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Rosie
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Grant



Deane
Gunderson



Marion
Abbott
Gunderson



Mary Jane
King
Jordan



Russel
Jordan



Marjorie
Davis
Harrold



Paul
Harrold



Wanda
Peers
Hodgell



Velma
Benton
Howard



Verle
Howard



LaVonne
Page
Howland



Joe
Reigelsberger



Norine
Arnold
Reigelsberger



Agnes
Bunda
Sefcik



Dennis
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Marjorie
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PEOPLE AND THEIR STORIES

Introduction

My road is like a long, thin ribbon. There is a gentle ripple to it as it rises and falls with the undulations in the prairie landscape. This ribbon has been the connecting strand as I contacted people, asked to interview them, and collected their thoughts and anecdotes about their rural heritage. Of course, each family's history is unique, and family members have varying perspectives. Indeed, no two people remember the road and life along it in the same way.

When I started this project, I thought that I would focus on my peers who rode the school bus with me. However, most of the interviews were with people of my parents' generation when they were in their mid-70s. There were three reasons for beginning with them. First, it was relatively easy to approach the septuagenarians and convince them that their perspectives should be recorded. Second, they had long-range perspectives with anecdotes reaching back as far as the 1920s. Third, there was the risk that they would be dead or not fully functional if I waited another decade to record their thoughts. As it is, some have died and others are frail with diminished memory and not capable of the quality of conversations that we initially had. Of course, others still have excellent memory.

I did interview one of my peers, Paul Harrold, who was six years behind me in school. He lives with his mother Marjorie Harrold on a farm along the road. I had not known their family well and was happy to interview the two of them together. Subsequently, I have felt comfortable enough to stop by their place for an occasional chat and do things such as borrow a Model M Farmall tractor from Paul or pick apples with Marjorie. Indeed, I feel enriched by the relationships that have resulted from this project.

Conversely, I felt uncomfortable about asking other people who live or farm along my road for recorded interviews. There were several reasons for my discomfort. First, I had the impression that many of these people did not seem to think that their perspectives were as important to the historical record as the reflections and anecdotes of septuagenarians or octogenarians. Second, I felt intimidated around some of them. At times, I had little or no trouble engaging in casual conversation with certain farmers while they were unloading grain at a bin site or at the local cafe. However, I never had the gumption to make appointments for more formal interviews with them. I feared that they would laugh and turn me down. Third, there were probably those who were aware of my bias against large-scale agriculture, intuited that I was not fond of their aggressive style of farming, and were reluctant to be interviewed by someone whose agenda was quite different than their own.

I have spoken by phone or in person with several of my other peers about their memories of the road; yet, I have not recorded our conversations nor fleshed out their perspectives for this project. After conducting a dozen oral history interviews, I began to realize that logging, transcribing, and interpreting the material that I had already gathered was a big enough challenge. To arrange for and conduct interviews with other peers from who are now dispersed to the far reaches of the United States would have been a daunting task. Perhaps some future researcher will rise to the challenge.

The gravel roads were created in the 1920s and 1930s atop the old dirt roads that were originally carved into place with horse-drawn plows and scrapers, using the soil from the ditches for the base of the road. The metaphor of the ribbon is helpful because it represents the fluid nature of the road. Sure, there are more rigid definitions for Iowa's country roads.

Pocahontas County engineer Steve Camp says that the top of an ordinary one is 24 feet wide with a 66-foot right-of-way from fence line to fence line. There is a subgrade layer of earth and then a base of rock with a surface of new rock, such as gravel, that is trucked in about every two years and bladed smooth for farm-to-market traffic. He suggests that if a new road were to be built, it would be done differently than the established roads. However, he says, “We are left with what history has given us, and it is not economically viable to change the roads.” Even as an engineer, Steve agrees that the analogy of a ribbon is a good one for country roads because they follow the ebb and flow of the topography and can shift their position after decade upon decade of use. If viewed from an airplane or the top of a grain elevator, the roads definitely look like a pattern of ribbons floating along the surface of the land.



A pickup truck travels east along the road, 1995.

A metaphor such as a ribbon is especially important for this chapter that consists solely of oral history material. If understood metaphorically or perhaps mythically, the road extends backward and forward through time, perhaps like a ribbon of DNA. In one sense, this ribbon represents the social flow of people who have migrated to and from the road. In another sense, the ribbon winds through the minds of many people. It has no rigid definitions. It is no longer a nearly straight-line object that spans five miles of Iowa farmland; it is a symbol of the collective imagination that generates many feelings, reflections, and stories.

I am thankful for the storytellers who have participated in this project, and I use the term storyteller with great respect. The real fun and meaning in doing the interviews and listening to the recordings of these people has more to do with how they said what they said than with the content of their remarks. Unfortunately, not even the best tape recordings nor written renditions of these conversations are as wonderful as the actual encounters with the participants. Although conducting this oral history project was hard work and presented a fair number of challenges, there were moments that were truly sacred or transcendent. These storytellers have told their personal stories so that the rest of us can understand what life was all about at a certain place and time.

The following material consists entirely of reflections and anecdotes from the dozen interviews that I conducted from about 1992 to 2002. Because seeing this kind of material on the printed page is different than listening to it, I have done some minor editing to make it more readable. Some reminiscences are funny; some are poignant; some are rather common. For instance, there are lots of people raised in rural Iowa prior to the 1950s who could tell about the big meals that women served to the crews of threshers who came to their farms. Other recollections are unique to a particular family or individual. Whatever the case, all the segments of interview material in this chapter have their own colors, shapes, and textures and are organized here like beads strung on a necklace. These segments can also be likened to strands of thread or yarn. When woven together, they exemplify the cultural fabric of the rural area where I grew up.

The Words of the People

Road Conditions

Don Grant: Denzel Johnson was our mailman. That was back before women were able to do things like that (chuckle). It was always a mail “man.” He had a car most of the time, but I can remember when there were old mud roads, and in the worst weather, he would come around in a buggy. It was a high-wheeled buggy with a cover on it and side curtains for real bad weather in the winter or summer. Otherwise, he drove a car. And that was a big event. There wasn’t much else happening. I can remember as a kid watching for the mailman because if we got a newspaper, we got it through the mail, and we could see him about half a mile west, slogging through the mud. I can remember him driving his car on muddy roads when he probably should have brought the horse, and I can still see him walking along that west road with his bag of mail; he had gotten stuck and was walking. My dad got a lumber wagon out to give him a ride, and my mother fed him, of course. She fed everybody who went by even if she had to throw herself down in front of their car. Dad took him down the road, and a couple of neighbors hitched up a wagon and took him the rest of the way because it was almost dark by the time he got over there.

At some time when I wasn’t too old, there was a big road improvement project, and my brother, Dunc, and I would watch. They were grading the road with horses and hand graders, a thing that slid along the bottom and scooped dirt. Some of them had wheels, and they would scoop loads up and dump them on the road, digging the ditches out that way. One of the grader operators was a woman. That was the first time I saw a woman working on equal terms with a man at anything other than working in the house. That was unheard of, but she was as good as any man. There’s no reason why she shouldn’t have been. That was an early breakthrough of the sexual barrier to women working at men’s jobs for equal pay. I’ll never forget the fact that there was a woman running one of those things. I don’t know if there was any emotion other than, “Hey, she’s pretty good! She’s doing it just like the men do.”

One year, the road was muddy with deep ruts, and when a set of ruts got too deep, you moved over and made another set while it was wet. This was usually in the spring and fall. In the winter, the ruts were frozen, and if you were lucky, they were frozen before they got too deep. But driving a car in the winter — you hoped you remembered where the ruts were so you could take another path outside of them. If you got stuck in those things, you would have to get out, jack the car up, and shove it through a rut. Of course with the old Model Ts, tires were fragile. I have said that no one really appreciates a flat tire unless you have had one in a Model T and had to patch it, too. To take it off, the old rims were a bearcat to get apart. You’re there in the mud with your car jacked up, and you’re trying to get this tire off, patch it, pump it up, get the tire back on the rim, put it back on the wheel, drop it back down, and then hoped you can get out of the mud.

Moving Day

Don Grant: Everybody helped everybody else move, that you knew. Back before moving vans and trucks, a lot of moving was done with any kind of vehicle you had. And it usually was a hayrack because a hayrack was big enough to put a bed and mattresses on, pull the racks with horses, and hope you didn’t load them down too much on the old mud roads. Even the first gravel roads were a little bottomless until they got them built up. If you knew who was moving, say the Joneses were moving from their old place down here, and somebody

was moving from here to the place where the Joneses were living, you had to coordinate the routes you took because there was only one rut, and two hayracks don't pass worth a damn on the old narrow country roads. I can remember people having to wait at a corner because they should have gone around the other way.

Tempers could be a little short because it was cold and wet. The first of March was always the worst day of the year. You tried to cover stuff, but you didn't have lots of cheap plastic to cover things with back in those days. And you were moving into a house and it was cold. You moved the stoves, in most cases the space heaters, and in many cases the cookstove. That was a beautiful job to lift a cookstove around, get the chimneys hooked up, and get the space heaters hooked up. All the doors were open, and here were people carrying stuff in. They had muddy boots, walking all over the house, but were trying to get things in the right room the best they could so they were settled as much as they could be. And the women were trying to clean the floors, which they couldn't do until everything was in. Then some fool came in carrying something and tracked mud all over the floor. There really wasn't any other way to do it. We couldn't stop and take our overshoes off.

I used to be glad when we would leave. I wasn't very old, but I could help carry little stuff in. I did feel sorry for the poor women. I still remember the faces of the women as they were looking at the devastation; it was going to take them days to clean it up. Everybody was cold and wet, and it would be two days before we could get the house warmed up. You didn't even have the stove in, and they had to get supper some way. There wasn't anyplace to make coffee, so some of the other women would come along with a coffee pot full of coffee; of course, it would be getting cold. Utter chaos and misery is all I can remember about moving. Dropping mattresses off the hayrack into the mud. Nothing ever went well on moving day that I can remember. There was nothing good about it. I don't remember ever helping anybody move when the weather was nice and things went well. My wife is a mover, and I'm not. I hate moving, and I think part of it harks back to those moving days. Now all you do is hire a van.

Maintaining the Road

Deane Gunderson: The county maintenance, as far as snow, is five times better than it used to be because of how their trucks have multiple uses now. It used to be they would have maybe three snowplows for the whole county, not counting the towns. So you would wait until the snowplow could come out and get by your place. But now they have their big rock-hauling trucks that haul rock onto the roadbeds in the summertime and spring. Those trucks are also useful as snowplows because they can be loaded up with rock and have a snow blade put on them. Those big, heavy, dual-axle trucks can push more snow than the old snowplows used to. Easily.

Marion Gunderson: One thing I remember about this road is that Don Grant's mother was not well her last years. I suppose, especially the last year, the road clearing crew kept our road open so that if she had to go to the hospital or have any help, people would be able to get to her.

Deane: There was one particularly wet spring. Our road from here east, especially the last mile, had water standing in the tracks. The tracks were about six or eight inches deep, and part of the bottom of the tracks got fairly firm. You just drove that road to town and splashed the water out of the tracks. Of course it ran back in again, but it was like that for weeks after weeks.

