

Interview Date: March 15, 1981

Interviewer: E.G.

Ernest Grundy

Interviewee: J.A.1.

Mrs. Joe Abraham [wife]

J.A.2.

Mr. Joe Abraham [husband]

E.G.: This is Ernest Grundy from Kearney State College. This is March 15<sup>th</sup> and I'm at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Abraham on Sicily Street in Ravenna, Nebraska. I'm out here for the purpose of interviewing Mrs. Abraham relative to her teaching experiences, also rural school experiences. This project – This is part of a project sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. What we will do with this tape is to put it on – is to deposit it to Kearney State College Library for the use of future scholars. I'd like to introduce at this time, then, Mrs. Joe Abraham. Mrs. Abraham would you tell me something about your – your family? Where you were born? That kind of thing. [1:00]

J.A.1.: I was born approximately 2 miles Northeast of Ravenna. My parents' names was – were Mr. and Mrs. Charles Fiala.

E.G.: Is that F-I-A-L-A?

J.A.1.: Yes. My grandparents came from Czechoslovakia so we are Czech.

E.G.: Where did they settle when they came here?

J.A.1.: They settled in Bristol Township in Sherman County, which is just across the line from Buffalo County [chuckles]

E.G.: That's fairly close to Ravenna.

J.A.1.: Yes, Ravenna was their town, but they were Sherman County people.

E.G.: By the way, do you say Ra-VAH-nna or Ra-VEH-nna? [1:40]

J.A.1.: Ra-VEH-nna.

E.G.: Ra-VEH-nna?

J.A.1.: Is the way I – we mostly say it.

E.G.: Then they were, your grandparents, were Czech...

J.A.1.: Yes.

E.G.: ...immigrants to this country.

J.A.1.: Yes they were.

E.G.: You remember about when they came? [1:54]

J.A.1.: They came to Nebraska in 1878 and my grandfather was the first – first settler in Bristol Township and then he encouraged other Czech people to come, so that was basically a Czech community right across the line in Sherman County.

E.G.: Did those people speak the Czech language, then?

J.A.1.: Yes, they did.

E.G.: Did you once speak it?

J.A.1.: I think I did some when I was small and then, as we grew up, we just kind of forgot about it, but now I'm quite interested in it again and - and have learned to read it and speak it a little bit when I make my mind up to do it. [chuckles]

E.G.: Is there anyone around here with whom you can speak Czech?

J.A.1.: There are a few people that still understand the language and speak the language.

E.G.: About your grandparents, did they homestead in 1878? They would have, wouldn't they? [2:50]

J.A.1.: Yes, they took out homesteads. My mother's parents, also my father's parents, they both took out homesteads in that area.

E.G.: Those were...160 acres at the time?

J.A.1.: Mostly, yes.

E.G.: They weren't under the Kincade Act, which permitted more land, were they?

J.A.1.: No, that – that came later, I think.

E.G.: Yes, and I suppose farther West also.

J.A.1.: Yes.

E.G.: What kind of country is it around Bristol Township? Is it rolling or is there a stream? [3:16]

J.A.1.: I would say it's rolling and there was a stream through our farm and where it came from or where it went, I don't know, but I always say that Sherman County is all hills. I call it Sherman County Hills. [chuckles]

E.G.: And you were educated then for your first 8 grades in Bristol Township?

J.A.1.: Yes, at District 42. However, I only went to school there 7 years because I never was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. [chuckles] In those days they would do that occasionally, they would have you skip a grade...

E.G.: Yes.

J.A.1.: I don't think it was because I was that smart, but I was alone in a grade and the teacher just put me forward with some other children and I just skipped the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade completely.

E.G.: How many children were there in your school when you attended?

J.A.1.: Oh, there were anywhere from, I think, 15 to 20 children, most of the time.

E.G.: One teacher?

J.A.1.: one teacher

E.G.: She had her hands full.

J.A.1.: 8 grades. Yes.

E.G.: Well then, you went to high school in Ravenna? [4:23]

J.A.1.: Yes. I attended high school in Ravenna for 4 years and...

E.G.: Tell me about that normal training.

