Transcript of an Interview with
Norman P. Lyght
June 25, 1974
Interviewer: David Taylor

Norman Paul Lyght was born in Pennsylvania in 1913. His parents came to Lutsen, Minnesota in 1913. He attended school at Grand Marais and graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1941 and received his Masters degree in education in 1951. He was an administrative assistant in the St. Paul school system.

Subjects discussed include his parents' background, the move to Lutsen, early life on the homestead, relationships with white neighbors and with the Indians, Black social and community life in northern Minnesota and other biographical information.

This is a verbatim transcript of a tape recorded interview. The tape recording is available in the Society's Audio-Visual Library.
INTERVIEW WITH NORMAN P. LYGHT

June 25, 1974

Interviewed by David V. Taylor

Taylor: This is an oral interview with Mr. Norman P. Lyght of St. Paul, Minnesota. Mr. Lyght was born in Brockwayville, Pennsylvania, January 4, 1913. His parents, Mr. Hosey Posey Lyght and Mrs. Stella Jefferson Lyght, came to Lutsen, Minnesota, December, 1913. This interview was taken on June 25, 1974 in the home of Mr. Lyght, 1670 Abel Avenue, St. Paul.

Mr. Lyght, when and where were you born?

Lyght: I was born January the 4th, 1913, in Brockwayville, Pennsylvania.

Taylor: And what were your parents' names?

Lyght: My father's name was Hosey Posey Lyght. My mother's name is Stella Jefferson Lyght.

Taylor: Do you know the birthdates of your parents? About when they were born?

Lyght: My mother, Stella J. Lyght, was born in Roanoke, Virginia, December the 28th, 1891. My father, H. P. Lyght - commonly known as H. P. Lyght - was born in Tuskaloosa, Alabama, January the 4th, 1881.

Taylor: Did your parents ever mention anything to you about their parents?

Lyght: Yes, on my mother's side. She came of a large family out of Pennsylvania. Coal mining was the industry there, practically. And the women did domestic work - housework - for various people. But the family was very large, and she had, I forget the exact number, but somewhere
around eleven or twelve brothers and sisters on her side of the family. Father, well, his relatives we know nothing about. He left Alabama when he was rather young and the first stop we know of his was in Pennsylvania, where he met my mother there. He claimed to have had a sister, Emma, in Alabama whose name he gave to one of his children. He claimed to have had a brother or two. But we only know of just rumors, nothing exact.

Taylor: Do you happen to recall your grandmother's name?

Lyght: My grandmother's name was Jones. [My] mother's name was Jones. Her maiden name was Jones. Grandmother was named Jones. There were two marriages there, so her stepfather, the last one, was named Anderson Jones. I do not know what her real father's name was.

Taylor: Was there any incidence of family in slavery that far back? Your grandmother being born in slavery?

Lyght: I do not recall anything there. Chances are they were, but ... and there seemed to .... Vaguely there's something in the back of my mind concerning that, but nothing that I can put a finger on.

Taylor: When did your parents marry?

Lyght: Parents were married .... Let's see, my father and mother were married in 1908 in Brockwayville, Pennsylvania.

Taylor: And how many children are in your family?

Lyght: There would be fifteen children in the family.

Taylor: Do you remember the names of your brothers and sisters?

Lyght: Yes. The first was Burt, who passed away this spring at the age of sixty-five. The second was Esther, who passed away in infancy. The third was Melvin who passed away about five years ago, about five, six years ago. I would say that was the year of '68, here in St. Paul. Then I am next in line. I was born January the 4th, 1913. Then Willis, who
was born in November, 1914. Then the twins - we had twin girls, Mary and Martha. Martha died at the age of twelve of scarlet fever and complications. Twin sister Mary, who was very ill likewise at the time, survived, and is living in Minneapolis. Then there came Hattie. Hattie lives also in Minneapolis as a beautician, a hairdresser. Then Arthur, then Shelia and Emma, then Jessie, David, John, and Robert.

Taylor: How then did your parents find their way from Brockwayville to Lutsen, Minnesota? What prompted them to migrate?

Lyght: I suppose we can say that it was due to hard times created by the strikes, coal mine strikes, there in Pennsylvania at that time, which left things very unstable; too unstable to raise a family by. And he thought that maybe there was something better somewhere else than trying to keep employment there with the mines, on and off that way. So in looking for another place to live, he came across the idea of a homestead, of homesteading. Looking through the papers, he found that there was a place or two open here up in northern Minnesota. His decision sort of ended up with the one, the present one in Lutsen. We did a lot of researching on it and found out all the details about it, what he would have to do, seemed okay, and packed up his family and headed there. He did go there first though, prior to packing up the family and so forth. He did go up and take a look at it. I guess that happened the year prior to moving up there. He did take a look at it.

Taylor: How large was the family then?

Lyght: There was Burt, Melvin .... Three. Mother and three youngsters, besides Dad.

Taylor: By what means did your father come up here?

Lyght: They took a train from Pennsylvania to Duluth, and after staying in
Duluth while checking out various legal things concerning the property and so forth, then he put us aboard the steamship America and set sail for Lutsen, landing at Lockport, which was the main landing place there at Lutsen.

