Transcription of **RPL ORAL HISTORIES**, for Rockford Public Library
Subject: *Stuart Ralston*, **Tape No. 2 (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 have been talking about Caledonia in 1900 and you were just mentioning the Town Hall.

A: Yes, the Town Hall was the gathering place for all kinds of meetings and especially dances that were held quite frequently in those days and one of the famous bands that played was Leaver's Band from Beloit, who not only played the music but called for the square dances, which was the popular dance at the time. Square dances constituted a substantial part of the evening's entertainment. So, the hall served as a meeting place of all kinds of gatherings, such as insurance companies or whoever might have a gathering and wanted to meet together, and the Town Hall was the rallying place.

The creamery occupied a prominent place in the town across from the Wilson Store. The raw milk from the farm was brought in and processed. The milk was made in the main into butter and shipped out from there as a finished product.

Q: Shipped on the train?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have refrigerator cars?

A: Yes…but how about that. I don't…We had ice packed cars. They packed ice in the ends of the cars. That's the way that the merchandise was shipped. And as a part of the project of this creamery, they dug a site for a lake in the back of the creamery and used this for cutting ice in the winter. They filled it with water and then as it froze in the wintertime, they cut the ice and put it into the icehouse to be used for cooling in the summer months. This proved to be a rather expensive way of making ice as the maintenance of the pond was very difficult through the growing up of weeds and trees in the pond itself. So, ice was later shipped in by the carload

and unloaded into the ice houses from trucks or from wagons. It would come in by car and then be loaded into the…

Q: Into horse drawn wagons and then transported to the ice house?

A: Yes.

Q: I have heard of the icehouse in Caledonia. Was there just one?

A: Well, there was an icehouse in connection with the creamery and an icehouse in connection with the meat market. The meat market was an interesting place run by James McMillan and (laughs) he was a character. He had a slaughterhouse out back of Steve Huntley's. If you know where Steve Huntley lives along the road to the Browns, you know, straight across the 173 and Caledonia. The slaughterhouse was out there, and he'd go out and butcher a cow and then bring it in and sell it to the folks in the village (chuckles). He'd have a great big leg of beef, you know, and he'd go in there and wrestle that in on to a big block and get his big old saw and saw off a slab of roast beef or round steak or whatever he wanted. It's very interesting. It's a – those memories were – you see, that was primitive. That was right down basic. He bought a cow from Jim Smith. He took that old cow out and butchered it and he sold that meat right there in the village. It's about as basic as you can get. Unless you went out and…

Q: No middlemen?

A: No middlemen. You couldn't get any more basic unless you did it yourself. Because that was pretty close to doing it yourself. And then he sold other things. He had oysters, big pails of oysters, I remember, at certain seasons of the year.

Q: When you said he bought a cow, was that really a dairy cow? Was that the kind of meat you ate?

A: Sure.

Q: No beef animals like we have today?

A: Well, no, I wouldn't say that they were always milk cows that he bought. He probably bought steers at times.

Q: Or were there a lot of Shorthorns around?

A: Not really. I don't believe in those days there was Shorthorn steers. I don't know whether there was…

Q: The Scotch breed is a dual-purpose Shorthorn. It was kind of dark red with blotchy white through it. I thought perhaps they had a lot of those around Caledonia.

A: Mmm, gee.

Q: Because we'd use them both for milk and for meat.

A: Well, you see, everybody milked in those days. I suppose most of the livestock around Caledonia were milk cows.

Q: But do you remember black and white ones? What'd the cows look like?

A: Gee, I would say that they were – I don't think they were Holsteins at all. I think they came in later than when I was a boy. I think they were red cows more than the Holstein. I think the Holstein came in later on. People got into dairying in a bigger way and the Holstein cow seemed to be the answer to more milk.

Q: Okay, now back in 1900 then, would each family in the town of Caledonia have their own cow?

A: Well, no. You see, Sarah Sloughy had these five or six cows, and I would say that the majority of people probably would get milk from her. Now those people that had a big family like the Martins and us and a few of the people would own their own cow. And we had a cow for a long time.

Q: I think I heard you say that you usually milked that cow.

A: Well, I did. I milked that cow morning and night.

Q: By hand?

A: And (chuckles) she'd get out of the pasture sometimes and of course it would always be on the night when we were going to a dance or some other darn thing and she'd get loose and

get away down the track toward Argyle and we'd have to go down there and get her back. No, that cow has never made a hit with me at any time. (Laughs)

Q: Oh, dear. You had another tract of land then besides the half block across from you.

A: Well, the cow was kept in here.

Q: Oh, I see. That was fenced in? Part of that block?

A: This part was fenced in, and this was pasture.

Q: I see, okay. That wasn't too large then, was it?

A: No.

Q: Probably just half an acre?

A: Yes, probably would be not more than half an acre. I don't know how many acres there are in a block. I would say there were more than an acre in a block, wouldn't there be?

