Transcription of **RPL ORAL HISTORIES**, for Rockford Public Library
Subject: *Stuart Ralston*, **Tape No. 4 (Call # ARC R 977.331 R164M)**
July 18, 1975
Recorded at subject's address: 1506 National Avenue, Rockford IL
Interviewer: Joanne Reid

- [*Currently, Tape 4 is broken, so the audio portion of this interview is unavailable unless and until the cassette tape can be repaired*]

Q: Did he turn that wheel by hand?

A: Yes, he turned that wheel by hand – I can see him yet just turning that [wheel] as many times as he thought it should be made.

Q: And did he operate that entire shop himself?

A: Entirely, entirely by himself.

Q: And do you know where he got the tanned leather?

A: Well, probably from Hess and Hopkins down in Rockford. He'd buy them probably from wholesalers, but Hess and Hopkins would be one source that he could have bought from.

Q: Would he have to take a horse and wagon to go and get that?

A: No, the salesman would probably deliver it for him or it would come up by railroad. It would come up by the KD.

Q: The KD?

A: Kenosha Division. That was the railroad that ran through Argyle to Caledonia and Rockford – through Rock Cut. That was where Rock Cut got its name. Rock Cut got its name because the railroad made a cut through the rock that's now Rock Cut. That was a rocky mound and they cut through there. I can remember the rock cut. The train went through that cut.

Q: Did they dynamite that?

A: Oh yes, that's the way they got it out. It was quite a thing. It was thirty feet high probably.

Colin Lang was a blacksmith of excellent ability and was so recognized throughout the countryside. His horseshoeing ability was unquestioned and he really knew how to handle horses either peaceful or fractious and he could calm them down with the many ways he had to do it. He was pretty gruff but once you knew him, he was a very pleasant gentleman and liked to have the kids come in and watch him at work and see the sparks fly. I remember he used to make iron hoops for us that we could roll in the street and one advantage he had in some of the hoops he made – he made a handle with a ring around the hoop so that by pushing, the hoop would move forward. That was the deluxe of the village.

Q: You didn't have paved streets, did you?

A: No paved streets but we had a sidewalk that went up the main street. A wooden sidewalk that went up the main street. The streets were kept reasonably smooth with gravel and that sort of thing so we could run on the gravel street.

Q: Did you have races with those hoops?

A: We probably did although I don't remember specifically of races. There were always two or three that were questioning their ability to run and to see what they could do with their hoops.

Charles Segerlund was a very capable doctor who lived in Caledonia until he died, and he was interested in many other things. He was very active in getting the telephone system started in Caledonia and was the manager during his entire life. It was called the Boone County Cooperative Telephone Company and was a very successful little operation until it was sold a few years ago to the General Telephone Company.

Doctor Segerlund, with the assistance of William Cunningham, Mark Martin, and Stuart Ralston, installed a complete telephone system in the town of Capron. We did all the work of making the initial installation of that telephone system: spending the entire summer over there in roughly the years of 1907 or 08.

Q: How did that come to be?

A: Well, Dr. Segerlund contracted with the Capron people to put the telephone system in.

Q: They had none before that?

A: None whatsoever.

Q: So, Caledonia had it first?

A: Caledonia had a telephone system first.

Q: How about Poplar Grove?

A: Poplar Grove was always a part of the Boone County system. They did their calling through Caledonia. Caledonia had the system before either Poplar Grove or Capron. Then Caledonia built the line in Poplar Grove and then they built the Capron system as a separate unit. The Capron system was not connected with the telephone system of Caledonia except by one or two long distance toll lines.

Q: This gentleman that you're speaking of was a physician?

A: Yes.

Q: This was just a side business of his?

A: Oh yes, he was a very highly intelligent person. He had many interests. He installed the first carbide light system [I think] in the town and he was very knowledgeable along many mechanical lines.

Q: So, it wasn't strictly a business venture? He was interested in making progress.