Taylor: And how distant is Lutsen from Duluth?

Lyght: Lutsen is roughly a hundred miles northeast of Duluth along the lakeshore. Lutsen itself is situated — located — on Lake Superior, and there was a fishing place there owned by a family that was headed by Charley Nelson, who was an emigrant from Sweden. And he came over [and] he was here with several of his brothers, and they had a fishing place there on Lake Superior. Probably at that time also, they ran the local post office there, post office for Lutsen. He happened to be the guiding soul of Lutsen there. In looking for the homestead, I mentioned that there was another choice, one or two other choices. The family almost did go to South Dakota in that search, but I don't know through what means the decision was finally made to go — take up the homestead in Lutsen instead.

Taylor: How large was the homestead?

Lyght: One hundred and sixty acres. At that time there was just a cabin, a shack there which was probably considered as a log cabin built of logs, and probably could also be considered as a trapper's shack. It was of that particular nature. One room log cabin.

Taylor: Did your father farm? By what means did he earn a livelihood?

Lyght: He cleared the land off and grew whatever vegetables were needed to support the family, but he had to start from scratch. [He] didn't have anything because when he came up, what possessions that we had were put in storage in Duluth, when we made the trip from Duluth to Lutsen. The things that we had were put in storage in Duluth. So consequently
he had nothing. All the possessions he had were those that could be carried on the back or by hand. When we landed at Lutsen, we were able to find lodgings with a brother of Charley Nelson. This was Alfred Nelson. We stayed at his place for perhaps two months anyway, until we could get the log cabin livable up on the homestead. Then they struck out on a trail, which was no better than a moose trail, from Alfred Nelson's to the homestead. I was in a pack sack on my Dad's back. He carried Alvin in his arm and my mother led Burt by the hand. This was the way we made the homestead.

Taylor: Did your parents, looking back upon that first winter, find it extremely difficult or trying?

Lyght: Yes, it was. It was very trying. In fact the next several years were very trying; for my mother particularly, because she was a city-born and bred young lady and it was very lonesome for her, very lonesome for her. She had a hard time adjusting to those living conditions. So it was rather difficult for her, but she survived it. She is still living on that homestead.

Taylor: What was the type of social life you had up there? Was Lutsen sparsely populated? Were you out in the wilderness by yourselves, as it were?

Lyght: We were approximately three miles from the nearest - well, I would say probably not three miles, but about a mile and a half or two miles - from the nearest neighbor at any time. We were no nearer to the nearest neighbor than that. This person was married, and just he and his wife were living on a similar type of a home about a mile and half to the south of us. His name was Strand.

Taylor: Did you get along well with the neighbors? There was no problem
because of color differences and things of that nature?

Lyght: No, we didn't have any difficulty there until the kids started school. When the children started school, then of course, problems arose. There was a question whether Black kids should go to school with white kids, and problems over transportation, and so forth like that. It even got to the point where at one time Dad was threatened with being burned out; shot up and burned out by some younger of the white people of that neighborhood. He told them, "Come on, as long as my finger can hook on a trigger, I'm going to keep pulling that trigger. I'll just keep shooting at you." That idea then did not succeed. That was one of the confrontations that happened. There were a number of small little arguments and disagreements this way from time to time. Father stood up under circumstances, knowing he had a family to keep, stood up the best that he could to them. Mother was a good support for him. Consequently, no real serious trouble did arise. I can realize though that there were times when meat was scarce and he had to go out and shoot a deer, that they probably could have forgiven him, but there were people who were free to tell on him and so he was jailed a few times for that. He was just quickly turned loose; kept overnight and turned loose, this sort of thing.

Taylor: Was it against the law?

Lyght: It was against the law. But then again in a country like that, it was usually recognized that settlers were not the sort of .... The law enforcement people would probably look the other way, when a man was out scuffling, trying to get meat for his family. But there were people who felt that this was a chance to get even with him. So consequently there were times - and I would have to consider it being more or less harassment - when he was arrested in this way. But on the other side though,
he was elected to the school board and to the town board there.

Taylor: When was this?

Lyght: Oh, this was back in 19... let's see, it was around ... I was doing my early school years then. So that must have been around 1923, '24, somewhere in there during that time. He was without a doubt well-respected, and so forth.

Taylor: How big was Lutsen about that time?

Lyght: It was just a township which it probably still is today. Oh, I probably would say that it contained .... Well, it covered quite a bit of territory. The entire township itself covered quite a bit of territory, but maybe about twenty families. Probably it was not many more than that.

Taylor: What can you remember about early family life? Are there any incidents? Any fond memories, anything that might be of interest? Apparently a family that large and in the wilderness would have to stick together, and probably would share a lot of unique experiences.

