

Martha Robinette Transcript

CK. The following interview was recorded on September 13, 2015 at the home of Martha Robinette in Alpena, Michigan. Martha reminisces about her seventh and eighth grade years, in 1939 and 1940, when she attended Rock Valley School, a one room school house in Krakow Township located in Presque Isle County. The interview is conducted by Cindy Kus.

How far was your home away from the school?

MR. My actual home was about three miles from there; but my grandmother lived about mile and a half from. I had . . . At the age of 13 ½, I had to go and live with her because she was widowed.

CK. Oh, ok.

MR. And of course, there was no telephones or, you know, where she could call for help- so someone always had to be with her.

CK. And you were the only one that lived with her?

MR. Yes.

CK. Ok. And so you said her house was one mile?

MR. From the school, yeah, at least a mile from the school.

CK. And did you walk there?

MR. Yes. I walked.

CK. In winter and all year 'round. (chuckles)

MR. Uh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

CK. Ok. Ok.

MR. And it had the grades from one to the eighth grade.

CK. Ok.

MR. And I only went to school there in the last two years of my school, 7th and 8th grade.

CK. Where did you go to school before that?

MR. St. Casimir's in Posen.

CK. Ok. So, did you start going to that school because . . .

MR. Of Grandmother.

CK. Oh, I see, I see. So you had already had a good foundation before you started going to - Rock Valley?

MR. Yeah. Mm hm.

CK. Rock Valley.

MR. And I was the only 7th grade student, and in the 8th grade, there was a boy that, uh, came because his parent, his father was working on US 23 that was being constructed that year.

CK. What year was that?

MR. That was between '39, uh, and '40.

CK. Wow.

MR. Because, you know, school starts September, it was '39, by May I got out of school, out of the 8th grade, and that, that was 1940.

CK. So, can you describe the setting of this school? Was it . . .

MR. It was, uh, very simple on the outside, more like . . . like just a . . . a small home. You would reach . . . There were little flat porch in the front, and in the back attached right to the schoolroom was a wood shed, where the wood was kept, because we had a wood burning stove.

CK. And did the teacher start the fire in the morning to keep it warm?

MR. Either the teacher or one of the, uh, boys would come and start the fire, the 8th graders.

CK. What time did you start?

MR. We started at uh, at uh, I believe it was . . . either eight or nine, that I can't remember now. I know the St. Casimir's school started, we had to be there at eight.

CK. What time did it go through?

MR. Uh, 'till four.

CK. 'Till four, that was a full school day . . . and there was just one teacher?

MR. Yes, at the Rock Valley school was one teacher, yeah. St. Casimir's was nuns . . .

CK. Ok.

MR. That were teaching.

CK. Right. And that one teacher was there for a long time, do you know or...?

MR. No, he . . . it was probably his first assignment, because he was a very young teacher. And . . . but he was a very good teacher. Before that, they had some that the kids kinda ruled the roost, that's what I heard from . . . from the others that sometimes they fooled the teacher – Ah, if they, ah, were given an assignment, let's say for Monday? And they would tell her Monday that that wasn't the page. You know, they kinda like, because they told me that they did that – they were surprised because this teacher was very alert.

CK. He was sharp.

MR. We teased him that he had eyes on the back of his head because he could be looking there at the board, seemingly, and he knew if one of the children was behave, misbehaving or teasing one another or something.

CK. So, I'm curious, how could one teacher teach eight grades at one time?

MR. Well, I – I think he had us sort of on a, a . . . schedule that he went by, with starting with this grade, and this grade and I think he started with the 8th and 7th graders, and then, when it got down to the lower grades, ah, he would probably be working with one, 5th grade or 6th grade, and if I got my assignment done, he would ask me to go and help with the slower learning, like spelling – I was teaching children to spell.

CK. Oh, that's a good method to use.

MR. Number . . . Yeah, I enjoyed it. It was a, it was, you know, it didn't bother me at all – I liked that, I liked that part.

CK. And did you have a recess time?

MR. Yes, we had recess for 15 minutes. And uh, there was no, not much trees or anything, so the yard was quite clear around the school, we could play ball and, we could, you know, of course there . . . all these different ages that were playing, you know, but, uh . . .

CK. Did the older kids kind of look after the younger ones?

MR. Yes, and if some of the boys liked to tease some of the younger ones-

CK. Mmhuh.

MR. - us older ones, especially the girls, we would put a stop to it by threatening to go and tell the teacher.

CK. Ok.

MR. So there was – and it didn't take much to do that. And of course, the woodshed was the place where the, um discipline -

CK. Took . . .

