

Interview with Fred Wendt

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Interviewed by C. Perry Schenk

Schenk: We're going to be talking with Mr. Wendt who has been a long-time resident of Sauk Rapids. We've been sitting chatting about some of the years gone by and some of the things of the current situation and current happenings around Sauk Rapids. It has been very interesting up to this point, but I'd like to know just a little bit more about your past history, because that is one of the real intriguing things. Mr. Wendt, where did you come from and when did you come to 'Sauk Rapids, and what are some of the things that you remember the most about Sauk Rapids at the time that you came? Now that's a triple worded question, isn't it?

Wendt: Well, I was born and raised in Faribault, Minnesota, and went to teacher's school for five years and moved to Sauk Rapids in 1903. And at that time there was only one grade school here. The old Russel School. My life at that time was going to, attending high school at St. Cloud and our first high school graduate was in 1908. A young man by the name of Berglund, I think his name was James Berglund. Now the city looked a whole lot different then than it does now. For instance, that block where Dr. Fresslade's house is there was a tree standing at about the middle of the block high up and so the sidewalk went up hill and downhill again because they wanted to save that tree. And downtown itself, why the stores on the side where the Red Owl and the Coborns are now, why you had to go up three steps and all along a wooden plank to get into the stores. The Post Office was in a building run by Duke Coborns father and his brother. That is

where the Task Jewelry Store is now located. I remember too, the night I got into Sauk Rapids the foreman and the night watchman at the Saw Kill, cause we had a Saw Mill here then, it was running night and day, it was at the depot, met a train coming in at ten o'clock at night and I guess he always met the train and he took me up towards the Lutheran Church up here and when we got as far as Beandies then we met Fred's father. He was coming lickety-split to meet me. The next week we started school and we taught three generations during the time that I was there. And we finally built a schoolhouse in 1924, then we started to build, I think they call it the Junior High now. Well, in order to float that bond issue we had all the schools march, the Trinity School children marched, the Catholic School children marched, the Public School children marched, to show the people how many children there are so they would vote for the bond issue. And sure enough we wanted that bond issue. I served on the Public School Board for nine years and I finally resigned and after that I served on the library board and then in the city itself I served on the Board of Health. So far as the Lutheran Church is concerned, I was president, uh, Vice President of the State Teachers of Church Schools in Minnesota. That was for several years, and then president of the Twin Cities Teachers. We had about thirty teachers at that time. And the state teachers of course were a great many more because we also had the Wisconsin Senate belonging to us also. The place where I now live was an old mansion. They told me it was used as a courthouse for some time. And another said it was a Catholic Church for a while. I know there were four families living in it when I bought it. I offered them \$1000 for the place and the fellow turned me down. In the meantime, somebody else had paid down \$100 so they came to me and said I could have it for \$900 because the other fellow backed out. So we started to tear the thing down and I saved all the brick off the outside between the siding, it was all piled with brick and I thought, "My, those are pretty nice bricks to save," So I piled them up nice and the

first rain that came, they all washed away. They weren't burnt at all. That's another experience I had.

Schenk: How many years were you with the public school?

Wendt: About nine years.

Schenk: And what was your capacity with the public school?

Wendt: I was secretary-treasurer. That was the only office that paid any money, because when I came here you wouldn't believe this, but my salary was \$35 a month in 1903.

Schenk: Yes, I can very definitely believe that, at the time we were just pulling out of a great depression that had come at the later part of the 1800's and things hadn't really started coming up yet.

Wendt: You're correct on that. Then I was single for four years and where the Blue Eagle now is, that was a hotel called the Campbell Hotel, and across from the liquor store there was another hotel named the Holman Hotel. And the trains used to stop there at noon to give the people a chance to have dinner at Holman Hotel. That happened for some time. Well, I boarded at the Campbell Hotel for a good many years and if I remember right, I think that a meal ticket was about \$4.50 a week. And that was for all meals, for three meals a day.

