

Interviewee: Stanley "Stub" Preston
Interviewer: Glenn Leggett
Date of Interview: February 13, 1992
Transcriber: Jennifer Wolfson

Stanley "Stub" Preston
Side One

Glenn Leggett [GL]: Today is Tuesday morning, ten o'clock. We're going to be talking to Stub Preston in his room at the Mayflower. I'm doing this oral history interview for the Friends of Stewart Library who have this oral history project about Grinnell during the Depression and World War II. Stub Preston, would you tell us something about the early years in Grinnell and about your family?

Stub Preston [SP]: Yeah. I was born 823 East Street in Grinnell. May 30th, 1903 They tell me it was on the kitchen table, which was adjacent to the bathroom and my mother would be taken into a hot tub and then brought out on the kitchen table for the delivery. Doctor Wiley was the doctor, E.B. Wiley. Nice person, bedside manner was wonderful. He could make you feel better than any medicine that was ever made.

GL: Well tell us about your family. Were you the oldest in the family or the youngest? Or where did you come in?

SP: I had a sister who was four years older than I am. She now lives in Des Moines. My Dad had worked for various clothing stores in Grinnell when he found an empty room on Fourth Avenue which he occupied for a short time. And then the old Merchant's National Bank folded and the corner building, the northeast corner of Fourth Avenue and Main Street, became vacant, and he had moved into that building. He was there from 1896, I believe, until I retired from the clothing business in 1965.

GL: That's the building that's now known as the Preston building, isn't it?

SP: Spencer Building is the name on the corner of it. Spencer was the name of the banker who got in so much trouble he drowned himself in the lake with his son.

GL: Was this Arbor Lake?

SP: Yeah, uh huh.

GL: Tell me something about Arbor Lake. It was a kind of swimming and recreational area, wasn't it, when you were growing up?

SP: Yeah, I don't know why it was built, just recreational purposes, I guess. It had about three or four bath houses around the length of time that I can remember.

GL: What did you do to entertain yourself when you were a boy growing up?

SP: Did a lot of things we shouldn't have done, I'm sure.

GL: What school did you go to?

SP: Went to Cooper School.

GL: Cooper School. That's gone now too, isn't it?

SP: Yeah. It's a parking lot now for the college cars.

GL: Tell me, Stub, do you remember any of the teachers you had at Cooper School?

SP: Yes, one of them was Miss O'Rawson She was from Kellogg and her punishment was to whack the back of the person's hand with the edge of the ruler. It was supposed to be punishment for misdemeanors in the class. We spoke earlier of the lake. That was built to pump water out of it for the industry in town. Had a pumping station in one corner; it was a yellow brick building, and it pumped water uptown to the various industries. I suppose, to Spaulding and to Laros, the washing machine factory run by Jesse Fellows. The other industry was a glove company, a glove factory.

GL: This was started by Mr. Lannom, was it?

SP: No, Mr. Lannom didn't have — It was — Dave was his first name, I can't think of his name now.

GL: We'll be talking about industry in the town a little later. But I want to get back to Cooper School. Was most of the emphasis in those days on reading and writing and arithmetic?

SP: That was it. As I remember, that's about the only thing we studied other than geography.

GL: Did you go there for all six grades?

SP: I was in the old Center School on the — was an old wooden building, by where the City Center is now. I went there I think for a year. I remember one of the teachers was Miss Bray and she scolded one of the boys because he wore overalls to school. I thought he had a perfect right to wear overalls to school if he wanted to, but he had to dig up a suit to come to school in. Which I thought was not very democratic.

GL: What were the years that you were in those grades schools?

SP: Cooper School from kindergarten to third or fourth grade, and then to this school where the city center is for maybe a year. And about that time I went into the high school, I believe.

GL: But the junior high school and the high school were in the same building, roughly, weren't they?

SP: Yeah, yeah. The high school was at the south end of that structure. It was a two or three story building. Had a big assembly, they called it, where all study periods were. If you were pretty courageous, why you wouldn't go to the assembly. You'd go to town, and stop at Candyland, I suppose.

GL: Where was Candyland?

SP: Where Cunningham's is.

GL: Where Cunningham's is now.

SP: Candyland had half that building and A. D. Talbott had the other half, a drugstore. A. D. was a brother of Dr. Talbott. The doctor and his brother, the druggist, kind of interlocked.

GL: Do you remember any of the teachers you had in high school?

SP: Yeah, Johnnie Cecil was a teacher. There was one teacher who would patrol the halls and crack the whip and kept order. Can't tell you her name now. But she was quite a — She ruled the land with an iron hand. Her mind was not wicked and low, though.

GL: [laughs] What year did you graduate from high school?

SP: 1922.

GL: 1922. What sort of extracurricular activities did you participate in? Music? Sports?

