<u>Transcription of **RPL ORAL HISTORIES**, for Rockford Public Library</u>
Subject: *Stuart Ralston*, **Tape No. 5 (Call # ARC R 977.331 R164M)**
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Interviewer: Joanne Reid

- [*Currently, Tape 5 is broken, so the audio portion of this interview is unavailable unless and until the cassette tape can be repaired*]

Q: Stuart, do you want to talk a little bit more about some of the people that lived in Caledonia when you remember them?

A: Yes, during the last week I have talked to several people in Caledonia including my sister Bessie, who has been in charge of the bicentennial for Caledonia Township, and she has given me some items that I would like to also include. The first item is a correction consisting of the presidency of the Caledonia National Bank, and I would wish to make the change saying that William Strong of Beloit was the first president of the bank but shortly after succeeded by Mr. John A. Brown who was president for the rest of the period of the life of the bank.

Q: Do you remember Mr. Brown?

A: Very well. He lived right across the street from us.

Q: Oh, he did?

A: Yes, across the street from the church and across from us.

Q: So, he was a friend?

A: Oh yes, he was a very close friend of my father's. The pastor who probably was pastor of the Caledonia Congregational Church for the longest time was Reverend Clark, who with his family, lived in the parsonage during the tenancy of the church. He was a fine man and a father of a very fine family.

Q: Can you remember any personal connection that you had with him?

A: Not really, although we were at Lake Delavan at the same time in adjoining cottages. He had a son who was quite a fine athlete from Beloit College, and we used to swim together in

the afternoons in the lake. One afternoon my sister, Bessie, fell down in the water, which was about three feet deep, and lost her sense of direction and was pulled out of the water by Reverend Clark's son. It's been a dark spot in the family that we don't discuss.

Hollis Day was the owner of a livery stable in the village and operated it quite successfully for a number of years, but the automobile, of course was the answer and he was the victim.

Q: What's a livery stable?

A: Where they rent horses and buggies.

Q: Did lots of people in Caledonia have to do that?

A: Well, people would get off the train there, you know, and go out – salesmen particularly – go into the country and see the farmers. See, they couldn't get into town any other way. They wouldn't drive from Rockford to see a farmer about corn. They would get on the train and go to Caledonia, go to the livery stable and get a horse and drive out to the farm.

Q: Do you have any idea how much it would cost to rent a horse?

A: Oh, it would probably be a dollar a day or something like that. It was inexpensive according to the time. I remember one night we rented a horse to go to the graduation in Rockford High School of Annie Wilson. We drove to Roscoe, took the inter-urban and got into our buggy and encountered a terrific lightning storm and the horse ran off the road and ran two wheels into a ditch, tipped the buggy and the horse upside down and we in the top of the buggy and the heels in front of us but the neck of the horse had been turned back on its body when it fell over and we were able to crawl out and finally pull its head out from under its neck and got the horse on its feet and the buggy right side up and went on to the next farm house and stayed all night in the haymow.

Q: You said "we." How many in the buggy?

A: Dave Ralston and Bill Cunningham and I were the three in the buggy at the time.

Q: That's a wild experience!

A: I never see that darn place on that road to Roscoe that I don't think of the wild night we spent. We were going along and all of a sudden that horse just ran two wheels off into that ditch and tipped that whole thing 180 degrees overboard, and we were sitting all messed up on the top of the buggy and this horse was upside down with four feet in the air in a little side ditch.

Q: It's a wonder you weren't killed.

A: Well, the horse never moved because its head was back, and I suppose it was so tied in it couldn't move. Well, we got her out and saved it and our fathers paid for the damage.

Q: But how many horses would they have in the livery stable?

A: Oh, they'd probably have eight or ten horses.

Q: And that was one man's business?

A: Yes, that was one man's business. Hollis Day.

M. M. Martin, a man of some distinction in the village, was a schoolteacher, but he did other things. He had talent as a violinist, and he experimented with electricity and did many other things, and then he had a little farm of a few acres and raised berries and vegetables for people in the village.

Charlie Rahbar was the man, the baggage master at the railroad station and also was the man in charge of the pump for pumping water into a great big tank where the engines resupplied their water in the tank next to the engine for the use of the engine itself when it was running.

Q: You mean they often had to refill that tank when they were stopped in the station?

