

**Ruth Wensel
Narrator**

**Dorothy Johnson
Interviewer**

**April 12, 1985
Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project
Moorhead, Minnesota**

DJ: Ah, what is your name, please?

RW: Ruth Melvey Wensel.

DJ: Yes. This interview is with Mrs. Wensel, who served as councilman?

RW: Yes.

DJ: Councilwoman.

RW: Councilwoman.

DJ: From...?

RW: From 1954 to 1978.

DJ: Oh! The interview was held at eventide on April 12, 1985. And the interviewer, Dorothy Johnson, is representing the Heritage Education Commission. Now we have your name. And where is your home address, Mrs. Wensel?

RW: At Parkview Terrace, 100 Third Street North, Moorhead.

DJ: And then I must ask you your age.

RW: Well, I just...just had my eighty-eighth birthday. My birthday...or my birth date is March 23, 1897.

DJ: And where was your birthplace?

RW: At La Crosse, Wisconsin.

DJ: Yes. And your parents' names?

RW: Joseph and Elizabeth Daily[sp?].

DJ: Their nationality, or your nationality?

RW: My mother was English, her father and mother were both born in London. And my father's mother was born in Scotland and his father in Ireland.

DJ: Oh...

RW: But they both were born in the United States.

DJ: And when and why did you come to Moorhead then?

RW: Well, during World War I, I met my future husband. And when he came out of the service, we were married. And I came to Moorhead as a bride on August the 7th, and...ah...in 1919.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. What education do you have, Mrs. Wensel?

RW: Well, I had high school and business college. And when I came to Moorhead, I had a real good job as a credit woman for a large wholesale lumber company at the transfer in Minneapolis.

DJ: Oh. Mmmm-hmmm. Well, when were you involved with local government in Moorhead then?

RW: You mean, why was I involved?

DJ: Or when? Mmmm-hmmm.

RW: When...well, that was...hmmm...the same year that I was elected. And in the...one morning, we wake up, and here's all the big trucks going over the North Bridge. And my husband said, "Well, Ruth, you'd better call that city clerk and find what's going on." I called them, and they said, yes, the council had voted the night before to send the trucks down A Street and over the North Bridge rather than Center Avenue, because the businessmen were pretty unhappy with all the trucks going over Center Avenue.

And so then a few days later, oh, all these great big trucks came, ruining the wonderful new paving they had, and the curb and gutter. And we were in the yard, and a big one went over the bridge. And I said to my husband, "You know, for two cents, I would run for that city council." And he said, "Well, why don't you?" I laughed and I said, "Do you think those men would let a woman enter their field?" "Well," he said, "You might be surprised." Well, it happened to be it was election year, and every night when I would come home from work, he would say, "Well, Ruth, when are you going to go and sign up? Now pretty soon it's going to be too late." So one night I said, "Well, tomorrow morning, I'll get up at daylight and make preparations and I will

go up before I go to work and sign up.” And when I came in to sign up, the girl looked at me as much as to say, have you gone out of your mind? And I thought, yes, I guess so.

DJ: [Chuckles]

RW: [Chuckles] And when I was elected, I was so...oh, so disgusted. And I said to my husband, “Now what have you let me in for?” And he said, “Well, you just get in there and do an honest, honorable job, and you will get along okay.” Well, the first thing I asked for was a ten ton limit on our street going over the North Bridge. And I didn’t get very far, but one day, one of the men made a slip and he said, “Well, Ruth, what’s the use of us putting ten tons up on this side? Fargo will never go along.” “Well,” I said, “How do you know Fargo won’t go?” “Well,” he said, “I’ll tell you, if Fargo will go, we’ll go a hundred percent.” They were so sure.

