

Scott W. Erickson
Narrator

John Esse
Interviewer

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Orr, Minnesota

Scott W. Erickson - **SE**
John Esse - **JE**

JE: [This is John Esse] Interviewing Scott W. Erickson, a Norwegian, I believe. It's kind of interesting coming into Orr today, Scott, with all of the signs up around of the people apparently going down to the big basketball game at, at the Orr High School. Won, I believe, Region Seven, is that correct?

Now, Scott is a man who has had a very various life, a life that has been quite compacted with a lot of events. Scott is a well known person, not only within the city of Orr, but throughout the state of Minnesota, and he has had some major experiences that is gonna be fun to listen to here today.

Scott you go back to the turn of the century when you were born over in Clintonville, Wisconsin. That's the northeastern part of Wisconsin, isn't it? Now would you like to start out relating your early days of your life and work on up to at the time that we see you becoming involved in the logging industry up here in northeastern Minnesota?

SE: Well, I was born at Clintonville, Wisconsin, September 17, 1899, in a little town of Clintonville, Wisconsin. And, I spent up until the time I was about nine years old, ten years old, I had a few years of country school, elemental education. And family being very poor and seven kids come right in a row; it was just a matter of getting out and working if we was going to wear clothes and eat. I wound up as a full sailor on the Great Lakes at fifteen years old. I look back and I can't hardly believe it, but I have the pictures, and quite a number of pictures of that time. Then, at a little later date, at sixteen years old, I was out west, going out to west to make my fortune out there. I wound up mostly starving, starving out in Montana and North Dakota. One thing after another with a lot of experiences out there and wound up for a short time working in the bridge and building outfit with the Great Northern Railroad. They headquartered at Willmar, there.

And, before I really realized it, I wound up in the army, was ambitious to get over to fight the Germans at that time, and one thing after another, and anyway, before I got through, I wound up

in the field ammunition section and in the Battle of the Argonne. I had my eighteenth birthday at Verdun(?) Sur Meuse on the Meuse River. And, uh. . . .

JE: Now, that's located up in northeastern part of France, isn't it?

SE: Yes, well, it's a hundred and twenty-five miles east of Paris on the Meuse River. And, things were moving pretty fast there, of course, the Battle of the Argonne was the biggest battle in history of the United States as far as losses were concerned and sacrifices, I learned, and there was a lot of mistakes made even in that at that time. But anyway, they drove the Germans out of the Hindenburg Line and followed on up to, I remember the cities, Stenay, Seéian, and Stenay, and there on.

But, anyway, our gas, the gas, was the thing that we hated so much in the war. It was hard to get around, and there was a lot of the phosgene gas, and particularly mustard gas. And, in this battle of the Argonne, and juggling the ammunition for the artillery, and this and that and what not, I took on quite a lot of mustard gas and phosgene gas. Well, so much that the hair came off of my head at the time. But, I'm fortunate it grew hack on again. It was other things that happened, but it was fortunately through the war I stayed there for eight months after, because of knowing about ammunition, blowing up the shells, disposing of the gas, and all of these things and didn't get back until the following September.

JE: You said that you met your brother over there. Did he go in the service the same time, and same outfits?

SE: No, he went and he wound up in, he went in a little before I did and he wound up in the field ambulance section. And I went A.W.O.L. with him for awhile, hauling in the wounded back to an evacuation hospital, or field hospital as termed it at that time. And one thing that I do remember that in this ambulance which I was with him and helping him in, that I can still remember my feet sticking in human blood on the floor of that ambulance. And, so many things to experience. I'm eighteen years old at that time and my brother is twenty years old at that time. It was quite something to go through.

We, fact, we never expected to live through the war, but we was getting -- we talked about it at night sometime we, we's each covered with ten thousand dollars each of insurance, and that sounded like an awful lot of money and the satisfaction we were getting out of it that we'd be dead, but our folks would get twenty thousand dollars. That, we were getting particular satisfaction out of that anyway. That was something. But anyway, lived, lived through the war, and had got us award, a few of us kids. Fifteen day trip down the Mediterranean Sea, Monte Carlo, and the towns along the Mediterranean Seas. We headquartered at Nice. Everything, they took care of everything, transportation, food, every, all, everything that we wanted. We didn't have any money, no pay caught up with us in those days, of course. I wound up a corporal, and I think the pay was twenty-one dollars a month, but I was sending half of that home. And the paychecks hadn't caught up with us, so we didn't have any money down there, couldn't get in very much trouble without any money. That was one thing we were fortunate at least.

