

Interview with Gertrude Gruber

February 21, 2002

Grand Ledge, MI

Interviewer: Dr. Russell Magnaghi

Transcribed:

RM: Mrs. Gruber, could you start out by giving me your birthdate?

GG: November 22, 1907

RM: Your background is Cornish, could you tell us a little about your grandparents, where they were in Cornwall, and how they got to the Upper Peninsula.

GG: Well, the one set of grandparents came from...my memory isn't the best...from Camborne. My grandfather came from Camborne and my grandmother from Verdue. They came to this country, my grandfather was 21 when he came. My grandmother was only 8 years old. She came with her parents. Somehow or other they both got to the copper country and that is where they married and raised a family.

RM: What was grandparents names?

GG: My grandfather was Samuel Wilcox and when they came to this country there was some reason that they changed it to Woolcock.

RM: How do you spell that?

GG: W-O-O-L-C-O-C-K My grandmother's maiden name was Edwards. Annie Edwards.

RM: About what year did they go to the copper country?

GG: That I'm not sure. But I think my grandfather came directly, but my grandmother lived in Pennsylvania at first and the family moved to Vermont to the mines in Vermont. That was back when the Molly McGuires and the Cornish people were fueding. He was working in the mine at that time.

RM: So did he leave the Pennsylvania coal mines because of the Molly McGuires and the trouble that was going on?

GG: No. I don't know why they moved to Vermont. Probably they thought it was a better place, migrating like they did. They were always searching for something better.

RM: Then from Vermont he went to the copper country?

GG: Yes.

RM: Did you ever hear of what attracted him? Was it something special?

GG: No I didn't. This was before my time. But I do know that there was quite a rush in the copper mine back then. Everybody was looking for something better. That's probably what drew them to that area.

RM: Where did they live in the copper country?

GG: My grandfather lived in Hancock. My grandmother and her family lived in Hubble. He bought three little houses and lived in one of them. I used to know where it was, but it's gone now. They were little houses. My grandparents were apparently married up there because that's where they were living.

RM: And what did your grandfather do for work?

GG: Well he worked in the mine and it was just a few years and there was quite a rush in California and Montana. The gold mines in Californian and the copper mines in Montana. He had a sister living in Montana so he went to Montana and sought work in the copper mine there. But it was very damp. He became ill. So he came back to Michigan to the copper country and stayed there for the rest of his life. His health wasn't good from then on. He never worked in the mines again, except he'd work in the dry house. It was a building where the men came up from underground and the men changed their clothes. It was very hot underground and this was on the surface. It was something he could do.

After that he was just an invalid. My grandmother had to raise 6 children and support the family.

RM: Did he have rental property?

GG: Yes.

RM: So he had some income coming from that.

GG: No, this was the other grandfather. Samuel Woolcock.

RM: This was your mother's family?

GG: Yes.

RM: What was your grandfather's name?

GG: Samuel Woolcock.

RM: What did your grandmother do with her husband incapacitated, what did she do to keep the family going?

GG: She took in boarders. Miners and later they moved to Hancock and she took in boarders that were working on the street cars. She fed them. They lived in her home. Did their laundry and everything. It was hard work for her. Especially having an invalid husband.

RM: About how many boarders she took in?

GG: I do not know how many. It couldn't have been too many at a time because her home wasn't that big. But she did a nice job feeding them well.

RM: Were these Cornish boarders?

GG: Not necessarily. There were a lot of different nationalities in Hancock. We had Finnish neighbors, also Italians. We had stores locally, there were three or four that were operated by Italians.

RM: So that was the end of his work in the mines. He just did work around the dry house. How many children did your grandmother have?

GG: Six.

RM: So she was taking care of the boarders and the six children and her husband. Did she keep any cows or sell milk or anything like that?

GG: No.

RM: Just the boarders. Do you remember what year all this was happening? When your grandfather went to Montana and got injured or...

GG: It was in the early 1880s. Because he was there when my mother was born. She was born in 1884. When he came back from Montana, he came back a sick man. From then on he couldn't do too much.

RM: This is your mother's family. Could you tell me a little about your mother and growing up in Hancock?

GG: Well she was born in Hancock but they moved to Quincy Hill. Growing up she didn't go to school beyond elementary. High school was unheard of. She married when she was 21. Helping her mother was about the only thing she did.

RM: Did her husband work in the mines? Your father?

GG: No. His father...I haven't told you about his parents. His father worked in the Osceola Mine. That's where he died, in the Osceola Mine fire.

RM: His name was?

GG: He was Thomas Gruder.

RM: Was he Cornish?

GG: Yes.

