Interview with Leo Lassard

Marquette, MI

June 28, 2001

Interviewer: Dr. Russell Magnaghi

Transcribed: July 2, 2002

RM: Good morning Leo. Could we start out, what is your birthdate? How old are you?

LL: I am 85. I was born in 1914.

RM: Where were you born and where did you first live?

LL: Sault Saint Marie, MI. That was for a short time. I don’t remember exactly how old I was. My two brothers and myself and my sister all ended up in the orphanage located in the Upper Peninsula two miles out of Baraga...no two miles out of...I guess it was Baraga.

RM: That was Asonence

LL: Asonence, that’s it.

RM: So your background is Chippewa?
Interview with Leo Lassard

LL: Yes.

RM: So you're French Canadian and Chippewa.

LL: Yes.

RM: Could you tell us a little about what life was like at the orphanage?

LL: It was a teaching... I went to school there and also the kids were used for chores. My brother used to take care of the milking of the cows. Also we had to go out and look for them. We'd go out in the morning and look for them in the bushes. Then we had to listen for the bell that they wore around their neck. That's the way we found them. Sometimes it was difficult to find them if they were far away or if they were quiet. The was one of our chores, chasing the cows. We also had to work on the farm, planting potatoes and other vegetables. What else did we do?

RM: Did you have to keep the place in order, clean the facility?

LL: One of the chores I remember was in the spring of the year the potatoes were all put into cement room. We had to sort them out, throw out the rotten ones, which was a smelly job. One of the things I remember going to school was if you were caught doing something you shouldn't be doing you'd get a ruler on your wrist with the sharp edge hitting your hand. It wasn't flat. That happened to me a couple times.
Interview with Leo Lassard

RM: What were the names of your brothers and sisters that were there?

LL: My brother George was there. He was the oldest. I was the second. Ida was the third oldest. Walter was the youngest one. There was something to do all the time, either working on the farm or going to school.

RM: Why did your... your father sent you to the orphanage?

LL: My parents separated then.

RM: What were their names?

LL: George and Alice.

RM: So your father was left at home with the four children.

LL: Yes. We were in the orphanage by that time.

RM: How long did you stay in the orphanage?

LL: About 4 years.
Interview with Leo Lassard

RM: So when you came out how old were you about?

LL: Oh, I don't exactly remember how old I was.

RM: A teenager?

LL: Close to a teenager.

RM: Then where did you go?

LL: Back to Sault Saint Marie. We were living with??? my father was a bootlegger.

RM: Tell me a little about that.

LL: My father used to make beer and moonshine. We used to help him with it. We also had to clean all the bottles. He invented a bottle cleaning thing that you hook onto the cold water and you turn the water on and shot the water into the bottle and knocked all that yeast out. There was also, about a quarter of a bottle of yeast from the beer. That would wash it out. That's all the cleaning we had. My brother George, he milked the cows. All of us went out, well George, and I and Walter would have to go out and look for the cows every day.
Interview with Leo Lassard

RM: This was at the orphanage. What about making moonshine? Did you make
moonshine?

LL: No, I didn't do that. All I did was wash out the beer bottles.

RM: What did your father do, sell the liquor?

LL: Oh yes. He had customers coming to pick it up. I sampled it myself and found that
it was horrible.

RM: What did he do for a living when he wasn't making moonshine?

LL: I think he was a bar tender in a beer ???

RM: At Sault Saint Marie. After that what did you do? Did you go to high school at
Sault Saint Marie?

LL: No, I went through grade school. High school, I never went to high school. I never
graduated. But I got along.

RM: What did you do for a job? What occupation did you get into?
Interview with Leo Lassard

LL: The first job that I had was working in a shoe shine parlor, shining shoes for a dollar a day. I worked from 8:00 in the morning until 9:00 at night 7 days a week. My brother also worked there. Through working at the shoe shining parlor, it was located right next door to the theater. I got a job in the theater as an usher.

RM: Was that the DePaul family at the Soo that had the theater?

LL: DePaul.

RM: What was the name of your brother that was helping you?

LL: George.

RM: So you did that for a while.

LL: I did that until I got a job in the theater as an usher. The theater operated 7 days a week. It usually opened around noon and stayed...the box office closed at 10:00 at night. So it was a long time.

RM: How much did you get paid there?

LL: A dollar a day.
Interview with Leo Lassard

RM: During this time you didn’t sell any of the moonshine; you weren’t doing that.

LL: No, I never got a hold of that.

RM: Just the bottles. You’d clean the bottles. Any other jobs that you had?

LL: I was an usher.

RM: And what did you do there?

LL: I didn’t do anything there.

RM: Then what happened after that? Did you work on the ore boats?

LL: Yes, I sailed on the ore boats as a porter.

RM: How did you get that job?

LL: Through talking to other people. That was a dollar a day.

RM: So you worked as a porter on the ore boats. Did you have any wild rides in storms on the boats?

LL: Yes, but none that I was really afraid. Usually the boat went like this.

RM: Did you get sea sick?
Interview with Leo Lassard

LL: No, that was one thing, I never got sea sick. A lot of people did.

RM: You were lucky. So you were a porter for a while, what other jobs did you have on the boat?

LL: Then I was promoted to second cook. I was making pastries.

RM: Deserts and salads and whatnot?

LL: Yes.

RM: Did they feed the sailors well on the ore boats?

LL: Very good. Otherwise they wouldn't last. They would get off.

RM: So you did that for how many years?

