

NELLIE EDWIN SWEENEY

Interviewed by:

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Oral History Project

Latah County Museum Society

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I. Index

NELLIE EDWIN SWEENEY

Moscow; b.1883

granddaughter of Peter Carlson, early day schoolteacher

1 hour

minute

Side A

- 01 Parents came and homesteaded 9 miles from Moscow. Went to Lewiston to go to a doctor when her brother was dying of diphtheria. She almost died of scarlet fever.
- 05 Started in second grade because she knew how to read, but she didn't know anything about numbers. Went to Lewiston Normal to get a life diploma to teach. Her husband died shortly after they were married and she was left with two children.
- 09 Got a job teaching on Driscoll Ridge near Troy. Recently she heard a story about Bob Dunn who other teachers always had trouble with, but she never did. Bobby said he couldn't be mean to Nellie because she was so good to him. Dunn's mother used to beat him severely.
- 14 1 Taught at Troy after Lewiston Normal. Had trouble with one boy and shook him by the shoulders. His grandmother sent a note telling her to repair his ripped coat, but the principal told her to ignore it. She had no more trouble from him.
- 20 3 Two single Swedish women sit in her class to learn the English language. They give her a silver dish the last day.
- 22 3 Mother was an organist for Peter Carlson, her grandfather. He had a big congregation in Illinois. Later Mother gave music lessons in exchange for house work. Peter Carlson very strict: sin to dance or curl hair. Organized the Lutheran Church in Moscow which first met in homes in Moscow. Grandfather preached all around like a missionary.

Side B

- 00 6 Two men plotted to kill Peter Carlson on his way to a country church because they didn't like religion. He went a different way that day. Another time he got stuck in mud and he prayed to God to help him. Grandfather convinced a man who was swearing roundly to come to church and they ended up good friends. He always preached in Swedish and was an exceptionally good and honest man. She preferred the Presbyterian Church. The faith is the same, but they do things somewhat differently.

Nellie Edwin Sweeney

minute

Side B (continued)

- 13 Hard to leave her children to go to teach during the week near Troy.
- 15 Repeats a story she used to tell her son about a boy named Johnny and his prayer to God. A lady friend told her that story.
- 19 Had to make lesson plans in town schools which was a nuisance.
- 20 Recalls another story her friend told her. A young girl learns to swear from the hired hand and her parents try to stop her. Mother says she must leave home if she swears again and she does. The Mother should never have said that--you must be careful what you say to children. A Mother tries to get her daughter to stop swearing, "Oh, god!", and her daughter nudges her mother next Sunday.
- 26 Taught south and north of Moscow after teaching near Moscow. Quit teaching after her Mother died. Worked in Psychiana's mailing department and then picked peas (probably ruined her eyes there). Got some Social Security for picking peas. Her salary was \$100 per month when she quit teaching.

with Laura Schragger
July 3, 1974

II. Transcript

NELLIE EDWIN SWEENEY: Well, my first school after I graduated from the Normal was right in Troy.

LAURA SCHRAGER: How did you get that job?

N S: The job in Troy?

L S: Your first job, yes.

N S Well, I don't remember just how I got that. But anyway I was recommended where I graduated, you know, as a . . . They were looking for a teacher, I guess, and they recommended me, you know. Well, the first year I taught there I taught the first and second grades, you know. And I liked the little folks so well, I always did, you know. And I thought after teaching that year, I thought I believe I'm a better teacher for the upper grades, about the sixth and seventh. So I asked the school board if when they re-elected me for another year if I could teach the sixth and seventh because they needed a teacher for the sixth and seventh instead of going to the ^{first and} _{second}. And they said, "Yes." So I had the sixth and seventh grades then. And I never had any trouble, only with one boy, and he was kind of ^I onery, you know. He'd sit there and he'd bother all the children around him. He'd shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, he'd make a noise you know, and just pester 'em, you know. And I thought well, I can't let him do that, I have to do something. You know I was big and strong then, you know. So I went over there to him and I grabbed him by the shoulders, you

