

10/18/19 – DENNY AND ERLENE SENSENEY

KG – Kayt Gochenaur

DS – Denny Senseney

ES – Erlene Senseney

KG – This is Kayt Gochenaur. I'm interviewing Denny Senseney today. It's the 18th of October and Denny just came into the museum and started telling us about his father who was a TB patient. Can you tell me about him?

DS – Correct. Dad's name was Sam E. Senseney. He had been here two different times in the early 1950s. I just remember taking him to another small town of Iola, Kansas. We put him on the train we were all – my sisters and I - so young, all we knew was he was gone to the hospital. We didn't know he was going to New York. We didn't know he was going to Saranac Lake or Will Rogers but the first time he wasn't here too many months. The second time he came back, he was here almost two years, I think. They did surgery. He survived. He came home. He had a movie theater in Moran, Kansas. The Minor Theater in Moran - it was before the days of television when everybody went to the movies two or three times a week. It was a nickel for kids and a dime for adults and popcorn was about the same. Dad would just have a fit knowing what they get for popcorn and Coke nowadays.

KG – And Moran is where you grew up?

DS – Moran is in southeast Kansas. I grew up there through 4th grade and then they opened a Southeast Kansas Tuberculosis Hospital in Chanute, Kansas, which was a community of about 10,000 people in southeast Kansas. At that time somehow, he learned about that having been here and he applied for a job as a recreational therapist. His job was to find things for the patients (who were quarantined at that time) to do that occupied the time they were going to spend there. So, using what he learned at Saranac Lake at Will Rogers – ceramic work, leather work, other kinds of things – he got the equipment and the necessary things to do that for the patients in Chanute, Kansas at the hospital. As well as with his background as a movie theater elder he could get the right equipment and the right movies and show movies a couple of times a week, have picnics, have entertainment. He was just a really kind, caring person so he was there to take care of people because he knew what it was like to not be able to see everybody, you know, that you love and you care for.

It was really a blessing today that we went out to the Will Rogers (then hospital) and we met the... I can't remember his last name... but he took a long time with us, to show us around because none of us (his family) has ever been here. This is our first trip ever to Saranac Lake. We were within 120 miles of here in Vermont staying for a few days and I saw the map and I said: "We have got to go to Saranac Lake." Because all we ever did was hear about it. But not much. Our parents of our generation didn't talk about hard times so I learned a lot coming here. When we were out there, he said: "You have to go down" and he warned me "she's going to want to take your story." He told me to look for you.

KG – Can you tell me what you do remember him telling you about his stay?

DS – He had a few pictures of some of the people he met there from the movie industry of some kind. I don't know that he ever met anybody extremely famous but he, as you would do being gone that long, made friends with some other people. He showed those pictures and I wish I could tell you their names right now. He brought home a few pieces of ceramic and leatherwork that he did here. But they didn't talk about that very much. The second time he was here he was pretty seriously ill. They called Mom and said you need to get here. I know a good friend of theirs who was a dentist in Moran covered the cost of an airline ticket to where... I don't know where they would have flown into here...maybe...

KG – There are a few small airports here.

DS – It had to be something in the 1950s where you could get into by a commercial flight, maybe Albany. But, anyway, she was here for a while. He recovered fine and eventually recovered completely and lived until he was almost 90 with one lung that was pretty much completely removed but you would have never known it.

KG – How old were you when he first went to cure?

DS – Ok. I was probably two when he went for the first short time. I was probably four or five years old when he went the second time but we had no understanding of the seriousness of what this was. This wasn't talked about with our generation. They didn't talk about hard times. So I was pretty young. When we moved from Moran to Chanute, Kansas then I was in 4th grade, which would be about ten years old. He worked there until he retired probably in about 1965, probably 1970 when he retired from the Southeast Kansas Tuberculosis Hospital.

KG – So when he was working with the TB patients did you then have an awareness of the disease and how serious it could be?

DS – Yes because they were very concerned that my two sisters and I would contract the disease by being too close. We had a stringent wash your hands policy anytime you were in the hospital. My mother also worked there as a medical records librarian. They would tell us what was going on and he would show us what he was doing but we didn't go out there and hang around very much but we grew to have a pretty good understanding of how serious this was and how dangerous it was. I'm not sure we really understood how much tuberculosis was a serious medical issue until we were actually here and went out to the Will Rogers and came here and learned more about it. We had no idea. We thought this was a hospital in the middle of nowhere and it's beautiful. We grew up going to Colorado because it was close for every year when we were all kids. Now we see why because this is like Colorado except the mountains are a little shorter here. The beauty of this was something I hadn't planned on, this being this pretty of a place for him to go be sick.

