Transcription of **RPL ORAL HISTORIES**, for Rockford Public Library
Subject: *Stuart Ralston*, **Tape No. 3 (Call # ARC R 977.331 R164M)**
July 11, 1975
Recorded at subject's address: 1506 National Avenue, Rockford IL
Interviewer: Joanne Reid

Q: Aunty Margaret was your grandfather's sister?

A: Yes.

Q: And what were the provisions now in the abstract?

A: The provisions in the abstract were that they would turn the farm over to D. C. Ralston with the proviso that they would be taken care of for the rest of their life: with a roof over their head; with the equivalent of a cow and a horse; and with medical care and hospitalization if they needed it. And the farm would be theirs and if they didn't carry out these provisions, they would have to pay $16,000.00 for the farm.

Well, the years went by and they died. And then D. C. Ralston died. Then the farm came down to the three [four] brothers [in order of birth: John, Stuart's father, James Reid, Dan, David M.]. Uncle David who married Martha McCathran, a sister of or an aunt of Abbie [Greenlee] who just had their 50th wedding anniversary. It came down to the four boys. Then they in turn sold the farm but Aunty Margaret was still living, so she winds up in a little house in our yard. And those four brothers took care of her for the rest of her life – bought her clothes and food and all the rest of it - supplied this house for her and she lived there in our yard in this little house until she died.

Q: Your father and his brothers?

A: Father and his brothers.

Q: Were his brothers as progressive as he?

A: Well, Dan Ralston – you should remember Dan, Abbie's father?

Q: I remember the name Dan Ralston.

A: Yeah, he ran Argyle [the Argyle Elevator].

Q: Gee, I should remember that, shouldn't I?

A: Ray's father [Dan Ralston] – Ray [Ralston] and Abbie's [Greenlee] father – ran the Argyle Elevator for Dad. Dad and his brother James owned the two places. Dan worked for them all his life, down there.

Q: Did your dad start the elevator in Caledonia?

A: I can't answer that question because he went there in 1880 and all the land that they bought was bought in his name and I can't tell you whether there was an elevator on that land or whether they built the elevator. I've never been clear on it. But they soon had this elevator. They bought livestock, too, when they first lived there. They drove livestock in from – see, in those days they drove herds in on the roads to the railroad stockyards – then they would load it [the livestock] in the cars there.

Q: So, you had a stockyard right along the railroad track there in Caledonia?

A: Right at the elevator. Yep, remember them well – going and agitating wild bulls that they would get in, you know, and have in a separate pen. We would get in there and try to rile them up and have them bang the fence below us (chuckle).

Q: Nobody got hurt?

A: (Laughing) No. So, these were some of the things that we did in the early days of Caledonia. Of course, the baseball thing was very interesting to we younger players. And then the only place we could swim was down at the Beaver [Creek]. So, if anybody was going to the Beaver, and it was usually our wagon, everybody in town piled on – [that is] the boys. And we'd go down to the Beaver to a muddy old hole. After we'd been in there for five minutes the water was black, it was black mud (chuckles). But we went down to the Beaver.

Q: That would have been about five miles – south of Caledonia?

A: Umm, yeah, maybe. It was at the – you know where Burton Ralston lives, on that road [Wheeler?]?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, we turned off there and went – let's see, that's south – that would be east, we went east there for a little ways and then cut through a field into the Beaver.

Q: Just the boys could go?

A: Well, that's all that did go.

Q: Was that skinny dipping days?

A: Oh, we had that. I remember one thing we had an awful time to get out of the pool, you know. We didn't wear trunks or anything else and anybody that tried to get out early would get a mud ball in their back, so they'd have to come back in again (laughter).

Q: Stuart, can you remember the activities of your mother or any relationship you had with her? Did she read to you?

A: Oh, yes, she was a tremendous reader and we would read to her, you know. We loved to read to her, and then she was a great person to get us to learn stuff, parts of the Bible and poems and things of that kind. She was a great mother. She watched over us like a brood hen. Still without doing much… And gosh, I don't think my father ever said anything, particularly, except when he did say it, we knew he meant it!