Driving to School

Verle Howard: I first had a Model A that we drove to school, but I didn't take any other kids. Then when I started taking the Reigelsbergers and the Zemans, I had a four-door to haul all those kids. I think I got enough from hauling them to pay for my gas. It was a real hassle waiting on the girls. Nobody would ever be ready on time, and tempers flew. Mary Therese Reigelsberger was a bearcat. (chuckle) All the fellows smoked, and we would smoke up a storm the last two miles before the school; and of course, our coats would stink of cigarettes. I had a twin sister [Doris] who would come home and tattle, and all hell would break loose. (chuckle)



A bus from the Pocahontas Area Community School District travels along the road after letting Kaitlin and Joseph Reigelsberger off at their farm home, circa 1996.

The First School Bus

Helen: Your husband Monk started a service station in Rolfe. Tell me about your role in the business and with the first school bus.

Lucile Taylor: I became a part of the oil business, the Royal 400, right away when we were married in '42. Of course, '41 was Pearl Harbor, and in May of '43, Monk got a call from the president: they needed him. It didn't make any difference that he was 30 years old and married. So he enlisted because he didn't want to go in the army, but he hated to leave his business. Like I told you, that was his first love. So I didn't go back to teaching school, I just kept the little old station going, and I drove the tank wagon. Some of the boys from the farm didn't have to go, and I used to think, "Well, gee, if we just had a granddad or dad with a big farm, we wouldn't be over there in the service." But I hauled the gas out to the farms. There wasn't a power takeoff on our old truck. You pailed it with a five-gallon pail, and those farm boys were really good [to help]. If they knew I was coming with gas, they would be there to pail the gas for me. We had a hired man at the station, and we hauled all our gas out of Fort Dodge. So I would drive to Fort Dodge to get that. Then we got the first school bus in Rolfe. We owned the truck, and the school owned the chassis, and the kids paid us every month — or the parents paid for the kids to ride on the bus. Of course, it wasn't as big a bus as they've got

now. The big farm boys were riding the bus, too, and we carried a scoop shovel. You know, they didn't always call school off, and if we needed to scoop a little to get out of a driveway or something, why those boys, Roger Witt, John Shimon, and Norb Alig, were really good help. They rode the bus every day. There was Arlen Christensen, too. They were really good [boys]. If you needed help, they knew how to use those scoops.

Marjorie Simonson: The first school bus was terrible. It just had benches. There was a bench along the middle of it, and that was where the exhaust pipe went back. So you had to be real careful you didn't burn your legs on that pipe. But if it was real cold, everybody tried to sit in the middle by the pipe. I thought that was the craziest bus, and later I thought, "That's dangerous."

Traveling Sales People

Helen: What do you remember about traveling sales people who came to our place?

Marion Gunderson: Oh we had ice cream, we had milk delivery, we had the Minnesota Woolen Mills, we had, I don't know what all. The milkman we got to know pretty well because he came, what, twice a week or so.

Deane Gunderson: I remember some of them. I don't remember how often they came. The Fuller Brush man would come.

Marion: The Watkin's man came.

Deane: The Watkin's guy and magazine salesmen.

Marion: Some of them we welcomed because we needed their services, and others we weren't too happy to see because they were a nuisance.

Deane: Seed corn salesmen. Everybody wanted you to just plant a bushel because it would just be terrific, you know.

Helen: I remember when they used to give the first plastic bags that I knew of. They came from Pioneer.

Marion: Yes, and I still have some of those; they're the best plastic bags that there are.

Helen: Do they still give them out?

Marion: Nope, I don't think so. I haven't gotten any from Joe for a long time. But I like them.

Deane: Do you mean the bags that the seed came in?

Marion: No. The kind I use in the kitchen.

Animals

Velma Howard: When Karen and Kelley were small, they wanted ponies. Don Shoemaker from Rolfe advertised two ponies. So we bought the ponies from him. I only remember Buttercup's name. Anyway, at that time, we had fences around the buildings, and there was a wire gate. Those ponies could figure out how to unhook that gate. Every time the kids tried to pasture them in the area between the house and the barn, those ponies would work around until they could get out. And away they would go, back to Don Schoemaker's place. Then Verle would take the girls in the car and go to town. They would find the ponies, and the girls would have to ride the ponies home or they would hang onto the reins and make the ponies run along behind the car. Verle would just mutter and storm all the way home. Finally, the kids didn't ride the ponies anymore, and the ponies were old. One of Verle's cousins, Gary, who lived south of Palmer, was here. He had little girls, and those little girls spent the whole afternoon riding the ponies. So Verle gave him the ponies, and he took the ponies home. Gary

kept the ponies until they died of old age. He, too, cussed Buttercup because she was always the one that managed to get out.

Verle Howard: We even had a milk cow.

Velma: We had a milk cow for almost three years. It was Randy's chore to milk the cow. And then Randy went to Washington, D.C. — he won an REC trip in his junior year of high school — and Verle had to do the milking. The old cow kicked him out of the barn, and she was shipped to the locker and butchered after that.



Chicken at water trough at the TJ Family Farms near McCallsburg, Iowa.

Mary Jane Jordan: We always had chickens.

Russel Jordan: In fact, when we lived at the south place, we had a hatching flock from Beckord's Hatchery. They would take our eggs for hatching eggs, and they would bring roosters to put with the hens so the eggs would be fertile. And these roosters — they called them barbed Rock — they were gray and white speckled and ornery. They would never tackle me when I would gather eggs.

Mary Jane: But they would me.

Russel: Yes, they would fly at Mary Jane.

Mary Jane: And scratch my legs.

Russel: So one day, I had to go somewhere and said, "Well, you'll have to gather the eggs." And she said, "Well, I hate to do that because those roosters will attack me." So I said, "I tell you what you can do. Put on my coveralls and my overshoes and my cap, and those roosters will never know the difference. You can go in there and get the eggs, and everything will be fine." But she hardly got in the door when one flew right at her. And how they knew the difference, I don't know.

Mary Jane: It was really bad for the kids because they couldn't go gather the eggs either. The roosters were just so ornery.

Helen: Did you clean chickens?

Mary Jane: I always dressed chickens for our family, but I never dressed them for anyone else.

Helen: All by yourself, or did you get the kids to help out?

Mary Jane: No. I did it by myself as a rule. Russ would help sometimes.

Russel: I would cut their heads off and pick the feathers. Then Mary Jane would do the rest.

Mary Jane: Jim and Ginnie still raise chickens on our farm.

Russel: But nowadays, there's a place at Kimballton, Iowa. Jim and Ginnie put their chickens in a crate the night before and take them up before six o'clock in the morning. The place then cleans the chickens and has them ready for the freezer.



Young pigs at Faber, Marjorie, and Paul Harrold's farm, 1989.

Farm Activism

Helen: Was your family ever involved in farm activism?

Don Grant: You named your worst-looking hog Herbie Hoover, and that's about the most violent that it got. You were too busy trying to make a living and working. My dad belonged to the Farmers' Union. I can remember going to meetings where there were some heated discussions on occasion, but not to the point of activism. They would have a meeting and thoroughly denounce Herbert Hoover, and that was about as close as they came to violence. Then they would all go home and go to work again. It never got to the point of dumping milk or any picket lines.

Helen: In terms of farm unions or activism, did you ever run into a picket line?

Russel Jordan: They had that going on in about 1958 when the NFO (National Farmers' Organization) was born. I went to a meeting over in Pocahontas, and there were a lot of people over there. There were people from somewhere telling about the NFO coming into being. We were interested in it, but I never got involved. I kind of supported their theory, but in my estimation, there were always a few flaws in it, and I didn't think it would work. Their theory was if people don't give you the amount of money you want for your hogs, well, don't

sell them, hold them off the market until they give you what you want. Well, when a pig gets ready for market, you can't keep him for six months more.

Mary Jane Jordan: It gets too heavy.

Russel: So it seemed to me there were a few flaws in their thinking. The thinking is good, but it isn't like some product that you can put on the cold storage shelf and wait until people will pay the price — you've got a perishable product.

Childhood Entertainment

Helen: How old were you when you moved to the place where you lived during most of your growing up years?

Don Grant: I know we lived there when I was two years old because I decided to go to school with Dunc one day. We went to Roosevelt number 5 a half mile west and a mile south, and I had on just a diaper, or whatever they used for diapers in those days. My mother was getting dinner for cornpickers or some other crew. She was busy, and I took off. She missed me and could see me walking along the west road, going south with Duncan. She really didn't have time to come and get me then, and she knew I was with him and a couple of neighbor kids. She knew the teacher and knew I would be well taken care of. So she came down and got me at noon, and I apparently had a wonderful time.

Helen: Your folks and my grandparents both belonged to the Country Jakes. Tell me about the group.

Don: The Country Jakes were young people who had grown up together and got married about the same time. I remember on a moonlit nights, a cold one with a lot of snow, bundling up in the bobsled and going ten miles to the Vaughn farm north of Rolfe. Dad wore a big sheepskin coat. He put the team in the barn or threw blankets over them outside before going inside to the party. We kids went along. We had a lantern hanging on a stick on the sled, but we didn't really need it because the moon at night was beautiful. I can remember snuggling in with horse blankets and straw and soapstones we heated before we left. Then we came home. It seemed like two o'clock in the morning, but it was probably 10:30 at night.

Helen: What are some of your favorite memories of the farm?

Don: My dad said very little, and I think that's partly because he couldn't hear. We didn't have talks in the field because he couldn't hear me. Some of my fondest memories are of when we would take a load of corn or oats to town to sell. When I got big enough, we would take two wagons. Then when we came home after unloading and buying the groceries, we would tie my team on behind, and I would sit in the spring seat with him on his wagon. He loved peanuts. We'd have a sack of peanuts then a bag of jellybeans so we wouldn't get thirsty. Those are some great times that I remember.

Helen: What did you do for recreation when you were a youngster?

Joe Reigelsberger: We would walk down to the creek with an old gunnysack, and two kids would stand on either side of the sack and seine upstream with it. We put the sack down into the water, walked quickly about six or eight feet, lifted it up, and then looked to see if we had some minnows and little fish in it, put them in a bucket, then brought them home, and put them in the stock tank.

Norine Reigelsberger: We used to wade and play and have a swing in the creek near us when I was growing up. The creek had real fine sand on the bottom, and it felt good between

our toes. There were loads of real tiny shells. We just played with those. We didn't really catch anything.

I don't think that children nowadays have nearly the imagination to make do with nothing like we did. I mean, well, they still play with boxes, but we did a lot of things without all the toys they have now. It seems like the minute a new toy comes out, the children have it, while we hardly ever had any toys. We couldn't afford them because we were raised in the Depression. I had one doll, and my mother made clothes for it. That was my big entertainment; everything was centered around this doll. Things just aren't that way anymore. I think maybe they're losing something by not having to create some of their own entertainment out of nothing. You know, I was in seventh grade before I ever had a bicycle. Can you imagine that? And look at the kids now. How many bicycles has our grandson, John, had? He's nine. How many bicycles has he had? He's on his second bicycle, and he wants another one.

Electricity and the Radio

Marjorie Harrold: I remember when we first got electricity; before that, we just had the icebox.

