

## INTERVIEW WITH KATE (RICE) CHIESA BY KAY PALMCOOK, 2009

INTERVIEWER: Kay Palmcook

INTERVIEWEE: Kate (Rice) Chiesa

### **Kate's family in Oconto Falls – First hearing of the FANTASTIC wages offered by Henry Ford at the Ford Plant in Kingsford, Michigan**

**KATE:** In **Oconto Falls** – which is a paper mill town – we heard about the fantastic wages that Henry Ford was paying his workers and believe it or not many people did not believe that this was possible. My Uncle **Rollie** [?] was among them. And, my dad said, “I am going up there and I am going to look it over.” And so he did. But, there were already people from Oconto Falls that were already established here, and so my dad looked up **Charlie Lauersdorf**. Charlie was a carpenter of the first order. He was busily, very busily, employed, and had quite a number of men working for him building houses. So my dad got a job while he was waiting to get into the plant. Whenever they [*potential employees*] heard that they [*Ford Motor Company*] might be hiring, there were a large number of men who would gather at the gate, and then, when they thought that it would be all right, they would call men in and interview them one at a time. Of course, men were used to working hard and they had many occupations, and chief among them was farming. Many of them were loathe to leave their farms. They didn't want to leave them, but they wanted this fantastic wage and so they left their family to take care of the farms and they found a place to sleep – that was their main [*goal*] after the work was done – was a place to sleep. At that time there were a number of people who rented out their basements. They had cots and they rented out the basements to the men and sometimes some of them had three different shifts on the same bed. But these women were interested in getting ahead and so they would keep the beds clean, and of course, many of the people had

worked in lumber camps and they knew how to behave themselves. There was no rowdiness. You were too tired! They wanted to sleep! Everything was very orderly, and many of these places also boarded the people sleeping that were sleeping in the basement. It was quite a thing to see them stream out of the house with pails, dinner pails, that the woman had put up at so much [*cost - ?*]. At one time there was also a company that brought food into the Ford Plant and the name of that was **LaBrecque** [*Al La Brecque*]. They had a special gate in the fence for this wagon that would go in with the food. There were several wagons that would leave and go into the plant with the food. They would sell the food there and the men would eat it there. That was quite a novelty!

### **Moving to Kingsford – First seeing the Ford smokestacks from a distance (TAPE GLITCHES)**

**KATE:** About to build a house, **Charlie Lauersdorf** hired him [*Kate's father*] to work for him until he got a job at the plant. That was fine with my dad, and he made the deal and so that the house was built without any doors or windows. But, my dad figured, “Well, I might just as well go down and get the rest of [*the*] family.” He came down and he supervised the moving and loading the trucks. We had two trucks that brought tout furniture and we rode in the car. We rode ahead. We didn't have to eat the trucks' dust because the main highway was nothing but sand. There were no paved roads or anything like that. We went northward and finally we came to the hill outside of **Niagara** [*Wisconsin*]. We looked in the distance and saw these two huge – we didn't know what they were – chimneys. And we said to Dad, “What is that?” And Dad said, “Well, we are going to move pretty close to them.” He said, “Not very far.” And so we thought that was

## INTERVIEW WITH KATE (RICE) CHIESA BY KAY PALMCOOK, 2009

wonderful. And then he said, "Wait until you hear the whistle!" We came on and finally we arrived and of course we were all tired. We had something to eat and then we all went to bed. We were just exhausted. We ran around the yard and there were still some fir trees and some bushes, and we just thought this was the most wonderful place in the world. Of course, running in and out of the house without any doors and crawling out of the windows without any panes – that was a lot of fun, too. Finally, we went to bed. The next morning things were a little different. We had to pitch in and help. It's doubtful how much help we gave, but we tried. That day they put in the windows and the doors. We went to bed that night feeling very secure because the night before in a strange place with no windows and doors...we didn't like that, but everything was fine.