J.A.1.: [chuckles] They offered 2 years of normal training which prepared – prepared you to teach school after you graduated from high school. You didn't have to attend college at that time. You could teach 3 years after you got out of high school, and that is what I did.

E.G.: Then were you required to go to college during the summer to renew your certificate?

J.A.1.: After three years, then, yes, you were - either had to go to college for, I suppose, a regular term or you could go to summer school for a summer.

E.G.: Did you do that?

J.A.1.: Yes I did. I attended one summer in Kearney.

E.G.: Kearney State...then how many years did you teach all together? [5:15]

J.A.1.: All together I taught 6 years and then I got married. I married my husband, Joe Abraham, and we have two children, two boys, both grown with families of their own by now.

E.G.: Where do they live?

J.A.1.: One is living in Waseca, Minnesota, they have five children, and the other one is in the military service. He is in the Philippines at the present time and he has two children.

E.G.: And you are presently retired?

J.A.1.: Yes, semi-retired, something like that.

E.G.: Semi-retired

J.A.1.: [chuckles] Yes.

E.G.: Yes. Well, you taught then, I would take it, in the 1930s? [5:58]

J.A.1.: I started teaching in 1934. I was about 6 days short of my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday.

E.G.: That's almost a record, but you were really through high school in a hurry.

J.A.1.: [chuckles] Yes I was. I had to stay home one year between high school and teaching because I didn't pass one of my exams. When you – before you could start teaching you had to take examinations in about 15 different subjects, and I didn't pass mental arithmetic, so I [chuckles] had a year to wait before I could teach school. Otherwise, I would have started teaching at the age of 16.

E.G.: Yes.

J.A.1.: [chuckles]

E.G.: You know Carl Curtis, former senator Curtis. We interviewed him one time, about a year ago, and I ask him about mental arithmetic, and he gave me a few instances of problems, even. Now, I started teaching about the same time you did, but I didn't have mental arithmetic, this was in Kansas. What do you remember about mental arithmetic?

J.A.1.: Well, you just... [mic adjustments or mic problems and slight static]

E.G.: Yes, I was just wondering what you remembered about mental arithmetic, Mrs. Abraham. [7:19]

J.A.1.: Oh, I guess we were given problems and we weren't permitted to use pencil and paper for the answers we had to work the – come up with the answer just working it out in our head. And I remember that that was the – the one examination I didn't pass for my teacher's examinations. But I don't remember exactly how they gave us that examination, whether we were writing the answers down or just telling the answers, or just how that was.

E.G.: I just wanted to mention that Mr. Joe Abraham, who prefers to be called Joe, just walked in and I certainly want to ask him pretty soon about his experiences as a native speaker of the Czech language. I think one thing I'd like to ask you now, Mrs. Abraham, is did you have community meetings at the school house, either where you taught or where - when you attended?

J.A.1.: We always had one – one Christmas program or a program during the year which consisted of songs we would sing and presentations and we called them dialogues, which were little skits. And the whole district, and the public, were invited to come and attend these things. And, usually, we had a last day of school picnic, also, which was the same thing, patrons of the district were invited or the public was invited and there was always a lot of good food. And, sometimes a program, one year we wound a May pole on the last day of school and that sort of thing took place while I was going to school. [8:25]

E.G.: When you taught, did the community back you up pretty well?

J.A.1.: I – Yes they did, and if the children were disciplined in school the parents also backed us up, they didn't argue with us too much about why we did something, unless it was pretty drastic, which I never found that I had to do anything like that, but we were always supported by the patrons.

E.G.: Now, most of those patrons were probably second generation immigrants...

J.A.1.: Uh, yes...

E.G.: ...at the time you taught.

J.A.1.: Yes [clinking in background]

E.G.: How did they look upon education?

J.A.1.: Education was very important to the people at that time, the children were encouraged to go to school and also told that – that what they were going there for was to learn, not to just play around [papers ruffling in background] and they were very enthusiastic about giving their children a good education.