SP: They had a band. I think I played the drum in the band for a year or two. And football, of course. Grinnell had a good football team. Had a good basketball team. Went to two tournaments, I think. Had two state tournaments, one in Ames and one in Iowa City. And Grinnell went to one of those and came out real well.

GL: Are there any people in town now who were in high school with you that you remember?

SP: Sure there's got to be —

GL: 1922. Was Art McDowell?

SP: Art McDowell was out of school for a while and he went to Grinnell while I was in school, I'm quite sure.

GL: Did you go right from high school to Grinnell College?

SP: Yes.

GL: Did you live on campus or did you live at home?

SP: I lived at home.

GL: Do you remember any of your classmates at the college at that time?

SP: Well, I remember one of my teachers, Mrs. Robert Y. Kerr who ended up real close to the White House.

GL: Florence Kerr.

SP: Florence Kerr, right. Wonderful woman.

GL: She was a graduate of the place too, wasn't she?

SP: Of Grinnell College? I think so. She was very good to me. At one time I wanted to – Want me to go ahead with this?

GL: Yes, please do.

SP: I wanted to get authorization to sell uniforms during the war. We had an OCS unit at the college barracked up in the college dormitories. And I wanted to get authorized to sell uniforms and I couldn't get anything accomplished from the quartermaster corps in Philadelphia. I called her – somehow I got her phone number – and I called her in Washington and told her the problem. I couldn't get the uniforms. I had to have them. The class graduated in December and this was September probably. And I said, "I want you to do something if you can to get these uniforms for me." And she said, "I don't know whether I can do that but I'll go over and see Captain Black." (I think the man's name was.) And she went over and saw him and I had the uniforms shipped soon. She cracked the whip and got things done. The uniforms got lost in the Chicago freight yards. And the express man in Grinnell came to me and he said, "I understand you've got uniforms coming in and they're lost." And I said, "Yes they are, and I need them real bad." He said, "Well, you give me your permission and I'll get into the freightcars in the Chicago stockyards and find them and bring them out express." And he did. The express bill was seventy-six dollars. We had them a very short time, and I had to send the boys up at the barracks appointments to see me for fifteen minutes to get their measurements and pick out their uniforms and get them tailored for them. My wife helped me unpack the uniforms when I finally got them. We were busy all day taking fittings and getting the stuff out to various people in town who could do tailoring. One tailor couldn't possibly do it. We got them all graduated and we got them all uniformed. I wasn't making much money on those uniforms. I had it limited to twenty-five percent markup and I wanted to do something about that. So I went into Chicago and talked to Hart, Shaffner and Marx. I wanted to sell their made-to-measure uniforms. And although my credit was good, I would be

buying fifteen twenty thousand dollars worth of uniforms and I'd been used to paying my bills, which were five hundred to a thousand dollars. So it was quite an increase in credit. And I argued with him and he didn't want to say that he'd send them to me, that he'd let me sell them. And finally I said, "Now you know, I don't collect the money from these graduates. They sign a voucher that they'd gotten uniforms and then the post exchange brings down the bill and gives me the check." Well, when they found out that that's the way I'd pay for the bills that I bought from them, from Hart, Shaffner and Marx, why, that was OK. We went along and as soon as we could we got them into made-to measure uniforms which carried a forty percent markup.

GL: Now, you were running the store at that particular time. Was your father alive?

SP: Yeah. Dad died in 1954, so he was alive and around. He didn't stop me on anything. He let me go, and it was quite an experience. The second lieutenants wanted their uniforms to fit like the paper on the wall. [GL chuckles] If I ever learned about alterations, I learned it there.

GL: Stub, let's go back to your days as a college student. What professor do you remember most clearly?

SP: John Ryan.

GL: John was a speech professor, wasn't he?

SP: Yes.

GL: Do you remember — What did you do about foreign languages? I'm assuming that at that time Grinnell did have a foreign language requirement.

SP: Yeah, and you had to have foreign language or science to graduate. And I didn't want either one of them so I graduated from Drake after I went to Grinnell three years.

GL: Then you came right back into the store.

SP: Yeah, 1927 was my first year in the store.

GL: Now tell me about some of the other merchants who were doing business at that time.

SP: There were four clothing stores — Longnecker's, Swisher's, McMurray's, and Preston's.

GL: Now where were they physically in the town at that time?

SP: Longnecker's was on Broad Street between Commercial Street and Fourth Avenue. McMurray's was on the corner of Fourth Avenue and Broad Street.

Swisher's was on the alley between Main Street and Broad Street on the north side of the street.

GL: Four clothing merchants, all, in addition to women's clothing too, I assume.

SP: Yeah, they all sold just men's clothing and they all seemed to do all right. They made a living.

