

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NARRATOR: Willy Penner

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: Willy Penner was born in 1936 in Grabowiec, Poland. He had one older sister but she died of scarlet fever at the age of sixteen. Willy's father was drafted by Hitler in 1945 while Willy was forced to work as slave labor on his family's old farm for four years. They were finally reunited with Willy's father in 1949 and they immigrated to the United States. Willy met and married his wife in 1958. He served as Cimarron Elementary Principal for twenty-six years and continues to live in Cimarron.

DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 11, 2003

INTERVIEWER: Rachel Pederson

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Cimarron, Kansas

NUMBER OF CASSETTES: 1 audio cassette

LENGTH OF CASSETTES: 60 min.

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 46.5 min.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: World War II; the experience of living as a German in Poland in the 1940s; Immigration to the United States; Schooling in the 1950s; Description of Cimarron in the 60s.

Willy Penner
Narrator

Rachel Pederson
Interviewer

July 11, 2003
Cimarron, Kansas

Willy Penner – **WP**
Rachel Pederson – **RP**

(Beginning of side A)

WP: Is the mic. close enough for you?

RP: It's fine. Ok, it is July 12, right? 2003.

WP: Eleventh.

RP: July eleventh, 2003 and I am interviewing Willy Penner. When and where were you born?

WP: When, I was born uh July 31, 1936 in, in Grabowiec, Poland, central part of Poland. And uh, we lived as German nationality people in Poland. Uh, there were lots of other people like us, Mennonite people who had gotten permission historically way back there to live in Poland so that we could exercise our religious freedom and also have an opportunity to farm among the people and uh . . .

RP: So your parents were farmers?

WP: Yeah, my parents were farmers and I had a sister who was uh, ten years older than I was. Uh, I remember very little about her because when she was sixteen years old she passed away due to scarlet fever, you know, which also indicates that medicine was limited, you know. We didn't always run to a doctor but uh, she was hospitalized and didn't have penicillin and so consequently after twenty-two days in the hospital she passed away.

RP: Not cool. So tell me about some of the chores you did growing up, as a child.

WP: Well, of course as a little kid uh we played with the neighbor kids you know. Games, uh, uh, we didn't have TV or radio or newspaper or magazine or books for that matter and so a lot of our spare time was just being creative and dreaming up ideas and playing with kids. Uh, homemade toys and so forth.

RP: You lived on a farm. Did you, did you help with farming or . . .

WP: Well, later as I got older I did. Uh, as a kid it was pretty limited . . . Actually my life changed considerably when I was eight years old. My sister then passed away and then about ten months later we had, World War II came along and was already in progress and we had to evacuate because we were German nationality people living in Poland and we were affiliated or associated with the German people even though we were not uh, that close to them. But we had to evacuate in order to escape the Russian front and the Polish people at that time. It was a critical time for us. Uh, my dad was drafted so that left my mother and I – she was lame – we packed our wagon with some of the belongings that we considered valuable and left on a January day with some of the other friends and relatives who were German people in our village.

And so we were heading towards Germany and so in a matter of about one week of travel, which was extremely cold, treacherous, we were overtaken by the Russians and, you know, and then we were uh imprisoned. Everything was taken away from us. They looted, took our horses, our wagons and so . . . And then we landed up in prison camp where it gave them a chance to uh, sort out people that were valuable to them, to the Russian, you know like working class and so . . . Mother and myself, she was lame. They didn't have any use for her. I was too young. My aunt was taken. They had two boys, they were too young so they were left with my mother and so then we couldn't go on to Germany. Instead, we returned back to our home place in Poland where we were imprisoned or taken captive and then people would come and just pick us up and use us as more or less slave labor and we were held hostage, basically, there for four years.