RM: So your mother and father were both Cornish. So what happened then, did you hear any stories about what your grandmother did on that side, having lost her husband?

GG: Let's see, when they first came, they lived in ??? then they moved to Osceola and he worked in the mine there. After the fire and he died underground, suffocated. She was left with 2 children. My father was only 10 years old. I don't know what she did to raise them. Her daughter, my father's sister, was 5 years older than him. She didn't live very long either. She had a heart attack and died about 2 years after he died in the mine, leaving 2 children. The girl was old enough to keep house and take care of her brother. She married at 17. Because he didn't have a home, he married into the family. He had a good home. He never would work in the mine because of what happened to his father.

RM: What did he get into then?

GG: He worked for the mining company. He was in the engine house. He ran the machinery. He did that for quite a long time, until one time he had an accident. They

worked 12 hour shifts back then. The man that was supposed to relieve him didn't come. He worked the second 12 hour shift. Then it was his 12 hour shift again. They made him stay and work. Well, after 24 hours and still working at a job like that, he fell asleep. Fortunately there were not men on the ????. It was ore and it went right up through the shaft house. He walked off the job and never went back. They probably wouldn't have wanted him anyhow, but he never worked for the mines. For a long time after, he did work in the engine house in another mine, but in between , he was a carpenter.

RM: But then he went back and worked, I guess they call them stationary engineers?

GG: Yes. He worked for the Hancock Mine as a stationary engineer. Also, the Quincy Mine, the engine house that is part of the museum, he operated that machinery for a while.

RM: That would be a very responsible job.

GG: He was a very responsible person, but working so many hours with no sleep...

RM: And that's also a job where you have to be on top of it. You can't let things go on their own. So you were born in 1907. And you grew up in...

GG: Hancock.

RM: What I'd like to do in terms of growing up, were there any customs...you're talking about as time is passing here. You have your grandparents and then your parents, did the family maintain Cornish traditions? The foods, pasties...?

GG: Oh yes. I've eaten lots of pasties in my time and ????. Those were the two main Cornish things that we carried on, and we still do. I don't make pasties anymore, but Norm brings me some from Marquette and they're in my freezer.

RM: Did you ever have clommen cream???

GG: Oh yes.

RM: Then there was another thing, figgy pudding?

GG: Yes.

RM: It's like our plum pudding. Were there any special holidays that were celebrated? Christmas, Easter...

GG: Easter and Christmas especially. Then Thanksgiving, that's about all of our holidays here.

RM: At Christmas and Easter did the Methodist Church have elaborate singing and music at the services on those days?

GG: Oh yes. They were special.

RM: Did they have a children's choir?

GG: In Hancock where I went to church they didn't have a children's choir. It was only temporary, for a short time. We attended church Sunday morning and Sunday night. I remember wondering why I had to be in church, but it didn't hurt me.

RM: Do you remember when you were growing up, the Sons and Daughters of St. George?

GG: No, I do not remember that. None of my parents or grandparents were involved in that I'm sure.

RM: Did your grandparents belong to The Odd Fellows or any of those groups?

GG: My grandfather was unable to because of his health. My other grandfather, we'd have a big ??? in the family and he has a pin on that says Elks. Apparently he was an Elk.

RM: That was common. The Cornish tended to belong to just the mainline organizations like the Elks, The Odd Fellows, The Temple of Honor, and then they had the Sons and Daughters of St. George. That was an English organization and since the Cornish were English, they joined. I'm trying to find those groups today. They said the first lodge was in Negaunee, but the first lodge in Michigan was in Detroit. The Britannia Lodge. The other thing about celebrating, do you remember did the Cornish celebrate Good Friday with a dinner and entertainment?

GG: I can remember in my home Good Friday was very special. My mother never served meat on Good Friday. Of course being Methodist, we did eat meat at other times, but never on Good Friday. That was a very special day. We went to church.

RM: Was there any public meal at the church?

GG: Not on Good Friday. Before Easter on Thursday, we do have a... just recently at the church I'm going to here, we have a cedar dinner. That's Jewish. The Jewish people have the cedar dinner on Thursday. They've been doing that at my church, I don't know why. Last year I did get to one.

RM: It's sort of like the Passover dinner.

GG: Yes. But when I was growing up they didn't. Some people observed Lent and gave up various things. We always talked about it. We were going to give up candy when we were growing up.

RM: I was curious about that. Eating fish on Good Friday, was that something a lot of people did or just your family?

GG: We didn't eat any meat.

RM: You ate fish on Good Friday. But was that restricted to only your family?

GG: I think it was something her family did and she just carried it on.

RM: So that was something Cornish people did?