A: Yes. You see, in going through the town with thirty trains a day, it was a junction point and very often I've seen the engines pull up and pull down this big spout into the mouth of the water container and then pull a chain and the water would pour into this great big vault and fill it up with water and then the engine and train would go on.

Q: Oh, and that was done by what kind of method? I mean, this big tank being filled – you said this gentleman…

A: The water was pumped into a big high tank that was higher than the engine so the engine was filled by gravity. The water was pumped, however, by a gasoline motor that drove a large pump that supplied the water to that big tank.

Q: Would that be something that he'd have to watch over all the time it was running?

A: All the time. He had to keep that tank filled because he never knew when an engine was going to come along and need a tank full of water.

Now for the time being that's the story on the people of the village that come to my mind although there are many others that are worthy of comment, but there's not room here to talk about all of them.

Q: How many people do you think lived in Caledonia?

A: Hundred and fifty.

Q: About a hundred and fifty in 1900?

A: I think you've got that on it – think you've got the record there.

Q: It was a high percentage of school students then because you told me there were sixty in school and there were only a hundred and fifty people in town. Where did that come from?

A: Well, they came from the farms. Yes, most of the kids, well half of those kids, I'll bet you came from the farm. I'll bet you thirty of them came from the farms. And there would be…you see, when I was a youngster going to school there were eight in our family. You see, they had larger families then than they do now. A lot of the inhabitants of the town were youngsters. We had a ball team and enough for another one with kids that lived right there in the village.

Q: Were there schools built out in the area later?

A: Yes, there were schools built out in the area later, which took the load off the Caledonia School. There was the Wyman School, the Cummings School, and the Morgan School that I can recall offhand – you see, they in turn will take a substantial number of youngsters from the Caledonia School.

Q: I wonder about when they were built?

A: Well, they were probably built – can't answer that. Well, I know the Cummings School was built later because Ralph Cummings mentioned that today that the Cummings School was built and that took some of the load off the Caledonia School and the same would be true of the others.

Q: Maybe in the 1920s?

A: Well, I don't know. That Wyman School was there for a long time, and I think Alvin Brown went to that Wyman School all the time he was there, and he would be eighty now, so that Wyman School was probably not – probably the people from the Wyman School didn't come to Caledonia. I don't recall.

Q: That has a stone foundation, doesn't it? So, it probably was a…

A: That's a stone building entirely.

Q: Oh, the whole building was stone?

A: Whole building was stone.

Q: So, that was probably built in 1880 or 1890?

A: Yes, it probably was.

Q: Stuart, how about recreation in the town of Caledonia when you were a youngster – besides the hoops; you told me all about the hoops! – what fun that was. Did you have bicycles?

A: Yes, the bicycles were the principle means of transportation, local transportation, of course. And the big day in the life of a boy or a girl in Caledonia was the day they got bicycles. I remember my father sent to a wholesale house in Chicago that he dealt with in other things and all of a sudden one day three bicycles arrived and we couldn't get them uncrated fast enough and start to find out what the mysteries of bicycling were all about.

Q: That was your first bicycle?

A: My first bicycle. There was one for me and one for David Ralston, my cousin, and one for his brother. I think that's what the three bicycles were all about at that time.

Q: Did bicycles then look just like bicycles today?

A: Yes, except the tires were the large type tires. They were built stronger throughout. The present-day style bicycle was built on the racing type and then of course they're much lighter.

Q: And where did you do your bicycling?

A: Well, we had the main street of the town was reasonably smooth and then we drove out into the country even as bad as the roads were and battle the ditches and all the rest of it trying to get from place to place. I remember one day driving in from my uncle's farm against a strong headwind and on a dirt road, and I'll tell you that was a battle to be long remembered. It was a case of 'ride a little ways' and then get off and walk a little ways to get your breath. Those were the days when bicycling was not much fun, except that they did get you from place to place.

Q: And that's what they were primarily for?

A: Yes, that was the reason for bicycles in those days like it's getting to be today when you can't buy gasoline, you're going back to the bicycle.

Q: Did adults ride bicycles?

A: Not so much because they drove horses and buggies in the main, and if you're going any distance at all, it was the horse and buggy that was the main method of transportation.

Q: How young were you when you drove a horse and buggy?