Q: Probably a little more. Well, you couldn't con your little brothers into milking the cow?

A: I don't know whether they did after I left or not, or whether we got rid of the cow later on. Let's see, I left home in 1907. I went to Champaign in 1907. Graduated from the Academy; that was a three-year course.

Q: Where was that?

A: Beloit, in connection with the college.

Q: How did you happen to go there?

A: Well, the train's use was better to Beloit than it was to Rockford and we could catch a train at 7:00 and be back home at 4:00 in the afternoon and have stayed the full day at the Academy.

Q: Was that a regular train or an interurban?

A: Oh no, that was a steam train. That was a train that went from Madison to Chicago. So…

Q: What did you study at the Academy?

A: Well, I took the usual things. We had our – the head of the Academy was Pa Burr, Professor A. W. Burr, and he lived in Beloit, of course, and was in charge of Latin and pedagogy at Beloit College. He taught classes at Beloit College as well as being principal of the Academy. And then in English we had a man by the name of [Franklin B.] Snyder, who was the son of the old preacher of the Second Congregational Church, and he was taking PG [post graduate] work at Beloit College. He later became president of Northwestern University for many years. Then there was Irving Mower who taught us mathematics and Irving Mower became president of Beloit College for his entire life; died as president of Beloit College.

And then we had another man that, by the name of Stetson, and let's see, he taught history. We called him Sally, Sally Stetson (chuckles). And he knew they called him that and he laughed about it. He had a good sense of humor. And then McAllister taught us physics and chemistry. But you see, we had quite an unusual group of teachers there, with Mower and Snyder and Professor Burr. You couldn't find that in any high school in the land, really, to have men of that caliber teaching in a little school. There were only about 14 in my graduating class at Beloit Academy.

I went up there the other day and got a tile from the roof of the building that was being torn down. There was a story in the Rockford paper about Beloit Academy building being torn down right as of now and I jumped in the car and went up there and got some tile from the roof. It was built in 1900 and torn down in 1974. It was 74 years old.

Q: But you went to it when it was very new.

A: Yes, see, I was in – well, I graduated in 1907 so it was only seven years old then.

Q: Were there several that went from Caledonia to the Academy?

A: Yes, there was – well, John and Glenn went to Beloit High School instead of the Academy, but my cousin David went to the Academy and Bill Cunningham, and I think Colin Ralston went to the Academy for a few years. So, it made a…

Q: Was that like a private college where your parents had to pay for sending you there?

A: Yes, yes, it was, yes. But I don't think the cost was very high in those days. I don't think it was much of anything, really.

Q: But you could have gone to the high school free.

A: I think – I don't know whether we could or not. See, that's another state. I don't believe we could. I believe Dad looked into that and found it was just as costly. We boys wanted to go to the Academy because Bill Cunningham had gone there.

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

Q: You were going to talk today about the train. Would you like to talk for a couple of minutes about the railroad industry in the town of Caledonia in 1900?

A: Well, the railroad (long pause) business in Caledonia was quite a momentous thing because it was the junction point of the KD Division [Kenosha Division Railroad], which came up from Rockford and also another division that came in from Spring Valley known as the – I think we called it the Spring Valley Division and then of course the main line between Madison and Chicago.

And there was not only a lot of work to do in the depot in the way of telegraphing and taking care of freight and baggage and that sort of thing but the operators that were on twenty four hours a day lived in the village or in the Chamberlain Hotel, which occupied a location right near by the depot. And I believe, if I'm not mistaken, at one time there was some twelve operators lived in Caledonia that worked for the railroad.

Every train that went through Caledonia had to stop and make a report on a form in the depot giving the time of arrival, when they left, the name of the conductor and the trainman and so it was a town of great activity as far as railroads were concerned. And then, of course, the Ralston Elevator shipped a great deal of grain and brought in lumber and that sort of thing and there was always cars being unloaded over there – so that the activity of the railroads was great at

that time in comparison with now when there's practically no trains go through the town all day; maybe one or two.

Q: How many used to go through?

A: Oh, there would be as many as thirty trains a day. You see, thirty trains a day is – well, I'll bet there were more than that. That would only be about – a little more than one an hour – but I'll bet there was more than one an hour went through Caledonia. I'll bet there was maybe forty or fifty trains went through there in a day.

Q: Were those both freight and passenger?

A: Both freight and passenger.

Q: Or were some just passenger and…

A: Some were just passenger and then the KD of course had a freight car on it occasionally. Well, practically all the trains there were either freight or passenger. There were no combinations at that time. There was enough passenger business to support the trains that came through Caledonia and made this great influx of railroad business that was there at the time. The Chamberlain Hotel located there near the depot was a famous hotel and made famous by the Chamberlain mother and two daughters who ran the hotel, very high-grade people in every way. The mother was an excellent hostess in the hotel and was anxious that everybody that ate there would get their fill. The table was one great big table that people ate at. So, if you came in for dinner you would eat with telegraph operators and farmers and mechanics and people in all lines of work.

