

Sylvan Schumacher
Narrator

Deborah Locke
Minnesota Historical Society
Interviewer

New Ulm, Minnesota
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AL = Aimee LaBree
Minnesota Historical Society

DL = Deborah Locke
Minnesota Historical Society

SS = Sylvan Schumacher

AL: This is Aimee LaBree on August 10, 2011 in New Ulm Minnesota. Interviewee: Sylvan Schumacher. Interviewer: Deborah Locke.

DL: Mr. Schumacher, could you spell your name for me?

SS: S-Y-L-V-A-N S-C-H-U-M-A-C-H-E-R.

DL: When and where were you born?

SS: I was born May 10, 1934 at home in Leavenworth Township.

DL: Who were your parents?

SS: Ben and Francis Schumacher.

DL: Who were your grandparents on both sides?

SS: Charles and Margaret Schumacher were my grandparents on my father's side, and on my mother's side, John and Anna Poss (spelled by speaker).

DL: How about your siblings?

SS: Doris, Clifford, Marvin, Robert, Eugene, John, Bernard, and then my parents adopted a girl, Susan.

DL: How long have you lived here?

SS: All my life.

DL: What is your occupation?

SS: I'm retired now, but I farmed all my life.

DL: You weren't in the service?

SS: I went to Service. For 6 months I went into the National Guard and had to go to active duty in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Then I had to go for training in New Ulm once a month, and then we had to go 6 months to Camp Ripley for 6 years.

DL: What is your heritage?

SS: German.

DL: Where did you go to school?

SS: In Leavenworth Public School, District 12, it was.

DL: What's the first news story you remember from your childhood?

SS: Probably World War II.

DL: Which relatives had the most influence on you?

SS: My mother.

DL: Tell us a little bit about her.

SS: She was very particular the way things should be done, she always was on schedule, and she worked very, very hard. It was hard times then, and I can remember her working way late into the evening, darning stockings. They used to have to patch all the stockings; you'd have a light bulb there and would patch [fabric] over there, to fill all the wears in the stockings. And there were a lot of other things I can remember that she always done. We had to watch our language, and religion was very important to her. You had to be on time, and when dinner was at 12 and supper at 6, you better be there, because you had to be timely. She got a lot of work done and was involved with a lot of different things.

DL: Your father was a farmer?

SS: Yes.

DL: What did you learn about family history while you were growing up? Who told you about it?

SS: They didn't tell us a whole lot about history. My mother told more about history; of course, she would tell on her side, and my dad would tell some on his side. And my grandpa told us some things. He told us a lot about the Indian Uprising and everything, he was two years old when it happened. He knew a lot of stories because our neighbor was a good friend of his; his name was Charlie Schneider and my grandpa's name was Charlie. Charlie Schneider was 16 years old when the Uprising was, so he knew all the stories that happened, and my grandpa would relate some of the stories he heard. He would tell us about when he was younger. They went trapping, and got caught in a big snow storm and they had nothing to eat. They had trapped some muskrats and the only thing they had to eat was the muskrats and we always laughed because he told us that you cooked them until when the tail come out. Then they were done and ready to eat. There were other stories he told us [about] what had happened as he grew up. I don't know any other real history stories that would be interesting.

DL: Was that your grandfather Charles, or your grandfather John?

SS: That was Charles. Grandpa John, they lived in Iowa and I very seldom saw him, and he died when I was six years old, so I don't have anything of history from my grandpa. My mother used to tell some history [about] where she was born and raised. They came from Wisconsin and moved to Ashton, Iowa when she was about four years old. So I don't have too much information on my mother's side because they both died fairly quick after that, and my Grandma Anna died about a year or so after he did, so I didn't have too much to do with them.

DL: You said your Grandfather Charles told you some family history from 1862. What stories do you remember him telling you?

SS: The one he told was there were two men going to New Ulm. They were down in the woods and all at once they saw Indians in the background. So one of them crawled up in a tree, and the other one had his dog along, so he couldn't go up in the tree because his dog would be there. He saw a slough over there, so he went with his dog [to the slough] and he watched from there.

