Ernest Wabasha and Vernell Wabasha
Narrators

Minnesota Historical Society
Karissa White and Ben Petry, Interviewers

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Ernest and Vernell Wabasha’s Residence
Lower Sioux, Minnesota

KW = Karissa White
BP = Ben Petry
EW = Ernest Wabasha
VW = Vernell Wabasha

KW: Today’s date is Tuesday, July 11, 2006 and we’re in the home of Ernie and Vernell Wabasha in Lower Sioux. My name is Karissa White and I’m interviewing today. Okay, Ernie, what is your full name?

EW: Ernest Wabasha.

KW: What is your date of birth?

EW: September 2, 1929.

KW: And you grew up here?

EW: No. I was born in Nebraska. We moved back here in 1938.

KW: Okay. Where in Nebraska?

EW: Santee.

KW: Why did your parents live in Nebraska?

EW: I guess my grandparents were removed from here and then my dad . . . I don’t know if he was small and lived here when he was removed but he came back up here and decided to move back, I guess.

KW: What was your father’s name?

EW: Henry.

KW: Henry Wabasha. What was your mother’s name?
**EW:** Florence Helen.

**KW:** What was her maiden name?

**EW:** Chase. Joe Chase. He was . . . I can’t remember. I’ve been going blank a lot. He was . . . I don’t know if you’d say his father was famous or what. But Joe Chase, his father was . . . I’ll have to wait for Vernell.

**KW:** We can come back to that when she comes in. So your father was from here. How did he meet your mother, do you remember? Did they ever tell you that story?

**EW:** We have a picture there somewhere. He’s with my mother’s family.

**KW:** We can come back to that [the pictures] if you want Vernell’s help.

**EW:** Okay.

**KW:** Are you the first born?

**EW:** No, no, no. I was from a big family. I think there were twelve kids. So I have three younger sisters but there’s only two younger ones left. And I’m the only boy left. Yes, there’s three of us left.

**KW:** Do they live here?

**EW:** No. My two sisters live in St. Paul.

**KW:** You must visit with each other?

**EW:** Oh, yes.

**KW:** Do you have memories of your grandparents?

**EW:** No. They were already gone when I was born.

**KW:** So you’re in the middle then of the twelve kids.

**EW:** Well, I’m the fourth to the youngest.

**KW:** The fourth to the youngest. Okay.

**EW:** There’s about eight more older than me.

**KW:** Do you have a favorite story that you always think of when you think back to your childhood?
EW: No. I never really thought about it.

KW: Down in Santee maybe?

EW: I don’t hardly remember that.

KW: Did you go to school when you were there? You would have about seven when you moved back here, right, or eight?

EW: Eight. Yes. I went to . . . I don’t know if you ever heard of Marty Mission in South Dakota. I went there for eleven years. The year we moved back here I didn’t go to Marty. I went to day school here and after that I finished school in Marty.

KW: You didn’t go to school down in Santee?

EW: Not that I recall, no. I must have, though. Because . . . let’s see . . . no, I can’t recall ever going there.

KW: Do you remember your impression of Santee when you were a kid? Did you like it?

EW: Yes. Just okay, I guess.

KW: But your family was there?

EW: Yes.

[Ernest’s wife Vernell Wabasha enters the room]

KW: Did you want to ask Vernell about—? We we re talking about your mother’s family. You said her dad was famous.

EW: Jesse James. Remember?

VW: I’ll show you all these pictures.

KW: Yes, he wanted to know where his pictures went. So you moved back here in 1938?

EW: Yes.

KW: Were you sent to Marty Mission?

EW: Yes. My folks sent us there.

VW: [Shows picture] This was his mother and this is her mother. This is Jenny Wacoute.

VW: That’s her sister Emma, isn’t it?
**EW:** Yes.

[Vernell goes on to show more pictures]

**VW:** And this is her . . . this is Joe Chase and that Dakota woman, Jenny Wacoute. And his father is supposed to be Jesse James.

**KW:** Wacoute is spelled W-a-c-o-u-t-e?

**VW:** Yes. This is his pa’s grandfather.

**KW:** What was his name?

**EW:** Joseph.

**VW:** Joseph. This here is Napoleon.

**EW:** Napoleon. My grandfather Napoleon.

**VW:** This is on his dad’s side and this is the mother. This is Natalie Graham. This is his dad.

**KW:** Napoleon Wabasha the First.

**VW:** These are really old pictures. What I’m doing is trying to get them all together so we can put them in a collage.

**EW:** This is my dad when he was twenty years old.

**KW:** Henry B. Wabasha.

**VW:** This is his dad and his mother and his . . .

**EW:** My mother’s father.

**VW:** And that’s his mother . . . or no. That’s the grandmother and this is the mother.

**EW:** Yes.

**VW:** These two. And then that’s her mother.

**KW:** So this is your grandfather then?

**EW:** Yes.

**KW:** Your grandmother married Joe Chase.
**EW:** Yes. Joe Chase.

**KW:** Was he Indian at all?

**VW:** Yes. Joe Chase was. I mean he’s part Indian because his mother was . . . do we have a picture of his mother, Mary? This is Natalie and this is her when she was younger. See, we have all of the men up there. All of the Wabasha chiefs are up on that wall over there. And those are all . . . and so I said, “Well, they need women.” You know, they all just did the men. And I said, “Well, I think I should put together . . . find the women to these men. Because without the women there wouldn’t be no men.” Let’s see. And then this is Chief Wabasha III. This here is Martha . . . or Nancy Wabasha. That’s her mother. That’s Jenny’s mother. And in that other picture . . .

**KW:** This one?

**VW:** Yes. Martha and Jenny. That’s her mother.

**KW:** She looks like her mother.

**VW:** Here’s a bigger picture of the two. I made extra copies but I have to do some for his . . .

**KW:** Yes. That’s good. Using copies instead of the real ones.

**VW:** And this is Mary Wabasha. She was married to Ellis Campbell. This here is Napoleon Wabasha when he was young.

**EW:** The elderly Napoleon. Way back then this picture was made in Redwood Falls.

**VW:** This is Natalie and that is Ray Campbell. That’s [Ernest] when he was a baby.

**KW:** Right there?

**VW:** Yes. And this is Joe Chase and his other daughter. Helena. These are pictures of them when they were younger. This is Joe Junior and Grandpa Wabasha . . . I mean Grandpa Joe Chase and Helen. And this here is Martha holding Emma. That’s Helen. Here’s Ernest when he was little and I think this might have been taken when they were leaving Santee when he was eight years old.

**KW:** Okay.

**VW:** And this is his sister that lives here. Her name is Emmarica. I have some other pictures.

**KW:** So this is your family in Santee?

**EW:** Yes.
VW: Here’s that brother George that got killed in the war and then that’s his brother Matthew and that’s his sister Emmarica and that’s his mother. That picture in that glass case is his mother and father when they lived right here. That house was right across the driveway here. They had it torn down and built this when we lived here. We’ve been married fifty years now.

KW: That’s a long time, too. That’s great. Well, thank you for sharing those. Those are really neat photographs.

VW: So I’m trying to find them all and get them all in order and I want to get a big frame and put them all in order. The Wabasha maternal and paternal family.

KW: Yes.

VW: Because none of his family, the younger kids, know who anybody is. This generation. I think his generation would probably be the last generation. They are the great generation. The greater generation because, you know, they’re seventy-five and over in that generation.

KW: They’re the last ones with the links to all the photographs.

VW: Yes. They’re the ones that know. Our grandkids wouldn’t . . . and then our great grandkids, they probably would never know who anybody is. This is our son and daughter and these are her two kids.

VW: There’s his daughter. She’s sixteen.

KW: She’s pretty.

VW: Yes. That’s his daughter. But these two here, she’s twenty-five and she’s expecting her first baby and he’s twenty-four. So that was sixteen years ago this one was taken. And this is Winona Wabasha.