I remember one day I – see, we used to play baseball at noon. Well, we'd come home for dinner and then if you weren't back there at 12:30, you'd lose your place. Well, I was quite a ways from the school, four or five blocks, and I would dash home and if dinner wasn't ready I would just raise Cain 'cause I had to be back at 12:30. And mother got pretty much upset about it because once in a while she wouldn't be [ready for dinner].

And one noon I came home and they were waiting for me (chuckle) and Dad said, "We're just sick and tired of this rushing business every noon." And he said, "We're just going to settle this once and for all" and he says, "you come with me." And we went into the front hall and he had a horse whip in there (chuckle) and he had an idea he was going to give me a lesson and the horse whip was so long he couldn't swing it and we both got to laughing (laughter). And I think it was more effective than if he'd whipped me.

Q: So then, you didn't try to get back at 12:30 anymore?

A: Well, they were more careful to have lunch ready, too! It kind of worked out a combination of things, so it worked out all right. But it cleared the air anyway.

Q: But you talked about your mother doing a lot of canning and cooking obviously.

A: Yes, she'd do that. She made bread by the – oh gosh, the bread she used to make! She had a great big round thing – like this (gesturing) - a pan…

Q: With tiny holes in it?

A: I don't remember about the holes. Then it had a cover that went over the top and she would put the bread in that, you know, and then it would rise and then she'd cut it up into loaves afterwards – oh gosh, I don't know how many loaves she made at a time – five or six or seven loaves.

Q: It would probably only last your family a day or two.

A: Oh yeah, it wouldn't last long.

Q: What was a normal dinner meal?

A: Well, we had barley broth – was a must in the wintertime. I like it yet although there was a time when I never wanted to see another barley in my life. Barley broth. And then we used to – I'll tell you one thing we used to eat, and we used to like it, too, was we'd take a slice of bread and put ground meat on top of it. I'll bet you never even heard of it.

Q: Um huh.

A: And it was good, very good. But then we would have meat, I don't really remember. She was quite good at pies and cakes. We would have those.

Q: You'd have meat at least once a day then, mostly beef?

A: I think we'd have meat once a day. Probably mostly beef because I doubt that he [the butcher] ever killed calves or things of that kind in that slaughterhouse. He probably just killed…

Q: Did your mom can meat?

A: No.

Q: No?

A: No.

Q: So, it was all fresh meat?

A: Um huh, yes, it was all fresh meat.

Q: And she'd go to the meat market every two, three days then to get that?

A: Yes. She would like – I went to the meat market for meat (chuckle). It's funny the things you remember. This Jim McMillan [the butcher] was a great singer, he had a terrible voice, but he had a great variety of songs and I remember one of them he used to sing, "It makes no difference what you were, it's what you are today," and he'd sing that at the top of his voice (laughing).

Q: He was the man in the meat market?

A: Yes, he ran the meat market.

Q: How about your mother washing clothes?

A: Well, we had a woman, Mag Baker, that came every Monday morning at 7:00, and she would wash everything in sight for the week and dry them and iron them.

Q: Oh, she did all of that!

A: Oh, what that woman used to do!

Q: Bet there weren't too many women in town who had somebody come and do their wash?

A: No, there weren't. There was very few had Mag Baker. She was the tops in cleaning, cleaning anything. Talk, talk, talk, and work all the time. But from 7:00 in the morning until 6:00 at night she would work. And then walk home. [She was very dedicated to her family.]

Q: A distance?

A: Up to the schoolhouse, which was across the track.

Q: Just four or five blocks?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember how much she was paid for a day's work like that?

A: Dollar a day! At one time. Later on, probably more, but a dollar a day – yep!

Q: So, times do change, don't they?

A: Change!

Q: But you started out by saying that Caledonia was such a thriving town.

A: Well, it was a very active town because [it was] in the center of an excellent agricultural setting and, of course, the people had to shop and they came there to shop. They bought their groceries and their meat and their hardware and farm implements and all that, so they had to buy stuff there, in Caledonia. Well, it's a good town.

