

# Josephine Spreitzer Pruse Video Interview Transcript



MNHS Grant # 2307-28200

Project Name: Ely Memorial High School Centennial Anniversary

1924-2024: Oral History



**Project was completed by the City of Ely's Heritage Preservation Commission with funding from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.**

**Interview Location:** Carefree Living, Ely, MN

**Date of Interview:** March 14, 2024

**Interviewer:** Celia Domich, Class of 1969

**Interviewee:** Josephine Spreitzer Pruse, Class of 1942

**Narrator:** Josephine was born in 1924 in Ely, the same year the Ely Memorial High School was completed. She is the youngest of 14 children born to Joseph and Katherine (Judnich) Spreitzer. She grew up on Chapman Street, a block from the school, and her family also had a 40 acre farm on the southeast side of Ely. She graduated in 1942 and then attended Ely Jr. College and worked for a local dentist. She married Bernard Pruse in 1947. They spent 40 years in Mendota Heights raising their four children and where she worked as a dental assistant. In retirement, Josephine and Bernie returned to Ely in 1986.

**Celia:** So what year did you graduate, Josephine?

**Josephine Spreitzer Pruse:** In 1942.

**Celia:** Okay. And what were the schools that were there in 1942?

**Josephine:** Oh, there were numerous schools. There was the Pioneer School, the Lincoln School, a Savoy School, and the Washington Elementary and the Memorial School. So I'm as old as the school, ancient, a relic.

**Celia:** That's true, you are as old as the school. Did you walk to school?

**Josephine:** Oh yes. We lived within a block of the school, so I was never late for school. Perfect attendance.

**Celia:** Did you go home for lunch?

**Josephine:** Yes, absolutely.

**Celia:** Do you remember your hours at school?

**Josephine:** They were from 8 to 4.

**Celia:** Did you have to work at home while you were in school? Did you have chores?

**Josephine:** Well, I'll tell you the truth, I did not work that much at home because I had a lot of sisters to do all the work. I didn't, there wasn't much left for me to do. So I would, let's see, I started babysitting when I was nine years old, pretty much of a baby myself.

**Celia:** Well, I was going to say, with your family or with neighbors?

**Josephine:** Neighbors.

**Celia:** What was it like to be in school back then? What was the atmosphere?

**Josephine:** A very, I would say, serious is the word. Serious. We were all children of the Depression. And we were taught an awful lot - no, you can't have this, we can't afford it. I mean, it was something like you had to sacrifice an awful lot of what your wants because there were too many needs, like food, clothing. So we tried to earn um, pull our own oars and earn some money too towards that end.

**Celia:** And you were the oldest, so you didn't get hand-me-downs?

**Josephine:** I was the youngest, so I did get hand-me-downs.

**Celia:** You were also in school during World War II. What was that like?

**Josephine:** Very solemn. Very serious. A lot of the boys knew what their future would be, that they would have to enlist or get drafted. So my husband decided when the day he turned eighteen, he enlisted in the Navy.

**Celia:** Did you have other friends that went into the service, then?

**Josephine:** There were a lot of our senior boys that went into the service.

**Celia:** Were products and materials, were they rationed?

**Josephine:** Sugar, I know. Flour. A lot of the basics that people used a lot. Coffee. And I don't know what else. I didn't worry about those things, my mother did.

**Celia:** Did you feel like you got a good education in Ely?

**Josephine:** Wonderful. I would give our educators great marks.

**Celia:** Do you remember the size of your graduating class?

**Josephine:** I beg your pardon?

**Celia:** The size of your graduating class?

**Josephine:** I can't remember exactly how many, but I know there had to be about 110 at least.

**Celia:** And did you have a favorite area of study?

**Josephine:** I really liked History and English.

**Celia:** And did you have a favorite teacher?

**Josephine:** My one of my favorites was, I'll spell her name. First name. You can decide how to pronounce it T-Y-N-E.

**Celia:** Tiny.

**Josephine:** Soya.

**Josephine:** And she was the one that encouraged me to read.

**Celia:** And so you read a lot when you were in high school?

**Josephine:** I loved reading.

**Celia:** What kind of books did you read?

**Josephine:** Well, at the time, most of the books were adventure, so I can't really pinpoint. My very all time favorite book was by Charles Dickens, The Tale of Two Cities, lot of drama.

**Celia:** Did you have a best friend in high school?

**Josephine:** I did have a close friend, a couple of 'em. Emma, she was a Zuprek (Married name Zelesnikar). She used to walk from Chandler and then stop at our house, which is a block away from the school to warm up a bit for the last trek. And that was a trek for her. So we got to be friends, friendly. And Esther Cherne (Married name Beel). She lived across the street from us. Did you say that we lived on that farm? We lived in town.

**Celia:** Oh, you lived in town?

**Josephine:** Oh yes, on Chapman Street.

**Celia:** On Chapman. Okay. Did you participate in any sports or any activities while you were in school?

**Josephine:** Well, I belonged to the Pep Club. They had Glee Club, which I should have belonged to, but I couldn't do any after school activity because I, I don't know if you're, you know, I don't think you would know, his name was Buffalo. He was from Greece. He had a candy store, candy shop. So I would babysit for his boy and their two boys after school.