Paul Harrold: Here?

Marjorie: No, we had electricity when we came here. I think it was '38 when electricity came through the country. The first thing we got was a refrigerator, that and an electric motor for the washing machine. I always remember that because there was always that little old gas things on the old Maytags. I can remember sometimes, especially in the winter when it was cold, Mama would step on that thing and step on that thing to get it to go.

Paul: A step starter.

Marjorie: We had a pedal that we stepped on, and sometimes it started and sometimes it didn't. It was such an aggravation.

Paul: Here we had a DELCO battery system.

Marjorie: Years ago, it was built with DELCO.

Paul: This was a fairly modern house for its time because it had an upstairs and downstairs bathroom.

Marjorie Simonson: I remember when we got electricity. Of course, all the light fixtures were just a bulb. They had this strange little, cream-colored holder and a pull string. I remember especially that my mother had a gas motor on the washing machine, and when that washing machine got changed over to electricity, we couldn't believe how quiet it was. So that was really different to have electricity.

Don: I lived at home for about four years before I started to college in the fall of 1940. In the winters, I worked in Rickard's Hardware Store. I worked around the store for a while as a clerk and floor sweeper. I took care of batteries back when there were battery radios; everybody brought their batteries in to be charged on Saturday night and took another one home with them. I would work whenever I could; it wasn't a very formal job, but Ed gave me some money once in a while. I enjoyed it, and I was helped by learning radio servicing from Ralph [Rickard]. I did some radio servicing and put batteries in cars in the winter and stuff like that, all those good jobs. Besides learning something about radios there, I took a correspondence course, and did a lot of reading about them, and did a lot of playing around with them.

I built a lot of little one-tube radios, and I think I got up to three tubes, which is a real big radio. I had a battery radio by my bed at night and listened to places like KDKA in Pittsburgh,

San Antonio, Salt Lake City, Omaha, and WSN in Nashville. Back then there were clear channel stations, and then there were two or three Mexican stations where people had been run out of the United States to Mexico, like Dr. Baker who was “installing monkey glands in men” at the time. (chuckle) That’s why he was in Mexico and not in the United States. Preachers who had been run out for something or other were selling everything including religion from Mexico. They were these boomer stations with a half million watts. So that’s what I did. I listened to music. I could listen to anything there was; and there were nice clear stations.

Then the REA came through. Well, of course, I was an expert in electricity by then. I found out later I wasn’t, but that’s another story. Soon people started wiring farms. Rickard’s had a pretty good operation set up. Ralph would sell the jobs, Brownie, Keith, Dale, Erwin O’Brecht, and I would go around and wire the farms, and Ralph would go around and sell them the fixtures. Then the clients would all go into the store, and Ed would sell them the appliances like the refrigerators, stoves, and things. It worked out pretty well. Ed Rickard was a good, honest guy; he gave a good price and quality workmanship. It was sort of interesting.

There were still some of the old ethnic communities like Norwegians, Danes, Bohemians, and Irish. There was still an ethnic influence. I think it was Madge Johansen who was the king Dane. In other words, he was the patriarch of the Danish community, and it was Madge’s farm that we wired first. We would wire one farm in this community, and everybody would come in and look at it. This would be complete with appliances and everything else. We would do the whole thing. Then they would get together over there on Sunday afternoon, and everybody would look at the setup and see if it was OK. If it was, then Madge and a couple of his assistant patriarchs would come into Rickard’s and say, “You wire these farms” and have a list of 10–20 of them. That was the way Ed did it: one quality job then more quality jobs.

Helen: Did you wire your own farm?

Don: Well, I wired it because I knew how to do it. I got a good price on the wiring supplies, and didn’t need any help. So I wired it. I wasn’t as excited about as my mother about getting electricity on the farm. My dad never showed excitement about it. I knew he was, but he never said anything about it. I know he liked throwing that switch for the first time in the barn. He went out; did chores; and turned on the lights in the barn on the shadowed side, the yard light, and lights in all the other buildings.

Electricity was a real revolution, I think, particularly for women. Now they had something to work with. The refrigerator was probably a big part of it. I don’t think the electric stove was that big of deal because a lot of them already had bottled-gas stoves. My mother never thought the electric stove held a candle to the old cookstove. She knew how to run it. It took her a while to get used to the heat adjustments on the electric stove. Electricity on the farm was a godsend.

Pumping water was another big piece if you didn’t have a water system and if you didn’t have a windmill. Just the fact that we could pump water anytime we wanted to anywhere we wanted to. We just threw a switch and didn’t have to worry about starting an old gasoline engine. We didn’t have to grease the windmill anymore if we didn’t want to. But most of the farmers continued to keep them and grease them.

I started bringing home immediately the appliances that I could afford, the small ones, and started making payments on some others. I spent most of my salary on appliances for the house. I guess I probably wanted them as much as my mother — say there was a little selfishness connected with it. I’d like to say I was doing this all for my mother, but I got a lot of

satisfaction out of seeing her using things like a mixer that she could make malted milks with. That was a big deal. We didn't have to go to the soda fountain at the drugstore. I was interested in radios, and with electricity I could be a ham and do things I hadn't done before with them. I think a soldering iron was the biggest deal. I could plug that in, and I didn't have to fire up a blowtorch if I wanted to solder something.

When I got interested in radio, my friends and I bought little books and studied for the tests and practiced code. Jerry Thompson, Brownie Rickard, and I practiced together. When we thought we were ready, we went down to Des Moines to some government building and took the test. We had to be able to send and receive code at thirteen words per minute and pass a written test in radio fundamentals to get the ham license. We went down together. I think Brownie didn't pass the first time, but Jerry and I did. Then I went home and started building a rig; that's what we called it. It consisted initially of a one-tube affair, the 6L6. I know that's very meaningful to you (chuckle). We would put together a power supply out of junk — I did anyway — tearing old radios apart and getting the power supply out of them.

Then there was the stringing of an antenna. That was the toughest part. That meant you had to have some poles or a couple of trees strategically placed. I did have one tree strategically placed, as a matter of fact, a whole row of trees. I wangled an old telephone pole. I don't know how tall it was, maybe 20 feet, but that wasn't high enough. I found an old piece of pipe on the farm and decided I could attach it to the top of the pole with some conduit straps or something. Then I wired a pulley on the top of it and thought, "Well, I can get my antenna from that tree out there to this pole." But it had to be insulated. Then I climbed the tree — got up there — well, I don't know if I climbed the tree or not. The antenna had to be insulated from the tree and at the other end. I had an insulator at the end of the antenna, and I tied a rope on that and put it down through the pulley. That pipe was heavy to climb up on a ladder with and try to hold it and nail straps. That's what your dad did one Sunday afternoon. He came over and helped me put the pipe up and then went home. Subsequently, I pulled the antenna, and it had a lead. In it was a twisted pair of wires in the middle that came right down, right into this little room in the corner of our house. That was my ham shack. I had everything ready to go and all tested out and hooked the antenna on. It was late in the afternoon by then, and we had company for dinner. I got it all fired up, and it worked. I tested it with a little flashlight bulb with a loop of wire soldered to it, and I held that down over a coil, tuned everything to a maximum brightness on that bulb, and ran the lead in and out of the house. I was real anxious to try it out — just crazy to see if there was really anybody out there. I built my receiver, it was checked out, and everything was ready to go. (pause) I found my old log book, which I bought after the occasion, and all is duly recorded in there (chuckle), my first contact. I tried it out and found there were people out there in the real world who actually heard my signal. This key I pounded out. I think maybe I contacted Jerry Thompson first, and then it was supertime. A storm was moving in, which I hadn't really noticed.

This is the high point of my life. Hurricane Andrew could have come by and flattened the place, and I wouldn't have noticed until I got this first contact. While we were eating supper, a big bolt of lightning hit someplace real close, and I didn't think of my antenna in time. Normally, there would be a big switch on the rig and a ground wire down to a stake pounded in the ground so it would be grounded in case of lightning. Well, I didn't have any kind of lightning protection on it at all, and I smelled the smell of burning Baco-lite. Then a bell rang in my head, I rushed into the room, and there was smoke coming out of my receiver (chuckle). Lightning had hit it and had blown the switch off of my receiver. Fortunately, I had it plugged

in the right direction so the hot wire went to the ground and didn't go through the whole radio; it just went through the switch. I didn't think of the antenna right away. I checked out the receiver and the transmitter and everything lit up. But I wasn't about to go on the air with lightning out there because nobody could hear me anyway — too much static. I think maybe I looked out the window, and in a lightning flash, I saw my antenna lying on the ground. I did nothing until the next day. I found out that the lightning had cut my lead into chunks three or four feet long, not neatly, but it really hadn't damaged the antenna. I put it back up and went on from there. That occupied most of my time.

Marjorie Simonson: On the day Pearl Harbor was attacked, my parents thought my brother was stationed there; he wasn't there and had gone to the Aleutian Islands. So, it was fortunate he wasn't there. But I remember that day because they were so upset. It was a cloudy, foggy day. Also that day, the neighbor lady died. That was the first time I ever experienced somebody that I knew dying. So it was different.

Helen: How did you hear about Pearl Harbor?

Marjorie: On the radio. It was toward five o'clock in the afternoon when we heard it. It was my job to go out and get the cobs to bring in for the cookstove and fill the cob box. My dad was doing chores, and my mother came out and told him that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

Marjorie: I remember my girlfriend and me when the "Hit Parade" came on the radio. We would always get on the telephone and chat about what our favorite song was and where it was going to place on the "Hit Parade." Of course, if we were on the phone and other people on the line wanted to, they would click the receiver up and down. We called it "rubbering" when somebody listened in on someone else's conversation.

Babysitting

Marjorie Simonson: I babysat for everybody in the neighborhood. I was with Mrs. DeWolf when Jack was born. I was with the Healds when Rachel and Raymond were toddlers. I was also with Anita Beckord, Fay Wax, Clement Shimon. Because of my dad, if somebody called and wanted me to babysit, I didn't dare say, "No, I'm busy." To him, these were his neighbors and friends, and he thought it would reflect on him if I didn't babysit. But I remember, too, that it was the time of gas rationing when I worked for the Healds. Evidently, the rationing was really bad right then because I worked six days, and I was supposed to get to come home on Sundays. We didn't really live that far from the Healds, I suppose maybe 5 to 6 miles. But my dad didn't have enough gas to come get me, and the Healds didn't think it was their responsibility to take me home, so I would have to stay on Sundays, too. And then, the Healds were the type of people where you didn't do anything on Sunday. You weren't supposed to sew. That was their philosophy: Sunday was a day of rest, and that's just exactly what it was. But that wasn't my idea of what to do on Sundays.

I remember Mrs. Heald was very particular. We would set the table at night for breakfast in the morning, and maybe I would have to scrub the floors or just any number of things. I think the first job I had was for Helen Heald, and I started out at three dollars a week. Now that was pretty good money, but she thought I did a good job, so by the end of the summer, I was getting a dollar a day which was six dollars a week. Then before school started, I got to take off a few days. I always got to go up to Okoboji — I don't know who took me — and spend a day up there. That was my vacation. I went to the amusement park, rode the rides, and then I bought my own clothes for school.

