

Theresa Zupancich Jamnick, Virgie Strukel Ivancich, and Betty Markovich Kunstel Video Interview Transcript



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Interviewer: Celia Domich, Class of 1969, Volunteer with City of Ely Heritage Preservation Commission

Interviewees: Theresa Zupancich Jamnick, Class of 1956; Virgie Strukel Ivancich, Class of 1955; and Betty Markovich Kunstel, Class of 1951

Narrator: Theresa is the oldest of five children born to Edward and Molly (Merhar) Zupancich. The family lived above the Zupancich Brothers Grocery and Theresa worked there through her school years, graduating in 1956 and attending Ely Jr. College. She married Joe Jamnick and raised a family of six children and managed the Vermilion Community College food service for 32 years before retiring.

Virgie graduated at the top of her class in 1955. Her parents, Frank and Helen (Kovall) Strukel, owed Frank's Liquor Store on Sheridan St. She also graduated from Ely Jr. College and UMD with a business education degree. She taught in Greenway and Babbitt and in 1968, she and her husband Paul, bought and ran the Ely Dairy Queen. Virgie and Paul had three sons.

Betty's parents were Joseph and Katherine (Maki) Markovich. She was one of eight children who all had to work growing up. After graduating in 1951, Betty married Stanley Kunstel and they raised five children together. Betty was a cheerleader in high school and continues that tradition today as the lone cheerleader, leading the Ely School Song at in-town sporting events.

Celia: Now you were all born and raised in Ely. Tell me what it was like going to school in the late forties and fifties. Theresa, do you want to start?

Theresa: Well, we went to, we only lived four blocks, 3 to 4 blocks away from school. And when we started kindergarten, we only went half a day, and then first grade on, and we had an hour for lunch. So we, most, 95% of everybody went home and had lunch. And then we had better be back at 1:00.

We had principals every place, when we were in elementary school, we had two lady principals, Miss Austin and Miss Ratzlaff, and they were very strict. You did not. You had to walk in the hallways. You didn't ever holler. You respected your teachers. In fact, even into high school, Mr. Langen was a very strict principal also.

But I enjoyed my school years tremendously. I did a lot. Was involved in some sports. I was in pep club. Well, I went to all the football games, the basketball games, hockey games. Hockey was outside in the ice, out on the side of the school, we stood in the snow bank. The football team, we got to go to a lot of the games because one of the parents had a bus, so he would take lots of the fans.

When we were juniors, we went all the way up to International Falls. God bless us, we lost 75 to nothing. We jumped back on the bus and came back to Ely, and when we were seniors, we still lost to them, but not so bad. But it was fun. My high school days were fantastic.

Virgie: Theresa did a great job. I can't add much to it except that I went to Lincoln School, which was right up around here, right here, we were right here, yeah. Where it is now. Where we're sitting here now. And we had a principal also, Miss Stember, same kind of person, you know, very strict. We had went there through the fifth grade and then sixth grade we went to the Washington school and then to the High School. So that's the only thing I have to add. Theresa did a great job.

Celia: Betty?

Betty: Well I did pretty much the same as these girls going to school here. And I only lived two blocks away on Sheridan Street. And family of seven sisters and one brother, and we lived in a four room upstairs of my grandparents' house. So it was kind of crowded.

Celia: Did you work summers, Betty?

Betty: Yes, I did. When I was nine years old, I was delivering papers, newspapers. I had to do that for, for a while. And then when I was 13, I got a job at as, as a waitress at a cafe down by where the gas station is on Sheridan Street. Yeah. Anyway, which wasn't far from our house. And then as I got older and I was working in the grocery store, the co-op store, that's how I got my E sweater, pay for it.

And then I've, I've always enjoyed sports. And we didn't have the sports like the boys did. I remember two of my sisters, were good swimmers. And I always liked swimming. I was in Shagawa Lake all the time. And in fact, I even, I even saved a couple of kids because the mothers were too busy. Well, anyway, I was a lifeguard for a couple of years. I have so much fun now that I'm older that I get such a a big fan, fan group and, they really support me a lot, too. And I think that's why I'm still here.