Schenk: And I imagine they had pretty good fare too?

Wendt: Well, it must have been alright, I was satisfied for a while, we had along many stonecutters at that time you know. So, she had quite a few boarders. And when she gave up I went over to Holman Hotel and old Dad Holman had a farm out here and whenever they'd butcher a porker, why, we'd have nothing but pork to eat for a whole week.

Schenk: So, you were hoping he'd butcher a beef, I bet?

Wendt: We sure did wish so, and since rhubarb was in growth, we had rhubarb pie every day.

Schenk: Everything in season right as to the limit and beyond, huh?

Wendt: That is absolutely correct, yes sir.

Schenk: Well, what was your line of work when you came into town?

Wendt: I was teaching then.

Schenk: What subjects did you teach?

Wendt: Oh, I taught all grades. By the way, perhaps this would sound queer to you, but I had 125 pupils in that school.

Schenk: Oh, my goodness, was that in the old Russell Building?

Wendt: No, that was in an old church building that they had moved from the corner where our church now is, to over where the new school the long tennis court is over there, and that was the Trinity School. We had outside plumbing of course, and we had a water jug where the kids had to haul water every day, so they would have something to drink. I'd make the fire every morning after I had lost the janitor, he got too old, and that kept on in the twenties. Around '21 or '22 I couldn't take it anymore so I had to get a rest. They called another man to teach and he stayed one month.

Schenk: And then he was gone and you were back again?

Wendt: No, but they came after me again. Then they got another man, he stayed nearly two years and he came over and said I should help him get away. I said not with that look if I'd do that. Well, he said he had to get out of there, and so they came after me again, and then there was a group of them came over, a bunch of fellows and they said, "Mr. Wendt, if you came back, we'll guarantee that you have a new school house." And in the meantime, I had been in the Post Office. Oh, I served as acting postmaster for a few months once that came as a shock out of the blue sky.

Schenk: Where was the post office located at that time?

Wendt: Then the post office was located across from the bank—what's in there? Was there a TV in there?

Schenk: Oh, Admiral TV, well, that was still there until the late 1950s.

Wendt: That's correct, I tried once to get it moved across the street but I didn't get anywhere with that, those few months you know, But I thought it was one of the finest things in the world when they moved the post office to Second Avenue.

Schenk: Well, it made the traffic a lot easier there.

Wendt: Oh, my yes, goodness sakes, yes.

Schenk: Actually, you have spent all your time with the Trinity School as a teacher during your teaching career?

Wendt: Teaching, choir master, organist, Sunday school teacher, young people's councilor, that's what they had me occupied with. You know, they thought there was no limit to what I could do.

Schenk: Well, in your being able to carry on all-those, you know they were almost right,

Wendt: Yes, but when I got to the hospital they said, "Now we find out why you're here, you're doing this and you're doing that, and you've got choir and you've got the Sunday school and teacher's meetings and what else? Nobody can take all that, you've got to cut that out."

Schenk: That's right, and it finally gets to the point of just beyond the limitation where eventually you either have to cut it out or go down. Well now as far as the school is concerned, the present Trinity School that's the one that was built in 1924?

Wendt: That's right.

Schenk: How many students did you have occupying the school the year that it was opened?

Wendt: Well, the year that it was opened, we started with two classrooms that September. The next year we had three classrooms, and the next year we had four classrooms. And our largest enrollment was 183 for four teachers. So we had a load again, but we got along and we didn't have to write State Examinations or anything. But I had my children write State Examinations in order to check myself to see if we were doing what we ought to be doing. Whether we were up to standard or not.

Schenk: Well, you know, I remember having to write state examinations in the 7th grade in geography, and then in the eighth grade all of the others. But you know, I bet there are a lot of folks now-a-days that don't even know what state examinations are.

Wendt: That's right. I think in the seventh grade they could write their geography and spelling, and the rest came in the eighth grades. But you could write them all in the eighth grade if you wanted. I enjoyed that because I knew then if I was keeping up to the standard or not. And then

the county superintendent got ahold of me and said, "You come on over and help me check these papers over, the State Examinations that are coming in here." So, I went over and helped him check those over, too.