Living Simply

Helen: My understanding from what you have told me is that Verle's parents owned a farm in Calhoun County but lost it in about 1930. Then they rented near Ware about the time he started school. After that, they rented near Havelock, and then moved to a place southeast of Poky before buying this farm in 1940, the year before he graduated from high school in Poky in 1941. I'm wondering, Velma, did your folks lose their farm, too?

Velma Howard: My parents didn't "lose" a farm. They sold. They had bought my mother's family farm in Missouri, and they were just making ends meet and couldn't keep the payments up, so they sold the farm. Dad was a hired man for one year, and then he managed to rent a farm down by Lanesboro. From there, they went to Jefferson and rented for several years before they bought the farm at Curlew. They always had to struggle to make ends meet, or at least that's the way I remember it.

Helen: When you graduated from high school, Verle, did you ever think you would end up back on this farm?

Verle Howard: Yeah, I had a slight idea that I would, and more so than ever after I traveled around the world for a few years.

Helen: Why is that?

Verle: For one thing, you are your own boss, pretty much. You make your life what it is, and that's the way it is on the farm. You have nobody breathing down your neck. (chuckle) If you do, you can tell them to go chase whatever they want to, and it doesn't make any difference to you. It doesn't hurt your business a damn bit.

Helen: How much are farmers really their own boss when you consider all the government policies and other things that seem to go against farming?

Verle: Well, at least you still have choices. You don't have to enroll in the programs. You're still more your own boss than punching a time clock where they have to meet production schedules. Actually, you make what life is on the farm for yourselves. I can see where it would get pretty tough on the farmer if you didn't want to do anything. (chuckle)

Helen: How would you describe the lifestyle that you have cut out for yourself here?

Verle: I wouldn't want to change it.

Velma: Our operation is small by normal standards. And if we had a family, there is no way we could operate the way we do. We would have to have more land or another job. But when you are two old people with rocking chair money, you don't need to farm a lot of land — just enough to keep you active.

Helen: You two have often said that you are holding things together with baling wire. Could you explain what that phrase means?

Verle: When your machinery starts giving you little problems when you're in the field, a piece of wire will tie it together until you get done — that's what we call, "We're running on baling wire."

Velma: When I was growing up, we used that term. When machinery wore out in those days, they couldn't afford to trade it in — and we can't now on our 160 acres. So we hold the equipment together with baling wire for one more year. You repair it rather than trading it in on new; we repair it.

Verle: And then you say, "We baling wired it together for another year."

Velma: If the baling wire holds out, we'll be OK.

Verle: I have the required equipment to farm. When I quit farming a half section, I never sold any machinery.

Velma: You have bought a different picker.

Verle: But fundamentally, I still have the equipment I had when I was farming a half section. I do all my own maintenance on it, and it hasn't really cost me anything.



Buckets of corn cobs at Living History Farms, 1986.

Marjorie Harrold: Back a few years ago, people, especially those who went through the Depression years, didn't waste one thing. They were very aware of costs and money because for a while, they didn't have any.

Paul Harrold: Tell the story about coming home from school every night and picking up the cobs.

Marjorie: I would go to the pigpen and pick up cobs. Oh, I hated that job. You see, we had a cob stove to cook our meals on, and we didn't have enough cobs. We saved them when we shelled corn, but by the time the next year rolled around, we didn't have any left. And we fed hogs ear corn — threw it out on the ground — and the hogs chewed the corn off. Then we had to pick up the cobs, and can't you imagine somebody with a basket of cobs that came out of the pigpen sitting by their stove these days. But we thought nothing of it.

Helen: It might attract flies, and it might smell.

Marjorie: The smell was the worst. Of course, I don't think our pigpens were smelly then like they are now because we fed them out on the ground.

Paul: Probably not as many pigs per square foot, either.

Marjorie: Yeah, it isn't like now when hogs are so shut up.

Helen: At one time you were raising your two children on your 50 percent share of 240 acres. How did you manage that?

Marjorie: I think people used to do it all the time. Nobody farmed big farms until recent years, and the farms get bigger all the time. Our seed and other inputs weren't as expensive as they are now. And we didn't have to have the big machines in order to farm because we didn't have that many acres. Our kids didn't have all the latest stuff either. They went with what they had and that was it. I sewed. They always wore homemade things. We ate canned goods out of the basement, I had a deep freeze, and we had our own meat butchered. So we had plenty to eat and something to wear, and I guess that's all we worried about.

Helen: Has your family had a pattern of communicating pretty well?

Marjorie: Our kids always were a part of the discussions.

Paul: For instance on September 4, 1983, we got quite a hailstorm. It hit the homeplace

here and the other places we were farming — 100 percent damage on corn and beans. We just sat down at the table and talked it over. We didn't know what to do. The windows were out of the house, and all the buildings and the roof was damaged.

Marjorie: That was just a year after we had bought this place from my parents' estate. We just didn't know what we were going to do.

Paul: We had hail insurance, but we didn't have as much coverage as we should have had. One thing, we didn't have any feed for our livestock unless we bought it. So that was the first year this place didn't have cattle. We had some hogs. We did go through the field with the combine and got thirteen bushels per acre of salvaged corn. I think we got four bushels per acre of beans. We had gotten a new combine in 1976 and never had a rock run through it until 1983, trying to gather more beans but got the rocks with them. It was hard — the decision part, the management part — to try to pull through the winter and have enough money to buy seed for the next year. We had no bean seed to fall back on. We always kept bean seed back. We would buy new seed to plant, and then we would harvest that new seed, then plant it again the following year. We would keep buying some new seed each year. But that year, we didn't have any to fall back on, so we had to buy all new bean seed. That was just a little tough, and we had our payments to make at the Land Bank. That went on whether we had a crop or not. Plus in 1982, our drainage ditch was cleaned, and we had a \$57 per acre charge on this farm to pay for that, but we had ten years to pay for it. It was 9 percent interest through the county.

Marjorie: Our family was real close. When the kids were little, our suppertime was always our time to take a little time and talk things over. Like when they started to school, we all made it a point that we were together at the table at suppertime, and we would discuss whatever they came home from school with. They would always have something to tell us about what somebody did that day or what they did that was fun, and we always made a point to talk things over. I think that kept us close. Even when they were in high school, we always tried to have a time when we could talk about things. And of course, they always kept track of what was going on at home, too. They would have to know what we did that day. Paul was always interested in what was going on, and whenever he came home from school, he always went out and helped with whatever Fay was doing. Paulelda probably wasn't quite as interested, but she always kept track of what was going on.

Paul: Even when she was off to college, she wrote a letter home every week, and she asked what we were doing or how the dog was doing. She kept track of the seasons and what work we would be doing. Of course, she asked about us and how we were doing first.

Marjorie: Always a letter every week. You just looked forward to it because you knew it was going to come.

Paul: Mom always wrote one back every week.

Marjorie: If there were problems among us, we would discuss them. And any business, I tried to have Paul and Paulelda know what was going on, so there shouldn't be any problem for them when I drop over.

Neighboring

Helen: What can you tell me about neighboring, especially since you live just across the road from Velma and Verle?

Marjorie Harrold: Verle's folks moved there the year before my folks moved here. There weren't any better neighbors. Of course, that was back when farmers worked together

with haying, and they were threshing yet, too. My dad and Verle's dad did all kinds of things together. That was the war years, too, and we didn't have any help, so we had to depend on our neighbors.

Verle Howard: We get along, I would say, ideally. Paul never bothers me. I never bother him, but if I need another hand, I just hold my hand up, and he'll be here. And it works both ways. For instance, if he is out sorting hogs, and I go out of the house in the morning, it's nothing for me to go over and help him sort a load of hogs. By the same token, if I need something, he would drop everything and come over. There are a lot of jobs that I can't do alone; I have to have two more hands. All I have to do is let him know what I'm going to do, and he's here. And you don't even have to let him know. He'll come over and tell me.

This spring, I had some wet plowing that I had plowed, and it was flabby. He came over and said, "Verle, why don't you come over and get my big disk and that big engine of mine and disk that spring plowing again." So he didn't wait for me to go over and get his outfit. He brought it up in the field and came in the house and said, "Well, Verle, come on out, and I'll show you the main points of this engine and how to operate it and where to run the RPM." So I disked 70 acres, and Paul came back over again and said, "Verle, if I were you, I would hit that again, and then I would hit it with your own little disk." It gives you an idea of what kind of neighbors you've got. I disked the whole field twice, filled the tractor full of fuel, took it back over, and put it in his yard.

Velma Howard: In the wintertime, Marjorie and Norine and I get together, usually three times during the winter. We each take a turn hosting and having coffee. If Marjorie stops over, it's not an invited thing. We drink coffee together when we happen to stop by each other's homes. We talk on the phone, maybe once or twice a week. We wave to each other when we go to our mailboxes or when we are mowing the lawns. We exchange recipes over the telephone. If she has some extra garden stuff that she knows we don't have, she brings us a sack, and if I have something, I take her a sack. We don't make a point of entertaining each other — we're just here. We each know that the other is there.

Verle: As a rule, we each know when the other is gone.

Velma: We make a point of telling each other if we are going to be gone, so we can watch their place and they watch ours.

Paul Harrold: When we want to go somewhere, we just tell the Howards if we are going to be gone for a while.

Marjorie Harrold: We kind of watch. If anything looks strange, we'll see what's happening.

Paul: It's pretty hard not to look across the road during the day when we are just an eighth of a mile apart.

Marjorie: We know what each other is doing.

Helen: It's nice that you have similar standards in terms of keeping your farms clean. Because you are so close, it would be horrible to look over at someone else's eyesore.

Paul: Well, I don't imagine they like the pigpens being across from their front yard.

Helen: I think the setup is nice because Velma and Verle can feel like there are animals around but not have to have their own.

Marjorie: They can look over and see ours. (chuckle) But sometimes on Sunday when the wind comes out of the north, it's not so good.

Paul: And I am sure in the summertime, considering they don't have their own live-

stock, they probably would just as soon not have their neighbors' flies, either.

Paul: We used to go back and forth with the Jordans. I call those the fun days, when we were baling together, and families were helping each other. The girls would be out running the tractor. At baling time, they would either be running the baler or raking, or mowing, or pulling the rope on the forklift operation at the haymow.

Marjorie: We used to get together for oyster soup suppers and stuff. And the kids would always come. Of course, they always had to play school. Janet was always the teacher, and she would have the little kids lined up on the davenport.

Paul: Did I play school?

Marjorie: Oh, you were in there, too.

Paul: I can't believe that. (chuckle)

Marjorie: She put you in your seat (chuckle) and told you what to do. The Jordans mention so many times about how we used to get together for supper, and the kids could play.

Helen: In terms of the cycle of independence and cooperation in farming, where are we with that today?

Marjorie: When a serious problem comes up, they still ...

Paul: The serious problems, yes, they still group together.

Marjorie: Farmers always help each other.

Paul: But we are further apart now as far as our daily lives as we have ever been with neighbors.

Marjorie: It is because so many times the farm next to you will be farmed by somebody who comes from quite a distance. You don't know him well enough and don't have much to do with them.