KG – Now how long did your mother end up staying up here with him when he was really ill?

DS – I'm not going to be too accurate about this but I would guess a few months – two or three months. Our grandparents came and lived with us in Moran while mom was here. She was a nurse early in her career. Mom and Dad met – he was an ambulance driver and she was a nurse in the hospital and it went from there. My sister, Nancy, and my other sister, Sue, we knew this. We didn't know a lot about it. It was really important to me to get here so I can take pictures of the places and the books and the videos that you have back to show and share and with our children too.

KG – Tell me about your Dad. Just tell me what he was like. What was his personality like?

DS – Erlene, why don't you start and let me get something together here.

ES – Sam was one of those people that never met a stranger. Anybody that he came up to and would say 'Hi' they would have sworn they knew him already. He was so outgoing and so friendly. He was the neighborhood go-to guy if you need your flowers watered, dogs and cats fed...

DS – Feed the dog, take the trash out.

ES – He was wonderful. He even continued that when he went into assisted living. He did that there too.

DS – You would immediately like him. There was no pretense. He was completely trustworthy. A man of highest integrity.

ES – What you saw when you met Sam was exactly who he was. Very kind.

DS – Generous with what he had.

ES – Had a big faith and he lived his faith.

DS – He had red hair. I used to have red hair. So we didn't know how he felt about this. He didn't talk about it.

KG – Unfortunately that's a pretty common story here. It's really stigmatized in many people that they just didn't talk about it.

DS – His first profession he had was as a mortician.

KG – Really.

DS – They said probably he contracted that from a body at some point because in the low land of Moran you aren't going to be around a lot of people who are coughing up blood and who are going to have an understanding of what this was. I never got the feeling that he thought it was something to be ashamed of but it also like everything else he didn't talk much about his personal feelings. He didn't need to, he showed you.

ES – He'd turn a conversation... just turn it around right back on you.

KG – How did he end up going to the Will Rogers Memorial Hospital? What was the connection?

DS – I don't know a lot. All I know is they said that this was the Will Rogers at that time – it had changed names to that – and if you were connected in any way to the theater, movie, entertainment business (if you could get here on your own) all the charges would have been covered, which would have been important because they didn't have a lot of means to do this. That's all I know. How he heard about this I'm guessing would be through some contacts in the movie industry, through purchasing shows. Everybody in little towns went to the show – that's what they called it. So I'm guessing that's where he heard about it. I don't know much more than that.

KG – What year was he born?

DS – Dad was born in 1914.

KG – So he was curing in the 50s so he would have been...

DS – 36 to 40 somewhere in that age range.

KG – When did he start the movie theater?

DS – OK. We moved to Moran in 1948 so this would not have been too long after he got to Moran. I was born in '47 and we moved there in '48-'49. I wasn't paying attention to what year or day it was. Baseball practice or school was calling.

KG – Did you used to go to the movie theater a lot and watch movies too?

DS – Oh the family did the theater. Mom sold tickets. My sisters would sell the popcorn and the candy. I was too little to do any of that but I had a putty knife and I got to scrape the gum off the bottom of the seats for a penny a cup. Except Mom wouldn't let me go in the upstairs, in the balcony. She said: "You stay out of there, that's where the bad kids go." Anyway after a couple... my sister said after a couple of years: "Denny, take a bath, eat supper, go to the show, take a bath, eat supper, go to the show." It was just what we did. It was a family entity. I don't know if

you know of UPS now. A forerunner to UPS was called EFD – brown trucks - Exhibitors Film Delivery. When he would sign up to rent movies for this particular time, after the show was over... you had three shows a week – Sunday, Monday... No, no anyway there was a three-day run and two two-day runs. You'd rent the movies and the newsreels and the comics and then after the show was over, if it was the last day of runs, you'd put them in the packages, set them in the lobby of the hotel, and the driver had the key. They would bring your new ones and put them there and they would take the old ones back. That's what EFD did with theaters all over the country. I'm sure that those brown trucks looked just like UPS now except it's broadened out to more than theaters. I remember the very first Coke machine – pop machine – we had. It was called Green River and it was the biggest pain. I don't know if you ever saw one where the cup came down and then the syrup trickled into it and then the water. About every third one fell over. Dad just finally gave me a handful of nickels and said: "You just stand here. When one falls over, you put a nickel in and you hold that cup until it's down and then you give that to the customer." The same candy bars you are used to seeing now. The same smell of popcorn. Mom would sell the tickets until the show started and then she would take me home because I was little. It was a family-operated little theater.

