

**Willard Manderfeld  
Narrator**

**Deborah Locke  
Interviewer**

**New Ulm, Minnesota  
August 11, 2011**

**AL = Aimee LaBree  
Minnesota Historical Society**

**DL = Deborah Locke  
Minnesota Historical Society**

**WM = Willard Manderfeld**

**AM = Alice Manderfeld**

AL: This is Aimee LaBree on August 11, 2011 in New Ulm, Minnesota. Interviewee Willard Manderfeld, Interviewer, Deborah Locke.

DL: Could you just spell your name for us, both first and last?

WM: W-I-L-L-A-R-D M-A-N-D-E-R-F-E-L-D

DL: When and where were you born?

WM: [I was] born December 12, 1928.

DL: Where were you born?

WM: In Brown County.

DL: Were you born at home?

WM: Yes, in Linden Township.

DL: Were your family farmers as well?

WM: Yes.

DL: What are the names of your parents?

WM: Eugene Manderfeld, and Hilda. I think that was her shortened name. I think her full name probably was Hildegard. We never called her that. She was always called Hilda.

DL: On your mother's side, your grandparents' names?

WM: John Drexler and Frances.

DL: How is their last name spelled?

WM: D-R-E-X-L-E-R.

DL: Who are your siblings?

WM: I had three sisters and two brothers.

DL: Are they still living?

WM: No, just one sister is living, that's all.

DL: How long have you lived here?

WM: All my life, not on the same farm, though.

DL: Did you ever leave for military service?

WM: Yes.

DL: When?

WM: 1951.

DL: What is your heritage?

WM: German.

DL: Where did you go to school?

WM: Country school, district six. After a while it was named 79 and now it's completely gone.

DL: How far did you go in school?

WM: We went to country school till sixth grade and then we went to Searles to parochial school.

DL: What's the first big news story you remember from being a child, the first big event outside of this area that made you aware of a wider world?

WM: I suppose World War II. I was about ten years old or something like that. I remember sitting by the radio, well my dad did, he always had to listen to the news and we sat there and listened with him, too. I had uncles who were in the Army at that time so we were more or less concerned about them.

DL: Sure. Which relatives had the most influence on you?

WM: Oh, I suppose my dad's brother. We spent a lot of time together.

DL: What was his name?

WM: Arthur Manderfeld.

DL: Did he have a farm also?

WM: He was on the home place before I got there on it.

DL: So you inherited his farm?

WM: Well, no I bought it but I was kind of... not that I realized it, but I think I was kind of in line for it when the time came, when I got out of Service. But I did buy it from Arthur.

DL: What did you learn about family history while you were growing up? What stories do you remember over time?

WM: Very little about the Indians or the Indian conflict or war. I suppose it was either we were kids and weren't interested and never heard much talk about them. The first history and stuff that I can recall was probably with the Second World War.

DL: You were German/American. Did your family ever talk about the family back in Germany?

WM: No, no. My parents were all born here so it was just my great grandfather or whatever... But I never got to really know him. He passed away in 1932 so I never did get to know him.

DL: Did your parents speak English or German?

WM: German.

DL: Do you still speak it?

WM: Oh yes. Wherever there are people around in the neighborhood that talk German, we still talk all German.

DL: Do you have children?

WM: Yes.

DL: Do they speak German?

WM: No, they might make out a few syllables here and there but no. At the time I was in school, I guess the schools didn't want the kids to...they wanted [them] to be brought up in the English language I suppose. But when I started kindergarten or first grade, it was a good thing we had German teachers because we didn't... they had to teach us English first. {Laughter}

DL: You mentioned that you didn't hear too much about the 1862 US/Dakota war while you were growing up.

WM: No, no, very little as far as I can recall.

DL: Did you have family members who lived through that time?

WM: Well I suppose my great grandfather was involved. His brother and his cousin they were...

DL: His younger brother Henry. So that would be your great great uncle, Henry.

WM: Yeah, I suppose, yeah.

DL: I've heard of an Anton.

WM: Anton, that was my...

AM: He was at Big Stone Lake. And he escaped up there but his brother and his cousin were killed.

WM: Anton was...

DL: So let's back up. You say your great great grandfather was involved with that... Wait now, what was your great great grandfather's name?

WM: Anton.

AM: His great grandfather.

