

Steve Smrekar Video Interview Transcript



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Interviewer: Celia Domich, Class of 1969

Interviewee: Steve Smrekar, Class of 1968

Narrator: Steve's parents were Steve, Sr. and Jeanette (Dube) Smrekar and he was one of their five children. After graduating in 1968, Steve received degrees from St. Cloud State University, Bemidji State University and UMD. He followed in his father's footsteps as the Industrial Arts instructor at Ely Memorial High School. He taught for 33 years and also coached softball, hockey and football. Steve is married to Nancy (Kerntz) Smrekar and they have two children. He is affectionately nicknamed Stove Bolts Junior and his father was Stove Bolts Senior.

Celia: What was it like to be in school in the 1960s, Steve? What was the atmosphere?

Steve: The atmosphere was a little different than present. We went from 8-4. We had an hour for lunch. Hour 3 to 4 was activity hour, where we had intramural basketball, band, choir, and that kind of stuff. And then athletics was after that.

And then the school-wise was junior, elementary was K through 6. Junior high was 7, 8, and 9. High school was 10, 11, and 12. And then we had our regular sports; hockey, football, baseball. Hockey was played outside right where the teachers' parking lot is now. I remember some of the days if it was 20 below, halfway through the period, we'd switch ends, because the wind was blowing, so one team would have no disadvantage. And then we didn't have boards on the fence on the side of the rink, so if somebody got checked, we rolled up in a snow bank and we had to stop. So it's kind of interesting. It's a lot different than it is now.

Celia: What was the size of your graduating class?

Steve: Our graduating class was like 123.

Celia: Now, your father was a teacher in this school. Will you talk about that a little?

Steve: Sure. He was a student here, graduated in 1929, was on the 1929 basketball team that went to state. He was a leading scorer in the state tournament. He used to shoot with a two hand set shot. Then he went to Saint Cloud State.

I was just thinking about that today, which is kind of ironical that I chose Saint Cloud State. I didn't even think of that. And then he came back to Ely where he was raised, and started teaching, and 42 years later, he was in the shop, taught sheet metal, drafting, small engines. He taught junior college, small engines, coached basketball, coached football. Then he taught night class, taught that for like 35 years, adults.

Celia: So how many years did you say he was there?

Steve: 42.

Celia: Okay. And his name was?

Steve: Steve. So. When I took his job, they didn't have to change the name over the door. And his top salary when he retired was \$16,500, in 1976.

The kids called him Stove Bolts, because when we made gun cabinets, he talked about stove bolts all the time. And a nickname, a lot of the teachers had nicknames at that time. So the kids called him Stove Bolts. And then later on, his son got the same name. So I was Stove Bolts Junior and he was Stove Bolts Senior. So, you know, kind of interesting.

Celia: What classes did you take when you were in high school?

Steve: I took all the shop classes, and we had to have English, math, all the main classes. Never took biology, and then I wound up teaching biology. I had biology in college and with phy-ed, phy-ed is a tough degree. Physiology, anatomy, chem. So when I got out of Saint Cloud, I taught biology here for half a year. When for Loren Leino, it was kind of a unique experience. And I had some, I taught a physiology unit when I first started and some of the kids that were in that class wound up to be doctors, so pretty well, not that I was teaching that well, but, they were just that smart. Then we went to, I didn't have a biology degree, so then I wound up at MinnTac for two and a half years and decided one day I'll go back to school. So I gave my two weeks' notice and went to school on Sunday, registered Monday, and started Industrial Arts on Tuesday.

Celia: So what was the motivation there?

Steve: Just all of a sudden, just wanted to do something different. So I got my degree and came back to Ely and was subbing and got hired at Ely and started coaching first day I was here.

Celia: Did you have a favorite teacher when you were in high school?

Steve: I had a couple. I, when we were talking yesterday, my dad was one, Bud Adamic, Neil Edmond, because we had a top notch shop program and we used to have four shop teachers at one time. And then I look back at a lot of the kids that graduated from Ely High School, a lot of

them got their PhDs in Industrial Ed. Shop teachers like Tom Murn, wrote some books. So, you know, we had a lot of good kids that came out of here, so it's kind of rewarding, that part.

Celia: Did you have good facilities?

Steve: Oh we had beautiful facilities. Our small engine shop was in the basement and looking back at it, I wish we would've put our welding shop downstairs, the small engines upstairs, then we could have made more trailers and things like that because we had garage doors that we could haul the stuff out. So we had to, we were kind of limited with our welding shop, but that was a, we had a Cadillac of a shop, lots of room, and we did a lot of kids. My first year in my shop, I had four 9th grade sections and one senior, and we had separate 7th and 8th grade shop, separate 10th grade shop. So that's why we needed all four teachers but we had a lot more kids back then.

Celia: Did you participate in sports when you were in high school?

Steve: Yeah, I played football, hockey, and baseball. And whenever our football team was, we had three wins, probably one of the best records in Ely for many years. But football was tough while we were in the IRC, and then we had a good bunch of guys that were playing, so. And baseball was our top, top sport. We went to state two years in a row in Legion. We had a top notch pitcher in Paul Starkovich, so that worked out really well. And we had a good bunch of guys. We played baseball in the summertime every day when we were growing up.