A: Oh, probably fifteen, let's see – probably fifteen, maybe younger than that. I first drove an automobile in 1911. That would be 11 [years from his birth in 1889 to 1900] and 11 [years from 1900]: I was 22 years old when I first drove an automobile. Of course, those were the days of real sport when you could get in an automobile and hope it didn't rain for the time you were away so that you would get home safely without getting stuck in the mud.

Q: Because there were dirt roads?

A: Oh yes, dirt roads everywhere.

Q: In an open car?

A: Well, the cars even in those days had a canvas top with flapping side curtains so you didn't get drowned if you did get caught in the rain, but you generally got wet.

Q: I'm surprised that you weren't just a little boy when you drove the horse and buggy. Did your dad think that was dangerous?

A: Well, I probably drove long before that. As a matter of fact, I remember having driven a team of horses when I was working at my uncle's out on the farm and drove with a load of grain to the elevator in Caledonia and on the way met Dr. Segerlund in a red Maxwell and the team took for the fences, but the doctor stopped his car and dashed over, grabbed the two horses by the bits and virtually dragged them past his Red Demon! And at that time I probably was ten or eleven years old.

Q: The doctor had a very early car then?

A: Oh heavens, he had the first car in Caledonia anywhere near! Little bit of a thing without a top, well, I guess he had a buggy top. And oh, that was that devil on the road for horses! And this uncle of mine had fast horses and they were sleek and, oh man, when that red thing started coming down at them, they would have no part of it. But this Segerlund, this doctor was a great guy. This Dr. Segerlund was a smart man. He knew what to do in most emergencies.

Q: Was it the noise of the car that bothered the horses?

A: No, it was everything. The thought of the thing running without any apparent motion looked like a demon I suppose to a horse like it did to men and women. It made a terrific noise too, you see. The muffler wasn't anything like mufflers are today and the looks of the thing combined with the noise probably was the thing that disturbed the horses.

Q: So, you went out and helped your uncle on the farm when you were a kid?

A: Yes, I worked on the farm. I was greatly in love with this Uncle John Kelly, and he was a great horseman, and I just wanted to be with him wherever he went – didn't care where it was. I would go out and at the age of seven I would spend most of the summer on the farm and I'd wash the dishes and look after the kids. I remember at the end of the first year I got fifty cents

and the second year he doubled my wages: I got a dollar! And I thought that was big money, and I guess it was in those days.

Q: For the whole summer?

A: Whole summer. I just loved it out on that farm. He was the kind of a guy that would get an idea that he wanted to hitch one of the horses up on a, what did we call it? A cart, a two-wheeled cart, and he would come driving down the road and he would holler, "Come on there, Stuart. Get in the seat with me!" and away we'd go down the road. Full speed! Then over at Duncan Kelly's farm, his father's farm, on haying days or stacking days, there were just picnics. All the brothers came over and helped and that was a ball. They were all a lot of fun, and I remember those days so well! As a matter of fact, the brothers have all died but the memory lingers on of the fun I had in those years up on the farm.

Q: You were stacking loose hay?

A: No, the hay was raised and put into the barn with a fork, a hay fork, a hay fork stuck in…you've seen a hay fork pick up hay.

Q: Yes, I have.

A: Well then, a hay fork is a big "U" with teeth that when it goes into the hay stand parallel with the sides and when they've got a big bite in the hay, they turn crosswise. Then they lift that hay fork out of the hay; it takes up a great part of the load with each lift.

Q: How do you lift up that fork?

A: By a team of horses and rope pulleys that they would pull it up and the team would drive away from the barn and the further away they went the higher the bale went. But stacking grain, of course, was the thing that was a lot of fun, too, and that took two operations. It took the operation of lifting the bundle from the shock onto the wagon and then when you got to the barnyard, to a man who made the stack. Then the threshing machine would back in between the stacks and then the bundles were again dumped from the stack into the mouth of the threshing machine where the grain was separated from the stalk.

Q: Were you allowed to eat dinner with the men?

A: Oh yes, sure. I would eat dinner with the men, and I finally got old enough so they put me in a barley straw stack. And if you've never had barley beards down your back and in your neck, why, you don't know what being in a barley stack is because you not only have to take care of keeping the straw level but you have to keep out of the way of the stuff coming down on top of you. So, it's a kind of an operation and it's a thing that's unheard of today.

Q: A hot time of the year, too, isn't it?

A: Oh boy! And it should have been done away with long before it was (chuckles).