WM: Oh, great grandfather. Great great would have been Hobert. Hobert was great great, Anton was great grandfather.

DL: So your great grandfather Anton and your uncle Henry, what was their involvement?

WM: Well Anton joined some kind of an army I guess. That's why he ended up at Big Stone.

AM: He signed up to work for the government for the Indians, putting up buildings and things.

DL: Was he and Indian Agent – what was called an Indian Agent?

WM: No, he would have just been a laborer.

DL: He was connected to the Dakota through some kind of employment, some kind of work?

WM: Yes, I guess that's what you would call it.

DL: Where was he located when he did this work? Where did they do the work?

WM: That's when he ended up at Big Stone Lake.

DL: What were they doing there? What kind of work was it?

WM: I don't know, is that in the written up somewhere, the kind of work they did?

AM: I think they were teaching the Indians to farm.

WM: OK, then that was it -- farming practice.

AM: Teaching them how to put up buildings and there was something about burning coal.

DL: What became of him? What happened next? He's working there and...

WM: During the time they were up there, the Indians ambushed them and his brother and cousin got killed. He hid out in the bushes or whatever it was and got saved. I don't know how long he stayed up there but when he came back to Fort Ridgely, he just traveled at night because he was afraid of traveling in the daytime. [He was] barefoot and had no food I suppose. The farms and places along the way, along the river on the way down...most of the people were deceased or died or killed. Then there was food in there then he probably helped himself to it if the Indians didn't. That was his food. And I guess he, from the stories that we got at night, you know he traveled at night, you can

imagine you don't have much direction. So one night he must have ended up by morning back at the same place that he had started. But he eventually got his way down to Fort Ridgely.

DL: Your great grandfather then just walked from Big Stone Lake to Fort Ridgely. How far is that?

AM: Big Stone Lake is 150 miles from here.

WM: So I suppose it would be close to a hundred miles.

DL: That took him a while to do that.

AM: I think it was eight or ten days. Something like that.

DL: Now there was this ambush and his brother and his cousin were killed. Where was that?

WM: At Big Stone Lake.

DL: He finally arrived at Fort Ridgely.

WM: Yes.

DL: I wonder what that was like. I wonder if they were worried that he was Dakota. If they knew that he was white and it was safe for him to just walk up there. That would have been a challenge too.

WM: I would imagine it would have been. I don't know -- did he really know any people that were at Fort Ridgely? I suppose not.

DL: He must have known the area well to know to go to the fort. Where was he living at the time? Where was his home?

WM: I suppose the place where I am now, the home place where they homesteaded.

DL: That would be where?

WM: In Sigel Township.

DL: How far is that from New Ulm?

WM: It's two and a half to three miles southwest of town.

DL: What's it called again?

WM: Sigel Township.

DL: Sea Gull? Like the bird?

WM: No, S-I-G-E-L Township. They homesteaded the place in 1857 but then they didn't get the title till 1861 I guess.

DL: How old was he at this time? Any idea?

WM: We were talking about it, we were wondering, we kind of...

AM: 36.

WM: Yeah.

AM: 36, 37 somewhere in there. He was born in **1926**.

DL: Here in this country?

AM: No, in Germany.

DL: Did you ever hear any stories about him as a person? You know what he did but what about him as an individual?

WM: No.

DL: Nothing while you were growing up?

WM: No. Either we weren't interested enough when we were kids or something. That stuff wasn't brought up until after we were married, when we started looking into the history of it. That's where we found out most of the history of what happened to him and all that.

DL: How long was he at the Fort?

AM: It said in here until... It said a train went to St. Peter and he got on that. It doesn't say how many days it was. Overnight at least.

WM: I suppose it wasn't more than a night or a day or two or whatever till he had some connections to get back.

DL: Meanwhile his farm is back here and his wife. I presume he was married?

WM: No, he wasn't married yet.

DL: But he did have the farm?

WM: His parents would have had the farm then, yeah.

DL: And they're wondering, "Where is Anton."

WM: I'm sure there was no communication or nothing. I imagine they were concerned and worried.

DL: Especially if word got to them that their other son and their nephew had been killed.

WM: Yeah, if they found out about that before, they would have probably thought the same thing happened to Anton and they just didn't find his body.

DL: Do you know where Anton's brother and cousin are buried?