Paul: We're in a position where we still neighbor a lot because of corn shelling. If Verle wants a tool or I want some help, all we have to do is go back and forth. The same way with George Diedrich. He or Verle always ran the baler. But there is less of that being done.

Marjorie: They are getting to the age where they can't do it anymore.

Paul: So we are more independent, I guess you could say. We've got all our own equipment; that has come about over the years, but before that, we used things together. We still do somewhat, but not like we used to.

Marjorie: That reminds me of when Faber farmed Mrs. Ives' ground over there. Anyway, he came up alongside Philip Brinkman's ground. Gus was out working, and Fay got off to visit. Of course, that was just normal for Fay. Gus talked about that. He went home and told his mom.

Paul: That probably never happened before.

Marjorie: Nobody had even stopped to visit with him like that — he thought that was just great. People used to do that quite often. Anyway, when Fay passed away, Gus wanted to make sure to come over the evening before the funeral. His mom said that Gus never forgot Fay because he stopped and talked to him.

Paul: Took some time.

Marjorie: Gus thought that was so nice.

Russel Jordan: We had just lived in the Rolfe area a few days when a terrible blizzard came. We had just barely got moved in. And golly, I went out the day after it stopped snowing and blowing, and there were snowdrifts fifteen feet high all over the yard. We had just lived there a couple of days. Someone had told me that Mrs. Grant was real ill and needed

medication. And in fact, I think someone had called and wanted to know if the roads were open out and wanted to see if they could get medication out. So I told Mary Jane, “I think I’ll walk into town and see if we’ve got any mail in there and maybe get a few groceries.”

Mary Jane: We had party lines then. (chuckle)

Russel: So she said if I was going to walk into town, that she had heard about this Mrs. Grant needing medication. She said, “I’ll call down there and see if they have gotten her medication. Maybe you can bring that back.” It was fairly cold, but it was a nice clear day, so she called down there. Mrs. Grant had gotten the medication. Within just a few minutes, Mrs. Howard, Harry’s wife, called Mary Jane and said, “How’s he planning on going to town?” She had heard on the party line that I was going to town. “Well,” Mary Jane said, “He’s going to walk.” “Well,” Mrs. Howard said, “Don’t let him go, the snow is so deep, he might not make it.” Mary Jane said, “Well, you don’t know him. He’ll get there and back.” So I started out anyway, and I walked down to that corner where the road is now closed, and I went by where the Chism family used to live and some people named the Glenn Samuels lived there at that time. So Glenn saw me coming down the road, came down to the end of his lane, and said, “What are you doing?” And I said, “Well, I’m going to town.” We got acquainted that way, and he said, “Can you ride a horse?” I said, “Ya, I could ride a horse if I had one.” “Well,” he said, “I’ve got a couple of saddle horses. So if you want to come up, we’ll get on them, and I’ll go with you.” So we got on the horses, went to town, and got the mail. The train came through, and the horse tried to throw me off, but I managed to hang onto the saddle horn and stayed with him. But we got the mail back. And we did buy a few groceries and that way I got familiar with yet another neighbor.



Field of knee-high corn south of Deane and Marion Gunderson’s farm home, 1996.

The Land

Mary Jane Jordan: Up in that flat country, when the snow stopped, it was against buildings and against the farmsteads, but down here there are hills, so we just don’t get that much snow.

Russel: I always kind of liked the level land, but I don’t know if Mary Jane got used to it.

Mary Jane: I like the hills better.

Russel: She likes the scenic hills. One thing that I never really did get to liking about the flat land was hitting rocks — something I wasn’t used to at all. The first time I hit a rock, my plow unhooked, the tractor lurched ahead, and I thought, “What the heck has happened now?” I never got to liking those rocks, but I did get used to dealing with them and found out they weren’t as much of a problem as I thought they might be.

Helen: Is that because it’s glacial land?

Russel: Yes. The glacier came in there, and that's the reason it's level. In the process of leveling things off, it left rocks. Here in the Atlantic area, there is a timber-type soil that got its fertility from timber vegetation; there are two completely different soil types but both are productive and fairly easy to work.

Mary Jane: I always appreciated the land because it produced so well, but what I didn't appreciate were the ponds that were sometimes sitting in the fields. My dad remembered northern Iowa as having muskrats years ago before they did all the tiling, and he wasn't enthused about us moving up there because he envisioned the flat land with ponds. The first time my folks came up to visit, we had that storm, and all the water was standing in the fields. But it was always amazing to me that the tiling system took care of things like that.

Russel: I was wondering about it, too, when all this water showed up. And when we came up, we drove around and looked a little bit, and I said, "I don't believe this is a normal situation." We went over by where your granddad owned some ground. Of course, I didn't know who owned it at that time, but it turned out it was some of John Gunderson's ground, and right in the middle of a pond there were a couple of haystacks. And I said, "I don't believe that man would have put those haystacks there if he had thought there was going to be two feet of water there. I don't believe this is a normal situation. So I think we better wait a while before we make too much of an assessment." Then Harry Howard came down and told me — I suppose he thought the same thing — and that's one of the first times I got acquainted with him. He said, "It looks pretty bad now with all the water around," but added, "I want to tell you, this is the garden spot of the world, right here."



Mick Reigelsberger plants corn, circa 1998.

Changes in Farm Technology

Helen: How would you describe the changes that are happening in farming?

Norine Reigelsberger: Just in my lifetime, there have been a lot of changes. I have seen my dad use horses for farming. I remember the first tractor we got was an Allis Chalmers. I suppose I was about seven or eight. It was one of those that didn't have rubber tires on it; it just had steel wheels. Now we have four-wheel-drive tractors and combines and all this

sophisticated equipment. Even the way we run our operation is so much more sophisticated. You use the computer for so many more things now; then you never heard of a computer. And it has been a scary thing for us at the age we are to start in using it.



Freddie Voss of Fonda cultivates corn, 1994.

Dennis Sefcik: In the 40s, we had forced mechanization because of the war. We had a section of history coming through here where people could still survive simply with horses — the diehards, so to speak — who would say, “They’ll never get me to have that noisy, rickety thing going up and down my field because I like these horses. They are nice and quiet, and I do my thing, and I feed them oats.” So you have that kind of guy who could still eke out a living on a horse farm, which would be maybe an eighty-acre farm, surely never more than a quarter section, but at least an eighty. He could eke out a living. But the guy next door who had that tractor would say, “I can run that threshing machine, and I can get it done faster than you can with any of your equipment.” And then he would say to himself, “I can’t get ten guys to haul bundles and stuff anymore, I’m going to get my own machine and do my own thing, and I’m going to make it a combine. Now, I can do this myself. I don’t need ten guys. We don’t have ten guys. The military has taken them. They’re at jobs, gone here and there. So I can farm this — I can do more than that eighty. I can do this whole quarter now. I can rent this quarter, give half away to my landlord, and I still have the same thing you do with your horses. And I got it all done faster.” See how the change was coming. But they still needed horses to do things like mow the ditch. So that went for a while until they decided, “Well, let’s mount a mower on the back of one of these tractors, and then we’ll go up and down the ditches with that tractor. We’ll get one of these little tractors and mow the ditches. My ditches are just as good as your ditches with your horses, and I don’t have to feed them all winter just to go up and down the ditch. I put gas in the tractor, put the mower on, go up and down, and I am done. I take the mower off, and I’m ready to do something else.”

For us, in our family, that transition was most noticeable in the 40s because in the early 40s, we still had a pair of horses that was kept primarily for mowing ditches and for some more of those little projects. I can remember riding one of those great big work workhorses. They have those big, strong, broad backs and when I got off, I couldn’t even walk. I was just kind of stiff. I can remember one day I was riding that horse around, and some little pigs got out underneath the fence. Of course, I had to chase them and get them back in. I got off that

horse, but I couldn't run fast enough to catch that pig. Then after about five minutes, I got limbered up and was ready to go again. That was the end of the horse era that I remember; it was pushed pretty heavily by the war and the war effort.

Now when your grandfather, John, was working with the horses, he was cultivating one row at a time. Then he probably went to one of those modern, two-row cultivators with about four horses on it. That was big time, and boy, you could get a lot done in a day's time. Well, today, if you are at eight-row equipment, you're at the bottom of the pole. From there you go up. A fair number are at twelve-row equipment and some are even higher. So a person asks how that affects all the equipment. If you look at the new equipment, you can harvest six rows of corn at one time. Now remember, John started out taking one ear of the stalk and throwing it into a wagon box. One ear at a time, one stalk at a time, and maybe he had three or four guys picking on that load. Well, now, that combine goes through the field faster than I can drive that horse from one end of the field to the other. That combine is not only going to get there faster, it's going to do six rows at one time.

Helen: What was the transition from horses to tractors like for your family?

Paul Harrold: One of Mother's brothers would cultivate with the horses, and the other one would cultivate with the tractor.

Marjorie Harrold: When we first had a tractor, the older brother drove it, and the younger one stayed with the horses. He liked to work horses, so it worked out all right. During the war years, we still planted with the horses and cultivated with them, too. Then because there wasn't enough help, you needed to get things done a little faster, and you made some kind of a hitch so you could hitch the planter to the tractor. That was all those war years, you see. From the time we moved up here until ...

Paul: You graduated from high school in Rolfe in '45.

Marjorie: Until I graduated, that was wartime. Well, I learned how to drive the tractor, work in the field, and run the milking machine. You see, my dad milked cows at that time, too. I just plain had to be a chore person and helper. I helped my dad pick corn, and I always hauled it in, elevated it, and did the milking at night.

Helen: What was it like to pick corn?

Don Grant: It seemed rather futile to take that big wagon out in the field and pick those little ears of corn and throw them in that box. It took all morning to get one full if you worked like crazy. Then you went in, dumped the wagon out, went out in the afternoon, and you did that again. All you were doing was filling the box and emptying it, and you did that for about a month or month and a half. You hoped it didn't snow, but it usually rained, and it was pretty muddy and messy. There was enough frost on the ears to get my mittens wet early in the morning, and they stayed wet all day even though it warmed up a little. But I kind of liked it, (laughs) but it was very futile. And I still think about it now. That was the dumbest thing we ever did on the farm — throwing the little things in a box and then dumping them out, starting all over again, and trying to get it done by Thanksgiving.

There was a social aspect of corn picking in regard to who got out to the field first. Of course, there were no airplanes and no cars and tractors making a lot of noise when you went out and picked by hand with a wagon. So it was quiet at daybreak. And you hurried out into the field so you could be the first one to start hitting that bang board with an ear of corn because the sound would travel a long ways. Then you would stop and listen to see if your

neighbor was out there. If he wasn't out yet, you would keep throwing the ears in there, and finally you would hear this bang board banging from a ways away. You could tell who was out in the field picking, who got out first, and what order they got out in. That was part of the game, and then you would give your neighbors a bad time when you saw them on Saturday night and say, "I beat you out to the field."

One of the great triumphs in my life was when I outshocked my dad in the oatfield, and when I outpicked him in the cornfield. He was pretty good!



Harvesting corn at Living History Farms, 1986.

Helen: How come there are so many farms with a Model M Farmall tractor still around?

Verle Howard: It's a good, functional tractor. It's a good chore tractor with adequate power.