E.G.: Did they look upon education as a way for their children to advance in the world? [10:12]

J.A.1.: I think so, I think that – it finally - at first, well take when my mother went to school, high school wasn't that important, but by the time I was growing up we were told that if we didn't go to high school, we would have a hard time getting along in the world, getting a job or whatever.

E.G.: Yes. You mentioned to me, in your letter, and you mentioned it earlier here, that your husband did not speak English when he started school...is that right, Joe?

J.A.2.: That's right. [10:55]

E.G.: I wonder if you would tell me about how it felt as a youngster of 5 or 6 to be going to a school where classes, I suppose, were conducted in English.

J.A.2.: It was English and most – most of the people, all they talked was English – I mean, spoke English. And kersis [?] and I were starting together on accounts of we would have somebody to talk to and when dad took us first day to the school, he let us go there and...

E.G.: Now, could your father speak English?

J.A.2.: A little bit, but not that much, all they spoke at home was the Czech language.

E.G.: Your mother spoke Czech, also.

J.A.2.: Yes, sir. So then that first day, I think we took off for home kind of early right after probably did lunch or so, and then the next day we start for school and there is a line of hedge tree along the road on the West side, and soon that we could get hid behind that from the house, we only lived a quarter mile from the school, and when they couldn't see us out the kitchen window we snuck down to the cornfield and stayed in the cornfield until the kids started going home and then we'd follow them home, and of course it took a few days before dad knew we was hiding out when the neighbor squealed on us and he said – we got strict orders we had to go to school

E.G.: Well, I notice here a certificate for perfect attendance, you apparently did start going to school pretty regularly.

J.A.2.: Yeah, yeah, afterwards.

E.G.: Did your parents believe in corporal punishment? Did they ever paddle you? [12:21]

J.A.2.: Oh, I think they did, yes. I know that dad, one time, that was - he got on the school board and he came to the first day of school and kids was all around there and he had a piece of rubber hose and he handed that to the teacher and said, 'now I want you to use it on anyone that needed it to be used.' And the teacher did use – and they used it. Take them out in the hallway, we had a hallway where we kept the lunch and the coats, and every once in a while they would take them out there and give them a couple lashes on the seat of their pants. And of course we all had to col - carry lunches – cold lunches – like at home, that was all just strictly rye bread. Right seldom we'd get white bread to go to school and most other kids carried white bread and that was quite a treat whenever we carried white bread and jelly and butter, whatever it is on there. Very seldom, there's no lunch meat or anything else.

E.G.: Did your parents raise the rye?

J.A.2.: No, no. They bought all their flours, stuff like that. Yeah, they bought it.

E.G.: Was rye bread less expensive?

J.A.2.: No, it was just on count-down [?], that was the traditional flour [chair creaks] and the white, they used that strictly for Sunday baking that's the – course, like I said, I remember we thought we had things really bad back then eating just bread sandwiches, strawberry and apple in the fall. Dad buy plenty of apples. But we had family that lived right West of us, and their name was Pillars, and all they ever carried to lunch was a pancake probably about 10 inches in diameter and whatever they put on it, and they'd roll it in the newspaper, carried it in their pocket and just kept it there at their desk, and come dinnertime, that's all they had, that one pancake. They probably went to school for a couple months, three months, and then they moved away from there but I can always remember leading them back cause that's all they had for lunch.

E.G.: Were their parents transient workers? [14:22]

J.A.2.: They was just poor people, looking around where they could find some buildings that didn't cost them much to live in and they generally worked out as hard men on the barns around and all that.

E.G.: I'm interested in just how you found, beyond hiding behind the hedgerow, how did you feel in going to an English speaking school? Presumably most of them spoke English, or at least the teacher did.

J.A.2.: Well, I can't remember how I felt...I guess I felt kind of bashful all of the time because the kids would make fun of you, till you got to learn your English better than anything else, then they kind of took your side, but for a long time you would just push back all the time and stood around by yourself and watch them play and all of that.

E.G.: Well, then, how did you learn to speak English? You know, in the present day we had a lot of conversation about bilingual classes and you didn't have bilingual classes, did you? [15:09]

J.A.2.: No, I think my folks – the folks probably tried to teach us as much as they could at home, probably more so than the teacher did, they really did. You learn more words, and then you get along much quicker in school.