Lyght: Yes, I suppose so. Personally speaking, I do remember .... Probably one of the things that stands out in my mind is the fact that - this is on the enjoyment side was - that as a provider, as a family provider, oftentimes we'd have to get meat where we could get it. The fish or game or whatever could be and, of course, it was always enjoyable if he shot a deer. It was kind of a nice experience, even though it was work involved, to go with him on a pair of skis across country and with a gunny sack, whereby he could take and stuff it full of meat and tie the thing across his shoulders, with a rope around his chest and hanging down from his back on a pair of skis, and transport that meat home that way, as much of it as he could, knowing also that [the] longer it stayed there,
the chances are the wolves would get it and eat up the rest of it. So he'd have to get as much of it home as possible if it was located in a difficult place. Sometimes it was located where he could take a horse, and the snow wasn't too deep. He could take a horse out and drag it back in. He did this a number of times. But those were kind of interesting things.

Then I can also recall, in line with providing food, that [in] early morning - that was in the spring after the ice had gone off the lakes, and the fish were biting - and he would come by the cabin. Now we had built another house - he had built another little shack - there because the family grew too large. They had to take and find sleeping quarters outside of that one room cabin. We had that for quite a few years. I mean it was there when we came, and used by the family for long ... until the family got too big, and then they had to move and [build] other sleeping quarters. So he'd come by the window and call, and he would say, "Hey, Norman. Hey, Norman. Let's go fishing." That would be just before sun-up. And because the sun would probably be just getting up; we could see it through the trees as we walked down to the Caribou Lake, which was about a quarter of a mile from the homestead.

Taylor: Caribou Lake?

Lyght: Caribou Lake. We'd get a boat. At that time he didn't have a boat, but there were couple of neighbor's boats that he always borrowed there. We'd go down and get in the boat and go fishing. Fishing was no problem; there was no problem because usually he knew where to go catch them, and when we got to that place - have to row a ways - when we got to the place, of course, we could pick them up as fast as they were biting. Well I'd say, we'd pick them up as fast as we could get them off the hook. Throw
the hook out; troll a bit, get one; pull him off; troll a little while again; get another one. Use an old simple thing called the spoon hook. Dragging on with a line - no rod - just dragging the old spoon hook behind. He would row the boat and I would hang on to the line that way. We'd pick them up that way, and come back with maybe a wash tub full of fish, and be cleaning time and eating time. Of course, my mother was a good cook. She's still one of the best cooks, even as old as she is. She's beginning to forget things now, but she still is a whale of a good cook yet.

Taylor: You mentioned before that your father grew subsistence crops. Did he cultivate anything else once the family was established? Could we say he was a farmer per se, or did he make his living with other things?

Lyght: He made his living .... Actually, he had to have cash, particularly when kids went to school. There was shoes to buy, school clothes to buy, so he had to get cash some way. He did this by getting jobs on the road, working for the town or the county. If the county was building a road, he would get a job working for them - construction, road building - construction work. If the town was doing it, then of course, likewise he would do it. Wages were very small, of course. Somewhere around forty-five, fifty cents an hour for a nine hour day. But it still .... Things were cheap. Food was cheap; clothes were cheap. Therefore it helped to make ends meet.

Taylor: Did your mother work at all, or did she have her hands full with the children?

Lyght: She had her hands full with the children. There was quite a few years, that it wasn't until after he died that she did work. She worked
at the lake.

Taylor: At the lake resort or something?
Lyght: At Caribou Lake, because Dad did own for awhile ... he did own a resort on the lake. And we called it the Northern Lights Resort.

Taylor: Was this a number of cabins?
Lyght: A number of cabins and boats so that .... Each cabin was supposed to have a boat, so that when the tourists would come up to rent a cabin, as the Moore's [Mr. Louis Moore, Sr.] did, they would also have a boat to go with it. And then of course ... which guaranteed them fishing.

Taylor: When did they start this enterprise?
Lyght: Oh, that was back in about 1926, I guess. It must have been around 1925 or '26 when they started to build that.

Taylor: Did a lot of Blacks from St. Paul and Minneapolis and/or Duluth come up and patronize?
Lyght: Quite a few. I would say not a lot. But quite a few did. Quite a few did. The greatest amount of trade was from white tourists. But there were quite a few that came from St. Paul and Minneapolis. John Banks, of course. A. V. Hall, S. E. Hall and quite a few folks there, some who have passed away already that were up there. Dr. Crump. I don't know, you probably remember Dr. G. Walton Crump. He was one of the first Black people that I knew up that at that particular time. He came that time with S. E. Hall, A. V. Hall, Mrs. .... Her name was Glass at that time. But her name was Eunice. Yes, Eunice Glass, but at that time .... But she also married later on to Jones, Byron Jones also. And John Banks, Cora Bell [Banks] and let's see, Mr. Roper and Charley Banks. We had quite a few of the people there. Of course, out of Duluth there were the Adams, the Fulbrights, and of course, Mrs.
Steve Maxwell, and some of the members of her family and friends were up there then. Then Cox's from Duluth were there. And let's see, Steve Cole; I guess I mentioned Steve Cole.

Taylor: Do you remember a Mr. Ray?

