

LARRY ELLIS

His father, Percy Ellis, was the manager of the sweet corn packing plant,

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(The sweet corn plant was served by a spur off the main line and there was a turntable at the plant.)

Well, the turntable...I want to say now, there was at least, besides that spur that came into the canning factory, that spur came down there and ended, well, it was equal to where the pumping station was. And then there was two other sets of tracks....that was called the M& St L Railroad. There was a big dock and stuff that set down, maybe two blocks or three blocks down where Talbott & Olds used to be, big grain deal, there used to be a huge depot there for M & St L and Carl Speth was in charge of that depot and his wife worked for my dad, the couples were good friends

The M&St L was really busy at that time. Now it's got hardly any traffic on it at all. But at that time they had trains runnin through there, the Rock Island and M & ST L was going on all the time, I mean tons of trains coming through there, coal trains, all kind of stuff like that. That turntable, it was amazing because us kids would set out there, they'd have some cars to go the other way toward Searsboro and Oskaloosa...so they'd pull those cars on to the siding enough to where they could get that engine around...four people could turn that great big engine around on that turntable and you wouldn't have thought they could do it but evidently it was so balanced, they turned it around with very little effort. They'd just back in it and pull out, they'd go down and hook on and away they'd go in the other direction, and it was quite a deal in its day.

And then they'd stop at the old water tower periodically and put some water on. It was a fascinating era, it really was, for kids growing up. It was hard times, during the second world war. I remember most of that and it was really tough. I mean families had kids in the service and

didn't know if they were gonna be killed. A lot of them did have people killed.

The turntable was huge, I mean it held them great big steam engines. The whole engine, that's all you could get on it. It's just amazing to see them old gals, and that whistle, the way they'd blow...every engineer had a different sound. You remember the cafe, the old cafe that set down there by the Rock Island depot, where the restaurant's at...right across the tracks was a cafe that was there for years.

All the train people when they stopped would go there to eat. They run over there, get coffee, get sandwaiches and they'd cater to all the people who came there, both directions, I mean...I want to say the P&M cafe but that wasn't it...I could find out for you, though.

HOW DID YOUR DAD GET STARTED?

Dad started with Continental Can Company out of Chicago, and later ended up with American Can Company and he traveled all of that region, Wisconsin...he dealt with all these people for I don't know how many years before he run into this man by the name of Clark Hagan that was originally out of Storm Lake. He owned maybe ten canning factories in the state of Iowa and over into Wisconsin and Minnesota. That's where dad got to know him real well and he said 'why don't you get off the road and come to work for me.'

So that's where he ended up first was in Grinnell. He wanted him to open up this one in Grinnell and get it going. It run pretty good for, Oh, I guess that factory was there for a good ten, twelve, fifteen years. I think it was around '47 when we moved to Vinton, Iowa. He took over a canning factory there for two years for Green Giant. Clark owned that, too.

Then, I don't know, the sweet corn days, when they was hauling sweet corn in with horses and wagons, cause they'd come down the street with a team of horses pulling a wagon load of corn, you know. Some of them had some old '37 Chevy trucks, one bed trucks, that they'd haul it in with, a lot of them had horses.

WHAT YEARS WITH THE HORSES?

O anywhere from about 1940 to '42, '43. on the end of the deal, there it shows on the picture where the silage came out of the husking shed. The farmers would get to use that silage, take back to give to their cattle, hogs or whatever they fed it to...and a guy by the name of Bob Revell, that was foreman, worked the part of the huskin' shed, took care of the horses, which was his pride and joy...dad got to lookin at some of the farmers with the tractors and he thought maybe it would be cheaper just to put gasoline in a tractor to pull different wagons around out of that pit there where they dumped the silage, it would be easier. One day I was down there with my dad and he was tellin Bob they were gonna buy a tractor.

Bob says, 'Oh Perc, you don't want...' I can't remember the names the horses, but he was really speaking up for the horses...he was reachin' up there patting this one on the nose, sayin' 'you can't get rid of these..'and one of them bit two fingers off while he was pettin' it. Right away he said, "Get the tractor.'

He gave the horses to some farmer, said give them a good home. At the factory they were kept in a little stable out at the back of the factory, they had a little place they could put em in out of the weather. In the winter some farmer kept em, and when the corn season came, why, he'd bring them back in.

YOU MENTIONED YOUR DAD WOULD GO OUT TO CHECK THE CORN IN THE FIELDS.