So we were all scattered and then my chores increased considerably, back to your question, uhm, herding cattle, doing chores in the morning and evening. Uh, not going to school, not going to church, not being able to associate with any of my German nationality people. So life changed considerably so you know, I did work, day after day. And uh, basically lost my freedom, you know. I was just like a slave, or a hostage. But we had cattle. We raised oh, wheat, barley, oats, rye, potatoes was a big crop, sugar beets and I had to help with all of that, you know. Uh, we probably had four to six milk cows, some sheep and they had, in the summer time they had to be herded on, on pasture land and the pastures were considerably smaller and so, you had to just be with them all day long, make sure they didn't get into the neighbor's territory. So watering the cattle in the wintertime, you had to carry buckets of water. We had special braces fitted to our shoulders where we had chains hanging down on the side where we could hook into oh two buckets of water, maybe, I'm guessing about five gallon a bucket and you could . . . You had much more strength carrying those and you kind of had this rhythm where you didn't spill the water and you carried those maybe a hundred feet, two hundred feet into the barn to water the animals, especially, wintertime animals pretty well stayed inside because it was pretty cold. Poland is a little farther north latitude of where we are in Kansas. It's probably closer to like Canada.

RP: You mentioned your sister died of scarlet fever. Was, was that like . . . did more than one person die of scarlet fever at that time or . . .

WP: Oh, you mean an epidemic or something?

RP: Yeah.

WP: No, not that I was, no I don't think so. I was not aware of it, you know. So that was a big loss to my parents so I was the only one left then and I guess at the end of the interview I might, we might cover a topic called revisiting, you know, seeing if we could find so footprints of the past. We might cover that.

RP: You said that your father was drafted. Did he come home? Was he killed in the war?

WP: He was drafted two, three days before we had to evacuate. He was already then – let's see, this was in 1945 so he was born in '95 so he was 50 years old. I mean the Germans, since we were considered German nationality people, Hitler forced all men who were able physically to go into the draft. It was a special, uh special army, I mean more or less protection in the area but then he was moved and we got separated and he ended up also trying to escape the Russians coming from the east toward the west and he ended up fleeing to Denmark, uh, to the North. If we look on the map here, in this direction, and so he was taken, he was captured by the English as a prisoner of war and then released and then he ended up in Northern Germany where he worked for four years over here and it was about two years went by before we finally found each other. And we stayed living here in Poland near Gehonaf (sp?).

Uh, he didn't know the whereabouts of us. We didn't know the whereabouts of him. It was an extreme chaos. I mean a lot of families lost loved ones in the war. For instance, my uncle who was with us in the immediate train, wagon train, you know, the Russians took him and his daughter who was my sister's age, and they marched them off and the sister did survive, I mean the daughter did survive but we have not heard anything of him since then you know. He was probably taken to a labor camp possibly. Uh, he was a person who could not see very well, he could not read or write and therefore we fear that along the way if there was any information or forms to fill out, he probably didn't fill them out and nobody there to fill them out for him so there, you know, most likely no paper trail. I mean we have done so searching for him and have not found a trace of him. Uh, now what was your question?

RP: I forget.

WP: Did you? Uh, anyhow, then my father wrote a letter to the Polish people that we knew because we lived among Polish people and they basically were our friends, we were their friends and simply asked, "Have you seen my wife and my son? Do you know their whereabouts?" And so when this Polish man got the letter, why he gave the letter to my mom and that was good news. My dad in turn, who was working for a farmer in Germany had a visit from a friend of his – well it was a cousin – and they were so engrossed about visiting and finding each other as they were crossing a street, my dad got hit by a truck and it broke his leg and so he ended up in the hospital and uh, while he was in the hospital for a number of months, he receive this first letter from my mother after two years, I mean the first whereabouts, you know. And he says, "Man, talk about good news, that was good news."

So uh, so that's the way . . . we stayed there for four years. Uh, the people that I worked for actually lived on our farm. They took our farm from us and we could not own anything. We had no rights. It was like slavery in the good old days in American history. So it was kind of a mixed uh bag because here I was at home so to speak but my parents weren't there, my sister was gone and I had to work, uh, full time, lost all my rights, couldn't enjoy things average kids were enjoying. Uh, I also didn't associate with any of my German nationality people so I lost the language in four years. I couldn't speak my native tongue, which was German. Uh, only Polish as so, then, jumping ahead here, and finally the International Red Cross helped myself and my mother out of Poland and so then when we were reunited I couldn't speak with my dad German. He had speak Polish uh . . . Another interesting thing that happened in while I was in those four years as a hostage, the people I worked for said, "Hey why don't you write your dad a letter. I'm sure he wants to hear about you, you know," so I had the address and after, you know, being gone for two years I wrote a letter and he tells me he received the letter but he couldn't read it. I had forgotten so much, you know.

