

11/19/1990 Betsy and Mary interviewing Verna Hess Larkin about her early days. (Jacob Solomon makes occasional comments in background.)

M: You want to tell about where you grew up, Mother? There was a house on the site previously. When was the one built that's there now?

V: I'm not sure; probably about 1905.

M: Do you remember the other house?

V: Not at all.

M: That was a really old one, wasn't it?

V: Yes.

B: And we have a picture of that, with your mother and-- Was it in your family, that house?

V: Not especially. It belonged to my mother's father.

M: So that was where your grandmother, Gram, lived then?

V: Yes. Then of course my grandfather Shope died, and she and Uncle Oth went to live at Brants' farm, rented a house.

B: Oh. Was that somebody's name?

V: Yes.

M: Where's the Brants'? Is that up the road?

V: No, that's toward Middletown. I pointed out those two large farmhouses, one a brick house and one a stone house.

M: Yeah, I think so.

V: They were owned by Grandfather Hess's aunt and her husband. They were farmers. But I never knew that we were so closely related until I was grown up because of their father Albert, who was fat and lazy. (Laughter) And the property had been willed to the children of Albert, so he was not interested in keeping it up.

M: Oh, because he was irresponsible.

V: Yes.

M: So his descendants or something are those men who were fixing up your house, who own the house now--your old double house?

V: No, they're--Albert Brant was the grandfather of the man who's fixing up the house.

M: And your father was George--what?--Hess.

V: W. I never knew what it stood for.

M: Do you know when he was born and where?

V: He was born near Middletown on a farm.

M: The farm we saw that time?

V: Yes.

B: That has the barn--

V: Yes.

M: --with the tombstones from the family cemetery, all stacked up together.

V: Yes, and Grandfather Hess worked at the car shops at Lucknow, near Harrisburg, the Pennsylvania Railroad car shops.

B: Lucknow! The name of a place in India! How did it get that name?

V: I don't know, but I think he must have been a shop supervisor, from what I can remember.

M: Where the trains were maintained and repaired or something?

V: Yes, maybe built, but I'm not sure. And we lived two miles from Middletown, and my mother drove him to work every day and picked him up in the evening, and from Middletown he took the train to Lucknow.

M: Oh, your mother drove in, in a car? Oh no, not a car!

V: No, horse and wagon.

B: Just like today's commuters, then. Probably wore a nightie and her bedroom slippers.

M: Do you know when your father was born?

V: I should know, but I think it was about 1868, I would guess.

M: And how about your mother, when was she born?

V: About two years later, about 1870.

B: Yeah, I have that all written down.

M: And where?

V: My mother was born in Bloomington, Illinois.

B: Indiana?

V: Illinois.

B: Oh, when they went out to try to go west.

V: Yes. They went to a farm out near Bloomington, and they weren't there too long. I suppose Uncle Oth was born near Middletown, but--

B: He was younger than your mother?

V: Yes, he was the youngest. And they had this ice storm, out of season, on the farm at Bloomington, and instead of just waiting for it to melt or thaw, the farmers took long ropes and went along and knocked the ice off the heads of the wheat, and as a result it froze. So then there was no crop, and that's when they came back.

B: So they were only out there a couple of years.

V: Yes. And Uncle Sad remembered seeing wagon trains parked near their place, on their way to the far west.

M: Uncle Sad was older than your mother?

V: He was the oldest--either Uncle Sad or Aunt Merk, I forget which was the oldest.

M: We're getting some background noise here; Betsy's making funny noises. Actually, it's Jacob Solomon who's making the funny noises.

M: So let's see, your mother had brothers and sisters: Sadoc, America, Othneal--

V: And Peter.

M: And your mother's name was Katie--

V: Katherine Alma.

M: She certainly got lucky, didn't she?

V: Yes!

M: The one with a normal name.

V: My grandfather wanted to name Uncle Pete 'Dolabella,' which is a biblical name, but my grandmother objected. (Laughter)

M: And your father's brothers and sisters?

