Transcription of **RPL ORAL HISTORIES**, for Rockford Public Library
Subject: *Stuart Ralston*, **Tape No. 1 (Call # ARC R 977.331 R164M)**
July 11, 1975
Recorded at subject's address: 1506 National Avenue, Rockford IL
Interviewer: Joanne Reid

Q: Stuart, you told me that your birthday was August 17th, 1889. And where were you born?

A: I was born in the village of Caledonia in Boone County on August 17th, 1889, in a small house situated on the lot diagonally across from the Congregational Church in the village, which house was moved up the street later on and placed on a vacant lot; the building now being the property of David Caldwell Ralston, a cousin. Our new house was built including inside plumbing, which created more or less of a scandal in the village at the time – thinking that that wasn't the way that that should be handled. However, it was accepted finally, and with a big front porch, which seemed an extravagance to many people, was also finally admitted to be a great thing after they had come up and sat on it for a while and looked off into the beautiful distance, over the fields and woodlands to the southeast of home.

The village at that time was a lovely setting with, of course, grassy streets in the main, with tracks in the middle; and occupied by a group of people that represented many walks of life and of many different nationalities, this being due to the railroad which came through Caledonia and was a junction of the Wisconsin Division and the Kenosha Division [of the C&W Railway Co., Chicago & Northwestern].

Q: Now, are you talking about Caledonia at about 1900 now? When you talked about the grassy streets?

A: Yes. Baseball was played wherever we could find a spot and oftentimes in the streets because traffic was light in the back streets of the village, and especially up near the church there was a spot big enough to carry on a baseball game and that was the favorite spot. Although, at school there was a continuing game of baseball that went on, not only at recess

and noon, but also before school and after school, and the competition was terrific for each of the jobs on the team.

Q: Was that baseball the very same as it would be today?

A: Yes.

Q: The game itself…

A: Yes, it was hard ball, but we had a whale of a team in Caledonia! We had a team that we played all over – played Belvidere; we played Roscoe; we played Beloit; we played teams from Rockford; we played Argyle, I don't know how many games…

Q: And that was when you were in grade school?

A: Well, yes, grade school and high school. I think probably we got to our prime when I was in the academy, which would be like high school. But we were good enough that most of us played on high school teams afterwards, so we had an outstanding team, really.

Q: Did you have a coach for that or did you just get together and play?

A: Just rough and tumble struggling for a position on the team. Yes, this Bill Cunningham was older – a little older than we were – than most of the kids, well, there were a whole bunch of kids about my age that happened at that time – see, that's how it was possible. Bill Cunningham was older, and he acted kind of as a coach and encouraged us, and his father, who ran one of the stores in the village, was quite an enthusiast on sports as well. He used to come outside of his store and play catch with us and help us in that way.

Q: Stuart, how many people were in your family?

A: My family consisted of my mother, whose maiden name was Mary Smith and who was born on the farm known as Knockbay on the outskirts of Campbeltown in Argyleshire, Scotland. She came to this country at age seven with a sister, Agnes, aged nine, their father, John McMillan, had died and their mother came over to Caledonia to marry a man by the name of McNeilage whom she had known in Campbeltown. Mr. McNeilage was a manufacturer of shoes and manufactured shoes in what we called a shoe shop. Of course, when we were boys, the

shoe shop had been discontinued as a place for making shoes, but in the office of the shoe shop as it stood there closed, there was a myriad of pigeon holes containing little wooden pegs that Mr. McNeilage used in putting shoes together.

Q: But that was your step-grandfather?

A: That'd be my step-grandfather, that's right. And he was the father of Jessie, the mother of Bill, Helen, Martha, Ida, Raymond, Kelly, and of John McNeilage who went to Milwaukee. Well, my mother was a Smith and her mother was a McMillan. And they lived there in Caledonia across the street from us. My brothers and sisters consisted of David Ralston, the oldest, who died at the age of three with scarlet fever, which at that time was a dread disease. Then I was born next, two years later; then Bessie, two years later; Martha, two years later; John, two years later; Glenn, two years later; Mildred, two years later, and two boys who died in infancy. There were eight children altogether.

***** [*The gap here is from an erasure of the original cassette tape*.]

Q: You were born about the time that your oldest brother died then, weren't you?

A: Yes, he was three years old when he died – I was a year old.

Q: And you can't re…

A: Oh, I said three years, that should be two years. I was born two years after he was. That should be changed to two years – and then I would be a year old when he died at the age of three.

Q: But of course, you can't remember any of that, can you?

A: No, no.

Q: That's a good-sized family. Is that one of the reasons you moved from your house?

A: Sure.

Q: . . . and got a new big house?

A: Yes. You don't know the house Steve Ralston lives in?

Q: That's quite near where the school is.

A: Yes, almost right across the street from the school. They've got it painted yellow now, bright yellow.

Q: That's the house that you were born in? And they moved it from where it was to that location.

A: Yes.

Q: And then you moved out of that house into a new house that your father built?

