

# Mike Forsman 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:** Ely Memorial High School, Ely, MN

**Date of Interview:** March 13, 2024

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

**Interviewee:** Mike Forsman, Class of 1965

**Narrator:** Mike graduated from Ely Memorial High School in 1965 and is the oldest of 10 children born to Dale and Flossie (Kobe) Forsman. After high school, Mike served his country as a Marine, married Ernestine Hautala. Together they had four children. He worked in the mines as a mechanic and served as an Ely City Councilor, Mayor of Ely, and St. Louis County Commissioner.

**Celia:** So first, I'd like to say, Mike, thank you for all of your service.

**Mike:** It was an honor. It was an absolute honor to serve this community. And yes, it was.

**Celia:** So tell me about what year did you graduate?

**Mike:** Graduated in 1965.

**Celia:** You were born and raised in Ely. Did you go through the entire school system here?

**Mike:** I did go through the including the (Ely) Junior College when it was a Junior College before it became a community college. And then I did graduate later on from the Vermilion Community College with an AA degree there. And so.

And I left there to go to Reserve Mining Company in January of '67 after my friend Louie Tomsich came in and showed me his check that he got from Reserve Mining Company. I said, holy mackerel, you can make real money here, you know, and I and, and on a cold January, must have been the 29th of January because I started January 30th, I went up to the gate to ask them for a job. Stan Landa took and interviewed me. They sent me down to see the clinic and start the next day on January 30th, probably about ten below zero. I started at the mine sweeping floors in the crusher and that and shortly thereafter I got on their apprenticeship program for Diesel Mechanic, which in my mind was one of the one of the wisest moves that I ever made in my lifetime. It certainly is financially has been really good to me there and stuff.

**Celia:** You came from a big family. Why don't you tell us about that and going to school with all the kids?

**Mike:** I was lucky enough to be born to the two finest people on earth, Dale and Florence Forsman. And I choke up when I talk about my parents because I don't, I honestly don't think I could have found two people that cared as much about their children. Ten children. I was the oldest of ten and, and, and nine siblings. Obviously if there are ten of us there and stuff. My uh, and to this day I think that we have probably the one of the strongest bonds of a family that that you can have. I really do I love all my siblings and I feel that they love me too.

**Celia:** Did you have to work at home when you were growing up during school?

**Mike:** That's almost like like rhetorical. I mean, when you when you come from a family of ten, you gathered the wood in the woods. You hauled it to the... When I just got my license, I got my driver's license. I was 15, we filled that pickup time and time again with firewood there. We split it. There was no hydraulic splitters then, it was all, you know, with axes, etc., etc.. You carried it in the house for you. You washed the dishes. In fact, when I started at Reserve Mining Company by my, in January, my mom said, "Yeah, it's going to cost you \$150 a month to live here at our house. The only thing that that's going to be changed is you won't have to do dishes anymore." And that's true, I mean, and \$150 back then was quite a bit of money.

**Celia:** So did you work in the summer? Did you get summer jobs when you were in school?

**Mike:** I started delivering papers when I think I was nine years old, I believe. And then then when I was probably around 12, I'm guessing I started working for Sonny Vertin as a busboy at the at the Vertin's Cafe. And at that time when I was 15, Sonny had a partial ownership of Canadian Waters, so I think they bought him out the following year, but Sonny got me over there as an outfitter when I was 15 years old. So I transferred across the street from the Forest Hotel over to Canadian Waters and worked there as an outfitter until the, all the summers until I started at Reserve Mining Company in '67.

And ah, and I will say that I absolutely enjoyed working there. I mean we had some of the, we had a great crew there, I mean an absolute great crew that that, that we worked with and, and it was great to meet all of the different people. And at that time when you got there in the morning, the parking lot would be full of people, full of people, all with their packs, all excited to get out into the Boundary Waters.