* [END OF SIDE ONE]

[SIDE TWO]

A: It was a good town in many ways, and I will give you an example of why I think so. The village dealt in business at that time in an entirely different way than is done today. Mainly everything was bought and sold on the word of the person that was buying or selling, and this certainly prevailed in different businesses that were in existence at that time.

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

An explanation of what they did would be in order at this time and so here goes. Probably the largest business in the village was the Ralston Brothers farm implement, grain, lumber, coal, and feed business, which supplied a very large territory of farmers. William Cunningham had a general store that carried everything people in the vicinity would need in the way of groceries, oil for lamps, and flour and bakery goods that were in common use at that time.

Q: Did they have canned goods, too, Stuart?

A: I doubt it. I doubt it.

Q: Do you remember going there to buy things when you were a youngster?

A: Oh heavens, yes! I would do the shopping for the family on many occasions…

The price for a binder at that time was roughly a hundred dollars, which is quite a change from the price of farm machinery today.

Q: What's a binder?

A: A grain binder… James McMillan had the meat market, and he supplied the community with meat, which he manufactured himself. He had a slaughterhouse outside the village and would buy the stock that he was to butcher and take them out and cut up the meat and bring it to the meat market for sale.

Robert Kelly had a barber shop, which he operated for a number of years. Mrs. Kate Chamberlain with her two daughters operated a famous hotel in the village known as the Chamberlain Hotel. It was a very busy center of activity as it was located in a railroad center where people changed cars and also on occasion stayed overnight.

The several operators that worked the telegraphic shifts on the railroad who would at times stay at the hotel and often ate there. The portions supplied by the Chamberlains were famous throughout that part of the country.

Q: Do you have any idea how many rooms there were?

A: It's my recollection that there were eight or ten rooms in the hotel with a large dining room with one great big table where everybody ate at one table, and the people were waited on by Maggie and Katie and Mrs. Chamberlain kept a wary eye out to see that everybody had enough to eat.

Q: Did they also do the cooking? The Chamberlains – did they do the cooking?

A: Oh yes. The Chamberlains did everything in connection with the hotel. There was no water in the hotel, and it all had to be transported from the well upstairs into the kitchen for cooking.

Jerome Sweeny had a barber shop and pool room that he operated for many years and he was the father of a very fine family. Two of the boys became quite famous: Perry becoming president of the large [Pan American] Standard Oil Company in Texas, and Lloyd becoming sales manager of the Massey-Harris Company in Racine [Wisconsin]. [Harold was Division Manager for Lloyd.]

Q: Did you go to that barber shop when you were a child? Was that a barber shop?

A: Yes, we all went to the Sweeny barber shop. Bob Kelly was another barber shop across the street, but he was only there a short time. This Sweeny shop was the hangout for the town.

Q: Was that the days where you used a straight razor?

A: Oh sure, nothing else.

Q: Did most men go to that rather than shave at home?

A: I think so, I think a lot of them did. But, oh, I suppose many of them used their own razor at home. My father went often to the Sweeny Barber Shop.

Q: Did most men have beards then?

A: Yeah, I think most men did wear some kind of a beard. My father wore sideburns and a moustache, over, down, and up like this (demonstrating). And there's a boy in our church that looks just like him. I stopped him the other day and I said he looks so much like my father I had to speak of it to him and I don't know whether he liked it or not, but anyway…

Thomas Wilson was the manager of the Caledonia Creamery. His brother, Robert Wilson, ran a general grocery store across the street from the creamery and was the son of a man who had started the store and who was an astronomer of some note and had an observatory in his yard where he watched the stars on occasion and was considered quite an intellectual.

Q: That observatory was in Caledonia?

A: Yes, right in his yard.

Q: Do you remember looking in it?

A: I don't remember looking in it but I remember the thing very well. It was a canvas thing with a canopy on it and it could be moved around and then he had a sizeable telescope in there that he watched the stars.

The Wilson family was quite a talented family and Robert Wilson's daughter, Irene, became a very well-known artist, a painter.

