

Interview with Margaret Tabbut

Interviewed by Gladys Westrum for the Heritage Education Commission

Interviewed on January 22, 1985

Margaret Tabbut - MT

Gladys Westrum - GW

GW: This interview is with Margaret Tabbut, a resident of Clay County since 1918. This interview was held at Moorhead State University recording studio on January 22, 1985. The interviewer is Gladys Westrum, representing the Heritage Commission.

Margaret, as a child, where did you live?

MT: I lived on a farm three miles west of Kragnes, Minnesota, right on the Red River.

GW: And what was your mother like?

MT: Oh, my mother was a hard-working, loving Swede. She and her husband moved on to the farm that her mother and stepfather had owned. She was a very nervous individual. I can remember her concern many times when my father didn't come home just exactly when she thought he would, and she would pace the yard and pace the floor until she could hear the truck coming down the road. She had been a schoolteacher prior to her marriage and, I think, a very community-minded, a very community-interested person.

GW: What do you think would surprise her if should she come back and visit you today?

MT: I think all the modern appliances that we have, the things that make homemaking and housekeeping so much easier. I think probably another thing would be the--I often think of the escalator stairs, riding upstairs. I can imagine that would be quite a surprise.

GW: Maybe be frightened of them even. Describe a typical day in your house as you remember it when you were a child.

MT: I can remember getting up early in the morning. We could never sleep in. There were chores to be done. I had certain chores, my brother had certain chores. After they were done, we had our periods of play as young children. We were expected to help. There weren't any other neighborhood children close. Maybe about a mile away was the nearest other child to play with, so it was a rare occasion when we got to play with them. I remember some of my chores--washing dishes, carrying water, filling the wood box, going to the ice house--that was one I really hated. I was happy when those days were over.

GW: Could you share what one day of your life was like as a homemaker when you were first married?

MT: Oh, my! I could reminisce easier, probably, about some of the things that I did in my mother's home. I was married just after the war. I was on the faculty at the University of Minnesota and my contract ran until June, so the first six months of my married life, I was a full-time working wife. My husband, when he came home from service, just couldn't stand to sit around, so he applied for a teaching job and got one out at New London, Minnesota. We were a commuter couple for six months. We had weekends together. They were busy days. I traveled a lot with my job in Extension, so much of my homemaking was done on weekends. It was well organized with washing, ironing, cooking what we needed to have for the weekend to eat. I would say it wasn't an ordinary homemaking responsibility.

GW: Maybe not what you'd planned when you were going to get married.

MT: That's right.

GW: How about when the children were small?

MT: When the children were small we were living at Morris, Minnesota. We had an upstairs apartment above a garage and had the usual washing, cooking, housecleaning tasks to do. I enjoyed it as a homemaker and a young mother. I remember that the washing facilities weren't as handy as they might have been. I guess we were above the garage, had to go outside to go down to the laundry. That posed a little bit of a problem in the wintertime with a young child.

GW: I take it you weren't teaching or anything then. You were just a homemaker.

MT: No, those were the years when I was--I hate to say "just" a homemaker. I was a homemaker and that was my sole responsibility.

GW: How about after the children left?

MT: That was another big change in our lives. However, it so happened that 25 years before I retired, I accepted a position at Concordia College, so I was a working homemaker then, also. After the children left, my husband had become disabled and he took over the homemaking responsibilities that I would normally have done had he been working yet. So I would say we weren't the average home situation. But he fit in very nicely with doing the things about the house.

GW: Did it seem empty, then, when the children left, or didn't they all leave at once?

MT: Very definitely. No, they didn't leave at once. It was a gradual exit, so there was seven years between the oldest and the youngest.

GW: What holidays were especially important to you?

MT: Birthdays were always important. My father and mother always celebrated our birthdays. I remember during the depression one time, the biggest birthday present I had

on my chair was this big sweet potato wrapped up in this fancy paper, and I loved sweet potatoes and that was a great birthday present. Dad and Mom always made a lot of our birthdays.

