

Gail Seabold: I'm at 510 11th Avenue in Grinnell, IA and I'm talking to Mr. Walter Rixen, and uh the date is April 26, 1993. Why don't you go ahead and start out talking about your parents.

Walter Rixen: My father was Arthur Rixen, my mother was Ida Sheal Rixen and uh. . . they lived in Western, IA in Shelby County. My father was raised in a very small town by the name of Corly. You can find it on the map yet, it's just a very small town. And uh he later moved to Harlond, IA where they married, my mother was raised on a farm in Shelby county also. My father uh, I think had two years of college at a school in Des Moines, a business school and later became County Treasurer at Shelby County, IA. And he was in that job when he died in 1944 while I was overseas in the army. My mother had no education beyond the sixth grade, her mother passed away and she. . . uh had three younger brothers and she stopped going to school and started being a housekeeper for her father and three brothers.

GS: And took care of them?

WR: Hmmhum and raised them and. . . later raised three children and, and later yet worked in a hospital for years, although she had no special training. She worked with a doctor who ran a maternity hospital in Harlond.

GS: So she helped uh delivering babies?

WR: Right.

GS: When were you born?

WR: I was born on July 28, 1923. So. . .

GS: And where were you born?

WR: In Harlond, and I don't think I was born in a hospital, but I don't know. I think I was probably born where most people were at that time. There wasn't, to the best of my knowledge there wasn't a hospital in Harlond at the time. So. . .

GS: What was, uh, Harlond like?

WR: Oh, it's the average Iowa county seat town, it's probably about four thousand people. Uh, a very good business town for farmers in the area. You didn't have a lot of industry at that time and uh I don't know, just the average community I would say. We thought it was the best of course.

GS: (laughs) And uh how many brothers and sisters do you have?

WR: I have one brother that's a year and a half older than I am and I have a sister that's a year and a half younger than I am, so that's it.

GS: Alright, and would you say that you uh, got along with your brother and sister most of the time?

WR: I think so, I don't remember. I remember wrestling with my brother a lot in the living room and my mother didn't want us to, but uh I don't think we ever had any horrible disagreements that I can remember.

GS: Alright, then, what were your school days like?

WR: What were they like, let's see. . . I was a uh very, very active child. A lot of people tell me that, that I was

into a lot of things I probably shouldn't have been. I was probably, uh not malicious but I was, was very. . . physical too. I ran, and played, and climbed, and tore around quite a bit as a youngster. But I do remember that I was very, uh, shy around older people, especially teachers. I didn't. . . uh, I was very. . . intimidated, I guess would be the word, by teachers. Of course, that was in elementary school and as I grew older, as I got to junior high school I began to uh. . . I guess loose interest in studying. I did pretty well through elementary school, not too well during junior high and senior high. I was very interested in sports and participated in everything that they had at our school. Uh. I was probably a football and track person more than I was basketball or baseball. Uh, I did get a. . . should we move on?

GS: Oh no, that's fine. . .

WR: I did get a scholarship to go to Upper Iowa University, it's in Fayette which is way up in northeast Iowa. And I went there one year in 1941-42 in Walbrook County. And I, my father had a friend in Harlond who ran a road construction business and he had a contract to build some bridges on the Alaskan Highway and my father got me a job with that. So in the spring of 1942 I went to Alaska and worked for 11 months.

GS: So how old were you then?

WR: Uh that would have been, I would have been eighteen.

GS: Alright, so did you end up spending most of your time on construction, or did you end up having to go to the war at all?

WR: At the age, well let's see it was in November of 1942, it was getting very, very cold in that part of Alaska, and uh I did ask the man that owned the company that I was working for if I could, uh, get a release from my job so that I could go home and he agreed to that. So it was in November that I got, uh we hitch hiked a ride on a truck down the highway to Valdez, Alaska and then by boat to Seattle, Washington, and then by train back to Harlond, and I was home two weeks and I was drafted into the army. So I was uh, sent then from. . . I think was probably inducted into the army January of 1943. . . went through basic training at Fort Deverens, Massachusetts. Spent the winter at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts on Cape Cod. And uh, they then sent us to New Orleans, Louisiana where we waited for about four months to go overseas and we ended up in New Guinea and I spent about two and a half years in New Guinea during the war. So. . . that's about the extent of my army experience.