A: That's right. And he had the support of a number of men in the village who make or leave a village stranded. If those men are not there with a public spirit and just merely live in the town [, the town] dies. In the days gone by, the men were very interested in building up the town and they did, and it was a very active little community.

Q: You were a very young man when you helped put that telephone in.

A: Yes. Well, in 1907 I would be – was born in '89 – I was eighteen years old then. Oh, I remember that summer, we worked like slaves, I tell you! In some of the lines we had ten pin cross arms, which meant that you had ten wires on each cross arm. We'd climb the pole, wrap

our leg around and then tie in all ten of those wires with a tie wire around the glass. And you can see how far we had to stretch to get that job done. Each of us took the third pole and we had a driver on the wagon and he kept that old wagon going and I want to tell you, to keep your place with every third pole you had to keep moving. We'd tie in miles a day of that telephone system.

Q: How many miles do you suppose you installed altogether?

A: Oh, we must have installed twenty or thirty miles of wire in that town that summer.

Q: That's a pretty exciting thing.

A: Oh, we had a great time. We worked like – oh boy, we worked!

Q: Do you have any idea how much you got paid for that job?

A: Oh heavens, we got paid about ten cents an hour or fifteen cents an hour.

Q: Was that your first job?

A: Yes, that was my first job. But it was a lot of fun anyway. We had a lot of goings on in Capron. We got to know a lot of the young people there and had lots of fun.

Tom and Sarah Sloughy were gardeners, and they had a few cows and they sold milk to the people in the village and also, they had a garden and sold stuff from the garden to people who wanted it.

James Richardson was a gentleman that lived in the village and his job was a guard at the railroad crossing and although probably his income was not very high, nevertheless, he bought and paid for a home in the village. My father had financed him in the house, and I remember the day he came up and made the last payment (laughs). And that was a great day for him and of course it gave my father a great deal of pleasure to have him the owner of the house.

Q: Do you know if your father charged interest?

A: Probably. But interest in those days was small. Probably five percent. But he just kept pegging along. I used to sit and talk to him in his little shanty there at the road crossing and he'd tell about his experiences as a boy and it was quite interesting. But I've always admired

James Richardson for having done what he did in his lifetime to buy and pay for a very nice house. It's still there in the village and it's still in nice shape.

Q: Do you know if he spent most of his life there?

A: I think he did. He was there when I was born, and he died there.

Q: And did he have a family?

A: Yes, he had quite a large family. Two of the boys went into the railroad business and the girls married and moved away, and it was a nice family.

Mr. H. D. Adams was the expressman at the depot and was very active in many things in the village, very active in the church and he had a very fine family that was very active in the church and in the community, his wife especially. His daughter was the Valedictorian of Beloit College, Harriet Adams, married Robert Thompson. That's before you knew anything about it! But Rob Thompson was a very fine farmer that lived out and away, and they were very happily married.

Q: What did you tell me the job was, the expressman?

A: Yes. He was the express – handled the express that came in to the depot of freight – freight and express for the railroad company.

Frank Richardson was the telegraph operator and was the man who was longest an operator, as far as I can remember, in the Caledonia station. As a matter of fact, I think he spent his life as the telegraph operator in the depot in Caledonia.

Q: Telegraphs kind of intrigue me because that's not been an important thing in the last few years.

A: No, it has not because that telephone thing is so far out [surpassed]…

Q: Can you tell me any telegraph incidents that you remember?

A: Not really. Telegraphing was all done by the Morse Code, by making and breaking electric circuit, which would do the same thing at the other end of the station and merely made a click. There would be – three clicks was an 'S,' for example, and one click was a 'T.' Their ears

were so attuned that they could listen to that thing and write it right off as though they were reading it in English.

Q: Did people in the village use telegraph?

A: Not so much. Of course, in an emergency they would. That was the only way to get it out of town. Oh yes, that was used then but wasn't used like the telephone, of course. It would be purely message because in those days they wrote letters. They had time to write letters and receive answers.

Q: Did it get its most use by the railroad itself?