But, anyway, we got back from the war. I worked for the Minneapolis Steel and Machinery Company as a kid just before I left. And coming back as a veteran, they felt more or less obligated to put the veterans back to work. Well, in this particular case, I come in, and of course, I'd have to go to the doctor and be examined and he checking over and he said, "I think you better not work inside. You better get out in the open. Stay out in the open." And asked about this gas business here and there. Well, I didn't pay so much attention to it, only I paid attention to what he had to say was to get out in the open, and that is what brought me up in the north country.

The money that I could get together at that time wasn't very much, and I started north. I hadn't heard of Virginia at that time and International Falls, and let alone Orr and Gheen and these towns along here, but I did wind up, when I run out of money at Orr, Minnesota, which was in 1920. Then, well, naturally was woods work around, get busy at something.

And, the government at that time to all that had seen Foreign Service, you could get a homestead, 160 acres, and get title to it in fourteen months time. You didn't necessarily have to live on it, you just registered, and you'd get the title, a warranty deed from the government in fourteen months. Well, I got one of those homesteads, but I did build a log building of some kind on it, and spent some time out there kind of getting organized on this and kind of looking after myself pretty well to get away from this effects of the gas.

But I wasn't, I got a job out of Gheen, and where there was a logging outfit going on where they were first starting to use aspen, popple, plain everyday popple for box lumber. There was a big cut fit from down the cities Rathborn, Ridgeway, and Hares -- three of the names I remember at that time. And I got a job with them out at Silverdale.

I was there ten days, getting along very well. I was riding with one of the trucks, was gonna take some stuff out just out of the camp two, three miles out to where they had a logging operation going on. And we started out with the hard tired truck, the big white truck, with loaded down. And the bridge just on the edge of the camp over there didn't hold up and it turned up and I wound up under that truck with the gasoline running down on me. I can still hear -- the driver got thrown clear -- I could still hear ho. . . . I can still hear him, to this day, hollering for help,

"Help! Help!"

Well, the lumberjacks come out of the camp, There was no flashlights to speak of, and they come out either smoking cigars, kerosene lanterns, and coming right up and I was conscious part of the time and go unconscious, but one thing I knew that they had to stay away from there with this gasoline and the cigar smoke here and there and what not. And I'm, and my times when I was not unconscious impressed upon them that.

Well, it took some time to get the mechanics over there to cut me loose from under that thing and slid me out, probably took an hour's time. They were afraid of all of that gas because they needed a hacksaw and a hacksaw made sparks and one of these things. Anyway, we got out from under there. Well, it took about four hours and they got some sort of a doctor. Went out, I got lying in a

shack back there and trying to figure it out myself just what my chances were. And had quite a lot of experiences along that line with other people, not so much with myself. But the doctor did tape -- my lip was split and some teeth were knocked out and this and that and what not, a few ribs were broken, and a few more punched in -- but he taped me all up all around my chest and across my face and one thing after another, and then left. His chief concern was whether that was covered by insurance or not. I remember that, that was standing out particular in my mind in the years after that.

JE: So, he was worried about his [Unclear]?

SE: You know, if it was a case of this kind at that time, I think it was a good thing it can't, because anytime anybody gets hurt now they want to sue for \$350,000.

And, that case of mine would really been one case of that kind. But it's neither here nor there. But, after an hour or two, after the doctor left, I knew in my right leg, I don't know what they call the bone, the femur, femur, I guess it's something like that [The bones in the lower leg are the tibia and fibula]. I knew there was something wrong after I lay down there that wasn't right. So, there was a fellow name of Herb Homblow from Cook, Minnesota, about a year younger than I was. Incidentally, he just died ninety days ago. And, I asked him to take that wrapping off a that leg that doctor'd put on, down by the ankle, down there. "There's something wrong," I said, "There." And, he said, "I hope you know what; you're doing." Well, he took it off, and I was laying down on a kind of broken down iron bed, and, I told him when he got that wrapping off to, I took a hold of the back of the iron bed with my hands and told him to take a hold of that leg with the heel and the toe and put a steady pressure on it, and which he did. He was scared, and well, so was I as far as I was concerned. And, I said, "Pull a little harder," and I pull a little harder. We heard a crackling and the bone had been broken and it snapped into shape. I did not; see a doctor after that, we, there was some slats from a, you need a biscuit box, they're wooden slats. We took some the stuff that I was laying on there and wrapped around here and put those slats on, and we tied them on with rope over there. That was my splints.

