

**George and Elizabeth Smith
Narrators**

**Amy Rieger
Interviewer**

**August 5, 1993
The Smiths' home in Bemidji, Minnesota**

AR: A bit of background information first. Where and when were you born?

GS: My name is George Smith. I was born September 19, 1915 on the White Earth Reservation. My birthplace was White Earth, Minnesota. My parents were Ojibwes. They spoke their native language at home and I could understand them and I could speak Ojibwe. We moved about considerable because my father was a blacksmith. His work was oftentimes for the government. He was transferred from one place to another. I began school quite late – when I was eight years old in White Earth, Minnesota. At the age of nine, we moved to Ponsberg [phonetic] and lived in the community of Pine Point, adjacent to Ponsberg, which is known, too, as Carsonville, Minnesota.

My father's work was quite seasonal. The major part of his occupation was in the fall, winter and spring, when there was considerable amount of blacksmith work to do for farmer's in the area. Then the season became very lax after the planting season. We were more fortunate than a lot of people because of his occupation. However, in the summertime we needed to do other things for income purposes. I remember picking strawberries. People would gather on the prairies and dig snake root. Snake root was an herb for medicinal purposes. I remember seeing whole families out on the prairie with scrub hose and paper and [unclear] and pockets in their aprons, stuffing snake root into their aprons. Then this would dry out and, as I remember, sold for ten cents a pound. We have a sample of here on Betty's desk. She might bring it out for you to see. Then they'd gather strawberries and so forth. That was in the early part of June.

Later on we went to work to in the pulp camps. Means of travel was by truck. It was the advent of the trailers attached to trucks. They didn't have trailers earlier than that. Then they had boxes on the trailers that were used for hauling grain and then for hauling people. Many people did not have automobiles in our community, so we all loaded up on these trailers and get taken to the berry patches or the pulp camps. We went out to Itasca Park. The place we located for pulp cutting was on the north end of the lake, outside the park. It was on Route 200. About a mile and a half from Sauer's store. The location of it was called Iron Springs. We prepared for this responsibility by getting our saws and things sharpened. My job was to peel the pulpwood. As I recall pulpwood brought three dollars a cord at that time. Each family was assigned a strip, a jackpine strip, on a forty

acre track. So there was quite a community of people in tents living in this area. We were fortunate that the water was very good. I was remember that our pastor was even with us. He conducted prayer services in the evening. We prepared for my part in this endeavor my having a spud made. A spud is a tool for peeling purposes. A blade with a handle. My spud was made out of a cultivator handle and the shear of the cultivator and sharpened. Other people used hoes and bent the stem part of the hoe and sharpened the hoe for the purpose of scraping the bark off the pulpwood.

AR: But you had to have your own equipment?

GS: Yes, that's right. Then my other duty at the pulp camp was carrying water to various people who were cutting wood. I'd carry it out from the spring to the swampy area where people were cutting pulp.

AR: How old were you at this time?

GS: Nine years old. The other experience I had there – I just had two experiences at the park – we played baseball and other games in the field next to the store, that's a post office north of the park. As I recall there weren't any other buildings except the store and a few little cabins that were adjacent to the store and post office. One of the occupations we had in the evening was to move toward the sound of the slapping of beaver tails in the pond. We never saw beavers, we were just attracted by the sound. There is such a pond north of the park. The river, too, had beaver sounds. We would play baseball when we weren't cutting pulp. As I recall, I had four dollars when we went back from the pulp camp to the village to celebrate the Fourth of July. That was really well, having four dollars. Then the next experience I had that same summer was to be loaded on the truck again with my whole family. A number of families were on the truck, and we went up to Ash Lake, near Orr, Minnesota, to pick blueberries. On the way we stopped at Wegmann's store at Itasca Park. I remember it had a large storefront with a porch on it and on the porch was an artist who was painting pictures and selling to the tourist. I remember having cookies and ice cream, then we had to travel the balance of the day and that night in order to get up to the blueberry patch. After the berry season we came back to the village again. That's my experience.

AR: What did you think of the park as you were going through or passing by the Wegmann's store?