Lyght: Yes, and Ethel Ray, his wife. They were very good friends. Yes. Mr. Ray, yes. And then we had people from Iowa. There were several people, a couple different families out of Iowa. I'm trying to think of the names here though. It's been pretty hard to do a little digging there. But they came up regularly, and there were Warren's. That's one family out of Iowa. They were the older ones. There were some younger people there, too, who had come up regularly every summer. There was some doctors out of Chicago. Dr. Mercer, Dr. Hall [and] two other there. Their names escape me at the moment. The would come up in the summer for fishing and in the fall for hunting. Then, of course, Dr. Mercer used to be one of his other pals. Dr. Hall died. Dr. .... Let's see, Hall, Mercer; what's the other two names? But things happened to them and circumstances changed, but Dr. Mercer would always come back until he died. He would always come up and hunt - to go hunting. In fact, one of the gifts he bought mother was a Remington .22 rifle. She was so proud of that gun. In fact I think the gun is still around somewhere. Or did that ... no, I guess that isn't available any more. That one I guess got burned up in the old home - in the old house.

Taylor: The old house burned up?

Lyght: After the family had built the second cabin to pick up the overflow from the first cabin, father decided then that it would be better to have one big house - combine everything into one big house. So he
built this house out of the logs of the woods. He'd have to drag them in with the horses and hew them. The house was about thirty-two feet by twenty-eight feet I guess, was the size of it, two-story house with a large attic in it too. It was modeled after several other houses there in Lutsen. He copied it after some other people who had built it. In fact, if you go up on the North Shore now, you'll see several houses there yet that look just like the one we had on the homestead. This was the second family house. But this house was never completed. It was built - it started to be built around 1926 or '27, somewhere in there, around 1927. Then it was livable; made livable. For a long while, though, it sat there, and portions of it were used for sleeping purposes. Then it was eventually made livable, at which time though, I was not up there at all. But somewhere during World War II, they started up Silver Bay taconite plants. Silver Bay started building for that. I guess this was right after [Father] passed away, around 1945, or right around the time he went to the hospital. Around 1944 or '45 - in there, my brothers and my mother moved down to Silver Bay, where the boys were working down there on the - getting this taconite plant built. So they were able to pick up material, enough materials to complete the house, as far as building material was concerned, and made it livable for the family - put the family under one roof, those that were there at that particular time.

Then after I came back from the War - from the service in 1946 - and got settled here in St. Paul here .... That's over on Central Avenue, this was our first home there. By that time we got straightened out - I got straightened out job-wise and got settled there - then I began to be concerned about her comfort up there, and also whether she
had the means of living, and so forth there. So I felt very badly, because the house really needed quite a bit. It needed running water, electricity and so forth, and that sort of stuff there, a modern bathroom — and all this sort of thing. So I began to check here and there, and did a lot of work in completing that work on my own, and also whatever work they had trouble with — other brothers who were ... happened to be by her. Brother Arthur was logging up there at that particular time. When he had time, he would come by and give a hand at remodeling this house. [I] was able to then get the running water in there, get a bathroom and heating. Well, of course, the heating .... We needed central heating. We never did get to that particular point. And then about the time we got everything all set there, then that burned down. That was about 1967.

Taylor: The big house burned down?
Lyght: The big house burned down.

Taylor: What was the cause of the fire?
Lyght: Overheating. Overheating there and ....

Taylor: How was it heated?
Lyght: By an oil space heater. Actually what happened, I think, was that she was pushing it pretty hard, because we had unusually cold snap, the night the house burnt down. It was forty below zero; forty degrees below zero, and about a fifty mile an hour wind blowing, driving. It was some cold. [Laughter] The house caught fire and nothing could be done to save it. In fact, I guess we were lucky to save her. She wanted to run back into the house to try and find something, or to pick up something that she thought was still there, and had to be restrained from going back. Actually though, she was so cold, because they had taken
her out and put her in one of the vehicles there that had come up there. I think that was my brother John put her in one of the vehicles there that had come up there. I think that was my brother John put her in his jeep station wagon that he was using, because he had been working for Charley Ward's across the lake there. He kept his jeep all through the period of time that he was employed by this man. She [Mother] was only in night clothes, and he put her in the jeep while he tried to see what else he could do. Well, she got so cold that she, I guess she felt she might as well go inside where there was heat, rather than sit out there and freeze to death. So she started in, but they stopped her and finally got her down to Don's place. So the next morning - oh, early in the morning, about three o'clock, I guess; somewhere shortly after three - I got a call from up there from Willis, and he said, "It's gone." I said, "What?" "The big house." Then I had a few, a couple [unclear] there. But I did dare to ask the question, "Did you get her?" Is Mama okay?" And he said, "Yes, we got her out." They did save some of the stuff there, but everything else but the house went flat, because the water - there was not enough water, just was not enough water to do any good.

Taylor: And it was so cold.
Lyght: And with the driving wind, being so cold ... I don't know, it would have taken two or three fire departments, and they would have still failed on that particular night.

Taylor: Were there any other Blacks who homesteaded in that area, or were you the only Black family that far north?