He said they [the Indians] had seen the two of them and they seen this guy go up in the tree, so they came and they shot him out of the tree and killed him. Then they came over to where he was and he had his dog, and the dog started to bark. He couldn't let the dog bark, so he had to drown his dog. He saw them getting close to the slough. He found a reed that he could breathe through. So he went under [water] and he breathed through the reed until he could not last any longer, and when he come up they had left, and then he made it to New Ulm.

Then another story he told about this one family where they saw the Indians coming and they had two little children. They didn't know where to hide them so they put them underneath one of those great big soup kettles like they used to have, those real large ones, they put them under there and said to be real quiet. And they [the Indians] killed the whole family. Then somebody else came and heard the kids hollering. There them two were, safe under the soup kettle.

DL: How did they breathe?

SS: I suppose there was just enough there. It wasn't real flat on there, and two kids maybe didn't use that much [air]. I don't know how long they were under there either, but anyway, they said they found them, they were okay. But I don't know about the family or nothing; he didn't know any of that.

And then he told when the Uprising was, the Schneiders lived close to where I live now, which was Leavenworth, and the Indian reservation line is only about a mile or a mile-and-a-half from where old Leavenworth was, where the Schneiders lived. They got to be real big friends with the Indians.

A story they told was this: Charles Schneider, the son of John, was supposed to catch some fish. He would get a couple sandwiches and he would go and give them to the Indian boys and then they would go down and catch fish for him. The [Indian boys] didn't have no fish line or nothing, but they knew how to either catch them by hand, or they would take this stick when they saw a fish, and they could flip them right out of the water. They got to be really good friends with the Indians because the Cottonwood River was right next and they wanted to have some river area [near by] anyway, where they could go to. So when the Indian Uprising [took place], the Indians came and warned them and told them that they should leave immediately because the Indians were on the warpath. So they packed up the wagons and they got to New Ulm before the Uprising took place, because they warned them way ahead of time. And they're the only ones that I can find in the Leavenworth history that were settled in Leavenworth and came back to Leavenworth after the Uprising.

DL: Do you know the family name again?

SS: Schneider. John Schneider was the father and Charles Schneider was the son, and Charles was the one that was friends with my Grandpa, and he told him all these different stories. I wish we would have wrote a lot more down. Those really are the only ones that I remember, but he told us a lot more. And it was very interesting at the time, but I was real small.

DL: The two men who saw the Indians approaching that day; who saw the Dakota and realized they were in trouble so they tried to hide or escape- do you know their names?

SS: No. He did not know their names. He knew the story because the one who had went to the slough did make it to New Ulm then, he survived then, so that's how they knew the story about that.

DL: The property they were on would have been located about where?

SS: He didn't know for sure where the property was. It could have been in Leavenworth Township, but Leavenworth Township was what five townships are now. There were four townships in Brown County; now there are 16. The four townships were all in Brown County at the time, and there was Leavenworth and Milford and Cotton Wood and Linden. And this could have been in Leavenworth Township at the time; now it probably wouldn't be. He didn't say for sure, but it was a story that they knew that had happened here somewhere in the area. But he didn't give a specific area where it happened.

DL: How about the children who hid under the soup kettles; where was that home located?

SS: That he had no idea where it was. He just said this was one of the stories they told him. Where this had happened, he has no idea.

DL: Charles Schneider's family, then, had connections to the Dakota people. And a group of them, or one or two who helped them out with the fishing came and told them there's trouble, you better leave. And the family did pack up and got out of there.

SS: Yes. They told them ahead of time, so when the Uprising started, they were safe already.

DL: And they did return home later.

SS: Yes.

DL: But you're telling me most of the people did not return home, even if they survived?

SS: I made a history of Leavenworth and a book for our township, and in all the checking I did, they're the only ones that I could find that came back to the area after the Uprising. Everyone else left the area. And my great-grandparents, they came in 1864, after the Uprising. I guess because they were warned, they weren't afraid to come back. Everyone else just left the area and didn't want to come back anymore because so many had got killed and everything. They were just afraid to come back again, I guess.

DL: There was no assurance that it wouldn't happen again.

SS: That's right. There were still a lot of problems that went on for years. It took really until 1880 when Wounded Knee until it really got all settled, which is close to 30 years

after that. So there were still problems in the area, and I think that's why [most people] were afraid to come back.