V: I never knew my father's relatives as well as my mother's relatives, which I think is a natural thing, but Dad had three sisters and one brother, whom I never knew. He died when he was still young. Well, I knew two of his children. But his widow remarried, and her second husband inherited \$300 and so he quit work. (Laughter) Uncle Sad, however, lived to be 95.

M: So your mother, you said, was real jolly and friendly and outgoing, and people liked to come to see her--

V: Yes, she was the most pleasant one of all of them, although Uncle Oth was very pleasant, too.

M: He died quite young, didn't he?

V: Yes, he was thirty-eight. I remember my father telling me that my mother's father, whose name was Daniel Shope, told my father that my mother was the brightest of his children.

M: Your father, then, was not so friendly and outgoing?

V: No, he was very stern and reserved.

M: And when you were little-- Let's see, you had what brothers and sisters? Uncle Roy was the oldest, right?

V: Yes, and Harold.

M: And then Vera was--

V: She died before I was born. She was about seven. And then, when I was about four, Malcolm was born. He was the youngest in the family, but he lived only two years and died of scarlet fever. He had a very virulent form, and I think he was sick only two days.

B: What did Vera die of?

V: Typhoid fever.

M: When you were little--Uncle Roy was about twelve years older than you?

V: Fourteen years older.

M: When you were little, it was just you and Uncle Harold?

V: Yes.

M: And Uncle Roy went to Lehigh?

V: Yes, and was there, I don't know--he didn't graduate because my parents couldn't afford to keep him there. He went to work for the McClintock-Marshall Construction Company. It seems to me that they said he got a job with them because he belonged to Sigma Nu, and the construction company people were Sigma Nu members. So he worked for them for a while, and then he eventually went to Panama and was there for three years, I think. He came back just before the canal was opened in 1914.

B: And that's where Cousin Marnie was born?

V: Yes. He came back and was married and then went back to Panama, and his oldest child was born there. And he came back just a month or so before the canal opened because my mother was so sick. And she did die in the following March, I think--1914.

M: She died of cancer.

V: Yes.

M: And then your father never married again?

V: No.

M: Well, you said Uncle Roy had to quit Lehigh because they couldn't afford to keep him there any longer. Is that about the time Grandfather Hess became a minister?

V: I think it was, yes.

M: So he didn't have the same job any more?

V: No, and not the same income, I guess, by any means.

M: And then you were about, what? --ten or so when he--

V: I think so.

B: And then that's when your grandmother came to live with you? Or was she always there?

V: Always lived with us, as long as I can remember.

B: Oh, she did?

V: I guess after Uncle Oth married, why, she came to live with us. He married Lillian Gish, not the movie actress. She was seven years older than he was, and they weren't married too long until she died of consumption. They had two children, and the younger one died of scarlet fever, just about the same time Malcolm died.

B: Oh, I didn't realize that. So Cousin Lillian had a sister.

V: Carmen, yes. Of course, this is all in Geyers Cemetery, you know; you can see the dates.

M: So how did you feel about Grandfather Hess going into the ministry?

V: I didn't like it at all, because at first we thought we'd have to move to be where he was preaching. The first place he went, it was five miles from a high school, and my mother was determined that we'd go to high school, and so that was given up.

M: So he went out and preached some distance away before your mother died.

V: Yes. When she died, he was preaching in Northampton County.

B: Where's that?

V: North of Bethlehem.

M: And was boarding, just staying up there all the time?

V: Yes. Well, not all the time; he'd come home from time to time, but he did stay there.

M: Then after your mother died and he was still preaching, then that's when you and your grandmother went to live at Aunt Merk's, right?

V: No, we didn't go to live there-- My grandmother and Harold and I stayed where we were, and Harold, when he was through high school, worked two years at the shoe factory in Middletown, to earn money to go to college. Then when he was in college my grandmother and I stayed on where we lived there.

M: Oh, really. Well, when did you finally move to Aunt Merk's? When you were starting college?

V: Yes, I think so.

M: Because your grandmother would've had to be there by herself--

V: Yes. 1918.

B: Where did your grandmother move, when you went to Aunt Merk's?