### **Attending elementary school...new students every day...makeshift school buildings**

**KATE:** We moved up the 11<sup>th</sup> of August and so school hadn't opened up yet. And it was opening, and, of course, we were all wanted [*wanting*] to know where we were going to school. We had never been to the west side of **Breitung**, and that was where the school was. We had heard that they had moved in some rooming quarters that the men had used when they had built the **Ford Plant – portable schools** – so they were moved and they were in back of the regular school which was a stucco building. Now, I don't know if that was built for a school or not, but at any rate, I got to go into that building and my brothers and sisters went out into the other buildings and they were just in a shack! Every day we would go to school and every day there would be five new students. And, in no time at all, the room was full of students...and, where to put them? There

wasn't any place and so we had to go in shifts. Half of the school went in the morning and half in the afternoon. We went to school in the first part of the school year either in the morning or in the afternoon, and they you traded so that everybody was treated equally. That is the way we went to school.

### **Building the community**

**KATE:** It was so exciting because everywhere you turned people were busy. They were hauling lumber; they were pounding on their houses. They had grandfathers, uncles...they had everybody getting these houses built. Many women pounded on the walls putting up plasterboard after their husbands left for work. They worked maybe until 10:00 or 11:00 at night, and maybe until he came home. And it was so exciting because wherever you turned you met someone new, and everybody was so...you know, you were just like a friend. You were a friend, and there were no enemies. There were only friends and helping friends... people that wanted to help you. Many men banded together and would work on one person's house and then go and work on another person's house. That way, it was a lot easier because some of the men could do one thing well and somebody else could do something else well. The houses went up, and it was incredible how fast those houses went up. A lot of them only had one floor, but, thank goodness, they had all of their windows and doors! I had to throw that in! Everybody helped everybody, and if anybody got sick, immediately there was a procession of people bringing food to that person's house. If anybody would see the doctor come, everybody went out and stood out and waited until the doctor left, and then somebody tried [*to*] find out what was wrong. Always, people would help each other. If you broke a limb, if you were sick, there was always somebody to help you

## INTERVIEW WITH KATE (RICE) CHIESA BY KAY PALMCOOK, 2009

and help the family in general. This trading of work went on until the old-timers died. It went on for years afterwards. It was a good feeling. It was a feeling of togetherness, of family, and that is something we don't have now. It's too bad, but that's the way things are. I don't know if anyone else has ever experienced a town in the building. They should have come to **Kingsford** because that was really and truly like a frontier town would go up alongside the railroad tracks. That's about the way it was, and new businesses were being established all over the place. We had more barbers, people that fixed your shoes. We had I don't know how many grocery stores that started and one big meat market. I don't know how many boarding houses, but it was really quite a place, and a place that those that lived in it through that period will never forget.

**KATE:** [UNCLEAR] worked on the production line and there they cut this raw lumber into pieces which they made into parts – wooden parts – for the cars of that day and one of the reasons that the **Ford Plant** went out of business is because they no longer used wood in the building of cars. But from these products that were left over – sawdust – they made briquettes out of. They produced many different kinds of alcohol and different products – caustic things – and many different products that I wouldn't even know about. And they had a **Mr. Devine** that was the head of the...

**INTERVIEWER:** Mr. Devine was the head of the **Chemical Plant**?

**KATE:** He was the head of the – where they did their experiments.

**INTERVIEWER:** OK.

**KATE:** He was a **chemist**. They had a chemistry department and Mr. Devine was the head of it. They produced many different kinds [of] products from the wood, but first came the experiments. Then, of course, the **Chemical Plant** was running which manufactured mostly the briquettes. The briquettes were so much in demand that they could hardly keep up with them

and that took a lot, and when the wooden parts were no longer manufactured, they still kept the Chemical Plant and used wood products. Then there was no more wood used until they made the **gliders**, and then they used the wood, but it was a small amount compared to what they had used.