Some of these people still go out there, but now, they're they got their cane with them when they're going and stuff, you know and you know, but and it was some of the adventures that we had were above and beyond fun. I mean we, I used to love taking out the towboats and go and Louis Tomsich, one of my good friends, was a towboat driver.

**Celia:** What was it like to be in school in the fifties and sixties? What was the atmosphere like at school?

**Mike:** While I was going to school, I really believed that there was a tremendous respect for the teachers and the staff, not just the teachers, but the staff.

I mean, I picture the janitors were at a, you know, they were people you respected that the teachers, the bus drivers were somebody that you respected, and you really didn't talk back or get in trouble because when you got home, mom and dad made sure that you got in trouble there too. If you, if you got, if you got in trouble in school, you got in trouble at home. And that wasn't always a good thing there because Dad was tougher than the teachers were there.

But we had some great teachers, and I'll say it, even though it might be a little bit, what do you call it, but my favorite teacher was Bud Adamic. I absolutely admired that man, I still got this soft heart there when I think about him. He was my mentor when I got on the City Council. I sat right next to Bud, and Bud was one of the sharpest guys that you'll ever know. I mean, and he was a service man, serviced, served as a photographer on a bomber, which he actually got to fly in one of those bombers at the at the Duluth Air Show. They escorted him up, got to sit right where he used to sit when he was taking pictures and stuff.

I'll tell the story the way that the story happened. So a couple of bad guys, not bad guys now, but maybe a little bit back in high school, they put a tack on Bud's chair right in front of the study hall. The study hall was full. You know, I forget which study hall probably down the way at the end of this hall here. And Bud got up there, sat on that tack. Bud did not move. He sat there and looked around till somebody started to laugh. Then they came up. You know. I couldn't have done that. I would have jumped up. And then the whole I everybody would have laughed. No, Bud sat there till he saw someone laugh. "Get up here" you know, and stuff. It was great.

I did like a lot of other teachers. I mean, I really did and admired them there. And some of them I really got to know better after I got out of school and I'll use Merle Lunceford, for example. Merle ended up being a good friend after I got out of school. He was, when I was in school, he was Mr. Lunceford. He was, he was an authority. He was an authoritative figure. And to me, I had to respect him, you know, I mean, and I still respected him afterwards. But afterwards he became like a friend, you know what I mean?

Some of the teachers certainly shaped some of my future, you know, I mean, I was not a good student. I'll put that right up front. I was not a good student. I don't think I ever took a book home. I didn't even care about school. All I wanted to do was get home and work on cars, that's all.

And I mean, my grandpa owned a junkyard, and if I was happy in that junkyard, I was happy in our garage. But. But I, you know, but I apparently had enough intelligence that I was able to make it through school even without taking a book home. And, I didn't get great grades. But at the same time, I think I retained a lot of what was taught in school. I really do. And like I said, this school system, and it probably still is today, but it was a great school system. It was it was something that that I think our community was and probably still is proud of.

**Celia:** What was your favorite memory from high school?

**Mike:** The truth is in some of my good memories were, were the people that you got to be with in school. People have always been a real important part of my life there and stuff, you know; to know people to take in, to interact with people, cutting up and stuff like that.

And under my class picture, in the yearbook, it says impromptu classroom comic something or other like that. And that's, I did like to do that. I know I used to sit behind Midge Folio you know, because Folio, Forsman, I sat next to her behind her probably for decades and, and Midge sometimes would just egg me on there and stuff, you know and, and she did good at it then I was usually took the bait.

And then and yeah so I one of my favorite memories is my wife. When I was a, a junior in high school, I took a German class there and stuff there and Ernestine took German class as a freshman. I used to always forget my book so I could slide my desk over to her and then I could read her book. But that way, I'd be close to that pretty girl next to me that little redhead next to me. And if she we had to go up to the blackboard. I always used to like to stand next to her at the blackboard there and it was and many years later, and I think I've told you the story off of this interview and stuff like that, you know, I met up with her and it ended up with a 55 year marriage that seems like it's still going pretty darn good.