E.G.: Some of the other children spoke English, apparently?

J.A.2.: Well, there was probably a few that understand – understood Bohemian but they – they just spoke strictly English. They would never speak the Czech language at all, cause there were a lot of Czech names in the neighborhood, alright, but, of course, this fellow I referred to, whose mother was Polish and his dad was Bohemian, I mean Czech, and when they was at home they would strictly talk English among themselves all the time. My folks, I suppose they talked Czech among themselves until the day they se – they died.

E.G.: Yes.

J.A.1.: I forgot to mention that his father was an immigrant from Czechoslovakia. Where my – it was my grandparents, but his father was a Czech immigrant. [16:18]

E.G.: About when did he come over?

J.A.2.: In nineteen nine, I think, or something like that, and when he came over he took a homestead at lakeside at the - in the sandhills. He went on that Kincade, you know, Land rights Act...and...

E.G.: That was about nineteen nine?

J.A.2.: That was, yeah, I'm thinking that area someplace. Then, folks got married in, 19, well see, 1915. And they went up there to live for a while, and then they must have come back in - kind of in the fall here right before I was born \_\_\_\_\_ [?] but uh...

E.G.: Was it difficult making a living up there? [17:10]

J.A.2.: Well, yeah, there was no...no [not sure what he says here, mumbles/garbles] I take that back, my folks they didn't - they didn't go up there. He came back, and then they got married, and he started farming up there and that's how they retell that story. Ah, yeah, he worked on a ranch most of the time up there, and of course, it was the same way, when he come there he didn't speak no English. The only thing on this ranch that he worked on, there was a lady that was cooking out there with a Czech descent, so between her and him then they got along real good, but the cowboys over there always played dirty tricks on dad all the time. They'd give him a horse that was used to cutting out the calves from the cows, saying, which he didn't know - the horse knew more than he did, and it'd stop quick to dodge after the calves and he said he'd go...out the saddle the other way.

E.G.: Why did he come over considerably later than Mrs. Abraham's people? Or, it must have been about 30 years later. Was it just a...

J.A.2.: You mean her folks?

E.G.: Yes.

J.A.1.: My grandparents.

E.G.: Yes.

J.A.2.: I don't know. Course I had - I had a cousin say once that said he went AWL from the army over there, snuck away...him and his sister came over together, and they met in New York. They didn't come over together, but they waited for one another in New York City before they came out West here. But dad was working the steel mills over there, too, at one small time, because he could - knew how to work these castings, you know, that they pour from different machineries and stuff like that.

E.G.: You mentioned something about where you kept your lunches, I wondered if you'd mind talking a little bit about what the building was actually like. Maybe where you taught?

J.A.1.: You mean where we kept our lunches?

E.G.: Yes.

J.A.1.: Uh, well...

E.G.: Did you have lights in the building and...

J.A.2.: No, there was no...there were only lamps that hang on the wall, but that don't use electricity, it uses kerosene, but we never used lights during the school time at all, regardless of how cloudy it was.

Three windows on each side of the building, but when you walked in the hall...the school, first there was what we called the hallway, that was probably about 8 foot wide and 30 foot long...that was the full length as wide as the school house was. And then the rest of the building was probably, oh, 30 by...oh, it could've been 30 by 30, I suppose. [unclear] or something.

E.G.: A framed building?

J.A.2.: Yeah, framed building.

E.G.: Painted white?

J.A.2.: Painted white.

E.G.: Painted, though?

J.A.2.: Painted, yes...and, uh...

E.G.: I thought it was a little red school house, but most of them were white in this country, weren't they?

J.A.2.: Yes.

J.A.1.: [Chuckles] Yes, all of them that I can remember, were white.

J.A.2.: [coughs] But the last year...two years that I went, about 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade, we had about 35 people in school going. And that school house was what you might say was packed. I mean, there wasn't room to write for anybody else at all. [20:00]

E.G.: How was it heated?

J.A.2.: With a stove right – pot-bellied stove right in the middle of the school house...the kids that sat right close to it were hot and the ones on the outside walls, they was freezing to death.