A: Yes. We moved that house – we ate breakfast on the old site in the morning; we had lunch halfway up at noon; and we had dinner on the new site that night. We "lived" in the house all the time it was being moved. Mother never got out of the house.

Q: How was that possible?

A: Well, they just put some great big timbers underneath the house and then jacked it up on rollers and then started to roll it. They rolled it out to the street and up the street and back into the new lot.

Q: And that was still in the days of horses!

A: That was in the days of horses – you see, the way they worked it, they had a [winch], two horses going in a circle around a great big drum fastened to the ground. As they wound up the cable on the drum, the house was dragged along.

Q: Oh!

A: At a low reduction of speed. So that was a…

Q: Was that a customary thing to do…in those days?

A: Yes. It was quite a customary thing because – oh, they moved it so slowly, you know – there was no trouble of keeping things in place on the shelves.

Q: But it was a considerably smaller house than…

A: Well, it's the same size as it is now exactly.

Q: That doesn't seem to me small.

A: Dave's house?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, it was a…see, we had a parlor, and we had a living room, and we had a dining room, and we had a kitchen, and we had a back storage room.

Q: And about five bedrooms upstairs.

A: No upstairs to it. It was all one floor.

Q: All one floor – then where did you sleep?

A: Well (laughs), we probably slept two or three, at least two in a bed, and let's see, we had – one, two, three – we had three bedrooms with a couple of beds in each one of them (laughs). And I don't remember that we were crowded!

Q: How old were you when that happened? When you moved out?

A: When we moved, I was probably about seven, I think.

Q: And then how old were you when your dad built the new house?

A: Yeah, that's when I was about seven.

***** [*The gap here is from an erasure of the original cassette tape*.]

Q: Then you moved that house to a vacant lot in order to build a new house on the place where you had had the old house…

A: That's right.

Q: And you lived in the smaller house for a year or so while your father was making the new big house?

A: That's right, yes.

Q: What was unusual about that new house?

A: Well, of course, it had, as I said before, an indoor toilet, and then it had a great big porch out in front. And people thought that that was a terrible waste of space. But honestly, that porch has been more of a room to the whole family than any other room in the house. In the summertime, it's a lovely place to – you see, we owned the half-a-block the other way across from the church. In other words, we owned…this McNeilage was quite an operator. He owned this lot here, this whole block, and then when our grandmother died, we got this half of the block. And so, we had a big garden then, we had a cow, and I had to milk the cow, which I hated, and this was a pasture, and the cow was there and then this was the old garden. We raised sorghum and potatoes – we raised all the potatoes we ever needed. You see, we lived pretty darned primitively. We raised a great deal of the stuff that we used to keep us alive – keep the whole family alive – from this garden: potatoes, and Dad used to raise celery and then he would bleach it, so that when we picked the celery, the celery was all white. And the way he did that, he'd plant these little plants and then at a certain time he would take a tile and set that tile over the top of the celery and the celery would eventually grow up through, but everything below that would be bleached white. And then when we would take the tile off and take a stalk of celery up to the house, it would be all beautifully white and very tender. So, then we could see from our front porch – we could see across here and over to the John Andrews Woods.

***** [*The gap here is from an erasure of the original cassette tape*.]

A: There was a beautiful woods down here and then these fields were always so beautiful, and that…

Q: That's to the east you're looking…?

A: That's to the east. Well, it's southeast, kind of.

Q: . . . porch and looking across your garden into the woods and the fields beyond…

A: And off into the fields across and then eventually into the woods.

Q: How did you cultivate your garden?

A: Well, we used a horse, of course, and a plow to get it worked in the first place. And then it was all done by a hoe and rake. We planted the seeds by hand and then we kept the weeds out with a hoe – just the old-fashioned hoe, that was it!

Q: Did all you kids have to help?

A: Yes, I got the brunt of it because I was the oldest and, of course, when they came along, the pressure was a little less, you know, and I suppose we bought more stuff. I don't know whether we'd sold any of this. Well, when I was down in Florida a couple of years ago, Dave Ralston, or Elmer, as we used to call him, remembers that we used to have Christmas up at our house and then all the Ralstons would come with [Uncle] Jim and [Uncle] Dan's family. Then we had a target over here and we used to shoot a rifle across here.

Q: Across the street?

A: Across the street. Well, of course, there was nothing over here to hit except Sarah Sloughy's cows. Sarah Sloughy lived in the house across the street from Doctor – from the doctor's office – toward the railroad track.

Q: Was there a doctor's office there then?

A: No. But where it is now.

Q: Okay, but where it is now.

A: That was Katie McCarthy's house. And she lived there with three or four cows and she wore a black dress and a red shawl and she tended those cows in the streets of Caledonia her entire life. That was her pasture. Her cows ate the grass in the streets of Caledonia.

Q: Wouldn't they wander all over…?

A: She was out there all day long with those cattle. Five or six cows.

Q: Did people have fences around their yards – around their houses?