**Celia:** Do you keep in touch with your friends from high school? I mean, besides Ernestine, which we know.

**Mike:** Oh absolutely. Tony Seme is still a real good friend of mine. We ran away to Florida together, in his '59 Ford convertible one time there and stuff there. And his dad put out an APB for us. They never caught us. Got to West Palm Beach, Florida, there watching a drive-in movie. And we decided we were going to turn around and go back home there. And I always regretted that we didn't make it down to the Keys because that is on my bucket list to get to the southernmost point.

But Tony's still a good friend and Louie Tomsich, I always considered being, you know, just a great friend. I spent a day with Jim Garni just not too long ago, and Jim was a great friend growing up there and stuff like that. Spent a lot of time out at my grandpa's junkyard working with them and stuff like that.

Moe Filson, spent a lot of time driving around in his brother's cars when his brother would come home. His brother always had the nicest cars.

Certainly, I'm a coffee shop person, so I love going out for coffee and stuff like that. And if you're in Ely, Minnesota, and you go for coffee, all of a sudden someone sits down you don't know, two weeks later you're good friends.

**Celia:** Did you get into any other trouble besides running away to Florida?

**Mike:** Pete Jiacik was, Pete Jiacik, who became a good friend of mine when he was chief of police and even before that, but at one time he stopped me and I had my '27 Chevy and he told me, he says, I don't want to see any more than two people in this car or I'm going to give you a ticket for overloading. We got four of us in that '27 Chevrolet there and stuff. And I look in the rearview mirror and here's Pete coming up behind me with the red lights on there and stuff right in front of the school here and stuff like that.

Well, we went through about three stoplights and when, hid the car, hid the car, dropped the girls off there and stuff like that. And I drove home, got home, and my dad says, Pete Jiacik says to give him a call. And I said, I says, why? He says, because you outran him. I said, well, how does he know it's me? My dad says, how many old Chevrolets that can outrun a cop car are in town? Well, it had, we had a Chevy V-8 in this old '27 Chevrolet there and stuff like that. So I called Pete and Pete says, Mike, I've got a ticket sitting here on the on the counter here. He says, way I figure it, he says, you were overloaded. You ran three stoplights. You outran the cops. This is before fleeing the police was a felony, you know, and stuff like that. This was before that. And he said he says you, he says, I've got a ticket here for 50 miles an hour and a speed in a 30 mile an hour zone.

He says if you don't come in and pick up this ticket, he says, I'm going to take and my only job till I retire is to follow you. He says, I'll follow you and you forget to turn your turn signal on at the right time? He says you got a ticket. He says your tires don't have enough tread on them? You got a ticket. He says that's going to be my only job when you come to Ely. That's the, he says to follow you, and I says, I'll be right in Pete.

I was a hot rodder back then. Took me a while to realize that, you know, that you have to do things, that there there's places that you can do it that are safe and there are places you should never have done it. And the thing is, the good Lord, and I really believe this, the good Lord and a hell of a guardian angel kept me from getting into serious trouble where it could have been way different.

I would never advocate the things that I did to anybody. I mean, you know, because you couldn't get away with it. Two things. You couldn't get away with it and nobody could be as lucky as I was, nobody.

**Celia:** You left Ely to serve in the military. Why did you decide to come back? What drew you to Ely?

**Mike:** That's almost self-explanatory. I mean, I love this town, I really do. I mean, the family was here, you know, and right now, most of my family is here, though. Yeah. And the memories, memories and opportunity.

If you look at my resume, it'll look like I'm 150 years old. I mean, well, I've always worked two jobs. Even when I was in the Marines, I worked at a body shop in the evenings when I'd get done with radar school, I'd be working in a body shop in 29 Palms.

When I, I drove, I drove a tour bus there for Dennis Konieczny up on the, when he was running it as a resort outfitting up there, picking up people from Saint Louis, from the Chicago area, and from Indianapolis and stuff like that.