GL: What banks were operating at that particular time? You told me earlier that the Merchant's Bank folded, but wasn't there a Citizen's National Bank?

SP: The Citizen's National Bank was across the street west of the clothing store. And when things were tough they sent down a carload of money from the Des Moines bank and spread it out on a table facing Main Street and they tilted the table up so everybody could see all the money. And the chief of police, Alex Manson, stood behind the money with his trusty-rusty on his hip to be sure that nobody was going to steal the money.

GL: Was this a Brenton bank at that particular time?

SP: Brenton took over the Citizen National Bank.

GL: Was the present Brenton Bank built at that time or did that come later?

SP: That came later.

GL: Was there any other bank in town, or was that it?

SP: For a while there was a Beyer Bank. They just retired; nothing happened there. And the Grinnell State Bank was there.

GL: Who was the president of that bank at the time?

SP: Dr Talbott, I think.

GL: Dr Talbott? Talbott is a kind of a common name in Grinnell College because there was a John Talbott who was a doctor, who died just recently. And I think his brother, Robert Talbott, was also a Grinnell College graduate, and he made ties.

SP: I've got three or four of them in the other room.

GL: I think he's just recently deceased. But these two Talbott brothers were sons of the Talbott your speaking of?

SP: They're sons of the druggist, E.D. Talbott. Bob just, bang, fell on the street and that was it, no one really knows.

GL: Tell us something about the transportation in those days, the early '20s when you were growing up. Was Sixth Avenue still the main thoroughfare east and west?

SP: Yeah, it zigzagged from where it is now east of town and came through town on Fourth Avenue. There's a sign on that building that Dick Poynter once owned – circle around it – 7, it was Highway 7.

GL: I suppose the main transportation though was the railroad, wasn't it?

SP: Well, when school was out, the depot was just jammed with people. We couldn't hardly walk around to buy a ticket. All got on the train to go their homes for vacation.

GL: And the M. & St. L ran passenger trains in those days, I take it.

SP: Yeah, I took a passenger train to Fort Snelling for a month's military training on the M. & St. L.

GL: A while back, Stub, you talked about the suicide of this banker, Spencer. Tell us more about him. He sounds like an interesting character.

SP: He built the building where the clothing store was and where Boklada is now. But the bank examiner would come and he'd bring out a packet of notes and say these were Swiss high grade notes, umpteen number of dollars and the examiners would accept that as true. He was spending the money and got in so much trouble that he finally gave up and drowned himself in the lake. His son was the forger who forged the notes and when he thought he couldn't possible get out of it, why, he drowned himself, with his son.

GL: Did he take some of the businesses in Grinnell down with him?

SP: I don't remember of any businesses that closed at that time. There might of been some –

GL: You were well started in the clothing business when the Depression, beginning roughly in 1929, happened. How did you deal with it?

SP: Well, actually it didn't hit out here for a couple of years. Started back East in 1929, but it took it a while for it to get out to the Midwest. It was real tough. I had two clerks, paid them twelve dollars and a half a week, and they seemed very satisfied. I said, now if either one of you guys quit, or go somewhere else, why, I'll raise the salary of the other one to fifteen dollars, and looked forward to that with a lot of enthusiasm.

GL: Did you ever raise it to fifteen dollars?

SP: Well, Johnny Craig went to Des Moines to work for Penney's, and at that time I gave Dudley Huls fifteen dollars a week.

GL: He was really your only clerk. You kept the books yourself.

SP: Yeah, kept the books, did the advertising, cleaned the windows, wrote signs for the interior of the store. A small town merchant has got to be able to do

everything. And I could do everything. A lot of people wanted me to wait on them. One of them I remember came in and the clerk asked him if he could help him and he said in a deep voice, "No, I always deal with Mr. Preston."

GL: What were some of the brands of clothing that you sold? Any that are still in existence?

SP: Yeah, no, I don't— Later on I got Hart, Schaffner and Marx, but I had Adler of Milwaukee. They did all right; they had good clothing. Then they thought they were getting real smart, made what they call a McBedouin finish, didn't have any silk on the inside, was all the same material the suit was made and it didn't go over worth a darn.

GL: Did you do much business with college students in the matter of tuxedos and that kind of thing?

SP: College business was a pretty good factor, was about twelve or fifteen percent of our volume. Most of the enrollment was from Iowa towns, and they might be even smaller towns. And the student would think, "Well, I'll wait till I get to Grinnell and see what the other boys are doing." And so we sold quite a few.

GL: During those years, Stub, where did you live? Did you live in town?

SP: Yeah, I lived at 1422 Main Street.

GL: Did you have a family by that time?

SP: One son. When? Born in 1932, '33.

GL: When do you think that the Depression really hit Grinnell? When did you really begin to notice it?