MR. Yes. And I don't think that only one time, one of – one of the boys, the oldest one in the 8th grade, ah kind of like, sassed the teacher and raised his hand and the teacher said, "We're going to the woodshed". And it sounded like he was, when the kid – ah, paddling; but sometimes I wondered if he didn't talk to the kid a little bit and then just made it sound like it. But it worked with that boy, he never, if he did give him, he give him just one, you know - because there was a change in the child after he came out. And then nothing was said in the room, no cutting down, you know. But, uh, that was a – every child knew, that if you misbehaved, that meant that you had to go in the woodshed with the teacher, and the paddle was there. It might sound cruel, but children need to know and carry out what is expected of 'em.

CK-What subjects did they teach as this school?

MR. We had what would be really referred to -reading, writing and arithmetic. And in reading, you read geography, um, there was one other one that we had, where you - I don't know how it was termed now, I kind of forgot, where you, verbs and adverbs, adjectives . . .

CK Grammar. Grammar?

MR. I guess that's what it would be. Yeah, mm hm. Yeah.

CK. And were . . . What was the background of most of the students who were there? Were . . . did they come . . . It was in Posen, so was it

MR. Yeah, they were farmers, most of them, yes. They were farmers.

CK. Mm hm. And mostly Polish, would you say? Or, a blend?

MR. Ah, they were probably half and half, 'cause, see, Millers were German, they didn't speak Polish. And, uh, there was a boy, at least for sure one boy, that his last name was Miller, and, and that 8th grade boy, had, because of the construction, his parents and them moved temporarily in that area and they were from River Rouge – isn't there one near Detroit?

CK. Detroit, mm hm.

MR. Yeah. That's where he came from.

CK. And where-

MR. And so he wasn't Polish.

CK. All right. Where did he live?

MR. Um, I don't know really, he lived somewhere in the neighborhood, they must have rented a, a place, you know.

CK. So, back to the school itself – did it, did it have running water?

MR. Uh, no, we had to have a pail of water. And also, um . . . all at once it left me now . . . hm.

CK. Did it have a . . . did it have a water pump? Like-

MR. Outdoors, yeah. Mm hm.

CK. And an outhouse?

MR. Outhouse was just an ordinary outhouse, yeah.

CK. Ok . . .

MR. A little ways away from the school. Even like . . . That was the only place we went, because, you know, it wasn't night time, it was daytime, school. I can't think of that, what I had, what I was going to say.

CK. Ok, maybe it'll come back to you.

MR. Yeah.

CK. Did the school have a bell?

MR. Yes. I don't know if they used that one or the teacher at least used a bell. To, you know, to announce the start of the school.

CK. And what, what color was the school?

MR. That one was white.

CK. White?

MR. On the outside, yeah.

CK. Do you know if it's still there?

MR. It's still there, but it was converted to a home. Somebody lives in there, because the school is no longer there.

CK. Were there homes close to the school?

MR. Uh, there was one on the corner. And, uh, I don't know, you probably are not familiar with that area at all, but that home, that was called, because there were Meeshak – M-i-s-i-a-k, they were living on the corner, and the people always referred that - to that as Misiak's corner. That that's when they say where you're going to school, you know, the school by Misiak's corner.

CK. Did many people have cars at that time? Or were there horse and buggies, or . . .

MR. Not, not much horse and buggies, just winter sometimes sleigh was used, you know, with horses. Um, but not for me, because Grandma didn't have that, you know. But when I went to St. Casimir's, that's how on a kind of a bad day, my Dad would take the sled, big sleigh, with the horses, and it was still dark and we were going to school. You know, that was kind of a treat, to get a sleigh ride, because most of the time, you walk, I'd walk behind my brother, that's how Dad told me, because I was younger than that brother, and he would make the (thumps table), and he - Dad would say, "You step in his foot prints".

CK. So, I don't think I asked you, how many kids, total, would you say were at that school? Just a guess -

MR. Not any more than between eight . . . 18 and 20 probably. Yeah. That's, I - I - maybe some schools had more, but we didn't. There'd always only be like 3, 4 kids in - in each room, might have been maybe 22, but I never really remembered, I'd have to sit there and count 'em now and I don't know if I'd remember all of 'em.

CK. So, did you bring a . . .

MR. Because I was the only 7th grader, and at that time, the girl that was ahead of me was the only one in the 8th grade; but then when I got into the 8th grade, she was out, you know, but this boy, (tap, tap, tap), um, yeah.

CK. River Rouge.

MR. Yeah.

