Interviewee: Leo "Slim" Flanagan

Interviewer: Jim George

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Transcriber: Jennifer Wolfson

Leo "Slim" Flanagan
Side One

Jim George [JG]**:** This is Jim George, today is February 14, 1992. I will be talking with Leo "Slim" Flanagan for the oral history project of the Friends of Stewart Library. The project is Grinnell Voices From the Past. The subject is the Depression and World War II.

JG**:** Slim, to open this up, we'll turn the clock back to 1929. How old were you then?

Leo "Slim" Flanagan [SF]**:** I was twenty-one. And in 1930, I went to work on Fifth Avenue at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Main Street in a station that was known as the Independent Oil and Gas Company. Porter Winters was the operator. Later in the year we were merged with the Phillips Petroleum Company and we became Phillips Oil Company. I think it was probably in August because along in early October I remember a big long car drove in one day and asked me to service it. And two men got out and went in. One was a short fella with wire rim glasses and the proverbial blue suit, and the other one was a tall guy with engineer boots and a plaid shirt and ten gallon hat. And it turned out to be the Phillips brothers, the founders of Phillips Petroleum, and I got to shake hands with both of them.

JG: That's great!

SF**:** That was kind of the highlight of my year at Phillips Petroleum. One other thing that was both kind of wild and funny. One day the fire whistle blew–this was probably in August–the fire whistle blew and Harry Case was coming north. I stepped out to the sidewalk to see where they were going and Harry was driving the truck all by himself and headed north on Main Street. And about the same time old Alec Barr was in town with his car always pulling an old wagon behind. And of course he couldn't hear anything. He didn't hear the sirens so he just drove right across Main Street dragging this wagon along about ten miles an hour and Harry was doing all, everything he could to dodge him. Well finally Harry hit the wagon–didn't hurt the truck much–he got stopped. He was up in our–within ten feet of our pumps, up in our parking. And I had many, many words for Alec Barr. He backed out of there and went on to the fire but it was it was kind of a funny happening. Then in September, in August, in late October, the man across the street, Mr. Ping, who had come up from Muscatine and built a big service station on the south side of Fifth Avenue, he come over and tried to hire me, offering me about thirty-five dollars a month more than I was getting, which was no small figure in those days. And well they were all small figures, but thirty-five was was big money.

JG**:** Now was that, was that '30, in the fall of when?

SF: That was in the fall of ’30. Now I was getting ninety dollars a month from Phillips and I had had three raises. I had had a ten dollar raise every month the first three months I was there, providing I stayed a year. So, when Mr. Ping tried to hire me at that figure I told him that I couldn’t go till the first of March. So that was all right, so I moved across the street in 1931 to the Ping Oil Company.

JG: Now where, what location is that now?

SF: All right, that is right beside–it’s right across the street from the Grinnell Herald Register office. And my time there– Little did I know that I was going to spend fifteen years there before I left. But I enjoyed practically all of it. I did love it. I love people and I love to wait on them. And we had some queer experiences there. I always remember, the Grinnell telephone office was where Vogel and Tomasek’s office presently is. Of course it’s empty, but that’s where the office was. And I remember one day two girls come out of there, the employees, and had a right good fight out there on the street, over a man I suppose, I don’t know what else. I had no idea who they were or anything else but I got to enjoy the hustle, the tussle.

JG: [laughs]

SF: Anyway, we went on, and we had lots of experiences in the station there. I later leased the place from Mr. Ping, and things got so bad in the Depression that I got my first experience of going broke. And so I went to work for Ben Tarleton, which took us off of Fifth Avenue down to Fourth. I was there only about six months and the Depression got so bad he was going to lay me off and didn’t want to. And so he went up and leased this station which was empty at that time, the same one I’d been in, but with a different oil company. It was then with City Service. He asked me if I would be willing to go up there on halves, my time against his money. And I said it’s better than not working, so I went up there. Jobs were very scarce in those days. I went to work for Ben in this station on the 21st of December of 1932.

JG: Can I interrupt Slim, because I might forget this question. I was curious about– What was the price of gas in those times?