V: She went there, too; that was her daughter, of course. And I really feel bad about that; my aunt was very unpleasant at times to her. Although Aunt Merk was neurotic, you know. She could be nice, too, but she was-- I think there was something the matter with her.

M: Tell about the bloody leaves.

V: Well, this little girl was murdered by someone my aunt and uncle knew, and my aunt asked my uncle to go and get some of the bloody leaves that were in the woods where the child was killed. So he did, and she kept these bloody leaves and always had them, as long as knew her. Of course, this child was killed before I was born, I think. But she showed me these bloody leaves.

(Jacob crying. M: It's probably going to sound as if a child is being killed right now!)

B: I thought it was from an airplane accident.

V: Well, that was another time.

B: Another bunch of bloody leaves.

V: No, there was a crash at Royaltown, near Middletown, and my aunt wanted some of the wood from the airplane, so my uncle went and got it for her, which she also kept. I don't know what happened to any of that eventually. By the way, the man who killed (t)his child was convicted and sentenced to be hanged, and at that time hangings were public, and Uncle Al went to the hanging--

B: Aunt Merk didn't go?

V: No--and the man on the gallows saw Uncle Al and said "Hello." I think he said "Hello, Al." Isn't this awful!
(Laughter)

B: I bet Aunt Merk was sorry she missed that! Famous for fifteen minutes.

V: It's awful, sitting here and laughing. Of course, you're not going to type this, I mean, you're not going to let people hear this.

M: I'm going to sell it to CBS. And Uncle Al, Aunt Merk's husband, was kind of a jerk, too. I remember you saying something about him whistling all the time when his son was trying to study.

V: Yes, everybody thought he was very good-natured, but he was self-centered. And I lived there so I really saw another side of him. For the most part he seemed very jovial, but he was self-centered.

M: Couldn't live with Aunt Merk without getting a little bit off.

V: No. He also had taught school. He was very fond of guns, and as I remember him as a child. He was always cleaning and polishing a shotgun or revolver or something. And one time he took one of these revolvers to school with him and laid it on his desk. I don't know anything more, but we thought it probably scared the kids. And he also had a very good bass voice, and he sang with the choral society in Middletown. That was one of his amusements. He was always whistling. His son Arthur never did well in school, though he did manage to graduate from high school, and my aunt always thought that her son didn't do well because his father was always whistling.

M: When Arthur was trying to do his homework?

V: Yes, when Arthur was trying to study.

M: Singing was a big amusement back then, wasn't it? People got together and sang.

V: Yes, they had singing classes in the evening. They'd meet and learn new songs and sing. When you had guests, usually somebody could play the organ--we had an organ at home--and then we'd gather around and sing.

M: Uncle Oth sang too?

V: Yes, Uncle Oth.

M: Did your mother sing?

V: I don't remember that she did. You know, she'd sing, in church and that sort of thing, but Uncle Oth and Uncle Roy and I think my schoolteacher John Brubaker and Sol Brinser--they sang very well.

B: Oh, I like the story about when the schoolteacher was mean to you and hit your hand.

V: Hit my *head*.

B: Oh. Well, tell that story.

V: I started school when I was five. My birthday isn't till January, so I was five. I really shouldn't have started then but I did. And I was really very timid and afraid. And one day I was standing--we'd stand up on the platform and the teacher would give out spelling words. Wasn't that young--spelling words in the first grade. Do they do that

now? I guess they do. Anyway, I couldn't spell a word, and he took the spelling book he was holding and hit me on the head with it. And for a long time my mother had noticed there was something the matter with me, that I didn't want to go to school, and she said I seemed worried and so on. She asked me about it and I finally told her, so she talked to the teacher and told him he wouldn't get anywhere by treating me like that. You know, I wasn't used to that. Anyway, he did change, and I had no trouble after that.

B: Hadn't he taught your mother in school?

V: Yes, he had. He was a Dunkard preacher on Sundays.

B: How old were you when you had to sit through the whole day of preaching? Did you have to sit for a whole day and listen to preaching in Pennsylvania Dutch?