GS: There wasn't much to see. I couldn't see over the boards of the truck! You just can't imagine how we were packed into that trailer -- all our camping gear and quite a number of families. Mr. Henry was the driver of the truck, and he was paid a certain amount to transport each family. He'd haul them out there, then when it was time to return from the berry patch, someone would write a letter and Mr. Henry would come back for us. That's my story.

AR: How did you get along when you were working at Iron Springs in the park? Did you have any contact with the local residents there?

GS: No, just when we played baseball. There was no communication between the neighbors and the

AR: Did you win at baseball?

GS: I hardly remember. I was nine years old I don't remember too much about each game.

AR: What were your father's and mother's names?

GS: Tom and Nancy.

AR: Do you remember when you stopped by the Wegmann's store on just that one instance, do you remember if you happened to see either Mr. and Mrs. Wegmann?

GS: No, I don't remember seeing them. I stayed in the truck; we were confined to the truck, the kids were. Otherwise we'd scatter all over.

AR: Do you remember were there any other people there at the time?

GS: There were tourists. I could see them walking about near the front of the store. As I recall, from that truck all I could see were the treetops!

AR: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

GS: No. That's my total experience there.

AR: Have you been back to the park since then?

GS: If I told you about that, you'd have to turn off the mike!

AR: I'll do that.

[Rest of tape 1, side 1 is blank.]

AR: The following is an interview with Elizabeth Smith at her home in Bemidji, August 5, 1993.

Will start with as far back as you can go. Where were you born and when?

ES: I was born in 1922. My parents lived at Beltrami in Polk County. I was actually born in Crookston. Two years later we moved to Mahnommen County, a farm in eastern

Mahnomen about three and half miles on the Rice River. I lived there for about twelve years. I think my attachment to rivers came as a result of living in that area.

The Depression came and my father lost the farm and we moved to Roy Lake, which is right on the Clearwater/Mahnomen County border. From that time on...all of my school days were spent at Mahnomen with the exception of six months at Roy Lake, but during my eighth grade I stayed with my grandparents, and at the beginning of the ninth grade there was a school bus that ran from Roy Lake to Mahnomen. At that time Highway 31, as it was called, was a gravel road and not in very good condition. We had days when we couldn't go because of storms. We had days when we barely got there because of mud. In 1938 our bus driver—in those days the bus driver was privately hired contractor – we prevailed on him to have a bus picnic. We went to Itasca Park. I don't know how many people went; I would say 15 or 20. He took us to the tower and we had a lunch at Preacher's Grove, which was the picnic area. I can show you some pictures of that event.

AR: What were your first impressions of the park?

ES: I must have been impressed because the Mississippi River was something that I really remembered, and I'm sure that at that time we went to the headwaters because that was the place to go. I think probably the trees would have impressed me, especially around Preacher's Grove. I had gone to the park when I was about eight, but I don't remember anything about that, except I'm sure again that I must have visited the headwaters sometime. On one of those trips I know I went across on the rocks. I can vaguely remember, but I don't know who or what or what time. Of course at that time the headwaters weren't as developed as they are now, in fact it was very marshy. I remember the mosquitoes were thick, the poison ivy was terrible and I was very susceptible, to I had to be very careful as to what I did.

The spring of 1940 I graduated from high school and did not go on to school. In the fall, my mother had broken her arm so I was taking care of the family at home. I had five brothers and sisters, all younger. Sometime in March 1941 I must have gotten a letter, or my mother did, from a woman who at that time was named Lucy Bonik of Bagley who had worked at the Royal Lake Lodge sometime previous. She was working for Mr. Wegmann at Itasca Park but was going to leave, and she wanted to know if I wanted to have her job. It paid \$20 a month, which in those times was quite a bit of money. I was to go to work the 15th or 16th of March, a Sunday.