SF: Well, with City Service–it was new in Grinnell–I sold the first five gallons of gas on the evening of of December 21st to a man by the name of Clum Van Treese, who everybody knew back in those days (been dead many many years). And for five gallons–was ninety-three cents for five gallons. Later on, City Service came out the following summer with a– They called it a gasoline that was competitive, and it was a green colored gasoline. We had those little ten gallon visible pumps that you had to pump up by hand, you know, and when we introduced that we sold eight gallons for a dollar. Which was pretty cheap for gasoline. We later took on tires there. We took on Firestone Tires, as the dealer, and in fact we were the distributor for Poweshiek County. Which turned out to be very, very successful.

JG: OK, now do you want to–I interrupted you–do you want to go back to the deal you had with Tarleton in the station?

SF: Yeah, well, this was still, this was still the same place and we were still fifty-fifty. He was the Goodyear dealer and when I asked him if we could get Firestone there he said no. He said, "We got Goodyear. We don't need anything else." And I said, "Well, this is a chance for you to control Firestone. It's going to be in town somewhere and you can either control it partially or not have any control whatsoever." And he said, "Well when you put it that way let's take them on." And we did have success and at that time we didn't have the agency too long until tractor tires became very popular and we changed–I think the first year we handled them I believe we changed ninety-three tractors from steel to rubber. Which was pretty good business and lots of work. Well that was the beginning of the tire business for us and it went on and on and on. Finally they wanted us to build a store in town and we refused to do that so we lost the agency then but I was ready to leave anyhow. I wanted to get up on the highway. I had a chance to go up on the highway and I took it. All those years that I was on Fifth Avenue I did enjoy it immensely. And one thing I remember so plainly was I was sweeping the drive one morning and a car pulled up and parked right along our–on the curb right along our parking–and the man got out of the car, come over on the parking and turned around and faced north. And I just stand there looking at him. And pretty soon he turned around and saw me and he come over and said, "My name is Watt, what's yours?" So I told him and that was the beginning of quite a friendship with L. B.Watt, who came to purchase the newspaper and did purchase it. And we became good friends thereafter.

JG: Well Slim, one question that comes to my mind because I had some experience with it: how did gas rationing affect your business and what stories do you have about that?

SF: Well, gas rationing, and and tire rationing. Everything that we had to sell was rationed. And the two boys that worked for me–one was my brother and the other one was Lincoln. I can't think of his first name right now. Anyhow–[in background: "Roger"] Roger Lincoln–they both went to service, were drafted into service, and I was left alone. So I run the thing. And we finally got so we'd close every evening at six o'clock, because you couldn't stay there all the time. And business wasn't bad; it was terrible. Well, one time I was– We still had Firestone at that time– We were, I was in Des Moines at the Firestone office and the president called me in and said, "There's a new book out, ration book out." They put one out about every four or five days. And he said, "There's one here that you can go back and get every one of the machines that works on the road in Poweshiek County and replace all the tires, if you want to right now." And he said, "Here's the phrase that says, if it would cause inordinate delay to recap these tires, then they can buy the tires, new tires." So I went back and we put new tires on every maintainer in Poweshiek County, great big fellows, and they, when I– The trustees were so pleased that I had that offer that everything was fine until it came time to pay, and the bill was so big that they said if they ever put that through to one person at one time, they'd all get fired. So [laughs], I was kind of holding the bag there. We, I had to bill it at around seven hundred dollars a month till we got it all worked out, which took longer than a year. And they rewarded me the interest that it cost us, so, all came out all right. And they held their job, and we had every machine in very good shape in this county. And when I got those permits– The man in charge here at the local ration board had to give me these permits, these certificates for tires. Well, I got them, and as soon as I got them I didn't go back to the station, because I somehow or other I felt like they might want to recall them or something. So I said– I went down to the hotel and I wrote, put them in an envelope, and put them on the train, on the three o'clock train and mailed them right down there.

