

Washington County Museum  
Oral History Interview with Melvin Van Domelen  
At Melvin Van Domelen's home in North Plains  
October 4, 2012

Informant: Melvin Van Domelen  
Interviewer: Beth Dehn and Ilene O'Malley  
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A= Melvin Van Domelen  
B= Beth Dehn  
C= Ilene O'Malley

B: Okay, this is Beth Dehn and Ilene O'Malley for the Washington County Museum recording an interview with Melvin Dom- Van Domelen on October 4, 2012 in his home in North Plains. And today we are talking about the Bracero Program and some memories Mr. Van Domelen has of the braceros. So can you tell us what you were sharing about um, the years that you recall at a camp in Shute Park?

A: At Shute Park?

B: Yeah.

A: Well I was in a, uh a 4H and I had to be uh, 10 years old to go to the fair so this would put the year at about 1942, '43, along in there. And at that time they only had the County Fair for the youth, for H and FFA members and the rest of the buildings were not used for fair activities but they did have a program set up for Mexican laborers that were coming up from Mexico and staying in these buildings. And uh, we were told to uh, you know, you don't go over there and talk to those guys but the distance between the two buildings was about 35 feet and there was no barrier in between. And so every evening they would come out and they'd play their guitars and sing a song and then when it got dark at the end of the building and so we'd got to where we would go over and sit down with them and they'd give us treats- I can't remember whether it was candy or a cookie or what that was, and they'd sing us some song. And uh, later on I think they were... how many years they were there- two years I'd imagine it was a seasonal thing, maybe three years but when the program was over and they returned to Mexico... the fair continued after the war was over but the upstairs in one of those buildings still had the cots or the bunks made where the laborers had slept. And they were very crude things. They were like, uh, 2 by 6's nailed out from the wall about 3 feet and I know they were too high because I slept in the second bunk one of those years at the fair and they had like chicken wire on the bottom; kind of a hammock style and they were just- one roll of chicken wire went around the whole length of the building. But they dropped off at the individual bunks. So I know those were still up there the first year they had the fair after the war because I slept in one of them.

B: Was it comfortable?

A: [laughs] I can't remember. When you're that age, if you're tired enough, you can sleep anywhere. But that-

C: Do you remember how long the building was?

A: Oh the... oh, they had two long buildings there with uh, one was called The Grange building and one of them was called The Farmers Union building and both buildings had an upstairs in them, had wooden floors, um they were at least 100 feet long each of those, maybe longer, maybe 150 feet. But the building where I slept in the bunk was probably more like 70 or 80 feet long but it was a more substantial building. It had a cement floor, two floors in the building and an outside stairway. So how much of these Grange buildings and uh, the Farmers Union buildings they use? I know they used the Farmers Union building because that where we would go over and listen to them play their guitars. Whether they were in the Grange building I don't know, I suppose they were.

B: Now, can you describe, you've already shared with us, but can you describe where the camp was located in what is now Shute Park.

A: Oh, it's on the west side of Shute Park and... I think at that time it was county ground but now it's the location of the Hillsboro Senior center and the parking lot and when the fair took place there was also a vacant lot across the street to the west where they set up some camps and the machinery dealers would put in displays and things over there.

B: And... how... can you describe sort of the- I think you said there was a labor shortage so can you describe what was happening at that time? 1942, during the war, what was your family doing at that time?

A: Well, we had a farm in Mountain Dale and I had two older brothers, one of them was in high school when the war started and the older one, he could never get drafted because he had what they called a perforated eardrum which meant he had no protection against blast or explosions. And it was kind of comical because every six months he'd get a notice to apply for- to come in for a physical examination and he knew they weren't going to except him but he had to take a day off- he worked in the ship yards and so he had to take a day off to go in and say yeah, you're ear is dead. My other brother graduated from high school and stayed home about a year and took care of the dairy while my dad was working in the shipyards, everyone was working in the shipyards, they'd hire anybody. And I always talk about a little dwarf we had that the community's name was Walty Chance and he was highly valuable down in the shipyard because he could go places that nobody else could. And I've heard stories about him tying ropes on Walty's feet and sending him down a tube until they could pull him out. So my brother eventually listed in the marines so that left my dad, my mother, and myself on the farm. And she would go out and throw sacks out on the combine when he was harvesting, I have pictures of them. And I was driving the tractor when I was 12 years old. One of the happiest days of my life was when my father told me that I was old enough to stay home and help him and I didn't have to go pick strawberries. Everybody seemed like they had strawberries up the valley or all around. Just everybody had strawberries and you'd see

them in the afternoon, they'd go down with a trailer load or they'd have them in the trunk of the car or the back seat of the car or small trucks and then there was some really really large growers too and that's where the labor came. They would let school out early just so that the kids to go pick strawberries.

B: Now, what happened, so there was no one to pick strawberries so did the strawberries go under? Or what crop became more prominent during the war?

A: What happened to the strawberries? [chuckles] I, I don't know what happened. They just uh, there are very few fields around now. Just a couple of big growers that grow them. But it was just something. The hill ground seemed to be really good to grow berries for some reason or other. It was real good berry ground.

B: Do you remember what crops were being grown during World War II?

A: The what?

B: What crops were being grown during World War II?