KG – When your dad was up here taking the cure did your Mom continue to operate the theater?

DS – No. He sold it pretty quick after that. She went back to nursing in a local, a little larger town. So she took a night shift so she could be with us during the day. That was a struggle for anybody to work all night and then try to put up with three kids during the day. I remember when Mom finally got word that Dad was coming home. "I don't know what day he is but the day the day he gets home I'll put one of the rugs over the front rail of the front porch." Every day at noon I would run to the corner and look and after school I would run to the corner and look and one day it was there. (emotional) Sorry, I didn't know that was in there so deep.

KG – Can you tell me a little bit... did you know that your Dad was artistically inclined with the making of the leatherwork and all of that stuff?

DS – No, not any idea. He learned all that here. We didn't see that. He was a really good athlete as a young man growing up. That's probably why he was in in good enough shape that he survived I suspect. But no... my sisters and I always played a lot of music and we did all that. We had no idea that was in there and, hell, he came back and got the job at the TB hospital and started teaching people how to use it and he'd show us stuff. Then he has a hobby and started making women's purses and billfolds and guitar straps. He would go to county fairs. He and Mom would set up a little booth. It was more for fun than it was for making a lot of money. That's where we got interested – this is art, this is really special. No, we didn't know that.

KG – He kept those skills that he learned here and just kept using them.

DS – Yes, for his whole life. I think when he finally moved up closer to my sisters in Topeka, Kansas... I know he kept all his stuff. I've got all of his leather supplies and all of his tools. I've got to find somebody to teach me that. It's a dying art. Tooling is what they call it. It's kind of amazing how much Saranac Lake – that experience - meant to the rest of his life. What he did with other people and with the leatherwork and ceramics. Mom then did some ceramics that he taught her how to do. All of that came as a result of being here for a while. This is such a pretty place. That's one thing I just wasn't prepared for. In our mind Saranac is a bad place – it's where you go to get sick. Driving over we said this is just like Colorado. This is beautiful. Except your leaves are already all turned. In Vermont they were just now turning.

KG – So he worked - did you say 27 years at the TB hospital?

DS – Yes, that's about right, until he and Mom both retired. Yes.

KG – Would you ever visit him at the TB hospital?

DS – Oh sure. We couldn't go in all the wards but we could go... he started a library. People would donate used books and he started a library in there. Of course he made places for them to work on their leatherwork or their ceramics. He got either some money or donations to buy the kilns. He got and built a little picnic area that had a picnic table and they put a little roof over it out there for them so that people could get out there and enjoy that. He just made it a place that was as comfortable as you could be when you wish you were somewhere else. My understanding was there were two or three wards. One where you had active tuberculosis and that one you couldn't get in there even if you wanted to, and because Dad had already had it and been cured, he either was immune to that or not but we couldn't go in there. We actually weren't allowed to hang around patients anyway. At that point... I don't think they still do this but at that point you got TB tests every year or so at school. They pricked the skin and put something in there and then in a week or so if it turned whatever color... They were real concerned about that. They wanted to make sure we did that. We stayed healthy. That was a big concern I think probably because of what he went through. You don't want your kids to have that.

KG – Was TB common where you were from?

DS – Not that I knew of. Wichita, which was the largest community in Kansas. Currently about 400,000 population. There must have been an area there. I think there were two other TB hospitals in Kansas at that time. Older. So, there must have been more of that going on than we knew was going on. But I know Dad had something to do with getting bricks made that said "Don't Spit on the Sidewalk" and later in our lives when we'd walk downtown every once in a while, especially in front of the Eaton Hotel, we'd see that brick and I'd say: "Oh I know what that means." Different brick companies would make so many of those a year and he'd help distribute them around other cities or whatever else just to let people know, you know there is a reason that it says that.

KG – These are bricks that are in the sidewalk?

DS – Yes, they are brick sidewalks and every once in a while you would see one of these bricks that said don't spit on the sidewalk. I don't think anybody ever realized what that meant or why. If nothing else it's just embarrassing to have somebody tell you not to spit on the sidewalk. For what reason?

KG – Now tell me a little bit about yourself. What did you do after leaving Kansas or did you leave Kansas?