Q: Oh, really (laughs)? Why do you say that?

A: Because it was torture (laughing)!

Q: (Laughs) I think some people have very pleasant memories of threshing bees.

A: Yes, they were fun but…the days I spent with the Kelly's were a very pleasurable time.

Q: What about other recreation in the town of Caledonia?

A: 'Course, the big recreation was the baseball team. We had an excellent team. I talked today with Dave Ralston who was a member of the team, and he said that they had lost the scorebook, so we can't brag scientifically about how many games we won, but we won a lot of them! We played teams in Roscoe, Rockton, Belvidere, Beloit, Rockford, Capron, Poplar Grove, and we had a very excellent record and, of course, the town supported the team, and oh yes, we played Argyle every Fourth of July for a number of years when the two churches joined forces in a big picnic.

Dancing was, of course, quite a social event in the town because when there was a dance put on, it drew people from all the countryside. And it was a gala occasion with round dancing and square dancing, and square dancing was very popular in those days even like it is today.

Q: Did you get to go to those when you were just a little boy?

A: Well, yes, we started going to them when we were small. We didn't do much dancing probably, but we went anyway and probably danced with some girl our own age to learn how to dance. We eventually learned the steps.

Q: Your parents went to the dance, then?

A: Not really. They were all younger people.

Q: Oh!

A: Oh yes, they were younger people.

Q: Like I learned to dance going to dances where I went with Mom and Dad, and I probably learned to dance with men in the crowd rather than kids.

A: Well, I think there would be something to that, that the older people would take us over and show us some of the steps. One dance I remember was called the "Fireman's Ball," and that always took place right after the midnight lunch. That was a square dance and a wild, fast dance that was. But we all looked forward to the "Fireman's Ball," and everybody got in on it.

Q: That was a square dance?

A: Yes, that was a square dance.

Q: Who was the caller?

A: Sever. Sever was the caller, and he was the director of the Sever Band from Beloit, which was an excellent band and played for years and years. He's the band that we almost always used. He was a great musician and had good musicians with him and was always an enjoyable evening.

Q: How many people were in the band?

A: Well, he would probably have a – he always had a guitar – no, he always had a harp. He played the harp, played it beautifully, and then there was a cornetist and a drummer and, well, there would be…

Q: No violin?

A: Oh yes, a violin, of course a violin. Violin, cornet, drum, harp, and then maybe on a special occasion he'd have a guitar or something of that kind.

Q: And those dances were in the upstairs of the town hall, is that what you told me?

A: Yes, upstairs of the – guess it was called the Ralston Hall in those days.

Q: Was there as much alcohol consumed at a dance like that?

A: Not really. In Caledonia, the dances were very moderate, and I don't remember of seeing any drunkenness around the dances at all. We would go to other towns, though, and see some of it but very, very little drunkenness in my early days, except one man that worked for my father, and he was a drunkard if there ever was one, but my father always took him back (laughs)! He was the town drunkard.

Q: Was there a bar in town or a tavern as you'd call them?

A: No tavern in the town, although there were two there when my father came to town, but he was active in getting them out and they soon were put out.

Q: You mentioned a parade in town.

[END OF SIDE ONE]

A: For a number of years, the businessmen of the town put on a picnic day, and that day was something that we all remembered. There was a parade in the morning of floats and automobiles decorated up, and I remember one year we had W. W. Bennett, the mayor of Rockford, up as the speaker of the day, and he rode in the head car in the parade and then later on we would retire to the woods where the picnic was to be held. And a lunch was served there, and then in the afternoon there was races and other activities going on, and about two o'clock we had a speech from the speaker of the day, and then in the evening a dance was held out in the woods on a platform built out of lumber from the lumberyard that was set up temporarily and an electric light plant was installed to furnish lighting for the dancing. So there was much going on in the social life of Caledonia.

Q: The bandstand and the lights were put up just for that occasion?

A: Yes.

Q: And torn back down and put up the next year?

A: Well, they were sold and didn't hurt them, you know, people dancing on these boards. They'd be put back in stock and sold and then the next year they'd put on some new ones.

Q: And that was done by the businessmen?

A: Yes.

Q: So, they must have had some kind of an association.

A: I don't know that there was a close association per se. I think everybody just pitched in and one or two men would head it up, and everybody would take a certain part of it and then we'd carry it out and that's the way the day proceeded. They were happy days, and the parades were a lot of fun and everybody took part in them.