WM: I suppose it was close around Big Stone, if they were buried, maybe they were burned. Some of them talked like the Indians burned some of the bodies too. I suppose later on they recovered some of the bones and stuff. I don't know if that happened or not.

DL: From what we've heard there could be burial places all over the area that were never marked.

WM: Yeah that's right. As far as we know there are no markings out there anywhere.

DL: There's a question whether or not the war had a direct impact on your family. Obviously, yes!

WM: Well I'm sure it did, on my dad. **They were familiar with them. They knew them. So I imagine they were...**

DL: Have you ever been to Fort Ridgely where Anton went?

WM: Oh yeah, we've been to Fort Ridgely at different times.

DL: What were your thoughts about while you were there? Plus you have military background.

WM: We were up there when they kind of restored all of it. It was interesting to walk around the grounds and see where all of the buildings were and then the big building where they had all the artifacts and stuff in there. You kind of looked through all that paper and stuff to see what you could find or see the history of it. I liked it. It was real interesting.

DL: Did your family react to this in any way as in move away or get out of Brown County for awhile when they heard about this violence toward their cousin?



WM: No, not that we ever heard of. See the one neighbor down the road, it was a Manderfeld farm too, they always said he [Anton] was friends with the Indians. So maybe the family felt, "Well we've got a little bit more confidence in that because the other one there he probably could speak to them or trade with them." Stuff like that. Our farms were right on the edge of the Big Cottonwood River so I suppose it was kind of a risky place to be. {Laughter}

DL: It's possible that these men were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe if they had been home and the local Dakota had known their families, they would have been spared.

WM: That's possible, yes.

DL: Did your family carry any anger toward the Dakota from that period forward?

WM: No, not that we ever noticed or heard of it.

DL: That's quite remarkable really.

WM: Yeah, you would think they would have anger against them and so on. Anger from my grandfather, but they never talked about it.

DL: Were any of your family members in New Ulm as part of that defensive measure.

WM: Three of them. One was down in St. Paul.

AM: You mean in 1862.

DL: Yeah. Did they travel to New Ulm and be part of...

WM: What was the question?

DL: The question is. Did any of your family members go to New Ulm for protection?

WM: Oh, no I don't think so.

DL: They stayed home.

AM: They probably did. We never knew anything about it.

WM: They had a building here in town that was the Eidner Building. Are you familiar with that?

DL: Um hum.

WM: I guess it was just the women and children mostly in there.

DL: Have you ever been to Fort Snelling?

WM: Yes, we went down through there. I suppose it was ten or fifteen years ago already or maybe longer. We went down there with a bus once and walked the forts and all that.

DL: What's your opinion of the war?

WM: Oh I don't know, it's hard to say. {Laughter} I suppose you could look at it this way: The Indians were here first and we kind of tried to chase them out. I don't think they really would have really chased them out. They tried to make friends with them and they probably tried to teach them things. So I think as far as I felt about it, they would have had a right to be here. But I think it was a matter that the government didn't get their money or something is what started the war I suppose. So I think if it wouldn't have been for their money and stuff that they were supposed to be getting, maybe things would have been different. They might have grown up and farmed together next to each other. The Indians weren't really farmers but they tried to teach them how [to farm.]

DL: You even had family members who tried to teach them.

WM: Yeah sure, Anton; that's kind of what he was involved in. He tried to show them how to raise corn and stuff like that.

DL: What do you think of the treaties?

WM: Oh, I don't know. I didn't really follow that too much in history.

DL: Do you think it's a good idea to commemorate the events of the mid 1800's?

WM: Yes I think so. I often wish we would have either started sooner or talked to older people, but by the time we started [learning our history] it was about 1976. What did we get started with at that time? By that time all the old people were passed away. So we didn't have anybody to rely on for answers so we just had to go through all kinds of papers and stuff. We did have a lot of old papers and stuff that my grandparents and great grandparents probably had in the old house. The old house is still standing there but they built a new one in 1939. There was one box of old papers that we had up in the attic for many years that we finally dug up.

DL: What were they about?

WM: Oh, all the different work he did. He kept a – not a diary but a list of all his stills and a book where he had all the money that he spent on like snuff and oh, I don't know what else – every little bit. And money that I think he probably borrowed to somebody else

once in awhile. Sometimes it was just ten cents or a quarter or something. But he had a little ledger. It was only a small ledger. It's pretty hard to read but we could make out a lot of interesting things in there.