know, like that, and I just shook him and shook him and ~~shook~~ shook him and sat him down. And I said, "Now, be good!" He never said a thing; he just sat down and did what I told him. That was in the forenoon, I think. At recess, I thought, 'Well, I don't know. I'm going to have trouble with him, I believe.' Well he lived with his grandma, I don't know where his parents were, maybe they were dead or divorced, I don't know. So when he came back to school after lunch, he had a note in his hand, he had a paper. He said, "Here teacher." I thought, 'Now what.' So I read it. And it said: "As you tore Bobby's coat this morning, you have to sew it up." And then it was signed her name, you know. I didn't say anything, I just had the children go to work, you know and they went to work, you know. I went up and told the principal--we didn't have a superintendent, but a principal. I went up and told the principal, "What shall I do now?" Well, he said, "You couldn't have a school if they didn't behave themselves, if they sat there and bothered everybody around them. He should have had a darn good lickin is what he should have had. You don't have to do anything, just ignore it." And you know that boy never gave me a bit of trouble after that, the whole year through. He was just as good as gold. He never, never bothered the other children or anything. I don't know why he took it like that. He just never bothered any of us anymore. That was the end of it. He behaved himself, you know. I didn't mean to tear his coat, of course, you know. That was not very nice of me to do that but I couldn't help it. I just couldn't help doing it, you know. And I don't even remember his name. You know that's so long ago. That was the first year that I taught school, about thirty years ago or more. Oh, it's more than that--a long time more than that.

L S: A lot more than that?

N S: Yes, lots more than that.

L S: When you taught the first and second grade were there many children who didn't know English well 'cause they're an awful lot of Swedes in Troy.

N S: Un hu^h, I know. Well, there were two single ladies that came. They were grown, you know, Swedish ladies that wanted to go to school to ^{me to} learn the language. They came from Sweden, you know. And my, they were good, they just watched my mouth, you know, to see if they could understand what I was saying, you know. And they just watched everything we did. They were so good. And when I came the last day of school they had a gift for me; they had a silver dish ^{for me} as a gift because I'd been so good. And well, I had tried to help them, you know, all I could. And then what helped me was that I understood the Swedish language myself. Y'see my folks were from Sweden. My mother was just a baby, she didn't und^rstand anything about Sweden but my father was eleven years old when he came to America from Sweden, you know. And he came first to Illinois and worked for a farmer. He was a farmer himself. And he met my mother. My mother had a father that was a minister of the Lutheran church. And she was his organist in the church and choir director. And my father, he had a ^{good} great tenor voice, and he sang in the choir. And that's how they ^get together, you know. So when they moved to Portland, he went to Portland too, you know.

L S: You mean when your mother and your grandfather went to Portland?

N S: Um hum. My gran^dfather had a big congregation in Illinois, in that place, but I don't remember where it was.

L S: Was he told to leave Illinois and come out here or did he just want to come out West?

N S: He just wanted to come out West because he read in the paper that there were homesteads for sale out here near Moscow. And he was always wanting to be a farmer, you know. And so he thought that would be a good place to settle on a

homestead, you know. So they came out here. But they didn't come in a covered wagon like some people did, you know. They must have come on the train, I guess.

L S: Did your grandfather take up a homestead?

N S: Un uh, no, he was just a minister. But my father was the farmer, you know.

And my mother was a musician. She just loved music, you know. It wasn't a piano, but she was an organist, you know. She could play the pipe organ, the big pipe organ back East, you know, in that church where they lived.

L S: Did she play out here very much?

N S: My mother, you mean? Well, she was old then by that time, you know. And she gave lessons. She gave music lessons to girls that came to the house, I know. And she gave 'em the music lessons and they'd do work for her like mopping the kitchen, you know, and things like that. She didn't like to do that but she liked to give music lessons, you know.

L S: Do you remember your grandfather well, Peter Carlson?

N S: Oh, yes. One year I went back East to visit him. He was a chaplain of the big Emmanuel Lutheran Hospital in Omaha. It was a big hospital, you know, and he was the chaplain of this hospital, you know. And he was there, they wanted him to stay on until he died. So he stayed there until he died and then they escorted his remains here to Moscow. He's buried here in this cemetery.

But his wife, my grandmother, she lived with us for a while before she died, you know. So I remember her but not so well as my grandfather.

L S: What do you remember of your grandfather?

N S: Well, I remember about him that he was very, very strict. You know the Lutheran church then wasn't like the Presbyterian church, you know. But they considered dancing a sin. And my grandfather thought it was a sin to even curl your hair.