Velma Howard: And it never wears out, does it?

Verle: No, it's a good, sound tractor.

Dennis Sefcik: The reason there were Internationals was not the equipment but the salesman. It was the salesman who was very good at getting this equipment out to the farmers, probably giving them a freebie like a little cornplanter book, maybe a pencil, you know, the trinket junk. The second thing was if they gave you good service on it. If you had some trouble with it, they claimed they would come out and bring the district man. A farmer would think, "Oh man, that's a really big deal. They really care about me and my tractor."

For our family, our heritage has always been “red.” That started with Matt Sefcik, who started out with his first tractor being a Fordson, From there he went to a 1020 McCormick Deering, then from the McCormick-Deering — now notice the name changes here — he went to a 1937 Farmall. Now remember, corporations are buying and selling up on the top level, but we’re still red tractors here. A Farmall F20 could not outpull a Universal Minneapolis, the same type of tractor. It could not outpull it; yet it outsold it. It outsold it because it was about \$100 cheaper and because of the salesmanship on it. It was painted gray. The Minneapolis was a gray color, but we painted it red to make it look sharper. So in about 1937, the companies start painting all those Farmalls red. Now what do you like seeing going down the field, a piece of red equipment, nice and shiny, or some shade of gray? See now how the salesman works? The salesman is the one who starts that heritage. Now if the grandfather here, the original man making the transition into mechanized equipment, started out red, chances are, his kids are going to do that. So my dad is all red equipment. My brother is all red equipment. See how it went on down? Now my mother’s side is exactly the other side. They started out with the John Deeres — the A, B, G, and whatever — all the way up the line. But of course, red is always better than green. And of course, when you get together on Sunday afternoon, there’s the argument, “Well, ours could outpull that green” or “We can outpull those red ones.” So it isn’t so much that the implement is going to be able to do so much more or less, but it’s the salesmanship behind it.

I can also remember Dad being bold and forward in testing out his tractors to make sure they were running at best efficiency and horsepower rating. That wasn’t done by a lot of farmers because they weren’t sure that it was worth it. But he said it was worth it, “because otherwise you are wasting money on fuel and not getting efficient use of the engines.”

Helen: Why John Deere tractors?

Mary Jane Jordan: His first John Deere was one that his dad had.

Russel Jordan: I got started with John Deeres, so you got going on something and you get addicted to it. It wasn’t that they were all that much better than the others. (pause) I liked them and the simplicity of them, and they were good and economical to run. When we moved up to Rolfe, I got acquainted with Spike, the John Deere dealer. I always liked to deal with him. Sometimes we would dicker around and get about half mad at each other, but we really liked each other.

Mary Jane: They would always make a deal.

Russel: But Spike claimed he lost money on every deal.

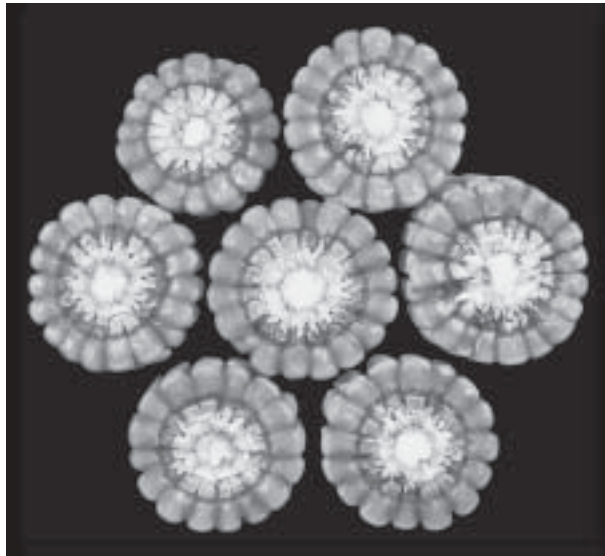
Helen: My grandfather, John, quit high school after his sophomore year but was a successful farmer. I’m not sure how he would manage in today’s world of agriculture.

Dennis: There is no possible way he could do that today because he would not have exposure to anything dealing with computers. He had no exposure to dealing with commercial fertilizer. He had no exposure to high-tech machines. So you see, as long as he worked hard, planted the right crops, and harvested on time, he was going to make money. But today, that won’t work. You can work from morning to night, twenty-four hours a day, all year long if you want, and you’ll go broke. You have to have the education to make it. Buying and selling of grain in advance. Chemicals. Some chemicals today cost as much as five and six hundred dollars a gallon. You can’t afford to waste that kind of money on something that you don’t know anything about. You must know how it works, the rate of application, and the safety

procedures involved. If you don't know that, you don't belong in the business. The same with seed corn. When he was buying seed corn, he could probably get it for five to ten dollars a bushel at most. Today, if you get seed corn for less than sixty-five to seventy dollars a bushel, you've got a bargain. The same with seed beans. Now seed beans we can probably get for fifteen dollars a bushel. And in his day, he was probably buying it for a buck or two bucks a bushel.

The way it operates today; you can't operate just with hard work. That will not cut the mustard. Something goes wrong on the machine, and the light is flashing — well, you've got to know what that means and how seriously to take that flashing light. Does it mean "Stop, and stop immediately, and shut it down" or does that mean "I can go for another half day." That makes an awfully lot of difference on equipment. So if you don't know that, and you don't know how the electronics work on equipment, you're lost.

If John would come back today and get into one of those combines, I'm sure he would think he was in a Star Trek ship. He couldn't relate. "What's that supposed to do?" Because for him, the left foot was for the clutch, the right foot was for the brake, and the hand over here was to put it in gear. That's all he needed to know. But you see, today, this over here adjusts the air conditioning, this adjusts the temperature, this is the windshield wiper, this adjusts the remote mirrors, this adjusts the speed of the implement, this adjusts the tension — this puts it into four-wheel drive. Those are all things we have to know when we sit down to ride in that piece of equipment. It isn't hard work. It doesn't take a lot of muscles. In fact, I know a lot of women who do the combining for their husbands. It's no problem, you know, because everything is power steering and power this and that. But you see, when he was finishing up in agriculture, power equipment was just starting to come in.



Corn Prices and Input Costs

Helen: What does it cost a farmer to produce a bushel of corn?

Russel Jordan: Of course, it all depends on if you have your farm paid for or whether you are paying interest. I think the experts say you should figure the interest charges in even if you do own the farm. So I suppose that \$2.20 would be a basic minimum [for what it costs to produce a bushel of corn.] The inputs have gone up from 300 to 500 percent. I

have a story I like to tell about when we were getting ready to move [from Rolfe back to southwest Iowa]. I needed to get a new pickup, and I was getting two dollars or more for corn in 1973. It might have been even close to three dollars. I went into Bill Brinkman's [Chevrolet dealership] in Rolfe and told him I wanted a ¾ ton pickup and he said he would have to go in the office and do a little figuring. He came out and said it would cost \$3,400 for a ¾ ton pickup with power steering and all the things I needed. Today, a pickup like that would cost \$12–14,000, and I am getting less for the corn than I did then. So, you see, all of what you put into [farming] has gone up from 300 to 500 percent.

In 1946, corn was \$2.46 a bushel because I have a friend who said he got out of the service in 1946, came home, and he had to buy corn to feed his livestock until he [harvested his own new crop] and had to pay \$2.46 a bushel. The reason he remembers [the price] is because it was 1946 and \$2.46. Now he has to pay \$30–50,000 for a tractor, \$15–20,000 for a pickup truck, [but] he is getting \$1.80 at best for corn and has to pay all those higher inputs. I don't know what to do about all this, but something isn't lining up right. We can't keep this up forever if those inequities stay in place.



Threshing oats at the Mary and Wesley Hronek farm, circa 1920. Southwest quarter, Section 17, Roosevelt Township. The photo is from Mary and Wesley's daughter, Irene Drobney.

The Threshing Run

Helen: What do you remember about threshing along this road?

Verle Howard: When we moved here in 1940, they still ran threshing machines, and everyone who had grain furnished a man either to haul grain or to haul bundles. The Grants owned the threshing machine at first. Then my folks bought a threshing machine when Grants decided to quit, and we threshed for several years. That was when you really had the neighborhood working together. The women always served great big meals — wherever you were, they had to feed the crew. The crews had six or eight bundle racks, which meant six or eight men hauling bundles and pitching them into the threshing machine and maybe one or two spike pitchers in the field that helped the fellas load their bundles. Then, of course, they had the grain haulers that hauled the grain from the threshing machine to the farms and elevated it into the cribs. In some cases, they might even scoop some into a bin for the farmers, but it entailed a lot of work. You cut the grain in bundles, shocked it, let it dry out — or cure — and then you threshed it. When the threshing was all done, the crew always had a great big picnic. That was “settling up day.” You always paid the owner of the rig for the threshing. I think they got about a penny and a half or two cents a bushel for threshing it.

Don Grant: Threshing was an old tradition that I wish was still alive, but there aren't enough farmers living close enough to each other now, and the crops are harvested with combines anyway. However, I realize that progress wiped it out, and it was a laborious way to do things. The threshing run was as much social as it was physical and necessary to harvest the grain. People worked together. Somebody owned the threshing machine and ran it; the kids hauled the bundles; and the old men hauled the grain, compared how much they hauled, told lies, and harassed the young guys. It was a great thing because the grandfathers always came out for threshing to run the elevator and put the grain in the bin. They hung around the rig to tell everyone how to do it. Threshing got them back into farming. They had an important part, and they were respected by the younger people for their opinion and their knowledge.

I guess ten would have been the standard number of people in a run. They would go from place to place. The way of determining who was first depended on whose oats were ready first; they made some sort of a mythical determination. Quite often it was geographical, and they started at one end of the road and followed on down to the other end.

And the fathers and the sons and the grandfathers played games, mostly in bundle hauling. This was on Wednesday and Saturday nights because the first person there in the morning was the start of a run, and then you pulled loads into the machine in the order that you arrived in the morning. You went out and loaded up your bundles onto hayracks, then came up to the machine, and number one started a run. Everybody hauled the same number of loads of bundles. So the game you played, if you were number one, was that on your last round you stalled and got up to the machine to unload at 5:01, which was the time after which you would not have to go back out for another load. You were the kingpin and everyone's workday hinged on you. This was particularly important on Saturday nights because you wouldn't start a new round after five o'clock. That was the rule.

Helen: Sounds pretty complex.

Don: Say, on Saturday night that quitting time was five o'clock — that's when you stopped going back out to the field to get another load. So you wanted to make sure you didn't get unloaded before five o'clock. If you did, you started another round, and everybody had to haul another load. So the fathers would get up and help you pitch bundles to try to get you unloaded before five o'clock and send you out again. Well, one of the really neat ways for a kid to keep that from happening was to find some bundles that were a little wet and strategically locate them in the rack where only you knew where they were. Because if you throw a couple of wet bundles right smack into the teeth of the threshing machine, it stalls the machine. That means the crew has to take the door off and clean all this out. Well, you ain't going to finish before five o'clock. The fathers, having been boys themselves, know exactly what you're doing, and they're inspecting the hayrack to see if they can spot the wet bundles. The trick is to divert them with conversation, and as you work your way to the wet bundles you stored so carefully, you grab them before the fathers can see them and throw the bundles right into the teeth, and then stand there and say, "Oh, what a shame," as the rig comes to a halt and the belt flips off the drive wheel.