I don't know if he had decided that I needed shoes, I mean, he knew that I had some needs, you know so he bought a pair of shoes, but he couldn't send both of them. Packages were limited to a certain weight, you know, so he decided to send one shoe. So he sends one shoe. I get this package with one shoe it in, and of course I don't know the circumstances why he sends one shoe. So I keep waiting and wondering, "Why one shoe?" Well, he's thinking, Ok, I'll get this one shoe and I'll write him a letter saying "Hey, got the shoe," So that means he could send the other one. Well, he never got confirmation that I had got the shoe so he never sent the other shoe. And so I had one shoe and I'm thinking, "Where did I communicate to my dad that I maybe lost a leg during the war." And uh, so when we were finally reunited one of the questions my dad asked is, "Hey, did you bring the shoe?" I said, "No," I said uh, "What good would one shoe do?" He says, "Well, I've got the other one." So you know, it was . . . Now, you know, we pick up the telephone we call each other or write, you know, but I was losing it pretty quick, you know, after two, three years of not being in school, you know. I mean I forgot the language, I forgot how to write because I had only been, let's see, the first two grades in Poland, which was a German schooling for us German nationality people.

So it was a difficult time uh because then the front was coming through, even before we evacuated, I mean, we had uh Russian planes and circle our village and drop bombs because there were German military people in our vicinity and they in turn endangered us because the Russians were after them so in school we didn't have fire drills, we had air raid drills. We'd run into fox holes and the fox holes was shaped like a Z almost, you know, like this you could get in here and come out the other end or visa versa and they were deep enough that one adult could uh . . . oh, probably say maybe five feet deep. I mean you could squat down and it would protect you from shrapnel if a bomb dropped too close and we had bombs, that fell, a bomb that fell probably uh, oh I'd say two hundred yards from our house and I mean it really rattles the windows and makes quite a crater, you know.

RP: Let's skip ahead a little bit. When did you come to the United States?

WP: Ok, lets . . . when we were reunited with my dad, we could not go to where he was working because the farmer was already keeping other people and he only could keep people that were working for him so here my mother was lame and I was, let's see, I was eleven years old. I really was of, both of us were of little value to him so the guy says, "Hey I can't keep your family." And so it was either being separated again, but then my dad heard about MCC, you know Mennonite Central Committee had established two refugee camps, our Mennonite people, two refugee camps in Germany. So he contacted them and told them his dilemma and they said, "Hey, be sure you come right away. Get all your belongings and your wife and your son and just come to our refugee camp. We were eligible to stay there.

So Christmas Eve when we arrived in Germany and were reunited with my dad uh it was quite an interesting thing. It was very special you know. My dad wasn't sure when we were coming, where we were at, so my mom had to write a letter to him. She didn't have postage money so she put on the letter, on the envelope "The receiver will pay postage," And he got the letter without a postage stamp on it. So anyhow he came and picked us up on a bicycle. Well, you know, you could uh, he could uh haul one person at a time but here I was again . . . So he'd take my mom a ways and he'd come back and get me and haul me a ways. The only problem was this was Christmas Eve. It was dark and so I would run as fast as I could, couldn't keep up with him you know. So we finally made it to his place so we spend the night there. The next morning we get on the train and we go to this MCC camp, refugee camp at Groni. It was close to Holland. We arrived there and they had just celebrated Christmas Eve, you know, it was late. The Christmas trees were still up, there were two Christmas trees. I don't know why. I can't remember why. Everybody was in bed so they put us up. Next day we go to meet everybody and of course my parents seems like they knew about a third of the people in that camp. I mean these were all friends you know and so this was a tremendous reunion and these were all people just like us. Most of, just about every family had a, had lost maybe a husband or a brother or a sister. I mean either they got killed or they were missing in action, you know. So I mean everybody had common ground you know. We were all in the same situation. We could all comfort each other very easily and so the camp consisted of . . . if you can imagine like a gym, about the size of a gym and they had partitioned it off with blankets about, you know, not quite this, well maybe about this high, six feet high, seven. The rooms were about the size of a good size bathroom where you could put a bunk bed on one side and a bunk bed on the other side and you had a little a two and a half feet of hall space and that was, your room.