Q: So, people other than guests at the hotel ate in the dining room?

AL Oh, heavens yes. There was only about eight or ten rooms in the hotel, so they depended on the other business. People used to come there from all over that part of the country on Sundays for Sunday dinner – it was that famous!

Q: And they were coming in horse and buggies at that time?

A: Coming in horse and buggies.

Q: Did the grocery stores get most of their things through the train?

A: Yes, they would get almost all of their groceries by train. And then, one of the stores, the Cunningham Store, had a man by the name of [Elliott] Wheeler who had a horse and wagon and he went out through the country, sold stuff to the farmers door to door from the Cunningham Store. He did that for years.

Q: He would just load his wagon with groceries from the store?

A: Yes. Load his wagon with groceries from the store and then, I don't know whether he got back at night or not or whether he'd be gone for two or three days. Probably be gone for two or three days because that would be quite a stretch for him to get back every night.

Q: That's quite amazing, though, when you think of fresh fruits and vegetables in the time before refrigeration!

A: Well, let's see, would there be fresh fruits in those days?

Q: (Chuckles) I don't know, would there?

A: I wonder…I don't know. Of course, potatoes – because everybody had a cellar that had no heat in it. And now the potatoes that we would raise over that lot across the street here would keep for weeks and we would have potatoes to last us the whole year. They would get stringers on them, you know, and we'd have to go down and break those off once in a while. But the potatoes were still okay. And we would buy a barrel of apples and that would last us for a month. So, you see, they did have fresh fruit at that time.

Q: How about canned things?

A: Oh, of course, that was a big business in the fall, oh Lordy! The canning days were – I never will forget the canning days of cooking, cooking cherries and strawberries and putting up garden stuff – with Mason jars and rubber bands and a zinc cap for the jar. They are having a hard time to get nowadays I see by the paper. Do you do any of that now at all?

Q: I don't.

A: Do many people do that?

Q: Well, it's gotten to be popular again now in the last year or two.

A: Yeah, but the sugar thing is so darn costly, I suppose it costs as much to put it up as it does to buy it.

Q: Yes, it does. But you helped your mother do it?

A: No, no she would be in – I guess the girls did best in that. They were awfully handy with, they were certainly darn good cooks, both of them. Oh (nostalgically) they can whip a meal together in less time than about anybody I know. So they must have learned in that kitchen with a wood stove.

Q: And how about your lights?

A: We had acetylene gas for light. Acetylene gas was made from carbide, and we had an acetylene gas machine in the basement. And it worked like this (sketching) – there was a tank with water in it, and then up here was a container that held carbide, little granules of carbide. And when they would drop down into the water, they would make a gas and then that gas was piped out to the house – upstairs to the different fixtures. So, this pipe would – the pressure would get to a certain point and then the way the fitting looked was like this (sketching). Then it had another one the other way, too, the same way. And then the gas would come out from that side to this, and they would meet there. And you'd light that and then that would cause a flame, an open flame, the same thing over here. And that gas came from this generator in the basement.

Q: And so, one pipe would go to every fixture you had in the house?

A: Well, no, there would probably be several pipes come off here and go to different places.

Q: This was the size of a small furnace?

A: It would be about three feet in diameter and maybe five feet high, this tank. Wasn't too big.

Q: Did many houses in Caledonia have that?

A: No, nobody had, I don't think anybody else did. [In fact, there was a central plant in Dr. Segurlund's garage.]

Q: Your father was a progressive man?

A: Oh, was he ever. I don't know how he accomplished all he did accomplish…He was a great worker, he worked night and day, you know, he worked at night, too. He didn't waste any time.

Q; Do you think you had things like that simply because you had more money to have them or was it because of your father's ideas?

A: Father's ideas. We weren't well off then at all, never have been as far as that's concerned. But it was his aggressiveness that…how he would think of having that great big house in Caledonia, I don't know. It took nerve to build a house like that in among the lot of little houses. But he just had the nerve and the gumption to do the thing that should be done and, good Lord, that house was none too big, I'll tell you, when the family was all growing up. We had a nursery, and we had a parlor and a living room and a dining room and a kitchen and then, off to one side we had another little house where Aunty Margaret lived.

She was the wife of John Caldwell. And he lived on the farm that Bill Ralston has recently sold [on Route 173]. He bought that farm from the government at two dollars an acre, John Caldwell did. And my grandfather's sister was married to John Caldwell. Then David Caldwell [Ralston], my grandfather, came over and lived with them and worked for them on that farm. And that was 120 acres that they bought from the government at two dollars an acre.

Then they bought two more tracts of 120 acres, and they had 360 acres that they worked. And as John Caldwell and Aunty Margaret grew older, they could see their days of working on the farm were coming to an end, so they gave the farm to D. C. Ralston on the proviso…

[END OF TAPE TWO] **/** (Jo Wald, Transcriptionist, 1975) **/** (Doug Janicke, Transcriptionist, 2022)