GS: Now were you. . . in any of the fighting?

R: I was in the Amphibious Engineers and we were, we were-- ran landing craft, although we were in the army we still operated landing craft and uh I was never directly involved in any, uh, actual combat. And the battalion that I was in, was, uh, was formed to salvage and repair landing craft equipment and that's what we did. We went on, into uh,

beaches where there had been landings and salvaged any boats that were usable or that we could put back into service. And we towed those to Finchava, New Guinea where they repaired them. . . They were probably later used in the Philippine landings, but I developed malaria and was sent home. And I. . . Probably, I got back to the United States in March of 1945. I had a skin disease and the terminology they used was Jungle Rot and I had my fingers and feet were very bad. My, my complexion doesn't fit very well in the climate and so I had this skin ailment and I had malaria and so I got sent back to the United States and I was discharged just before the war ended in Japan.

GS: Alright, was there any experience while you were there that really stands out in your mind?

WR: What, in the service you mean?

GS: Yes.

WR: (Pause) No, it really just kind of blends. . . It's getting to be a lot of years you know.

GS: Hmmhum (laughs softly).

WR: And I don't, like I said I never was really involved in any actual combat. We ran our boats up and down the coast of New Guinea on freight mostly. We'd go to Port Moresby which is on the tip of New Guinea and we'd uh, bring supplies back up to, uh, small bases where they didn't have natural harbors for ships to come in and anchor and unload. We would keep supplies for those. . . We were, on a couple of occasions caught out in some tough storms and these weren't the

handiest boats in the world. They were the landing craft where the bow, the whole bow would drop out on the beach and they were just like sailing a box.

GS: (Laughs).

WR: And so the rough water, when we got into wind and rough water it was probably, um, . . . just scary. It was some pretty bad times and we got caught in a couple of storms like that. But we were fortunate, we survived.

GS: And you didn't have any problems with like submarines?

WR: No, uh, really it was just a kind of. . . I enjoyed it you know, I had a good time. I'm not the kind of person that, uh, worries about things like that. I, I have told people that and they look at me like I'm crazy, but I really enjoyed my whole time in the service. I had a lot of good experiences, met a lot of good people, and really had an enjoyable time. I of course wasn't dodging bullets and that sort of thing. So we did, did uh I don't know, just a normal existence people would have in the situation I was in. There were an awful lot of people homesick, and upset about being there, and they worried and that type of thing. I guess I just didn't know enough to be upset about it.

GS: So, did you hear things, um, the other things that were going on during the war?

WR: Oh yeah, we were, we had good radio contact and we heard Tokyo Rose and she'd tell us about what was going to happen next, and where they were going to bomb next and where the submarines were going to attack our convoys and that type of

thing. The area I was in was really pretty secure by the time we got there. We had a few air raid warnings, but we were never really in any great danger. I guess we didn't know that. As I look at it in later years, we were about six months behind any of the serious fighting.

GS: Did you have any idea about the Holocaust or the atomic bomb? Did the atomic bomb happen after you got back?

WR: I think I was back in the States when they dropped the bomb. No and we weren't that well informed about the war in Europe, we just uh, I don't recall hearing anything about the Holocaust or that type of thing until after we got home and after the war was over and we began to get the. . .

information and everyone found out about it. So, we were more concerned with *kamikaze* pilots and that type of thing. We were really worried because they'd do some strange things. They would go into areas where there hadn't been any combat for a long time and they would send some raids in there with their dive bombers and their small aircraft. Again, I was fortunate in that I was never involved.

GS: Alright, what was life like when you came back from the war, when you had to deal with your malaria. . .

WR: Well, let's see. I, when I came back they, they sent us to Camp Carson, Colorado, I think they call it Fort Carson, Colorado now but as I recall it, it was Camp Carson, Colorado. It's at Colorado Springs and we were at a rehabilitation set up. We were actually under hospital

orders, but we, uh, lived in a barracks and uh, and uh. . . we really had no duties. We would play volleyball most of the day.

GS: (Laughs).