V: No, not a whole day--at least an hour.

B: I thought it was more than that, because then you would-- I'm getting you mixed up with some book I read, probably. But all the preaching was in Pennsylvania Dutch?

V: Not always but sometimes. Yeah, I'd sit there and listen to it--

B: --and not understand it.

M: Tell about camp meeting. That was sort of like summer vacation, wasn't it?

V: Yeah, it was a religious thing. They had services and something like Sunday School every day.

M: You stayed there, then, didn't you?

V: Yes.

M: Even though it was only about three or four miles from home--Geyers?

V: Yes, in little cottages or tents, and Aunt Merk and my mother took a cottage together. And there were no facilities. You had to carry your water quite a way. And of course there was no bathroom, so every morning there was this line of people going with their 'night buckets' as they were called, to the public toilets. They were not the toilets such as you see now at Strawberry Festivals, you know, that sort; they were permanent buildings.

M: And that campground doesn't exist any more, does it?

V: No, not that one, although Mt. Gretna now, of course, is much more modern, but it's similar.

M: Did you go to Mt. Gretna to camp meeting?

V: No. There was one at Hummelstown; I went there but very seldom. Not to stay. You know, anybody could go to the services.

M: I was thinking too about other recreations. In back of your place there was a stream where you went fishing.

V: Yes, and a swimming hole there, where we went swimming.

B: What kind of fish did you catch?

V: Eels and catfish and sunfish.

M: How'd you skin the eels? (This is going to be expurgated, I can tell you.)

V: Well, you killed them and then nailed them on the barn or on a fence post, nailed them by the head, you know,

and then skinned them down from their head and then cut off their head, of course.

B: Did you skin catfish the same way?

V: You could, yes, I guess we did, yes.

M: And your mother always fished on--

V: Ascension Day.

M: That's a tradition or something--

V: Yes, it is, but I don't remember what. I don't think people do it any more.

B: When is Ascension Day?

V: Forty days after Easter. And of course we had Sunday School picnics, and we'd have birthday parties, and another thing when I was a child they used to have handkerchief showers on your birthday. Your mother would get in touch with people and tell them you were having a birthday, and they'd send a handkerchief.

B: And did people put edging on themselves, do tatting--?

V: I don't remember, Betsy.

M: And you all read a lot, too.

V: Yes.

M: I always think of Cousin Lillian saying she learned to read when she came to your place to live. She lived with you--

V: Yes, because her mother died. And my uncle had a housekeeper but she was not satisfactory, and I think she thought Uncle Oth should marry her, but he didn't want to and as I remember her, I can see why not. So she and her father came to live with us. And in the evening my mother used to read to us, to the whole family. I remember one of the books was "Ishmael, or Out of the Depths." Or maybe it's "In the Depths." It was by Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth.

M: And you read Dickens too, didn't you?

V: Yes, my cousin Lillian's relatives from Ohio sent her the full set of Dickens, so then I had a chance to read Dickens. I didn't read all of them then, I guess. But then my uncle died so Lillian went to live with her grandmother at Swatara Station near Hershey--her grandmother and aunt and uncle.

B: How old was she when her father died?

V: She was eleven. Uncle Oth and my mother died within the same year. Isn't that awful? Can you imagine, for my grandmother! But Uncle Oth died almost a year before my mother. And Aunt Merk wanted to rear Lillian, and she wouldn't talk to us for a while because she thought my parents were instrumental in sending Lillian to live with her aunt and grandmother.

B: They probably were, weren't they?

V: They might've been.

B: That would've been awful for Cousin Lillian.

V: Yes, oh yes.

M: Tell about Uncle Harold and the ladder.

V: We had three or four acres, and we'd have hay and corn, and we had a small apple orchard, and near the stream that went through our place there was very good soil for growing sweet potatoes. And I remember one time Uncle Harold had a ladder down there. I don't know why he had a ladder there, can't imagine. He stood the ladder upright and started to crawl up on it. I think they do that in circuses. Anyway, he wasn't successful and it fell and hit my grandmother who was working with the sweet potatoes. (Laughs) And also in the field across the stream, which also belonged to us, we'd see these flickering lights sometimes during the year, and some of the people around there said they bet something's buried there.