A: Yes. You see, each railroad had its own telegraph system. The Western Union had a deal with them. I suppose the Western Union owned some of the lines and the railroad owned some of the lines and they would have interchanging deals, of course. Whichever would work out the best for both concerned.

Q: Would they send messages about freight?

A: Oh yes. The big thing on the railroad was keeping track of the trains. You see, each train would report into – well, say a train coming out from Chicago would pass through Poplar Grove. The Poplar Grove operator would telegraph Caledonia that train number X has passed through Poplar Grove at such and such a time. And then that was true all up and down the line. It was the way they kept track of the trains to keep them from running into each other.

Q: Were there sidings in Caledonia?

A: Yes. There were several sidings at Caledonia. Four or five sidings there and sometimes they'd be full because freights would have to make way for passenger trains. There used to be I suppose thirty to fifty trains a day in through Caledonia. Now there's very few.

B. A. Streeter was the schoolteacher. He was really a man who was looked up to in the village because he had a job that was a strenuous job. He presided over a schoolroom with – in the wintertime there would be as high as sixty students and one teacher. And he would teach the subjects of history, geography, arithmetic, reading, spelling, and writing for eight grades in that period of time of a day, which was a tremendous job. But I think we got an awful lot out of it

because we were especially encouraged in reading and writing and spelling. We had spelling contests. We would stand up along the wall on both sides and then we would try to spell down the other side and that sort of thing. They had them quite frequently and so you were put to it to learn to spell. We would have books with blank lines in them and on those blank lines we would put letter after letter of the same letter, one right after the other, the whole line. The next line would be another letter but that whole line would be that letter. The idea was to gain perfection with that letter. And so, as a result we became pretty good writers. It's so important to be able to write, I think, because some of the writing you try to read now of the youngsters that write to you is pretty hard to read. So I think B. A. Streeter was an outstanding instructor of those days and handled that school in excellent shape. He was lame, had a stiff leg and he just had dignity enough to keep everybody in line.

Q: What method did he use to keep his students in line?

A: He was just ahead of them all always, mentally. He was alert and when he could see things developing, he had ways of sidetracking it. He was a gentleman.

Q: So, he was not extremely authoritarian in a disciplinary…

A: Not at all. He did it the other way. He did it by beating them to the gun with his brains. And he did it in such a courteous way that that sort of thing never developed.

Q: No hanky-panky going on? Do you remember anybody getting spanked?

A: No, he never touched anybody. I do remember one thing (laughs). One of the boys in school chewed tobacco and he had a little tin box with ashes in it and Mr. Streeter suspicioned that something was going on there. So at night he looked in the desk and found this ash tray full of ashes. And so, the next day he called the school to attention and he held this thing up and he gave a lecture on chewing tobacco (laughs) and told all the bad things about chewing tobacco and showed what J. Morgan had been doing spitting into the ashes!

Q: Oh, he spit into the ashes?

A: Sure!

Q: I couldn't get the connection between ashes and chewing tobacco.

A: That was a spittoon.

Q: I see. You said that in the wintertime there were as many as sixty students.

A: You see, the boys on the farm would sometimes miss some of the spring and summer schooling because they were working on the farm, getting the crops in and getting them harvested again so that in the winter they would come, and they would still come to school when they were twenty years old. But they would be getting knowledge of one kind and another and in school.

Q: In other words, they would come back, maybe at the age of fourteen they would come back and still be in third grade where they were the year before.

A: Yes, or maybe they would study outside and be able to pick up where the class left off, you know, if they were smart, and there were some awfully smart boys.

Q: How would they know where to place students?

A: Well, they would – I don't know how that was worked really. I think they would talk over what he had done in the meantime and then they would put him in – and I don't remember that they had special classes for those boys either. I think they just went into classes they seemed to fit into. He could tell in a short time where they belonged.

Q: Even if the kids were a lot younger?

A: Yes, even though the kids were younger.

Q: And that was acceptable?

A: Well, that's the way it worked.

Q: Did you have examinations at the end of each year?