WR: And uh, and really my skin rash went away shortly. It did begin to clear up pretty well after we got back into a decent climate, back in the United States. And I didn't really develop malaria until I got back here. We had been taking, uh, an adabrin tablet everyday all the while that we were in New Guinea and that as I understand it was a medication that didn't cure or prevent malaria, it just retarded it. And when we came back on a hospital ship, they decided that they could take us off of the malaria then. And about three weeks later was when I ended up coming down with the malaria, and I was actually in Iowa when that happened. Because we were at Camp Carson, Colorado. . . and it was between VB-day and VJ-day and the government was worried that people were beginning to slack off on their war contract jobs. So they asked some of us if we wouldn't go to plants that had war contracts and , uh, talk to the workers about how much we've appreciated what they've done and wouldn't they keep it up until the war was over. So we were waving the flag and they sent another man and I to Cedar Rapids, and we talked to about four or five war contract plants in Cedar Rapids. And that's where I actually came down with malaria. I started getting sicker and sicker, and the fellow that was with me called the Colonel in Des Moines that we were working

through and he sent an ambulance out from Schick General Hospital in Clinton, Iowa and picked me up and took me to Clinton. And I went through about two weeks of recovery there and then they sent us back to Camp Carson. So I actually developed that malaria in Iowa and people think that's really strange.

GS: (Laughs) Yeah. So, uh, were there a lot of women working in the plants that you went to speak to?

WR: I would imagine for those times. During WWII the women really began to work in large numbers in defense plants. Uh...what, you asked me a question and I've forgotten it, where I was going with all my...

GS: Well, uh just your experiences since you'd gotten back from the war.

WR: Well when I got discharged, that was August 5, 1945, when I was discharged, I remember that. And, uh, I came to a, to Harlond. My father had died while I was over in New Guinea and uh my mother and uh, my brother is diabetic so he was never in the war, my brother, uh, was married. My sister and my mother were living in a house in Harlond, so I moved in and lived there through the winter. I worked, the first job I got back from the service, I worked in a body and fender shop and worked through the winter. And the next summer, a farmer friend talked me into getting a priority, a veteran's priority slip for a hay bailer and uh by getting that I could get one of the next ones that were manufactured. The war was running down. So we got the hay bailer and I ran

the hay bailer for him during the summer of 1946. And then I decided that this, I had to do something more important with my life.

GS: (Laughs).

WR: I went back to Upper Iowa on the GI Bill. And went back to school and, uh, in three years finished at Upper Iowa. And played football, and did reasonably well at school. Uh...met my wife, probably the greatest thing that ever happened to me.

GS: At Upper Iowa?

WR: At, well she was, she actually lived in Sumner which is about fifteen miles west of Fayette. She had a couple, two cousins, that went to school at Fayette and through one of them I met her and uh and started dating her. We finally, we got married, I still had a year of school left. And we, we lived rather frugally. I had uh, uh, I think the government was paying my tuition and I got ninety-five dollars a month expense money and we rented a small upstairs apartment in a house for \$18.50 a month. And uh, my wife had been working in a bank in Sumner, but she wasn't working. But we did work at a dance hall in Olwein, IA. I was a bartender, and my wife was a hat check girl and we worked um, let's see, every Tuesday and Saturday night they had a dance. So we worked Tuesday and then twice a month they had a big band that they would bring, bring into the coliseum in Olwein. So some weeks we worked three nights, and we really did pretty well. I mean when you consider the times, we made, oh about thirty

to thirty-five dollars a night for the work that we were doing. Put that with the money the government was giving us, we did pretty well. In fact I don't know that we may have been better off then, than we've ever been since then. Now let's see...Uh because of all of the veterans coming out of school, and a lot of them thought that they wanted to be school teachers, which was my goal, and uh especially we all wanted to be coaches. So that there was, uh, to find a job was rather difficult.

GS: Did you, uh, major in Education then?

