

Lorraine Luschen
Narrator

Amy Rieger
Interviewer

July 13, 1993
Rieger's home near Itasca State Park

AR: Where and when were you born?

LL: August 1, 1924 in St. Paul, Minnesota.

AR: Did you grow up in St. Paul?

LL: Yes, until I got married. Then I went north.

AR: You went to the public schools in St. Paul?

LL: Yes, Barnesworth, Johnson High School and the University of Minnesota. I graduated with a degree in sociology and Scandinavian.

AR: You got married to Mel. Did you meet him down there?

LL: No, I met him at Itasca Park.

AR: Were you working at Itasca at the time?

LL: Yes, four of my friends and I came up to work. That was 1948.

AR: How did you hook up with Itasca?

LL: I don't exactly remember. We inquired or got the jobs through Ralph Welke in the state office building.

AR: Had you visited up here a lot before?

LL: No. It wasn't until we were married that my family came up and bought a cabin.

AR: So you came to Itasca cold, as it were. What were your first impressions?

LL: Great. We've always loved it. I don't remember anything specific. It was just a fun place to be.

AR: It wasn't a shock coming from St. Paul to the north woods?

LL: No. I'd been partial to the north shore growing up and was in that country more often than in this part of the state.

AR: So you applied down there, they gave you a job and you and your friends came up here. What were you doing?

LL: I was doing waitress work at Forest Inn at firsts. It wasn't until much later that I worked in the office.

AR: Rieger Did you live in the dorms they have there? How was that?

LL: Yes. It was fun.

AR: Were there a lot of time working up here like that?

LL: Oh yes. The dorms would be filled.

AR: I talked to Ben (?) this morning about how a lot of the waitresses were college students and they would stay in the dorms so that they were readily available.

LL: We worked split shifts then. The ones in the dining room did. At Forest Inn I worked a straight shift. But in the dining room the girls worked a straight shift, so you had to be available.

AR: He mentioned now that you have to go through the civil service and know two weeks in advance. Did you see that change and what did you think about the system they use now?

LL: I think it's all right. All state jobs are through civil service now. Back then I think we took an extremely simple test to get the job. I don't know if right away then or later was the civil service test. I don't know when that started. It was fun living in the dorm and being with the girls. Some worked in the laundry and some in the dining room and I worked at the Forest Inn.

AR: Was this a summer job?

LL: Yes, but it would go through September. At that time the University wasn't starting until the end of September, so it worked out well for us.

AR: What did you do on your time off? Did you hook up with Mel right away?

LL: No, I didn't. We'd go up to the beach or go on cookouts. We weren't much into hiking or using the trails like they do now. Go to Bemidji a lot. Somebody usually had a car and we'd ride along.

AR: You said you waitressed at Forest Inn. That's when they had the kitchen there, there's nothing there now. How was that? I'm sure you've been to Forest Inn recently....

LL: It was like you've seen in the picture. Just a counter with stools. (Shows Amy a picture, which she says she has not seen.) After that picture was taken that put stools out there. There were tables in the back room, where the lectures now are. When I worked there it was mostly this, then at this part there was a higher counter where they served ice cream and pop and beer. You had to be 21 to work there.

AR: They've really changed that around then! How much did you get paid, do you remember?

LL: I don't remember.

AR: Did it give you enough spending money?

LL: Yeah. I imagine. We lived very economically. I don't remember at all how much.

AR: Were the dorms about what they are now?

LL: The bathrooms have had considerable improvement, but basically they are the same.

AR: Did you meet Mel the first summer?

LL: Yes. That was the summer I worked there. The following summer we were married and neither one of us worked. I was finishing college and had a summer class. We got married in August. He worked every summer after that and I worked maybe...our first born was in 1951, and after that I didn't work until my youngest was about three or four, then the older kids could take of them. She's going to be 30 this next month, so it must be 26, 27 years ago.

AR: Could you tell me a little bit more about Mel and his work? How did he become the lodge manager? He was after Ralph Welke.

LL: He'd been working in the office for all of that time. I don't know when Ralph Welke left. He took the test necessary for civil service and just moved into it naturally.

AR: Had he been working here before?

LL: Yes. He worked there since we were married except for that one year when we got married. From 1948 on.

AR: It was quite a responsible job. He was responsible for Douglas Lodge, Forest Inn, the souvenir shop...

LL: ..the headwaters and Brower, the whole bit. The lodge and souvenirs and dining areas, because they had at that time Brower Inn, too. And the laundry area, too. He was a workaholic. He started in March on weekends and worked almost up to Thanksgiving if not through most of the time. After he retired from teaching, the last few years, it got to be a nine month job, and we'd be gone for three months in the winter.