CK. Came. So, how did you deal with meals, or lunch?

MR. Everybody brought their own lunch. And, uh, one of the things that us kids really liked, and not everybody did that because it was a kind of a touchy thing about carrying an egg, but, we'd, um, bring an egg and put it in the humidifier on the stove was attached with a open top there was water in there

and that water would get hot. And if we put that egg in when we got to school at eight, nine o'clock, ah, by noon, lunchtime, our egg was hard boiled. It was kind of a treat, you couldn't do it every day, but or because, you know even parents wouldn't, uh, and some of 'em wouldn't be, if they had to walk further than I did, or younger, they probably wouldn't be trusted with raw egg, you know. But it was a treat. Yeah, everybody brought lunch. And there was some family that was kind of poor, there was quite a few and it was a stepmother involved in there, and because a mother had died, and they wouldn't have lunch pail. Sometimes they had, they might have got it from relative, because a lot of Detroit or farther, they had newspapers – and, and they would pass them on to us - not the same day naturally, they had comics that they wrapped their lunch in, not no plastic bag or fancy, uh, you know, lunch pail. And, uh – but not all the children, but I remember maybe there was nothing else to wrap it, and that's what they sent there and ate. Sometimes they even had pancakes, cold pancakes.

CK. Hm.

MR. So . . .

CK. Was the stove . . . big? What can you . . . describe the stove.

MR. Well, it kept the room real warm, so it wasn't, it was like a one room, so it didn't need a real big – course the places weren't insulated like they were later, but it was brown metal, like, you know, it be painted or something, uh, probably about so high, and maybe that wide.

CK. And what did you do with all –

MR. It was in the middle of the room, so that distributed the heat all around.

CK. Evenly, yeah.

MR. Yeah.

CK. Yeah. And how were the desks arranged?

MR. The desks were in rows and they were sort of like attached to the floor or else to one another, 'cause you couldn't really move 'em around, and of course at that time we still had ink wells in the middle of your desk.

CK. Did you have to supply your own ink?

MR. No, the, the, that was supplied by the teacher. We didn't use that real often, just for penmanship. But, uh, otherwise, we had pencils, just regular pencils, not ball points and stuff.

CK. Do you have any of the work that you did? Did you keep any of that?

MR. No, I didn't. Well, probably it was more because of I was staying with Grandma, I didn't even have a room – I had to sleep in – I shouldn't put that in there. I had to sleep on a cot in her living room. There was only two small bedrooms – and they were small, they didn't even have closets, just, like pegs for hanging clothes.

CK. That was a question I was going to ask, so if you had 20 kids, and they all had boots and coats

MR. Yeah.

CK. Where did all of that?

MR. Well, at the back of the room was, uh, hooks, regular clothes, you know, hooks, and that's where we hung our coats.

CK. And was it-

MR. Likely had assigned which one was yours or the kids got used to somebody was hanging, and the boots neatly set underneath, underneath the coats.

CK. Did you like going to school?

MR. I loved it. Maybe it's because I had to stay home from school to help pick stones, potatoes, whatever was necessary. Because the stones had to be picked before the crops went in, and so they couldn't put it off 'till, uh, you know, Saturday didn't probably give us enough time, or if it rained, then it would have to be another whole week before Dad could put the crops in. So whenever, and us – how our farm was very stony, flat, stones that seemed to grow during the winter months.

CK. (laughs)

MR. So every time when you worked the soil in the spring, those crazy things were out there. Yeah, not a very good soil to – uh, it was good for growing the crops, but the thing was if you didn't do the stones, when the seed fell under, there would take a long time for it to come out, you know, after all. You know, I guess – I'm not that, you know.

CK. So back to that classroom – did the - was there a chalkboard?

MR. Yes. And, and to me, it was a privilege, when you got your work done, you could - they did that at St. Casimir's, too – you could clean the boards and go out and shake up, out the – uh, what do we call 'em –

CK. Erasers?

MR. Eraser. It was a chore, uh, but children had chores in school.

CK. Well, tell me about that.

MR. Yes, yes, uh, when, like, if you brought in, uh, the wood to the wood shed and then carried some to put in the stove, eventually you got a little bit of that, so somebody had to either offer to do it or they were assigned to do it, to sweep. And before we left for home, both schools, before we left for home, you had to have everything put away in your desk, 'cause there was like a little shelf underneath, open, and no junk was left on your desk from one day to the other, that you put your stuff in there.

CK. And did the school provide materials? Did they provide books and paper . . .