SP: 1932, it was real tough.

GL: That was the year of the bank holiday, wasn't it?

SP: I think so. You took checks in when the bank was closed, because you'd take them and trust, figure that the person who gave you the check would figure it out somehow.

GL: Was it your experience that people were really pretty reliable about that business? You didn't lose much money?

SP: There were quite a few bankruptcies. I know Dad was opening the mail one morning and he slammed an envelope down and he said there was another one of them that went broke. They owed the store some money.

GL: Was your dad working in the store at that time? Was he still—

SP: Yeah, Dad worked, he was around the store until I got him paid off. He wasn't taking any chances.

GL: [chuckling] Wanted to keep an eye on you, did he?

SP: Yeah, I remember, I got my final check from the army, from the post exchange, and I paid him off. And from then on, why, he didn't show up very much. He'd stop in say, "Hi," that was about all.

GL: But he lived until the 1950s, didn't he?

SP: '54.

GL: '54. When did you move out on Route 6, oh that lovely place out there that you had just before you moved to Mayflower, you know, that sort of country estate.

SP: 1887 Fourth Avenue. Big yard. Now it's all cut up. But there were no residents between there and the city limits east and two vacant lots on the west and it was kind of isolated there and it had a nice big yard, kept it up real well.

GL: Let's talk a little bit about downtown Grinnell. You told me about the clothing merchants. As you went around the corner from your place on Main Street, what were some of the stores operating in those times? Were there jewelers in town?

SP: McMurray's Dry Good store was on the southwest corner of the intersection. Roy Matthew's was on the southeast corner of the intersection, the bank was the northwest corner, and our store was on the northeast corner.

GL: How many jewelry stores were there, do you recall?

SP: Were there in Grinnell? There was Bartling and Nuckolls, and that was about where Cunningham's is. And there was Yeager's; Harry Yeager, had a bigger store. I've forgotten where it was, ended up with a little narrow store, about four feet wide, run mostly a special order jewelry store there. I know a fellow came in broke and wanted to sell me a diamond and I told him I'd give him five dollars for it. He sold it and I took it down to Harry and sold it for ten.

Side Two

GL: Stub, I'm going to ask you now about some of the restaurants in town, particularly that famous Monroe Hotel.

SP: George Hiser ran the Monroe Hotel and Carl Phelps ran the hotel on Broad Street that was across from where the flagpole used to be. As I remember that was the place where we had family Sunday dinners.

GL: Is that what eventually became the Park Hotel?

SP: No, it was the middle of the block, Park Hotel was on the corner.

GL: Well the Monroe Hotel was a rather famous place, wasn't it?

SP: Yeah, it was a big hotel, and George and Velma Hiser had apartments at the north end of the building. You may be thinking of the Chapin House. It was quite a hostelry. You walked up a half a floor to the main floor. Norman Hall worked there washing dishes and we used to go down there to Sunday dinner and it was before we finally got our Sunday dinners at the Monroe Hotel. The Chapin House had some floors on third floor that people generally didn't know about. Fellows would come out from Chicago, have a room over there, in the Chapin House.

GL: Was that close to the railroad station?

SP: Yeah, the area has got a little grove of brush in there now. It was west of the depot.

GL: The Monroe Hotel was standing when I came to Grinnell in 1965, and as a matter a fact I think it was still operating. But it had had more famous days, I take it.

SP: Yes. The dining room was the last part of the Monroe Hotel that ceased to exist.

GL: When you wanted to go to Chicago or to Omaha, why, you just went by train, didn't you?

SP: Yeah.

GL: Were there lots of passenger trains in those days?

SP: Oh, there were four, five a day.

GL: How long did it take you to get to Chicago by train?

SP: It seems to me that I could get on the train at four o'clock in the morning and get into Chicago at eight, and work all day and come back on a train that came in about eight or nine o'clock that night. It was a source of merchandise that you couldn't get anywhere else. When merchandise was short during the war, I'd go into Chicago and I'd go to Kansas City to get goods.

GL: Tell me something about the response of the community during the worst part of those Depression years in '32 and '33. Do you remember the WPA and the PWA and the Agricultural Adjustment Act and those things?

SP: I remember the projects [?] had built sidewalks for – The government financed some sidewalks around the park. PWA I believe was the name of it.

GL: That was the first one I think.

SP: What was the NRA?

GL: That was the National Recovery Act. And that affected you business people, I assume. You had certain requirements to meet.

SP: I can't remember what they did. Oh, they paid something for merchandise that you had. If you had two hundred pair of overalls, you had to estimate the weight of the actual cotton that was used. You had to subtract what you thought the buttons and the dye weighed and then they paid you a percentage relative to the amount of cotton that was in the product. And you had to fill out a lot of forms and send them into Washington and you got a check back.