The night before my to-be husband and I went to Detroit Lakes and we were caught about seven miles from Roy Lake in a terrible blizzard in which people had died. We drove seven miles in this storm. It was a very peculiar storm because it started out raining a little bit and as we got closer to home the weather kept changing and it got snowy. Then it froze on the windshield and we didn't have defrosters then. George stepped out to clear

the windshield and a terrific gust of wind – I can still feel the car moving under that gust of wind – hit just as he stepped out and he lost his hat. We never did find it.

We had seven miles to drive, and the snow was getting heavy. At the time we started out there was very little snow on the roads. It was melting; March was fairly normal. But the roads were starting to become white. We went a mile and a half or two miles in this terrific wind and snow and we came on a car in the ditch; there were three people in it. We offered them a ride and they accepted and they rode with us to the [unclear] corner, which is about three miles west of Roy Lake. We asked them if they'd be all right, and they said "yes". We were worried about leaving them in what seemed like the middle of nowhere although there were houses in that area, but you could barely see them from the car. From that point on, I drove the car from the passenger side. I was steering from the bank of snow the snowplow had left behind; that was all we could see. How we made the turn at Roy Lake to go up to my parent's house, I don't know. But we did get into the driveway and got stuck. It took us to go the approximately 50 miles from Detroit Lakes to home about six hours.

That ended the hope of going to Itasca Park the next day because the storm continued that day and on Monday it was about twenty below zero. We walked from where we were down the lodge so my husband could tell someone where he was. Nobody knew where he was and as it turned out they thought he was lost in the blizzard. Then he offered to drive me to Itasca Park. The road was open; it must have been plowed sometime that day because we got there. He dropped me off and then went back to White Earth.

The Wegmann house, as I remember it, was a white trim house on a hill above the store. The living areas downstairs consisted of a fairly large room where we ate and cooked, and that opened into an area that I think had been a dining room, but Mrs. Wegmann was bedridden more or less, and she used that as a bedroom. There was another room downstairs, and a stairway that turned with a landing. There were several bedrooms upstairs, but I don't remember how they were arranged. I know that I had a southeast corner room but there wasn't much in there except a bed and a small dresser. There was electricity, which consisted mostly of lights in the center of the room, not lamps or anything else to turn on.

Bert Pfeiffer would come every morning about 6:00 or 6:30 to make a fire, and I would get up and cook breakfast. I used to do all the housework. The cooking and washing and cleaning. As I said, Mrs. Wegmann was in bed, but as I recall she wasn't entirely bedridden because I can remember we went to both Bagley and Bemidji in the Wegmann car. Bert drove that. At that time they had a very fancy car. It was a Chrysler, probably a 1940, 1941. Very comfortable when you're used to Model As or Model Ts. The roads weren't too good.

One thing I do remember is that in April or May, we came to Bemidji on Highway 71 and spent the entire trip going from side to side on the road because of break-up in the

blacktop. This was an annual occurrence. They hadn't perfected the art of blacktop roads and every spring the blacktop broke up and there were chuck holes. In some cases the whole roadway would become broken up, then they'd have to repair it again for the summer, and the next year it'd be the same thing all over again. As I said earlier, when I went to Mahanomen to school the road was gravel and there were roads that weren't even graveled, so the roads had come a long way.

AR: So you lived right with the Wegmanns? Was there anyone else who lived there?

ES: No one else lived there. Bert would come in the mornings and help with the fires. He ate with us. I think about his life. It really must have been quite a life, too, because he would come seven days a week early in the morning and stay most of the day and then he'd go home in the evening.

AR: What type of person was Bert at that time?

ES: I found him very helpful. He was quiet. As I think back on it I often wonder what he thought...At that time I hadn't acquired much knowledge about people and didn't know much about them, but thinking back I wonder about him. Mrs. Wegmann was more or less bedridden. She may have had Alzheimer's, but I'm not sure what happened to her. She ate and one of her peculiarities was that she'd take the food didn't eat and hide it around the room, which really upset Mr. Wegmann and, of course, I can't blame him because it would spoil and create quite an unholy mess. I always thought she couldn't help that; somehow I had sympathy with that.