MR. Uh, yes. The books are, uh, especially the 7th and 8th grade which would be more like the township, or, uh, we did. St. Casimir's, sometimes you had to pay rent and they rented some books and some, I guess if you had the money, you could buy 'em, I don't know. But most of my books were rented. So you could. You, some you could take home, and some, it depended on the teacher, then you had to just work with them in school.

CK. Now, St. Casimir's, you - I would imagine you had religious studies.

MR. Oh, yeah, you had a religion class. A certain time of the day was religion class.

CK. But at Rock Valley there probably was no religion.

MR. No, no, no.

CK. Did you go for soc, or, ah, Sunday school? Did you do that? When you were at Rock Valley?

MR. No, the St. Casimir's didn't really have any Sunday school. You know, that's where I belonged; but the teacher, my teacher there, he was very good. He, if it was during like during Lent, and there were services in our church, or a holy day, he did not mark us absent. We could take off early, at noon on Friday, and the Stations of the Cross – that was called Stations of the Cross – they would be in the afternoon at St. Casimir's. And he would let us go. See, I walked to St. Casimir's from the time I was eight years old, three miles. Three miles to school, three miles back. No matter what the weather was like, unless it poured, and - and if there was somebody that could drive, you know, like my Dad if he was around, he drove us to school. I don't ever remember my mother driving, though.

CK. Did you get report cards at the school?

MR. Yes. And I walked in the dark on the day that I get my report card, I'd go home and my Dad would sign the card and I, next day I take it to school. Return it, you had to return it. And you had to – the teacher watched that. Parents had to be – you had to have a parent's signature. Wouldn't have necessarily have to be my Dad, but I think the last couple times maybe the teacher didn't give us a report card – we might have gone – until this was given. But this was given. We – as an eighth grader, I had to go because I was gonna be graduating, I had to go all the way to Pulaski, which is somewhere near Posen. That's the name of the community, or - or school, maybe it was just the school called that. But I, we had to go where all the eighth graders from different schools, not St. Casimir's, but the public schools, they all got together and they were given a test. Like a - you know.

CK. Oh, like a – for graduation, or certification? To get a certificate?

MR. Yeah, to get a certificate, or just even a, a written – I don't even remember if I got a certificate. He never filled this, (examining report card) the – they never filled that. 'Cause that was the very last day and I didn't see my teacher after that.

CK. Yup. So you . . . do you - you don't know if you passed the test?

MR. I did, I might have it someplace, but I can't remember. And it could've been lost at my Mom's and Dad's, you know, there were so many of us in the family – twelve kids, so, you can imagine.

CK. This was 75 years ago.

MR. Isn't that somethin'. Yep, yep. 1940 I graduated.

CK. Looks like you were a good student.

MR. Well, I could've been probably better, but I wasn't bad.

CK. And, did you have, It looks like you had an agriculture class? Do you remember that?

MR. Uh, yeah – we did, uh, we did have that. I don't remember all that was in there, but it was, uh . . .

CK. You got an A in it.

MR. Yeah, yeah. Whatever it was, I forget now that. Geography is something that I was ok, but for some reason, I was not that . . . I didn't hold it, it didn't stay here (points to head).

CK. Mm hm.

MR. You know, shoulda stayed with me longer, but for some reason it didn't. And, and history was not one of my - for some reason I had this crazy thing in my head, "what do I want to know about those old people? I wanna know all that's gonna be happening – what's happening right now!" And it, you know, not all children are like that. After I got older, and even now, I love to read something that was in, you know, way back. Yeah. I don't know, I might be wrong, but did Balboa discover gold? Was that the name of the person? What did Balboa do?

CK. I don't know. (laughs)

MR. (Laughter) One of them stuck in my head and I, you know and I – but I was, um, and then I was sick one year, er, it didn't help, I got a real bad mark and that made me hate that class. I was, I was very sick, I had, um, like boils, one underneath my tongue and one inside my mouth. Figure it was a boil that was causing that, because the pain was so intense. And then, it, when it did break, it's kinda like sudden – you get the relief suddenly. It was a horrible thing to have. This here made my – before it burst open, it felt like my whole head was being pushed up. But, I mean it was hurtin'!

CK. And so you were out of school that whole time?

MR. Oh, yeah, I was right down in bed, my Mom used, uh, we didn't have, uh, uh, those, uh, hot water bottles, she'd just wrap like a flat whiskey bottle or Sears Roebuck catalogue, she'd warm it up in the wood stove. You know, watch it, but when it got hot, she would put a towel over it or some cloth, uh, however much was needed, and then you would put it and it'd stay hot for a long time, you know, like especially when you were laying in bed. Which I was, I was right down in bed. I – you know, naturally eating and everything was a problem with that.