Christmas has always been a very important holiday. I can remember many Christmases with family gathered together--aunts and uncles and children. Thanksgiving was also special, especially as a young child, in that Mother and Dad celebrated Thanksgiving with a couple that had lived in Iowa with my father's parents, and they continued to celebrate Thanksgiving together after they came to Clay County. One year would be at our house and the next year it would be at the Peaches' [phonetic] and it was always a big holiday. They had both moved to Minnesota about the same time, back in the early 1900s.

GW: That's interesting. Who kept the money records in your family?

MT: In my immediate family I did. In my mother and father's family, I'm sure that I remember my dad's very detailed records. In fact, I still have some of them.

GW: How were the money management decisions made related to homemaking, just those that were concerned with homemaking?

MT: I think both Perry and I did a lot of talking and had good communication about how we were going to spend. Some of our early married life, money wasn't very plentiful and we had to make some very careful decisions as to how we were going to manage.

GW: Did the children have allowances?

MT: Yes, they did. They weren't very great, but they had allowances and they worked for it. They had certain responsibilities they had to do. They weren't paid for doing a job, but they would get their 25 cents a week or whatever; and that was theirs to spend and use as they wanted to.

GW: They really did earn it. It wasn't just handed out to them.

MT: No, they had their household responsibilities.

GW: How much time did you have for volunteer activities then?

MT: I took a lot of time for volunteer activities. I guess my background and my work in Extension just became a part of my life and I took part in Sunday School and church activities, women's association. I was also a Campfire and Bluebird leader for many years. I saw one group of Bluebirds through their senior year from the beginning to the end, and that was a joy. As a result of some of that, I did have a chance to participate in the county organization. Then I found myself involved in adult education when I moved to Fargo-Moorhead. Somebody had told the administrator of the adult education program that I had done some of this type of work, and it wasn't long until I thought, "Well, one night a week; that would be fun." It wasn't long until I was teaching four nights a week.

GW: That's the way it goes when they find somebody willing and capable. How about hobbies? Did you have time for hobbies?

MT: Oh, yes, sewing was a hobby. And I loved to cook; I'd say that was a hobby. We also liked sports. My husband was a coach at the time of his teaching responsibilities, and I became very much involved in enjoying sports with him.

GW: Did you have help in the home?

MT: No. Maybe I should take that back. The first years that I taught at Concordia College I had somebody come in once a week and help with the general housecleaning. But, other than that, I didn't. My children were still young. The baby was four when I started teaching at Concordia. I just had to have some help.

GW: And no extended family--you didn't have anyone else around here that could help.

MT: I did the first couple years that I taught at Concordia College in that Perry's mother spent the winters with us and that helped with the babysitting with the four year old.

GW: But the children didn't take much responsibility, then, if they were so small.

MT: No, they had their regular chores, but not a lot of responsibility.

GW: As a family, what did you do for fun and entertainment? I suppose you went to games if your husband was a coach?

MT: That's right. He also was active in the Little League baseball. Our children participated in sports in school, so we were with them. We enjoyed skiing, we enjoyed being at the lake in the summer. We did build a summer cottage and spent a lot of our summer, most of our summers, out there. We enjoyed family games, doing things together in the home.

GW: It's coming back again now--families are getting into games again, aren't they? That's good.

How were your Sundays different from other days?

MT: Sundays were a special day. Sunday mornings were generally spent at Sunday School and church. We usually had our big meal at noon on Sunday which is different from the other days. It was Mother's holiday in the afternoon. Everybody got their own supper--pick and choose from what we had. Many times we had company and many times we were visiting others, and sometimes they were just family days. Sunday was company day.

GW: They did that more at that time. You'd always have somebody home for dinner on Sunday. They don't do that so much anymore.

MT: We frequently had made homemade ice cream on Sunday before we had dinner.

GW: How do meal patterns of the early '30s differ from the meals that they are eating now?

MT: Most of the meals, I think, in the early '30s were made from scratch. I don't remember that there were too many mixes on the market at that time. A lot of our own food was produced at home. I was still at home at that time. We had a big garden and did a lot of food preservation--canning--and had our own meat and milk, so I would say that we had a normal, healthy, nutritious diet. However, it was basically made from scratch whereas nowadays we eat a lot of prepared foods, although I don't use too many of them but I take advantage of the frozen products.