Celia: Virgie, how about you?

Virgie: I worked for the shopper when I was like in 4th grade or 5th grade. This is when we lived right across the street. So I ended up delivering shoppers. And by the end, by the time I was in junior high, I was working in the shopper helping with the people, putting it together and everything. So yeah, that was my first job. Second job, after, from my sophomore year to senior year, I worked at Vertin's Cafe in town. Busy. You know, I was just, oh my gosh, we had a station, you had a station, you had four booths. That's all I took care of, that's how busy it would be. We would keep turning over, turning over. Very, I mean, it was, it was wonderful.

Ely was just, you know, I mean we had people, guys flying in to go fishing that, you know, the planes were flying all over, and people went to the Boundary Waters. We were in the era when it was wide open. Until the sixties when they preserved it, it was just a great thing. I mean, we, everybody thought, oh God, we're done, we're done. But I mean, you know, it was, it turned out to be you still get people here. So that's good.

And then I worked at Penney's. And by the way I'm an only child so that's, I know these guys have a lot of siblings, but I don't. I was all by myself.

Celia: Theresa?

Theresa: Okay, I, I was an only girl. I had four brothers and I worked at Zup's forever, when I was, when we were small, like 9, 10, 11, 12 years old, our main job was to put potatoes from a 100 pound bag into 10 pound bags. And then my brother would sit next to me and he had to tie them with those metal strips. But then soon, my mother used to do all the bookwork and then I took over her job and I, I worked there and until I went to the college, just doing bookwork.

But then I got married and I had six children and so I was busy at home. But um and my husband, I was, my husband and I graduated from the same class and Joe worked at Reserve and then he was eventually the city top electrician.

Celia: What was the size of your graduating class?

Theresa: The size? I think we had 127.

And Ely was so booming then because the mines were working and we could get jobs anywhere, in the summer because everybody, the town was just fantastic. And when I worked at the grocery store, we were closed on Sunday, but on Saturdays, if the customers came in at 10 minutes after five, I had to stay until they bought all their groceries and, and then we could lock up.

But boy my dad was very strict on the hours. Yeah, but it, it did me good, I liked my job. And then when I went to the college, I was hired as in the food service. And Bill Maki, in fact, hired me and I worked there for 32 years, had the best job in town. Those kids would come in and they'd be hungry and we could feed them.

And then we had housing, so we went to meal plans. To this day, I see many kids and they'll say, they'll say hi and I will say hi back because I knew not their name, but I remember seeing them at the college that, that's a great job also.

Celia: And I was going to say, Betty, now, you had a small graduating class, right?

Betty: Yeah, we had the smallest for the, for many years.

Celia: Do you remember the size of that class?

Betty: Well our class that we had, there's 51.

Celia: And then just a few years later, Virgie how big was your class?

Virgie: 64.

Theresa: And we doubled.

Celia: Doubled? By the time Theresa graduated?

Virgie: Because the war ended.

Betty: That's when I got married. Yeah. The boys came home.

Celia: Virgie why don't you start this one? What was your best memory at school?

Virgie: Well, my best memory was. Well, it's hard. I had so, I had so many. I was very active in my class. They did a lot of things. Anyway, the best memory that I had was when I was a junior. I got picked to go to girl's state and that was, I had never left Ely, you know, that far. We went to Minneapolis and the bus, we that took the bus up. We stopped in Soudan and picked up the girl from Tower, so she and I went together. It was great. That was the best experience you know you actually, you actually run a government, run a state, actually the state. You elected officers and you learned how, you know, it's supposed to be done. And so that was, that was very interesting. That was, that was a really great experience. I just loved it.

Of course, I'd never been anywhere, you know, anywhere, probably Duluth was the furthest you ever went because every weekend we would go to our cabin up in Jasper Lake. That was where we would go because my dad had one day off, Sunday, that the only days after 10:00 at night on Saturday nights, we would jump in the car, drive up the Fernberg and stay until Sunday after 5:00 and drive back. So that's why we never went anywhere because my folks never hired anybody. They both just worked the store. My dad also sold insurance there out of there eventually.