**INTERVIEWER:** The gliders? Tell us a little bit about that.

**KATE:** [TAPE CUTS OUT AND BEGINS]

After the rest of the Ford Plant was done with – as a matter of fact, it was purchased by another company, but my dad was still working in the **Chemical Plant**, and so when the day came when everything was closed down, my dad came home, and he looked kind of pale. He stood in the doorway, and he walked in and the first thing he said was, "Well, the job is over. It's done with." Tears came to his eyes and streamed down his face. I cried because I had never seen my dad cry, not even when my mother died. He didn't cry that I had seen, and so, as a consequence, I felt it was an emotional shock, something like when World War II began. You just couldn't believe it. Then, later on, of course, I did see him cry one more time when he had to go and ask for relief. He said no Rice has ever had to ask for relief and he cried.

### Hank – Henry Ford, the person

**KATE:** Hank was Mr. Ford, Henry. He was quite a guy. He could talk and he could get along with the common man. He was at the same time...he was THE BOSS. And, it is told about... One day they were looking for Henry and they couldn't find him. He and **Mr. Edison** were...they couldn't find them anyplace. They looked all over town. He was late for...they were holding a dinner for him where they stayed and ate, so this man that told me this – I can't think of his name – he got an idea. He knew Henry pretty well because he used to drive him around. Wherever [Whenever] Henry wanted to go, he would ask for him, and he

## INTERVIEW WITH KATE (RICE) CHIESA BY KAY PALMCOOK, 2009

would drive him wherever he wanted to go. On this day, he thought, well, I think I know where Henry is. It's about the only place he hadn't looked. So, he went down to the dime store – **Woolworth's**, the dime store – and there was **Henry and Mr. Edison** with their feet up. They were having lunch at the lunch counter while everybody was waiting for him at the place where he stayed.

He loved to take his friends out in the woods and their favorite **camping ground was down beyond the Ford Airport**. They never told anyone when they were coming, and he was just like the rest of the boys.

One day he went into the **Ford Plant** and he was walking around, and Henry was kind of tall...and this low-hanging pipe knocked his hat off. He called the boss over and he said, "The next time I walk by here," he said, "that had better be higher than my hat." So, the next time Henry walked by, it was fixed; never knocked his hat off again, and that's the way he was. But, at the same time, he was very...just like the rest of us. If he saw that someone was in trouble, if your car was stuck, he got out and pushed just like everybody else. If he got muddy, he just brushed it off, just like everybody else. And he was especially kind to Ford cars. He liked them – to just shove off the dirt – and helping the people that drove them because he felt a kinship toward them. There are a lot of little tales about Hank and it just made him one of us. That's what it made him seem like...just like one of us, and that part is pretty good.

From the Ford Plant, when they ran it, they had huge belts and during the course of time these belts wore so that Henry – everything had to be run very well...nothing slipshod – and so, these belts would be removed and sent out to the garbage or to the fill and they were expected to stay. You weren't to take the belts, but if you worked

at the plant and the gatemen often looked the other way when you walked out with something you weren't supposed to. And why they wouldn't want you to walk out with a used belt...you had to stop and think that maybe someone would walk out with a good one, so nobody was supposed to walk out with anything. But Dad would wrap this belt underneath his shirt and he would walk out the gate. He would come home and then he would shoe us. He would repair our shoes with this belting. At first he cut it and he would slice it because it was too thick and they were greasy. And so, when Dad would make soles for our shoes, we weren't welcome in the kitchen because it left marks on the floor, and had to be scrubbed out. But, I'll tell you, if you have ever had a pair [of] shoes shod with one of Dad's soles, it was something else because it didn't bend very easy. You had to wear them out in the mud and the rain before they were pliable. For a few days we would walk around like we were on wooden stilts or wooden shoes because you couldn't bend them. But, then after they became pliable they were OK. That's how we saved many a penny on shoes or even having the shoes fixed, which I believe at that time you could get your shoes fixed for 25 cents. Now that's not bad.

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you show us here?

**KATE:** Just to show how far down it went in the family, this is the shoe last for the baby. Everybody had their shoes...

