

Legends of Freeborn County History Is...

by Bev Jackson

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In the 19th century, the Scandinavians, the Germans, the Czechs, and the Yankees all came to Freeborn County searching for a place that would provide them with a secure home and a comfortable living. They were looking for a community where they would feel welcome and would fit in. They found that while home was a temporary dugout in the side of a hill and the winters were tough, eventually, with hard work, the home and security they were looking for was right here.

In the 20th century, the Dutch and Mexicans went through similar struggles. Primitive housing in the newly founded town of Hollandale and its surrounding farms would be only temporary. Eventually, through very hard work and determination, life would surpass even their wildest dreams. Education for the children, travel, nice homes, good jobs, the American dream right here in Freeborn County.

It's hard for those of us, whose families have been established in this area for several generations, to imagine the struggles of our ancestors. We don't remember being "the new kid on the block," we don't remember the difficulties, and the stories seem vague or even humorous.

In a recent exhibit, the stories came back. The people whose pictures were on display, and whose experiences are told on the storyboards, are some of Freeborn County's 20th century pioneers. Many of them have been here almost 60 years, but their memories are reminders to all of us of what happens when you leave all that is familiar and move to a place of new beginnings.

The following are excerpts from the conversations that formed the basis of this exhibit: "Language was the biggest barrier."

*"I learned more and more from my kids when they were going to school."

*"My dad graduated from high school in Mexico. He was a jack of all trades, but he couldn't speak English."

*"My good friend couldn't speak English when he came to school. He only spoke Norwegian."

*"I flunked first grade, cause I didn't know the language."

*"Our home had only cold running water that froze in the winter."

*"I remember digging carrots with a pitchfork."

*"I applied at the Good Samaritan Center on a Tuesday. She said, 'When can you start?'"

*"Our tools were an onion weeder, a hoe, and our hands."

*"I went to Hammer School. It was one room. Mrs. Breamer would take us for a sleigh ride."

*"I was head usher at my church for 25 years, and I've been involved in lots of community organizations."

*"I wish that I had retained, in some way, the Mexican Hillbilly music, the music my dad used to play."

*"By the time I was 12 years old, I knew I was poor. Now I feel rich. I'm closer to the land. I can see the sky in the morning. I don't want to live in a big city and be a number. I need to be an individual."

*"Our parents were always telling us to better ourselves...They always wanted us to talk English."

*"We all seemed to pull together. At that time you had to. We all had to help out."

*"Our mother taught us to sew and to crochet. We couldn't go anyplace 'til our house was picked up, and we still don't."

*"My daughter is taking Spanish at Concordia."

*"The bad part of Albert Lea - It's too cold."

*"The good part - It's my home."

These quotes could be from the 1990's. I guess that's what made the exhibit so remarkable.