DL: Where did all of these people go to? Did the records show where they left for?

SS: Well, it says a lot of them went to Mankato. From New Ulm they went to Mankato and I really don't know where they would have went, but they left the area. And it's quite a few people that would have been around the area. When Leavenworth Township was established in 1858, they had like 30 or 40 people vote in the first election. So there were quite a few people in the area, and all them left.

DL: Are you related to any of the newsmakers or leaders from that time?

SS: I'm on the township board and my dad was, my grandpa was, and my great-grandpa was, and he was also County Commissioner in 1872.

DL: Do you have friends today who are Dakota?

SS: No, I don't.

DL: Does your property in any way connect with the events of the 1860's?

SS: I guess a little bit of my property might have been on Leavenworth, where they had established Leavenworth, 320 acres was established for Old Leavenworth, and I'm right next to that line. I don't know for sure if any of mine was or not- probably not, but it's real close.

DL: Your specialty is these shelters, these dug-out shelters. How do you know about them, and what was their purpose?

SS: I got interested in them because my great-grandpa, John Joseph Schumacher, come from Wisconsin in 1865. They homesteaded about a mile west of me, right where Leavenworth is now. The first year they had no place to live, so they dug a dugout along the Cottonwood River. They had two children, and my Grandpa Charles was one of the two; he was about 1-1/2 years old when they came. They made a dugout, they dug into the side of a hill of the [river] bank. They dug out three sides, and then put posts in there and then they covered the top with wood posts, or whatever, and then they put hay on top, and then covered that with dirt. So it was completely covered, and the only opening was to the front side.

I was always interested in what a dugout was like, and I could never find any dugout to look at and no one knows for sure how they were. I come to the Historical Society and they gave me a few printouts and told about them, but there wasn't really that much on how they were made. Our family is interested in history, and this was something we were interested in. It was about 2-1/2 years ago that we decided to make a dugout. So I went and two years ago in April, I cut down about 35 trees and put them out to dry until

last fall, and then we started to dig for the dugout. And I don't have any really know-how of how they really made them, so I had to just do a lot of guess work of how they might have made it. We're in the process now of getting it finished.

DL: Is the dugout process related in any way to 1862?

SS: Not to 1862. I think in 1862 when the people came, they were putting dugouts in at that time, and this was right after. But that's what usually they did: they would come to an area where they were going to settle and homestead, but they had no place to live. So the only thing they could do was make a dugout to live in for maybe one or two years until they could get enough trees cut down for a log cabin. Dugouts didn't last that long. And then they would have their log cabin made, they would use them for cellars because that would keep things cool. Then they just left them to deteriorate, and probably after 5 years they probably were just abandoned. And that's why you can't find anything about dugouts much. Where my great-grandpa had his, the people who lived there said when they were just kids that there was a place there. They said this is where they thought that was.

But that's 60 years ago now, so I go no idea really where- I know about the area, but to know right where it was, we don't know that.

DL: What would these things have looked like? Could you stand in one; were they tall enough so you could stand up?

SS: Yes.

DL: That's a lot of digging. And it had to be dangerous as well- what was to keep it from caving in?

SS: It depends on what the banks are like. The one I dug, when we got down about 4 foot, we got to real hardpan, where it's real hard dirt. So there's no way that's going to cave in. In some of the places I had to put slabs along there so we could cover the sides, but it's hard there and not going to cave in. And the higher part above it, I got some boards along the edge so it can't cave in. But otherwise you can see it won't cave in because the ground is that hard. But nobody's ever seen any. The Ingalls, theirs was up by Walnut Grove. It was later on when they dug theirs. They had whitewashed the sides, the dirt, they whitewashed it. But I know when my grandpa made the dugout there was no way he could get any whitewash or anything, because the train wasn't through there and there would have been no way they would have done that. But later on they maybe did.

DL: How would they heat them?

SS: They had little stoves. I got a little stove that's about this high, something that they could haul around. It's got a flat top. Now they call them laundry stoves, but they're real hard to come by, because they're quite old.

DL: How would they keep the smoke from not going into the dugout?