DS – No. Grew up in Moran, in Chanute, and went to college at Wichita, Wichita State University. "Wheat Shockers" I had an exceptional band teacher my last year of high school and I said that's what I want to be. So I went to school and got my degree in music education and I taught band in public schools in Wichita, in the area, for nine years. After that the music store that had served all of us music teachers went out of business and we decided ok that will give me the ability to be in my own business but stay close to music teachers and music kids and all that. We opened that store on April 1, 1978. I sold it on April 1, 2008. It grew from just three of us to 50 employees serving most of the school districts in the state of Kansas, selling band music, choir music, orchestra music, piano music, pianos, band instruments, string instruments, guitars, lesson studios. We had 7 or 8 people who repaired instruments. It was what you would call now a full-line music store, of which there are few of anymore. We loved that. Erlene was teacher for 20 some years, not in music although you are a good musician.

ES – Yes, I was a classroom learning disability teacher.

DS – Special Ed.

KG – How did you two meet?

ES – Well, we taught in the same town. I would sell tickets (since I was a teacher) to the football games and the basketball games and his band would march in you know and play music at the football games especially and then the pep band for basketball. Then I ended up leaving Wichita and moving to Kansas City and when I came back, I moved.... That was in Wellington, sorry. Then I moved back to Wichita and he had the music store by then and we met there. We had our first date and then three weeks later we got engaged.

KG – Really?

ES – And six weeks after that we got married.

DS – I didn't want anybody else getting her.

ES - So we were engaged twice as long as we dated. We've told our daughter don't you ever do that.

DS – We'll never know.

ES - That was over 28 years ago now. His music store business was just the best kind of business anybody could ever be in. Everyone was happy when they would come in. Yes, it's just really fun. We had a community band at the store and traveled to Europe twice. It was just a great, great fun place to be.

DS – We grew a business because we wanted to make a living of course but we also, being a music teacher and a teacher, wanted to help the teachers who were standing in front of the kids every day to be as happy as they could be doing that profession and as good as they could possibly be. Teachers, no matter what it is, don't learn everything they need to know to be a great teacher in college. You get the basics and then you have to hang around some other good teachers and watch and see what happens and you have to be inspired. So I think our business was built on how can we help teachers be happier and better and stay teaching. I've had the chance in my business (because of the success of our business in the industry) to be on several boards and committees to talk about how do we make sure that we continue to have music in schools and the arts in schools. And have been a great advocate for that through our trade associations and through what we can do with the 'music in the brain' research. But you still have to have parents and friends and mentors that don't talk you out of being a teacher. I'm really passionate about 'we need the best of the best in the classrooms for our kids' sake'. We do get some of those but we don't get near enough of those because too many parents and teachers talk kids out of going into education. I'm really interested in what we can do to make sure that the teachers that have agreed to do this know that there is some of us out there that want to help them not only be better but be happier and do the best possible job every single day they can. The business helped fund the ability to do those things while I had other staff selling stuff and fixing stuff and I could go out here and be an advocate for teaching.

KG – That's really cool.

ES – That's his soapbox.

DS – But that's the way Dad was. I hope that helps.

KG – Well, I think we're.... we did 27 minutes and I know you said ½ hour. We've got three minutes left. Is there anything you want to share while the recorder is on? Anything I can ask you that you want to say?

ES – This is a good museum to point out exactly what tuberculosis is and was and how they have changed historically, medically, how they cure people and all the things that people would go through to try to be healthy, even if it meant being away from their family. Sam was so lucky to

have such a loving family back home waiting for him. That was at home waiting for him. That was important to the whole family.

DS – You know this has been a learning experience not just at Will Rogers but here in this building – to learn more about what was all this, what was this about. I did some research online in the last couple of days about Saranac Lake and didn't know there were other places besides Will Rogers Hospital. This is a whole community built on serving those patients. So that was really interesting to me, especially for people like us who aren't close enough here to really understand it. I suspect they had people from Will Rogers and the other institutions from all over the world and the country who don't have an understanding of what all happens in Saranac Lake. You need to get Ken Burns to do something.

KG – I'm sure.

DS - Let's team up because I want him to do one on teachers.

KG – That sounds like a great plan. You get the teachers front and we'll get the TB front.

DS – There we go. I'll go meet with him and say there are two things. You have to get in line soon. So people who don't understand what all goes on when you're that far along and you're that sick. Like I said, that generation didn't talk much about that. Thanks for what you do.

KG – I'm so glad that you were willing to sit down and do an interview. It's a perspective that a lot of people don't have and it makes these stories come to life because it's your story and it's so educational for all of us. I'm very grateful that you're willing to kind of let me kind of hijack your trip. I'm going to turn this off.

END