Well, I knew that the next day that the Fargo Street and Commission were meeting at nine thirty, and I was there plenty early. And who should be their leader but Mr. Hilder[sp?], who had driven the ambulance by our house for years. And he said, “Mrs. Wensel, I don’t understand why you people have put up with the injustice that you have. When...when the city council has no right to change the highway.” And he said, “I can almost assure you that we’ll post the signs.” In the afternoon, he called me and he said, “We’ll post the signs the minute Moorhead is ready.”

Well, I went down to the City Hall. Mr. Cook[sp?], who now has passed away, was the clerk. And he called our street and bridge man and he said, “Oh, we’ve got to have another council meeting.” And I said, “Let me have that phone.” I said, “Why do you need another council meeting? I’ve got the copy of the minutes from the last meeting, where you said if Fargo would go, you’d go a hundred percent.” He said, “Well, Ruth, it’s going to take a long time to have permanent signs made up.” And I said, “Well, I don’t care if it takes all summer, but I want temporary ones up and I want them up this weekend.” Well, they must have been pretty permanent. They lasted twenty years until urban renewal took them down.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. And so you’d say that you were involved in making that lasting change in the community.

RW: Yes.

DJ: Can you think of any others where you were involved in a change?

RW: Well, the cars, everything went over the North Bridge. And they...anybody on the south side of the avenue, or the...or the north side of the avenue, they could never get on. And so I said, “The next thing I want is a four-way sign on that street.” Well, I got it. Then everybody took...had their fair chance. And...well, and what else could you say?

DJ: We...yes. Hmmm. Do you think during this time that you had any failure or disappointment in government while you were in office?

RW: No, I don't think that I did have, because I always had the respect of all of the councilmen. They knew I was there for one thing, and that was to do the very best job that I could do for my Ward and the City of Moorhead.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Was there someone you called for advice or support?

RW: Well, not...hmmm...I might call some of the members on the council if I was interested in some certain things.

DJ: What about your husband during this time?

RW: Well, my husband was in and out of the veteran's hospital, he was quite ill. And...

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. Hmmm. Were you...hmmm...anything besides a council member?

RW: Well, no. I'd had good business training from the time I was fourteen. My father was a lumberman. And when I was fourteen, he started me keeping his books. I'd always remember the...and three months afterwards he said, "Now Ruth, you're going to take off the first trial balance for me."

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm.

RW: He'd taken them off before. And when I took it off, I was two thousand dollars and thirty cents off, and I cried on his shoulder. And he said, "Well," he said, "Check your work and you'll find it." And then I went up to the house, we lived a block away, to my mother and cried on her shoulder. And when my dad missed me, he came up. And when he came in, my mother said, "Everybody knows what a wonderful bookkeeper you are, but you just expect too much from Ruth, a young girl." And my father said, "When Ruth is working for somebody else, she won't have me to find her mistakes. I am trying to teach her confidence, and to stand on her own two feet." And then my dad left. And then my mother turned on me and she said, "Your father is right! You get down there now and do what he tells you to do."

DJ: Would you say that your parents were sort of role models for you?

RW: Well, yes, they...I think so. They...they wanted me to do things right.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Good. Well, now, I think that you were vice mayor sometimes or something?

RW: Yeah, well...yes, I was the vice mayor for eight years. And when...then that meant that when the mayor couldn't go, well, I had to go to Canada, and Duluth, and Minneapolis, and different places. And that was a real good experience, too. And I remember going to Winnipeg when they had Fargo and Moorhead Days up there. And we had a special seat, and I could always take a friend and they would pay her expenses. And when they...pretty soon, when it was

over, the race, why, they said, “Mrs. Wensel, we want you to come down and award the trophy.” And then they sent me a picture of that.

DJ: Oh.

RW: The Winnipeg...the mayor of Winnipeg.

DJ: At Duluth then, you said you went also?

RW: Yes, I went to Duluth, and that would be regular meetings, you know. And...

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. Yeah. Ah, what kind of coverage did you get from the media? Like from the...oh...*Forum*, or...and radio?

RW: I had very, very good...very, very good coverage.

DJ: They mentioned you especially?