They were very, very strict, you know.

L S: Was he strict with his kids? Did he bounce you on his knee at all?

N S: Oh, I don't remember that because when they grew up they ^{left} home, you know, had jobs and went away.

L S: Was he here in Moscow when you were young?

N S: Well, he organized the first Lutheran church here. And the way he did it was he just had a few of the older people meet in houses, they didn't have a church, you know. And one of those women was here to celebrate my birthday the other day, and she'll be ninety-two in October.

L S: What's her name?

N S: Lena Peterson. She's a great friend of mine. And she was here and she knows all about my grandfather and he organized this Lutheran church here in Moscow. And then after a while there got to be more of them, and they got to have a church, you know. And that church, of course, is demolished, you know. It isn't the same church, but it's where the Senior Citizens have their club now. That's the place where they have the club but it isn't the same building, but they had another church there afterward, not the one that he was the minister in. Now listen, if you ever want anything, I just happened to think of it, if you ever want to know anything about the old times to give to the museum, she's the one to go to, Mrs. Lena Peterson. And I don't think she's listed as Lena Peterson. Her son, I think has the phone and his name is Glen, Glen Peterson, that's her son.

L S: That's who she lives with?

N S: Uh huh. Yeah, they live together down here. And well, she would tell you a lot more than I can because her folks were the ones that organized this church, you know, this first church that he had. And we were talking about it the other day when I had my birthday. We were six ladies here. They

were friends of mine from the old times, you know. And they came and celebrated my birthday, and she was one of them. And she started into talk about that. What a good time we had in the olden days, you know, and everything. Well, why didn't I think about telling you about her before?

L S: Well, I'll go see her, I'll go see her.

N S: Now her husband's name was Conrad--Mrs. Conrad Peterson, but he died. ^{He's dead.} I think the phone is in Glen Peterson's name. But she's the one to see, she can tell you a lot more than I can. And she's one year older than I am. She's a lovely person.

L S: Your grandfather, he used to go and preach out in the country, didn't he?

N S: Uh huh. All ^{around} . Well, he was like a missionary. I didn't tell you this, did I? One Sunday, there were two men, you know. that didn't like religion and they didn't like ministers. So they made up their mind they were going to kill him. Did I tell you about that?

(End of Side A)

Transcribed and typed by Kathy Stanton

N S: Here near Moscow, in this county, you know. So they made up their mind that next Sunday, you know, they were going to kill him. They knew just which road he would take to that little church. It's way, way out. They knew which road he always took Sunday morning to go to that church. So they took their-- I don't know what they had, it was rifles or guns, or something. So they were going to lay for em and watch for em and kill him because they didn't like religion, they didn't like ministers. So he always said that God protected him. They waited and they waited and they waited and they waited and he didn't come. And something had told my grandfather not to go that road

this morning, so he took another road, and they didn't get to kill him. And there were so many different daily things that happened like that that my mother used to tell me; ^{that were} so interesting. They never got to kill him at all, you know. He used to pray an awful lot, you know. And he declared it was God ^{that} protected him. And one time, one Sunday morning he was driving to church. He had an old horse and buggy and his horse's name was Fanny, And the road was bad, you know, it was muddy and it was bad. He got stuck and Fanny couldn't get out of that rut. He didn't know what to do. So he said, he started in to pray. "Well, God, now you help me get Fanny out of this rut, if you love me and want me to preach this morning, you help me." And he said, "Just then, Fanny, did give a jump and out she went" and he went fine all the rest of the way. Well, you know, he used to tell so many different things like that, that were so interesting to me, you know.

L S: They're good stories.

N S: And ^{then} you know, my grandfather and grandmother lived here in Moscow for a while. That's before my grandmother died, you know. So they lived on Third Street. Well, you know where the Pres^bbyterian church goes down to Third. And in that house, just where the Third Street meets Van Buren, that's where they lived. So he walked downtown that afternoon, you know, my grandfather. And as he was walking home, he was walking down Third, you know, there were two men fixing a telephone pole. And he had never met them or anything, you know. They stopped for a minute, there was one of em up at the top of the telephone, he was just swearing to beat the band, you know. My grandfather stopped and he said, "Say, what do you mean by taking the name of the good Lord, our God in vain? Why, that's terrible." That man s^aid, "Who are you? What business is that of yours how we talk?" It wasn't, you know. He said, "Well, I'm the minister up here at the Lutheran church and I don't like to see you

talking like that. Say, why don't you come to church next Sunday and hear me preach. Maybe you won't swear so much. And do you know that they ended up the best of friends, you know? And they did come to church the next Sunday. He looked around in the church and lo and behold--there they were in the last seat all dressed up fit to kill, you know, there both of em were.