RP: Oh, that's lovely.

WP: So we had uh two bunk beds which meant we had four sleeping places, well, we only needed three but the other place was our accumulated uh wealth, our suitcases and what little belongings we had. And so there so many other people there, I mean if you got on the top bunk bed you could look into everybody's room, which was uh created a real problem so there was strict rules about uh no peeking at night. And we all had a communal kitchen where we all helped prepare the food, the ladies did and we all ate together and so there were certain advantages. After being, separated for four years you can imagine how uh how special it was to have people there who were of your own kind,

you know. They understood exactly what you went through. They too had lost everything and so . . .

Now this refugee camp also became a place where you were prepped to immigrate. I'm getting to your question here now, when I came to the states. So uh the problem was we had lost everything. I tell you the only thing that we, that survived was my sister's little bible. That is the only thing that I can remember that we, that survived the war, you know, but we had lost all our pictures. We lost all our addresses from our relatives in the United States and Canada, well United States mainly because my mother had a sister and a brother that came here in the twenties. My dad had brother that came here I think in 1910. So we wanted to contact these people, say, "Hey, help us get across," because we had to have sponsors so how do you contact these people, you know? We lost everything and so my dad was very creative. He would uh, he obviously knew the names and I still have his little address book and diary where I found where he wrote the relatives name and he wrote down uh Indianapolis, Oklahoma. Well Indianapolis is about the size of Charleston, Kansas. It's unincorporated, you know. It's just . . . you know, so not everybody knows where that's at. Uh, Wasta (sp?) County, it's in a different county, I think it was and so the letter arrives in that vicinity but uh the post master just had a hard time where it could fit in, you know, so they passed it around and eventually my uncle and aunt got the letter and so that was the beginning of our connection. Then of course once we made one connection then he could find also his brother who lived in Hillsboro so then they, they came, they served as sponsors but uh the people in this refugee camp . . . some of them couldn't find sponsors and so they were uh, they immigrated to Paraguay, to Uruguay uh, if they were younger they could more easily go to Canada – that's where we wanted to go because all our friends and relatives who were in our situation went to Canada and we wanted to be together with them but we couldn't go there because we couldn't find any sponsors. My parents were like I said, let's see, fifty years old, no they were fifty-five years old now so we had to have sponsors.

So that took about fifteen months before we got everything arranged and then uh, we came by ship to uh, to uh New York City. The day before we arrived we had an explosion on the ship because uh we were in warm waters and we had extremely cold waters and the waves splashed against the ship froze on the outside and so the heat on the inside, cold on the outside caused an explosion and so uh, I still remember when we uh the last morning before, the morning we arrived in New York City, you know, they announced – this was in February – they announced that if you wanted to see the statue of Liberty, you could go on deck. So I mean I beat it on deck and uh as I went on deck I could see where the ship had cracked from one side to the other side I mean, there was uh . . . you could see day light below you or I mean, lights, but anyhow we saw the statue of Liberty and it was all lit up and oh, it was such a good feeling because we had been on the sea, the high seas for eleven days you know. I'd been sick just about every day.

There was another family on there that we knew. Uh, they went to North Dakota, I believe the Hubert family. So we didn't know that many people but uh, now we had a choice to make. We could either get off at New York City and go by train to Oklahoma or we could stay on the ship and go to New Orleans, you know and . . . so it was closer.

RP: Right.

WP: To go this way and then by train over here. I think it would only cost us thirty dollars a person from New Orleans where I think from New York it was suppose to cost a hundred twenty dollars but anyhow our sponsor raised enough money so we decided to take another, we couldn't go by that same ship because it was disabled. Took another ship, went to New Orleans, go on the train and then the exciting moment. Here we are in the United States and I heard so much about this country, you know, had such false impressions I mean like, I almost had the impression like they have Christmas here every day, you know. You don't have to work. It was just uh such a great country, you know, but uh we had to make some adjustments, you know. Of course we came with a working background and so we arrived in Oklahoma with our relatives and there were probably about forty people to greet us at the train station in Clinton. Let's see, did I answer your question?