RW: Yes. And had to laugh, one time I was running for office and for reelection. And they had in the...they had a Moorhead paper at that time, and they had a piece in there that it...it was...would be foolish for anybody to run against Mrs. Wensel, because they would be defeated before...[Laughs]

DJ: [Laughs]

RW: We...my folks, they got a kick out of that, you can imagine.

DJ: Did you get defeated? Or you just ran again and didn't get defeated?

RW: No. I never was defeated...in all those years. And the last year that I was on the city council, I was taken deathly sick at a meeting. And they'd rushed me to the hospital and they said I had a ruptured appendix. They operated, and there was nothing wrong with my appendix. Then they said that it had to be my stomach. And I had a gastric ulcer. I didn't even know I had it. And it had burst, and I was bleeding to death. Then they took seventy percent of my stomach. So then I didn't run. It was election year, and I didn't run.

DJ: Oh. So [unclear].

RW: So I never was defeated.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Ah, what community changes have you seen during the years that you were in office or here in Moorhead?

RW: Well, the one thing that...that grieved me most was the urban renewal. Because when they were going to have urban renewal, it was to take care of the people that were flooded on the

north and the south side. And then when Mr. [Robert] Roberts got ahold of it, he dropped the south side people and included the downtown. Well, they chased businesses...one business after the other out of Moorhead. And that Bottolfson Building was a practically new building. That was torn down. And the First Ward school building was in good shape. It was a...a crime, the stuff that was destroyed. And in those days, when they built something, they built it to last. I can't say that about things today.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. So you would say that you were, ah, part of the change, and yet you were unhappy about it.

RW: Well, yes. Well then I was going to say, when...after...one day we were going over to the Parkview Terrace where I live to dedicate the ground. And when we were...I, being the only woman on the council, I took the first shovel of dirt. And when we were walking back, Mr. Wohlwend, who now has passed away, he said, "Ruth, at the next council meeting, I'm going to offer a resolution to fire that Roberts. Will you second it?" And I said, "I sure will." But you see, it was too late. We...we did get rid of him, but it was too late, and the damage had been done.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. Ah, have you been involved in any, oh, politics, community involvement since you have retired from office?

RW: No.

DJ: No. Mmmm-hmmm.

RW: Because I was about eighty then.

DJ: Oh.

RW: It was time to quit. [Chuckles]

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Did your family support or discourage your involvement in community affairs?

RW: Oh, they always...

DJ: Now you said your husband egged you on.

RW: Yeah. And they all encouraged me.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. Wanted you to keep on?

RW: Yes.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. It didn't take away from your family life.

RW: Yes. That's right.

DJ: No. Mmmm-hmmm.

RW: I just have one son living here. I have one son living here, Glenn Melvey. And he's assistant superintendent of schools in Fargo.

DJ: Oh, yes.

RW: And see, my children were all Melveys. I had four...I had five, I lost the first boy at birth, and then I had two more boys and two girls. And June is in Montana, Audrey is in California, and Donald, he's retired and he spends...they spend their winters in Florida, and then they have a lovely home on Pelican [Lake] for the summer.

DJ: Well, now, have any of the children been involved in politics or government affairs?

RW: Well, I...[chuckles] Ah, Glenn is going to talk here on the eighteenth. They took a trip to the Holy Land, and he said it just made the Bible come open to you, because they have...their minister from First Lutheran and some other group, he would tell him...and he said we have...we've trod places where Jesus had trod. And they...also the tomb that he was...Jesus was in.

DJ: Yes.

RW: He said, really, he said it was so wonderful, they couldn't get over it.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm.

RW: And he is giving a talk on that the eighteenth, here.

DJ: Yes. And he's...since he is involved in community affairs in Fargo then. Because he's a...

