

Poweshiek History Preservation Project

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Frank Heath

Speaker: Marie Walker Eisenman

Date: September 9, 2013

Place: Grinnell, Iowa

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Persons present: Mari Duke-I
Marie Walker Eisenman-S

Duke: It's September 9th, 2013. I'm Mari Duke, the Interviewer, and I'm talking to Marie Walker Eisenman. Okay well, the main thing I wanted to talk to you about, Marie, was your involvement with city government. And I thought, maybe what we would start talking about was what kind of civic involvement you had before that, and how you came to be interested in serving on the city council.

Eisenman: Well, it was interesting, and that's an interesting way that you approach this. I was, I guess, my civic involvement would have been that I had been on the hospital board. And I'd been there, again the dates I don't know for sure, I know it's been, it was at least two terms. And then I was on the daycare center board, so, plus the fact that I worked at Ramsey-Weeks and so I was known through that, and then my, my – with the College, being the wife of a Professor and administrator probably made my name familiar to people. I found it interesting that I had this opportunity and I never would of just gone out and said, "oh yes, I want to be on the city council," but, I was approached one day by Dave McConnell, and Dave McConnell was the mayor. Well, he was a council person, and he was going to be the mayor, and he needed to have his seat...

Duke: Oh you filled his seat when he moved up to mayor, okay.

Eisenman: Yes. So he came to me, and I, so I thought that was a really interesting idea, and I, and the fact that I was newly single, I was in the business world, and it really - it was interesting to me, and fortunately my bosses, Bill Weeks and Rick Ramsey said, "Oh yes. I think that probably wouldn't damage our business if you did that." I mean, that was their concern. Hadn't even occurred to me.

Duke: Well Rick had been on the council before.

Eisenman: Rick had been on the council. So then, Dave brought my name before the council as just an appointed person, but there were a couple of people on the council that knew about this, and so they decided they wanted to put their own candidate forward, which they did. And that was Eleanor Walsney and so if you remember, Mari, I came to you. [laughs] and said I need a campaign manager, and we really didn't have to do a whole lot, but we did put some notices out and ...

Duke: I think we mostly called our friends.

Eisenman: We called our friends

Duke: Told them to call their friends.

Eisenman: And lo and behold, I won that seat, which was really nice. So that was a learning experience and Dave was just really great help, and...

Duke: Like a mentor, kind of?

Eisenman: Well, just, yeah. Oh I knew I could always go to him, but also Ted Clausen was the city manager, very helpful, everybody was. There was a, as you probably remember, a very conservative wing of the city council in those days and so it was always an uphill battle whenever there was anything proposed that was gonna require some extra money or, there were a lot of challenges. But...

Duke: Well, can I interrupt you? – Did the people who had supported Eleanor Wasley, were they difficult,

Eisenman: Yes.

Duke: ...or did they accept you?

Eisenman: They were probably as gracious as, under the – I think they would have preferred their own candidate because then they could have swayed her into their own vote. And there were a lot of votes in those days in which it was very lopsided, you know. So it, so it would have been helpful if they'd had their own candidate. So then when my term was up, which was a fill-in term, then I went once again, to be elected for the next full term,

Duke: Okay.

Eisenman: ...and that, I was – by that time I was beginning to, you know, I really understood the mechanism of city government and was enjoying it. I was on all the various committees.

Duke: What committees?

Eisenman: Well, I'm trying to remember. The finance committee was the most interesting, of course, because we were the budget.

Duke: That's where the power is.

Eisenman: Yep. And we set the salaries and set the budget, but – oh, I'm sure I probably was on.... I can remember touring the sewer plant and the water plant and, you know. I can't remember whether I was on Streets. I just don't remember. It doesn't ring a...it isn't clear to me.

Duke: So how many, how many terms did you serve?

Eisenman: Well, just one and a half.

Duke: One and half, okay.

Eisenman: And then the second term, I married Al Eisenman in 1989, March of 1989, and I served through that summer and fall until we went to Arizona, and it seems to me at that time that I resigned because I felt I wasn't going to be a good councilmember. And I'm – in my mind, maybe, I was gonna say, Eliva Wright (sp?) but no, that doesn't seem right either. I'm not sure who took my place at that point. I was on with Peggy Pinder. She came on while I was on, and we worked very well together. That was a good...and Montie Redenius was on with me.