RP: Uh-huh.

WP: Your question was uh how did I come . . .

RP: Yeah, how did, when did you come.

WP: If you want to interact on some of this, if you have questions why feel free.

RP: Well, as a sponsor what, what did they do? Did they provide -?

WP: Ok, a sponsor is, is a little bit like parents who wanted to adopt somebody. Ok, they assume responsibility. They first of all sent money to uh for our train ride to arrive in Clinton. They also promised that they would help us find housing that they would help us find our job, you know, so we wouldn't uh, uh be at the mercy of society and simply get started. That'd I'd find my school, get, to get, to go school and so they sort of assumed a responsibility for us a period of time.

RP: Now was it the United States that insisted that you have sponsors before you came over or was it something that MCC instituted?

WP: Uh, no this uh not just MCC. This is uh common practice, you know.

RP: So basically if you didn't have someone in the United States already you couldn't come across.

WP: Uh, it kind of depended on age too you know. If uh you know, you had to pass a health test, physical test and that was a problem with a lot of people because they were exposed to TB (Tuberculosis), communicable diseases. And so they didn't just want to bring sick people over here, you know. But, and I think a lot of people went to Canada if they were younger they may not have needed sponsors, you know, but uh, somebody that would take them under their arms for a period of time.

RP: So you finally got to Oklahoma when you were about twelve, thirteen?

WP: I was thirteen years old, yeah.

RP: And you –

WP: And I had just finished . . . go ahead.

RP: Well, my just, my question was did you know any English or . . .

WP: I knew a few words because when we found out we were going to the United States, we . . . I tried to take some classes. I still have my little, my little book where I did some writing assignments or some words, I had a whole list of words, you know. But I knew very little. I knew ‘Hello,’ ‘please,’ ‘Thank you,’ some of the magic words. Uh, I know on the train from New Orleans to Oklahoma, I uh, it took about twenty-two hours. And I wanted to buy something to eat and uh, uh I was still a little gun shy. I was not, I mean here you are in a strange country and you, I think basically I think my survival skills . . .

(End of side A, Beginning of side B)

RP: . . . Just a little bit because it usually takes a while to start picking up.

WP: Ok, when we arrived in Clinton I think it was February twenty-eighth and this was a picture of uh myself and my mom and dad and they had a little story in the newspaper about it when we arrived. Uh, oh here is a book of some of my first uh English that I took, you know. You see, it’s the, there’s the English, there’s the German and uh let’s see I had some writing assignments, something I saved. Anyhow, I enrolled, or I went to school at uh, we finally settled in a little community close to Clinton called Bessie. Bessie is uh probably about the size of Ingalls maybe, a little bigger. And boy they didn’t know what to do with me because I couldn’t speak any English and here I was thirteen years old. I could speak German again you know because the fifteen months in Germany allowed me to . . . and I also went to school there. So probably because of those two reasons they put me in the first and second grade for a couple of weeks.

RP: That must have been interesting.

WP: Yeah, it was. I was the big kid and uh the teacher could speak German.

RP: Oh, that’s good.

WP: Yeah, in fact the teacher is still living.

RP: Really.

WP: Yes, in Corn (Oklahoma) Miss uh Miss Funk. And so uh it was difficult.

RP: I would imagine.

WP: Yeah, it was, it was difficult. It was different. The kids were real nice. I would, my first day – I'll never forget – is uh went through the lunch line, we ate at school. Gosh with my background, I, I mean, I, I know what it's like to eat out of a trash can, you know, literally and here I go to school, eat my first meal, and I'm observing the kids just all the kids they dump half their food into the trash can and that was, that was very painful to me. I didn't like that part. It made me angry. Ok.

RP: So how long were you in the first and second . . . How long did it take you to move up through school?