KW: All right. Well, it’s good you have that picture of while you were at Santee. So shortly after, then you moved back here and you lived in that house that was just torn down.

EW: Yes. Yes.

KW: Do you remember as a kid what your first impression was of moving back here?

VW: They lived in a tent.

KW: You lived in a tent?

EW: Yes, way down. When you go down the hill right here, there’s a road right before you turn. The road goes straight but then you turn and then there’s another road that goes into the woods there. We moved down in there about a mile back into a tent. In fact, two tents. We had those big army tents. I don’t know if you remember those.
KW: Yes. I’ve seen pictures of those big army tents. Why did you live there?

EW: There were no houses around.

KW: When you moved back, how long did you live in the tent?

EW: Let’s see. Pretty well into almost winter. We finally got our house a little ways over there. We lived the winter there.

KW: So they built houses for you?

EW: No. It was already there.

KW: It was. Did they have a lot of houses here? Who built houses for the Indians back then?

EW: I don’t know.

VW: The houses back then were built by a group of the guys that lived here. Because when we tore that old house down, remember, those young boys, the Thomas boys and the men that lived here, was the crew that built some of these houses. Because they wrote their names on these boards, like on some of the framework, on the boards. I think most of the houses were all done by government workers.

KW: From the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps]?

VW: Yes. Probably most of them came from the cities or Bemidji or they had IHS [Indian Health Service] and programs like that.

KW: So they hired people to come down and build houses?

VW: They would bring . . . I suppose they were relatives. That was probably why they had so many houses.

KW: Your family moved here in the summertime and then when winter came you had a house.

EW: You remember how we worked that?

KW: Who built the houses? Were they from the WPA [Works Progress Administration] programs?

VW: Well, they had the lumberyard company here, didn’t they? Back in those days, you know, the lumberyard people had a crew, I suppose, that would come and set up and had a contract with the government. It’s like today they have like these HUD [Housing and Urban Development] programs where they get a contractor from a government contract. They put out for bids and stuff and I think that was who built most of these houses for these wasichas [white people] that lived out here.
KW: So was it one of those three-room houses that you lived in, Ernie?

EW: Yes.

KW: Was it really small for your big family?

EW: Yes.

KW: Is that one reason why you were sent to . . . which mission in South Dakota?

VW: Well, he was in school in Marty at the boarding school. It was a Catholic boarding school. When [Ernest’s] family and brothers and sisters first went, they were living in Santee, Nebraska. I think it depended on where you lived back then, because most of the families in our vicinity, on our reservations, they all went to Catholic boarding school. The majority of them went to Marty. Some of them went to Pipestone, but that was before. That had to be before they put up Flandreau because Flandreau came after Pipestone, didn’t it?

EW: I don’t really know.

VW: Yes. And then they had an Episcopal boarding school in Springfield. They called it Hope School. You know, they had these different . . . and I think it kind of depended on what side of the river you lived too, you know, or the creek or something. My grandmother was a Presbyterian but we were Catholic and Father Dan went around. In fact, his picture was in one of the pictures. That priest that was in there before they left Santee, I think that was him.

KW: You went to Marty Mission when you were eight?

VW: No. He went before that.

EW: Yes. Six, I think.

KW: And how long were you there for?

EW: I went eleven years.

KW: So you were seventeen. Did you like it there?

EW: Not really, I guess.

VW: You had no choice but to like it?

EW: Yes.

KW: Were they strict and mean or . . . you just didn’t like to be away from home?
EW: Yes. They were strict, mean . . . I don’t know, I always thought they were mean. Maybe they weren’t.

VW: Our parents sent us to the boarding school for convenience because we were crowded into these little houses and the severity of the winters were so bad out there on the prairie. I went when I was like four and a half years old to boarding school [from the fall of 1939 to the spring of 1954]. I was there for twelve years or thirteen years until I graduated from high school. But the schools, they were more like a military thing. And they were real strict; you lined up for this and you lined up for that.

EW: Marched everywhere.

VW: People talk about taking your language and culture away from you, but I always felt that that was something you learned at home, because I didn’t think a German nun would know anything about it. After I got older I thought they probably didn’t know anything themselves about the Indian communities or the reservation life. I used to tease the nuns. After I got older, I’d say, “I used to think Latin was our native tongue.” Because we all had to learn Latin. Every year in high school that was part of the curriculum.

EW: Did you both go to the same boarding school?

VW: Yes.

EW: You both went to Marty? Not at the same time though?

VW: Yes. He was in high school. He was an older boy. But we didn’t see each other in Marty because the boys stayed on one side and we had our own buildings. We went to classrooms together but the boys sat in the front and the girls sat in the back.

KW: Did you get home that much?

EW: During the summer months, yes.

VW: They used to let us go home on holidays. But then because of the epidemics, the measles and the chicken pox and whooping cough, you know, the childhood diseases, somebody would bring them back. They would be too . . . you know, it would be too strong of a . . .

KW: They were not equipped to deal with those illnesses?

VW: The students brought too many diseases back [to the reservations]. So then they quit letting us go home. It was too much of a hardship, too, on parents because it was up to the parents to come and get you and take you and bring you back. Most of the kids came on buses. The school would send a bus out to a certain location and they’d all get on it. I mean, you know, families that would come. They came from North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Minnesota, Wisconsin.
**EW:** Nebraska.

**VW:** Nebraska, Kansas.

**KW:** So you got to meet all kinds of kids then from everywhere.

**EW:** Yes.

**VW:** And when I was growing up we never separated tribes from one another . . . because everybody was treated the same. And so you didn’t know if whoever was there . . . you just knew they were from a different community or different town.

**KW:** Did you go with any other brothers and sisters?

**EW:** Oh, yes.

**KW:** Did all your siblings go or just a few of you?

**EW:** I think pretty much all of them were.

**KW:** What did your parents do when they came back? Did they farm or garden? Did they have a garden?

**EW:** Oh, yes. My dad, he made a great big garden. That’s what we had to eat during the wintertime.

**VW:** [To Ernest] What did you say? Your mom used to can over a what? Hundreds of quarts of everything.

**EW:** Yes.

**VW:** You canned vegetables. You canned anything that you wanted to preserve. If you couldn’t dry it, you canned it. We used to dry corn and squash and onions.

**KW:** So when it was canned, where would you put it then?

**VW:** In the basement . . . I mean we used to have like they called cellars. Outside.

**EW:** Cellars.

**KW:** And that would keep everything cool in the winter?

**VW:** Yes. Or even in the summertime, because it was a big hole in the ground. We’d put potatoes down there.

**KW:** Did your parents make you get involved in that? Gardening?
EW: Oh, yes.

VW: That was your entertainment. I mean you didn’t go any place. You couldn’t leave the yard. You never were allowed to go out of the yard and you didn’t dare go out of the yard. Even with your parents. You stayed there all the time, didn’t you?

EW: Yes.

KW: And helped out and did chores?

EW: Yes.

KW: Did you know of anyone who had a car?

EW: Yes. I guess we did. A few people had cars. Not many, but . . .

KW: Your family didn’t have a car?

EW: No. Yes. We had to hire somebody every time we wanted to go to town or anywhere.

VW: If you had to go to the hospital or doctor or something. No one had a horse and buggy, especially in Santee. Most of us walked. You know, you had to walk to wherever you were going.

KW: So what happened if someone was sick? You had to run and get someone that had a car?

EW: Yes.