GL: Did the clothing business really suffer during the Depression years?

SP: Oh hell, I remember when we worked all year and our volume of sales was less than twenty-five thousand dollars. I don't know how in the hell we stayed open. I know I'd be paying a bill a little late, so I'd put it on the floor and crumple it up and step on it like it had been lost in the post office.

GL: Did you continue to employ a person to help you?

SP: Yeah.

GL: Do remember what you paid?

SP: Twelve, fifteen dollars a week, something like that. I was working a lot myself. One night I was on the balcony which had a window to the west. Lyle Garwood went by about eleven o'clock at night and he said about time you quit, isn't it Stub? And I said, "Yeah, I got a little more work to do." And the next morning I was in the store at eight o'clock and Lyle went by and he said, "Did you stay all night?" [chuckle] I said, "No, I had a little sleep."

GL: Well, those must have been very difficult years. You were raising a family at those times too, weren't you?

SP: I didn't have a family then.

GL: Stub, about your personal circumstances at that time. You had one son and I take it that Carmen was helping you out occasionally in the store.

SP: Yeah, she worked during busy time, Saturday nights. She kept books and paid bills. She always got home by the time school was out so our son wouldn't come home to an empty house.

GL: What kind of an automobile were you driving in those days?

SP: Drove a Pontiac that I bought second hand and drove it all through the war.

GL: What institutions in town did you belong to, activities you participated in? I know you were a Congregationalist. You were a pretty regular churchgoer, I take it.

SP: Yeah. Belonged to the Elks club. They had good Elks dances. It was lots of fun.

GL: Was this before the days of the Kiwanis Club and those luncheon clubs?

SP: I remember when the Kiwanis Club came to town to organize and my Dad wasn't enthusiastic about it. He thought it would spoil the Commercial Club. Course it had no relationship to the Commercial Club at all.

GL: Was there a Rotary Club in those days?

SP: Don't think there was. Kiwanis was the first service club in town.

GL: Were you a member right from the beginning?

SP: I think I was a member in 1938. Art McDowell and I were having a discussion out there one time about who was the oldest member.

GL: Well as the Depression ended, and we began—and clouds of war were on the horizon, what was the general attitude of the town toward that business? Tell us about Pearl Harbor and the effect it had on the town and particularly on your life personally.

SP: I don't remember what effect Pearl Harbor had, but I know that the war was the first indication we'd had that we'd get out of the Depression. I think the national economy was built up by military orders and military activity that cost money all the time. Put a little more money in circulation.

GL: What was the attitude of the community toward those pre-World War II days? I mean, were they isolationist?

SP: Yeah, I think that the country was pretty much isolationist and we would have stayed out of it probably if it hadn't been for Pearl Harbor.

GL: Where were you on that Sunday of Pearl Harbor? Do you have any memory of that day at all?

SP: Yes, Dick Seeland and I were hunting. We talked about it while we were hunting and we agreed that things were going to happen now. We were getting into a hell of a mess. I remember when Germany took over Poland we were on a picnic and Jack Sanster said, "Well, that guy is on a rampage. This is just his first move. A lot of things will happen in Europe." Which they did.

GL: I know that the college was affected drastically by the outbreak of the war, of course. The enrollment of men students went down considerably. Eventually there was an ROTC organization on campus. Did you deal with the college on the uniforms for that group, too?

SP: Well, that was the group that Mrs Kerr got me taken care of on that. I got uniforms and I sold uniforms. Later I sold Hart, Schaffner and Marx made-to-measure uniforms. If the order was over a hundred dollars, which was quite a little money then, why, we'd try to have a little open house where we lived on Main

Street for the fellows that – “over a hundred club.” “Come on up tomorrow afternoon. We’re having an open house for you guys that are good customers.” There’d be ten or fifteen of them there, I suppose.

GL: Well, I take it that the military unit that was stationed at the college really saved the college, did it not? I mean –

SP: Well, I think it did. There were no men around. I know I was in Chicago buying goods one time walking down the street at night. A car load of girls went by said, “Hey there’s a man! There’s a man!” [laughter]

GL: Did the war pretty much clean out the younger men in town?

SP: It sure did. And a course when they came back, they all wanted suits. Some clothing stores would be sold out entirely. You wouldn’t have a suit left. I got down to five. My normal stock was around five hundred suits. That’s when I had this money, because I changed the assets from clothing to dollars. And I said to my Dad, “What am I going to do with it?” And he said, “Buy land.” And that’s the first land I ever owned, was a result of that sellout of clothing. I hung leather jackets on the suit racks and raincoats and everything to make the store look full. I didn’t want it to look empty.

GL: But you stayed in business until the early ’60s, didn’t you?

SP: I sold the store in 1962 and worked for the buyer until 1965.