Duke: Okay.

Eisenman: So, yeah, it, it was, it was a good experience and actually if I hadn't married Al I would have continued on with it. I thought it was a really, really really worthwhile. And it was sort of down my alley, where there were decisions to be, having to be made and I kind of liked those kind of involvements.

Duke: Right, Right. I know Al had been on the council. Was he on the council when you were?

Eisenman: No.

Duke: No, that was before.

Eisenman: That was quite a while before, I think, but I don't remember those dates.

Duke: No, it doesn't matter. What were some of the big issues that you were involved, that were confronting the city at that time. We didn't talk about what time it was. Was it like the '80s.

Eisenman: It was either...I think it was, it probably was the, like the, well, wouldn't the mayors election have been in '84,

Duke: So in the '80s.

Eisenman: So, yeah, it was through the '80s, probably, probably about; '84 to '90.

Duke: Okay and then you were married in '90?

Eisenman: '89.

Duke: You were married in '89. Okay, it was during the '80s.

Eisenman: Well, Wal-Mart was a big deal.

Duke: People were resisting it being built?

Eisenman: The first Wal-Mart, and yes because at that time, what was it? Pamida?

Duke: Oh yeah, there was a Pamida.

Eisenman: Pamida was out on the west side, and it seems to me there was another sort of discount store across from McNally's.

Duke: Wasn't there a C-mart or something like that.

Eisenman: I just don't remember the name, yeah. And uh...

Duke: Down, where them by the college, where the community college is now. I think there was....

Eisenman: Yes, exactly. Well, yes. That's yeah, the name of that escapes me, that wasn't Pamida, then...

Duke: I thought it was C-Mart.

Eisenman: Well maybe.

Duke: Doesn't that sound right. Or P-mart or K-mart.

Eisenman: Well, I don't think it was K-mart.

Duke: No, it wasn't K-mart.

Eisenman: But anyway, those entities, and rightly so! Historically Wal-mart does that, to take care of businesses and, and the city was cooperating with Wal-Mart because we felt you just couldn't shut somebody out. And so that was, that was a hard.

Duke: There was a...Are you saying there was a group of people that were kind of agitating?

Eisenman: Business people. I don't think, I...no. And the other, the other issue that I remember was the storm sewers.

Duke: But just second, I want to stay on Wal-Mart for a second. So when you say businesspeople, do you mean local businesspeople, or do you mean these other, these other discount stores?

Eisenman: The other discount.

Duke: And not necessarily the local ones.

Eisenman: No, I don't remember. There must have been discussion, but I don't recall it being a...

Duke: Okay.

Eisenman: I don't recall it being really huge.

Duke: Okay. The other thing I remember about the '80s was a lot of the stores and, separate from the Wal-mart issue, but a lot of stores were closing downtown. Wasn't that the time when the farms, you know, when the farm crisis.

Eisenman: Well it was, in the early '80s. That was also the time that we were having the downtown business fronts, what was that called?

Duke: Oh, Main Street.

Eisenman: Main Street. We did a lot with the Main Street. And we were also dealing with the lighting downtown. Because we did a, we did a trip on, I think it was a private plane from GTE that flew us to Duluth. And we got to look at the lighting in the cold, cold, cold night.

Duke: But that was the purpose of the trip, was to look at the lighting

Eisenman: To look at the lights.

Duke: That's interesting.

Eisenman: And I've been so pleased with the lights that came up now because at that time, some of these council people were just, they couldn't envision anything, quite anything attractive like that, it had to be very functional, and they weren't at all sure that it was going to give enough light.

Duke: Did we end up with lights like in Duluth?

Eisenman: Yes, yep, no. We did, probably even better. With the new streets and...yeah. But the other problem that comes... that I just remember from a personal standpoint was the storm sewer situation.

Duke: Okay, what was that?

Eisenman: Because we had a huge, huge, huge, huge rain. And 10th Avenue historically, has always, has been a street where the storm sewer just was not taking enough of the water away, and so there was a lot of flooding, street flooding,

Duke: Street flooding or house flooding?