Schenk: About how large was the public grade school at that time?

Wendt: Well at that time there was only the Russell School, they went to the eighth grade, that's all that was there.

Schenk: Was their enrollment just about the same size as Trinity?

Wendt: Well, let's see, they must have had a few more yes, they must have had a few more. I don't know exactly what they had, but it was more.

Schenk: Well, it was just in relative terms, whether it was the same size or a few more because those figures are one of those things that don't actually mean too much, I mean, aside from the school in which you're located, that's the point interest. Was there a parochial school down at Sacred Heart at that time?

Wendt: No, no, that wasn't there at the time. That came later. Quite a few years later.

Schenk: Now, how about the streets of Sauk Rapids at the time that you came here?

Wendt: Oh boy, let me tell you something. Not only in Sauk Rapids but in St. Cloud. The streets were all one mud puddle. They were all one mud puddle, you couldn't walk across the street. They would shovel the crossings, you know. Then they got the wonderful idea to pave St. Germain Street with cedar blocks, which was very nice, but they didn't have any storm sewers and when the first heavy rain came these cedar blocks were floating all over the street. Now isn't that something?

Schenk: That sounds like some of the things that could transpire we can look back and kind of smile at the present time, but it was a disastrous thing at the time that it was.

Wendt: It certainly was. Then the thing was there wasn't a restaurant over in St. Cloud not to say anything of the town here. But there wasn't a decent one over there. They did have street cars over there.

Schenk: Where did that streetcar run? I mean what was the general route?

Wendt: It ran on Second Avenue as far as the Grand Central Hotel. That's as far as this one ran. It went up to the end of Second Avenue and turned around and came back again. And then they had an extra car that brought the car shop people in, and at the fair grounds they had a sidetrack where one of them would side track until the other went by, and the fare was 5 cents, and they had two men. And I know when I built my house that was in 1915-1916, I hurt my back lifting a pail of cement down or something that I wanted to do. I thought I'd go over and see a chiropractor, and we drove over, and you know those street cars are on four wheels and they went bumpety, bumpety, bump, and I felt so good when I got over all those bumps that I didn't go to the doctor.

Schenk: Everything got jarred into place, huh?

Wendt: Yeah, and I thought if I took another nickels worth back I'll feel pretty good so I came back on another nickels worth.

Schenk: So, for a dimes worth, you had everything more or less jounced back into shape?

Wendt: Pretty well, yes.

Schenk: Where was that Grand Central Hotel that you mentioned?

Wendt: Where it is now, it still is there, The Grand Central Hotel.

Schenk: Oh I see, in St. Cloud?

Wendt: St. Germain and 8th, isn't it?

Schenk: Oh yeah.

Wendt: That is the only hotel they had, although there was a little one out towards the Great Northern Depot somewhere. But it didn't amount to much.

Schenk: Now where was the saw mill, you mentioned that.

Wendt: Oh, the sawmill was right down across from where the depot now is. Right straight down the street. Now what street was it? No, the mill was between the liquor store and the bank, straight down. That's where your sawmill was. And they ran day and night. And the logs all came down the river and so they'd have a man down the river to always check the mark, if it was the right mark to go to this mill or not.

Schenk: Oh yeah, and they had to check marks and some that had a different mark went to saw mills further downstream then.

Wendt: They went down stream, they pushed those aside and they went down stream. That's right.

Schenk: Well, there was a flour mill just a ways down from here wasn't there?

Wendt: The flour mill was across from you know where, that cleaning shop now is across from that hardware store. Across the street from there, that's where the flour mill was. And a mighty good flour mill. That was Oscar Greeks' father.

Schenk: That's what's I understand.

Wendt: Oscar Greek's father ran that flour mill. He had very nice flour. I know he always used to tell me that my wife was the best baker in town. She was a good baker, I'll admit, but that's what he said.