He would go out in the fields, he had one or two guys who would go out and check the fields...he knew when they were planted and he kept real close contact with the farmers, and he was really good at what he did. I mean, up there in that big factory in Seymour, Wisconsin, it was huge and he had three or four field men...I'd ride with him in the car and I was a sophomore in high school when I first started going up there and workin with him during the summer. He knew just about when this was going to be ready and if they said, Well

it's ready to go, most of the time he'd say well, OK, I think you're probably right...or they'd bring him in a sample and he'd say yeah, it's ready, start getting 'er in here. But he knew just about everything he had to know to get the corn in on time so it didn't go bad so the farmer had the chance of gettin the best product, the best price for it.

ONCE THEY BRING THE CORN IN...

First it went across the scales. They took a sample off the wagon when it came to the scales, take it in and either one of the foremen or my dad would look it over, make sure everything looked good, you know and they'd tell the famer one way or the other, if he needed to get it all out at once or he could take his time, you know, by the way the moisture content...

And then it went down to the huskin' shed and they dumped it in that corn pit. And there was a big chain elevator that was sittin' underground and that would take it up into the huskin shed. Then it would go in to the women, there was 25, 30 women that was in there and they fed these big machines that would husk this corn and the other conveyor would take it down and dump it into the silage pit and they would take this corn and trim the ends off, they'd put it in these 'huskers' they called em and they would take this corn and shake it and it would take the kernels and stuff off of it. It was amazing how that thing would do that without damaging anything.

And it would go up this big conveyor belt over to that, where they canned it, it was a two story building. and up above they had these big tracks that came in and the guys would put the cans in these deals and they'd go down into the closing machines. And then when the corn came in, they'd can the corn through these big closing machines and they would dump em into these big 4 wheel crates. And they they'd wheel em into the retort room. The retort room had big cranes in there and they'd pick em up...they held three crates to a retort, and they'd precook em to a certain degree and when they took em out, they'd put em in the old cooling canal and down the old cooling canal they'd go, clear to the back of the factory.

Then they'd be taken out by another crane and put for the people to box and they'd box them individually by the number of the cans, like 303 and gallon cans, whatever, they'd put em in their individual boxes and put em in the warehouse. And in the wintertime, they'd get the different labels, like Green Giant, and they'd put the labels on em and load em into the boxcars by hand. Everything was done by hand. There wasn't no pallets or any fork lifts or anything like that. They had big old carts with big steel wheels on em and they'd load that corn onto the cart, what they could handle, and out into the boxcars. They'd have enough guys and they'd stack em up about 8 feet high in the boxcars. They'd leave just enough room so when they opened the doors they could get in there and start taking them out.

WHAT ABOUT CORN BORERS, INSECTS?

Can't remember that stuff they had for corn borers at that time, I know they said it was killin' the corn and when my dad was up to Toledo, at the cannin factory...he had a real bad temper...and these farmers was gettin on him really bad, said it was killing the corn and he said "It won't even kill a human being!" And he went and took a half gallon jug...I was sitting in there that afternoon...mixed it up according to the way the label was and he drank over half of it. He sat there for the next 45 minutes and he said, "Do I look like I'm dieing?" He said "It's not killin me and it's not killin your corn."

He got sicker'n heck later on that night, but it didn't kill him. He told his doctor and the doctor thought he was crazy, but....

SO THE CORN WENT INTO THE CANS AND IT WAS RAW CORN AT THAT POINT AND PRE-COOKED IN THE CANS. BUT TELL ME ABOUT THIS COOLING CANAL.

It was a regular canal, a good 35, 40 feet long, it went clear to the back of the whole factory and it was probably 6 foot deep, probably 5, 6 feet across, and the crates went right down in there, completely submerged and they moved very slowly down through there to cool that corn. By the time they pulled that out there at the end the corn was completely cooled down. Then they boxed it.

They filled the canal, started early in the spring, filled it a little at a time. They didn't want to fill it too early or us kids would get into it. He'd catch us in there swimmin, he'd boot us out. He just didn't want anybody gettin hurt in it. We used to swim in it when he wasn't around. Had a lot of fun.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WORKED THERE?

I'd say on any given day, forty or fifty. Then in the wintertime when they were doing the labeling, stuff like that, maybe fifteen or so worked, pretty much the whole winter, gettin' the corn labeled and shipped to different places, and loaded in the box cars because everything was loaded by hand. There wasn't any easy way of doing things back then. And the work force was kind of limited because all the younger people were gone to the war. Like Maytag, they converted over during the war to ammunition, stuff like that, so there was a lot of women working in those plants, there was slim pickin's...a lot of older people working in the plants at that time.

I'd say some of them women had been working for dad since the plant opened. They enjoyed it, them gals could get in there and they were good hard workers. and some of the men were older, up in their late 40s who were working there. Wasn't too many young people there. Few high school kids might have worked there, but not very many.