GW: What do you remember about grocery shopping when you first started shopping for food?

MT: It's certainly changed. We had a market over on North Broadway where my mother and father and we did most of our shopping. I think it was called the Broadway Grocery Store, the Broadway Food Market, or something like that. You'd go in and stand and tell the clerk what you wanted, and the clerk would get your product--whatever you needed. You didn't have the opportunity to walk around the store and select things as you do now. I remember Fred Jahnke was the name of the man who managed that store. They became very good friends of my folks. Nowadays, of course, we just push our carts, pick our products, and I guess the modern food market probably has upwards of 10,000 different items to select from whereas in those days, it was much more limited. A lot of the things were in barrels and boxes and you could scoop out what you needed and what you wanted.

GW: How frequently did you go to the store?

MT: Once a week, I think. We had a weekly trip to town. Transportation wasn't as great. I remember we had a little old Ford with the open doors. [Laughter] If the hill coming into town by the old North Broadway bridge was wet, it was almost impossible to come because it was so slippery. I remember some harrowing times coming up and down that hill to go to town to get those groceries once a week.

GW: What about prices?

MT: [Laughter] I don't remember exactly their prices in the '30s, but they were certainly a lot less than they are. But, of course, income was a lot less, too. That was true in the early '40s when I was first a homemaker, too.

GW: How was food kept fresh and safe to eat?

MT: There has been a big change. Going back to my early days of memory in the 1920s, my father and mother had an ice house. The ice house was probably 24 by 24. In the middle of the winter when the ice was probably at its thickest, Dad would go down with a saw, a hand

saw, and saw the ice in the river into large chunks, maybe about six feet long and with a team of horses pull these hunks of ice up to the ice house and pack it full of ice. Then on top of that layer the sawdust. That was our means of refrigeration and it would last usually until August or September, with that sawdust insulation. We had a great big Red Wing pottery jar that we would set in that ice and it gradually would melt its way into the ice and that was our refrigerator. That's how we kept our things cool in the summertime. It was my job to go out to the ice house, and as the summer wore on, the sawdust got deeper and deeper and wetter and wetter. I hated that job, but I did the job well. I can also remember preserving, canning a lot of the garden produce. Mother had a big boiler that we put the corn or the peas or whatever in to boil for three or four hours in order to process those vegetables. As the war years came on in the 1940s, we had the advent of the pressure cooker.

GW: Oh, yes, I remember that.

MT: That made a big difference in our canning methods. Really, you could can corn in twenty minutes instead of three hours of boiling it in the boiler on the stove. As we had electricity, with the advent of rural electrification in the late '30s, then the refrigerator came into being.

GW: I was going to ask you, "When in your married life did you get refrigeration?"

MT: I had it, of course, when I first started, but I'm thinking back on the farm now and Mother got it probably in 1936, '37, something like that. I can remember also the advent of frozen foods. Strawberries were the first things I remember as being frozen. Dad would buy a big twenty pound can of frozen strawberries, and we'd bring it out and put it on the front porch in the wintertime and we'd have frozen strawberries. From then on, of course, frozen foods became more and more popular.

GW: That's right, and now we have vegetables and everything. What about time for food preparation? How's that changed with the advent of refrigeration? Do you find more time?

MT: Much less time to prepare, much more time to do something else. Technology has made a lot of difference in the time of food preparation.

GW: What about water? What was your source of water when you first started homemaking?

MT: When I first started in the '40s, of course, we had running water when I was living in Minneapolis. But going back to my farm experiences again in the 1920s, I can remember when our only source of water was rainwater. We had a big cistern in the basement, and we would collect the rain from the roof of the building and store it in the cistern. I remember that water as being the water we used for washing and this type of thing. I don't recall, but I think we also drank it. I don't recall hauling water. We had a pump from that cistern right by the sink and we could pump our water as we needed it. Then, in 1925 we had a well digger on our property for about four months before they struck water. They

did finally get water in a 120-foot well. We were near the river, and there was a hard pan they said, as they called it, that was difficult to dig through. But once through that hard pan, we had a good source of water and that well is still functioning today.

GW: I imagine that was a day of rejoicing when you had your own water.