A: I can't answer that question – I don't think we did. I don't recall of any examinations ever being given in the seven grades that I was in the school. I came down to Hall School for the eighth grade.

Q: In Rockford?

A: Yes. I took my eighth grade in the Hall School down here [in Rockford].

Q: Why was that?

A: Well, I was going away to the Academy and my father thought it would be a good idea to come down here and get sort of the idea of what you were going to run into in the Academy or high school. And they thought that the school down here was more qualified to lead you on into that new schooling better than they would at the school there in Caledonia with so many students. And I think he was right.

Q: How did you get to Hall School?

A: Well, we came down in the KD Monday morning and then I lived over on Fisher Avenue with Charlie Brown who was another boy from Caledonia. That was his grandmother, we lived with her. I stayed down during the week and then went back Friday night.

Q: Was that frequently done?

A: No. Most of the kids from Caledonia went back and forth every day. And the kids from Argyle all went back and forth every day. From high school and grade school, too. I don't know whether they went to seventh grade or not. I don't know that they did. Elmer Ralston, that's Dave Ralston, went to Roscoe to school. He drove back and forth. That's Abbie's brother.

Q: Drove what back and forth?

A: Rode from Argyle to Roscoe every day to school. For eighth grade.

Q: You say he drove?

A: Drove a horse and buggy to school.

Q: Now how old were you when you came to Rockford for eighth grade?

A: Well, let's see. I graduated from the Academy when I was seventeen, and so I came down here when I was – in 1903 that would be – I was fourteen when I came down here. Well, let's see, that's Streeter. Mike Morgan was a farmer who lived on the edge of town and was quite a character. His family married and moved away. He eventually died. Jim Smith [Julius Schmidt?] lived on the east side of the track and he was the railroad section foreman for many

many years. William Cunningham was the telephone foreman in Caledonia for many years; he took charge of the repairs of the telephones.

[END OF SIDE 1]

John A. Brown was president of the Caledonia National Bank and John Greenlee was cashier. And that little bank survived – they carried on a banking institution there until all the banks were closed during the depression of the 1930s and the bank was allowed to open immediately when permission was given to reopen the banks again. But, later on they sold their assets to the First National Bank of Belvidere and paid off all their creditors and paid the stockholders a substantial amount on their stock. It was an excellent example of what can be done with fine people operating in positions of trust. Fred Wicks was a building contractor. He built houses around through the countryside. Mr. Clark was Pastor of the Caledonia church for many years.

Q: Do you know when that church started?

A: Well, it would be, I guess, of about 1900, but that wouldn't be quite right so I won't say exactly whether it was in the neighborhood of 1900 or 1904, something of that time.

Q: Did they have churches in Caledonia before that?

A: No, I'll tell you when it was built. By golly, it was built when I was three years old because I went to the Willow Creek Church till I was three. We drove back and forth every Sunday. We were all members of the Willow Creek Church. Then, you see, the village of Caledonia was comprised of many people of different religions and so my father was very anxious to get a church in the village where everybody could participate. So, after many meetings they finally voted that they should become a Congregational Church and they built a church then, and from then on were…So, that would be – I was born in 1889 and three years later would be 1892. Well, that church probably was built in 1895, roughly 1895. Because I can remember as a small boy of seeing the great frames for the windows being hauled in on a hayrack from where they were built out of town. I think they were built in Beloit. They were hauled in on a hayrack and then set up into the church ready for the windowpane.

Q: You lived cater-corner from that?

A: Yes, we lived diagonally across the corner.

Q: You would have milked your cow right across the street from it?

A: Yes, right across the street. That's where the pasture was.

Q: So, you probably watched that church go up quite a bit?

A: Yes, yes, we did. I was there when that church was started. I can remember going to the Willow Creek Church, and I remember the seat we sat in. I mean approximately.

Q: You sat in the same seat every Sunday?

A: Oh yes. And I think we sat in the same seat with D. C. Ralston, my grandfather, my father's father.