Lyght: About twelve miles north of us was another fellow, a Black fellow, by the name of Moses, George Moses, who had a homestead up there. He
married a girl; what was her name ... Anna? What was her maiden name? But anyway, he married her and took her up on the homestead. But she couldn't handle it. So she left and went back to Duluth. She married a fellow by the name of Winfield. The Winfield [David] who is playing ball with the San Diego Padres is her grandson. They live out on Park Point, the Winfield family, until recent years. I guess it must have been around 1936 or maybe a little bit later, they came to St. Paul. Part of the family came to St. Paul, and Buddy Winfield, who is Dave Winfield's father and then Mrs. Winfield - Anna Winfield - came to Minneapolis and lives out on Snelling Avenue. She married a fellow by the name of Homer Smith, who is also deceased at this time. So that's the ... That was the end of the homesteading. But this fellow named Moses had several brothers who lived in that same area.

Taylor: What was the township that they were in?

Lyght: That was still the township of Lutsen. There was three other brothers. Let's see, Floyd, Will, and - oh boy, there's another one - and Guy. Floyd, Guy, and Will. So that was George, Floyd, Will, and Guy. They made a quartet, a musical quartet, so I can get them together. But they live there on Harbor Hill - the three; and George lived on his homestead up there. He still insisted on going back and living on his homestead. They were originally out of Chicago - the Moses brothers - but they have all gone now. I think all of them are dead.

Taylor: What was your first contact with Blacks outside of the area of Lutsen? Obviously, you were up there .... Did you make many forays to Duluth? Did you go down to Duluth?

Lyght: Not many. Dad used to go into Duluth. [He would] take an occasional trip into Duluth in order to be there to buy a horse, or stock up on
provisions for the winter, because .... He would also, in the later years, besides the work that he could do on the road – road work building and so forth like that, he also took out logging jobs.

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Lyght: Logging was a pretty big thing in that particular area there during the winter months, and I say winter then, because logging is done a lot differently now. You can log the year around now. But at that time though, they had to depend upon snow and sleigh horses and sleighs to haul the logs from where they were cut down to a landing on Lake Superior there. So he would take out small contracts this way, and with a team of horses he would then, after cutting an amount, would haul those logs down that way. I say this to say that he had to, when he took out these contracts and .... Then he would stock up provision for the family for the entire winter, and have it shipped up by a freighter, a boat – they're called freighters. They're small boats ... just the same, have them shipped and docked there at Lockport, and there, of course, he would meet them with a horse and sleigh or a team of horses and pick up the provisions, just stock things that were needed and then would .... That would carry the whole family through the winter this way. But he would oft times go down to Duluth, shopping around a bit there in order to make contracts with the grocers and also with hardware people for whatever tools he might need, and so forth like that. Or else, even with somebody if he had to get another horse, he'd have to contact somebody who would be selling horses down there too.

Taylor: Did you ever accompany your father on one of these trips?

Lyght: Yes. I did, but this wasn't until very late. He usually made these trips himself there. Once in awhile Burt, being the oldest, would go down
with him. Maybe once or twice Melvin went. But he usually made these trips himself. I think it was during my junior year in high school, I guess, that Melvin had a Ford - Model T Ford - and so Dad borrowed that Ford and he and I went to Duluth. But we never did get back with that Ford though. It broke down before we could get back, and I think we had to hitchhike our way back, the best way we could. But he went down to look after some doings there. And I don't know how ... I don't know how or what he did accomplish there as far as business was concerned. But anyway the time was interesting. It was, for me it was an experience and at the same time, like I say, it was probably my junior ... I had to be either sophomore or junior in high school, probably sophomore.

Taylor: Is there a date associated with that trip?

Lyght: That was .... Well, I would say that was .... It was summer, shortly after school was out. Must have been junior year .... Must have been my junior year, 1930; 1931. Yes, about 1930.

Taylor: What was your impression of Duluth then?

Lyght: Oh, I thought it was really some big city. [Laughter] That was my first trip there. That was my first trip to Duluth. We stayed with the Steve Cole's, who was a very close friend of the family. Steve Cole's and ... Steve and his wife would come up in the summer frequently; drive up in the summer and visit with us as a family. So this was probably the closest.

Taylor: They were Black?

Lyght: Yes, they were Black. And so whenever time that somebody wanted or needed to go to Duluth, then their house was always open. Their house was always open for us. So we always stayed there.

Taylor: Did you meet many other of the other Black community when you were
there in Duluth that short period of time?

Lyght: No. Well, let's see now. I don't know whether I met ... myself ....

No, I think that those were the only people that I did meet. We did know the Blacks, of course, at that particular time. In fact we knew the Black's, the Coles, the Adams' and Cox's and Rodney's and so forth, before, when we were staying in Duluth there before moving up on the homestead. So .... But time was probably very important and never had too much time to visit so, most of the time it was just in - staying with the Cole's and getting our business done and out again.

Taylor: What are your recollections of the Depression years and how it affected northern Minnesota, and your family in particular?

Lyght: Very serious to us, because quite a few of us were getting old enough to work - to seek jobs. And it was probably the most critical in 1932. And that was the year that I got out of high school. There was nothing doing; but fortunately the government instituted programs like NRA, WPA, and those programs came through. That did help a lot. But prior to that there just wasn't anything cooking. In fact, there was a period of time when we had to even accept something on welfare in order to hold together. The family was pretty large. There was probably twelve in the family at that particular time. I was finishing up the last two years in high school around that time ... 1929, '30, '32. Yes, I was in the middle of high school.