MT: That's right, and I can remember when Dad piped it into the cistern so we could pump the water from the cistern into the house.

GW: The cistern wasn't being used then anymore?

MT: No, we drained it and cleaned it and lined it, and then we pumped the well water into that. With the advent of electricity we got running water, and that was in the '30s. It made a big difference in one's food preparation, one's cleaning, one's taking a bath. [Laughter]

GW: We weren't so generous with the water then as we are now.

MT: No, I remember our Saturday night baths in a tub in front of the stove, the youngest one first, and then the next one and the next one, because of the water scarcity.

GW: What do you remember about clothing and household linens? Were most things purchased or homemade?

MT: My mother did a lot of sewing, and a lot of the clothing was made-overs or hand-me-downs. We didn't have much in the line of clothing, not the variety that we have now. We had enough, and we were warm. They were simple, mostly cottons or wools because those were mostly the only two fibers available in those early years.

GW: What about purchasing? You said your mother did most of the sewing, but the things you did buy, did you go to the store and buy or did you use the catalog?

MT: Both. We did shopping in town and we also used the catalog because of transportation problems.

GW: How did you keep the clothing clean?

MT: Laundry was quite an experience. The first washing machine I remember was one that we rubbed by hand. It was a wooden tub type of thing with a ridge on the bottom and a kind of a roller thing that rolled over the clothes on top. We advanced from that to a gasoline-motored washing machine, and that was quite an advancement. But there again Mother and Dad would have to catch water or pump it or haul it from the well and heat it on the stove in the big boiler, and it was a Monday morning job. Monday was always wash day on the farm. Drying clothes was another thing, especially in the wintertime. I remember hanging them out on the front porch where we had clothesline strung, and they would freeze solid. We would take them in piece by piece and dry them in the house after the wash, and those weren't especially pleasant memories.

GW: You didn't plan many other things for Mondays, did you? [Laughter] You noticed it in your meals and everything, I'm sure, when it took so much time for the wash. Something you did before you went to work.

MT: I remember my mother very religiously boiling the towels, always boiling them in the boiler on the stove and that was an old wood stove.

GW: How about the ironing?

MT: The first iron I remember is a sad iron you put on the stove, and we'd heat it. We had this wood stove. We advanced from that to a gas iron. It had a little gas tank on the back and you'd light it and it would burn and heat the plate on the sole of the iron. What a day it was when we had an electric iron and what an improvement. I think another thing that has really changed in ironing is the ease of ironing, the clothes, the modern-day technology. The materials have changed ironing. I can remember in 1940s--1941, 1942--when I was on the Extension staff, one of the things that we were teaching homemakers in the state of Minnesota was how to iron a shirt in five or seven minutes--I can't remember if it was five minutes or seven minutes--but we were stressing energy and time management. Cotton shirts weren't the easiest things to iron, especially if you wanted them wrinkle free. I went from county to county giving this demonstration on how to iron a shirt in seven minutes.

GW: I think men wore white shirts more then, too-- everybody that was in business wore white shirts. Now they have pale ones.

MT: Then we didn't have wash and wear. Another thing we did in Extension work during those times--I might mention it here--as far as food preparation is concerned. We were encouraging victory gardens. Every homemaker had a victory garden. Canning and pressure cookers had come on the market at that time and we were teaching them how to use pressure cookers in canning. Of course, they are still using pressure cookers, too. But I think more foods are frozen than canned now.

GW: What about repair of clothes, or how did you keep your clothes mended?

MT: We had to mend our own clothes, and I can remember one of my projects in 4-H Club was learning how to make a hem patch and how to darn. I exhibited both at the county fair. [Laughter] A lot of emphasis was given on keeping clothes in repair in mending.

GW: What about now? What have you seen in the clothing accepted for church and for school and for shopping and housework? What can you tell me about that?

MT: I've seen a big change--much less formality. I can remember when you'd never go to church without a hat on and dressed in your best. Now I see people coming to church without hats, in slacks, very informal attire. I think the whole of living is less formal as far as clothing is concerned.

GW: How about in school? When you went to school, what did you wear?