A lot of people don't remember, the baseball field used to be on the playground back in the... early fifties, so the left foul marker, left field foul marker was on the Industrial Arts building. It was there until they re-sandblasted the Industrial Arts building. And I remember that because they dug up the home plate and I was like, I don't know, six, seven years old. The home plate was sitting there, while there was nobody around. I shouldn't say this. I took the home plate home, and then we used to use the home plate for Lincoln School kids would come up from like the West End and the East End kids, we'd have big contests. And then, we would sneak on the football field. Kids would never, well, I don't know if anybody else would do this, we'd take a tablespoon from the container and scrape the chalk markers off the football field and we'd line the playground with chalk for our baseball games.

Celia: What did you and your friends do for fun in high school?

Steve: All we did is we played touch football in the streets, played baseball, did sports the whole, our whole summer time. And we spent time in Peschel's, cause John Peschel had to be a saint because five and six year old kids in there all take 2 pesos, and pesos were two for a penny. They said, Give me a nickel worth of pesos. No, no, no, give me 3 pesos. And John would put them back. And it was just, it's something that kids today will never see.

Celia: Where was it located?

Steve: It's where Lucky Seven is now, and there was a garage attached next to it. And then he had the best brown licorice, it was about a half inch wide, six inches long. And yeah, the green rivers cherry drinks, chocolate Cokes with the syrup. And there was a coffee shop, I still remember the ladies working there. They were a fixture. So it was good times that we had.

Celia: Did you go to homecoming or prom?

Steve: Yeah, I went to all the homecomings and I went to a lot of proms. Wore the same suit for four proms. But yeah we had a good time, good proms and everything was good in high school.

Celia: Did you at your homecoming did you decorate floats or...?

Steve: Yeah, we decorated floats. We had the big parade. We used to have, the senior boys would put on a pancake breakfast and senior girls would do something different on different homecomings. I remember the senior tea. I don't know if they have a senior tea anymore. The boys brought their mothers and they sat there with their ties on and sipped tea.

Celia: You brought your mother?

Steve: I brought my mother, well, all the senior boys did. We had a junior-senior banquet. They still have that. And Miss Gourley made me the chairman for the junior-senior banquet.

Celia: So was Miss Gourley one of your teachers?

Steve: We had her for English and she taught German. And we used to have Latin with Mrs. Wood, Miss Wood. We had German, Latin, English. And then we had thespians.

Celia: What are your best memories from school?

Steve: You'll always remember your high school days. And most of ours were pretty good. Your shop classes, your gym classes, and most of all your classmates that you hung around with and still keep in touch, so it's... And we've lost a few of our classmates over the years, so it's, that's the hard part.

Then you look at yearbooks and you know they're not here now. And we had a good turnout at our last reunion so it's... very good. And we had one of our classmates was our valedictorian, and he was a doctor, PhD in chem. And they took a lot of pride in our school and a lot of the kids that graduated from here take a lot of pride in the school. And he donated some money for scholarships here and along with some other ones, to carry on the Ely High School tradition. Because Ely High School does have a very good tradition.

Celia: Do you feel like you got a good education?

Steve: Yes, because some of the teachers that we had, were... they had some rules that when you're 15 years old, you think they're really kind of silly. Then you look back at it, all it is is discipline for later on down the road.

Celia: Did you always know what you wanted to do for a career?

Steve: Yeah, 4th grade, I wanted to be a teacher because I wanted to coach, that was the main thing. When I got the phy-ed degree and then couldn't find a job right away. But when I first started teaching here, I taught phy-ed and industrial arts and it's been rewarding ever since. Yeah.

Celia: And any doubts about coming back to Ely after you had been away?

Steve: No, I left for, what, two or three years and then came back and had no second thoughts. And it's been a wonderful, rewarding experience.

Celia: What is it about Ely?

Steve: Everybody knows everybody. Then you walk down the street and you'll get a smile. You can say hi to somebody and they'll say it back.

Celia: Do you keep in touch with your friends from high school?

Steve: Yes, we, our class reunion are for 55th, no 50th reunion, we had a committee that met and we still meet once a month. We have about 14 that show up, so which is really nice.

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

Steve: Oh, I tell'em, Look at the trades, because we're hurting for electricians, plumbers. I tell other kids, be a shop teacher, that's a good, it's a good trade. But look at the trades and have more than one path. So when you're looking for a job, you'll have a good background in what you're going to do.

Celia: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about?

Steve: We used to hang around the school all the time. Kind of kind of grew up in the school. And a friend of mine who knows lots of reminiscing facts from when we were young. We're at the football stadium one day and we kind of snuck into the field and we're running around in the stadium and I can't remember how old we were, 2nd, 3rd grade or whatever. And we were exploring and we opened up this door. We looked and we left very quickly because there was a big wolf that was mounted on a board that was the school mascot. And we shut the door and we exited very rapidly. So I had lots of memories in the school and I'm still here.

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