SS: Well, they had their stoves there, and they did have stovepipes at that time. And New Ulm had a few stores where they could buy them; otherwise they would have to go to Mankato to get supplies, and they would be gone for a couple days to go get supplies.

DL: Did they have doors; these dugouts?

SS: Yes, they had doors. They were pretty rugged; everything had to be cut with the cross-cut saws. They didn't have anything like what we have now. And the windows, some of them didn't have windows, so they would just take what you have when you get these little sacks, they would put a little oil on them so it would draw a little light through, just to get a little light in there until they got some glass, so they could put a regular window in. But some of them didn't even have that. But even the one I made, it's so dark in there; you'd need a light all the time. Even with the door open, if the sun starts going down it gets dark in there a lot, so they must have had to use their lanterns quite a bit.

DL: That's very rustic living.

SS: Yes. I want to just see what it would be like to be in there. And in the wintertime I want to go down there and start the fire and really see how warm it would be and how it gets. It's real damp in there now.

DL: How did they survive the winters- because winters can be very severe here.

SS: Yes.

DL: And here you are, stuck in the hole of a riverbank?

SS: Yes. I really don't know how you could live in there for two years, because it's so tight in there. They said some of them were 8x10. I made it 9x12, which makes it quite a bit bigger. But just a 9x12 room, that's all you got to live in with two kids for two years, or for sure a year. That's quite hard to understand, how they could make it, but it was tough times. I guess they just had to put up with the way the times were.

DL: If they had food to store, it had to be down there too, because how would they eat? What would they eat in the winter months?

SS: I really wonder. A lot of them would have pig and they made salt pork. Now how they made salt pork, I don't know, but it was some deal where you would put a lot of salt with it and soak it, and that would preserve this meat. They did a lot of that. They used to can meat. My mother canned meat when we were younger; we didn't have a refrigerator or anything, and then when we would butcher, they would can the meat, and

put it in fruit jars and cook it for so long, and then you put it down the basement and it was good any time. And I don't know if they did any of that, I don't know if they had jars, or really how they survived. It's really interesting when you think about how they would have survived.

DL: I wonder if they could have done any fishing on the winter, because certainly it froze over.

SS: I think they did. And in the winter time they used to cut a hole in the ice and then they would spear. You could spear carp. Now nobody wants to eat a carp or a sucker; we used to get bullheads, they were good, but nobody else would eat them now. But when I was younger, if you caught a fish, you brought it home and you had to eat it, so I'm sure that they did quite a bit of fishing too, through the summer months. Because I know like, this Schneider, the great-grandson told me that that's what he was told, that every so often they had to go down and get fish, and they lived right next to the river. I think they liked to be close to the rivers because they needed water and fish. It seemed like a lot of them settled along the river in the early years.

DL: The Cottonwood River is what you're talking about.

SS: Yes.

DL: I wonder how they could have been talked into doing this. If I were the mother of two children and my only option was to live out of a hole next to a river for two years, I wouldn't find that especially attractive. What kind of people were these? In your research did you learn anything about their personalities, or what was it that brought them here?

SS: I really don't know. My Great-Grandpa John Joseph was a really outgoing person, and he helped the people that homesteaded to get the paperwork done and everything, and then he would take the papers to Tracy. When Leavenworth got going, he was on the Township Board. Then he bought a store. They must have really thought it was nice here, because why you would leave Wisconsin and come that far, not knowing where you're going, with two kids, and have to travel that far. I don't know if the women had to go, or if they were willing to go. But my great-grandma was a midwife. When they came to settle, there were only two other people that lived there, the Sherman's and Webber's. She got to be a midwife because there were no doctors around in the earlier years, so whenever anybody was going to have a baby, she was the one they would come for, and she would have to take her goose grease and all this along. I guess they kind of had in there, what all she would have to take along.

DL: Did these early relatives ever talk about encounters with the Dakota?

SS: No, they never talked about it. I think when they came, it was pretty well settled. Because, see, they moved them [the Dakota] out of the area. Some of them went west,

out by the Dakotas, but in our area I think it was real safe when they come; I don't think there were any problems.

DL: What year was that again, about?

SS: They come in 1865.

DL: Did they bring animals with them? Did they have oxen or horses?