Well, it was quite a thing, and that story spread. This young veteran back from World War I and up there and sets his own bones in his leg. And, everybody come to see me. Fred Besette was senator, a powerful one up here at that time, he was out there. The Koochiching County sheriff, it was right on the county line, and his crew, and all the forester-s came out, and they wanted to take a look at that guy.

Well, I had offers of jobs and everything, this and that and what not, and it didn't take so long, I got, got kind of the pair of crutches and I was monkeying around for awhile, and, as a. result, I went for the forest service at that time. And, at that time, I was twenty and then became twenty-one years old, and landed in the forest service, one of the first that was put up in the Canadian Border. It had a log building up at Kabetogama Lake. The highway 53 was not through at that time. Incidentally, the first time I went over that road was the blazes on the trees, which is quite a few years ago.

But I stayed with the forest service that entire season, and the Virginia and Rainy Lake, the biggest white pine operation in this country or any country at that time, was on, was in operation and meeting quite a few of the people, a fellow by the name of Frank Gilmore was general superintendent, headquartered at Cusson. Tom Witton, was sort of president of the company. The company was owned by primarily the Weyerhaeuser's and the Edward Hines of Chicago, a few other investors in there too.

Well, at this time, I went with my pack sack up to Cusson, the headquarters up there and reported in. They had told me that I come to work day, night, or Sundays, anytime that I wanted to work for the Virginia and Rainy Lake Company; there would be a job for me. So, I left the forest service, thinking there was a little more opportunity with this enormous outfit. The Virginia and Rainy Lake Company, at that time, had fourteen locomotives, was running something like twenty-seven camps. There was between, coming and going, between four and five thousand people involved. The big operation was at Cusson, the big sawmills, the two big sawmills were at Virginia, Minnesota, capable of sawing a million feet of lumber every twenty-four hours. It was enormous operation.

My first job at that was up at the headquarters at Namakan Lake, just south of Big Namakan Island where the end of the railroad, the end of the main railroad run, from there on, from Cusson. Of course the logs come down to Cusson and down the D.W.P. to the mill at Virginia. And the first job that I got with them I was put in charge of the city of Virginia, that was the largest boat that they had up there at that time and I would be hauling lumberjacks down to the camps, which there was about eight or ten camps on the lakes, Kabetogama, Namakan, Squaw Narrows, and down one direction or the other toward Crane Lake, Then we had enormous skews, and we'd load up there from the railroad and tow horses, and when they needed more horses and oats and feed and sleighs and whatever is needed at the camps at that time, and I spent quite a lot of time. And, I was put in charge of one thing here and one thing there, and was getting along in pretty good shape.

We had the I.W.W.'s at that time, the Industrial Workers of the World, that were causing quite a lot of trouble up in the country. And I was ready to fight 'em at any, like I say, day, night, or Sundays. And I walked around with a cant hook handle in my hand, and I had quite of a lot of authority at this landing place, coming and going. And I'd made it a regulation that any boat; that left from that harbor must fire the stars and stripes or they don't leave. And I enforced that! There was no fooling about it. I, I follow, I supplied the flags. And saw that they were put on. Well, that story spread way to down to Chicago, down to the Weyerhaeuser's and all the way through. So, it was quite a thing. And, as a result, I met the original Frederick Weyerhaeuser. They was coming through at a special train, they stopped right here at Orr. And, I happened to be here at that time, and I remembered just as if it was yesterday. I was kind of nervous -- it was the president of the company saw me, and he says, "Come on in. Mr. Weyerhaeuser would like to say hello to you." And I walked, I come into the restaurant, the same restaurant there is here at this time. And, he looked at me and he took a hold of my hand and he says, "Well, young man, did you have a good night's sleep last night?" And, I said, "I did, sir." "Did you have a good breakfast?" "Yes, sir." "Are you feeling good?" I said, "Yes, sir." he said, "You're better off than I am." I found after that that he hadn't slept that night and had some stomach ulcers, which

eventually, I think, he died from at that time. But that was quite an experience with meeting him there at that time. But, he had heard the story about me, insisting up on those international waters that the stars and stripes fly on every piece of equipment up there.

And, that also spread way down to Chicago, before I got through, I was playing horseshoe with Edward Hines, Sr., who they called the "Prince of the Lumbermen" at that time, and I guess what he was. The Hines still have enormous organization in Chicago and on the west coast. And they still keep contact with me up here, which makes me feel pretty good sometimes.