We, in the late seventies, we bought two over-the-road trucks and on vacation from Reserve Mining Company I used to drive the over-the-road trucks. My kids were, my youngest wasn't around yet, but my three oldest kids are probably, were probably the only kids in the Ely school system that had been to the Caribbean, well, to Galveston in an over-the-road truck, been to California in an over-the-road truck, you know, because you could fit'em all in a cab over and stuff.

All of that, you know, people ask me how I did it. I honestly don't think I could do it anymore. I really don't. I mean, I didn't have a lot of time to do things. No '27 Chevrolets got work done when I was doing both of them. I enjoy doing both. One of the things that I tell people is that that the two jobs were so absolutely different that that's the only reason I could do it. If I had a job where I was doing paperwork in the evening, you know, and stuff like that, it would have been really difficult to be a County Commissioner and do paperwork overnight when I'd get to the mine. Heavy equipment mechanic, first of all, it comes naturally. So, I mean, you know, I'm using my hands, I'm keeping myself relatively physically fit. When you're climbing up into a 240 ton truck, you're climbing, you're taking and changing stuff. And you don't have to think about it because it's all natural. But yet when you're at the board level, you know, at the board level for the Saint Louis County Board, you got to use your brain and you have to think about things.

**Celia:** Was there any help in the school district to become more mechanical?

**Mike:** You know, to be honest, Mr. Fisher, who actually became a friend later on after school, you know, Bill actually ended up being a friend. But when he was a counselor, he didn't do me any favors. He, he was trying to guide me in a direction I wasn't ready to go.

I mean, you know, and the only reason that I did that, I went on the apprenticeship was that it that at Reserve Mining Company I'm sweeping floors in the crusher and this post that comes up there they're starting a new mechanic apprentice program you know will pay you Job Class 6. You get'en Job Class 2 sweeping floors, and I was thinking, I don't want to do this for any length of time. So I applied and got on real quickly.

And so the, in school I was never guided to it. The, but, guidance and, the guidance that I got probably served me probably better in my political career than it did in my mechanical career. The truth is I think that teachers like Mr. Dresch, Mr. Peninger, Eldon Foster, those guys with their vision of the world, of their vision of history, their visions of things, those resonate, you know, resonated with me, you know, and in my opinion, how great this nation is, you know, and our, you know, and our laws, etc., etc., those kinds of things, I think really served us well. So to your to your question, I don't think that they served me in my career as a heavy equipment mechanic or even an 11 years I worked as a at a dealership, you know, and stuff. But

I do think they served me in my political career because they really left a, put a ground, a ground base on, a baseline on things. And that baseline really worked well for doing things.

**Celia: What advice would you give to kids today in school? (Not on audio)**

**Mike:** My advice to kids, if you want to be a doctor, if you want to be a lawyer, if you if you want to be those things that require a college education, go for it. Keep your grades up, work hard at it so that you can get into those colleges that you want. Prepare yourself the best you can, knowing that it's going to cost you a lot of dollars to go to college. It will.

But to those people that are looking for to make some money to take in, to have a good life, I would honestly recommend the trades. The trades served me well. They served my, or the military. Those kinds of things don't require a college education. I know in a couple things. One is and I'm not telling anyone to jump into the military. What I am saying is that if you're leaning towards it, don't be afraid of it. The when you get out of the military or even when you're in, you have the opportunity to have a lot of free college, a lot of free education experiences you could never, ever have in a civilian life.

I mean, I've stood on the Parthenon in Athens, Greece. I never would have stood on the Parthenon in Athens, Greece, if I wasn't a Marine Sergeant deployed over there. It wouldn't have happened. I've been in Valencia, Spain, saw the bullfights there and stuff. Never would have seen that. I never would have got to ride across the Atlantic in the middle of the winter, bobbing up and down in the ocean in, you know, a 775 foot flat bottomed boat there with about 400 Marines with me there and stuff, if I hadn't been in.

**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.