AM: He was also the administrator to the estate of his brother and his cousin that were killed and to George \_\_\_\_\_ who was with them. We have administration papers.

DL: Do you have them at your home or at the Historical Society?

AM: At our home.

DL: Have you ever given them to anyone to review for a more complete story of Anton?

WM: No. She's got it pretty well written up.

DL: Do you have children who you would hand those papers down to?

AM: A daughter. She works at the \_\_\_\_\_ office in New Ulm and she's the president of the German-Bohemian Society in town. She's very interested in family history.

DL: You've read through them yourself?

AM: Um hum.

DL: Were they legible? Were they in good shape?

WM: Yeah.

AM: It's all hand written but some you could read and some of them are very pale but some have duplicate copies so if we can't read one, we can read the other.

DL: Little did he know that here it is 150 years later his great great grandchildren would read through his papers.

WM: Today at the fairgrounds we got the Sesquicentennial Plaque for 150 years.

DL: Oh you did, because your farm is 150 years old?

WM: Yeah.

DL: Oh my gosh.

WM: It's been owned by the same family all these years.

DL: We'd like to see that land because land is so important.

WM: Well the buildings ain't all original but the barn is, the old part still standing. That was built in the 1880's maybe something like that. The new section there, we've got pictures of that from 1910 or 1912. And the old house, not the original one but the old house, part of it is still standing.

DL: But there was no part of a battle on your property?

WM: No. That's something we never knew, if they had a log house or what they had before the house that's sitting there.

AM: That's the old house. [shows picture]

DL: I see. And the wagons! You know those wagons didn't move very fast.

WM: No, no.

DL: If you were on horseback, you'd catch up with it very fast.

WM: I suppose you could travel a lot faster on horseback than you would on...

AM: This is Anton with his wife and six children.

DL: Now you're pointing to a picture of a man who might be in his thirties...

WM: Yeah he would have been about what, 35, 36?

DL: Maybe this was taken in about 1880. He's got a grey beard so he might be older than that here.

WM: Yeah, the picture probably was taken in later years.

DL: He looks like a pretty tall man. He must have a lot of perseverance to have withstood that walk. As you said, all of these children, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, which one is...?

AM: Six.

DL: Six? 1, 2...

AM: That's his wife there.

DL: Oh, OK 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. which one is your great grandfather?

AM: His grandfather.

DL: His grandfather.

AM: Yeah, his great grandfather.

DL: OK, great grandfather and there's grandma right there, looking very stern. They all looked stern back then. Nobody smiled much for pictures. And they are seated in front of...

WM: This is the house, yes.

AM: The opposite side of that one.

DL: I see. And this is the land you're on right now. In fact we can go to this very spot where this picture was taken today?

WM: Yes. If the house was still standing here, then you could be sitting right up next to it there.

DL: Perhaps we can go there one day and take a picture of the two of you seated right in this area. That would be a good photo.

WM: Um hum.

DL: How many children do you have?

AM: We have four.

WM: Four girls.

DL: Are they all in the area.

AM: One is in St. Paul.

DL: OK. So your land is quite historically significant and you received a plaque, an award for keeping it as a farm. What's the purpose of the award?

AM: It's from the Farm Bureau. It's 150 years in the same family.

WM: Same ownership in the family.

DL: My goodness congratulations for that.

WM: I could have brought the plaque in. I've got it in the car.

DL: Are you still farming?

WM: No, 1998 was our last year. Our cousin farms it now.

DL: Were there many others getting plaques?

AM: Today we were the only ones for 150. There were four of them for 50. Right next to us to the south there's another Manderfeld and they got their land the same year that our \_\_\_\_\_ did. They just didn't apply for it but they should have.

WM: In our area, there were about four Manderfeld farms right in a cluster there. They all must have come pretty much at the same time. Then they each took their... Oh the one has got 200 acres but he's got a lot of woods with it. But the rest of them, I think they all took their 160 acres section. As far as we can figure out, they came here in 1857 but then they had to live there for three years and develop the land and then in 1861 they got their deed. So actually our farm has been in Manderfeld hands for 153 years.