But, anyway, up there with this enormous operation, Kettle Falls, at that time, was operation day, night, and Sundays, never closed up, and it was sort of a headquarters for the, oh, the lumberjacks, the drinking place of the whole north country up there. And, another job I had was to get: up there and shake the lumberjacks out of there so they wouldn't stay too long, get them back to the camps here and there, and had quite a responsibility and quite a job for a twenty-two year old kid at that time. But, I handled it apparently in pretty good shape, because I got more and more responsibility as it went along.

The company was gradually getting out, picking up steel here and there, and until 1929. I went down the south for them at 1923, when I was twenty-three years old. They figured there might be executive ability in me or this or that or what not, but landing on down I was running quite a job down there at Lumberton, Mississippi, for 'em also. But, I figured it Out, all those people coming down there, the sons and relatives, and here there were Harvard graduates and there was Yale graduates, and there was Princeton graduates, and this and that and what not. And I started to figuring this out, sure I'll be the steamroller all right, that me who was a fourth grade dropout wasn't gonna go very far along, so I spent twelve months down there and did make quite a reputation accomplishing things, but I'm thinking, thinking, thinking all the time.

So, I landed back up here in 1925, back, and started Planning, and, and got a lumber business going in the fall of 1925, got organized in the spring of 1926. And the people wanted to know where I got the money from, and this and that. "Well, I said, "I didn't have any money." I had an insurance policy with, with the Prudential, and the cash value was \$387.20. That's what I had started the lumber business on up in this North Country.

Well, one thing after, happened after, one thing after another and the village we, the lumberjacks, and we had an awful lot of trouble here locally, we formed a vigilante committee which I handled. We went around with guns in our pockets and sometime people carried rifles openly, we averaged in the area here a death a week, a murder a week. And things got pretty complicated so it is necessary to have the vigilante committee and which we did and finally got some money together, and we went after the sheriff of the county, we went after the county attorney, we went to the governor, we went to the crime bureau, we raised some, in other words, we raised so much hell that we did get attention up there. And there were no ifs or ands about it.

And, 1934, I incorporated the village of Orr, I took that responsibility on myself and was mayor for twelve years after that, getting the thing organized and getting water system going and here and there and what not.

Then, when the C.C. camps started up in this North Country, was handled by the army. Well, we made some inquiries around, and well, who do we get to do work with. There was generals, and colonels, lieutenant colonels, majors, and captains and they're stirring around up here like no... But they did not know anything about building camps here and there. They admitted it. They were their profession. Well, as a result, I was given enormous amount of authority in the camp building. I represented the Army, but I'm in the building business at the same time. So, there was no objection to that. Well, we worked day, night, and Sundays. Early morning there was many, many, many days that I just loosened up my boots and lay down on the davenport for a few hours and back again on the job. We built camps out on the Vermillion River, we built 'em out in the Superior National Forest, we built 'em up at Kabetogama, we built 'em down at Side Lake, we built enormous camp here at Cusson, one place or the other. And I had enormous amount of authority, but, in this thing someplace or other...

JE: Now, Scott, are those camps still around?

SE: No, they're most, there's part left up at Cusson, But they disappeared, burned off, got rid of and collapsed and went on down.

JE: They didn't maintain them at all then?

SE: But, it was a terrific thing, it was a snap for the economy and this whole area up here. And, so, after working and working at this, I figured I was entitled to a little vacation, so I got myself appointed the delegate to the World Gathering of Legions in Paris, so I disappeared for five weeks and went back over the war zones where I'd been in World War I, took my wife and eight year old son along at the time which was quite an experience.

Then, working in my own business, which I'd started in 1926. I was just going back the other night thinking about handling of my own affairs, something like 150 million feet of lumber. And I, I utilized then there's the weed tree in the days when we's legging big for the Virginia and Rainy Lake, they were more concerned about was Norway pine, white pine, when the fire started, tamarack, tamarack, the tamarack went out of business. Either tamarack died, a kind of a natural death of some kind of a disease came through, but we was still logging that for the telephone companies, Western Union. All of these people, shipped enormous amount of tamarack at that time. That was the end of the tamarack market. Incidentally, the trees are coming back in, there's quite a growth the tamarack in the country. I can see some right through my office window here right now that I've got in my little park out here.