GG: Yes.

RM: Things like that don't come out in the newspaper. It's not really talked about.

Even if you might not have been part of it, was there any celebration on St. George's

Day, April 23?

GG: No. I don't know anything about St. George's.

RM: So there weren't parades in Hancock.

GG: I don't know.

GG: I don't know anything about any parades.

RM: I don't know anything about any parades.

RM: At the turn of the century they made a big fuss. But as time passed, like when you were growing up, it died out. You would have remembered. I guess in 1905 in Calumet they had parades and bands and a whole bunch of activity on St. George's Day. But as time goes on, even the newspapers don't write about it. At one time they went into detail, but now it's forgotten.

GG:

GG: I would remember if they did because we always observed Washington's Birthday with a parade.

RM: Up in Hancock.

GG: Yes. That was very important. There was no school and we could all go down and watch the parades. Back then there were no cleared streets. It was snow and they packed it down. People on skis in the parades, and dog sleds and things like that.

RM: I don't know anything about any parades.

RM: So a real winter parade. I've never heard anyone...they've talked about having dog races in Marquette, but never a parade. Did they have things like floats?

GG: No. It was just normal.

RM: Did bands play? I don't recall any bands playing up in Hancock and I don't recall people having to go to work at that time. I don't recall any bands playing up in Hancock.

GG: I don't recall bands. I think it would be too cold for that.

RM: I don't recall any bands playing up in Hancock and I don't recall people having to go to work at that time.

RM: It would freeze the valves and what not. But they would have a special non-music parade.

GG: I don't recall any bands playing up in Hancock and I don't recall people having to go to work at that time.

GG: There was a parade and I can still see the people on their skis and dog sleds and so on.

RM: I don't recall any bands playing up in Hancock and I don't recall people having to go to work at that time.

RM: So you grew up in Hancock. Did you go to high school? I don't recall any bands playing up in Hancock and I don't recall people having to go to work at that time.

GG: Yes.

RM: I don't recall any bands playing up in Hancock and I don't recall people having to go to work at that time.

RM: So the other generation didn't go to high school, but when you came along, that generation was going to high school.

GG: I don't recall any bands playing up in Hancock and I don't recall people having to go to work at that time.

GG: Yes. My father went to the 10th grade. He did get some high school.

RM: I don't recall any bands playing up in Hancock and I don't recall people having to go to work at that time.

RM: Then you got married in what year?

GG: 1935

RM: Could you tell me about growing up in Hancock and Cornish people leaving to go to work in Detroit, Highland Park and so on. Could you talk about that.

GG: When Henry Ford started turning out Model Ts, lots of people went to Detroit from up there. I had an aunt and uncle, Russell Woolcox and his family, there were several of them. Cousins, and so on, all moved to Detroit.

RM: So in terms of looking at this, there were a lot of people leaving.

GG: Yes there were. A lot of people left. But my parents decided to stay right there. One reason was because of my grandparents, with an invalid grandfather. We lived just around the corner from them. My mother felt responsible that someone should stay there.

RM: Your father was the stationary engineer at that time?

GG: He was a streetcar conductor. I don't know the year that he left doing that, and when he went back to the mine again as a stationary engineer.

RM: But it was during this time. If it hadn't been for the grandparents, he could have left.

GG: Yes. But we just stayed where we were. When I was 15 I had the opportunity to travel from Hancock to Detroit with my aunt and uncle and a cousin in a Model T Ford. That was quite a trip. It took us 4 days and nights. We pitched a tent at night in a Tourist park where you could stay there for 25 cents. We fixed our meals along the way. There were no McDonald's or anything like that. Restaurants were mostly in the hotels. When we got there I stayed with the aunt and uncle that were living there. While I was there they took me on a tour to a Ford factory where they were making Model T Fords. That was quite an experience for me because I came from a mining county and this was a big factory. But it was very interesting to see them making automobiles.

RM: Was this in Dearborn or Highland Park.

GG: It was Woodward Avenue.

RM: Okay. That's Highland Park. Did they live close to the plant?

GG: Not too far. They took street cars everywhere.

RM: Did the people talk about leaving the copper country and going to Detroit. Do you remember they talking about if it was a pleasant experience?

GG: No. I think they did the right thing. They had more money to work with. But they always liked to go back up there to visit. Every time they came up to visit, they wanted pasties. My mother was busy making pasties. They always liked to come back and visit.

RM: Speaking of pasties, when you were growing up, were pasties sold in stores like they are today?

GG: No.

RM: So that's a more recent development.

GG: Yes. That's recent.

RM: So if you wanted a pasty you made it.