**INTERVIEWER:** Where was the rubber applied? How did he hammer the rubber on that?

**KATE:** Oh. there was a stand and this pipe went up and this fit on it, and then Dad nailed the leather on as best he could, and then he cut it like that, and then he would cut it about there. And we always thought if he could have cut it off here it would make it more flexible, but Dad didn't think so. And so we had them shod that way. We very seldom had leather applied on the heels. Usually shoes had rubber heels and they

## INTERVIEW WITH KATE (RICE) CHIESA BY KAY PALMCOOK, 2009

lasted longer than the soles. That's pretty cute!

**INTERVIEWER:** And he used rubber from the Ford Plant?

**KATE:** No. shoes were made with rubber heels...most of them. If you remember – no, you are too young – the black marks on the floor were the housewife's abomination. You got them by your heels, but not after they were worn. But for some reason or another, Dad never fixed any heels. Not to my knowledge. Never any of mine.

### Glider project

**KATE:** We were very happy when they heard we were going to manufacture gliders. They didn't know what they were, but they had heard about them, and they knew they were lighter than air...the air aircraft and that it was for the war effort and so everybody waited to see what and how they made the gliders. The men were called into work and instructed on how to produce these gliders which was more complicated than you would think because it was sort of like women's work. They had to apply this cloth to the wings of the glider and the body of the glider and it had to be done with precision and it had to be done right because these flimsy contraptions were going to carry our soldiers to the front where the gliders would zoom over after being cut from the planes, and they would land in back of the lines, which I believe was the primary purpose. The soldiers were fully equipped to do battle and so the production of gliders began in Kingsford with some misgivings. But everybody was happy to contribute to the art of the air effort and to do their part in the war. Somebody asked my husband, "Would you go up in one of those gliders?" because the men looked at the flimsiness of them, and they couldn't imagine anyone going up in a glider, let alone sailing all by yourself free of the tow. And he said, "Yes, I'll get in one so long as I have one foot on the ground." And that's the way some of them felt.

Finally they did get a few. They got in the glider when they pulled it out and people became less...they began to see the possibilities...and what these gliders could do in the war effort. Today, we have a sample here of part of the glider. And, if you could feel how light it is, you would marvel. Even *[if]* it were a big constructed – largely – it would still be terribly light. And imagine just putting cloth...gluing cloth on it. Now this had to go through all kinds of weather and it had to go up in the air where the pressures were probably very great against it. You can see you might think twice before you took a ride.

**INTERVIEWER:** [TAPE GLITCHES HERE] Ford car?

**KATE:** We started going in our Ford. My dad never had anything but Fords. That was the car to have. You could even beat it and it still went. On this particular Sunday we were going to **Kelly Lake** which meant when we went for a ride on Sunday, there was a lunch prepared. There was always potato salad. If you went on this trip picking berries, you still had potato salad and some cake, if you were lucky. And, of course, sandwiches – bologna sandwiches. That's all we could afford. So the little lunch – and, oh, I forgot – lemonade. Yuck! Usually the lemonade was too sour to drink. But anyway, we had lemonade and we would go on these trips and we never – it was never predecided *[insert instead "decided beforehand"]*. It was always *[decided]* in the car where we would go. "We don't care, Dad." Dad would take us where he thought we should go. We went to Kelly Lake and Kelly Lake was a pretty popular resort. It was very beautiful there, but, like all roads in those days, there were muddy places – very muddy! So we would come to this mud puddle, but my dad didn't care. He'd go through. He'd step on the gas and mud would fly and we generally made it through, but this time we didn't. And it was Sunday, and we were all dressed up...Dad in his white shirt. So he gets out of the car and he kind of doesn't

## INTERVIEW WITH KATE (RICE) CHIESA BY KAY PALMCOOK, 2009

know just kind of how things are going to go. And he said to my stepmother, **Anna**, who is a new bride, "Anna, when I say step on the gas, give it the gas!" He was back there pushing and he said, "Step on the gas, Anna!" And Anna stepped on the gas and she was kind of afraid to really step on the gas, so she was kind of light on the foot...not on the foot...on the spark. We didn't go anyplace, and so we tried it again, and no dice. Then Dad walks around very quietly and says, "Anna, when I say give it the gas, GIVE IT THE GAS!" He goes back and takes up his position to push on the back of the car and he pushes and Anna sure did give it the gas...and we FLEW out of the mud puddle! Dad walks around the car and we look at him and he is mud head to foot. We don't are laugh because we don't know how Dad is going to take this. He walks up to where Anna is sitting behind the wheel, and he said, "Well, Anna, when I said 'give it the gas,' you sure did!"