But, anyway, right after the C.C.s developed this business with the Great Northern Railroad, the Sioux Line Railroad, the Northern Pacific Railroad, the Chicago Northwestern Railroad, this grain door business. And, I've lost track of how many doors that I have made from 'em, but I suppose it, probably eight, nine, ten million, the doors have been made. Nineteen seventy-four, we made over three hundred thousand doors, took six million feet a lumber, and thirty tons of nails to nail them together. That we, I got the American Association of Railroads to agree on, that the aspen would make a good grain door. That's what we used, what we used to call the

weed tree. And, they're still making grain doors. In fact, there's three cars up on the track right now loaded which they'll pick up this afternoon.

So, when I said a hundred and fifty million feet a lumber, I think maybe it's closer to two hundred million feet a lumber that I've handled personally and on top of that when I'm starting to think of fifty years, which I'm on the fiftieth year now, at two thousand cords of pulp wood... Yes, total it out, I suppose, something like a hundred and fifty thousand cords of pulp wood over that period, and that's very conservative. So, some place or other must've done a little logging, too, and this and that in the logging business.

Now, with the tree planting which started fifteen, twenty years ago, twenty, twenty-five years ago, course, it is too bad it didn't start fifty years ago. Have to admit, there was a ruthless destruction of timber way back with the Virginia and Rainy Lake Company. There could of been a little more conservation, but it was a little different story at the time. With all the conifers, that, the logging, and the firewood get started there'd I be no, didn't have much of the forest service at that time. The fires'd start way back some place and all at once a couple hundred thousand acres would be burned over. Which is true, you couldn't, was nothing you could do about it, you see. And now the towers and the forest service and trails and roads going out all directions, and planting and planning, all you got to do is get in an airplane up here, which I've done hundreds of times, and look over. We've got a big territory.

And then, I went into advertising this north country with the Arrowhead Association way back when, I don't know, forty some years ago. And I'd get on the -- radios were just getting started -- and of course, I would get up and make, I'd talk about this land of lakes and streams and forests, and land which, this land which nature has so lavishly endowed and I'm going back to memory - I'd, I'd build up a few things, I'd read out of (Robert Service?) and here and there and what not. I'd tell them about the long drawn cry of the timber-wolf and the whine of the loon and the rice beds and this and that on the radios, and, and I'd wind up on the, with some poetry that I'd picked up some place, and add to, like:

"Let us probe the silent faces,/ Let us seek what luck betide us./ Let us journey to some lonely land I know,/ There's a whisper in the night wind,/ a star, it leaned to guide us,/ The wilderness is calling,/ Let us know."

And I'd pick up all of these kinds of things, and people were coming and get invitations here and there and everywhere. I'm still working with the Arrowhead Association. I got a bunch of their brochures; I mail them out to two, three states. I mail, at least, average out one a day. Whenever I get a little time, I send them out. And one thing after another. Well, this finds me at fifty years, up in this land of lakes and streams and forests. So, I just don't know exactly what I'm going to do for the next fifty years. But, I guess I've said enough.

JE: You never thought about retiring?

SE: No, I never have, I can't retire. I've got these things going, and a lot of things, everybody

asking me to help a lot of people, I help a lot of churches, and I am at the present time, and believe it or not...

Well, this picture is the hoist of the Virginia and Rainy Lake Company. The island that you see in the distance there is Big Namakan Island. This is known as Hoist Bay and is still known as Hoist Bay. The buildings and the, what you see there at the present time are mostly all disappeared have gone. But, this was enormous operation and this particular picture was taken when the water was very low. There was repairs being done at the Kettle Falls Dam on the Canadian side and the American side, and the water was (unclear) way on down, which is obvious from this picture. But something like three billion feet of lumber, logs were loaded out of this hoist. And the one boat that you see in the distance over there is the one that I was running at that time. And, here were the camps, was, were seated right back, looking from the camp window in the office windows, where you'd be looking at this...

JE: Now, camp...

SE: Haisting operations,

JE: I see a Camp building...

SE: But it's all through, there's lots of buildings...

JE: Okay.

SE: Lots of big buildings with...

JE: Now this was a railroad trestle, railroad...

SE: Railroad trestle, it'd go in the hoist where the logs were hoisted. Billions and billions of feet of lumber went out of there. Towed down from, all the, landed into the lakes.

JE: Uh huh.

SE: From Kabetogama, oh, down through all the narrows...

JE: That's quite a picture.

SE: Namakan Lake, Crane Lake, Sand Point Lake, the whole works. That is quite a picture. That is for sure.

JE: Says a lot of things.

Erickson; It certainly does. And a lot of experiences with many, many experiences, day and night, in that particular territory.

JE: Uh, huh. That's quite an operation. Well, thank you very much, Scott.

Forest History Oral History Project
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