Eisenman: And then house flooding.

Duke: Both of them, Okay.

Eisenman: And at that time, the house on the corner of Ann and 7th Avenue, Bob Halden's house and he was, Bob Halden was the head of the utility company.

Duke: Yeah, I remember his wife, Linda.

Eisenman: Linda. Oh, Bob Halden called me and said, and this was about 8:30 at night one night, and said, "I want you to come and look at my basement." And I said, "Well, I know we've had, you know, we know that it's serious up in there, on that street. I know it's serious," I said. He said, "No, you need to come." So I said, "okay." And they had water in their basement. I had to sit on about the third step from the top, and everything was swimming in their basement, and that was where they had their master bedroom, and the king size bed, and all of their, yeah.

Duke: Oh Gee.

Eisenman: And, so, he was very unhappy of course. He should be. I wonder how many people this spring called their city councilperson. But we were working on that. I mean it was, I don't remember what the, if there was ever a solution made. I remember cameras down in there trying to figure it out. And, you know, cameras getting down in there.

Mari: yeah, Yeah, I know what you mean. But you don't know how it was resolved, like, did they, taken it out to another creek or something.

Eisenman: There were things that were attempted, but I don't think it's totally....Grinnell tends to carry water from the northeast to the southwest.

Mari: Right. And as you remarked, we had a similar event this spring where a lot of people had water in their basements.

Eisenman: And I don't, you know. Ted Claussen, I'm sure somebody will....

Duke: I'm getting...to interview, I hope.

Eisenman: It will be really good. Really, really good.

Mari: He knows where everything is buried doesn't he.

Eisenman: Yeah. He was, you know, he did, an awful lot for the city because he was, he was himself an engineer.

Duke: Right.

Eisenman: And, so he was really the brains behind, behind the council. You really need that.

Duke: You took a lot of guidance from him and...

Eisenman: Oh sure.

Duke: Yeah.

Eisenman: Oh Sure.

Duke: Because of his background, and training.

Eisenman: And because he'd been, he was in Grinnell for many, many years, and he was very, very smart and knowledgeable, and he worked well, he worked well with other engineers and, and so that when he had to bring in outside people, he knew the language.

Duke: That matters a lot....

Duke: Those sorts of thing...

Eisenman: That is the one that somebody.....

Eisenman; And don't know whether every city council person is that well equipped but he certainly was.

Duke: And then Dave McConnell was the mayor that whole time?

Eisenman: Well, no. Dave. Well, that's what I'm trying to remember because, it... wasn't there somebody between he and Gordon Canfield.

Duke: Yeah, Bob Anderson, for sure.

Eisenman: Yes, of course, [laughter] of course. Bob was on the council when I ...he was mayor when I was on the council. So that's right.

Duke: Bob Anderson was mayor when...after. Did he defeat...McConnell.

Eisenman: McConnell left.

Duke: McConnell left and then there was just another election. Okay.

Eisenman: Yeah. And I worked a lot with Bob Anderson because at that time I was on the, on the finance and budget.

Duke: Uh Huh.

Eisenman: And so I...yeah, I worked a lot with him. And he, he relied on me a lot at that time for...because he was new.

Duke: Uh, huh. Sure.

Eisenman: Yeah. I even raised his salary for which he was always grateful. [laughs] I think it went from like \$3,500 a year to \$5,000. I don't know.

Duke: How about your salary? What about you what kind of salary did you get?

Eisenman: \$100 a month. It wasn't for the money, that's for sure.

Duke: No, you didn't do it for the money. Did it, was it financially a burden for you? Did it take away from your job.

Eisenman: Uh Uh.

Duke: No?

Eisenman: No. No I think it helped it in that I just became more astute, I just knew more about...

Duke: You just knew what was going on.

Eisenman:...about the city. And. No, I don't think it...

Duke: Was there ever...?

Eisenman: I suppose there would be a time when somebody said, "Oh, I don't want to work with her because of what she said at the council meeting" or something. But I don't, if it happened, I didn't know about it.

Duke: And did you feel any conflict between your job and the city.