WP: Oh, well, first and second grade I probably was, I don't know about a month, three or four weeks, I can't remember exactly. And then, these were combination rooms and so I spent first and second a couple weeks and then they felt I didn't fit probably too well there so they put me in the third and fourth grade and then that finished the school year because this was February, March, April, May. And the following year they started me in fifth and sixth grade and uh, so it uh, everybody was helping me. It actually didn't take me that long to learn to communicate verbally with kids because we'd go out on recess and I could always kick the ball the highest, the furthest because I was the oldest kid in the given classroom. One challenge was to kick the soccer ball over the school because this was a, let's see, with the basement it would have been a three-story building and I could do it sometimes. One time I missed and it went through the window you know. Yeah, so uh then, in three and a half years I finished first through eighth grade.

RP: That's not too bad.

WP: And I was still behind, I mean, about three years behind my age group.

RP: So did you go on to high school and that was . . . Let's see you got out of high school when you were about . . .

WP: I went to Corn Bible Academy, in Corn. And uh since I was always the oldest one, I went to my Superintendent one day. I said, "Hey, would you consider allowing me to take correspondences so I could finish in three years?" Well, he said, "Ok, We'll try it." So I took some correspondences, you know, in addition to my regular schoolwork. So my motto in those days was: "I don't work for fame. Graduation is my aim," you know. And so I did finish in three years, you know. And sometimes, and most times, during those times I was uh from that part of the class that made the upper class possible. You know what I mean don't you?

RP: Yeah.

WP: Ok, and very . . . But I was motivated, I was eager to work. Schooling was difficult, extremely difficult. I uh I viewed everything so differently. I mean this little

community in Bessie I noticed there lots of vacant lots and it bugged me. I mean that was waste. I mean, in Europe and Poland if you had a cow, you had half of your life and you could pasture the cow along the road somewhere, you know, and here all these vacant lots so I went around to all these people and asked them. I said, "Would you rent me your vacant lot?" And so I found eleven pieces of land. Some were half a city block and some were a little bigger and the biggest on was five and a half acres on the edge of town and uh I worked for a farmer and he allowed me to use a tractor and I worked these eleven plots of ground and I put it all into cotton. I mean I had cotton growing all over that town. That was my first farming operation, you know, and I enjoyed that, but I enjoyed working and you know, I'd been used to working as a kid very hard and so my interest was more in, in working . . . my interest in sports, I see, I never developed an interest in sports because I never participated so to speak. I mean all the basketball games that I played I can count on one hand. So uh, that's why I still tend to feel that way. I enjoy working hard and, and maybe don't have that much of an interest in sports as what the average person in the states does.

RP: So did your father go to farming or did he have to . . .

WP: My father did common labor. Common labor was occupation. We hoed cotton for thirty-five cents an hour in those first years, and I then I remember my dad making seventy-five cents an hour working for farmers and he would tend to gravitate to the people who could speak German, you know. Because he was hard of hearing and he had a hard time learning the language and you know, they'd go to church and they could not understand and it was very difficult for them.

RP: I bet.

WP: I heard him say one time, I have a tape that was transcribed just like what we're doing right now except in German. Uh, at the end of the tape he says, "You know, if we would have known all this I don't think we would have come to the United States." And Wow. It, it just shocked me and I was hoping nobody would hear it, you know. And I was just stunned. I was quiet and my mom says, "But we did it all because of you. We wanted you to have a future." Boy, I mean that was, it, it really impacted me. You know, I had to . . . I didn't come here to have a good time. I felt like God led me here and, and my parents sacrificed for me and I mean, I had to make my life count. So that spoke very loud and there were some other things that I went through that really got my attention you know.

RP: So I know you've been back to Germany or to Poland. Did you, can you tell me about that a little bit?

WP: Yeah, the first time we went back was my dad and I went back oh, let's see, '73. That would have been about twenty years, twenty-five years after we left Poland. But no, we didn't go to Poland we just went to Germany because we were scared to go back. We thought they'd, if we'd go back, they'd keep us there again, you know. And this was still

in the days when East Germany existed, you know. The Berlin Wall was still there so we did not go back but three years later in 1976 . . . July the fourth, 1976 was what?