A: Some of them did. We did. Well, we did in the old house; I don't believe we did afterwards.

Q: So, she would just keep them out of peoples' yards?

A: Oh yeah – oh yes – she had a stick and she'd call them by name and (chuckles) she would tap them gently if they did anything wrong, get them back in line. She was a character!

Q: (Chuckle) You said she did that all her life. Did she raise them for the milk or why was she doing it?

A: Oh sure, she sold milk. That was their livelihood: selling milk and eggs. They raised chickens and that's how they got money to live.

Q: To the people in Caledonia?

A: Yeah! Oh sure, where else? How could she get any place else? Only they didn't have a horse. Or did they? Maybe they did have a horse. They had an acre or two of land there, so I guess probably they did have a horse. But they wouldn't drive out to sell eggs. People came in and got them.

Q: I see.

A: Lots of people came to Caledonia to get groceries. There were two big grocery stores there, one on each side of the tracks. Cunningham was up on the hill and the Wilson store was down below.

Q: What else was in the business part of town besides the grocery stores?

A: A thing of great interest was the blacksmith shop. And to anyone interested in what a blacksmith shop was then can find an exact replica of it on the Rockford Museum Association's ground at the present time [currently Midway Village Museum], equipped just exactly like the old blacksmith's shop was in Caledonia. And it's a tremendous thing. The kids just love it! They go over there, you know, and he sticks a rod into the fire and then he works the bellows, and the air comes up through the tuyere and into the coals and the coals flair up. Then he takes that

iron out and puts it on an anvil and hits it with a hammer and the sparks fly and the school kids just *love* it (chuckle). And they go out there and watch him make stuff.

Q: Do you remember being in the blacksmith's shop in Caledonia?

A: Oh heavens, do I ever! I used to watch the old – Colin Lang was the blacksmith, and he was an expert blacksmith. To see him grab the hind foot of a horse and take that big rasp and file that horse's hoof down and take a red-hot shoe and fit it on to the horse's hoof and see that stinking smell of burned hoof go up your nose. If it didn't fit exactly, he would take it back and shape it again, but he would bring that hot shoe up against the horse's hoof.

Q: Does it hurt the horse?

A: No, of course, there's not a nerve tissue in the bottom of the hoof. And then he made hoops for the kids out of probably quarter inch round iron. And he made one for me one time that I thought was a beauty. It was a hoop, and it had a small ring around it. The ring was attached to a rod forming a handle that you pushed and as you pushed it the hoop would roll forward. You could keep that hoop going lickety-split just by pushing on that handle.

Q: And the hoop was how big in diameter?

A: Well, it would probably be two and a half or three feet in diameter.

Q: Three feet? And there was a round circle or a ring around the big hoop and then a rod fastened to that ring like a handle?

A: A handle, yeah. And, you see, as you pushed, you would push down low to start it. Then later on you would move it up higher and then you could keep that thing going forever without hitting it, you know. The ordinary way of rolling a hoop would be to hit it – keep hitting it – but this way we didn't hit it, we just pushed on that rod and kept it going that way.

Q: And you ran behind it?

A: Ran behind it.

Q: Would you race those or…

A: Oh, sure, we'd have all kinds of goings on with them.

Q: Hmm, like what?

A: Well, races or – or we would take them up to school. All the kids would have them, those hoops, you know, and races would develop on the spur of the moment. Then there was a sidewalk ran down the main street. That was the only sidewalk in town.

Q: Cement?

A: That was a wooden sidewalk: two by fours set on end and then cross boards across it. And that was the racetrack for bicycles and also for walking and all the rest of the activities in town. Then on the corner, there was this bandstand that was right across from the blacksmith's shop, and the bandstand was occupied every Saturday night by the Caledonia band. And they had a band comprised of people in the village and then farmers around there that played in the band and then the people would gather round, and they would sell pop or whatever around the place and every Saturday night there was a gang came in, to hear the music.

Q: You said they'd sell pop?

A: Well, yeah, they sold pop in those days. The bottle was made like this. There'd be a…(pause)

Q: It's fatter than a regular pop bottle today.

A: Yes, it was fatter and then the cork fitted here – like that.

Q: Down in the neck…

A: Yes. Then out of here came a handle, like that. And then this is all under pressure. You use carbonated water, you know, so this was all under pressure. So, when you wanted to drink, you hit that thing down – you hit this thing down and drove the cork into the bottle. And then it would take this position: the cork would be down in here, like that, so then the liquid could flow out, and you drank the pop. That's the kind of pop we had in those days.

Q: I didn't realize they had carbonated pop at that time.

A: Yes. Yes they…

Q: Now that certainly wasn't made in Caledonia.

A: No, that would come in by train. There was an ice-cream parlor in Caledonia, too.

Q: But they made their ice-cream.

A: Made their own ice-cream but the pop was brought in by train. Came in wooden crates…

[END OF TAPE ONE]

(Jo Wald, Transcriptionist, 1975)

(Doug Janicke, Transcriptionist, 2022)