RW: Yes. Mmmm-hmmm. He's been in...he's been in the Fargo schools, well, I think over thirty-four years. He's never had one day off for sick leave. And he stayed in the Reserve...you see, he was a lieutenant in the Navy. He stayed in the Reserve, and last year, now he...from then on, he gets six hundred a month, and free care for him and his wife at the vet's hospital as long as he lives. That's outside of Social Security.

DJ: Did you encourage him, or the other boy, or your daughters ever to go into politics?

RW: No, I just...I don't think that I ever did. No.

DJ: You liked it yourself, but you didn't necessarily push it onto them.

RW: Yeah...no. Well, in fact, one thing, that I made up my mind that I would never dictate to my children, and that I would never interfere in their marriages, and I have...I have stuck to that.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Ah, how did you deal with the stress, which so often goes with a public office?

RW: Well, sometimes it was pretty...you wouldn't sleep probably all night. But I'll tell you, I have learned to trust in Jesus so much. And when things bother me, I have turned them over to him. And you'd be surprised what it does. It's wonderful. And I...I have no fear of death. If I was to go today or tomorrow, that's fine with me, because Jesus said, "I will go with you all the way, even to the crossing of the Jordan." And I'm looking forward to something so much better.

DJ: If you had your years in government or politics to live over, can you think of anything you might do differently?

RW: Well, that's a pretty hard question. I don't really know what I would do....

[Recording interruption]

RW: ...gave them my very best. And I never went on the council floor that I didn't pray for God to guide my vote. And if I was going again, I would try to do the same thing.

DJ: Now what do you feel is your greatest contribution towards making Moorhead a better place?

RW: Well, there were so many things that was done, you know, with...by the whole council, that...like I said, I guess I've told you, getting rid of the urban renewal and that at the time. But it was too late, you know. But I always...like I say, I always prayed for guidance before I went on the floor, and I always tried to do what was honest and right.

DJ: Yes. Do you have anything else you would think of...?

RW: And I might say this, you see, I was first elected in the First Ward. Well, then when urban renewal came in, why, my house was torn down, and I moved then in the apartment at 419 Eighth Street South, just...right next to Korsmo's Funeral Home. And then I had to run from the Second Ward. And then I was elected from the Second Ward, and served the Second Ward until I retired.

DJ: Right. Well now, what about commercial zoning of Eighth Street South, for instance? Or you said you lived on Eighth Street, and in the 1960s, wasn't there some big thing about that?

RW: I don't...I don't believe I know just what you're talking about.

DJ: Yeah....

[Recording interruption]

RW: ...we really...we won in the long run. [Laughs]

Unknown Male voice: Why don't you talk a little bit about this?

RW: Yeah.

DJ: Yes. Mmmm-hmmm. Alright, well, yes, what about the Eighth Street zoning?

RW: Well, many of us was entirely against it. And as it happened, we won out. And I think it was a blessing.

DJ: Oh. You mean that there wasn't to be...?

RW: No. They didn't make it...they didn't commercialize it.

DJ: Oh, I see. Mmmm-hmmm. Well, Ruth, hmmm...this has been very interesting. I'm just wondering, do you have anything else, Mrs. Wensel, you might want to say or...?

RW: Well, I just would like to say this, that I think Moorhead is a wonderful place. I can't think of anyplace I would rather live than in Moorhead. And I hope to end my days here. [Chuckles]

DJ: And if you had the chance, if you'd been younger, you would have kept on in politics longer?

RW: Yes, I would have. Yes, I would have. Because I really was interested in it, and I felt it was a very necessary thing for the city, you know.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm.

RW: To have good politics.

DJ: Yes. Was there any other woman involved in politics in the council while you were on?

RW: No, not for quite a few years after I was on. I forget how many years before the second one was elected.

DJ: And you were the first one elected.

RW: Yes. Mmmm-hmmm. First woman elected to the council.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm. Yes. Well, thank you very much. This has been very interesting.

RW: Well...well, I have enjoyed it also.

DJ: Mmmm-hmmm.

[End of interview]

Transcription by Marilyn Olson-Trembl
June 2016