And also he filled out at least 2 to 300 income taxes every year for people. People would, after he retired, they were bringing in their taxes to his house. He was in his 80's, he was still doing income taxes. So, you know, that's how I got the business, the business in my, you know, and kept it going, when we bought the Dairy Queen, you know, my husband and I.

Betty: And I worked for her for 10 years.

Virgie: She worked for me and yeah, and Betty was one of my employees. And I had after I got, I got married, I had got, had three boys, 1-2-3, close and you know. Yeah. And so then we, with the, after Joey was born, we had a chance to buy the DQ and we did do it before we even knew he had cystic fibrosis, you know, because that's what he ended up having, and we lost him to that.

But I mean it was, we still did everything, took care of him, did what we had to do to keep him going and run the store. So, so my husband, he worked at Reserve. When he'd come home on whatever shift he'd be on, he'd go into this, he took care of all the maintenance. He'd work a 3 to 11, he'd come in at 11, stay there and do his job.

So we worked it together and, and the boys, 4th grade they were in there dipping dilly's already. So, I mean, and it went forward because eventually Pauly took the store and got the store. Of course we lost him now, too. So. You know, his wife is helping us run it, my daughter in law. She's like a daughter to me. I never had any daughters. So yeah. So it was. But the whole experience was great. Yeah. I've had a good life and now I'm retired. Finally retired. I used to go and help them count the money, even, even last year. But I know I said I'm done, you know, I'm 86 years old. I guess it's time to retire. I am done now. So.

Celia: Okay, let's go back to memories. Betty, any memories from high school that that come back to you?

Betty: Well, the ones that come back to me, I don't think I should talk about. No, I've always had a lot of fun.

Celia: Theresa, any particular fun things you did in high school? How about homecomings or proms?

Theresa: Oh yes, I did everything. I mean. Well, there was proms. I went to prom when I was a sophomore, junior, and senior, and then I was in Pep Club and we did lots of events at the halftime of the basketball tournament, basketball games.

Celia: Do you remember who you went to prom with?

Theresa: Yes.

Theresa: I went with Joe when I was a senior. I went with John Simons when I was a junior and I went with, um, Anderson. I forgot his first name, Anderson as a sophomore.

Celia: Did you decorate the gym and everything?

Theresa: Yes, for homecoming, we did. Oh yes. I was always involved in all those decorations. Or if, we used to have teas for our mothers from Home Ec classes. And so we did that. School to me was just fantastic. I enjoyed my school years, I enjoyed the kids, the people, I'm still in touch

with quite a few of my classmates that are still around, and we plan all the reunions that we've had. And yeah, you know, you just made the best of it because that's all you had. Yep. You know, otherwise you had to work more.

Celia: Virgie, did they have bonfires when you were going to school?

Virgie: Yeah.

Celia: Tell me about the bonfires.

Theresa: Oh they used to be at the little league field, remember? And somebody used to always light them ahead of time. But then would come homecoming, we'd have the snake dance. Yeah.

Betty: Oh my goodness.

Betty: And I was the leader.

Theresa: We were crazy.

Celia: People don't know what a snake dance is.

Theresa: We started, oh. We started at the school. Yeah. And we went all the way uptown.

Virgie: So, you know, we hold each other's, hold hands.

Theresa: And there probably was a hundred.

Celia: Did you sing or chant the school song?

Betty: So we stopped at every corner and then sometimes we went through Dee's bar, you know, we went through, we went through it. We didn't stop.

Virgie: They'd open their doors and we'd go through. Yeah. Then we'd go out in the alley and go back in.

Betty: Then we, then we went to the fire.

Theresa: Outhouses were in the pile and the logs and tires you were never supposed to put em, but you'd go at nighttime and sneak a few in so it would burn longer. Oh my goodness. It was, it was a, but everybody in school was involved. But so was the community. Yeah. Stores all had things to do because it was homecoming week. Yeah, I'm sure we couldn't do that again. But it sure was fun.

Betty: It was.

How did school prepare you? Did you think you have a good education?