GG: Yes. And everybody knew how to make pasties. My mother made delicious ones.

RM: So there was all of that activity. People were traveling back and forth. Coming back for vacations and what not.

GG: Oh yes. They loved to go back for vacations. Some of them got hay fever and the climate was much better up there, so they had an excuse. They had to come up because of the hay fever.

RM: Do you remember the conditions in the copper country in the 1930s with the depression? How did that affect you?

GG: Well, it was very interesting times. It was difficult to live through, but I'm glad I had that experience. My sister and I had been working. So many people were out of work back then. We waited for telephone calls. They would call me in the morning and say can you come to work. I was ready to go. I worked in the JC Penney store not knowing which day I was going to work. My sister did the same thing. We didn't earn very much money, but my father too, his work was cut right in half. He was earning less than \$50 a week. That's not very much money. But we would bring it home to Dad and would help to buy the food. He'd always give me \$5 and that was my spending money for the week. Or my car fare. I had to ride the street car. We got along. Of course, everything was so cheap back then. You could go to the store and buy a dress for \$3. Now, good heavens. You're lucky to get one for less than \$100.

RM: Were things kind of grim in the copper country during the depression?

GG: Yes they were. But there was help for people. We had the WPA and there was something else.

RM: The CCC?

GG: Well the CCC yes. My husband was an officer in the CCC camp. He graduated from Michigan Tech and there wasn't anyone in his graduating class that got an engineering job. He got a job selling insurance. He worked for his father. Other than that, there wasn't any of them that got an engineering job. My husband didn't get an engineering job until after WWII. That was the first engineering job he got. He did whatever he could when we were first married. If somebody needed some painting done or whatever. He'd do it. He heard about the CCC and he applied. He was at Camp ??? and we went there.

RM: So you got married in the copper country.

GG: We got married in Illinois really. But we lived in South Haven.

RM: Did you meet your husband in the copper country.

GG: Yes, when he was a student at Michigan Tech.

RM: And he was from down there originally.

GG: Yes. He was from South Haven. Then his mother was very ill with cancer. It was the depression and his father did have a job. He was working a steady job, but with a wife who was so ill, it was hard. They needed help. I didn't have a job. So I stayed and helped take care of her. That's why we got married in South Haven.

RM: So that's how you got down here. Then he went back and worked in the CCC camp.

GG: Yes. It was after that. I stayed with my parents for a little while. But we found a house in L'Anse where the people had left for Detroit. The factories in Detroit were hiring and putting out stuff for the war. This couple went to Detroit and found work there. So they rented their house. A furnished house, very comfortable for \$15 a month. I lived in this house alone because my husband had to live at the camp. It was an interesting experience. I had a pistol. It was the last house down the street. I could hear wolves and coyotes at night. There was bear and deer, wildcats in the backyard. I stuck it out alone. It was an interesting time.

RM: When did you come back down state?

GG: He got called from there. He was in ROTC in college. He was a Second Lieutenant in the army. They called him in from the CCC camp. He had to report to Maryland and I went with him. That was still army. Then he was sent from there to New Jersey and then to Okalahoma. We were there when they were building up the Air Force. They needed officers to set it up. They didn't have time to train them so they took them from the army and my husband had to be one. They picked him and sent him to Hunter Field, Georgia. That's when he went into the Air Force without any extra training. It was Air Force supply. So he wasn't flying. He went overseas. He was the company commander. They

landed in Cairo and went through the desert. He was in north Africa. Then he came back to the States. First they asked him what field he would like to go to. They had troops all over the world. He said he was going to leave it up to them. He could have gone to India or any other place, but he ended back up in the States. So we ended up in Utah and stayed there until the war ended. We were there for a couple years. That's where Norman was born.

RM: Getting back to your grandfather, did he have respiratory problems?

GG: No, they called it rheumatism. I think it was rheumatoid arthritis because it was so crippling.

RM: So he had difficulty just getting around.

GG: Back then we didn't have wheelchairs like we have now. They had castors on one of the dining room chairs. That was the way he got around. They had hard wood floors.

RM: So even this job across the street was difficult.

GG: That was before he got that bad. Gradually he got worse.

RM: Now to bring it up to the present, do any of your children or grandchildren maintain, or how do they keep their connection with the Cornish past?

GG: Well, I only have 2 grandchildren. Norman's daughter is one. She's 16. The other one is in England right now as part of his college. He's there for 2 months. He wants to get to Cornwall. He enjoys the family history. I have a nephew and his family who are living over there. They were there for 3 years. Then they extended it to 5 and now they want to stay permanently. His wife is the one that works. She is an engineer. She is working for an international tobacco company. Her husband, who is my nephew is a house-husband. Ever since the third child was born, who needed open-heart surgery as an infant, they didn't want to leave her with strange people. So he stays home to take care of her and it's worked out so well. The wife earns enough so that he doesn't have to work. That's the way it's been ever since. They're living over there now.