The very little I knew about the store... I remember Mr. Wegmann talking, and he talked about this many times, was in the "old days". I think he was talking about period around the 1920's when they had a little confectionery store and sold ice cream. It sounded as if they had waitresses and used the porch of the store as an ice cream shop where people came and had refreshments. I don't know how many people he had working for him then, but the way he talked I assumed it was more than one. Maybe Bert could help you with information on that. At the time I was there, the store was going downhill because he just wasn't able to take care of it. He was in his eighties and just sort of hanging on and not giving up the life that he knew. One of the things I remember is that I had to save all of the potato peelings and scraps of vegetables, and he fed the deer down in the hollow. The road now goes through that hollow, but at that time it was fairly open and there would be up to 200 deer there at a time. I think the deer in the park were a real problem because they were protected and just multiplied.

I worked there about three-and-a-half months, and my leaving was a little bit unhappy. I'd asked Mr. Wegmann if it would be all right if one of my sisters would stay with me for a few days, but then I noticed that the relationship wasn't good. He felt that she was infringing and using his wealth, shall I say, so I sent her to a friend at the ranger station

because I couldn't get her back home right away. Then one day she and this friend came up to the house and Mr. Wegmann accused me of hiding her in the house. I became very angry and quit. The ironic part is that he did charge me room and board for the three or four days she'd been there. Of course, I was in no position to argue, so I took it. I was sorry to lose the job because jobs were hard to come by, and this was not really a hard job, although looking back at it and knowing how people take care of bedridden people, I didn't do as much as I could have. I can't remember when I went to Lange's [phonetic] store, then.

AR: Just a moment before we move on. You said the Wegmann house was separate from the store at that time?

ES: It reminded me of an old-fashioned farmhouse. Wood-framed and in the style of what I'd call a farmhouse. I don't have any pictures of it. One of the other things I wanted to mention was that the original log house was still there. What I remember about it is that inside it there wasn't very much, but there must have been dozens of snuff jars, which were used for snuff and were all ceramic or pottery. Vase-shaped jars. I often wondered what happened to all of those when the property changed hands.

AR: Did they still have the barn and everything?

ES: There was a barn there, but I don't remember much about it. It was red. Somewhere there must have been a place to store the car, because that wasn't kept outside.

AR: I think he had an underground garage. Bert was telling me that. And you worked in the house and not in the store?

ES: I wasn't in the store. I went down to the store for things we needed but otherwise I wasn't there. So I didn't see the customers; I'd just know that they were there everyday. I don't know how, or who was there, one of the few times we went to Bemidji or Bagley because Bert drove the car. Mr. Wegmann must have been in the back. There was a butcher shop up past the ranger station on the north side on the road owned by a man named Baumann, I think his first name was Frank. In those days you still had butcher shops and other places. Restaurants were separate; there were no restaurants in that area.

AR: Had Mr. Wegmann discontinued his confectionery shop?

ES: He wasn't doing that, and I would say that he hadn't been doing it for maybe ten years. I do remember somewhere on the property seeing the small tables and chairs that were used in the 20's. I assume, but I don't know for sure, that Mrs. Wegmann helped him in that and maybe when she got sick or whatever happened to her, it stopped.

I cooked on a wood stove, but that wasn't any problem. I probably baked bread; I've been trying to think about that. I know I did at home, so I must have done it there. It

seems to be we had pancakes a lot for breakfast. One of the things I do remember is we had a lot of meat, which is something I wasn't accustomed to because we couldn't afford it. But Mr. Wegmann liked steak and he liked it done very rare. That spoiled me for steak afterwards. It was hard to find good meat, but somehow he did and he liked it cooked in a skillet with hot fat for a minute on each side, which was very rare but very good. I'm sure we had poultry, but I don't remember. In the early days they did canning and had a garden because there was still that sort of thing around, but at this time it would have been just too much for them. The other thing that happened was that help was getting harder to get. Times were changing and people were not as willing to work as long hours for the money people were paying. At the time I was working \$20 a month was considered a fair wage.