GL: Let’s go back and talk a little bit more about your personal circumstances. Who were some of the doctors that are operating in town at that particular time and which ones did you go to when you were ill?

SP: Doctor Wiley wasn’t in business then, I don’t believe. Attie Brock was a dentist, he came up from Deep River. And I can’t think who the rest of the doctors were.

GL: John Parish’s father –

SP: John Parish. Yeah, his father was in business and John was in business with his father for a while. O.F. Talbott delivered our son.

GL: Grinnell had two hospitals at that time, didn’t it?

SP: Yeah, St. Francis hospital and the Community Hospital.

GL: Was Dale Porter doctoring at that particular time?

SP: Yeah. My wife had some trouble after our son was born and went to Rochester and they had what they called an Elliott machine, which circulated water in the affected areas. And came back and Dr. Porter got an Elliott machine to give Carmen the treatments.

GL: But I take it you and your son and Carmen were really pretty healthy during those days. Doctors didn't have to doctor much?

SP: No, We went to an ear doctor in Newton. What the hell was his name?

GL: Stub, let's talk a little bit about farming during the Depression. That is, Grinnell is really a kind of center of the farm economy and I know that during those Depression years farmers were suffering really almost worse than anybody. What do you recall from those years of your own experience?

SP: Things were awful cheap for them. They could buy overalls for eighty-nine cents a pair. Some other thing that I was going to mention about that. Oh, Saturday was a big day. We did half of the whole week's business on Saturday. And half of Saturday's business was after six o'clock. They'd come in and make a day of it, and they'd put off the buying till the last thing. So we'd be open till eleven or twelve o'clock on a Saturday night, taking care of the farm trade.

GL: Do you recall anything about farmers organizing, burning their corn and slaughtering their pigs?

SP: There was a time that they said farmers were burning corn instead of coal because it was cheaper. Corn was ten cents a bushel. I don't know what coal cost, but they were actually burning corn in the stoves instead of coal.

GL: Did you spend most of the year right here in Grinnell working? I mean, you didn't, except for those trips to Chicago? Did you and Carmen at all go south to Florida in the wintertime at all for a period, or was that—

SP: We had a two weeks vacation, and for a good many years it was in Colorado. And later on, that was in summertime, and later on when I could take off some time in the winter we'd go to Florida. I think that was probably after I sold the store.

GL: When did— The Lannom industry must have gotten started in Grinnell about that time. What does your memory recall about that period? Spaulding, I take it, went broke.

SP: Yeah, they couldn't make automobiles. They bought too many parts. It wasn't integrated enough. There was a Laros buggy factory in Grinnell, too. Laros and Spaulding both made buggies, trail buggies. I had an uncle that trailed buggies out west. He'd hook up four, five buggies behind a team of horses and a buggy and start out going west and the farther you'd get from Grinnell the more you'd get for the buggies. [GL laughs] When you got to the mountains there were those narrow roads with switchbacks, they'd tie logs on the back buggy to keep the buggy from going down hill and running over the team that was pulling it. And they said that

the whole town would be out in some of those Colorado towns watching the progress of the buggy train down the mountains.

GL: But there was also a washing machine factory in town, wasn't there?

SP: Yeah, it was — See, we had two industries for a while. There was the glove factory and the washing machine factory. And the glove factory man built a house on Broad Street and Tenth Avenue. The big brick house.

GL: Broad Street and Tenth Avenue. Oh yes, I know where — right across from Merrill Park.

SP: Yeah, and then — Oh, it was a block south of Merrill Park.

GL: Yeah.

SP: And then Jesse Fellows bought the stucco house, it was right on Merrill Park. He was the other industrialist.

GL: Fellows. There was a Mrs. Fellows who lived in Mayflower, oh, within my time. I think she died maybe five or six years ago. Pearl Fellows.

SP: I think Pearl Fellows was from Newton, wasn't she?

GL: Could've been, I don't know.

SP: Wasn't she Dr. Fellows' wife?

GL: I think she was, yes. When did this — Lannom evidently came up from Tennessee to buy this glove factory, didn't he? This was the grandfather of young Sharp?

SP: Grandfather or was it his father? G. S. Lannom. There's a book written about him. It's a very interesting book, too.

GL: I think that's the present Sharp's grandfather.

SP: Yeah, it is. Yeah. Lannom came up to see the factory and Ben Ricker drove him up in a car I think with probably with some other Grinnellians and there's a limb across the road and Ben Ricker got out and moved the limb off the road. And Mr. Lannom said if people are that industrious up around Iowa that's where I should be. In Tennessee we'd leave that limb in the road for two, three weeks before anybody'd move it. [GL laughs]

GL: Didn't Claude Ahrens get started with Miracle equipment during those Depression years?