Helen: What about meals on threshing day?

Don: Fantastic. The women sort of traveled around the run and helped each other serve. Those who had the big coffee pots — the big coffee pots made the whole run. And a big oil tablecloth — they would have one or two of them that would make the whole run. They each had something to contribute to the whole run, and they would go help. And the woman

would try to outdo each other in the meals that they put forth. That was a big bonus. Of course, the kids benefited from that. They were always hungry.

Marjorie Simonson: I remember the threshing ring and how you would spray for the flies (giggle) before the threshers came. Mother would pull all the shades in the house to try and keep it cool. You would get these big washtubs and put them outdoors and fill them with water early in the morning so the men could wash their hands. Every woman on that threshing run would try to outdo the previous one, but some of them were not good cooks. So when Dad would come home from threshing, Mother would ask, “Well, what did you have today?” And he would tell her. Then she would ask, “Well, was it good?” It was like a contest. You didn’t make your pies the day before. You made them the same day. Well, my gosh, if you are making five or six pies — early in the morning in a cookstove, no less — can you imagine what that was like?



A kitchen washtub at Living History Farms, circa 1986.

LaVonne Howland: I can just remember the threshing machine coming twice. When you had them coming to your home, a woman’s work was very hard because in a rural area, electricity just plain didn’t get there. Towns got it first. There weren’t a lot of farms that had electricity because of the fact that it cost a tremendous amount of money, and you paid for it to get to your door. A lot of the farms didn’t have it. So you had your wood cookstove, and you had to carry water. You started very early in the morning.

When it came to threshing, the thing I remember is you started carrying the water in right away. You started carrying the wood and the cobs because you had to get things going. You had to get something baked for the lunch in the morning for those threshers, and of course, you didn’t have cold cereal for breakfast. I mean, we had breakfast that consisted of pan-

cakes and eggs or things of this sort because of the type of work that was done. Then you got breakfast out of the way as quickly as you could because you had to get in the oven whatever you were going to make for coffee. If it was cake, you had to get it in, get it baked, and get it out because you were feeding several workers at noon, which meant several pies. You had to get the meat going. You had all of this. Then as soon as you had all that figured out, you've got to figure out what you are going to serve for lunch that afternoon and probably that night for supper. So it was continuous all day long. The same way when the men were in the fields, planting, mowing hay, or whatever. You had to be planning because the type of work they were doing was hard, and they needed something for coffee. At noon, you didn't just have a lunch, you had a full meal, and the same way at night. So you were always carrying in wood, carrying in the cobs, carrying the ashes out, carrying the water in, and such.

The women, from my standpoint, were always cooking. Laundry was done much differently than it is today. The thing I remember is heating the water; you carried it in and heated it. I can remember using the scrub board and then the first washing machine. It ran on kerosene and made this horrible noise, and you stuck an exhaust hose outside to let out the fumes. Then ironing was done with the iron that you set on top of the stove, and you had at least two so you could keep rotating them. I think we had three so that two were hot while one was being used so we could keep them going. The dishes. Running water was just not heard of...

Helen: This was even when you were on the Brinkman farm?

LaVonne: Yes, we did get cold water inside at the north place. I remember the kerosene lamps. Women didn't work outside the home back then, not many anyway. There were a few who were a teacher or a nurse, but the majority were at home. That was a full-time job.

Men, Women, and Couples

Rosie Grant: We had decided we were going to be married, but I had never met his family. I was here in summer school, so I took the bus up, and he met me in Humboldt. Well, to this day, I have no conception of distance. It's very difficult to visualize how far it is. And I had no idea how far his parents' farm outside of Rolfe was from Humboldt. We would drive by these farms, and there would be chickens walking on the porch. I made up my mind if we got to his house and there were chickens on the porch, I wasn't getting out of the car, I was coming back to Ames. Well, we drove for quite a while, and I was a nervous wreck. Finally, we came to this little house. It was painted white, and it had a blue roof and blue shutters. It was just a tiny house, but the yard was beautiful — nicely cut grass and flowers. There was a fence all around it and not a chicken in sight. From the gate and the fence all the way up to the back door, there were flowers along the sidewalk on both sides. I saw that when we turned in, and I thought, "Thank God." I wouldn't have gotten out of the car if it had been otherwise. There was this little white house with white ruffle curtains and flowers and no chickens, so I went in and met his mother and father.

I used to like to go to town on Saturday nights with Don's mother. You would go early and park the car on Main Street, and then you could sit in the car and watch everyone in town. People would come by the car and talk. Don's mother would buy her groceries, and then she and other ladies would sit on the benches out in front of the grocery store and visit. I loved it, and it's a shame that it is part of the past. It was such a special time, and the stores were open late on Saturday night.

Don: I remember Eickenberry's Grocery Store and Webb's Drug Store. The men would go down to the pool hall and play cards. Saturday night was an institution, and in the summers, Wednesday night was also a night when people went to town. I am not sure why, maybe to shop twice a week or as an excuse to have a little social function in the summer when everyone was working hard. It was a big deal. You got to see your friends. You were working all day long and usually on your farm, and so you didn't go to town every day like they do now, several times a day. It was a social event for the farm wives, for the women who worked all day long, as did the men. On Saturday night, you went in to do your shopping; and back when everyone milked a few cows, you went in and took your cream can. Everyone raised chickens to sell eggs. You would sell them at the grocery store usually, or they did have a produce house that bought them. You would sell eggs, then buy the groceries, and then spend the rest of the evening sitting in cars. And as Rosie said, women would sit in front of the store on benches and the men would stand on street corners and talk, or some of them would go down to the pool hall and play pitch or rummy or something until 10 or 10:30 and then go home.

When we got old enough to be able to use the car, we might drive over to Pocahontas — why, I'm not sure except there were different girls there. You drove up and down the street and looked and then went home. That was the substance of our riotous evening. Or we might go over to a movie in Pocahontas because they had a little better theater, and it was something else to do.

Helen: I'm wondering, Mother, when it was that you first got an inkling that you and Dad would be moving to Pocahontas County and this farm?

Marion Gunderson: It was about February of '45 when your dad announced one day that we were going to move back to the farm. (pause) I wasn't too happy about it (pause). And as I think back on it, I think he had a lot of nerve bringing the city girl to the farm to live. But I guess I adjusted. It was lonely for a while. Then one day, Mildred and Arlo Ives came over, and we formed a little bridge club, and I began to make friends. My mother had told me, "Now, Marion, if you have trouble making friends, just go to church." That does work because you do meet people there.

Helen: What was it like to propose to Mother that the family would move to the farm?

Deane Gunderson: I don't remember how it came to the time of actually making the decision. (pause) It might be true that I always knew I would do that.

Marion: Bear in mind, it was the war years when we first moved in. We couldn't get a furnace, so we heated the big, two-story house with a warm morning heater in the dining room. We couldn't get a bathtub, so we took our baths in the divided sink in the kitchen.

Deane: Shower in the basement finally.

Marion: And the house wasn't in very good condition, but we did do some painting and wallpapering and got lots of rugs to put down. We didn't have wall-to-wall carpeting. We changed early on from a gas stove to an electric stove. There was a back porch that had a closed-off room that we used for storage. That's where I put all the hand-me-down clothes for you kids. The first winter that we were on the farm — I have told this so many times, that I am beginning to wonder if it was really true or if it was legend — the electricity was off for ten days. Here I was with three children, the oldest barely three years old, and trying to cook for a family. Of course, we had the warm morning heater, so we stayed warm. I had to warm baby bottles and do whatever else needed to be done. It was pretty tricky.

Helen: When you moved to the farm, did you figure you would build a new a new house?

Marion: Your father said we would build one “within three years,” but it took ten.

Helen: Oh, I guess I didn’t know about that.

Deane: You learn something new every day.

Helen: Was that part of your prenuptial agreement?

Marion: No. Well, that was the understanding I had anyway. (pause) We had good times in the old house.

Deane: I can’t believe that I had said that we would have built a new house in three years.

Marion: You may have just said, “Well, maybe we could build in three years, or something like that.”

Deane: That’s a dangerous thing to say. Oh well. (chuckle)

Helen: What surprised me, Marjorie, when I asked you how you and Faber had met, was when you said you used to love to go dancing.

Marjorie Harrold: That’s where I met him.

Paul Harrold: You always went to dances, and apparently he did, too.

Marjorie: Well, back then, that was our entertainment. There were all these dance halls around, and now there isn’t even one. I guess you can still go to Fort Dodge, but Twin Lakes had a dance hall, the Ridotto [near Havelock] had one, and Fort Dodge — we always went down there.

Paul: Storm Lake.

Marjorie: Yes, Storm Lake — the Cobblestone. They had good movies back then, and now you don’t know what to go to.

Helen: Did you and Fay keep dancing then?

Marjorie: Oh, yeah, we did, but of course, it got to be less and less. (pause) We really liked to go. That was the way young people got together then. I got to go to one dance a week. See, that was back in the days when you didn’t go by yourself. My folks would always go to the show and drop me off at the dance hall. After I met Fay, he would come and get me, and they didn’t have to take me anymore. (chuckle)

Helen: Was that in Pocahontas?

Marjorie: No, we would go to Ft. Dodge to the Larimore.

Paul: That wasn’t too bad for back in those days — going to Ft. Dodge from here.

Marjorie: Of course, I did the driving. (chuckle) But I didn’t go by myself.

Paul: That was 40 miles.

Marjorie: We usually went on Sunday night. I would go to the dance, my folks would go to the movie, we would come home, and all week we would be busy working.

Helen: Do you go to movies now?

Marjorie: Yes, Paul and I took off two or three weeks ago.

Paul: And went to *The Sister Act*.

Marjorie: (chuckle) Have you seen that?

Paul: We went to *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

Marjorie: We used to go to a lot of movies. Like on Sunday afternoons, Pocahontas always had a matinee, and my folks would let me drive over. There always were such good shows, too. I liked musicals, and there were a lot of those.

Helen: They say that for a long time on the farm, a woman’s work went as far as the chicken house because the woman was responsible in the house, and she was responsible

for the chickens, and the men might help with the chickens, but they would never come any closer to doing housework.

Marjorie: That's right.

Helen: Did you experience any of that?

Marjorie: Well, no. Fay always helped me. He dried the dishes after every meal unless he was in a big hurry. Sometimes he would come in, and I was a little behind with dinner or something, and he pitched in and helped.

Paul: I'd set the table.

Marjorie: Of course, he never helped me much with cleaning or washing, but he always helped me around the house. And he could take care of the kids when they were babies, just as good as a woman. (Chuckle)

Helen: I never knew Faber. How would you describe him?

Marjorie: He was always a happy person. He loved to joke. (Chuckle) He never found many faults with anybody. He saw the good in everything.

Paul: He had a lot of getup.

Norine Reigelsberger: When we were first married, the ASCS office wanted me to go over there and work — offered me a job — and Joe wouldn't let me because he thought I should be home and be a homemaker.

Joe Reigelsberger: Gosh, I sure made a mistake then didn't I. (chuckle)

Norine: You did.