E.G.: They burned coal, I take it.

J.A.2.: Yes, mostly coal, they – they'd bring in a load of cob for the teacher so she could start it easier, but they'd have two bins, one for cob and one for coal. They strictly burned coal.

E.G.: And a jug of kerosene to light the cobs with?

J.A.2.: Well, I think – I think they used kerosene to start – yeah, there was - they had to have kerosene there to fill lamps and stuff, too – like my wife said for the night's entertainment when the programs was on and all that.

E.G.: Now this school that you attended, it was between here – between Ravenna and Loup City... [20:56]

J.A.2.: Loup City, yes.

E.G.: What district was it?

J.A.2.: District 48.

E.G.: Oh, yes, Uh-Huh. And that actually wasn't very far from District 42, where you went to school, Mrs. Abraham.

J.A.1.: Oh, I don't know, how far was that?

J.A.2.: Well, that was, see – it was 10 miles or 9 miles [some other words in there]...cause when you went to where District 42 is, then you go six miles West and there was District 20. 5 miles West – 5 or 6 miles West, was District 20, and then we was the next district North of District 20 was 48.

E.G.: The lunches – no hot lunches? [21:40]

J.A.1.: No hot lunches, we carried them in little tin – tin dinner pails, we called them, and some – some kids...

E.G.: Were they syrup buckets?

J.A.1.: Some kids used syrup pails – syrup buckets, and in our school we didn't have a hallway, there was a shelf in the back of the room with hooks underneath for coats and, of course, the lunch pails went up on the shelf...and there was a water cooler – an earthenware water cooler, and we carried the water from the nearby farms, we didn't have a well on the school grounds.

E.G.: Did you have one common drinking cup?

J.A.1.: No, when I went to school, we each had to furnish our own cup. And those were Tempright, and I don't know if those went on the hooks or the shelf or something. And we still did that same thing when I taught school there in the 30s. We had to carry our water for washing and for drinking, and when I went to school we would sometimes get real ambitious and run for water and drowned out gophers [chuckles] just for entertainment during recess.

E.G.: Well, country school children had to use what they had available, didn't they, for instance, for entertainment.

J.A.1.: Well, we played mostly games until the teacher did get a couple basket holes put up, and the ground was hard enough that we did a real good job of playing basketball. Otherwise it was the games that children played in those days, like pum-pum-pull-away and – I can't remember the rest of them, but...we sometimes would come up with our own entertainment and – like I mentioned, carrying the water to get the gophers out of those holes and things. But we were always supervised, the teacher was always out with us.

E.G.: Was that considered to be one of the prime necessities that the teacher be out on the school ground with the students?

J.A.2.: Yep, she had to be out there watching, all the time, yeah.

E.G.: Why would that have been? Were the children so bad that they would have fought? [23:53]

J.A.2.: Well I think you had fights among the kids quite a bit, there's [can't understand] you had people with little poor that moved in and we was poor but there was probably a kid who was a little poor or a little different from another class and you kind of did pick on them.

J.A.1.: And then you had also all ages, and I think that probably made a difference, too. You had to supervise so that the bigger ones didn't pick on the smaller ones too much and...

J.A.2.: But people, like myself, like I tell my wife, well I had to stay after school a few times. Of course, I didn't tell dad when I had to stay after, either, cause I would've got whipped for it.

J.A.1.: Shooting paper wads [chuckles]

J.A.2.: Remember the pencils that you used to have? A red one, or a black one on each side, or a green one, and they were just hollow, too, and you'd shoot up a paper. And you'd stick it in one end, and then you'd take a regular pencil and shove it up the other end and make it pop and the thing would fly clear across the school room. There was the last teacher I had that's from hazard and at that time there was a style of a low-cut dress and it'd come right down in the middle in a "V" and we'd hit 'em right down below there, or we'd send 'em, and she got all red in the face and looked at me and told me that I definitely was gonna stay after school and pick up all the paper wads and so... [chuckles].

E.G.: And you stayed...

J.A.2.: I stayed [chuckles] Then I told dad I had to help her...