VW: Like some of the places like we lived were far out in different districts on our reservation. The Yankton Sioux reservation, if you lived far away, if you were sick, sometimes the priest, the missionary father or the nuns or somebody with a wagon or something, you’d hire them to take you. But if you needed to go into town, they’d say, “Oh so and so is going. You could catch a ride.” Some of the women, if they were expecting a baby, you know, like in the wintertime and there wasn’t a car going over to Pipestone. Most of these people had to go to Pipestone to the hospital. Because they wouldn’t let them use the Redwood hospital. So they had to go clear to Pipestone. So if you knew somebody was going to be expecting they’d say, “Well, Mr. So and So is leaving. He’s going over to Pipestone.” So the women that were expecting that month or that week, sometimes they’d have to go stay over there because they never knew when the next ride was going. Then they’d have to get somebody to stay with their kids. So it was a rough time for the people around here. Not only here but on most of the reservations.

KW: So if they stayed there would they have to spend money for boarding?

VW: You stayed with family or relatives or friends in those communities or you stayed at the hospital sometimes.
KW: The hospital let them stay. Okay. You said they made you march around school.

VW: Not march, but you lined up and you went.

EW: Oh, yes. March.

KW: So they had nuns there that taught you?

EW: Yes.

KW: And they were German?

EW: I don’t know.

VW: Most of them were German that I remember. Sister Cecily and Sister Theophane and . . . You know, they were all women that joined the convent, the Blessed Sacrament Sisters from the East, from Cornwallis Heights, Pennsylvania. And the missionaries came from St. Meinrad, Indiana.

KW: So you had academics and then you had the vocational? Was it all just academic or religious instruction?

VW: All of your boarding schools, you did your academic classes. You know, like when we were little we went to kindergarten, and first grade up to fourth grade, you went to school all day. Then when you got into fifth grade you worked. You went to school half a day and then you worked the other half. That’s how they kept the boarding schools going.

KW: Is that what you did too, Ernie? You worked half a day?

EW: Yes.

KW: What kind of chores did you have to do?

EW: Well, they had a lot of the trades, like printing, welding . . .

VW: Shop classes.

KW: Did they have woodworking?

EW: Oh, yes. But I didn’t get in on that because the war came along and everybody went to the service. They didn’t have anybody to train you anymore. They just quit doing that.

VW: The kids, most of the kids in the boarding school, like the boys . . . Because they were just building this mission, they were building buildings and it was almost ran on donations from across the United States. You know, with benefactors, because it was a Catholic boarding school. This priest, Father Sylvester, would go out and solicit help from these people. So the kids were
trained to pour cement and we all carried brick and picked up nails. The little kids all had to pick up nails.

KW: They didn’t separate girls and boys?

VW: Yes. We were separate. We all did the same thing but the girls did it here and the boys did it over by that building. [Ernie is] supposed to be the one you’re interviewing. He’s just sitting there with his hands in his mouth. You’re supposed to be talking.

KW: Ernie, I’m going to back up just a little bit about your childhood here. Or actually that would have been during the late 1930s or mid-1930s. Your parents had a garden. Did they work elsewhere?

EW: Yes. My dad did.

KW: What did he do?

EW: They had . . . what do you call it? WPA. And he worked for farmers around the area.

KW: You said you went into town sometimes for supplies and groceries. When you were little did your family ever experience any racism or discrimination because you were Indian or were you treated differently when you went into town? Any incidents?

VW: When we were kids we never went to town. Just on rare occasions. If somebody was sick we’d have to go up and get the mail at the post office. But that was only in the summertime because the wintertime we were in boarding school.

KW: Do you remember experiencing anything like that? Racism or—?

EW: I don’t know. A lot of people said they did but maybe I didn’t recognize what it was.

VW: Didn’t pay attention to it.

KW: Even when you came home for the summers from boarding school? Or anywhere? Like did you ever go into another town?

EW: Oh, New Ulm was one place the Indians couldn’t go. They wouldn’t let you in there.

VW: And if you did they’d tell you to be out of there before dark.

EW: Yes.

KW: Did anyone ever stay after dark?

VW: No. I didn’t grow up over here.
**KW:** I just was wondering.

**EW:** No. I don’t recall.

**KW:** You just never went into New Ulm? You tried to avoid it?

**EW:** Yes.

**VW:** When they used to have parades, remember they said, “We want the Indians to come and participate down there on Heritage Days,” or something. Like in Goodthunder, the town of Goodthunder. And stuff like that. But people used to throw stuff at them and holler at them . . . you know, make them calls and stuff. I remember these people telling me that one time.

**KW:** I’m going to go back to school but before then. Did you feel any different about the Depression that was going on? Did you ever experience anything different [because of the Depression] or was it always just the same?

**VW:** For us, for me it was always just the same. You were poor all the time. You were poor during the Depression so you didn’t know it was Depression time because you were poor anyhow. You were having a hard time in your family. And everybody was getting rations. You had to use food stamps. And I remember . . . I always remember my ma saying they had to have a stamp to buy a pair of shoes.

**KW:** Was that same for you, too, Ernest?

**EW:** Yes. Yes.

**KW:** So it was just like any other time?

**EW:** Yes.

**VW:** Everybody in town got relief. You know, got rations and . . . not just Indian people, but everybody in town would be getting something. They used to have women sewing clothes. I always remember when they’d give you these little overalls or coveralls. The dresses were all the same. Little brown or navy blue cotton dresses.

**EW:** Some of the clothes would have “not to be sold” on it.

**VW:** They were from the WPA during the Depression.

**KW:** You had different clothes. Did anyone—because I’ve noticed in some other Indian communities that there were some white people that would go around and give groceries or food to the Indians—did that happen here, too?

**EW:** Oh, yes. Yes, they did that.
They used to have some people around here, remember . . . I mean that wasn’t during Depression but I remember some people going around collecting food and stuff for the Indians and bread and stuff and not giving it to them. I was at one of these council meetings. Oh, yes. So and so wanted to know if we got all the groceries or something. But they never did bring them over here. I never heard where they went. They kept them.

Back to school. Did you have to wear a uniform in school?

We did. The girls did.

The girls had to wear . . .

The girls had to wear black skirts and white blouses.

The boys could wear whatever they wanted?

Yes.

I wonder why that was.

And we couldn’t wear jeans or slacks or anything like that. You had to always wear a skirt. It always had to be below the knee.

What would happen if someone misbehaved? What would they do?

Crack you one.

Yes, well, they would make you kneel down, for one thing. Kneel down for an hour or something. Or stand there with your arms straight out. That got pretty painful after a while.

So you misbehaved sometimes?

Oh, yes.

Were you bad?

What did you do?

If you got your shoes wet or talked in line or . . .

You always had to be quiet. Like there were times you couldn’t talk in the line or in the classroom or something and you’d get punished. When we were kids in boarding school you couldn’t go to the . . . if you misbehaved and got so many demerit things, you couldn’t go to the Friday night . . . Friday night they’d have a serial show like Custer’s Last Stand or Oregon Trail. You couldn’t go see that next chapter of it.
KW: So they made that the award.

VW: You couldn’t go see that. You couldn’t go to the movie.

KW: Did they have those serial shows when you were there?

EW: Oh, yes.

KW: So you were able to go sometimes.

EW: Yes.

VW: Or you couldn’t go to the basketball games. We had basketball in the wintertime.

KW: Did you play any sports, Ernie?

EW: Yes. I played basketball.

VW: He was all state in high school. He was good at sports. They didn’t have football when you were in school.

EW: No.

KW: So you just had basketball. Did they have baseball?

EW: No. Basketball was about the only thing.

VW: You didn’t have time for those sports because we worked to build the school. I remember when we were kids we had to cut the grass. They moved the playground to a different corner because they were building where our playground was. We had to go down there and cut all the weeds down by hand. They gave us scissors or little knives to chop all that buffalo grass down.

KW: Did you ever have to do something like that, Ernie?

EW: Oh, yes.

VW: We had to go pick potatoes for the school.

EW: Yes. They were building most of the buildings when I was going and we’d have to pour cement. Well, [it was] all kinds of hard labor.

KW: So it was really tough for a lot of kids?

EW: Yes.