Joe: If I had let you go, think of the fabulous retirement you would have.

Norine: Well, that's a mistake you made right there.

Joe: Yup, I goofed up.

Norine: You sure did. (chuckle) So anyway, that took care of that. I never ever thought of working after that. But when Mick, our youngest son, started to school, I thought, "This is going to be just terrible. I just won't be able to stand this being home all day without anyone being around." So I was just really bored, and that's when I worked in Ft. Dodge. One year of that was enough. I think that was probably the worst winter we've ever had. I drove home in some of the most awful blizzards you could imagine, and by spring, I had had it.

And you know, not having started out working from the very beginning, I didn't feel my family was cooperating with the fact that I had a job outside the home. When I came home, it was all still here, and I was expected to do everything that I had done before. By the time school was out I had had it, and then the job got to be more than I wanted.

I had started the job on a part-time basis, and it got to be almost full-time. So that got to be more than I wanted to do. When I started, I told them I wanted the summers off because I wanted to be home with my children. I was supposed to go back in the fall, and all summer I kept thinking, "I don't want to go back," but I didn't have the nerve to tell them I didn't want to come back. I finally did, and they weren't very happy, but that was the way it was. You see, things now are different. The husbands help do everything now, but they didn't then.

Joe: She just found out that year that I wasn't gifted with these abilities to cook and wash and things like that. I'm just not handy at those jobs.

Helen: What was the power balance like between your parents?

Don Grant: I think they pretty much made the decisions together. I don't think it ever

occurred to my father that he would do any housework; that was my mother's job. I also don't think he recognized that she was doing the fieldwork — gardening was fieldwork. We had a field garden and a house garden. The men did the field garden, and my mother did the house garden. I don't think they ever had a conflict there. I also don't think it ever occurred to my mother — or at least she didn't verbalize it — that she wasn't part of the management team. I think they made their decisions regarding the farm, the big decisions, together. Dad made the decisions on hogs. My mother made the decisions about when he was going to butcher hogs. She made the decision when he was going to butcher the steer because that was food. They bought a new car; they did that together. They bought machinery. My dad made that decision, but they sat down and talked about the financial aspects of buying the tractor, then my dad would decide what tractor to get. Other than that, I don't think there was a conflict or abuse on either side.

Most men think they make all the decisions, but if you study them carefully, they are allowed to verbalize the decision in many cases because there are a lot of women out there that are smart enough to let them do that. Really, the women are making the decision because they are smarter, but they're also smart enough to let him think he did it. That's the ball game there. He's happy.



Velma Benton (Howard) and Verle Howard, 1944.
Photo is from their collection.

Velma Howard: Verle teases me all the time about having “his dog house.” When we got the new recliner, rather than burn the old one, he put it down in the chicken house so he could have his “dog house.”

Verle Howard: Well, I do a lot of work down there in the wintertime. I build toy chests and ...

Velma: And then, our daughter, Hope, and her husband got a new TV, and again, rather than throw it away, they brought it to the farm for the chicken house, but it never got to the chicken house. It got put in the playhouse. That's why he has two places to go — he has the playhouse and the chicken house.

Helen: So, are you in charge of the house?

Velma and Verle: (chuckle)

Velma: I guess so.

Verle: You better believe she is.

Velma: I don't spend any more time in his chicken house than I have to.

Verle: I clean my shoes and take my boots off at the door of the house.

Velma: Well, doesn't everyone?

Verle: I can't even sneak in the door and cross the kitchen and get a cup of coffee with my dirty shoes on.

Helen: How was it that you started wearing suspenders?

Verle: Well, every time I got off the tractor or got on the tractor, I had to pull my britches up. I got so sick and tired of it that I said I was going to get some suspenders. And I was in the Farm and Home Store one day, and I saw these suspenders. I put them on and haven't taken them off.

Helen: Do you call this farm your homeplace?

Velma: This is the homeplace to the kids because Grandpa and Grandma Howard lived here, and now we're here. And when we talk family reunions, which we have been trying to have every other year at least, they always think it should be at the farm.

Helen: What's that like?

Velma: Sheer bedlam. (chuckles) I'm not exaggerating one bit. We rented campers about four years ago, and the kids were all here. We set up a tent, too.

Helen: What do the grandkids like to do?

Velma: The adults sit around and eat and visit and tease and generally enjoy themselves. And we play games with the kids. The grandkids like to dig out all the old games that their parents had when they were that age, and they make forts in the bales of straw in the haymow. They like to play badminton, horseshoes, basketball, volleyball, and whatever strikes their fancy. The grownups, usually the men go golfing, and the women sit around and swear because the men don't come home. (chuckle) You know, like most families.

Dealing with Change

Don Grant: Another thing I remember was the big old cottonwood tree we had by the road. It was there forever. It was big when I was little, and what was left of it was still there the last time I was back. This old thing was a symbol of indestructibility because cottonwood trees draw lightning, and I don't know how many times this thing got hit. It stood there and took the best shots: ripped bark off, chunks out, and branches off. It was not very lively when I left, but it was always the thing I looked at when I went home. This old cottonwood tree was a symbol of the place. The elements were not going to beat it. (*Note: The Grant farmstead and cottonwood tree were cleared in the 1980s, and Don died in 2001.*)

Helen: What do you feel about the changes happening along the road?

Joe Reigelsberger: It's kind of nostalgic. You feel like an era is going by that you wish wasn't. It seems like kind of a shame.

Norine Reigelsberger: It makes you wonder what is going to happen in the future. As fast as things have changed in the last fifty years, it makes you wonder how many places are going to be left on this road. Are all these four places going to be here, or are we going to be minus some more?

Joe: They tell us it is progress. Whether it is or not, I'm not sure.

Marion Gunderson: In talking about our barn and how we tore it down, I think of the abandoned farmsteads. There's a house right now over on the Plover Road that is abandoned and literally rotting away. And it's sad to see a house go like that. I would rather see it die a dignified death.

Deane Gunderson: It seems to me that there ought to be a county commission, but here you go with another government program, almost like Lady Bird's campaign to get rid of junkyards. Somebody ought to have the privilege to go out and burn down some of those buildings that obviously can't be used for anything.



The Rolfe Presbyterian Church, 1982. It is the church I was raised in and the church that LaVonne and my parents belonged to until the 1990s when the Presbyterians and Methodists formed the Shared Ministry of Rolfe. Velma and Verle, who were Methodists, also belong to the Shared Ministries. Before the organization razed the Presbyterian building in 1996, the bell was removed and stored on my parents' farm for possible future use.



Helen: Velma, if you were giving a program at church on loss and had to give a miniature sermon, or give some advice, or read some poetry or scripture, what would you pick?

Velma Howard: My goodness, that's a big question.

Velma and Verle: (chuckle)

Velma: I don't know what I would choose to say. It would probably depend on the mood I was in when they asked me to do it.

Verle Howard: I would tell them, "Just take it as it comes. Don't worry about tomorrow. It will take care of itself. You worry about today."

LaVonne Howland: The church has an important role. It gives a rural community a place to come — to gather together, very much like the old days — to thank God for the fruits of the year during harvest. Also, it is a place for people to replenish themselves. Things have changed because what people want today and where they put their priorities makes the church's role more difficult. When our grandfathers were on the farms, the church was first. When you went to town, you went to the church; you went to the quilting bee. The church was the hub. Today, the church is closer to last in importance. We have kind of become mixed up, and yet the church needs to function to help keep peace in the turmoil. People still need that solace. They forget that they need it more than just occasionally, and the church needs to be there to provide it through illnesses, a crisis, the loss of crops, severe weather, hailstorm, and the drought that we experienced.

Helen: As a parish priest, how do you help your people deal with loss?

Dennis Sefcik: A lot of times, the best thing I can offer in a grieving situation is simply presence, just the fact that I am there. I don't have to say anything or say "the right words." I don't think that's necessary. I have been in so many of those grieving situations over the

years, Catholic and non-Catholic. A lot of times, just being there and a comment like “We’ll all help you carry the load the best we can,” just a comment like that, is enough to help them through it. I can think, too, of specific cases where the right words weren’t even necessary. The presence was. It isn’t necessarily just death either. It doesn’t have to be death. It can be a financial reversal. It can be the loss of a farm.

I can remember talking with one person when his creditors were going to foreclose and take the family farm. This was in the 80s. What can I possibly offer that particular man? I can’t pull out a checkbook and write a check to pay the taxes and save the land. But the fact that I listened and understood the pain he was going through, I think, was enough to keep him from committing suicide because of that deal. I don’t know how he has turned out since that; I’ve never followed him. I encountered him only in that one set of circumstances. How he has eventually gotten through this, I don’t know, but I do know he lost the farm. This is really hard when you are talking about a family inheritance. And it’s gone, zero. The creditors, they don’t care. “Put the money on the line, forget all this family stuff.” They don’t care. Especially if it’s a bank owned outside the community, which most of the banks are now. They care even less. They don’t care what your name is and what your family tie to the farm is. “Forget it. Either pay the money or go. We don’t care what happens to you.” That attitude was very clear to farmers, especially through the 80s when we had to go through losing a bank a month in this part of the country.

Helen: I think we both realize that farmers could get buffeted pretty badly if each morning they looked out the window and thought, “Oh, my God,” either how bad or how good things are because each day is different and unpredictable. There’s the unpredictability of nature, the risks facing farmers, and the losses that a person suffers as a part of life.

Dennis: See, that’s why you will find that people in agriculture have a nice, wholesome presentation of themselves to God. I think it comes easy for them. You stop to think, “Now that guy cannot go out in that field until it’s dry.” I don’t care how big the equipment he’s got, how ready the crop is, he’s not going out until it’s dry. He’s got to wait until nature dries that soil. He can’t get a helicopter out there and dry the field off. It ain’t going to happen. So he’s got to wait for nature to dry that soil. So when it’s dry, then he can plant it. Now he’s got the input of how he wants to till it and how deep and so on; but then, really, he doesn’t have any control over the growth of that, either. He can make it grow a little faster with fertilizers and herbicides and so on, but the fact that it is going to grow is out of his power. So then it grows. Now, he also doesn’t have any control over whether it is going to mature. Now in 1991, he didn’t have any control over that frost and how it cut down the yield of his beans. Now if that frost had waited just another ten days, he could have noticeably increased the yield of his beans. But he didn’t have any control over that, yet he went ahead and he harvested. So he learns very early in the game that he doesn’t have a whole lot of control over the growth of that. Now he can make it sound like he decided this and that, but when you get him down to his basic heart, he’s got to say, “Someone else is controlling all the water supply, the drought, and the hail. Somebody else controls all that, I don’t.”

Sustenance has to come from their faith, their belief in God, and personal prayer life but also in that community of people sharing experiences together and carrying the load together. It doesn’t mean we have to get together every now and then and talk about what a big load we are carrying. It means that I am aware of my neighbor, down the street or down the mile, and I know if I need something, I can always go there. They’ll always help me. And that feeling is also a very sustaining thing.



The old section of the Clinton-Garfield Cemetery southeast of Rolfe.
The Pro Cooperative grain elevators are in the background, 2000.

From the yet to be published book *The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era*
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