**[LAUGHTER]**

**INTERVIEWER:** What would happen?

**KATE:** Well, Henry Ford was quite a character, and if you were driving a Ford and he saw you stuck in the mud, old Henry got out of the car, and, with the people that were with him, they shoved you out of the puddle and everybody...that made him one of everyone. He was just like the next guy because he would...no matter how much money he had or position or anything...we would help shove you out of a mud hole and he did!

**[TAPE GLITCHES] 35:40 END OF TAPE...INTERVIEW ENDS HERE.**

**KATE:** *...long ways on these very bumpy and dusty roads whenever you went for a ride. If you wanted to ride dust free, then you had to go in the front of the car. You had to drive around the car in front of you and so mile after mile finally we came to the top of a hill outside of Niagara, and that would be south and Dad paused. [Sounds like repetition of earlier story] and in the distance we could see these two huge*

*smokestacks and we said, "Dad, what are those?"*

Transcribed by: Melody Neece

Date: November 3, 2009

**1<sup>st</sup> draft**

Edited by William J. Cummings

Date: November 10, 2009

*Iron Mountain News, Iron Mountain, Dickinson County, Michigan, \_\_\_\_\_ Year, Number \_\_\_\_\_ [Friday, June 12, 1925], page 2, columns 2-3*

### ***Traveling Restaurant Is Popular With Ford Men***

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### **Six Carts Pulled by Tractor Used to Distribute Food to Workers.**

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Every day at 10:30 a.m. and at 6:30 p.m., six white carts, pulled by a tractor, wind their way into five buildings at the Ford plant.

And more than 700 Ford employes [*sic* – *employees*] anxiously and patiently wait for the carts to come to a stop.

There is a reason.

The carts are loaded with coffee, milk, pasties, meat and fruit, pies, lunch baskets, candy, salted peanuts, ice cream and other delicacies. The "grub wagons" or the "traveling restaurants," as the employes [*sic* – *employees*] call them, are owned by Al LaBrecque, who was given the concession by the Ford Motor company.

The carts are especially designed to carry the containers of food and keep them warm. They are equipped with rubber tired wheels and are a most efficient method in which to distribute the food.

## INTERVIEW WITH KATE (RICE) CHIESA BY KAY PALMCOOK, 2009

LaBrecque has a force of six men taking care of the carts, which are pulled into the three body plants, the maintenance building and the sawmill. The concession owner sells little lunch boxes, containing four sandwiches and a piece of fruit pie, for a reasonable price and they are very popular with the Ford workers.

The extent of his sales may be judged by one item alone. LaBrecque claiming that he sells more packages of salted peanuts at the Ford plant in one day than all the confectionery stores in Iron Mountain put together.

LaBrecque was given the concession at the plant in the winter of 1921 and worked it alone when he started. Today the business has nine employes [*sic* – *employees*], including a baker, and a \$30,000 building, 30x60 feet, on Breitung avenue, which borders the Fort [*sic* – *Ford*] plant on the south side.

The building is one of the most modern in the village, is two stories high and has a full basement. La Brecque has automatic bread and meat cutters, ice boxes, an over and a steam room which cost approximately \$2,000.

During the Ford log fire Monday afternoon and night, LaBrecque served more than 500 employes [*sic* – *employees*] with food. A check-up today showed that he distributed 160 gallons of coffee, 140 pints of milk, 2,077 sandwiches, 79 box lunches, 100 pasties, 200 meat pies and more than 150 hot dogs. The Ford company will pay for the food furnished the firemen.