Q: Did you have to rent that seat?

A: I don't remember whether there was pew rent in those days or not. But I think we all sat in the same – could be that pew rent was in vogue at that time.

Q: Do you think that the people in Caledonia copied any of the ideas from the Willow Creek Church?

A: Oh, I think so. I think there's been a very close relationship as far as the Caledonia people are concerned. There might have been, and I think there were, some feelings at first of pulling members away from it. But, you see, the town of Caledonia had a couple of saloons in it, and it was kind of a tough town with a railroad center there, you know. Father was very anxious to make it a decent town to live in and he thought a church was important. So, he was very active in getting the church started, and I think there was some feeling against him for a while because of it. But his idea was entirely altruistic in getting the job done.

Q: Did the construction people come from the town of Caledonia?

A: I don't remember who built the church, whether it was built by the same people who built my father's house or not. That was Duncan Campbell who built my father's house. His daughter is the wife of Carl Ralston.

Q: And he lived in Caledonia?

A: No, he didn't. He lived on a farm out in the country. But he was an excellent contractor. And he built that house, I think it was $2,200.00 for our home, our present home for $2,200.00 (laughs). Of course, houses aren't built like that now. The manse cost $1,750.00 right there next to the church. It's a big house, too.

Q: Yes, you said you had inside plumbing in your house?

A: Yep! Yes, sir, we were the first people in that part of the country that had a bathroom with a tub and all the rest of it: wash basin, toilet facilities, and then we had a big cesspool out in the backyard. A cesspool was a great big cistern with stone walls. Stones laid one on top of the other, so water would seep away through the stones. They're still being used after 75 years.

Q: How did the townspeople react to that?

A: Well, they thought it was terrible, I guess, at first, that you'd think of doing a thing like that. But afterwards they thought it was great and then one after another followed suit! So Dad was a progressive so-and-so! He didn't care for nothing (laughs)! He just had an idea and that was the way it was going to be.

Q: You mean he didn't care what other people thought?

A: Well, he did, but when he thought he was right he would go ahead – now that was quite a pretentious house to build in the little village of Caledonia. But he just decided that for the size family we had he had to have a house that size, and so he went ahead and built it, and we've lived in it. I don't know how we'd gotten along with less house.

And then I have also a man who was quite a character in Caledonia's life in the early days but it was a little earlier than this period, and that was William McNeilage, who manufactured shoes. He built shoes from nothing. He bought the leather, just like the harness shop man, he bought the leather and shaped the shoe and put the sole on it, and then I told you about the shoe shop being there until recent years. Dr. Segerlund used to have his office in it, too, later on, but when we were young out at the warehouse there was a whole raft of pigeonholes had these little wooden pegs of different sizes that he used for different size shoes. So, you'd go in and order a

pair of shoes, and he'd take the size of your foot and first thing you knew you had a pair of shoes.

Q: You mean within minutes?

A: No, within days, you know. He had tools to make it with.

Q: So, he didn't make shoes unless he had an order for them?

A: I don't know that he didn't. He probably had the standard size shoes that he probably made for work shoes and things of that kind. But he was quite a person. He married my grandmother. My grandmother's husband died in Scotland and then my mother and her sister Agnes came to this country. My mother was seven and my Aunt Agnes was nine – and he died and McNeilage knew her over there and he sent her money to come over and then he married her as soon as she got to Caledonia. And then they had two children. One of the children is Bill Kelly's mother, Jessie Kelly, who's a half sister of my mother, and she's the mother of Bill Kelly. You know Bill and Hazel Kelly. And that's the layout out there. And they owned the land across the street. And then, you see, when my grandmother died, she was the owner of all this land that McNeilage had owned and then that came down to us through that source. That's how we owned a half block across the street and my Aunt Agnes owned the other half of the block. So, that's how that was. Well, as far as I can give you that's the story of Caledonia…

Q: I would like, though, for you to go back and talk about Ralston's elevator for a bit. Is that part of your family?