Taylor: What type of projects were initiated that far north, out of curiosity?

Lyght: NRA was one of the projects. And later on came WPA and also CCC - Civilian Conservation Corps. That picked up my oldest brother Burt and Willis. I didn't make it to CCC. Burt and I went ... Willis went to CCC. Now I'm trying to figure while I was ... I was the first member
[of his family] to go through high school. I got the privilege; I guess it was kind of a privilege for them - for Father and Mother - to decide that I should go. Burt missed it. Melvin couldn't have cared less. And then when Willis' turn to go, there was some kind of decision made not to. Then Willis went to CCC camp. Burt and I went to NRA camp. We were located up on the Sawbill Road at a camp up there, which was also pretty close to another CCC camp.

Taylor:  What did you do?
Lyght:  Conservation work, such as cutting down dead stuff in the woods. And picking up the stuff that was lying down, putting it in stacks and burning it, and clearing up the woods there. They thought that was a pretty good idea. Of course, there's two sides to that particular question, because you disturb the habitation of animals in so doing. They get used to living and hiding out and having their young under fallen timber, woods and so forth like that. You're being nice and clean, and pick up and then you spoil the habitation for animals. So I don't know, we do a lot of things that way. But anyway that was a job. Now I had a job, Burt and I, working in the ... on the kitchen crew. We were getting out meals, and so forth. I had a few days though out in the woods there working just to break the monotony. But most of the time was spent in the kitchen there. In fact, [when] my oldest brother died this spring, we were at the funeral parlor in Grand Marais and ran into one of the guys who was part Indian who was on the same crew with us. Very interesting. Hangardner was his name.

Taylor:  Did your family have much interaction with Native Americans up there?
Lyght:  On, on a social way, no. We had .... There were several families, though that were ... there were several families that we were very friendly
with. The Leonard family was one of them; and they had a home on the lakeshore. Fishermen they were. Herring fishing was at its biggest pitch then. There were several youngsters in the family who were pretty good size. The old man was from Sweden originally, from Sweden. And his wife and [he] brought their family here and opened up a fishing place there. They were very good friends of us, and so as kids we would go down and play with those kids there. Most of the time we would eat - have dinner there, and then come back in the evening before dark. But this was only on a weekend, like Saturday or Sunday ... mostly it was Saturday, although there were some Sundays too. And so we got along very nice with those kids that way, very friendly. And then, of course, there were the Hagberg's, one family.

Taylor: They weren't Indians, though.
Lyght: No, these were not. Oh, you were talking about the Indians.
Taylor: Native Americans.
Lyght: Oh, we only knew certain ones as individuals. No families. There were no Indian families living nearby. There used to be, even on the homestead, or near the homestead. There were signs of Indians there because we ... I don't think you'd find them there today, but only a few years ago, there were some trees standing - maple trees standing - which they used to tap to get the maple sap to make maple syrup. Now we could always tell the Indian way of tapping, because they always made a V in the trunk of the tree. And the sap would flow in these two tapping places down to the point. And it would usually be a leaning one too. And then drip out that way into a trough or a container made of birch bark, this way. But wooden trough - they would chop out a wooden trough out of a piece of a tree that wasn't worth much, like an ash tree. And
so there were some of those still available there even a few years ago.
I don't think I would be able to find any now, because those trees, after they live so long, they fall down - get blown down - and then they rot away.

But we never did have ... we never did know .... We were not close to any families as such. There was one girl who lived with her mother, who at one time was married to an Indian named White Sky. She was Irish, of course, the woman was Irish. But she married this fellow by the name of White Sky. They had a girl that they named Ruth. Her grandfather was very friendly to us, to my dad particularly, an old Indian by the name of Veesik, Jim Veesik. Strange enough, another Veesik up in ... somewhere around Bemidji-way, here one year - but it wasn't ... we knew it wasn't the same one, didn't know if we could make any connection or not; perhaps not - but anyway, this had the same name as this other Jim Veesik, who died of cancer. In fact, he had an operation to have his tongue removed a short time before he did pass away. But he died of cancer, and he was a fellow you'd never know if he was friendly or not. He would usually he would just grunt. You only knew he was friendly by his responding at all. You'd say, "Good morning, Jim." Grunt. "Nice day isn't it, Jim." Grunt. That's what you'd get. Yet still he wasn't angry. That was his way of responding. He was the grandfather of this girl whose name was Ruth ... Happy. After she had this child [Ruth] by White Sky, then she married a French-Indian fellow whose name was .... Well, I think he changed names. He had some kind of a French name which was ... I guess happy probably was the meaning for that name. But, he went by the name of Happy instead of his French-Canadian name. But anyway, this girl was the granddaughter of this Jim
Veesik.

Taylor: How destructive was the coming of the Second World War in terms of your family? Were any members of your family recruited? Did they leave to go and fight on different fronts?