KW: Were they exhausted and tired?
**EW:** Yes.

**VW:** But we still had to go to church every morning and every night. We got up at six o’clock in the morning and went to Mass.

**KW:** How long would you go in the morning then? From six until—?

**VW:** Until you went to bed at night. And then they had benediction at seven. Then that would be an hour.

**EW:** Yes.

**VW:** And then at eight o’clock go to bed. Lights are off at nine. Couldn’t talk.

**KW:** Did they feed you good food? Did they have good food?

**VW:** Healthy food.

**KW:** So vegetables and . . .

**VW:** When I was in fourth grade I think they put me in the kitchen. Put me to work. We had different chores. I think it was fourth grade I went in there and then when I got into fifth grade and we were there that was our chore. Peel potatoes. Like we’d have oatmeal and mush or Cream of Wheat for breakfast in the morning.

**EW:** Corn meal mush pretty much.

**VW:** We’d have corn meal mush Monday morning and we’d have toast that was toasted on Friday or Saturday. Then they’d bring it over and we’d have that dried toast. Then milk and prunes. They always gave us prunes. Then we’d have like bean soup and . . . I used to like that though. Bean soup and brown bread. We never got white bread. We always got brown bread.

**KW:** Did you ever have to do any kitchen work, Ernie?

**EW:** No.

**KW:** That was all for the girls?

**VW:** Maybe in the bakery. Did you ever work in the bakery? We used to steal coffeecake when they’d bring that fresh. Get into trouble.

[Tape interruption]

**KW:** Did you write home often or did you get letters from back home while in boarding school?

**EW:** Oh, yes.
KW: What kinds of things were in those letters about home? Just what was happening?

EW: Yes. How the neighbors were, you know, getting along.

VW: How rough it was back then.

EW: Stuff like that.

KW: All the gossip?

EW: Yes.

KW: You were there for eleven years?

VW: 1948 he graduated.

EW: No. I missed one year when we moved up here. I forget what year that was.

VW: In 1938 he moved up here.

EW: 1938. I missed that year.

KW: So you stayed there until 1947 or 1948?

VW: He went to school here for one year and then he went back in 1939 . . . or 1938 school year.

KW: You went here then? Where did you go to school?

VW: They had that old school house over there. They closed that in 1969.

EW: Yes. I think I went there in 1939.

VW: Bishop Whipple Mission School or something.

EW: Yes.

VW: They changed the name different times but I know I worked with that trading post when we moved back here. In 1980 I moved back. He moved back in 1979. But in 1980 when I came back from retiring from the DIW [Division of Indian Works] in Minneapolis, I started helping the tribe. I got some grants and got the trading post going. But we did a lot of history and then we got that school on the National Register of Historic Sites. The church is on the National Register. I was involved with the Historical Society back then.

KW: That’s great.
VW: But with Ernest’s background, some of the things he’s done was he was in the Navy when he got out of high school.

KW: Did you go into the Navy right away?

EW: Yes. After high school.

VW: We still had his graduation suit for a long time from when he graduated from high school.

BP: Where is it now?

VW: I gave it away.

KW: Oh, no!

VW: Well, we had to move so many times.

BP: Who did you give it to?

VW: I don’t remember. I just packed them all up and I think they all went back to Marty to the mission. I sent them back down to the school because those guys still wanted to wear them old clothes. I mean he wouldn’t have fit it.

KW: This was his graduation from Marty Mission?

VW: Yes. His little suit his father got him, his wedding suit.

KW: That became a wedding suit, too?

VW: No.

KW: Oh, you mean in addition to his graduation suit. Okay.

BP: When did you send that away?

EW: I don’t know.

VW: I think it was in 1990. 1993. See, when we got married, we lived in St. Paul. We got married at the cathedral up there. He worked on the DEW line. He worked for Western Electric then. After we were married about six weeks, they contracted him with Federal Electric and he went up to the Arctic Circle for a year.

KW: For Federal Electric?

VW: Yes. And they put up that DEW line they called it. Distant Early Warning for radar installation. When he came back he applied for relocation because he wanted to finish getting his
degree. Because back then in engineering, you know, like he said, “Well, companies lay you off if you don’t have a degree. You need to have that.” So we went to Chicago. The Bureau had just come out with that relocation program for education purposes. So we signed up for that and they finally accepted him. I think they finally sent us up there in 1950. Let’s see. Lisa was born in 1957. 1958. So in 1959 they let him go to relocation in Chicago.

We had a really rough time. We really had to fight all while we were up there. The first two, three months they said he had too much of an education. That relocation program was only for those who went through eighth grade. I thought, “Well why would you want to send somebody to a big inner city and they wouldn’t know how to get around?” They did have some Navajos and other tribal people up there. They couldn’t even speak English. They were having a hard time. It was a program that they just wanted to get the Indians off the reservation and terminate all these tribes. Anyway, he went and we were going to take them to court. We got lawyers. Senator Humphrey even. He was a senator and he helped us. And Mayor Daly. We got a little lawyer, Mr. Lerner.

KW: You did that so—?

VW: So he could finish school. I mean they almost . . . wanted us to starve to death, I think. What did they give us? Fifty-seven dollars a week to live on. And out of that we had to pay our rent. Yes. That was what we got. Fifty-seven a week. Because we paid thirty-two dollars for rent. And we had two kids. Because before we left they said, “Oh, you won’t have to worry about anything. No, you don’t need your furniture. You’re not going to need anything because when the government sends you someplace they really take care of you.” Shoot. We got to Chicago and they stuck us at . . . they said they would put you up in a hotel. I don’t know if they called that a hotel or what, but there were roaches. You had to go through peoples’ apartments to get to your room. It was horrible.

KW: It sounds horrible.

VW: And so then they finally got us an apartment. We didn’t know anything about Chicago. The only thing I remember about Chicago when I was growing up was my mother would go someplace and if she didn’t come home right away we’d say, “Mom, where were you?” And she’d always tell us, “Oh, I went to Chicago. Came back around New York.” I used to think she just made that up. It was a fairy tale thing. And there really was a Chicago! [Chuckles]

EW: Yes.

KW: I want to ask you more questions about that but I want to back up to the war real quick and then we’ll get to when you two got married. In 1948 you finished school. So you were in school when you heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor?

EW: Yes.

KW: What did you think about the war or the U.S. entering the war then?
VW: It was scary. When I really realized, I think I was in second grade or first grade. I remember we were in that old frame building.

KW: So you were scared?

VW: Yes.

KW: What did you think, Ernie?

VW: I used to think they were going to come and bomb us, you know, and we weren’t home and where are our parents going to be?

EW: I don’t really remember what I thought about it.

VW: They made us all go to church. It was cold. It was Christmas. I mean it was around Christmas time because I remember we were real little. But I can remember that.

KW: Because you were probably about ten or eleven then?

VW: Yes.

EW: Yes.

KW: How did you hear about it? Did they announce it in your classrooms? Radio?

EW: No. I remember we were going to dinner that day and they said the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. And I didn’t know where that was or what it was.

KW: Or who the Japanese were?

EW: No.

VW: I remember they made us all go to church. I mean we were little. I was real small then. I remember we had to go right over to church and start praying.

KW: Did you then quickly find out what the war was about? Did they tell you in school or did you hear anything about it afterwards while you were in school? Like about soldiers fighting or the Germans or anything?


KW: People just kind of talked about it here and there?

EW: Yes.
VW: Didn’t one of those Eisenmans have to go to war in it? It seems like I remember one of them coming back to Marty in a uniform.

EW: Oh, really? I don’t remember that.

VW: Was it Joe Eisenman?

EW: Joe. Yes. He was younger than me. Ed.

VW: I remember seeing a man coming to the classrooms.

KW: Maybe to recruit?

VW: No. We were little kids. I mean I was only in like first or second grade.