Q: What was the government of the town?

A: Caledonia always has been an unincorporated village and it still is today.

Q: Which means there's no government?

A: Well, there's no county government, you know. There's taxes paid into the county just like farming land pays taxes, but there's no other regulation in the town of Caledonia than there is on the farm, as far as that's concerned. It's the same idea.

Q: So, whatever was done with committees and so forth was just kind of unofficial people, self-appointed leadership?

A: Oh yes, people just pitched in. I think Dad was very active in organizing those things. But everybody joined in. It wasn't he that did the whole thing, but I think he kind of stimulated action on the parts of everybody.

Q: Were there other organizations in town? Anything besides what they had in the church?

A: Well, there was an insurance company – they were kind of mutual insurance companies that met periodically, and they were small companies. Modern Woodmen of America I think was one of them and a great many people had insurance with them. I think they met once a month someplace. Then there were social gatherings at the homes between groups of people that would consist of both older people and younger people and when the younger people got

together there was always a sing fest around the piano, which was enjoyable in those days and still is when I ever get a chance to sing.

Q: Your sister, Bessie, was one of the piano players?

A: Yes, she always played the piano. There were other piano players, too, but she would be one of them that would be promoting the idea, and she was very active in music and was the organist at the church for seventy years when she retired.

Q: She must have been quite young when she started.

A: She started at the age of fourteen to play for the church.

Q: How did she learn to play the piano?

A: Well, she took lessons from Lizzie Merriott who taught us all how to play.

Q: Was she from Caledonia?

A: Yes, she lived out in the country. She's still living at the age of 93 or 94.

Q: My goodness!

A: Yes, still living! She married Frank Stewart, one of the members of the Stewart family, of the Stewart store. I think I'm right on that. I think he was a nephew of Mr. Stewart. He was a member of the personnel of the D. J. Stewart store.

Q: Did many kids in Caledonia took piano lessons?

A: Oh, I think a lot of them did. Very few of them went on with them, but Lizzie Merriott was a busy woman when it came to music. She had a lot of pupils and did a great job with them.

Bessie took some music lessons from a preacher's wife, who was an excellent pianist. She took quite a few lessons from her that helped her. I think Lizzie Merriott left town and then Bessie took these lessons from her.

Q: I wonder why Caledonia didn't progress to be a big thriving town?

A: Well, they were too close to Rockford and Belvidere and, you see, so many people in Caledonia worked in Rockford or Belvidere because there wasn't enough industry in the town. And as a result, the stores didn't get enough business to remain in business and they eventually closed. That was true of other businesses as well.

The same thing is true of the elevators; that type of business that was characteristic of the elevator was that farmers were in there by the dozens with wagons for lumber and wagons with grain and wagons full of grain to grind and to put components in the grinding that would best suit the animals that were being fed. It was a terribly busy place for many, many years. But, you see, the type of farming has changed mostly, especially in this area where the dairy business is a thing of the past. So, the business of running an elevator at a profit is a pretty tough business, and the only way it can be carried on now is to get into the drying of corn and shipping lots of corn and other grains that need drying.

Q: Was corn a big product back in the early 1900s?

A: Oh, it was the only product.

Q: Corn was?

A: Oh, yes. Well, oats were something but nothing else, really. Soybeans were not heard of. Corn was the big product. I remember in 1930 or so that oats sold for seven cents a bushel and corn sold for twelve cents a bushel. The farming business has had its ups and downs and, of course, in the 1930s, and especially in the Dakotas, the farmers could not pay for the seed for the next year and the government furnished the seed. I don't know whether they did that around here or not but in the Dakotas they did. Well, that's getting a long ways from Caledonia but anyway, it is an answer to why the elevator didn't continue to prosper, and, of course, the answer also is that elevators all throughout the country have closed and their part has been taken by other businesses that have come into town.

Q: Actually, most of the businesses that you have described as the big business of Caledonia have become defunct because of our society, like the livery stable…

A: Yes, by the change in our way of living.

Q: …tannery…

A: Yes, no question about it.

Q: And for that matter, the trucking business coming in to replace railroads.

A: Yes, it’s been a shame because they never should have allowed the trucking business to take away all the business from the railroad because if the railroads were left alone, they could do the hauling of a lot of the merchandise that now clutter the road and at a cheaper price and more effectively, and we wouldn’t be in the trouble we are now with trying to revive them. But the people trying to run the government know more about the railroads than the railroad people themselves and so, as a result, here we are.