Lyght: Yes, it did. Of course, I had left then for the University of Minnesota in the fall of '34. That was after I had done my stint with the NRA. Come back home after the break up of that ... come back and was looking for something to do round and about. I had wanted to go to college, and was at a point in life where I didn't know what I was going to do next. If I couldn't go to college, then I thought maybe I'd go and hop a train and ship west to California. I hung around one summer hoping I'd get a job so I could make enough money to pay tuition there. That didn't materialize. I also signed up again for FERA, which was a federal scholarship program. That was given by the University there, and by a number of colleges there. Through a welfare worker, I was able to get in line and fill out application for that scholarship and then after I waited - patiently waited - to see whether it went through, everything looked hopeless. Looked like it wasn't going to come through; wasn't going to hear nothing, no word of anything. Finally at the last moment, it did come through. And then I went to the University there.

Taylor: You came down from Lutsen to the University of Minnesota?

Lyght: Yes.

Taylor: That must have been quite a change.

Lyght: It was quite a change, I'll tell you. I did have a little help along the way though. We did make acquaintance with another ... a couple, an elderly couple by the name of Spauldings, who lived, in fact they lived down here, right off of Rice Street on Marion Street. I
don't know if you remember where the old Gulf station was down on Arlington? But almost where the viaduct is, down there by that rental place. But this was where they lived here in St. Paul. Now originally he was from out of Florida. He was largely Seminole Indian, Black and Seminole Indian; he was that mixture. I don't know what her mixture .... She was fairly light-completed person. She looked like she might have some Indian in her too, because she had very straight, coarse hair; but she didn't seem to have any of their features of it though. She was maybe a fair Black woman there. Very straight hair she had though, and very comical couple. A couple really devoted to each other; but she kind of ran the show there. So I stopped at their house on my way down. I stopped at their house, and of course, through them, I went to church. They were great church people. They were Pentecostal; Pentecostal, yes. I don't know if you know John Art Nelson who lives across the street from us now, but through those Spauldings then, I met his family in '34. And the Nelson family and several other people there too. Those acquaintances I kind of held on to. But anyway, that gave me somewhere that I could go in case it got too lonesome, and so forth like that. But things get kind of busy; you know, once you get to a place like the University of Minnesota. Things get kind of busy. Had one bad experience, of course though, right at the start. The boys who were accepted for that scholarship program were supposed to stay in Pioneer Hall. But they wouldn't let me stay because my face wasn't the right color, so they wouldn't let me stay in Pioneer Hall. And no matter how many strings I pulled and so forth, it ended up the same way. No Black students at that time were staying there.

Taylor: On campus?

Lyght: On campus.
Taylor: Where did you have to stay?

Lyght: So I had to stay at another place off the campus. The first place I got a room with was .... Let's see, what was her name? Oh boy, I can't think of her name. I can't think of her name now ... lived over there on Twelve or Thirteenth Avenue Southeast there, north of the railroad tracks. That's all in parking lots now, University parking lots.

Taylor: You were at the University from '34 to ...?

Lyght: '34, with a few breaks here and there, because I had to hustle my own way, and I ran out of scholarship at the end of that year. And then I had to make it on my own, through borrowing through the University through their student loan and so forth, there and staying out a quarter now, and a quarter then. I was able then to complete the work for a Bachelor's Degree in '41. When I finished that year, I got my first teaching job in the South.

Taylor: Were there many Blacks at the University at this time?

Lyght: Not many. But there were people there, like Dwight Reed, and Burt Shannon, Elmer Lewis, Lewis Mason, Al McClure - those kids. There was a youngster out of the South there, Tennessee - Louisville, Kentucky - Frank Edland, who is a very good friend of mine. We used to do a lot of traveling around on weekends there between the two cities, downtown and so forth like that. In fact we roomed ... because after ... There was two different places I roomed at while I was at the University. Over at this first woman's place .... Was her name Jones? What was her name? No, she had a granddaughter by the name of Arnold. Her last name was Arnold. And I can't think of her first name. But she married a fellow by the name of Jones who ran on the [rail]road. That's how the Jones name got in. But I can't think of this other woman's name. But
anyway, this place, and then, let's see, the following year, I got a room, a room at a white person's place there. Her name was Bristol ... Bristol ... right down there near Fifteenth Avenue Southeast, there right off the University Avenue there. And let's see, who was living at her house at that time? She had several Black students there. Harry Landers, Henry Thomas was there at that particular time, if you know Henry Thomas of Hallie Q. Brown? Okay, he was there. That was about the time when I first ran into him there. And, of course, then we went to the Phyllis Wheatley House after that. I got a job there as assistant boy worker there working under John Thomas, who was at that time boy's worker. When John Thomas left, and I took his place there for the time being there at the Phyllis Wheatley House, fortunes began to lift up for me then.

Taylor: So then you went to a teaching assignment in the South?
Lyght: Yes.
Taylor: Where?
Lyght: Well, the place was called Albany State College. At that time it was called Georgia Normal and Agricultural College. But now it's called Georgia State College. And of course, I had a big title about that long, you know, Director of Athletics and Physical Education - Director of Health and Physical Education and Athletic Coach. All for $100 a month, and room and board.