KW: With the older boys that were graduating, was your brother . . . your brother was in the war, right?

EW: Yes.

KW: He was older?

EW: Oh, yes.

VW: George.

KW: Did he enlist right away?

EW: Yes.

KW: Where was he at?

EW: I think he was in Texas. He got sent over to Utah and then . . .

KW: So he was already in the military?

EW: No.

KW: What was he in Texas for? Do you remember?

EW: Oh, I guess some of our relatives were down there. Auntie Jeannette or somebody.

VW: Was she in Texas or Wyoming?

EW: She was in Wyoming but he went from Texas over to Wyoming. I don’t know what he was doing in Texas.
KW: Did he enlist voluntarily?

EW: Yes.

VW: But he had to go from here though.

EW: Yes.

KW: So he must have come back here to enlist with the rest of those guys?

EW: I guess. Yes.

KW: So there were seven and they all just decided to join up?

EW: Yes. I guess.

KW: Did he ever say anything about the war or send letters or write to you at all?

VW: Yes. He wrote letters around here and in fact we probably still have some in pa’s trunk. We have a big old humpback trunk that we keep stuff in.

KW: Those would be valuable to scan in. Did you ever know where he was fighting at? Did your father or mother ever tell you where he was?

EW: Oh, yes. He was in Italy. He went to Italy. He was sent there.

VW: Austria. It seemed like there was a letter. I don’t know if it was his. I’m trying to remember. [Speaks to Ernest] Remember reading that letter he wrote to your ma? That was before his mother died in December of 1943, wasn’t it? George died in February of 1944.

KW: So she died before he died. Was he in the army?

EW: Yes. Yes. He didn’t know my mother died and she didn’t know that he died.

VW: Why do I think of Africa?

EW: What? Well, yes. He was in Africa.

KW: There was fighting in North Africa.

EW: North Africa. Yes.

VW: And then they sent him from there over to Italy where he got killed.

EW: Italy. Yes.
KW: Do you know what he did? Was he an infantryman?

EW: Infantry. Yes.

KW: Do you remember his unit and number or anything?

VW: Yes. We went over and we got all that stuff.

EW: It’s somewhere, yes.

VW: We got a whole bunch of that stuff because in 1993 we went over to Rome. We got to see the Pope. Pope John.

KW: John Paul II.

VW: Then from there we went over to . . . well, Bishop Lucker set that up for us. Then we went to Nettuno, Italy.

KW: Did you go with other people or on your own?

VW: Just this other couple went with us and this other guy went. Bud Lawrence from Mankato.

KW: Was he Indian?

VW: No. He had some relatives in Germany and there were some friends over there. They always came here and they always came to visit us. He’d bring them over to visit us. They wanted us to come over and visit. So Bud was going over there. He had tickets. He had won a couple tickets to Germany. Well, he wanted Ernie to go but I could go. We’d use those tickets and Bud would come with us. We didn’t really want to go because we were planning on going but we wanted to go to Italy to see his brother’s grave. We didn’t want to go to Germany. We wanted to go there. So we said if we went to Europe we’d go to Italy. So when Ernie had the opportunity he said, “Well, yes. We could go fly there and then fly on over to Rome and then take the train from there.” So this couple over there met us in Rome at the airport. We said we wanted to see his brother’s grave. We went to Europe. It was a good thing we did because we had a good time. It was really nice. It was really sad, the cemetery. Beautiful cemetery. Nettuno got them all [the soldiers from World War II].

KW: Was that was a specific battle you said that he died in?

VW: There were eight thousand buried in that cemetery. All those that got killed over in that area.

KW: So how old was he when he enlisted? How much older was he than you?

EW: He was the oldest one in our family.
**VW:** He died when he was twenty-eight.

**EW:** Yes.

**KW:** Okay. That was 1944 when he died. Were you back here then? Because your mother had just passed away in 1943.

**VW:** That was in December.

**KW:** December. So then you went back to school? Did you come back here to Lower Sioux for a time period when she passed away?

**EW:** I don’t remember. Do you?

**VW:** You guys came home. The reason I know is because I used to be friends with his sister, Vera, and she’s my age. I remember when they came and got her, because I remember we had to pray so they’d have a safe trip home. It was when her mother passed away. And they left and I think Pa brought you guys back around Christmastime.

**EW:** Yes.

**VW:** It was around Christmas.

**KW:** Did your pa drive?

**EW:** No. We came on a train.

**KW:** So he put you guys on a train. What did your mother die from? Was she sick?

**EW:** Yes. She got . . .

**VW:** She had gall bladder surgery, didn’t she?

**EW:** Yes. And then she caught pneumonia.

**VW:** Then they had to go from here to Pipestone because they couldn’t use the hospital. She had pneumonia.

**KW:** So they wouldn’t let the Indians use the hospital over in Redwood Falls?

**EW:** Yes.

**KW:** How much farther is Pipestone from Redwood Falls?

**VW:** Ninety miles.
KW: Redwood Falls is only . . .

VW: Five or six miles. No. It’s right over there.

KW: That’s too bad. Do you remember any opposition to the war or was everyone really supportive?

EW: Yes. I guess they were. We supported it because my brother went there.

VW: Remember they came out with that movie, *The Five Sullivans*? They used to show that to us at Marty.

KW: I don’t think I’ve seen that.

BP: It was about five brothers that . . .

VW: They were in the Navy, weren’t they?

BP: They were from Iowa. They all died.

VW: They all got killed in the war.

BP: What did you feel seeing that movie?

VW: Sad.

EW: Yes.

VW: How did you feel Ernest?

EW: Yes. I was sad. Yes. It didn’t feel good, that’s for sure.

VW: It was very, very . . . emotional to see that. Because they were quite . . . it was a war family, too. I mean they lost all five of their boys. The little brothers, even the youngest one.

KW: Did they have any war scenes in there?

VW: Yes.

KW: So you kind of saw what it was like?

VW: Yes. It was scary. To think that was where . . . Because a lot of the kids, I mean not a lot of them, but it seems like some of the boys that were in the upper grades, they were all drafted in it.

EW: Yes.
VW: I remember after the war some of them guys came back and they couldn’t play basketball [in high school] because they were too old, they said. You know, because when you’re in high school you can only be eighteen, isn’t it?

EW: Yes.

VW: You can play up until you’re eighteen. And most of those kids were like nineteen, twenty, twenty-one or something. Because if you were ever looked at senior pictures from back in the 1940s, you’ll see some of them guys look pretty old. You know, the graduating classes. I mean they did in our boarding schools, even the women.

KW: You are saying that they drafted them and then put them in basic training and then they sent them back to school because the war was done.

VW: Then they came back to school and graduated.

KW: I see.

VW: I know a lot of them went into service because . . . a lot of them went because of the GI Bill. They talked about how you could go on to school. There were some benefits from going and if you were having a rough time you went in and you could go on to school, go on to college, and get a career or something.

KW: So a lot of them did that, enlisted for that reason?

VW: Yes.

KW: The war ended in 1945. What did you think about that when the war ended? Were you relieved?

EW: Yes. I was relieved.

VW: We were still in high school.

EW: Yes.

KW: Did you think that at some point in high school that you might have to be drafted eventually when you were of age? That the war would go on and then you would have to be drafted?

EW: Yes. I kind of thought that.

KW: What did you think about that? Did that scare you?

VW: You wanted to go to the service.
EW: Well, I don’t know if I was scared or what. I figured I would be drafted. When I finally did go in, I enlisted because I didn’t want to be drafted. I wanted to enlist in the service. I wanted to go in. So I went.

KW: When did you enlist? Did you enlist right after high school?

EW: Yes, right after high school. In 1948 I enlisted in the Navy.