Schenk: Well, what finally happened to the saw mill?

Wendt: The saw mill then moved to Cass Lake.

Adeline: It burned.

Wendt: No, it didn't burn, Adeline, but they were getting their logs from a different source and so they moved it to Cass Lake and when they got rid of all the timber around Cass Lake then they moved out to Washington, out to Klickitat, Washington,

Schenk: Who owned the saw mill at that time?

Wendt: It was the Neil's Lumber Company.

Schenk: And did they retain ownership of it after it moved out?

Wendt: Oh yea, until a couple of years ago. Now it's owned by Wirehauser. (Weyerhauser?)

Schenk: Oh, I see.

Wendt: Wirehauser now bought it. That Neil's that bought it was a that ran it was a brother of my father-in-law.

Schenk: Are they any relation to the Neil's who are in town now? Was that Neil's of Niles?

Wendt: Same thing—some said Neils and some said Niles. Yes, Rose Neil's father was also a brother and Theodore Neils, the attorney over there, who was the son of August Neils at the hardware store, and Sashandre and a few, he kept all those things and he's the one who started his brother up in the lumber business, in the saw mill business I understand because that brother, Tobias, originally was a school teacher and they burnt out in Spencer, Wisconsin when they had that fire in Spencer Wisconsin that time, then they moved down here.

Schenk: And then they started in the saw mill down here?

Wendt: Then they started the sawmill here.

Schenk: How was that powered?

Wendt: Steam engine.

Schenk: Oh, they used a steam engine, they didn't depend on water power.

Wendt: No, that was steam engine and then farther down almost down down to the edge, they had what they called the planing mill. That's where they surfaced the lumber, polished it up, and smoothed up the boards, and so forth and so on. That was a planing mill and that was run on steam engine, too.

Schenk: Was that lumber that was produced right here, sawed out, planed? —That was loaded right on the flat cars, box cars, and shipped out from this area?

Wendt: And shipped out from here, that is right. And now that same lumber is now shipped out from Washington to this county. And that was good pine lumber they had here. And after they came to that stuff what do they call it, they called it white pine for a while but it wasn't then the

courts made them change that number because it wouldn't stand up, it looked like white pine but it would rot from the inside.

Schenk: Well, that wasn't something like Jack Pine, was it?

Wendt: No, it wasn't Jack Pine, what did they call that stuff, I can't think of the name right now.

Schenk: What about Sartell, did they have the paper mill then at that time?

Wendt: No, that came later. The paper mill was supposed to go down below the bridge here.

There used to be a marking where they dug out a part on the bank about as wide as from here to there where the paper mill should be but some of these old foogies we had in town wanted too much money, you know we had these fellows—there was a fellow John Sen, Joe Coat, Herman Berg, Charlie Bail and old man Stanton, I guess those fellows wanted to make a lot of money out of this thing. So they wouldn't pay that much money, see? So, they moved up there. Now down here, if they would've gone below the bridge they'd had a solid granite bottom.

Schenk: Oh, a very good base for a dam.

Wendt: Yeah, wonderful, but they didn't let them come in. By the way, Sen and Herman Berg were on the school board at the time. And they were imbeciles. I was appointed on that board and of course after that Sen didn't get along so well. I had some help and we said some of these things got to be stopped and they were. But those were the fellows. That Sen had an office where Lenn Creek has his barber shop now.

Schenk: Well now, getting back up on the north end of town, how far north do the buildings actually go as compared with the village now?

Wendt: Up as far as the end of this street. Yeah, Eighth Street, that's right.

Schenk: Well, that would have been up to the, what is it, the old Fletcher property?

Wendt: The old Fletcher property was there. And there were houses on both sides, there were some houses, not all of them, some of them were built after that. But old Fletcher was there, but after that you didn't have anything. That was all bare yet.

Schenk: Now that must have been quite a mansion sitting up on the hill. Quite an impressive sight, wasn't it, with the other buildings?