MT: I always had a dress. If we wore snow pants or overalls of any kind, they were hung up with your coat in the hall. I can remember my first years of teaching at Concordia College, that the students--the girls--were not allowed to wear snow pants or slacks in the classroom. They had to have dresses on. So, there has been quite a change.

GW: When you went shopping, how were you dressed? I mean, not just in your clothes, but have you noticed a difference in that women now go shopping with their hair up in curlers and things like that?

MT: We would never think of going outside of the house with our hair in pins. We didn't have curlers [laughter] way back then. Yes, you see much more informality and less formal attire all over.

GW: What can you tell me about the time spent in housekeeping, comparing what you do now and what you did when you were younger?

MT: My mother's full-time responsibility, I think, was homemaking although she helped feed the turkeys and do some of the gardening, whereas I think now much less time is needed in cleaning, in cooking, in maintenance of clothing, and so on.

GW: You told us what kind of a job you hated in winter, but what other job did you hate most in housekeeping?

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

MT: What did I hate most? Probably dish washing. [Laughter] My husband's always said he was an automatic dishwasher. That helped, but I really enjoyed homemaking. I enjoy homemaking today and get a great deal of satisfaction out of doing it.

GW: That problem is solved for you now if you hated dishwashing, isn't it?

MT: Yes. [Laughter] Now it's emptying the dishwasher.

GW: That's it. [Laughter] How has your attitude toward housecleaning changed?

MT: I don't have the annual housecleaning episode that my mother always had. I can remember spring housecleaning and fall housecleaning; it was a really major episode. Now I think I clean all the time, a room at a time, thoroughly cleaned occasionally, but never a special period of time that I do my spring housecleaning or fall housecleaning. I think it's more of a general, ongoing thing.

GW: What chores did you think of as weekly chores?

MT: Washing clothes, in those days, probably not so much now with the automatic washer and dryer, ironing, bread baking. I can remember one day was set aside for bread baking

in my home. Cleaning--always had some cleaning on Friday or Saturday for the weekend, getting ready for Sunday.

GW: I think most people thought of Saturday as cleaning day because it had to be clean for Sunday.

MT: And shopping--there was usually a day for shopping.

GW: What were some of the problems encountered in homemaking during World War II?

MT: Rationing. I can remember the sugar ration stamps and the meat rationing. Meat rationing wasn't as much of a problem for us on the farm because meat was available. But when I was on the staff at the University of Minnesota, I had to buy my meat and had to ration it. However, many of my meals were eaten on the road, so that didn't become a real problem, but it was for some people. I remember for my wedding cake, we collected sugar stamps from friends in order to turn them in to the bakery so they could bake the wedding cake. So I remember rationing.

GW: Did the gas rationing affect you? If you were on the road, it probably did.

MT: It did in that I had to be concerned about my schedule of travels. We did have an extra allotment for traveling as an Extension person, but one had to plan one's trips quite carefully in order to make it from one month to the next with the gas ration stamps.

GW: What were some of the problems encountered during the depression of the '30s?

MT: I think money available to buy things that you couldn't produce. I can remember such things as oranges being a luxury, and bananas were a treat--some of these types of foods that weren't as readily available then as they are now because of modern transportation.

GW: How did you cope with it?

MT: We had produce on the farm. I felt fortunate that I was on the farm now as I look back in retrospect because we always had enough to eat because of the gardening and the milk and the meat.

GW: Were you ever affected by floods living near by the river?

MT: Not until recent years. In my early years on the farm, I don't remember a flood. Sometimes part of the land would flood, but it wasn't until the 1940s that the land flooded and the buildings were flooded. We didn't have to move out of our home until the flood of the 1940s.

GW: How about the drought?

MT: That affected us, of course, in the amount of crops produced. It affected, perhaps, what we did as we went on to school. I was ready to go to college in 1938 and as a result of that didn't get to go exactly where I wanted to go for the first two years. But after that I was able to work six months a year and go to school six months.

GW: What impact have the technological developments had on your role as a homemaker, thinking about appliances and things like that?