SS: They had horses. They usually had a cow, and some of them even had a few chickens. I don't know if you could bring chickens that far, but a cow most of them had, because then they would have milk for the kids. Most of them had a cow; she walked along, I guess. They had a rope on the cow and then as the team and the wagon went, she would follow along, and then they would stop and feed the horses; they would eat the grass and she would too, and that way they had milk all the time and butter.

I don't know how you'd make butter with just one cow, because you gotta have cream for the butter-making. Unless it gets cold enough the cream don't come to the top. See, if it gets cold the cream comes to the top and you can skim it off and then you can make butter. So I don't know if they had butter, they probably just had milk.

DL: The animals would stay where?

SS: They had to make some kind of a shelter. Usually they would just get some logs and slant them against a tree and throw something against [the logs], and then they would have a place where they could get out of the snowstorms. Otherwise they were pretty much out in the open.

DL: Have you ever been to Mankato, to the execution site?

SS: No, I haven't. I seen where it is, and my daughter lives in Mankato.

DL: Have you been to any of the other historical sites that relate to the war?

SS: The Fort Ridgely and in Morton, through some of the areas there.

DL: What were your thoughts about Fort Ridgely?

SS: It was very interesting to see how they survived because of the cannons, and they had never seen cannons before, and how they really didn't have that many people there. But the cannons pretty well scared [the Indians] and held them back. And they said if they would have attacked again, they probably could have overtaken Fort Ridgely. But they didn't come back right and attack. It was really interesting to see what the few people did with cannons and how they held the Indians back.

DL: What's your opinion of the war?

SS: A lot of people blame this one, or that one. But it was created from both sides. First of all, we didn't give provisions like we were supposed to. Others felt the Indians didn't belong here, and we did. There was a lot of back and forth on both sides in the war, and war is always that way- there are two sides to it. But it's just too bad when something like that happens and a lot of people have to give up their lives.

DL: What do you think about the treaties?

SS: A lot of times when they made treaties they would bring whiskey along. They drank the whiskey then they would make the treaties. So I think sometimes these treaties weren't really in the best interest of both. I don't know if they should go forever because times have changed. It's really hard to justify all the treaties one way or the other, because times have changed so much. I really haven't paid a lot of attention to the treaties to know which route should be taken on some of the treaties and how they were. But some of them were abused a lot, on both sides.

DL: Times have changed. Would you say, for example, the Constitution should be changed because it was written at a very different period in American history?

SS: Well, I don't know- in some cases I think it should; others not. But I don't know if it should go forever on these treaties. It's really kind of hard, the way some of these are wrote up and everything.

DL: If you were a Dakota person today, would you want to live in New Ulm?

SS: If you want to stay with your heritage, you probably wouldn't. Otherwise I would think it would be a nice place to live.

DL: You don't think there's bad feelings toward the Dakota?

SS: I don't think anybody in our area has hard feelings. I never heard of anybody- I don't have any hard feelings against them, and I don't think in our area there's anybody that has hard feelings against the Indians, because what they did is probably what we would have done if we were in that same situation. Because if you don't have food and clothing, you don't know what you might do. So I have no hard feelings.

DL: Is it a good idea to commemorate the events of the 1800's; commemorate them the way Brown County is commemorating them, and the Historical Society?

SS: I think it is, because it's history and we're just commemorating what happened in history, and I think that history is interesting, that you gotta keep history going. If you don't check back, you lose it all. And so I think it's real good to have a commemorative for the Uprising because it is history and that would just bring you back 150 years to what happened, and it is history.

DL: What's the best way to commemorate those events?

SS: I think if we just have some events that kind of take you back to them times of what really happened, and try to show both sides: our side of it and the Indians' side of it. The was not all their fault. The settlers did come in and they pushed them out. You can see their side of it. When the settlers came, they wanted to farm and the Indians weren't into farming, so this was putting pressure on them because their land was being taken away. The other side is well, the settlers felt that the Indians didn't buy the land, they're just here, so it ain't theirs. You can see how, if we were Indians, how we would have felt if the settlers came and pushed us out of our territory.

DL: You are interested enough in the past to try to recreate some of it with this dugout project of yours. Is there other interest in the community in what you are doing?