SP: Yeah, I think so, had a really good affair. Was a round table, probably eight feet in diameter. It was tilted, and you got on the upside, when it started down you'd get to the outside, when it started up you'd get to the inside. So you could keep it going. And his father designed it and he had an office over at the clothing store.

GL: What, let's talk about some of these businesses downtown. There was a department store on Broadway, wasn't there? Called the Broadway Department Store?

SP: Yeah, C. A. Blair had that first, and then later, Dick, no, Sandy Beach— Bob Beach had it after Blair. And it seems to me Marshalltown store owned it for a little while, too. Blair and this Marshalltown outfit and then Beach.

GL: There was a Laros newsstand, too, wasn't there, in town?

SP: Yeah.

GL: Where was that?

SP: It was across from the library. Jerry Laros owned it.

GL: The present Varsity News, in that building?

SP: Might have been the same building.

GL: Uh huh.

SP: Harry Hopkins was mentioned awhile ago.

GL: Uh huh.

SP: Harry Hopkins was real close to Roosevelt and Mrs. Kerr, spent more money probably than anybody else in the world.

GL: Up to that point.

SP: Yeah.

GL: No, as my memory serves me right, Florence Kerr and Harry Hopkins and Chet Davis, who was very important in the AAA, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, were all classmates at Grinnell College, oh, around 1910, 1911, and 1912. And Harry was a Grinnell boy, wasn't he?

SP: Yeah, used to beat rugs for my mother on Summer Street.

GL: Was your father born in Grinnell, too?

SP: Jasper County, south of Kellogg.

GL: Well the Prestons have been around Grinnell for a very, very long time. Your grandfather was in business here, too, wasn't he?

SP: Yeah, he had a general store in, I think 1874 or something like that.

GL: Tell me about grocery stores at that particular time. This was before the days of supermarkets, wasn't it?

SP: Yeah, the closest to that was Ramsey's. It was a double room store. Everything was delivered, of course. And there was the other grocery store.

GL: You didn't really wait on yourself the way you do now, did you?

SP: No, there was a man run around, he had black sleeves on his coat and pencil behind his ear and he'd pick it up and you'd tell him what you wanted and he'd put it in a sack.

GL: They delivered too, I take it. Least this one did.

SP: Yes. I told you about the delivery wagon that Spaulding made, or did I?

GL: You were talking about the other wagon company there. You said there were two. Spaulding, and what was the other one?

SP: Laros.

GL: You talked about these trailer wagons, I think. But Spaulding made a famous wagon, didn't he? I mean, he was well known not only in the community but outside the community.

SP: Yeah, he made the delivery wagon. Each grocery store had their own delivery service. And Spaulding made a wagon – a station wagon sort of a thing – with shelves in it and running boards on each side and he collected groceries from all the stores and the fellows would stand on the running boards and then they'd stop in the middle of the block and they'd just explode in every direction with groceries for various people in the neighborhood.

GL: Were the downtown streets all paved at that time?

SP: Paving was brought as far as the railroad track on Fourth Avenue, probably in 1908 or '10. I was a pretty small boy. I could go down to the corner of East Street and Fourth Avenue and look uptown and see them working on the pavement. They had a drive for pavement uptown and Ed Brand – There was a big puddle in the road west of the clothing store and Ed Brand brought out some decoys – put duck decoys on that pond and sat at the edge of the pond on a cracker box with a gun in his hand to illustrate how badly Grinnell needed paving.

GL: This would have been Broad Street, wouldn't it?

SP: This particular puddle was on Main Street.

GL: [chuckles] What were the chief residential streets in those days? I take it that Broad and Main were really sort of the residential section, weren't they?

SP: Took a Sunday afternoon ride in the horse and buggy. My sister Sal would say, "Let's go up Broad and down Main," because that's where the nice residential district was.

GL: There was a canopy of elm trees, I take it, in those days over both streets.

SP: Yeah, before the Dutch Elm disease took them out.

GL: Stub let's talk about the dimensions of the town during those years of the Depression and just before World War II. I take it West Street and East Street were the west and east boundaries, more or less.

SP: That's pretty much it.

GL: And what about north? I mean was Merrill Park about as far north as people got?

SP: Yeah.

GL: I see.

SP: Child and George McMurray had a race through town, from East Street to West Street in their horse and buggies and everybody knew they were —

Side Three

SP: — lined the streets uptown to see the result of the race.

GL: Were those streets paved, or —

SP: They were paved. Quite sure they were paved.

GL: Just horse and buggies —

SP: Yeah.

GL: Were these people you mentioned, they were young people?

SP: Not particularly young, I don't know how old they were but George McMurray was middle age, I think.

GL: Were they gambling types?