TELL ME ABOUT THE GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR

i want to say it was late 44, early 45, when they brought them here. I mean, the war wasn't too far from being over. It only lasted one summer that I can remember that they were here. And they came in and they talked to dad about it. And he said, well, if you need some place...but they made sure that there wasn't any hard core. That's the first thing he was concerned about, he didn't want any hard core, you know Nazis to be comin in to work, you had to worry about em...although they were guarded and they had machine guns, the

guys who were there guardin them had Thompson :45 submachine guns.

I can't find that picture, i wish i could, I was sittin in the jeep with that Captain who was in charge of the whole thing and he had a Thompson submachine gun...the jeep windshield was down and he had the submachine gun layin right there and they took a picture of us in it, and I can't find that thing, I wish I could.

They were gonna take em in the old riding academy up here at the college. There was a big riding academy right where this new part's being built now,,if you go back to maybe where the baseball diamond was at, the riding academy sat right in there and it was a good-sized riding academy, and they wanted to house them back in there in tents. and the people in Grinnell didn't like that idea. They didn't feel secure to have them down in the residential area where if some of them would get loose, why...

So they kind of killed that so they went over there on Highway 30, past Meskwaki, just before you drop down into the bottom there, up there on the hill was an old Indian hospital. So they went over there and I remember going over there with my dad, some of them officials from the government. It was about a three story hospital if I remember right, good sized hospital. They went in there to see if they could house them there, you know, have some sanitary conditions and stuff. I don't know how long it had been empty.

So they went in there lookin and in a little bit I got bored. I went back outside. There was a big old bell out there in front of the hospital, had a hammer hanging on a chain. And I started beatin on that bell. And in the next ten minutes I had every Indian in the surrounding area because it was some kind of signal for the Indians to report when that bell rang. Well, that didn't go over too big, either. I got taken to the woodshed again, but...

That's where they housed them. They'd haul them over every day, they'd work til about 6 or 7 in the evening, then load em back up, take

em back over. That lasted that whole summer, probably two or three months and that's the last that they were there.

WHAT DID THEY DO AT THE FACTORY?

All they did was back there at the very back by the cooling canal, that was a open area. it was screened in, had a roof on it, came down, oh there was a screened area maybe four or five feet high from your waist up to about a foot from the top of the building, it was all screened in so you had plenty of air movin through there. They'd stay right there and that's where they guarded them at.

They had in there and they boxed corn and stuff and periodically the guards would say one of them would ask 'Could you find out if my family's still alive in Germany 'cause I haven't seen em since I was taken prisoner or before that, even. You know, they were guys who wanted to go home.

But that was the only time they were here. That was late 44 or early 45. They were only here one year that I remember.

HOW LONG DID THE PLANT LAST?

We moved to Vinton when i was in second grade and we were over there for two years. The factory closed shortly after dad left. Hagan closed it. By 1950 it ws being tore down. It was early in the 50s it was torn completely down. It was a pretty good complex. I mean, it covered...if we drive over there, I can show you where it started and ended and I can show you where the old turntable was and everything.

But it was gone by the 50s, '47 I don't think it was operating, after dad left. I think it might have operated one year after he left but after that it was shuttin down.

THERE WERE A NUMBER OF PLANTS AROUND IN NEIGHBORING TOWN. WERE THEY AS BIG AS THIS ONE?

The one in Gilman was about half the size of this one. The one in Toledo was about the same size as the one in Gilman. The one in LaPorte City was a little bit bigger. The one in Vinton was probably about the size of Grinnell's. That's the last ones I was in.

IT WAS ALL SWEET CORN AND THEY PUT DIFFERENT LABELS ON THE CANS?

It was all sweet corn. It was a big business at that time, sweet corn. It was amazing. They must have sold a lot of it around the country because all those factories was busier than heck. Cream style corn and whole kernel corn was the two that they did. Now the one in Vinton, they had peas. And they had asparagus 'cause I remember going out, having to pick some asparagus with the old man one time when he was out checkin a field. They had peas and asparagus at the Vinton plant.

THE POWER PLANT RAN ON COAL AND THERE'S A DRAINAGE DITCH COMING OUT OF THE PLANT.

Yep, a little drainage ditch that ran between the plant, drained out into the railroad tracks. Wasn't a lot of water but the ditch run maybe half full when the plant was in operation.

AND THIS POWER PLANT ONLY SERVED THE FACTORY. HOW MANY OTHERS WERE IN TOWN?

The only other power plant was the ISU that was down here by the old Elks' club, huge ISU plant set there. Had all the great big old deals that looked like Frankenstein's, you know, like those great big towers and wires going in every direction, like big spark plugs. Ran the whole downtown area, I think.

HOW CLOSE WAS THE WATER TOWER TO THE PLANT?