AR: When did he retire from teaching?

LL: 1981. He was an English teacher and taught at Chisholm most of the time. He taught at Laporte and Nevis before that.

AR: After you married in 1949, where did you live?

LL: We lived at Laporte, because he was teaching there. Lived there for a couple years, then my folks bought that cabin and winterized it a little better. It was kind of a cool cabin but fun. Then we went to Nevis for a few years and then went up to Chisholm.

AR: When he was working in the summer did you stay at home or did you come down with him?

LL: When we were renting in places like Nevis, we couldn't afford to pay rent for the summer, so we'd move out completely for the three months. At first we'd bring our furniture to the park and use it. In Chisholm we had somebody renting our house for one or two summers, so we left the furniture there. We lived in the park.

AR: Can you describe where you lived?

LL: There was a barracks down behind and a little bit to the left of the girl's dorm and laundry. Three or four apartments in that, extremely rustic. We even had an ice box. If you didn't hook your screen door, the raccoons would come in and take out a slab of bacon and loaf of bread from the ice box. After Ralph Welke left we moved into a two story house that's gone now. It was also in that same area. We lived in two rooms upstairs, with a hot plate to cook on. We had a hot plate in the barracks, too. Mel's cousin, Elmo, lived in one bedroom downstairs, and in the other room we stored furniture. We had several kids by that time, so it was kind of wild. We stacked them up. With the grandparents near, when the kids got older they'd go and help on the farm. After a while we had the whole house. Elmo stayed at the lodge. Then they built the new house up there on the hill. It was cozy and everybody was friendly. Other people lived in the

other end of the dorm. There was the boys dorm, too, and as our kids got older a couple of them would stay in that.

AR: How many kids did you have?

LL: Seven.

AR: They were all pretty much raised in the park?

LL: Yes. Mark would follow Ben around quite a bit and learn the trails. I don't know if he was a help or a hindrance!

AR: Ben was telling me a funny story that Mark had evidently told Ben that you worried about the kids wandering off into the woods and getting lost. So one time, Mel had one of the workers put shorts on and put mud all over his face and go out into the woods. Do you remember that?

LL: No, I don't. All I remember is that Peas Bailey would tell the kids that if you hear any noise there's a kid out in the woods.

AR: Who is that?

LL: He helped run the launch and did odds and ends around there. He was a real nice character. From Bemidji, I think. The kids all learned a lot about fishing from the guests who would take them down to the dock, or they'd follow them down there. They did a lot of fishing off the dock.

AR: Most of it was in the summer. Did it run into the school year at all?

LL: No, we never kept them out of school. We'd come down weekends because Mel was a teacher and he had to be in the school, too. So Labor Day we usually packed up and left. It worked out well because Mel would have to go to school right away, but there were usually a few days of teacher's workshops, so I had a few days to get the kids ready. I'd sometimes start in August getting their clothes lined up in Bemidji.

AR: How did you see the clientele change? You were there for thirty-some years.

LL: Yes, from 1948 on, except for '49, we were there every summer until Mel... that must have been '89 when we both left.

AR: So you really did witness a tremendous growth. Can you describe a little bit of that?

LL: The park naturalist program grew considerably, they were very minimal to begin with. The guests were like family because you'd see them year after year and look forward to when they came. This one would catch a lot of fish and you'd put it in the

freezer for them, and that one would just sit around in the sun, and that one had kids who would play with your kids. I didn't notice too much change. Some of the families that kept coming, their kids grew up and they brought their kids and it was like a family reunion for some of them. Some would come with a lot of kids and crowd into one cabin. When we first came there was housekeeping in one of them, but that changed. The bike trail is new.

AR: Besides the people that came back year after year, did you notice if any of the people that would only come for a few summers, did they change at all? Their attitude or what they expected from the lodge. Just the average visitor. Do you recall from '48 or '50 til later?

LL: I worked in the office and got to talk to the people and know them to well the first year or two, then I stayed home with the kids and tried to keep them out of everybody's hair. I didn't notice too much how the people changed.

AR: How about park facilities, roads and communications? I'm sure that has improved a little bit.

LL: Definitely. The park patrol man would come out and we'd have radios and that helped a lot. That wasn't at first, so when it happened, that was good. We would take turns sleeping in the lodge, because if there were emergencies, we were the only phone number in the park for people get a hold of anything. Kind of a scary responsibility, but luckily nothing major happened when I slept there?

AR: Were there any major accidents that stand out?