LL: I don't know... several years. There would be a layoff every December until the spring.

RM: So what would you do in the winter?

LL: Loaf.
Interview with Leo Lassard

RM: So you made pretty good money on the ore boat.

LL: Yes. It was a 7 day a week job. Of course I started in the spring and usually end up in November... I should give you a chance to write some of this down.

RM: I can ask questions. So you didn't have any real bad storms.

LL: There were some. We'd always have something.

RM: But nothing that really worried you. What did you do when you got done? Did you return to the Soo and develop a job there?

LL: I didn't do anything. I just loafed.

RM: In the off season. Then when you got done working on the ore boats, what did you do?

LL: I went back home and loafed. I never had much schooling.

RM: Did you... interact with the Indian community, the Chippewa community over at the Soo?
Interview with Leo Lassard

LL: No. In fact, people thought they were a little down on the order of Indians. Actually, I didn’t look like an Indian. My skin was white. But my background...

RM: It wasn’t wise to publish it at that time?

LL: The thing is we were considered low life people. You didn’t say there was any Indian in you. They’d all say you were stupid.

RM: So there was a lot of prejudice against the Indians, if they knew you were, then you’d be called that. So that was when you were growing up, pretty much throughout your life. What do you think of what’s happened to day over at the Soo with the casino and all the expansion of the Indian community over there?

LL: They’re some smart Indians.

RM: Do you benefit from any of that?

LL: None whatever. No. Of course, there are different classes of Indians. I don’t have Indian blood.

RM: So you’re not on the role then.

LL: No.
RM: Was it your father's family or your mother's family?

LL: Father. My mother was English...no not English.

RM: Irish? Scotch?

LL: Scotch. McKenzie was her name.

RM: And she was from the Soo as well.

LL: She was from the Soo.

RM: What did you eventually do in terms of...or did you work on the ore boats all your life?

LL: No I didn't. I moved to Flint, MI and I got a job as a shoe shine boy. Shoe shine parlors opened up at 8:00 in the morning and closed at 8:00 at night. That was for a dollar a day plus tips. You should have given me some time. I would have sat down and wrote some of this out. It comes to your mind easier.

RM: Maybe I can...you were in Flint. Did you ever work for the automobile companies in Flint? You shined shoes, did you do anything else in Flint? Any other...
LL: Yes. I did work for the automobile company, but I can't remember what year it was.

RM: Buick is there...

LL: Buick, Chevrolet, DC Spark Plug...

RM: So you worked there for a while.

LL: Yes, I worked at Chevrolet.

RM: The spark plug place?

LL: Yes.

LL: DC Spark Plug. I hope that's where I was. If anybody reads this and checks through, The records go way back. That would be in the '20s.

RM: The 1920s is when you were doing that?

LL: Yes.

RM: then did you return to Sault Saint Marie from Flint?

LL: The boats didn't operate me in November until spring.
RM: So you worked in Flint. Did you stay in Flint the rest of your life? Or did you move?

LL: Yes, I stayed there most of my years.

RM: When did you return to the Upper Peninsula?

LL: What year did we just finish?

RM: You were working down in Flint in the 1920s.

LL: Yes.

RM: Are your brothers and sister still alive?

LL: Yes. They're all scattered all over.

RM: Did you... when you were growing up in the orphanage, were you an altar boy?

LL: Yes. I learned the Latin Mass.
Interview with Leo Lassard

RM: Getting back to the orphanage, were you treated well there? Except for getting hit on the hands with the ruler?

LL: Yes. I wouldn't say we were mistreated.

RM: So it's a pleasant memory for you. Were you able to leave the orphanage and take trips home? Or once you were there...

LL: No, you stayed there for the whole period. It was difficult to get a ride home, but there were 4 of us.

RM: Did your father ever visit you?

LL: I think I remember him visiting us once. He came up with a friend of his and had an old Ford. They came in to see us.

RM: When did you move to Marquette?

LL: There again... if I was writing the history...

RM: You'd get it then. But you did live in Marquette for a period of time.

LL: Yes.
RM: When you were growing up, did you ever go out and gather things in the woods like nuts or berries?

LL: Oh yes. We went out and picked blue berries. They were used for the meals at the orphanage. There was about 20 or 30 boys there, all young ones and in their teens.

RM: So that was one of the jobs, talking about the different jobs you had at the orphanage.

LL: Yes, and like I said, my brother was in charge of the cows. We planted the gardens, potatoes and we had an orchard with apples and...

RM: Pears?

LL: No, there weren’t any pears, but I remember lots of apples.

RM: So you’d pick them and they would use the apples for the...

LL: Apple sauce.

RM: How about apple pie?
Interview with Leo Lassard

LL: Yes.

RM: So the orphanage was self sufficient. It provided everybody with food that was living there. Who were the priests up there? Capatian Fathers? Franciscan Fathers? Were there nuns?

LL: There were nuns. I don’t remember what order they belonged to. If you went to the library and looked up the old newspapers or whatever...

RM: Alright, well I think I got everything I wanted. Is there anything else you want to comment on that I haven’t asked, that you remember?

LL: No, that’s about it.

RM: You have sons and daughters?

LL: Yes, I have two kids.

RM: Do they live in Sault Saint Marie or here in Marquette.

LL: They live in Marquette.
RM: Okay. Well this has been very interesting getting some of this background. I know you’ve told me about it a while back and I wanted to get it on tape. It was very interesting. Very good. Thank you.