Q: How do you feel about your early life in Caledonia?

A: Well, I would say that it was the most enjoyable bringing up that a youngster could possibly have, and if every youngster could be brought up the same way it would be definitely to their benefit. No question about it, and as a matter of fact you see it every day now, people going back to small towns. They’re going back to small towns because there’s, I think, better schools. They’re not hassled by everybody with a crackpot idea of how to run schools and then they hire a superintendent that is a highly trained individual and then everybody jumps in and tries to run his business for him. It’s just as crazy as it can be. If they’d let a superintendent alone, run his school the way they did in the olden days, they would get the same type of education they did in the olden days.

In the small schools of the country towns, the great thing in school was competition, “Can I read as good as she can?” “Can she read as good as I can?” “Can I spell as good as that girl across the way?” It was a competition between individuals and that’s the thing that makes people, I think, makes them grow. I know very well that the competition in that town of Caledonia had a lot to do with my – whatever little I’ve done in life because you learned early in life that life is a fight from the day you’re born until the day you die and the competition in the school was one thing. The competition for a place on the baseball team was another thing. Competition for everything that was available to life was there in the small town and it was pretty basic, too, at most of the time. It was in a nice way, but you knew darn well that you were competing with

the girl next to you or the boy next to you or the boy across the room or whatever. If he was getting to be good, you wanted to be good, too. That was the life.

Q: Do you think that was instilled in school or is that part of a family environment?

A: No, I think it's instilled from healthy competition that isn't throttled by the things we see today: by parents not letting their children be disciplined or by parents not disciplining their children. And when kids go to school and do anything they want, what are they getting out of it? Very little because they haven't learned the first principle of self-discipline. Without self-discipline you're a lost sheep. Self-discipline is the first element of life if you're going to succeed. Well, these are all…

Q: That you can't always do what you want to do…

A: To do what you want to do you've got to use every means at your end; if you want to accomplish something you've got to turn to everything in…and the kids in that schoolroom, I remember now, the struggle was to get your paper in first and get your paper in correctly. All that sort of thing was part of life and it stands you in good stead all through life.

Q: Do you think that's a major element in democracy?

A: Oh, absolutely, absolutely! No question about it. But it's got to be untrammeled; it can't be thwarted by cheap politics. You've got to have a free swing of the system where everybody has a free chance to free wheel wherever they want to. Well, I didn't intend to give you a lecture on philosophy (laughs).

Q: Well, I'm happy to hear that – the lecture on philosophy. And you think you've got a good start in that vein in Caledonia?

A: No question about it.

[TAPE STOPS THEN STARTS AGAIN AT THIS POINT]

Q: Stuart, were you still living in Caledonia when you went to Beloit Academy?

A: Yes, I lived in Caledonia until I finished the Academy, which was in the year of 1907, and then in the fall of 1907 I went down to the University of Illinois not knowing a soul down there.

My father took me down, stayed for a day and then when I came back from class one day, he had gone back home, and I was left pretty much alone down there to shift for myself. I lived in a house off campus and got acquainted with some of the boys that lived in the house and gradually the home sickness wore off, and I began to get a lot out of school.

My selection of a course was that of electrical engineering, which was instilled in me by having worked for the local telephone company during my summer vacations in the academy and enjoyed it very much, although it was pretty strenuous physical work. The courses at the university in electrical engineering for the first two years were pretty much the same in all engineering and then after that we branched out in specifics of our particular line of engineering. At the end of the third year my father got me a job at the Rockford Electric Company as an electrician's helper. I spent the summer there and realized that in view of the fact that the company was building the plant that was known as Fordam and which has just now been destroyed, tearing down four large smoke stacks and the building itself. I realized what a great opportunity it was to be there during the time that this building was built over the top of the old powerhouse. And so I stayed on for two years and went back to school in the fall of 1912 and graduated then in my senior year in 1913, in the spring of 1913. After graduating…

Q: Can I ask you a few questions about the university?

A: Yes.

Q: Why did you choose the University of Illinois?

A: Well, principally on account of the economics of the situation: namely, the fee at the University of Illinois in those days was twenty-five dollars per semester and my cost during the four years that I was there was about three hundred dollars a year – total cost for everything, books and meals and all the rest of it!