RM: In England.

GG: Norman and his family is there. They left yesterday.

RM: He's going to be gone for 2 weeks?

GG: 10 days. He plans to get to Cornwall to see some relatives. Cousins of my parents that he did see once before when he was there. He wants to see him again. Beth is thinking maybe she'd like to go to Cambridge when she's through high school. I don't know if they can afford to send her there, but anyhow, we do have relatives living there. It would be convenient if she does go because there is family. We still have connections.

RM: You've got roots and relatives there. You said you continued making pasties.

GG: As long as I could make them I was. Now I keep them in my freezer. Every once in a while I have one. My daughter always makes the saffron for Christmas. She made me some and I keep those in my freezer too.

RM: So the Cornish heritage has maintained through several generations from the first Cornish.

GG: I used to make the steamed pudding for Christmas every year, until this year. Last Christmas, Norm got the recipe and he made it. He brought me one. It's in the freezer now.

****SKIP IN TAPE****

GG: Her aunts and uncles had a large family. There were a lot of cousins. It seems like when I was growing up, we used to visit back and forth. We rode the street car. She'd take me along. I don't know why she wouldn't take my sister. But she took me. I learned a lot just listening to these people. My brother and his wife visited and they hooked up to one of these cousins and he taped their conversations. I have those tapes. He didn't know the people that they were talking about, but when he brought them home, there were names that I knew. So it helped me when I wrote this history, I used those tapes.

RM: This is something you put together.

GG: This is the Woolcock's History that I wrote. It's all written by hand. I made copies and gave each of my children one of them. There are a lot of things that are just family.

RM: Very nice.

GG: This was the Curtis one, but I don't know as much about that family because my father just had the one sister and they seemed to lose contact. So I had to write this one from what I knew of the family and what happened to the grandparents and so on.

RM: This is interesting. How Florence got to...

GG: That's a good story. Her husband went to Detroit and was got a job and had a wife and baby come too.

RM: The baby was 3 months old.

GG: She couldn't wait that long so she took the train and got to the straights. It was frozen over so the ferry wasn't running. They rented a horse and cutter and went across on the ice. She with her 3 month old baby and met the train on the other side and went on to Detroit. To this day that daughter, she's living in a suburb of Detroit now, but she

dreads going over the Straights of Mackinaw. Even going over the bridge. She gets scared. Maybe thoughts of going over the ice when she was an infant just is in her mind.

RM: The other thing I want to ask about is, Norman has a copy of this. So I could borrow it.

GG: Yes.

RM: Did your mother or grandmother belong to clubs at the church?

GG: My grandmother didn't, but my mother did.

RM: Like women's groups and what not that would get them out of the house and socialize and so on. Was that common in the Methodist church?

GG: I think it was. My grandmother was so busy with boarders you know, and with an invalid husband, she just didn't have the time.

RM: But other people would. If they had the time, the women would find socializing around the church.

GG: Most of the ladies belonged to the Ladies Aid. My mother took me with her one time and when I walked into the house it sounded like bees. Everybody talking you know. All these women. I thought I'd never want to belong to the Ladies Aid.

RM: What would they do? Was there a purpose?

GG: Well they used to have pasty sales. They'd make 100 or more pasties and sell them to raise money. That money would help buy something the church needed.

RM: So the Ladies Aid was aiding the church. And it was a time... as you said with the buzzing going on, a time to socialize.

GG: Right. As a child there were clubs for children. They were all related to the missions. I was a member of that for a while.

RM: Did the women have temperance groups within the church?

GG: Yes there was a temperance group.

RM: So that would be another outlook for women. So even if they were not working and were in the home, they had these things that they could do.

GG: Yes. I don't think it was as big a group as the Ladies Aid, but there were a few people that belonged to it. We lived in Plainwall when we had our second child. My husband had an aunt that belonged to a group like that in her church. Babies were born and they gave them a ribbon. It was some kind of association. That's gone now. We don't have those groups at all anymore. There were not many married women who worked outside the home. Back then you didn't have all the modern conveniences. You baked your bread and canned your food and whatnot. People were busy at home. After I grew up there were more and more women working out of the home.

RM: Was that the immigrant women, or just their daughters?

GG: The daughters. My mother never worked.

RM: So it was really the younger generation.

GG: My aunts, none of them worked out of the home. But their children had to do it.