I worked at Lange's for probably four, five months. They had the store that the Sauer's had started up on the north end. Her name was Rozelle [phonetic], I think it was spelled with a "z". There I did housework and worked in the store. I don't remember how much I was paid then, but looking back I wonder how they managed because the volume of business wasn't really great. One of the things that apparently going on was a wood project of some kind, because there were people that came in and they had been working in the woods and they were treated as help rather than as customers.

When I first was there, there were still remnants of a CCC camp, and in the cabins were a couple of people who were attached to that somehow. The social life of those people was a lot different from the social life from the [unclear]. The Lange's had relatives north of the store [unclear]. They (the Lange's) had quite an active social life in the community.

AR: And the Wegmann's at that time just kept to themselves?

ES: Yes. Nobody came visiting. They probably visited in the store. I can remember vaguely that someone came to see her for just a few minutes, to say hello. There's an illegal thing I can remember about Mr. Wegmann. [Unclear] at that time was protected, as it is now. But early spring he came with some and wanted me to wrap it up and he shipped it to somewhere in the east. He said he always did it and he was going to keep on until he died. I often wondered how it got there, because we didn't have the things we have now. You wrapped it in moss and I think ice and I just hope that it got to the destination.

AR: Can you describe the Lange's store a little bit?

ES: The Lange's store was not the way it is now. They changed the front of it. There were windows in the front, and I think you came up a couple steps to get into it. They lived in the back. Three rooms or maybe four. A kitchen/eating area, I had my own bedroom... One of the things about both of these places is that there were no modern bathrooms. They had outhouses or chamber pots. With the Wegmann's I had to take of that, too. That's just the way it was at the time.

AR: How did you get the job at Lange's, and how long after you were at Wegmann's were you employed at Lange's?

ES: I can't remember. I got the job at Lange's through my friendship with the Rommels. They knew I worked at Wegmann's and they were looking for someone. I must have worked there four or five months, probably. But business wasn't very good so they had to let me go. They didn't want to, really, but what they were paying me may have been their week's profits. But it was a convenience to them because they could leave me in the store and go off and do things.

My association with the park since then has been....we lived in Cass Lake and my parents were in Mahanomen, so many times we went through the park to get to Mahanomen.

AR: Did you have much occasion to....

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

ES: I know that I probably didn't even get out on the lake. We didn't have a boat ourselves.

AR: And if you're working seven days a week...

ES: I was thinking about the trails that are there now. I'm sure there were some walking trails. One of the things, too, that kept me from doing a lot of things was that poison ivy was everywhere and I think I was always very susceptible and tried to avoid going where it was, if I could. But the other thing was that we just didn't do those things. I think it's only within the last 15-20 years that I've seen a lot of hiking and interest in that sort of thing.

AR: Did you have any time at all for yourself?

ES: I had this family, the Rommels [phonetic] that I'd visit. For my own amusement I did a lot of reading. I don't remember if the Wegmann's even had a radio. If they did, I probably didn't listen to it.

AR: A couple of people remember him listening to baseball games down at the store.

ES: People did that more back then. As my husband said, we went to the movies once or twice a week, which was quite a trip, too.

AR: Was that in Park Rapids or Bagley?

ES: Either one. I don't think we went to Park Rapids very much. I know I didn't go home very much because it was such a special event to go home. Of course, I didn't have

any transportation . With the Lange's, they'd take me in the evenings after they closed the store and if they went somewhere. They'd take me to their relatives.

You asked about the store, one of the things I remember about Lange's is that they had coolers for meat and so forth, and I think, though I could be wrong, that there was ice in there to give out. I'm trying to remember what the Wegmann's used. It was probably an ice box, but I can't remember. Or maybe it wasn't at the house. Lange's kept their stuff in the store cooler. The store always seemed to me to be big, yet I can't remember what all they store in there. Staples and canned goods.

AR: Did you have many breaks during the day?

ES: If you didn't have a customer or weren't doing something, that was your break. There were times when I'd be in the back cleaning something, or there were times I'd be cleaning in the store, and there'd be times when I wouldn't be doing anything, just waiting for someone to come along. It was not in the style of a grocery store like today. This was the beginning of World War II. Rationing hadn't started yet. I must have left Lange's in January of '42. I was working at Christmastime, because I had Christmas off.