A: Yes. I think I'd like to make some notes on that before I went into it because I'd like to get that pretty straight because it's a, that was quite an institution – my father at the age of twenty went to Caledonia. The reason why I'd like to go into it a little bit further, I don't know whether he bought an elevator that was there at the time or bought lots and built the elevator, and I think it's the latter. And then he went there, and his brother James came with him, and they started buying cattle among other things, selling lumber and grain and goats. This brother of his, James, that would be Dave and Carl's father, he bought livestock and shipped it there out of the stockyards in Caledonia. That was one of their – they gave that up before I was any size to know that – but they drove stock in. I can remember the driving stock in through Caledonia.

There would be great herds of stock coming into Caledonia, you know, and being driven down to the stockyards. And then they'd load them into cars for Chicago the next day.

But I'll get the dope on the Ralston building because that's quite a thing. You see, we owned that place for 85 years. And we just recently sold it. Bessie ran it for many years, then Ray Ralston bought a half interest in it, and he was there for a number of years.

Q: She did a good job with that place.

A: Well, you see, it was a dying business but, see, probably they could have done the same thing that he's doing now. He's drying corn and shipping corn and then seems to be we sold it out to Mark Grenlund. He seems to be making some headway. He's keeping up his interest payments on it, and we're going along with him to do everything we can to make it a success for him. He's put up a great big metal elevator that stands as high as the original elevator. It's a tremendous thing in diameter – gosh, it must be 20 or 25 feet in diameter. So, he's planning on, and if corn comes through like it could theoretically, this fall, he could make quite a clean up on that thing. There's going to be a tremendous crop of corn unless some tragedy occurs. Cause, my gosh, that corn is – that corn will be ready in September. It'll be dried out in September!

Q: It looks like it. I don't ever remember corn being this early.

A: Well, oh, I don't think it ever was.

Q: Well, we can use it after the last three years.

A: Oh yes, that last year was deadly. But you got twice as much for corn, that was some break, anyway. That was a little break – now this farm I look after down in Davis Junction for Harry Green, they got half a crop for twice the price, so they came out just about as good as they did the year before. But this year they'll – well, of course the soybean thing is what saved their life last year. They had half their farm in soybeans. And, of course, they went crazy – hit eleven dollars at one time – and I think he sold a lot of them at seven dollars a bushel.

Q: Well, that was a crop – well, what do I want to say? Not a livestock farm, just crop farming.

A: Well, that's entirely crop farm, but they've raised stock until four years ago. And this man said, "Nothing doing on livestock now for the next several years." He said, "It's going to go downhill, and it's going to be a no good business." And he was so right. Absolutely, the many people that he knows have gone bankrupt as a result of having livestock.

Q: Yes, I was going to say, we didn't have the advantage of the double price on corn because all of our corn goes into livestock.

A: Oh no, you wouldn't have the advantage there, absolutely.

Q: We really were hurt very badly last year.

A: Oh yes, you're a livestock farm entirely then? You feed all your stuff to the livestock?

Q: In a good year, no. In a good year, we would sell half of our crop.

A: Have enough to feed.

Q: But last year, for the last two years maybe, we've had such a terrible spring…

A: Yea, no good! No, this fellow is *uncanny* the way he can sense things. He has run that farm like a – you can't talk him out of anything else – you see, there's a trend now that beef is up, hogs are fifty dollars a hundred. But he says, "No, not yet. We're not going into livestock." So, we play his game. He's been uncanny.

[TAPING STOPS THEN STARTS AGAIN…]

We depended entirely on ourselves for entertainment. We had that big dance hall up on the second floor, and we had lots of dances, square dances and things of that kind. We had school and Sunday School picnics. And then baseball was a big thing in Caledonia, because it's the only sport that you could play with a five-cent baseball and the limb of a tree. We became darn good; we had a darn good ball team there. We played over many parts of the – many towns around here. So, I might add some of the life of the town, but I would like to talk to those that give some other slant to it.

[END OF TAPE FOUR]

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