And they'd come to hear him preach, you know. And they ended up such good friends and my grandfather said, "I'll tell you it sometimes pays to make friends with people even though they talk bad!" (Chuckles) No, that wasn't any of his business, you know, to talk to them like that. (Chuckles)

L S: Did you ever hear him preach, your grandfather?

N S: Oh, lots of times. But you know, he always preached in Swedish. You see then they had it all in Swedish. And afterward they changed it to English.

L S: Was he a powerful preacher? Was he a particularly good. . .? He sounds like an exceptional man.

N S: Well, I'll tell you, I wouldn't call him a powerful preacher, but he was so darn good. He was so good and honest. He wouldn't do anything wrong if you'd kill him. He was just a good man, you know, just real good. You see I joined the Presbyterian church because my husband was a Presbyterian, you know, and he didn't want to join the Lutheran church. And Myra Moody here in the Presbyterian church had asked my mother if I could go to Sunday school with her. Well, Mother didn't like it very well; she didn't want me to go to another church. You know how the Lutherans are. They want you to stick to their own church, you know. So she said, "Well, she can go with you to your Sunday school if she can go to mine too." It just happened that they met at different times. They didn't have the same meeting time so I could. And I went to both Sunday schools. And I got so I liked the Presbyterian so well that I made up my mind

that when I left home I was going to go to the Presbyterian church, you know. But I didn't tell Mother that, of course. And then when I met my husband, he wanted to go to the Presbyterian church, you know, he was a Presbyterian, why, I just joined. . .

L S: What were the difference back then between the Presbyterians and Lutherans?

N S: Well, I'll tell you, I was raised a Lutheran. And then I switched to the Presbyterian. And I found that the only difference--the faith is the same--the only difference is the way they do things. Now they take communion in a different way and things like that, that's all. I can't see any difference, only just the way they do things.

L S: I was wondering why as a child you decided that you preferred the Presbyterian church. Did they have a better Sunday school teacher or. . .?

N S: No, no, I'll tell you, in the Lutheran church we had to memorize so much. The catechism, we had to memorize psalms, you know, if you know what that is. And ⁱⁿ the Presbyterian church we had to take a training course so it really wasn't any different, only we weren't confirmed. In the Lutheran church they call it Confirmation, you know. They had a Sunday when they call it that they ~~were~~ confirmed. They ask them questions and the children answer, you know. But we don't do that in the Presbyterian church. We don't have so much catechism, that's all. But now the way they take communion is a little different. That's all together different. Now you know when I went to the Lutheran church they had us all go up to the altar and kneel, kneel around the altar. And the minister had a little--well, I'd say a container, I'd don't know what you'd call it--and it's supposed to be the bread and wine, you know. And he'd give each one a piece of that. It was just like a mint, you know, and go on to the next one. And then he'd give each one a sip of the wine and

go on to the next one. Well, now the Presbyterians don't do it that way at all. All they do is you sit in your seats and they pass the communion around to you, that's all. It means the same, just a different way, you know.

L S: Do you remember other stories of your grandfather, about things that happened to him or just that you remembered? The stories you told of him were so good.

N S: No, I just don't remember any more. But we got along fine even though he was strict, you know. He was nice; he was ^{good} to me. He wasn't mean at all, you know. But I remember when, you see, his wife, my grandmother died when she lived with us. We just couldn't get ahold of him, the roads were impassable and it was just like a blizzard and we couldn't find him, where he was. We had such a time to locate him. And finally we got him, we could locate him. Now will you tell me your name again?

L S: Laura Schragger.

N S: Laura Schragger. You know I have so many girls to remember. There three upstairs.

L S: A weekend, was that. . .?

N S: Well, what was hard for me was to leave the children. You know to go back to teach again and leave the children with my mother. Oh, how I hated to leave them, you know. I loved them so much, you know. My daughter and I were very, very close. And she was taken from me and that's the only daughter I had.