AR: What did you do after Lange's? Did you go home?

ES: I went home and then I worked for a while. We were married that spring, in '42.

AR: You said in the years since, when you lived in Cass Lake and went through the park to go home, what were your impressions of the park and that time, and since then?

ES: I've always enjoyed the park. I like the closeness of the trees and the lake is right there. It seems to me that for a while you couldn't see the lake, but now they cleared out some of the underbrush. [unclear] It's a place where things are relatively untouched and you feel free to walk around, that's one of the problems. Some of that land belongs to someone and is not available. When we were growing up, picking berries and things, it didn't seem to matter where we were, but now that's important. The free spaces are fewer and farther in between. The roads are widened and you have that closeness to the trees. It seems to me that it's one of the few places where there is a blacktop road without [unclear]. In the spring they'd be cutting, and they'd try to maintain it as natural as possible. Just last year we took our boat and went completely around Lake Itasca. It took us years to accomplish, but we did it! The area near Brower Inn has been developed and changed a great deal. They moved the picnic area out of there. The other thing is that they acquired the land by the north entrance and moved the resort that was down there. But basically it hasn't changed too much. They moved the visitor center to the other side of the river and make people walk to the headwaters. I think that was a good idea. I'm just amazed at the people who come to the park.

AR: Do you recall any changes in the park facility that stick out in your mind?

ES: The changes that I'm thinking of are the picnic areas. You could picnic at Preacher's Grove all the way down to the Brower's Inn. I think I've only been to a picnic once in that area. But it's like anything else. The land was ready and they had to put in other facilities.

AR: You were working in the area and were friends with the Rommels, who were in forestry. Could you describe that contact and any other contacts with local residents or park management?

ES: The Rommels [unclear], but I knew them before. Frank Pew [phonetic] and his wife were there. Andy Peterson was the superintendent, but I really didn't know him. There were people at Sauer's... the name Jack Prill [phonetic] comes out, but I can't think of who he was. I think he was someone related to the Sauers.

AR: Did you know Frank Pew well?

ES: No, just casually. I guess I knew him as Mr. Rommel's supervisor. That's a different relationship. The Rommels were real close. I'd confide in them and go and talk to them. They were family friends, and still are. It seems to me that there weren't too many people there my age, that I knew. At the park itself there were very few children?

AR: Did you have any contact with the University of Minnesota Biological Station?

ES: No, I barely knew what it was. I knew where it was, but not exactly what they did. I don't think I was aware of biologists and foresters.

AR: Can you reflect on your experiences a little bit, those seven, eight months in the park, working and meeting different people? How was it? Was it worth working there?

ES: I think so. I don't regret it [unclear]. My park money allowed my brother to go off to a defense plant. I was repaid, of course, but that was important. I think it taught me something about people. The other thing was that it showed me an area that stayed with me and probably always will. That reminds me...it must have been Rommels, before Christmas. A family was staying at the south end of the park in a knoll, almost a hovel down there. He apparently had a connection with the park, if it was a summer job, I don't know. Mrs. Rommel took the woman to Bagley to shop, and when they came home late in the afternoon, she took her down to the house, which at that time was way back in the woods. I don't remember their name. For whatever reason, she felt sorry for them.

AR: Did you have any contact at all with the Douglas Lodge people?

ES: No, I don't even think I went to Douglas Lodge when I was there. The one thing about Douglas Lodge was that it was a place where you had to have a little bit of money, and of course I didn't have any money. [unclear]

Maybe eight or ten years ago the historical society was up there, and that was the year that I saw the slide presentation on the buildings that they'd put together. That really impressed me, how much of a wilderness it really was, and to build that building way out in the sticks with no transportation to speak of was really quite an achievement. That was one thing about Mr. Wegmann, too, that I think is important is that he really thought a great deal to the park. He probably thought more of the park than he did of anything else. He was there since 1893. He had a great deal of interest in it.

AR: Anything else you'd like to share?

ES: No, I just thought that people might be interested in the fact that there were people around then.

Itasca State Park Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society