**Celia:** Did you work on the paper at all?

**Josephine:** No, not at all.

**Celia:** But you read it. So, what was the name of the paper?

**Josephine:** Ely Hi-lites.

**Celia:** What are your best memories of being in school?

**Josephine:** Well, I really don't have any best memories. We were there to learn. And there was, of course, we were brought up very strict, and we did not want to make any noise. I really mean noise. My sister was a secretary for the principal at the Washington Elementary so we had to really behave.

**Celia:** What did you do for fun in the 1940s?

**Josephine:** We played games outdoors. Hide and seek, all those fun games. No TV at the time so we had to make our fun.

**Celia:** Did you go to the movies in Ely?

**Josephine:** Oh yes. I remember the movie that came to town, it was called The Ten Commandments. And of course, my mother being very religious, we didn't go to too many movies, so she let us go to this movie, and all. When we were at church, we were at church a lot, and we would genuflect before we get into the pews. So when we went to the theater, we were genuflecting to get into the row, that was funny.

**Celia:** Did they have homecoming games?

**Josephine:** Yes, they did.

**Celia:** And did you participate in the homecoming celebration?

**Josephine:** No, I didn't.

**Celia:** At prom, did you go to any proms?

**Josephine:** No, I didn't.

**Celia:** Bernie was in your class.

**Josephine:** My mother wouldn't let me date. I said she was very strict.

**Celia:** Okay, so you didn't date in high school at all?

**Josephine:** No.

**Celia:** Okay. How did going to school and growing up in Ely influence your career and other choices later in life?

**Josephine:** Well, I don't attach that much importance to, you know, what I gleaned from learning in school, because we had applied ourselves to what was at present, our lives, and at the time the war was going on. And so there was quite an exodus of people from Ely seeking jobs elsewhere to contribute to the war effort.

**Celia:** So did you have friends, women that worked in some of the industries?

**Josephine:** Rephrase that.

**Celia:** Did you have friends who went and worked in, especially women, who worked in industries to help the war effort?

**Josephine:** Well, I'm thinking about in particular, Catherine Chimzar, who was in a very highly secretive, what do you call it, with the people who had the atom bomb. They met with President Roosevelt at the time. So Catherine was a secretary because she was highly trusted. It was very confidential. So there were a lot of people that graduated that made a mark for themselves. Like Willard Domich for one. Keith Brownell. And there are members of my family too. They contributed to the war effort. All my brothers served.

**Celia:** They all served? And everybody came home safe?

**Josephine:** Thank God. I think my mother prayed a lot.

**Celia:** So when you graduated and so many of the boys went into the service, then that means there weren't too many people to date when you finally got a chance to date at eighteen?

**Josephine:** Actually, you know, we couldn't get serious about anybody. So actually, when Bernie came home from on leave, he decided he would ask me to go to a movie. And that's when we started, you know, our relationship was very platonic, I would say, because he was in service and I was living at home under the thumb of my mother. She was a good mother. I mean, she had to worry about 14 children. And my dad was quite a worker.

**Celia:** Did you work at all when you were in high school? Did you have any summer jobs?

**Josephine:** Not really, no. Nothing permanent. After, well, I was in junior college when I started to work for Dr. Call.

**Celia:** And that was your first work in a dental office?

**Josephine:** That was my first real job.

**Celia:** What advice would you give to kids who are in school today?

**Josephine:** I would say invest in your future. Do not rely on your cell phones. Study. Make the best of what you have at hand. Your education means a lot for your future, you're investing in your life.

**Celia:** So, we all want to know, Josephine, what is the secret to a long and happy life?

**Josephine:** Do everything in moderation. Enjoy life, but do everything in moderation. Think positively. And when you get to this age, think young.

**Celia:** Ok, well, did you have anything else you'd like to say about growing up in Ely or going to school?

**Josephine:** Ely is quite a unique town. We were a very thriving community. We had over 6- believe it - over 6,000 people in Ely at the time when I was growing up. And it was such a thriving community, the mines were going full tilt, and they were the early settlers. And that's why my folks, my dad immigrated from Austria to come to work in the mines and then mom and dad were starting to have quite a few kids already that Mr. Trezona, who was a Captain of the mine, told my dad that it's too dangerous for him to work in the mines because he has a large family. They were doing a lot of dynamiting and it was not really a good job for him to do at the time to be there, put him at risk. And so, he was able to get a job at the water plant to calibrate pumps to make sure we got water for the city of Ely from Burntside. And besides that, then he farmed the acreage beyond Boundary Street.

**Celia:** So what was it that drew you back to Ely? What do you like about the town?

**Josephine:** It was my husband's decision to come back because he liked hunting, fishing, and he wanted to be back to where he was born and raised and start, you know, his hobbies. He liked doing woodwork, anything with wood. He made that little table there for me.

**Celia:** Really?

**Josephine:** Yes. He liked to do, on our lake shore he built a little gazebo with a swing and a windmill, and a wishing well, it's still there. But we had a flood over a year ago, it was so bad. So I took out the gazebo and the swing. I was heartbroken, but I was already here when all that happened.

**Acknowledgement of Support:** This publication was made possible in part by the people of Minnesota through a grant funded by an appropriation to the Minnesota Historical Society from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund. Any views, findings, opinions, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the State of Minnesota, the Minnesota Historical Society, or the Minnesota Historic Resources Advisory Committee.