WR: Hmmhum, I actually uh, had a major in Biology and a major in Social Studies along with Education. I never did teach any Biology, I taught some Social Studies, but primarily I was a physical education teacher and coach. Um, we moved to Waukan, which you probably know about where it is. My first job was three thousand dollars a year. I was an assistant coach. There was a head coach in the three sports offered at that time, which were football, basketball, and baseball and I was the assistant coach. A man by the name of Theorem Thompson was the head coach of those sports and we worked that way for two years. He moved back to Cedar Rapids and uh later he was the basketball coach at Coe College. No, not at Coe, Creighton in Omaha. But when he left I got the football job and they hired another man to be the head basketball coach and track coach. And we moved on from there. We lived in Waukan for uh thirteen years and I hadn't gone back to any graduate school during that period of

time because I worked every summer on construction work, building houses and worked for a contractor. And uh there were an awful lot of houses being built at that time so every summer we had plenty of work to do. And I, I didn't feel I could take the money and go to school because we had a son in 1954. And uh, but after twelve years of teaching and coaching I decided that if I was ever going to get it done I was going to have to go back to school. So we sold our house. My father-in-law was living with with us, he was crippled with arthritis and couldn't take care of himself and my mother-in-law was dead.

(Tape stops, Side B)

WR: So I decided to go back to school and get a Master's Degree in Secondary, with emphasis in Secondary Principalship. So we moved to Cedar Falls, so we sold our house and uh rented a little bitty house on the north side of campus in Cedar Falls and uh, my son was in third grade at the time. He finished third grade in Cedar Falls, and my wife got a job at the campus school as the secretary to the elementary principal and uh, I became a full time student. And we went through...1943-44 and I got my master's degree in the spring of 1944. And uh I was employed by the St. Ansgar Community School district which is in north central Iowa, right up by the Minnesota border. And I was, I continued to go to graduate school through uh, and worked in St. Ansgar. And I finished an Education Specialist's Degree in 1966, which would have qualified me to be a superintendent had I

ever chosen to do so. But I was always, I did apply for some superintendencies, and, and, was offered a couple over the years. And I just didn't think that I would enjoy it that far away from working with the young people. Um...after five years in St. Ansgar I decided that maybe we should move to a little larger school and started applying for jobs. And ended up in Grinnell in 1969.

In 1969 my son was a sophomore in high school his first year here. He didn't like this move, he didn't like it at all because St. Ansgar was a four year high school and at that time Grinnell was a three year high school. So he said, "I have to be a freshman twice." So he was kind of upset, but he uh, he got well acquainted really quick after we moved here... Let's see, how much detail do you want now?

GS: Well, uh, what was your first job in Grinnell?

WR: I was the high school principal when I moved here and uh we went through quite a turbulent time. This was the sixties, the late sixties, and uh...young people were really restless, they really were. And it was tough time to be in the school business because kids weren't that, they were more interested in the problems of the Vietnam War and the Korean War and all of the type of things like that. It was, uh difficult times. And in addition to that, the high school was where it is now, but the junior high was in what is now the city office buildings downtown. And that building was uh...really not adequate for the job we were trying to do with it. The fire marshal, the state fire marshal, finally

said that the building was unsafe and that we could not use it as a school building anymore. And so we went into what they call split shifting. The uh high school would start at about seven o'clock in the morning and we would run until noon and then in about twenty minutes we had to get all of the high school students out of the building and all the junior high students into the building and they ran from about 12:30 to about 4:30 or so. So we had, had, and that in addition to uh, we were really quite overcrowded...We had about, uh, oh we would run from about 550 to about 600 students in high school. And uh, our building was just not big enough to handle all those students. So we went through a period of modular scheduling, I don't know if you'd be familiar with that...But rather than have a six period day, a seven period day, or something like that we would have, every class would be so many modules of time. Twenty, like if three twenty minute periods, we'd say they'd go to a class for three mods, that would be sixty minutes. And maybe that would be for lecture for all of the kids in that course and then during the next six day cycle they might go to small group class under that same teacher at various times. It was, uh, it was fairly new and it didn't catch on as well as it might have...I forgot to tell you, at St. Ansgar we, we had modular scheduling also, we were probably the first school in Iowa to completely go to the mod schedule. And we did very well there, we had very good success, but I think because of the times and because of the problems we were

having trying to get a bond issue passed for a new building here in Grinnell. Uh, it didn't come off as well, although there are some of the effects of modular scheduling that you can still see in the schedule at the high school and middle school. The principal that's at the middle school was principal at that time too. And he would, I would start the day in the, the principal's office, and then at noon he would move into that same office. So we each had a desk in there and we each had our own files, but uh...I then, I, I think it was nine years, I can't really remember. Nine years at the high school and then openings came up and I applied for one of the elementary jobs and got the principalship at Davis Elementary in the south part of Grinnell (door slams) and I finished then as elementary principal.