A: Well, our farm was just like a general- it was like pasture land and hay and grain. The government was buying Austrian field peas for five cents a pound and my dad thought that was just really good, you know. He was really making money growing those field peas. They were a dry pea and you usually planted oats with them to keep them off the ground. And you combined them just like a wheat crop or an oat crop that they were dried peas. And, I don't know, they were using them as a cover crop somewhere I think.

B: Now you had mentioned flax. Can you- do you have any other memories of flax production?

A: Only time- most people south of Cornelius, they had a flax plant out there and I think the idea was to get material for parachutes. The government was behind that, growing flax. They had to soak it- I talked to somebody the other day and said they had to soak it to break the fibers down. But my father, the only flax he grew was from seed. He was growing seed to plant the flax.

B: Do you have any other memories of uh, just what was happening during World War II? I mean, you said children were getting out of school early...?

A: Oh yeah, and we- everybody... we will never see this country so united as it was at that time. We never will. Everything was for the war effort. We had paper drives and there was save your lard for 'munitions. I don't know if you've ever- 'munitions? Save the lard and the toothpaste tubes. All that kind of thing.

C: What would you do with toothpaste tubes?

A: I don't know. They wanted them! I think there was some lead in them yet in those days. They didn't know better.

C: Maybe they'd save the toothpaste tubes to make bullets.

A: Yeah, that could have been it. Just save your toothpaste tubes.

B: Had you ever heard of the word bracero?

A: Oh yeah.

B: You had. Okay. Do you think that that was something people were using in the '40s or was that a word you learned later?

A: Probably learned later. Yeah.

B: Oh okay. We were just- one of our questions is if the Mexican men were in the community at all or if they were just in the camp or what was the relationship like...?

A: I never... we never saw them. Wherever they went... they just weren't in the population. They stayed to themselves.

B: Do you have other questions? [to Ilene]

C: Umm...

B: Oh, the memories of the men. Could you talk about that? About the singing?

C: Do you remember anything more about that?

A: About what?

C: Do you remember anything more about the singing or how many men were there?

A: No, I had no idea. Those buildings could have hold a lot if they used all of them.

C: Yeah. Right.

A: But I don't know how many they had in there. Somebody must, I mean there must be a record or something.

C: Were they friendly to you?

A: What?

C: Some of this stuff you've told us but we just want to get it on the tape about how the men behaved toward you. Oh, and you mentioned 'we'. How many and you and some of the other boys- how many other kids were with you?

A: Oh probably a half a dozen of us. That's about all that was in our little club. We had about that many in our 4H club.

C: Uh huh. And the men were happy...

A: It seemed like they were mostly older gentlemen and they were- it just seemed like they just wanted to, oh I don't know, associate with us, you know. I think they were homesick or... missing children.

C: Could you tell, besides they had guitars, did they have anything else that you could tell?

A: That's all I remember.

C: That's all you remember. Okay.

A: And they would sing. They would sing a little whatever. We couldn't understand it but they would...

C: Did you like it?

A: Yeah, sure. It was great.

C: Were they pretty songs or...?

A: Yeah it was neat.

C: Did that leave you with a good felling about Mexican workers? Or did it just sort of seem it sit there-?

A: Yeah, yeah, well we were kids but they were kind to us and just seemed like they wanted to share something.

B: Is there anything else you want to add?

A: No, it's okay. I guess not. [laughs]

B: Oh, I was going to ask you since we're still doing this, uh, you had mentioned the strawberry fields and we know that Japanese families were big berry farmers prior to the war. Do you remember anything happening with the Japanese population during the war?

A: Well yeah, we had the possessions of one family stored in our attic. They... would come around about a week ahead of time and say in a week we're going to take you off so bring us what you can pack. And uh, we had possessions of one family in our attic all during the war. But my parents told me I couldn't talk about it because some people were so upset about this that they would label you sympathizers, you know. But one thing I really- I looked into a strawberry field- I did a story for the Beacon and it involves a Japanese family that was tending berries up on a hill and so, I actually picked berries up in that strawberry patch when they were gone and then the house where they were living there was all these books and magazines and stuff that used to be a wine cellar. But you think about it, and these folks were up there- I don't know if they had planted those berries or not, but they were tending them. And here was their crop, you know, coming on and that spring they were hauled off. There goes the crop.

B: Now do you know if that family came back to-?

A: I don't know if they came back, no. The one that we had the possessions in the attic did.

B: Oh they did?

A: Oh yeah. They were the **Minamotos** on Mason hill. That's where they lived.

B: And they settled in the area again?

A: I don't think they resettled here, no.

C: But they got all their stuff back from you guys? Or at least-

A: The ones that were at our house. I don't know about...

C: Right.

B: Yeah, were just trying to get a better picture of what the war time...

A: The uh, the Iwasakis that lived over... pretty close to this labor camp that we're talking about in the south of Shute Park, and their neighbor was Ed **Fidensol** and he took care of their place while they were gone. But they rounded them up and hauled them off. But they came back to become a pretty prominent family in the nursery business.

C: Iwasakis?

A: Iwasakis, yeah.

C: They have a nursery, don't they? Like on Minter road, I think it is?

A: Yeah they have some great places.