E.G.: Yes. Your father said that he believed you.

J.A.2.: Yes, he did.

E.G.: Of course. [All Chuckle] I wanted to ask you before this tape runs out, Mrs. Abraham, what do you remember about your rural school teaching experience? Did you like it? Did you enjoy it? [25:36]

J.A.1.: Ah, yes I did. That is what I had always had in mind with what I wanted to do. However, the pay wasn't very good, it was during the Depression, and I think the first year I taught I got 25 dollars a month. And I think the highest paid school teacher in Sherman County at that time was probably not any higher than 60 dollars, and...

E.G.: 8 or 9 months?

J.A.1.: 9 months of school

E.G.: 9 months.

J.A.1.: Yes.

E.G.: Well, do you mind telling me, what did you pay for board? Room and board. [27:04]

J.A.1.: Well, at that time I – I stayed at home. I taught at the school right near home, I had a mile and a half to go, I walked every day to school and home and so I guess I didn't pay any board, I was required, of course, to help with the work at home when I had time or was there, and I did teach 2 years at a school away from there and I think my wages were 30 or 35 dollars and I think I paid 12 dollars a month for board, so that didn't leave me very much. But I managed to save money [chuckles] somehow.

E.G.: You didn't have a car?

J.A.1.: No, I didn't drive a car then.

E.G.: You know, considering the kind of district you were in, which I assume was agricultural...

J.a.1.: Yeah.

E.G.: Those people who paid taxes didn't have a lot of ready money, did they?

J.A.1.: I don't think so.

E.G.: And is it possible that you might have had about as much ready cash as anyone in the district?

j.A.1.: Well, I think they always thought the school teacher was doing pretty well [chuckles]

E.G.: Did the school board members tell you that they owed it to the district or the patrons to get a teacher as cheaply as they could?

J.A.1.: No, they didn't really say that, I do remember though that if you were a first year teacher, they sort of thought that you could teach for a little less than an experienced teacher, and that's probably why my wages were so low at first.

E.G.: Did they tend to believe that if you were in a place 2 or 3 years, that was about enough and you should be moving on? [27:58]

J.A.1.: I think that that's about as long as most teachers taught, was 3 years at a time. I taught 3 years at this district 42, and then I taught 2 years in district 19, and then I came back 1 year in district 42. So, I don't know if they thought that 3 years was enough, they did hire me back after I was gone 2 years [chuckles]

E.G.: Yes. Then you quit and you haven't taught since? [28:29]

J.A.1.: No, I never taught after I got married.

E.G.: That'd been in the early 40s? Late...

J.A.1.: Yes. It was in 1940.

E.G.: I see. [pause] Joe, what do – what do you remember the most about your rural school experience? What sticks out in your mind?

J.A.2.: I don't really know.

E.G.: Did you like it? Did you look back upon it?

J.A.2.: Well, I didn't really like school, I only went till the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, as soon as I got out, I could've kept on going to school because I passed my 8<sup>th</sup> grade examinations, I didn't think I had to study no more and kind of got a little ornery in school and the teacher finally told me one day that if I don't want to study, then I better stay home, so the next day I stayed home, because I didn't want dad to find out that I wasn't studying in school because he would've made me stay home anyway. And I just started helping dad farm that spring. Had to haul manure out [unclear]. Course, at that time when we always took our 8<sup>th</sup> grade examinations, we had to come to Ravenna to – the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> [unclear] Dad would haul us down here and we'd stay with our neighbors, who used to be our neighbors, here in town and I used to think that it was fun to come to town and stay all night in town, but that's – I think back and feel sorry

for a lot of the other kids and how they was treated in town and at school and the way some of the kids had to carry their lunches and all that because it wasn't their fault that they were poor.

E.G.: Well, before we quit, then, would you – you taught 6 years – would you do it again? [30:13]

J.A.1.: I think I probably would. I had a lot of patience, then, which I probably don't have now [chuckles] But if I was to start – to get out of high school and want to do something, I'd probably do the same thing.

E.G.: Well I see that our tape is about to finish here, and I want to thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Joe Abraham for talking with me this morning.