VW: They said the boys that went to boarding school made good soldiers, good military men, because they already had that discipline. It wasn’t hard for them. We just had our class reunion and one of the guys . . . we have a military part of our reunion where we recognize and honor all of our classmates that never made it to the reunion. He made a career out of it, this Ernie McCloud. He does our military part of the reunion really good. And he said that the kids that went to . . . the Marty boys didn’t have a hard time in the military because they were used to the discipline.

KW: That makes sense. Used to being disciplined and . . .

VW: Getting up at the crack of dawn.

KW: Yes.

VW: Going to bed before sunset.

KW: So you enlisted in the Navy in 1948. Where were you sent then after that for basic training?

EW: To Great Lakes.


EW: Waukegon. Yes.

KW: What was your first impression of that, of the whole military thing?

EW: It was like boarding school.

KW: So it wasn’t much of an adjustment you had to make.

EW: No.

KW: What were you trained to do?

EW: Fire control. That’s aiming and firing the guns, big guns.

KW: Do you remember what kind of guns those were, specifically?
**EW:** Yes. Five inch. They were what they call five inch and eight inch.

**BP:** Those are big guns.

**EW:** Yes.

**KW:** Did you meet any other Indians while you were there in basic training? [Ernest shakes his head] No? So you had a lot of non-Indian friends there?

**EW:** Yes.

**KW:** Did you ever experience any discrimination because you were Indian?

**EW:** In fact, a lot of them were afraid of me, they said.

**KW:** A lot of them were afraid?

**EW:** Yes.

**KW:** How come?

**EW:** They had crazy ideas about Indians.

**KW:** What were some of them?

**EW:** That they [Indians] would kill them or something.

**KW:** Do you think that had anything to do with a stereotype of Indians as savage warriors or like the Westerns always show?

**EW:** Well, it probably did. They didn’t say that to me, but . . .

**KW:** They just wouldn’t talk to you?

**EW:** No, they talked, but they were kind of . . . they didn’t get too close, you know.

**KW:** Did you make any close friends then?

**EW:** Oh, yes. Yes, I had. But every few months you’d get transferred somewhere else, so you didn’t really get real close to anybody.

**KW:** Where did you go after that, after Waukegon? Were you transferred elsewhere?

**EW:** Yes. I was transferred to a brand new ship. It was a heavy cruiser they called it, which is almost as big as a battleship. It was called the Newport News. It was a brand new ship. It had air conditioning, which most ships don’t have.
KW: Were you usually sweating in the ships?

EW: Oh, yes. I guess so.

KW: They were just kind of miserable?

VW: Well, you were out on the Mediterranean in it.

KW: Oh, you were out on the Mediterranean on the *Newport News*?

EW: Yes.

KW: How long were you on the *Newport News*?

EW: That was the only ship I was on. I was on it during my whole service in the Navy. And I was glad, too, because it was air-conditioned.

KW: How long were you in the Navy? For four years?

EW: Five.


EW: Yes.

KW: Were you in the Korean War, too?

EW: Yes. I didn’t get over there but I was in the Navy during that time. That’s the only time I was in. I was in Europe. I liked it over there.

VW: He was in Paris. He’d go to that . . . where was it? Casablanca. He was kind of the Humphrey Bogart.

KW: Did you buy a hat and a suit?

VW: Perfumes. Somebody sent us some history on this. [Shows papers] This was a tugboat, wasn’t it?

EW: Yes.

VW: They named it after Wabasha III. I don’t know if you knew that.

KW: No.

VW: That was who this [tugboat] was named after. What year was that? Anyway, some man was looking it up. He says he is a descendant. Isn’t that the one that sent it?
EW: Yes.

VW: He started pulling out all the history on Wabasha and he found that boat . . . and what it did, it pulled these big warships, Navy ships, out to sea. They named it after Wabasha.

BP: How long was it in service?

VW: They had a big write up. Leonard must have taken that paper. He was going to make copies of it.

KW: That’s neat.

VW: I thought that was pretty nice, you know. I mean he sent us the hat. He sent about six of them. Ernest gave them to all his family.

KW: That’s nice. So were you in the Mediterranean?

EW: Yes.

KW: Did you stop off in Greece?

EW: Oh, yes.

KW: Italy?

EW: Every place over there. Every port there was over there.

KW: What was your job? What was the Newport News’s job there during the Korean War?

EW: They didn’t get into the war. It stayed over there in Europe all that time.

KW: Did you feel you were there to defend?

EW: Yes. It was a heavy cruiser, which is almost like a battleship. Big. It had eight-inch guns, which are not eight inches long but eight inches wide . . . that big.

KW: Were those hard to fire?

EW: No. They were all automatic.

KW: Were they clunky?

EW: Yes. They were hard to handle. You had to handle them.

KW: You had to be pretty strong?
EW: Yes. But I didn’t get into handling them. I got into aiming the guns. Fire control they called it.

BP: You would practice how often? When you would go out on maneuvers and things like that, how much time did you spend in port and how much time would you be out on the water?

EW: We would go overseas to Europe about six months a year, so we’d get around pretty much to all the ports that were there. We had a pretty exciting time.

BP: What did you guys do when you visited Greece? Was it the same guys you hung out with all the time?

EW: Yes. Pretty much, it seemed anyways.

VW: You were in the Navy with Sebastian LeBeau and . . .

EW: Yes.

VW: What’s his name? A friend of ours’ brother was in the Navy at the same time he was. He’s from Eagle Butte, South Dakota.

KW: You were in the Korean War until 1953. Then your time of service was up?

EW: Yes.

KW: And then what did you do right after that?

EW: Came back home.

KW: So in 1953 you were twenty-four?

EW: Yes.

KW: Did you work when you came back home?

EW: What did I do?

VW: That’s when you started working for Western Electric.

EW: Honeywell.

VW: No. He worked for Western Electric and then he met me.

KW: Did you meet in St. Paul?

VW: Yes. I and his sister worked in St. Paul. Then we got married in February.
EW: Yes.

KW: Of 1953, 1954?

VW: 1954. Everybody says, “Why did you get married in the middle of winter?” I said, “Well, I don’t know. I had sheets, you know, bedding.” I said, “He only had Navy blankets. They were too itchy. So we pooled our resources and got married. I was getting cold that winter.” Right after that was when Ernest went up to the DEW Line, up to the Arctic Circle.

KW: So you were here when you worked for . . . no.

VW: No. I was in St. Paul. We lived in St. Paul. Because there were no jobs here, you know, unless you wanted to walk beans or pick rocks in the fields.

KW: So you went up to . . . did you say General Electric?

VW: No. Western Electric in St. Paul. It was Sibley.

KW: Where did you live when you were there?

VW: On Laurel Avenue is where he lived.

KW: Did you live with anybody or did you get your own place?

VW: I lived with Ernest’s little sister, Vera.

KW: So that’s how you met then? Through Vera?

VW: Yes. I graduated from Marty in 1954 and then I came up here. I went in the convent after I graduated and I didn’t like it. They told me I had to be obedient, so I left. My cousin was a nun. She used to laugh at me because I never mind nobody. I stayed with my older sister Delores in Minneapolis. I stayed with her and then she ran into Vera one day down on Hennepin. She was going to the movie. She told Vera I was there. Then Vera came and she wanted me to go to St. Paul and work with her over there because I was working at Prudential Life Insurance. She said, “You’ll make more money.” Back then we only made like . . . I think it was like fifty-seven cents an hour or sixty cents an hour being a clerk typist. Vera was working in a factory and she made more money in a factory.

So I went over there and I started working over there in the cold storage right on the end of Wabasha and Kellogg. Right up there. I think we made ninety-three cents and hour or ninety-four cents an hour. It wasn’t even a dollar. And the landlord where we stayed, her sister worked for Peters Meat Products. One day while we were visiting her trying to get something free to eat from the landlady, her sister came. Lil [her sister] used to always have hot dogs. They used to be just good and they were those Peters Meat Products. She said, “Oh, you should come work over there.” She said, “They’re hiring.” So I jumped on the bus the next morning and went over there and then they hired me. So then we got to make a dollar and five cents an hour.
KW: That’s pretty good from fifty-seven cents.