Q: That's a bit different than the four thousand today, isn't it?

A: Quite a difference!

Q: How did you get back and forth between the university and home?

A: Well, we rode the Illinois Central train from Chicago and took the Northwestern or the Illinois Central, usually, into Chicago from there, and then that was the way we got back and forth. There was no automobiles to speak of in those days, and we relied entirely on the railroad to get us back and forth.

Q: And so, when your father took you down the first time you also went by train?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Did your mother ever get down to visit you when you were there?

A: No, she had passed away before I went – no, I'm sorry, she passed away in 1907, but she was never strong after I entered the university so she never came down.

Q: How many students did University of Illinois have at that time?

A: I can't really say. The only thing I do remember is that if we had six thousand people at a football game it was a big deal, so I suppose that the university probably was not more than eight or ten thousand at that time. Well, of course, all universities were about the same size, the universities in the Midwest at least: Wisconsin, Michigan, and the other schools were about the same size. Their increase in size in recent years has been a phenomenon that nobody ever expected.

Q: Was it somewhat unusual for someone from Caledonia to go to the University of Illinois?

A: I don't believe there was anybody from Caledonia in the university while I was there. So, I suppose the answer to your question would be "yes." It was unusual. But, you see, there was nothing there in Caledonia as a lifework, so the taking up of a profession was paramount in my mind. And electrical engineering was interesting then and has been all the days of my life, although I didn't follow it all my life.

Q: But you feel the decision was yours rather than your parents'?

A: Oh yes, very definitely. They had very little to do with it.

Q: Did your brothers and sisters also go to college?

A: My brothers, John and Glen, went to the University of Illinois, but neither Bessie or Martha went because Father was unable to send them at that time, which has always been a sad point in our family. They would have gotten a great deal out of it had they gone, and it's too bad they didn't go. But in those days the men of the family were the paramount part of the family as far as…because the men in those days were the bread earners and not the equal bread earners as it is today.

Q: It must have been at that time that Caledonia got electricity.

A: It was during the year 1914. In the meantime, I had graduated from college and was selling electric light plants to farmers around that part of the country. The elevator burned down and was rebuilt and with a promise from the Illinois Northern Utility Company that they would get electricity to the elevator, electrical equipment installed for the power of the different units that was in the elevator. But the winter came on and they tried to stall until spring about putting the line in from Poplar Grove. And I wrote a letter to a friend of mine down at the Illinois Commerce Commission at Springfield telling him the situation, and a copy of it got back to the Illinois Northern and they landed out in Rockford accusing me of misstating the facts. After meeting with their representative, they agreed that my letter was the fact and they would do anything they could to get power to Caledonia, which they did within a very short time, which was a great help to my father and his brother in operating the business there in Caledonia.

Q: Where was that meeting with Illinois Commerce Commission?

A: That was in the – well, it wasn't with Illinois Commerce Commission, it was with the Illinois Northern Utility Company. They didn't want that to get into the routine of the Illinois Commerce Commission, and we made a settlement with their getting the line to Caledonia and that ended the controversy.

Q: Why did you write the letter instead of your father?

A: Well, I knew this man down there, and he was a very capable and very fine person, and I knew if I got it started through him, I would get an audience, which proved to be the case.

Q: And that meeting was where in Rockford?

A: At the Nelson Hotel.

Q: Which was a well-known place?

A: Which was *the* hostelry of the city at that time!

Q: How did they put the electricity line in during the winter?

A: Well, of course, the problem of getting the poles in the ground was the big thing because the ground is hard and of course it's hard to get the poles out across the fields in snowbanks that probably prevailed at the time. So, that job of building the line was quite an undertaking, but they went to it and put it through in a hurry.

Q: They couldn't have an electric drill? How could they get into the ground?

A: They dug it by hand with shovels.

Q: Right through the frozen ground?

A: Yes, that's the only way they could get it done at that time. Of course, the ground is frozen down probably only six or eight inches at that time when it's covered with snow, so it isn't as bad as digging the hole without any soft ground.

Q: Did the Northern Utility Plant have a major plant at Poplar Grove?

A: No, it was just a transmission line went there and this was just a – the transmission line was tapped to run a line to Caledonia.

Q: But it was operating out of Belvidere?

[END OF TAPE FIVE]

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