(Mrs. Rixen enters the kitchen)

Mrs. Rixen: Hello...Hi.

GS: Hi. So, now did you just want the opportunity to work with younger kids?

WR: Hmmhum. I had all, I was, clear back to Waukan. I was, as I was a phys. ed. instructor, I was phys. ed. for both elementary and secondary, and I just loved working with those young people. So when this opportunity came up and I was certified as an elementary principal, and uh I thought I was getting older and I was getting to the point where the high school students got on my nerves quite a bit. And uh so I got this job and actually it was probably the greatest thing that I ever did. I loved the teachers, I loved the kids, and

we just had a great time, those nine years until I retired. We really did. Some of the people that are seniors at the high school right now were still in elementary school...So I go out there and visit once in awhile and I still find that people that use to come up and give me a huge hug in the lunch line and things like that when they were younger. You don't get that when they're in high school. So...since I've been retired I have tried to be as active as I possibly can in doing the type of activities that are, that help Grinnell. I like this community, I've really learned to like it, so I've remained a member of the Chamber of Commerce. I belong to the Senior Chamber and I belong to the Ambassador's, which is an arm of the Chamber of Commerce, and we welcome new businesses and call on people who have received promotions in their jobs and that type of thing. And then the Senior Chamber is, uh, a fairly active group for older people. But uh, we have, my wife and I, have really enjoyed our years here in Grinnell. By the way, she started to work as a teller at Brenton Bank the fall that we moved and worked until we both retired within two weeks. So, how's that? Have we forgotten anything?

GS: Well, um, now do you think that Grinnell has changed a lot since you first came? Has it, the uh people and the values of the town?

WR: I guess, I guess I would say yes, that they probably have. I think, I think that, that and I don't know how, why I think that, but I really feel that the people are...more

willing to...support educational activities, and uh, are more interested in their children having good buildings, and good equipment. Uh, because we really have, they've spent a lot of money out at the senior high school and built a new middle school. And uh, it just seems to me that, that they're more education minded than when we came. I don't think that I had anything to do with that (laughs). But, and I think that , that the community, and I might be wrong too, but it just seems to me that they have been more supportive of Grinnell College than they were when a I first came also.

GS: Well, um, 1969, I'm sure there was some...

WR: Well, the college students they, they, we use to shutter because every time they would find something to demonstrate against, they would always march out by the high school, so that our kids would be sure to see them, so that then we would have problems. Our kids wanting to get out of school and support the march with the students and that type of thing. But uh this wasn't really a serious problem. We did have a carry over from, there was a student newspaper, I don't think it was sanctioned by Grinnell College. It was called the Teridactel, which was really a bad, bad influence (chuckles) on the high school students. Therefore we had a real problem of our young people wanting to uh, uh publish their own paper with the same type of uh, literature that was being published in the Teridactel at the college. And uh, this was a real problem. And I also went through a time when uh...some people in the community...attempted to censor the

books in our library. And we went through a...about an eight month period of time and that was really a severe problem. And we actually ended up with...some very severe problems with the people in this family that had decided that, uh...And we did all, we survived it. I don't know just how to describe the problems that we had. But they actually came into the building on two different occasions and started throwing books out of the building off of the shelves and we had to physically remove them from the building. So...at that time it seemed like an awful, awfully traumatic situation. I suppose as I look back at it now, it wasn't maybe as bad as we thought it was. But anyway we didn't, they never did censor our books and we survived that one too.

GS: Do you remember um, uh what books they were...

WR: Not particularly, I uh I don't right now, no. They had, they had some that were classics I know, that they thought should be disposed of...We...I really can't remember, but they had a long list, along list that they wanted us to stop circulating. An uh...I don't know what else to say other than we survived that.