Q: That was Robert's daughter?

A: Robert's daughter.

Q: And which one had the creamery?

A: Thomas [Robert's brother].

Q: You were telling me the other day, a story, about going to the creamery when you were little. Can you tell that again?

A: Thomas Wilson was my uncle and I used to drop in at the creamery once in a while, and being of an inquisitive nature, wandered around in among the machinery. One day a big square churn had stopped churning and there was a faucet sticking out the end of it. And I decided that it would be very interesting to see what was in that churn, and I opened the faucet, and the contents are under heavy pressure, and the contents blew out in my face and all over my clothes, and as I ran away I couldn't remember whether I'd shut off the valve or not but I kept on going anyway.

Q: How did you get that all washed out?

A: Oh, I went out in the weeds in the back yard and rubbed off what I could and then finally went home and faced the music.

Q: And what were those contents that went off?

A: Oh, it was sour milk, of course, the end of the churn.

Q: Was that a wooden churn?

A: Yes, it was a big square wooden churn, must have been four feet square and about eight feet long.

Q: Was it run by some kind of a motor?

A: Yes, it was run by a belt from the line shaft.

Q: And did he have more than one churn or did he use that one all the time?

A: Oh, he had a smaller churn, but this was a big churn that the bulk of the milk turned into butter.

Q: And the farmers brought their milk to him each day?

A: Yep, farmers brought their milk each day and he'd turn it into butter.

Q: Would they sell all their milk to him, or would they separate the cream from the milk?

A: They would separate the cream and then the cream would be turned into butter and the residue would be turned back to the farmers. And, of course, as it started out, the first man there would get the first crack at the pump and he would get as much skim milk as he had containers to hold. Well, that went on for a while and then Mr. Coleman, of the Barber-Colman Company, invented a pump where you had to have a coin to put into the pump before you could get any milk and you were given so many coins as you unloaded your milk so that when you came to the pump for skimmed milk you could only get as much skim milk as you would turn in milk in the first place.

Q: Is that skim milk or whey?

A: Skim milk.

Q: It was skim milk.

A: Yes.

Q: It was what was left after they separated the cream out?

A: Yes, it was used for hogs, they just took it home and fed it to the hogs.

Q: Do you have any idea how much they paid for that whole milk?

A: No, I haven't any idea.

Q: And then you did tell me that they sent some of the butter on the train?

A: Well, I imagine that most of it was shipped away, because they must have had great quantities of butter there. From the number of farmers that came in every day they must have had a whale of a lot of milk come in there. So, I suppose it was shipped away in the refrigerator cars or refrigerated – I don't know what. There wouldn't be any trucks in those days.

Q: Did they have ice?

A: They had ice, so I suppose probably it was packed in ice in packages and shipped that way, probably not a very far distance. Probably to Rockford and other points nearby.

Another merchant in town was Richard Clarkson, and Richard Clarkson was a manufacturer of harness. He would buy tanned hides and from the tanned hides that would be stacked in the back of his shop, he would manufacture fine harnesses for the heavy teams that were used on farms for heavy hauling. His harnesses were prized by everybody in the community and once the harness was owned by a farmer he was set for life for harnessing his horses.

Q: Did he also repair harnesses?

A: Oh, sure, and he made collars and everything he'd need in the harness. He would buy the buckles and things of that kind but the rest of the stuff he made out of leather. He would make the thread that he used. It was a linen thread that he would fasten to a wagon wheel that was located in the shop and was located on an axis so it could turn and he would tie the strands of this linen thread to the spokes of the wheel and then fasten the other end rigidly across the room. Then he would start and spin the wheel until he had wound the thread as many times as possible, as many times as he needed to get the size of thread that he wanted. Then, with a pad of black wax that just fitted his hand, he would run back and forth on this wound cord, you might call it, until he was sure that it was entirely saturated with wax and would be…

[END OF TAPE THREE]

(Jo Wald, Transcriptionist, 1975) **/** (Doug Janicke, Transcriptionist, 2022)