Virgie: Oh gosh, definitely. Yeah, definitely. I mean, I you know, I didn't know what I wanted to do, what I was going to do when I took that little test in ninth grade. And then they told you what you should be. Well they said, I should be a social worker, and I thought, or take care of

sick people, and I thought, me? Never. I don't want to do that. So see it wasn't right. But then I did. I thought, oh I know what question I answered wrong. It was something about helping somebody that needed help. You know what I mean? Well, yeah, I could help somebody. So I put yes, I suppose that's what threw it over into that category. Yeah.

So but, you know, I, I took all the business courses I could take in high school. You know, I took two years of typing and every class you could take two years, accounting, I mean, we had, you know, a good selection of business classes, and I took all of them - shorthand, bookkeeping, typing.

Betty: That's what I did too.

Virgie: Yeah, yeah. And so, you know, that's like, that's what gave me my base. And then finally by my senior year, I'm thinking, I know what I want to be. I want to teach this. I loved it, you know. I'm going to teach this to other kids. And that's what I did. And that's when I made up my mind to do that.

Celia: Theresa, what did you think? Did your education prepare you for the rest of your life?

Theresa: Yes, I took shorthand. I took bookkeeping, typing. I need those classes to help, you know, and it helped me because when I worked in the store, I could do the bookwork. And then when I went to the college, I had bookwork. And as far as cooking, my mother was a fantastic cook and so was her mother. And so every time there was an event, I would be in the kitchen helping.

And I learned so much because my mom would cook for the church. You know that they had all those fundraisers. And so, and cooking just comes very easy for me. And I like it. But and I, you know, you can, do you, you have somebody to teach you like my mom or my dad. You can learn so much, I think, because you concentrated.

Because the my dad only went through 8th grade in school and he had to take over the store because Mrs. Zupancich had died and Mr. was old. And, he just listening and thinking about it now a days, how for a guy who went through 8th grade and all he did, and he was on the hospital board and he was on the church board and ran the business. But they had lots of gumption. They wanted, you worked hard and they took chances. And I think kind of that's how you have to do your life. Got to take a chance when you buy a house, you buy a car, you got to pay it off. And I had six children and they were very active in sports, too. So it was, it was great. Yeah.

Celia: What advice would you give kids in school today? What would you tell them with all your experience? What should they do?

Theresa: They should study hard, make good friends, and take chances on college or buying a business or something. You have to have a little bit of gumption, so you work really hard for that. And I think that's what we taught our children too, because they all were very successful.

My son John is an engineer and I, you know, and Theresa works, and Annie works. So I think you just have to just enjoy, and enjoy school and enjoy the teachers because the best years of your life until you're 19.

Celia: Virgie, any thoughts?

Virgie: Well, yeah. I mean kids are different nowadays. Ely still always has in every single class you've got, you know, amazing kids, you know, that do things well, they, and it's just, you know, it seems like, of course, we had those other kind of kids in our class, too. That they didn't do their homework or didn't do anything. They didn't care and all this and that.

Kids have to learn if you got to get a job, put your whole heart and soul into it.

But we've had so many students, graduates from Ely that have gone on to high places. You know, that would be interesting to track all that down and write it up because I'm telling you, we've had people do everything from working in the space program to running big corporations to doing, owning businesses that are, you know, and so it's, it's, it's just for a small town, I think we do a good job. And I attribute that to our faculty, our teachers, and of course, the parents.

And I think a lot of times in this generation, I feel sorry for these kids because the moms and dads, they both have to work to keep going. And these kids are on their own a lot. And so they, you know, they have to realize it. Well, they'll find out that that's what's going to happen when they go out in the world and just hope they follow the right path.

But we don't have a lot of kids like that, you know, but we have a lot of good kids. A lot of good students have come out of Ely, I'll tell you that.

Betty: Smart. Yeah. Because a lot of them have left Ely for the education, more education.

Virgie: Right, a lot of college.

Betty: And my, my granddaughters are runners. You know, Janie's daughters, all three of them, they're all runners. And, and this summer, last summer, they had that run in the park and, and my granddaughter Crystal, she won first place.

Virgie: Yeah. Like her mom.

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