LL: Of course, there were a lot of accidents through the park, but mostly during the day. When you talk to Elmo, he had more night duties and can tell you more stories about what would happen at night. Usually it was just a late guest coming in who couldn't find any place to go. Once in a while it'd be a medical emergency of some kind. It was comparatively calm. We'd all worry when we slept there thinking about the money in the lodge, because we only went to town once a week. It was right there in a little safe, safes were rather minimal.

AR: Ben thought you might have some observations about the change in the food service. He said you had some really great chefs there at Douglas Lodge. One gentleman, Henrik I think, would make turtle soup out of the...

LL: His name was Helmenik, but I'd have to check on that. And Worthman, who is teaching now down in the cities, he was an excellent chef. "Don't forget the parsley!" They were all very good chefs. Before the lodge was remodeled in the kitchen area for the first time, there was a big screen porch where the employees ate. That was rather wild because you know the summer weather is very undependable. There was one lady, Maude, who was an avid bird watcher. She'd come in after checking on the birds and

exclaim over this one and that one. She was a little eccentric, but made you smile. Your food got cold very fast on that porch. There was an old ice machine, where they had to crank out chipped ice by hand.

AR: Now today we have all of this already processed and frozen. Do you think that that is for the best?

LL: Well, no I don't. I think the greatest thing they used to serve there were the omelets baked in the oven. Now everybody gets an omelet made on the grill. They were so good. We had an extra bakery department, but now everything has little dabs of things. How those gals made all those pies every morning. Excellent bakery and excellent chefs. Before the processed stuff you did everything by hand. The salad room, where they prepared all the things for the salad. We had long distances to run. There was a porch area very similar to what they have now, the porch on the dining room. But this one is air conditioned and carpeted. It's changed a lot.

AR: Do you like it the way it is now and did you like it better before?

LL: It had more character back then. More timely. You want it to stay, but you know it has to change for efficiency and health-wise and what have you. Health restrictions are better for all of us now but...

AR: You didn't have any problems with food poisoning, did you?

LL: No, no.

AR: How about the reservation system? I know the current one just went into effect a couple of years ago.

LL: I had nothing to do with the new one. With the old, we couldn't take reservations until April 1 for that season, when now I hear tell that you can do it ahead of time. Then April 1, because the lodge wasn't heated or warm, we'd go up to headquarters to work. Mel couldn't do it alone, so I would work that day, too. Connie would help us. She'd operate the switchboard to whoever was available to take one. The reservations were heavy on that first day. Mel and I did it mostly. A long time ago it was Ruby Bergquist who would handle it. She would handle it from her home, they'd put an extra phone in there. I don't know what help she had on April 1, if any, or what happened there.

AR: But you didn't have a lot of people calling in that first day.

LL: Just unending. Late afternoon it would slow down, and the people would get upset because they couldn't get through. Then they'd say, "the people with the redial button on their phone had an advantage." We couldn't help that! It was very touchy because everybody wants what he wants and when he wants it. They get upset if you can't give it to them, but it was out of our hands. First come, first served.

AR: I know the deposit system has changed as well. You said you had it all there at the lodge and you had to handle it all.

LL: We had to count it and make it balance every night from Forest Inn and the dining room and the office. There were two bags from Forest Inn, the souvenirs and the lunch counter. We had to balance that all up each night and get a deposit ready for Tuesday. You had to count the money and had to make sure the weekly money balanced with the daily money slips.

AR: That must have been a job in itself.

LL: To do that while you're handling the phone and the front desk, it was rather difficult. Sometimes we had help, sometimes we didn't. Sometimes you had spare time to get it all done. Then it got a little more complicated when they did the credit cards and those slips. And now evidently it all goes to headquarters. Pretty soft! (Laughter) But we had fun, we enjoyed it. The people were all great that we worked with.

AR: No crabby characters?

LL: Always a bit of a problem here and there, but nobody's perfect. If we had a problem with them, maybe they had a problem with us. Maybe we were the cause.

AR: Can we talk a little bit about the people you worked with that really stick out in your mind? The great help or funny characters or...

LL: Olivia Topping worked in the souvenir shop and was in charge of it at Forest Inn. You had to watch for people stealing things. I heard one day – you couldn't approach them unless they left the building – I guess she ran across the parking lot and told somebody that someone had something they didn't pay for! Shirley Gelene (?) works there now and here mother worked there before her, that's Francis Layok (?).

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

AR: [Talks briefly about who will have access to the tape.]

LL: You asked about people in the park. They were all just great. I enjoyed George, who is still there, and Ed Benson and Donna Roe who worked in our office. Elmo, of course. Lou Schultz, who was in charge of the laundry ladies, would come up every day to get the laundry list we had to make out for which cabins needed cleaning. All very friendly people. I can't think of any characters except maybe Peas Bailey, and I told you about him. I don't know any reason for his name.