M: Like treasure or something.

V: Yes.

M: Marsh lights, right?

V: Yes. Actually, we saw traces of where some people must've been digging.

M: And you'll never know if they found anything; if they did, they wouldn't tell. Any other superstitions you remember when you were young?

V: Well, ones you remember now, about spilling salt, and walking on one side of a pole and the person with you walking on the other. I don't remember any superstitions.

M: How about stories, like your grandmother and the Evich Jaeger?

V: When the wind blew at night, and you know how it makes a noise through the trees and so on, there was a saying that that was the Evich Jaeger and his hounds going somewhere. That is in that book--

M: The Frederic Klees book--The Pennsylvania Dutch?

V: Yes, but I heard about it from my grandmother before I ever read it in his book.

B: I want you to tell about at Christmas when the Belsnickle--

V: I think that's in that book, too. After Christmas, or maybe before, these people would come around, sort of dressed in old clothes, and trying to scare you. I didn't know the meaning of it, and I still don't.

M: It was like the opposite of Santa Claus, wasn't it? Like God and the devil?

V: Yes, the bad part of it, I guess.

M: They had sticks that they would threaten to beat you with?

V: Yes, but the only person I remember who ever did it was my cousin Errol.

M: He acted the part of the Belsnickle? But he was very jovial.

V: Oh, yes, he wasn't mean, you know. It was just that old tradition, that's all. He was Uncle Sad's son.

M: Anything else you did at Christmas? Did you have a tree inside?

V: Oh, yes, a tree we cut down on our own property.

M: Candles on it?

V: No, too much danger of fire.

B: I always thought people would put candles on and they'd light them once and all stand around with buckets of water and just look at it.

V: Maybe some people did, we didn't. One thing I remember especially, the only time we ever had oranges was at Christmastime, unless we were sick. One time I was sick, and Harold said to me, "If Mom asks what you want, tell her you want some oranges." Nobody had oranges then; it wasn't like today.

B: Did you have bananas?

V: I think so, but I don't think as much as we do today.

B: How about lemons? There were more lemons, weren't there?

V: Might be, Betsy.

B: Because I know there are a lot of lemon squeezers, old lemon squeezers. They're always in old houses.

V: Yes, I know we had lemon pie and lemonade.

B: They must keep better.

M: Or they just became popular because they used them for mixing drinks, because I know in Scotland, you know, riding around with a net of lemons hanging from the saddle or something, and they used them to brew punch with. So maybe they got brought into the markets that way, and people tasted them and liked them. Oh, speaking of being sick, this is sort of jumping ahead, but what do you remember about the flu epidemic? That was what--1918?

V: Yes, I was a freshman in college [Lebanon Valley College in Annville, PA] then, and I was there a short time, maybe a week or two, and I was very homesick, awfully homesick, and then this flu epidemic began in earnest, and we all had to go home or else stay at the dormitory. So I went to my uncle Pete's--Uncle Pete and his wife lived in Annville--and I said I wanted to go home but I couldn't get a train till the next day, could I stay there all night? Well, they weren't too keen about keeping me because of this epidemic, but anyway I stayed there all night, went home the next day, and was home a month. Then when I went back to college I was happy. I don't know what it was.

B: Did Uncle Roy get the flu?

V: Uncle Roy had it. He was very bad with it.

M: Where did he live then?

V: In Ohio. He worked for the Middletown--it's not the iron works, but some big company.

B: Nobody else in your family got it?

V: No. But I do remember at least one person I knew dying of it.

B: And was Uncle Harold at college then, too?

V: Yes.

B: Where did he go?

V: You know, it's funny, I don't remember. Oh--oh, he didn't go anywhere; he stayed at college. He was in the SATC. The war was going on then, and he had to stay at the college and train. And then, just a week before he would've had to go, I don't know where--leave college because of the war--the war ended.