CK. Mm hm. Mm hm.

MR. You don't hear that so much about boils and why would you get boil? Why, I don't know really what causes it. I know it's an infection.

CK. Mm hm. I'm looking here, you also had drawing class. Do you remember anything about that?

MR. Yeah, but it was not intensive. You just, you know, certain uh, holiday or something that we had to draw, and they'd pin it on the wall. You know. I'm not very good at it. Never was.

CK. And then, did they have days when parents would come to school or would the parents have a conference with the teacher like they have now?

MR. Um, no. They didn't have that. But, uh, we put on school plays, for, like Christmas or any other holiday, uh, and then the parents that would be held in the evening or if it was necessary they'd have it in the daytime but being most farmers, it was in the evening. And then the parents came and watched the play. I was in a few of them like that, just in them two years. And I loved that. You know.

CK. Do you remember the plays? What they were about, or . . .

MR. No, not . . . not anymore now, I don't.

CK. Mm hm. Did you . . .

MR. The names of them, no, I . . . somehow that – for a long time I remembered, but now I don't.

CK. Did -- Was there music at all?

MR. Maybe sang couple songs.

CK. But you didn't have a music class, or . . .

MR. No. No, we didn't have it. No. I don't know, you'd have to almost have another person come in, cause where would the teacher find? But we did sing. He, he, like maybe in the morning when we came in, uh, or sometime during the day, I guess if we had time before school would let out, or just before lunch, that, whatever we were studying. Then - but the whole school sang together. Naturally, 'cause it was all . . .

CK. (chuckle) You were all . . . yeah.

MR. See, when I would be helping the little ones, uh, they would, the younger ones were all in one and it went to the higher grades, so then I would go over there and you had to kind of keep your tone down so that it did not interfere with whatever the teacher was working with the older children. That took a little bit, too, when you stop and think for the teacher to - to get, you know, what you had to learn.

CK. Yeah, and, I mean, now there's so much – there's such a broader range you can watch, bring in videos, you can-

MR. Yeah.

CK. you can . . . and back then it was pretty much books and – mm hm. Yeah.

MR. Mm hm. But, yeah, the teacher - that teacher, you couldn't fool him. Eh, because the kids – I didn't, because we never did that at St. Casimir's it wouldn't have entered my mind to say, uh, oh, we're on page . . . he'd say, open up your, uh, books to your assignment, whatever assignment was I gave you Friday or he'd say, you know, the assignment. Anyway, open up your books. The, the, the kids that had been in there before from lower grades, they would name the page that was different because they either didn't take the time to study that one – it was kind of funny to listen to 'em at first, but they didn't try that too often. They found out, the teacher said "Oh, no, it was page . . ." so and so. He didn't even have to open up a book, he either prepared himself that much before he got to school so he didn't waste much time. Yeah. He was fair, but he was also . . . let 'em know.

CK. Stern.

MR. And he wasn't even 20 years old. 'Cause, you know, in those days a teacher did not have to go to any special school except that ah, County Normal. They called it "County Normal"- you went one year, after you got out of 8th grade. And after that year, if your marks were ok, you were able to go, if you got hired into a school – you know, you applied for jobs, and you got 'em.

CK. Was he from the area?

MR. Yes, he was. Yeah, there was two family of Millers that lived in – in that, in that neighborhood, on the, that would be the Grand Lake Road.

CK. Oh, ok.

MR. It starts from the church cor – well it's probably a little further than that, but I just know that from the St. Casimir's Church corner east, that's Grand Lake Road, and it comes out, kind of a snaky thing, but it comes out to US 23.

CK. Ok.

MR. Yeah. By a bar. There's a bar right there. Yeah.

CK. Go exploring, find it. So, did you remember the kids pulling any pranks?

MR. Oh, ah, there might've been some, but nothing that I really remember, no.

CK. Ok. Ok . . .

MR. I don't remember them ever bringing a snake and putting it on the teacher's . . . (laughs)

CK. Is there anything else that you can think of that we might not have covered or that was memorable?

MR. Not right now, I can't. I told you about the woodshed, that that's where our wood was kept for the stove . . .

CK. Kind of equal number of boys and girls?

MR. Pretty much, yeah. Some . . . yeah, pretty much, yeah.

CK. Did parents back then have a tendency to send one over the other because they needed to be at the farm, or be helping out – do you know what I'm saying?

MR. No, not that I know of, no.

CK. Ok. Well, thank you, Martha.