DL: When these early farmers came in, maybe even preceding you...

WM: There had to be some but there couldn't have been too many because I think the way we were taught, out of New Ulm they came out and they all bought the land.

DL: Together, at the same time?

AM: Yeah, there were four people that came together and they bought farms in the same area. Most of the first farmers went out in Milford Township west of New Ulm. Then Sigel Township was just a little later.

DL: Do you think they had any idea that they were buying land and they were displacing the Dakota people?

WM: I don't really think so because they thought the Dakota Indians were along the river. They probably figured, oh they got the land and they didn't go out on the prairie. They probably went out to hunt a little bit but... I don't really think that they thought that they took it away from them because the land was for sale so they picked their piece.

DL: Who did they buy the land from?

AM: The United States \_\_\_\_\_.

WM: Yeah, you've got the...[bound family history book and turns to page with copy of deed]

DL: That's a lovely book. That took a long time.

AM: The United States of America to Hubert Manderfeld

DL: That's what it says and the date is 1861. The deed and it gives the dimensions of the property. Does it say what they paid for it?

WM: I guess someplace.

AM: There's no amount listed here.

WM: Oh maybe not there but later on they had places in... Well they probably only paid like a hundred...

AM: There were times you lived on a farm for like four years then you could own it without paying for it.

WM: Yeah that's what we thought at one time, that that's probably what happened. That's why they came here in 1857 and then they first got their deed in 1861. They lived here that long so they got the land free.

DL: Look at that lovely handwriting.

WM: Oh yeah, you should sure see some of that old handwriting, yeah.

DL: Alice, your family name is Sperl. We've seen that name too but I don't know of the context. Did your family have any connection with 1862?

AM: Not my family. There was a different Sperl here that came earlier.

DL: I see. Do you have more than one of these made up?

AM: Not right now. Right now that's the only one. I've sold about 80 of them. I'm making some more. You'd love a copy?

WM: [Laughter]

DL: Yes we would. How can we buy one from you?

AM: Well someday you could put an order in. I've started about four of them but I haven't completed them yet. Give me your name and address and I can let you know when they are done.

DL: Thank you very much. Mr. Manderfeld, what is your opinion of the war?

WM: Gosh I don't know. Well I suppose the Indians had a right to be here so I suppose they fought for what they thought was theirs and I imagine we probably would have done the same if we were there.

DL: What do you think about the treaties?

WM: Oh that, I don't think they got a very fair deal. They could have given them a better deal than just so many acres on each side of the river. Well, there was nothing that they could... Oh sure they could have lived the way they would have been [living], but then to provide for their families they would have needed more land eventually. But then I guess the Germans and them, they came over they did try... That would have been before the uprising. They tried to teach them how to farm and raise stuff too. Because before that I'm sure they just lived off the land – hunting I suppose mostly.

DL: Do you think it's a good thing to commemorate the events of the mid 1800's?

WM: Well I think so. In all the previous years nothing much was commemorated. Not much... I suppose there's stuff written, but you know like I say we've got to try to figure out the history now and it's hard to.

DL: It's hard to do without any record or any memory of interviews with your family members.

WM: Well that's like I said earlier, if we would have started with it when we first got married in 1954, our parents were still living. Our grandparents weren't living but there would have been other old people that we could have talked to about it. But it was just you know, when we were growing up and so on, maybe the older people probably talked about it among themselves but us kids weren't involved. You know at that time when we grew up, kids were only to be seen and not heard. That's the way they were taught. You were supposed to quiet and sit there. [Laughter] They thought that, why should the kids know about [the war?] Which was maybe one thing too, they maybe didn't talk much about it to their kids because **they probably figured that they didn't want to grind about it.**

DL: What's the best way to commemorate those events?

WM: Hum, I don't know. You can hardly give out any more plaques or stuff because there wouldn't be any people here to get them. So it would be mostly trust in history books. There are pictures... But there were a lot of pictures... That's one thing too from years back a lot of old estates and farm houses -- when the estates got cleaned out everything got burned up or was thrown in the dumps or the creek. Stuff wasn't saved. They thought, well this is something old, we don't need it anymore.

DL: Well unless you want to add something, I think that concludes our interview. Is there something you want to add that I missed?

WM: I suppose after we leave we'll think of all kinds of things, huh? [Laughter]