Wendt: Yes, it was. Fletcher was a county officer and he had the biggest house around here. Yes, that is correct. Oh, I didn't tell you about this either, you know the now what's called the Parent Teacher's Association, well, I started the first Parents Teacher's Association as far as our church is concerned. Right here in Sauk Rapids, that's in 1925 I started that. They didn't have any other one at that time. That was in 1925. Now another thing, you know the principals of these schools, you know if you'd have some good teachers you know they'd find out about it, you know. There wasn't anything ethical about it. They'd try to hide them away so I thought to myself, let's change that. Let's get some ethics into this thing, so I started what they call a principals' conference. They would meet once a year, a principal's conference then we could hatch out some of these things and stop some of it, and it did work. I started that.

Schenk: Well now, getting back to some of the geographical sights and so on and the landmarks. What was the means for getting from this side of the river over to the other side of the river on the St. Cloud side?

Wendt: Those bridges were both there.

Schenk: Both bridges were there.

Wendt: They were there. This bridge in Sauk Rapids has been replaced since that time. But the St. Germain Street Bridge was there. That's been repaired several times. But that was there, but the bridge on Highway 23 was not there.

Schenk: Well that's just been put in recently. Well, how fast did Sauk Rapids actually grow, I mean from the time you came, for a period of time was it a rapidly expanding town or was it more or less kind of staying the same size for a number of years?

Wendt: Well, for a number of years it stayed pretty much what it was, I would say since that junior high school was built it started to grow more rapidly.

Schenk: That had quite an influence on it then?

Wendt: I think it did.

Schenk: Now the old senior high school, the old junior high, the upper elementary, I mean all in the same building. I guess you probably know it better as the old senior high school, now did that building have any additions put on it or was that built the same size as it is at the present time?

Wendt: Now do you mean the one on the hill?

Schenk: I mean the one on the hill, yes.

Wendt: That's the same size as what we built it at the time.

Schenk: How many youngsters were in the high school when it opened do you happen to remember about how many?

Wendt: Some twenty, something like that. Some twenty or twenty-five. Because I remember almost every year I had the valedictorian of pupils in my school, I guess I made them work harder than they did up there at that time.

Schenk: You kind of leaned on them a little bit.

Wendt: I'm afraid I did.

Schenk: And, of course, Mama and Papa had quite a little bit to say about things, too.

Wendt: Well, they watched more carefully than they do today. You see you didn't have, after that prohibition business it started in that the father was gone in the evening, downtown, you know and maybe mother would go along. Then afterward the movies came, and all these different things happened you know, parties and bridge club and what else all. That cut down and I'll tell you it made a difference because before that the mother, I always think it's the mother that did the most, she'd sit there with the children in the evening and she'd listen to those youngsters whether they really studied or not. When they knew their stuff, when they knew their memory work for instance, and that helped.

Schenk: Well, how was the school over here at Trinity financed at that time, did they pay tuition or was it by some other money raising activity?

Wendt: No, they first paid tuition, fifty cents a child or a dollar for two or more. And I got in more money than my salary was. But I had to turn that into the fish.

Schenk: Was that per month?

Wendt: That is for a month, yes. And they paid for twelve months a year. And we taught school till the fourth of July in those years.

Schenk: When did this other change?

Wendt: When I started writing state examinations, you know, it came to a close early.

Schenk: Well, was it closing to coincide with the public school?

Wendt: Yes.

Schenk: Was the public school staying open till that time too?

Wendt: No, we closed at the same time. When they wrote state examinations, we wrote them too.

Schenk: Well, I really enjoyed talking with you, I see we're just about out of tape. We have been talking with Mr. Wendt about a number of various landmarks, activities and various things about Sauk Rapids that have transpired since the time he came in 1903. Thanks a lot for talking to us Mr. Wendt.

Wendt: You're certainly welcome, I'm glad you came down.

Schenk: Well, thank you and it's really been a pleasure.