VW: Even from ninety-three cents.

KW: Yes.

VW: Then we got another raise. And then I got married.

KW: When you worked for Western Electric, what did you do there, Ernie?

EW: What did I do there? We were . . .

VW: He did electronic work there. You know, different schematics and stuff. I think they were just coming out with computers or designing stuff like that for those phone lines and stuff. I think that’s what he did.

KW: How long did you work there for?

EW: Five years.

VW: Yes. They sent you up to the DEW Line, remember? Then you came back. And then he went to Chicago and he went to school at DeVries Technical Institute and got his degree. Fought with the Bureau.

KW: You hired a lawyer.

VW: Hired a lawyer. Mayor Daly was really nice.

EW: Yes.

KW: So you worked there from 1953 to 1958 and you got married and he was sent up to the DEW Line. How long were you there for?

VW: A year. In January he came back.

KW: So that would have been what year? 1958?

VW: We got married in February of 1956 and he went up to the DEW Line and he came back the end of January. And then in August 1959 we went to Chicago. We went on the relocation program. He did get to go to school after we fought. Even the guys from Washington, the Bureau guys came down there [to Chicago]. But we fought all the way. My brother worked for the Bureau in Aberdeen and I called him and I said, “God, they’re going to send us back to Minnesota!” “No! You stay right there. That’s illegal for them to take you someplace and say that’s what you’re going to do. It’s illegal. You stay there.” So we got a lawyer. The nuns had a convent there, too. The Blessed Sacrament Sisters. And it just happened that the principal that was at Marty when I was in high school was there at Immaculate Heart. She was the one that
knew Mayor Daly and got him involved. They wanted to put it all on the front page of the Chicago Herald or whatever it was.

I think the Bureau didn’t want any bad publicity, so they finally . . . Then they were kind of really rude to us after that. But we won our case. They sent him to school and did everything. They didn’t want him to work. If he got a job then they tried to deduct what he earned off from what he made, so we used to fight them. We fought them all the way though. Then they sent Ernest from DeVries and that all over to different places when he graduated. He was in the top ten of his class when he graduated from there. So then different big companies wanted [to hire him]. They were going to hire him out in Staten Island, some big company out there. That was too far for us to go. Then McDonald Aircraft got out there. Ernest worked on the Gemini. He worked for the Space Program. He [worked on] electronic paneling in the space program. He worked there.

**KW:** When did you work there?

**VW:** He went in 1961. He graduated and we went there and lived in St. Charles, Missouri until 1967. Then his dad was getting sick and they put him in a rest home up here in Redwood. He didn’t like it so we came and got him and then we brought him back. We’d go back and come back. And finally we just wanted to move back up here so he could be with his dad. We moved back to Minneapolis then. That was in August or September. It must have been in August because we put the kids in school at St. Stephens in 1967. From there he got a job at Honeywell.

**KW:** In 1967?

**VW:** Yes. And then he worked there. We lived in Minneapolis. Then in 1968 we bought a home in St. Louis Park and lived there until our kids graduated. Then he wanted to come back out here.

**KW:** Was that late 1970s or mid-1970s?

**VW:** That was 1979. I worked in Minneapolis at that time. I worked for the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches and then I served on the State Indian Affairs Commission. I was appointed to that, elected to that board in 1970. February of 1970. At the time I was appointed to that, I worked for the Minneapolis Public Schools for Adult Basic Education Programs setting up different programs throughout Minneapolis for Indian students . . . adults. Or minorities. So I worked there. And then Hap Holstein got sick and resigned and they asked me if I’d take his place, so I did. I ended up there all the time.

**KW:** So what made you want to move back here then after your kids graduated?

**VW:** Because this was his homesite. If he didn’t move back then one of the stipulations was you have to move back on your allotment or your assignment or you lose it. And he didn’t want to lost this piece of land. This was where his dad lived. His grandfather was from here. And this was where Chief Wabasha, you know, set foot back when the war came in 1862. That’s when he was removed from here. He was taken from his community in shackles. Then they transported him out to Crow Creek.
KW: So they said that if you didn’t come back here then they were going to—?

VW: Yes. See, his father had already passed away and left him this. His dad died in 1970. So they told him that he’d have to be back here. So as soon as our kids graduated . . . Leonard graduated in 1978, wasn’t it?

EW: Yes.

VW: When we moved back here there was nothing here. There was a big cornfield out here. I think it was in 1982 that Shakopee did their first bingo hall. Then Lower Sioux opened theirs in 1986, the bingo hall. We were the guinea pig to start gaming. Lower Sioux Jackpot was the first place to put machines in. They stuck their neck out.

KW: What did you think of that when they were going to put a casino here?

VW: Everybody would say, “Why are they going to put one way out here for? There’s nobody here.” Do you remember that movie Field of Dreams? “Build it and they’ll come.” So they built it and sure enough. Before they had the casino we had the trading post. We had the pottery. The pottery, that was the first economic development program ever put on a reservation that did any . . . really down in our area. Lower Sioux always was an example place. And the leadership worked for the people. They did things that would benefit everybody. It’s always been that way. Families were proud.

KW: It sounds like it. I think we’ll wrap up pretty soon here. The greatest generation. Do you agree that you’re part of the greatest generation?

EW: Sure do.

KW: Why is that?

EW: Well . . .

VW: Like I said when Maude was here, you know, our elders are very quiet. If you notice, they don’t boast about themselves. And that’s the way leadership was. They did what they had to do. Like they say, suffer in silence. They did all this stuff without complaining about why or how come. They just did it. I think they thought of the coming generations, you know, their kids and their grandkids. I think that’s probably why they’re the greatest generation. They worked hard for what they have. It wasn’t just given to them. It was hard work. They did their jobs.

KW: So you think that’s why. Because they worked really hard for future generations?

VW: Yes. And they were proud of what they did. There was a lot of pride and respect for themselves and for what they had to offer and to give to other people.

KW: Do you agree with that, Ernie?
**EW:** Yes. Sure do.

**KW:** I have one question about language. Did your parents speak the language?

**VW:** Yes.

**EW:** Yes.

**KW:** Are you a fluent speaker? [Both shake their heads no] No? Okay. I always like to ask about language.

**VW:** It’s an important thing that you know your language or your mother language. It’s a shame that we weren’t able to carry that on like our parents. They must have had a reason. And our grandparents must have had a reason for us not to be speaking that. They probably knew that we couldn’t use it, because each band and each tribe or each tribe are different dialects. In the United States there’s about three or four hundred tribes and they all have their own language. And you would only communicate with your own people, you know. So English came in and I think that was what they wanted us to learn.

It would be good if we knew it. We try to learn the language. I think it’s something that the kids . . . it would probably help them if they would teach it. They try to teach it here, some of the elders. Back a long time ago they tried to teach it in the schools but the only ones that ever picked it up good was the non-Indian kids. I don’t know why, but the women that were teaching like Pearl and Evelyn and them, they said the white kids were picking it up faster than the Indians. It’s a language that you have to talk every day. You have to be able to communicate. Like in Canada where the Dakota language for this dialect is, they even say, “Well, we’re more into slang, the Dakota, here it’s more of a missionary type.” You know, the linguistics of the language is more what the missionaries taught or how they wrote it in the books.

**KW:** Which is what we use as a reference?

**VW:** Yes.

**KW:** Those missionaries, that’s what they did. They tried to write it down and then scholars later on try to figure it out.

**VW:** That’s the same way with history. Even the interpretation for history. It’s his story. And they say, “Well, why don’t they let the Indian people tell their story of what really happened?” Today everybody’s plagiarizing each other’s stuff. The whole history, like that conflict. They think that’s the only thing the Dakota people ever offered to the State of Minnesota.