MT: It's made life much easier. I was thinking about this just in the matter of preparing food--from the old wood stove to the kerosene stove, from there to a gas stove, and from there to an electric stove, and now the microwave oven. That in itself has cut the time of food preparation just tremendously. The technological developments of food processing and packaging and transportation of food have made a big difference. There are fresh strawberries from California that are as fresh as those we pick out of our garden almost, and that certainly has made a difference in our diets. I think also of the technology in the washing machine, the dryer, the technology in the finishes of clothing--wash and dry, no ironing involved. I can remember standing, well, not hours, but a long time ironing my first daughter's dress. And now when I iron my granddaughter's dresses, it's a matter of washing and hanging them up and just touching them up, so technology certainly has had a great impact on homemaking.

GW: Did you always have a telephone?

MT: Yes. The first telephone was a thirteen party line, so you shared that with thirteen people. Part of the fun of living on the farm was rubbering--[laughter] listening to somebody else's conversations. I think everybody was as guilty as the next one in doing that, especially if there was--I can remember when some of the first boyfriends used to call and how careful we were about what we said over the phone. We had to be, because everybody was interested in everybody else.

GW: What were some of your frustrations as a homemaker?

MT: Maybe not getting everything done I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. I can't remember any grave frustrations. Some things I liked to do better than others, but I've always enjoyed homemaking.

GW: How do you feel about women working today?

MT: I have mixed feelings, and I say that having been a woman who worked. I know there are situations where women must work, and I think the challenge there is not to try to do everything. You have to set priorities and know what your goals and value systems are in order to manage. Mine was a situation where it was probably a fortunate thing that I had accepted employment at Concordia College because my husband became disabled and we just switched roles--he was the homemaker and I went out to work. It can be done. It takes a lot of decision making. You have to have priorities.

GW: That's a big thing--priorities.

MT: That's right. It can be very rewarding, and it may be very frustrating. If you asked me about frustrations, probably the greatest frustration was trying to be a competent, good homemaker along with my full-time job of teaching.

GW: What was your impression of such women as Eleanor Roosevelt or Amelia Earhart?

MT: I can remember Eleanor Roosevelt and I can't remember many impressions that I had of her. I can remember being awed by Amelia Earhart--the fact that she was a pilot and was brave enough to go off and do some of the things that she did. I remember when she became lost over the Pacific, and wondering. I still wonder sometimes.

GW: Still wonder. They never have really confirmed, have they?

MT: No, they haven't.

GW: In what ways do you think radio, tv, and movies have impacted our role as a homemaker?

MT: In many ways. I find the radio a lot of company as I work around the house. TV can be an interference, and I think tv has had a lot to do with our attitudes and our value setting as far as homemaking is concerned, sometimes for the good and sometimes not so good. Movies--well, movies and tv probably fall in the same category. I'm sure they've had an impact on some of my thinking. Some of them have reinforced my value system--

GW: I think that's been all of us.

MT: so that I've become--. I can't approve of everything, and I don't approve of everything I see and hear on tv or in the movies.

GW: What changes would you like to see in your life as a homemaker?

MT: More time. I still, as a retired person, have a time getting everything done that I'd like to do. Here, again, it's a matter of setting priorities and getting to them eventually.

GW: What would you like to see for your granddaughter, as a homemaker now? As she becomes a homemaker, what would you like to see?

MT: I would just hope that she would get a lot of satisfaction and see that there is some merit in being a good homemaker, that there is some fulfillment in homemaking. I think sometimes homemaking is expressed or shown as something that isn't fulfilling, whereas I think being a homemaker and a mother can be a very fulfilling and satisfying experience. I hope she can take some pride in being able to do well some of the things that are involved in homemaking. I always used to tell my students that food is an art medium, and you can paint pictures with food, the way you prepare it and the way you serve it. When you think

of food preparation in that light, it's more of a creative experience than a drudgery. I think one's attitude towards your skills in homemaking can have a great deal to do with your satisfaction. That's true of clothing and in sewing or home decorating. There's lots of means for satisfying fulfillment. There may not be a monetary realization there, but as my son-in-law says, "When I think of what my wife saves by being home, there is a monetary value to her profession as a homemaker, too."

GW: She's got a good role model to follow, your granddaughter has. I'm sure she will. Thank you, Margaret. I've enjoyed this interview with you and I hope others will when they hear it, too.

MT: Thank you. It was fun to be here.

[End of Interview]