Taylor: Oh, room and board.
Lyght: Yes, room and board was thrown in, which was pretty good at that time. It was pretty good. So in order to stretch things out a bit, I accepted a kind of extension teaching job. In this type of job, after school and after supper, we'd go out to maybe some school in the rural areas, and teach some extension course or other to rural teachers.
Another teacher and I, who was also kind of a lady friend of mine too, we kind of got together. I had the transportation, and she had the willingness to go. And so we went out and had our classes. She had one place .... I dropped her off, and then I came back to another school there which was pretty close together, and we would ....

Taylor: Coming from Minnesota, what was your reaction to Georgia and the type of role and functions that you had to ...?

Lyght: Well, there was some adjustment I had to make. Frankly, I used to scare this teacher to death. Because as I say, she was sort of a girlfriend too. And so we moved around to a lot of different places, even outside of the extension teaching job. And so whenever she would go with me, we'd pull into a service station for gasoline, and so forth. I would chew the fat with the guy there - who was there, just like I would up here. She'd get scared to death. She'd say, "You can't talk to people. You can't talk to people down here like that. You're going to get into trouble." She used to get scared of that.

Taylor: Were you shocked by segregation at all, or anything of that nature?

Lyght: No, I had to ... well, my experience at the University, of course kind of stuck with me. And, of course, I kind of learned how things were moving anyway. Because it was quite visible in the Twin Cities, even then.

Taylor: Really? In what ways?

Lyght: The fellows always knew places where they could go [to] receive decent treatment, and places where they knew that they wouldn't received treatment. And job situations - we knew at times we didn't get a job because we were Black. Jobs were reserved for the white guys, and so forth. We kind of learned that. I learned that kind of early, you
know. So therefore it wasn't really too big a surprise. It was disgusting to me to have to try - kind of degrading to me to have to go around to the back door to an eating place in order to get some food, or to have to go into a certain back line, say, for coloreds, and sit up in the balcony of a theatre. This sort of thing, you know, or to drink out a fountain that was .... I'd go into a place - store - somewhere and see or even to take the water that was Black, instead of taking the white water. [Laughter] They were bound to make an impression on you, but you didn't let it get you down. You still moved around just the same that way.

Taylor: You taught there for how many years?

Lyght: For one year. Then the army caught up with me. I went into the service.

Taylor: So you were stationed .... What did you do in the service?

Lyght: Well, I was stationed, first spot was in the Signal Corps School at Camp Crowder, Missouri. I guess it's still there, some phase or form of it is still there. Near Joplin, Missouri, in that area. I was there until January, and then I happened to be one of the people who had a high IQ; my records showed a high IQ. So I, along with another fellow from St. Paul, a youngster, O. C. Hall - who of course is dead now - O. C. Hall and another guy out of Seattle, Washington by the name of Egan Jones. Oh, there were about three or four of us. There were four of us; there was another person. I can't remember that person's name - Everly was his name.

Taylor: Wasn't O. C. Hall a recruiter of some sort, or didn't he accompany people down there to the camp and return - some kind of official?

Lyght: Yes, it may have been. He may have been .... Wait a minute, are
are you talking about O. C. Hall, Senior or Junior?

Taylor: One of the Hall brothers. O. C. Hall. It may not have been. Maybe I'm thinking of the First World War.

Lyght: You're probably thinking of ... You must be, because this O. C. Hall was the son of Orington, Sr. He was a different type of fellow. He was quite a ... he was a rather radical fellow, but he was a nice fellow. He was a friend of mine. Shortly after the war was over, and he'd got back here to St. Paul again, he got drowned in Round Lake, where his father had a summer home there - some way or another, it was kind of flukey. I don't know, can't really see how it happened. Anyway, but anyway we went to O.C.S. and, of course, my assignment was to the tank destroyer school at Fort Hood. Fort Hood it was called, Texas, yes. Camp Hood - they changed it to Fort Hood. And the, of course I got my commission then, and that was just a few months prior ... in May of that year. So about, well then, within seven months, I guess, after getting into service there, I had my commission.

Taylor: What commission was this?

Lyght: Second Lieutenant. And then, of course, I kept that through my service in the army. I had one run-in with my company commander and he wrote me up, and every time I turned around for a higher rating, that thing hit me in the face, and so I was never able to get beyond second lieutenant. That kind of bothered me. It bothers me.

Taylor: Were the forces segregated at that time?

Lyght: At that time they were, yes, but they started to open them up shortly. Let's see, during my time there? I guess so, but the 92nd stayed segregated all the time I was in there.

Taylor: So upon discharge .... Well, you didn't go over to the European
theatre at all?

Lyght: Yes.

Taylor: You did?

Lyght: Yes.

Taylor: Where did you serve there?

Lyght: I served in Italy.

Taylor: Italy?

Lyght: Yes. Because I went over in the fall of '40. Let's see, '43, yes. Italy in '43 and then while overseas, my Dad died, which was in '45, spring of '45. And so I served seventeen months overseas.

Taylor: And then upon returning, did you come back to St. Paul immediately?

Lyght: I came to St. Paul because during my state service before going overseas, I got married. And, of course, Emma Lou - of course - Mrs. Lyght - lived in St. Paul, so that was my stopping place upon returning. So that's how I got located in St. Paul.

[End of interview]