RP: The Bicentennial, wasn't it?

WP: Yeah, the Bicentennial. My wife, my dad, and I, the three of us joined a cousin in Germany. We drove into Poland. It was scary but uh that was the first time we had returned. Uh, twenty-six, that would have been twenty-eight years for me since I had been there and our buildings were still there and the people were glad to see us. Everything was great but here I was walking on the road to our place and I uh looked at the calendar I looked at my watch and I said, "Yes, at home, in America they are celebrating this big Fourth of July," and it really was moving that uh I was there and still I got out of there, you know, I was, I could always go back to the states. And we've been back uh '97, Leon, our youngest one challenged me and said, "Dad, why don't you and I take a father-son trip," you know. He flies for Delta and so the two of us and my cousin from California who was with my mom and I in those prison camps, I invited him to go along and we flew to Germany and rented a car and with my cousin from Germany drove to Poland and saw the home place again and some of the people and then last year, about uh eleven months ago, Ronna (Raber) and Erin and Kendra (Ronna's daughters) two granddaughters, they wanted to go see the home place, you know, where I came from. So we drove out there again and, and so it was extremely special to have them go back with me, you know, to go rummage around on the Cemetery and find my sister's head stone yet. And my grandparents are buried there and I found them.

RP: Wow, that's great

WP: Yep.

RP: Well, you have a few notes here. When did you come to Cimarron?

WP: Good question. Uh, my wife and I got married in 1958. She –

RP: Where did you meet her?

WP: She, uh we met each other in the same church that we attended, uh, about eight, seven, eight years after we were here in the States. She also went to Corn Bible Academy and uh, but we didn't meet each other there because she was three years ahead of me. We're the same age but she was always ahead of me. So then I started college at Tabor, went one semester, and she came there. She was wanting to pursue her nursing at Tabor and that's when we met. And so then I moved back to Oklahoma and went to Southwestern State at Weatherford. And she had already finished her nurses training and so that's when we got married. Now, I'm leading up to your question. Uh, the year after we got married I went with her father on harvest. And we were harvesting wheat north of Ingalls for Doc (Richard) Koppers.

RP: Ok.

WP: And oh, I just fell in love with this part of the, with this part of that state, this region. Flat lands, you could see as far as you wanted too. I said someday I got to find me a job here. And so, what was it, two years later I finished college and I noticed this opening, fifth grade teacher wanted at Cimarron. So I applied and got the job and so I taught fifth grade here for eight years. That was our initial move to Cimarron and then we moved away to take care of my mother in Oklahoma and after she passed away we felt again that we wanted to get back to this part of the state and the opening came up and I was principal here for twenty-six years the second go around.

RP: Wow.

WP: Yes, so we've enjoyed the Cimarron area.

RP: How has the town changed?

WP: Oh, good question. Goodness, uh, uh you know where the nursing home is at?

RP: Uh-huh.

WP: Everything north of there, there weren't any buildings. North of the grade school there weren't any buildings when we moved here in sixty-one.

RP: Wow. Uh-huh.

WP: Yeah, wow.

RP: That's, that's uh, a lot of the town.

WP: Right, and that's, so the town has moved in this direction (north). A lot of different businesses. A lot of, I mean, we had a Ford Dealership, Chevrolet Dealership, uh, we had a coop station right north of the library. You work at the library. Right north of the library that building was a Coop Station. Uh, the Champlain station of course still is there but all of these were service stations. Uh, now all we have is filling stations. You know the difference, don't you? The guys would come out and wash your windshield and check your oil and, you know, service.

RP: Ok, got ya (sic), got ya (sic).

WP: There was a lumber yard, let's see, half a block west of the stoplight, the main intersection. There were two grocery stores on Main Street. There was a café on Main Street, on the, I think close to Clark's. Cimarron Insurance I mean occupied several buildings. Uh, Wheat Grower's Hail Insurance, Irsik and Doll have that building. Uh, goodness there was . . . Doctor Penner had uh Dental Office, well that's in the same place. Nicklet's store was on the east side where the medical part is. Tuck's Variety Store is about where the City Building is right now, the City Office.