Just three tracks across, maybe hundred feet. That was a busy era for the railroads, they were just huge there. They had that big depot, I can show you where it sat, the M & St. L. And you know, on 146, West

Street, where you go across the tracks, right there where that laundromat's now...that used to be a stockyard. Stockyard run clear on down there, over a block or better and they had cattle and hogs, you name it and they loaded them in and out of the boxcars going here and there and they even shipped some in to farmers who bought cattle. I remember when that burnt. They had cows and hogs runnin all over on fire...

And right across from that stockyard, there was a great big huge terminal there with a great big dock where they unloaded machinery and all kinds of stuff.

THE STOCKYARD WAS PRETTY FRAGRANT...

Sure but people didn't care. It was a farm oriented community, much more so than it is now. The stockyard used to be out here where Theisens is at., in between there and HYVee. used to be a huge sale barn there and a place where the farmers met and drank their coffee and ate lunch and had their sales and everything there for years.

IN THE HUSKING AND TRIMMING ROOM AT THE PLANT THERE WAS A CAFE?

My mother run it. That was her little pride and joy, her and a couple other gals that she hired. They would take turns. They would have coffee in the morning and breaktime, usually 9, 10 o'clock they'd have a little break for the women and they'd have coffee and then at noon, she'd have sandwiches...whatever they ate back in them days. And at suppertime they'd have sandwiches and food again for 'em. And they worked til 9 o'clock in the evening til they shut down.

They'd start about 7, 8 o'clock in the morning and soon as the farmers got enough corn in there to start her up, it'd take a few loads to get it started, once they got enough corn coming, and they could keep up, why then...

They'd haul corn up and down them streets and us kids would run out and get on the back of the wagons, try to throw some of them roasting ears off, til the parents got after us or my dad got after us.

YOU SAID YOUR MOTHER RAN AN ICE PLANT?

Well, yeah, right there where...sits in there right across from McDonalds...the old grocery store is still there, the old front and everything...it was an insurance company for a little bit, had insurance offices in it. But that was a little grocery store for four or five years and my mom and brother and another woman that she knew run it. We had a big ice house there and sold ice everywhere in town. Somebody'd come in and they'd say how many pounds and they go out there and chop so many pounds and haul er out in big chunks. They'd come pick it up or my brother'd haul it to them in a truck. That lasted four or five years. That was about '52 to '56. Then they sold it and Gerry BiLow came in and he built that where that parts store is now, used to be Gerry's BiLow. It was a bigger grocery store than what that building is there now. That was there into the 70s before Gerry sold it out.

WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THE NEWSPAPERS IN TOWN?

The only thing I really remember about the newspaper is when the old man was pulling taffy for my mother and it wouldn't set up. He got mad and went outside...I'll show you the house we lived in, it's still there. There was a great big huge tree out in front and he went runnin out on the porch and and fired that taffy up in the tree. It was still oozin' and it got down so far and it froze. and somebody, one of the neighbors, I think Vic Bolstag across the street, went down and told somebody on the newspaper and they come down took a picture, had a big article in the paper, Percy Ellis Throws His Taffy in the Tree. He didn't like that too much. He went up there and told him what he thought of that deal.

The neighbors back then, the neighbors, you didn't have any TV, you didn't have that tkind of stuff, so all the kids, we had a ton of kids in the neighborhood...probably 35 or 40 kids would get together and we'd play kick the can and hide and seek...neighbors would sit on the corner between the two or three houses, sit and talk, drink a little bit

of beer, whatever they had to drink...pop or whatever. Wasn't too much of that stuff available because you had these food stamps, ration stamps. You couldn't buy too much or do too much. So homemade lemonade was a big deal. They'd sit there, watch us kids play, if we got into a fight they'd come break it up, you know. There was days, you never would forget em, it was a lotta fun.

That was back when kids learned to do stuff on their own. The parents were out working during the day, didn't have time to watch us. You better do what you were told to do because back then, if they found out about it...you know I never got beat by my dad to the point where it hurt. It more embarrassed me more than it hurt me. I don't think I can remember more than two or three good spankin's all the time he was around. But you respected...if he said to do something, you did it or you were going to get one of those spankins.

WERE THERE CONCERTS IN THE PARK? WAS THAT GAZEBO THERE THEN?

No the gazebo wasn't there but they had a great big...right there on the corner, Park Street, from the corner come back about a hundred feet, two hundred feet...there was a big bandshell there. A big huge deal there. Under the stage they had dressing rooms. They had I don't know how many seats, they had kind of like an amphitheatre, and they had seats in there and beyond that they had a softball diamond where they played the big kittenball...they had bands, the high school band would go out there and play. The college did some band concerts there.

That was in the early 40s and it was still there in the 60s, maybe late 60s before they tore it out of there. And there was a lot of people who said it could have been fixed up, they didn't want it tore down. They tore it down anyway.

Let's go, I'll show you where some of that stuff was.

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