**KW:** The only piece of history?

**VW:** Yes. Like they have that story [Alan R.] Woolworth [and Gary Clayton Anderson] wrote. Through Dakota Eyes. Now that wasn’t through Dakota eyes. That was through his own eyes. The references he pulled were out of the Historical Society. Things that white men wrote. I get a
kick out of some of our . . . I mean I shouldn’t, but I think you get a lot of . . . we have a couple Indian scholars that got their PhDs. But everything they learned was from the white man . . . what white men wrote about us.

KW: Because those are the only records because Indian people didn’t write it down. It’s just oral.

VW: It’s only what you remembered.

KW: Yes. Well, that’s why we’re doing these oral histories, because we want to get from the Indian person’s perspective. I think that’s really important.

VW: And I think, you know, like the kids today, they don’t understand. Like here today. “Well, Wabasha, who’s he?” Because their parents didn’t know. So how do you expect your children to know?

KW: Did they go to public school then?

VW: Did my kids? Or the kids here?

KW: Yes.

VW: Yes. They had the little school here that closed in 1969 for all the kids and it went up to eighth grade. And then when they got to eighth grade they went into high school at Morton. But then Morton closed and so all the kids from Morton then had to go to Redwood.

KW: They don’t teach local Indian history there?

VW: That’s just like the boarding schools. They never taught it in any of the schools. Never taught Dakota or Indian history. It was maybe a little thing around Thanksgiving about the first Thanksgiving.

KW: Indian kids dress up like Pilgrims and Indians.

VW: Yes. Like that one guy who said, “What are you going to dress up like for Halloween?” And the other says, “I’m going to dress up like a white man [laughter] and go trick or treating.” I said, “Well, you dress like that anyway.” Or like one time when we were in Minneapolis and AIM was first started. We were at St. Stephens, and George Mitchell and Harold Goodsky and all of those guys were talking about what could they do. They were getting so mad, you know, because they were always collecting all these old clothes for the Indians and giving them, you know, like polyester, little skinny dresses and I said, “Who can fit in that?” You don’t see a skinny Indian woman that needs clothes. It’s always us big women that are having a hard time and they need something. So they said, “Yes, we’re going to stand out in front of the church.” And they start handing out pieces of buckskin they got from Berman Buckskin.
We were involved in so many things in the inner city when they first started to bring attention to Indian people. I said it took all them demonstrations and stuff to bring out that there were still Indians around here. They came out with that book, *The Vanishing American* [by Zane Grey]. Well, we never did vanish. Even when Leonard, my son, was little. He was in St. Stephens and we had moved here from St. Charles. The teacher, Sister Margo, was teaching about Indians that the Dakota people were removed . . . there were no longer Dakota people. She didn’t say Dakota. She used to say Sioux. The Sioux people were all removed from Minnesota. They were all run out of here by the Chippewa. Leonard was there. Sister Margo said, “You should have seen him.” He jumped up and he was raising his arm in the back and he said, “No. We’re Sioux Indians and we’re still here. My mom and dad are Sioux Indian.” And Sister Margo said, “Oh, okay. Sit down.” She didn’t want to deal with him. He was in first grade.

They used to make me laugh when they were kids. “Ma, we’re not like that.” They thought it was so terrible. They noticed the difference when we moved from Missouri here to go to school. They wanted to go back to Missouri because down there in school the Indian people were recognized and respected. They noticed it. As little kids they noticed the difference between prejudice. He came back and they came out of school one day from St. Stephen’s and they said, “Can we go back? Can we move back to Missouri? I want to go back to St. Charles.” I say, “Why?” He said, “Because they’re not mean to Indians like they are here.” And he noticed that. I said, “Why? Who’s mean to you?” “No, they’re not mean to me but they’re mean to those other kids. There’s a lot of Indian kids in school, Ma.” So they noticed that. How the kids were treated, Indian kids.

Then we had that Project STAIRS Program we were part of starting in Minneapolis. They called it Project STAIRS. It was Service to American Indian Resident Students. We had some of the parents so we could get tutors. We were trying to bring attention to that there are Indian kids in the school. The teacher should pay attention to them instead of ignoring them. That’s what we did. And Dr. Davis, he was head of the Minneapolis Public Schools then, there were eight of us went up there to tell him we had kids in the school that were having problems. And he said that was the first time Indian parents had ever walked through those school doors to tell that there was a problem in the school system. And he was almost crying when he told us that. He said, “This is the first time.” Then we started working on the Minnesota Education . . . we got an Indian Education Board together of parents. You know, you have to be involved if you want to get your kids . . . and that’s what we did. We’ve got our Indian Upward Bound Program going. There was a lot of things happened back in the 1960s for our kids.

**KW:** That continues today. Upward Bound still exists. And the Indian Ed Program in public schools.

**VW:** Yes. They have Title 4 now where the kids and parents . . . We were able to get Indian parents involved in the school system. As aides and teacher assistants and teachers.

**KW:** That’s great.

**VW:** It was a struggle but we got the doors open anyhow. Now we’ve got a continuous struggle and fight to keep people’s attention on Indian kids.
KW: It is because if you don’t then it will just disappear.

VW: Yes. You’ve got to let them know they’re there.

KW: And why. That’s why it’s important to know the history of the struggle and what the people fought for previously. It’s important to know so that you can kind of keep up with that.

VW: Yes. Because we had those communities . . . you know, CC centers around Minneapolis. When they started Model City and Pilot City, you know, we were involved in all that stuff. Ernest and I and there were about eight other parents in south Minneapolis and north Minneapolis. Because Emily Peek and Dennis Banks was working for . . . Dennis just got out and he was working for upper Midwest. Then there was a Gordon Kendall. He was an ex-priest and he was the one that started organizing, getting that AIM going, because we were having problems with the police brutality on Franklin Avenue. That’s when we started the AIM group.

BP: Did you experience any of that personally?

VW: We didn’t hang around the avenue, but we knew people that did.

KW: Did you experience that a lot in the workplace or just around Minneapolis? Any discrimination or anybody saying stuff to you because you’re Indian?

VW: No. I think because we were always part of trying to make a change. We knew it was there because of the problems people were having. I just remember when Ernest was working for McDonald Aircraft and I applied for a job down there at McDonald Aircraft in Building 101. We were riveters. I applied and they hired me. We were in a classroom and there was me and a lot of black girls and a couple of Hispanics. All minority women sitting in there. One of the supervisors, a big, white guy came out. He was standing there talking to the instructor. “Spalding,” he said. I was sitting there and he went [makes “come here” hand motion]. We were writing because we were in class. I looked up and he went [makes tongue click sound]. And I thought, “What did he call?” So I didn’t move. I just sat there. I thought, “Well, he can come to me.” I used to be ornery, you know. Let him come over here to me. Like I was a little puppy or something. I kept writing. I still kept doing what I was doing.

Finally he came over and Chuck Spalding said, “Vernell! They want to talk to you out there.” I said, “Hey, I suppose they’re going to fire me. I just got started. They’re probably going to kick me out of here.” I thought, “Well, they can’t because there’s a lot of other minority women in here, too.” So I got up and I went out there and here he had this paper in his hand. It was my application, my job application. He said, “Vernell, why did you put down ‘other’ here? What nationality are you?” I said, “Well, you don’t have Indian there. You don’t have American Indian.” I said, “I’m a Dakota Indian.” “Oh. I was wondering why you didn’t put nothing on it.” I said, “Well, you had white.” “Yes.” “They had White and Black and Hispanic and Other. So I checked ‘Other’.” I thought, “Well, I’ll see if they really read these applications.” They did. He called me out there. That’s what he wanted to know, what “other” I was. I said, “Well, I’m other because you don’t have Indian on there.”
**KW:** Thank you very much for the interview today.