RP: Oh, ok.

WP: Uh, the Bank was in that vicinity, in that same building.

RP: Where was, where was the, the city building then?

WP: The city building . . . You talking about the Courthouse?

RP: Yeah . . . Well, you said that the uh . . .

WP: The City Office where you pay the electric bills.

RP: Oh, ok.

WP: That is in the same area where the bank was. In fact the vault is still there. Uh, the theater was about half a block north of the stop light on the west side. I think Alltel, Darren Addison has his office there. Oh, and there were other changes. Goodness.

RP: I'm sure.

WP: I remember in eighteen, in 1961 we had a big parade because it was the centennial celebration of Kansas, 1861, you know.

RP: Is there anything else that . . . any other stories or anything else that you can think of?

WP: Hum, well, uh I remember when we moved to Cimarron our kids were pretty small. Leon wasn't even born yet and I remember wading with the kids in the river, going fishing to the sandpit. You know, now you go out there and, you know, there is no water, but the park, the park was a very special place. I mean, the kids would go swing out there, uh . . . and so uh Cimarron was, has always been kind of a special place for us. The library has moved. You know the library used to be I think where the Donut shop is at now, down town.

RP: I didn't know that.

WP: You haven't been there yet, have you [laughing]? So the library is a very nice. . . Actually the library is where the Ford Dealership used to be and the office space for the bank is on, next to the library . . . well that was all Ford Dealership. Yeah. Well, what else do you have?

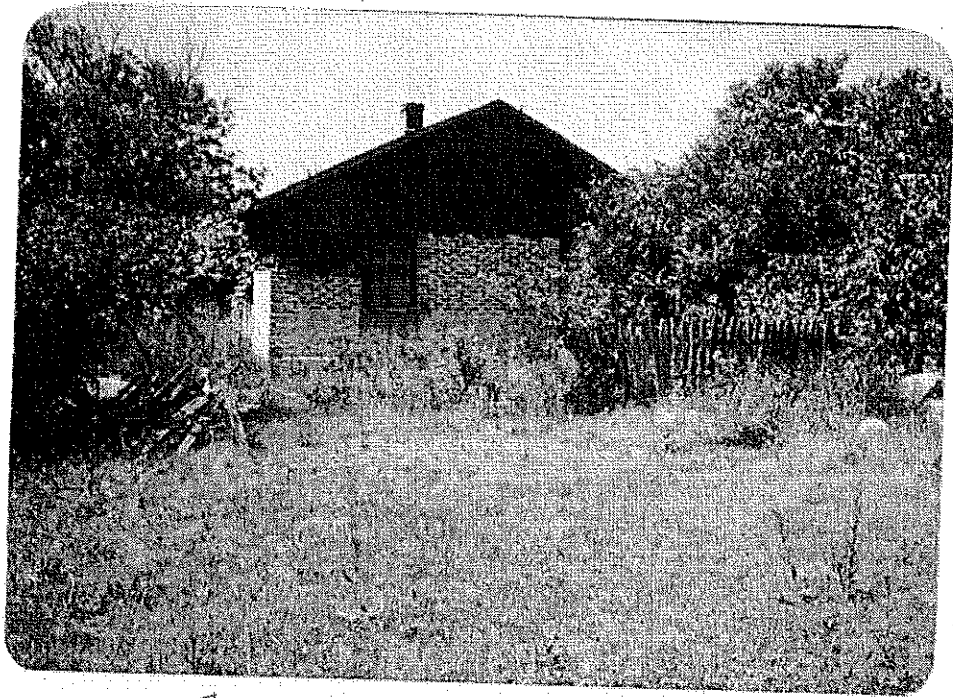
RP: That's about all I have.

WP: Yeah.

RP: Thank you for talking to me.

WP: You're welcome.

(End of Interview)



House

The old Penner farm



Barn



Willy + Leon Penner on a visit to Poland in 1976

Ella Penner

8-21-1926

3-26-1944

Ella
8-21-1926
3-26-1944



Ella Penner, Willy's sister's head stone



Grabowiec, Poland
Our Farm in 1976