SS: Since I started digging it, there's getting to be quite a bit of interest in that. There are a lot of them waiting to see it and see what it's going to look like, and just to see what it would be like to have to live in a dugout.

DL: Where is it located?

SS: It's on my farm site, just I suppose about 500-600 feet from our building site. There's a little ravine and we dug it into the side of the ravine so that when you come out the door there's a little creek going there. So we have a little stream going through there. Right now it's getting dry, it's slowing up, there ain't much of a stream there. But it's just right from our building site, about 600 feet.

DL: You say, "We." Who else is working on it?

SS: The family. The family's working on it and we're wondering how it's going to go, because it's a family thing. And Jason Davis called and he's going to come tomorrow morning and he said he wants some projects to do. But anyway, the family has been doing it all and I did a lot of work, but I gotta ask the kids: Well, am I doing this, or this, or how should I do this? And my son says, well: don't take that, that ain't gonna hold, you gotta keep this.... So, they're kind of keeping me in line.

DL: To be authentic.

SS: Yes. And I wanted to be as much as I can because you try to do it like it might have been done at that time. So I'm trying to keep it as much as what it would look like, as much as I possibly could.

DL: Who's Jason Davis?

S: Jason Davis is from Channel 5. He has this program, "On the Road," and he called here a couple weeks ago. The Historical Society called and said would you be interested in a dugout. So he said, yes, he would, so they gave him my name. And

then he called about two weeks ago and said it sounded like that would be interesting, so he wants family there tomorrow, and some projects to do. I just got the door and everything ready to put on, a window. So I'm having all these projects so we can do them, if that's what he wants tomorrow. All our kids are going to come, and 14 of the grandchildren are going to be there, so we hope we can keep him busy.

DL: Did you anticipate a lot of tourist interest in this when you started?

SS: Well, no, I didn't. When we thought about it, we were just going to make one to see what it would be like. So then when we were going to have this 150th, this commemorative, they asked if I would get a steering committee. So then I got on this board, we meet every month for two years. We met a year ago last August. So then I wanted to have a tour of some of Leavenworth too. I thought, well, I better get this dugout done and make that part of our tour. Last fall we felt we better get started. So then we started digging last fall. I want to have it all completely done by next year. I hear quite a few people saying they're interested and they would like to see what a dugout was like.

DL: Is this the only dugout that you're aware of in the area?

SS: I couldn't find any other place. In Walnut Grove they have a little bit of a place where you could see that a dugout was there, but I mean, there's nothing there- it's just a little groove in the ground. So there just isn't any in the whole area. I asked here at the Historical Society, Bob and Darla, and they had no idea where one was now. Since I started, somebody told me that Farm America in Waseca's got one. So if I get to Waseca I'm going to check it out, because I would like to see what their dugout looks like.

DL: How far is Waseca from here?

SS: Oh, it's about 60 miles, about an hour's drive

DL: From your family history are there any journals, or diaries, or stories, or are there any records that you were able to find?

SS: Not a whole lot. We have some stories, but not a whole lot. Not from way back. My wife has a diary and we made a book from our children from the time we got married in 1960, but not back in history. I wish my grandpa and them would have done something like that, because that would really be interesting now, if they would have had something like that.

DL: My guess would be that life was so hard, they put all their energy into just getting from day to day.

SS: I'm sure. Yes.

DL: And no one even thought of writing. Where would they get a book from, or a journal? Where would they buy it from; there was nowhere to buy it.

SS: Yes. We had a big family, 8 children, we didn't have no running water, no electricity, an outside toilet. That was just in my era, and this would be a hundred years before that. So you can see where they just didn't have time for any of that. And the only thing you had was if somebody tells you a story or something.

DL: These stories you told us about the Dakota, about when the war started, and the people who, some escaped and others who fled in time, are there others in the community who tell the same stories or heard the same stories?

SS: The story about the Indians telling the Schneiders that it was time to leave, my grandpa always told me that, and the Schneider's great-grandson told me the same story my grandpa did. The other stories what I told, that was just from one side, from my grandpa.

DL: About the kettle and about...

SS: And about the two that got shot.

DL: Two, or was it one?

SS: One got shot, yes.

DL: Thank you for your time.

SS: Okay!

U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society