don't know if it --'cause ah -- I think there's been a gradual decline over the years. The fact that the younger people that grow up here, of course, hadn't settled—very few of them in this community. The young people naturally would go to the cities or someplace for work, you know.

Stone: Uh- huh.

Melin: And that's the trend for most country churches, that is because their young people leave for--- for work and to start their homes someplace else.

LeDoux: Uh-huh. Was that a reason, do you think, they had to close another church at Clotho?

Melin: Well, possibly not. There was actually only two or three families there that were the background of that, and there just wasn't enough to keep it going there.

LeDoux: Uh-huh. Mark, did you have any questions?

Stone: Yeah. Did you—do you have any children, and could you--

Melin: No, no we don't have any children.

Stone: I see. Okay, do you still retain the full 80 acres that your father had?

Melin: Yes.

Stone: I see. And then you had no brothers that had it had to be—that it had to be divided amongst?

Melin: No. I'm ah -- I had two sisters. One of them passed away in the early 1900s – 1903, in fact. And then I had an older sister, but she moved to St. Paul and married and lived there. And ah -- but she was—she's passed away too at this time. So, I'm the only one.

LeDoux: We asked you earlier a little bit about the Depression, and I was wondering ah, since the church here, I presume, always paid its own pastor, to your knowledge?

Melin: Yes. Well, it's a--

LeDoux: Particularly during the Depression, was there any trouble in maintaining a pastor here?

Melin: Oh yes. There's been—there was times when it was difficult, but we never did ask for any help from our State Conference at any time.

LeDoux: Okay. As far as the ethnic make-up of the area, is it still predominantly Swedish around here?

Melin: No, very ah -- there isn't actually -- well, there are some families left, but I mean, I think it's pretty much a mixture of everything now.

LeDoux: When did that change occur? When was it not predominantly Swedish?

Melin: Well, I would say that happened pretty much in the --say in—in the 30s – the 30s and 40's. As the older families, of course, passed away and the places were sold, why other people came in and brought up, and it's a mixture.

LeDoux: Uh huh.

Melin: Different nationalities now—possibly mostly German, I think, that have settled here.

LeDoux: Uh huh.

Stone: Do you still have friends from the old days that you can speak Swedish with, or have you forgotten if basically?

Melin: Well, I had a brother-in-law that was married to my wife's sister that -- we could talk Swedish back and forth. But, it's not as fluent as we -- Then he passed away a year ago, so--

Stone: Uh --huh. I'd like to back up just once more to your country school days. Were the children there basically Swedish, or was there quite a mixture?

Melin: No, there was quite a mixture there of the -- I would say mostly German families, and then a few Swedish families. The fact was that when I started school I couldn't talk a word of English, because my folks talked Swedish entirely at home, you know.

Stone: Did they do that until their death or did they learn English?

Melin: Ah, later my dad learned English of course quite well because he had to...my mother never did learn English real well. She was hard of hearing most of her later years, and I think that was ah, the drawback.

Stone: Would you excuse me, would you say that that is the school was the basic reason that all your children of that time learned English—that, that you wanted one basic language for everyone—that ah everyone could converse with?

Melin: Well, I don't know. Well, of course it gives the young -- younger people that came from these different nationalities ah -- or they ah -- when they mixed, it helped the younger people of

course, the young people of course, or the children to ah – to mix you know, which they wouldn't have don't if they'd have been in their own homes of course.

Stone: Ah, are you familiar at all with the name of Rachey in Little Falls, or I mean Long Prairie?

Melin: Yes.

Stone: Okay. Ah, did – does that family name date back to this area?

Melin: I don't think so. There was a Mrs. Rachey that was a teacher here at one time, but ah, that was after I -- that's only been, oh maybe, I would say in the 50s – somewhere in there.

LeDoux: Ah, just briefly, I'm wondering if you can give us some of the impressions on how the church has changed over the years, either in the way ah -- manner of the services or just anything that comes to mind – how it seems different today than the ways it was or--

Melin: I would say very little.

LeDoux: Has the church stayed about the same then, you think, as far as the size of members and the way services are conducted?

Melin: I would say so traditionally. I think it's the same, of course, except that it's all in the English language now. It's – it's the same.

Stone: Would you say the church has pretty much supplied all the people around here with ah, the real basics of spiritual needs or would you say that if this church wasn't here – was never created that there would be really a large gaping hole in the social thing around here?

Melin: Well, I don't know about the social, because our church has never been the type of a church that has had a lot of social activities, but I ah – I think that's true of any church – that if they weren't there, why it would be a -- make quite a difference in any community. I think it always was here to fill the spiritual need if they wanted to use it, but of course where you have different denominations, then the -- then several churches in the town of Long Prairie, of course, some of the people have gone there, naturally, to their churches there – you know their own denominations, and ah--

LeDoux: You mentioned once that with the advent of automobiles and better transportation, people were moving back around more, young people were moving out a little bit more. Do you think that this has hurt this church at all – in, not in recent years, but going back a ways -- start membership – did they start going to Long Prairie more or--

Melin: Well, I don't think that we had lost too many to Long Prairie. They -- most of the younger people that have left have possibly gone to St. Paul or Minneapolis or different places you know, to find work. And ah, that – that of course has -- but then that ah, is just a natural thing for a country church.

LeDoux: Mark, did you have any other questions?

Stone: No.

LeDoux: Ah, Mr. Melin, is there anything that we haven't asked you that you'd like to add on the tape before we go or--

Melin: No, I believe not.

LeDoux: Okay. Okay, that concludes this interview.