GS: Yeah, so did you have any students that tried to play any pranks on you?

WR: Oh yeah, they uh, the job of high school principal in those days made the uh principal's home fair game for eggs, and it made your mailbox fair game for firecrackers. And uh, they liked, uh I had a convertible, a Plymouth convertible for a couple of years while my son was in school and I

thought that would be nice for our second car. And, I think we had it for two years and the students slit the top on it four different times and so we finally traded it for a different car. Uh, it was a favorite trick to drive in, quietly drive on to the lawn, and then tear up the sod with the cars. They were malicious around the high school. I don't think that was aimed at me. I think it was just a symbol of the time that schools were, were uh...not as accepted by the students. It was just the times.

GS: Did you have a lot of problems with drugs or alcohol?

WR: We had some. I, I would say that we didn't have a great, great deal of it, but we did have a number of students that we did have problems with. We had some pushers, and uh...We didn't have, uh I guess I can't say we had a severe problem but we did have students who would, that was back in the days when LSD was a favorite, and some of those kids would go on some pretty wild trips from their drugs. But, uh, as I look back at it, it wasn't as bad as I think some of the other, some of the larger city schools had. It seemed to me that they had more problems than we did. So (pause) you, it's easier to sit here retired and to think well it wasn't as big of a problem (chuckles) as you thought it was at the time it was happening.

GS: Yeah. Did you have any, uh, dress codes that you had to enforce?

WR: (Pause) Yeah, yes we did. I was just trying to think back...I don't think we had specifically a dress code. Just

that they, they had to wear shirts and shoes. They...I honestly can't remember how we handled that. We didn't have a great deal of problems, it was never a thing that bothered me that much. So I suppose because of that we didn't try to make a uniform. Some, some schools would , would uh, try to make the boys wear ties and other than blue jeans and that type of thing, but we really never did get involved that much...I don't think. You caught me there, it must not have been that severe of a problem because I don't remember.

GS: OK, now do you um have any particularly memorable experiences as a coach, during your coaching years?

WR: Well...Two things that stand out as an athlete and a coach. Upper Iowa, for two years while I was there we were the Iowa Conference Champions in football. And I, that stands out as being part of the team that won the Iowa Conference two different times, in fact it was two years in succession. And then at Waukan as I was coach, we had two undefeated football teams that I coached. So, you know that was a big thing in my career. It was, in fact they hadn't had an undefeated football season before that or since that at Waukan. So I still, I guess I am the only coach who had undefeated football teams so that made me feel fairly proud.

GS: So, uh, now how would you describe the Grinnell community since you first came and now. Would you say that it's conservative, or...

WR: Oh I don't know how to answer that one. I would say that it's, it's uh...yeah I'd say it was a fairly

conservative community. It's uh...it has really, uh, industry has grown a great deal since we moved here. It was just beginning to start when we moved here. The, uh, the community had purchased land just south of town as industrial park. And they have recruited a lot of industry into that area. And uh, so the town has really grown. It seems like that consistently we have...one of the, we're one of the highest towns of our size in sales tax revenue and that type of thing. Which would indicate that it's a great business community for shopping for people in the area. And uh, that was just all starting when we moved here. And they've had, I can't name all of the industries that have moved in over that period of time, but there must be fifteen or twenty uh factories and large industries that have moved here since we moved here twenty years ago. And I think that's probably better than the average town the size of Grinnell.

GS: Alright, well, uh is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

WR: Uh, no...I've participated in the town and gown fund drive every year since it started, and uh I have really enjoyed Grinnell College as part of the community. It, I think it's uh, I think Grinnell College doesn't get near the credit for what it means to the community by a lot of the people who live here.

GS: Do you think that people have uh, overall a positive or negative view of the students of Grinnell and Grinnell College?

WR: I would say it's far more positive. There are, there are naturally the people that are a certain type of people who, who uh have some very negative thoughts. And they would have wherever they live, and that doesn't bother me. The greater portion of the people who really, uh, give it some thought, I think really appreciate having this school, this college in this community. It's, it's been very good to the community, very good. And people realize it. It's, uh, one of the big assets to the community.

GS: Alright, well thank you.

WR: Hmmhum, well that's that.