Eisenman: No. [pause] No. It was a good experience. I can...In those days, I could see myself running for Mayor someday, you know, if I'd stayed single. You don't know what I would of...what could have happened.

Duke: So leaving was a little bittersweet, huh?

Eisenman: Yeah. Yeah, very nice experience.

Duke: You were getting into it. So because...

Eisenman: People shouldn't shy away from it. That's for sure.

Duke: Right. Because of your experience, have you followed the issues in town more closely?

Eisenman: Oh yeah, well, if I were here all the time, it would certainly be more.

Duke: Uh huh. But since you're gone...

Eisenman: But since I'm gone half the year, I'm interested, but cert...but some...I think, I think we have good government, good city government. I think Russ Behrens is a good city manager. I think Gordon is extra good at being mayor.

Duke: He seems to enjoy it. Doesn't he?

Eisenman: He represents the city really well, and he puts in a lot of extra time on it. Now that's the city office that is perfect for a retired person.

Duke: Right.

Eisenman: 'Cause that does take a lot of time.

Duke: And we've been fortunate in having mayors that have stayed around for a long time. I mean, Dave McConnell wasn't there long, but I remember Floyd Beaver and then Bob Anderson was mayor for a long time. And then Gordon.

Eisenman: That's right. No, I think, and I think the make-up of the council right now is really good. I don't...I sometimes check it on channel 12 and listen to it, maybe, but I don't hear it, but I don't know that it is as contentious as it was.

Duke: Well...You would...this is what I've noticed about the city council meetings now. Because, um, because they are on the television, I don't think the contention...

Eisenman: Yeah.

Duke:... and the arguments go on in front of the TV like they used to go on. I think

Eisenman: Could be.

Duke: I'm wondering if that doesn't come out more in the committee meetings, and less...

Eisenman: That's certainly possible. Yeah

Duke: Because committee meetings. I mean, they're open, but they're not televised. Well what would you...

Eisenman: Good Point.

Duke: What do you think people would think if, if some of the meetings you were in in the '80s were televised?

Eisenman: Oh, I think it would be very interesting. [Duke laughs] Like, one time, one remember...one time I remember when there was a vote and this one person leaned down the council table and said, "I think we could support that, don't you?" So and so and so and so. And,

yeah. It's sort of like one person is guiding the...I would think that would raise some eyebrows, if people were attentive.

Duke: If people saw that on television, on TV. Yeah.

Eisenman: It's sort of like...I've got to pull my...I've got to pull my support here behind me one way or another.

Duke: Do you think that, in general, the people on the council got along with each other pretty well and were respectful...you're shaking your head.

Eisenman: I think it was... managed...but at times contentious. And I don't think that Dave McConnell was really liked by one...one part of the council. So, you know, it was kind of like Obama today, you know. If he says yes some...there's a faction's gonna, there's a faction that's gonna say no. He was really...which probably made a difference because, at that time, a committee guy from the college was suspect, I think, more so than they would be now.

Duke: There was more of a town/gown—

Eisenman: I think that's probably...

Duke: What do you think about the way they treated people that came before them? Were they respectful of them, or...?

Eisenman: Well, I think the council, I think, started to shift a little bit about the time that I came on, that they were beginning to feel that they were not going to call the shots on all issues. So that caused friction, whereas, you know, I kept trying....I can't even remember...McConnell was on the council then, so he...see, Jim White?...Jim White came on, I think, about the time I did, so it was moving, it was moving towards a more progressive...

Duke: There was a turnover,

Eisenman: There was...yeah

Duke: And some of it, and there hadn't been a lot of turnover.

Eisenman: Jim would be a good one to interview. Maybe you will.

Duke: I yeah, I should do that.

Eisenman: Because he's been on...

Duke: He'd be a different, different time. Yeah, Yeah. [pause] Is there anything else in particular you want to make sure people know about from that time?

Eisenman: I don't think so. I can't remember anything... You know, the wheels of government run very slowly sometimes. So, yeah, I don't recall. And somebody else may recall some issues that I didn't. If they mentioned it, I'd say, "Oh yeah, I do remember that," but right now, I...

Duke: Well, if you think of anything that you wish you'd said, give me a call.

Eisenman: I will.

Duke: And I'll stick it in. Okay.