B: And you were really young in college, you were just sixteen, weren't you? And everybody else was older.

V: Well, about a year or two.

B: And you said one time that everybody treated you really well, and you were a big hit.

V: (Laughter) I don't know if I said I was a big hit--

B: Maybe because you were young, you were made a big fuss of.

M: And very pretty.

V: I don't know about that.

M: Well, I get the feeling your college days were pretty happy.

V: Yes, I hated to leave; I cried and cried. But then my days at York Springs were happy, too. Except that I had to teach school!

M: And didn't you say people criticized your father for sending a girl to college?

V: Yes, the relatives said, "Why send a girl to college; she'll just get married anyway?"

M: Probably was a struggle for him, wasn't it?

V: Oh, yes.

B: Your relatives wouldn't let you learn to ride a bike either.

V: Oh, my grandmother, when I went to high school, it was miles away, you see, and Harold had a bicycle to ride, but I had to walk. And Dad thought it might be a good idea for me to have a bicycle, but my grandmother said, no, she didn't think it was ladylike to ride a bicycle.

M: So you had to walk and Uncle Harold got to ride? It's a wonder you're not more of a feminist.

V: There were some other girls who walked, too. I wasn't the only one.

M: Did any girls ride bikes?

B: Grandfather Hess, though, really campaigned for the vote, for women's suffrage, didn't he?

V: Oh yes, he really believed in that, too, and the relatives didn't agree with him on that. He was sort of a--

B: What did he do for suffrage, do you have any idea?

V: I don't know. He probably voted for it.

B: But you don't remember his attending marches--?

V: No.

M: But he probably talked about it, because he said what he thought, didn't he?

V: Oh yes.

M: Then when you went to teach, what was the set-up there? How big was the school? Was it just one room up and one room down or something like that?

V: No, it was two rooms on the same floor.

M: And that was a high school?

V: Yes, just a three-year high school. Three or two, I forget which.

B: Was that normal? Is that what they were?

V: In a small place like that, yes.

M: Then they'd go on to another year someplace?

V: Yes, at Gettysburg. I don't know if there were fifty in the school.

M: And just you and Roy Starry were the teachers, right?

V: Yes.

M: And then you boarded with different people.

V: Yes.

PAUSE

M: We were talking last time about when you were younger, and a couple of things that you hadn't said were particularly things about your grandmother when she was young. What was it about the songs she learned when she was a little girl?

V: Well, when she was a little girl, they lived on a farm, and they had hired men, and one of the hired men taught them songs like "Barbara Allen," and her parents didn't know about this because they would not have approved. They were very religious.

M: They were Dunkards?

V: Yes. When she was older, during the Civil War, she learned many of the Civil War songs, and among them was "Ora Lee," which Elvis Presley sang as "Love Me Tender." And she had a step-mother, because the mother of her brothers and sister died, I don't know, maybe before they came to this country about 1840. Her mother's maiden name was von Steinmetz, and her grandmother's parents objected to this marriage because my grandmother's father was not a high enough, uh, caste. So they came to this country because of religious reasons. And also, about the close of the Civil War, my grandmother said she was ironing one day and a neighbor who was against the Civil War came and said, "Well, your President Lincoln's been shot!" --and seemed pleased with it.

M: What were her brothers' and sisters' names? They were pretty unusual, weren't they?

V: Not as unusual as her children's names.

M: Oh, that's right; I was thinking of her children's.

V: She had three brothers: Benjamin, Harry, and Samuel. Samuel was in the Civil War and was in Sherman's March to the Sea. And the sisters were Fanny and my grandmother's twin sister Rachel. My grandmother's name was Leah. And Fanny and Harry lived in Bloomington, Illinois, because another relative had moved out there and had them come out to him. Aunt Rachel, I believe, lived in Juniata County. Uncle Samuel lived in Ohio with his daughter who married very well. Benjamin, I think, lived in York County.

M: What was your grandmother's maiden name?

V: Landis. My grandmother died in her eighties and is buried in Shope's Cemetery near Highspire, Pennsylvania. The cemetery is named for her husband's family.