SP: No, they weren't. The gambler then was, well — Dutch Hooper was a gambler and hung around town a lot. He always wore a black suit and he had a deep pocket on his left, under his left arm where he'd keep his money. Young [?] was more than a gambler, he was — People never knew what he was doing. He'd leave town and come back with lots of money. [chuckles] Whether he held up a bank somewhere or not I don't know, but we used to see him come in to the Model Lunch.

GL: Tell me about this Model Lunch. Where was it?

SP: It was on Main Street. About there where that card shop is, and a fellow the name of Dad Wiggins owned it. For a while it was the only place in town to eat. Van Horn who was developing the telephone company said if you people don't get a restaurant in here that's decent for me to bring my guests to I'm going to move somewhere else. Well, they did and he never moved, but he threatened the business district if you didn't get a good restaurant he'd leave.

GL: Well now there was a theater on that corner too, wasn't there?

SP: Colonial Theater.

GL: Colonial Theater.

SP: Beautiful building. A balcony, they called it “nigger heaven,” the third floor.

GL: Uh huh.

SP: Red plush and a beautiful curtain and –

GL: Well you had live vaudeville there too, didn't you?

SP: Yeah. It should have been preserved. That building could have been used by the college or somebody. We had good shows, they'd stop in Grinnell and put on shows there between Des Moines and Iowa City. Or Des Moines and Chicago. Marcus and Franchill or some name like that was a good theatrical musical production.

GL: Did they have circuses in those days, too?

SP: Yeah, circus came almost every summer.

GL: Where were the grounds? Where did they –

SP: South on East Street where the Donaldson's plant is, I think that was the circus grounds.

GL: Oh yes. Where the 4-H buildings are now.

SP: Yeah.

GL: The main route through town, though, was what we now call Route 6, wasn't it?

SP: Yeah.

GL: But it was not –

SP: But it zigzagged to bring the traffic through the business district, thinking you might have to stop and buy something.

GL: Well, that's a philosophy that still holds someplaces.

SP: And it was Route 7, I believe. There's a “7” on Dick Poynter's building down there on the corner of Fourth and Main. Or Broad and Fourth.

GL: The Congregational Church was a different building but it was right where it is now, isn't it?

SP: Yes. Beautiful stone building. Just made me sick, made a lot of people sick, when they tore it down. Leland Mann wanted a new church, and I can't blame him, every minister wants a new church.

GL: I see that they've preserved the bell that was in that church. That's in the front. Course the Veteran's Memorial Building hadn't been built, had it? I mean, was that just a park there then?

SP: Yeah. E. W. Clark had a fountain there on the corner, called the E. W. Clark Fountain. E. W. Clark promoted a hose team in Grinnell. It was very famous, it won everything in the state. My dad was on the hose team. Was a pretty husky looking guy, too.

GL: I want you to tell me more about this hose, H-O-S-E, team that your father was a part of? How did it operate?

SP: Well the point was, when you had a fire, all the members of the fire team would hear the bell and run down to the fire station and the first one there with a horse would hitch up to the wagon and pull the wagon and the hose to the fire. But the hose team was pulled by people. And in competition, interstate competition, they pulled, the hose cart was two wheeled with 400 yards of hose on it – 440 yards. And the end of the race was when the hose on that cart got coupled to a hose on the ground. And the Grinnell hose team had a man who was a real fast coupler, but he couldn't run very long, so he'd run three or four hundred yards and he'd jump on the cart and they'd have to pull him to the end of the race, then they'd jump off and throw these two lines of hose together and they'd zzzzzzzz, when they'd click that was the end of the race.

GL: And the Grinnell team was good –

SP: Yeah. I think it says, they were champions of Iowa. I know about a third of the people on that team.

GL: Well that means that the fire department was all volunteers in those days too.

SP: Yeah.

GL: Do you recall any fires in Grinnell of significance during those years?

SP: Well I think the Laros buggy factory was the one I remember. It was across from the Spaulding factory on Fourth Avenue. It burned – I don't remember seeing it. The fire in the Cunningham building, when that burned down, was quite spectacular. I had guests in our house, we did, from Appleton, Wisconsin, and we heard all the commotion and the fire alarms and everything and we went down to see the fire and it had just gutted the building.

GL: Now when you say the Cunningham fire you mean where the drugstore is.

SP: Yeah but Cunningham's didn't own it then – I forgot who owned it.

GL: When did Cunningham's come in, do you recall?

SP: Yeah, when Talbott's went out. Don Cunningham –

GL: My notes say about 1938, does that strike you as –

SP: Sounds about right, yeah.

GL: Now Matthew's had been there years before, though.

SP: Yeah.

GL: And it was right across the street from you?

SP: Yeah. Where that pizza place is now.

GL: Well Stub, I think probably we've gone about as far as we can go.

SP: All right.