

StoryCorps Interview at the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library

Sue Olson and Ron Olson

SO: My grandmother was a first generation United States citizen and she had eight children. My father was the youngest. I came to learn that my grandmother, although she was married, essentially functioned as a single parent because my grandfather was absent for great lengths of time. She actually worked to support her family at the packing plant here in Cedar Rapids, at Wilson's. And as I grew older, I came to appreciate more how difficult it must've been for a woman in her era to be alone in the world with eight children and be solely responsible for the economics of the family as well as holding the family together.

RO: I remember you used to tell me about some of the things she would cook or bring over to your house.

SO: I think the cooking was the most fun in the traditional food. She made sauerkraut in her basement. The process is you shred it, and you salt it, and you vinegar it. And the brine, then, you drain off. I tell you, if you had a cold, her basement would clear out your sinuses immediately. That's really where I really learned to love sauerkraut. And of course we had kolaches. The kolaches were something that she created by hand—she made her own dough, and she beat it with one hand. I can still picture her holding that bowl in her left arm, off the counter, and a big spoon in her right hand and beating the dough. I can always remember the incredible size of the muscle on her right arm. I guess I just thought that's how grandmas looked—they had one big muscle and one kind of thin arm. But I'm sure, from beating the dough, she got that big muscle. She was a hard worker, even in retirement.

RO: Sue, you've been very involved with the museum. You're a board member now; you're past board chair. How did you get involved and what has your involvement been?

SO: You know, the reason I got involved really stems back to the stories I've told about my grandmother—and I also should mention the impression that my father made on me. His example of hard work and family stemming from my grandmother's hard work and family and I guess my own attitude toward hard work and family started to click with me and I thought it was time for me to give back a little, if I could, and to explore some more about what my Czech immigrant heritage had meant to me. So I agreed to go on the Board of Directors here. And the most important thing for me is to remember what a difference my heritage made to where I am today, the role models set by my grandmother and my father, but also to be aware that my behavior's shaping my children, and hoping that I can do as good a job with them—or have done as good a job with them—and that they will do that same great job with their children.