AR: How would you describe when you were working in the lodge a typical day, if there is such a thing as a typical day?

LL: At one time Elmo was going to college at Bemidji, so we worked out a split shift. He'd work in the morning and evening and be gone during the day. We went for quite a while with that kind of a split shift, and I didn't mind because I was living there and it didn't matter to me when I worked or not. After he quit doing that... sometimes we kept it on for a while, depending on what other activities people wanted to do. Otherwise we changed the shifts around a little. Seven to three and three to eleven. We'd just take care of the phone and the people at the desk and all their requests. Magazines that come in, record them and put them out front for sale. Newspapers that would come in every morning. Telephone mostly, and the money. I can't think of anything specific. We usually ate at our desk, because there was no one to spell us.

AR: Did you usually bring your own lunch or grab something from the kitchen?

LL: For a while there were employee lunches that you could buy. Sometimes you bought things on your own if you didn't want that. Once in a while, toward the end especially, I'd bring my own lunch. It was tempting to buy there because it was all so good and handy. I don't know anything else about a typical day.

AR: I know that's a hard one, because what is a typical day. Things happen, and most of it seems so mundane anyway.

LL: If the dining room got rushed, and there was nothing going on at our desk, we'd go bus dishes or something. Now that probably wouldn't be allowed because it's not in my job description. Mel spent a lot of time in the dining room when they got rushed. He was a workaholic, so his work would wait til evening.

AR: When he was in charge of the souvenir shop, did he have to figure out what you were going to sell and how to get it?

LL: He conferred constantly with Delores Frendenburg and before that with Dorothy Farrell. She and Mel and Delores figured it out, and pretty soon Delores was doing most of it all herself. They'd meet with the salespeople and stuff. Mel would constantly get to the souvenir shop and see what needed to be done and he always had the time sheets to do and the schedules to do. Have you ever talked to Harriet Johnson? She produced a book of poems. She made up special poems for Mel once and said that all he ever did was make Xs when he was making schedules. She lives south of Bemidji. Her husband Carl worked as a carpenter at the park. Harriet worked in the souvenir shop at the Forest Inn.

AR: How much contact was there between you and other local residents of the area?

LL: Not too much, we were pretty busy. Mel's folks lived here and my folks had bought that cabin at Laporte, so we were over here mowing lawn or over there mowing lawn or taking care of either set of grandparents quite often. We knew the people who worked at the park but didn't socialize with them. Ruby and Mel Bergquist we'd go out with to

dinner. Our friends would come visit us and we'd go out to dinner mostly. It was hard to get away in the summer to do anything else. Not a lot of down time when you have tourists and families and home and both sets of grandparents here. It really kept us out of mischief.

AR: Did you witness any park politics? Between your husband the naturalists or the forestry people?

LL: No, I didn't notice that. People pretty much got along except when the union would bring around a strike.

AR: Were there strikes in the park? How long did they last?

LL: Yes, there were. I don't remember how long they lasted.

AR: Who did it involve?

LL: Ask Ben sometime. I think he can remember more.

AR: How did you get along with the park managers?

LL: No problem. We'd go out to dinner with them often. John and Clara. Not with the Kontolas. We always had to smile because she always wore white gloves and she'd like for the patrol car to come pick her from Brower Inn and take her home. I don't remember much about Andy Peterson. We were there evidently when he was there, but I don't remember socializing with him except when we would have big park get-togethers.

AR: Did they have quite a few of those?

LL: They used to have a managers conference every fall, and quite often it was at Itasca. Other park people would come from all over the state. That was always kind of fun. It was usually in the fall when Mel was teaching, so sometimes we'd come down on a Wednesday night for their banquet. We missed most of the week. I think the last few years they have them at Cragun's and places like that.

AR: Do you remember any serious problems with other employees that had to be dismissed?

LL: No, I don't remember them.

[Lorraine shows Amy a book that Harriet Johnson had published, "The Leaves Clapped their Hands."]

LL: Here's the one she wrote for Mel. "You make little Xs, don't you" she wrote that right down on the bottom. That was when the employees had a little birthday party for

Mel one fall. His birthday is in February. Very often if your birthday was in the summer they'd get together and have a piece of cake and cup of coffee, so one fall they did for him. He was always having to revise schedules constantly.

AR: I bet that was a big job. He had the headwaters and...

LL: It was. Later on, near the end, he tried to let them make their own schedules, but very often he'd have to give them a little help.

AR: Anything else you can add about the park and how it's changed or any things that stand out in your mind about Itasca State Park? The change in management, the change in facilities...

LL: I can't think of any right now.

Itasca State Park Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society