Came back, the boys at the station that were still there said, "Ration board's been calling here every five minutes for the last hour and a half." I said, "Well I know what they want, I'll call him." So I called him and he said, "I want those certificates back." And I said, "I'm sorry mister, but they're on the train headed for Akron right now." And he said "Well, you're going to be in jail and so am I." And I said, "No I don't think so," I says, "You're worrying needlessly. I was assured by a man who knew them in Des Moines that this was legal." And I says, "I saw, I read it myself and I know it's legal." So anyhow, I had a few worried days there, but we all come out well, and finally he come over and said he liked me, but that was– I didn't think he ever would. [laughs] That was the end of the rationing there.

JG: Well, Slim, could I interject and ask how many gallons of gas just a private citizen could get in a certain period of time, and how about tires, too.

SF: Well, you had to be– If you were a doctor, you could buy tires easy enough. If you were a farmer you could buy tires. You couldn't buy passenger tires. You could buy all the truck tires, tractor tires and truck tires you wanted. But the rationing of gas, it seems to me like you were awarded about a coupon for about four gallon a week, it seems to me. I really don't remember down to the– Now I was fortunate. We had, we got along very well with gasoline. We never had any problem with coupons or anything else. And the only thing was we just didn't make any money. It was just one of those things that living was pretty tight in those days. But after the war was over and we got, we were up on the highway, we took over a station that was only running 4,000 gallon a month. And our first month there we did 8,000 gallon the first month and we went, kept on going. And after we were there two years we were, had it up to 20,000 gallon. So we were very–that was the best oil or gas business I had ever experienced.

JG: Where was this station located?

SF: This was on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Main Street. The southwest corner of the intersection there, right straight across the street from the big Spaulding house, the beautiful Spaulding house. And that is so beautiful. I had lots a time to look at that, and I tell you that is a pretty house.

JG: Yeah, and who lives in that now?

SF: I believe–

JG: Is that Betty Hammond?

SF: Yes, Betty Hammond, Betty Hammond owns that. That's right. And at the time that I was there, the people that lived there were people that run, had the hatchery.

JG: Ah, Rudkin.

SF: Rudkin. Elvin Rudkin and his wife. And they were awfully nice people. Used to go for walks in the evening in the summer time and come over to the station and visit for ten or fifteen minutes. Very nice people. That was a wonderful place. At that time, this might be of interest to

the city of Grinnell, too, the council decided to widen the streets in this town, and they tore out lots and lots of trees which made many many people pretty mad. And they were a big concern from Des Moines, and their names were Gilloti.

JG: Gilloti?

SF: Gilloti. And, we had a big lot there that reached clear to the alley on the west side of our station and they spotted that. So they came in and they said if they could use that to store their machinery, why they'd buy everything in petrol from us. So it worked out very good for us and we got to know them all very well. And they were Italians. And one of them was a lawyer and the other one was a man of this kind of work. But the lawyer of course did the business, I suppose. But I got to know them all very well. They were real nice people; they were here over a year. But I know they took trees down all over town; that really irritated lots of people.

JG: So, some things never change.

SF: Some things never change. There's something to irritate you every once in a while.

JG: How long were you at that location?

SF: I was there fifteen years. I had been six– One year over at the Phillips station and sixteen, fifteen years at the Ping place, and six years up on Highway Six and Main Street. So I came to town. The real way I got into the oil business in the beginning was Les Mehlin was a good friend of ours and he was working in this station. He had formerly run the tank wagon and service to us down on the farm when I was still on the farm and helping my dad. And we were in there one day in February–got some gas–and Les said he'd told him he'd promised to stay till the first of April. But he wanted to get– He was going out to a farm to start farming, and he wanted to get out of there by the first of March if he could find somebody to work for him. So he says, "Why don't you do it?" And I said, "I know nothing about it." My dad said, "Oh, he can do that." And he said, "I don't need him out there because the other two boys are there and big enough to work. But," he said, "they don't have to when he's there. So," he said, "we'll get along." So that was the way I got in the oil business for twenty-one years, by helping a guy out for thirty-one days. And I liked it, and I loved it very much.

JG: And where did you go from the oil business?

SF: I retired–didn't retire, but I was physically kind of in bad shape and I didn't do anything for about four months. Then I started selling insulation to– We were insulating farm houses, well, and town houses too. And I sold insulation for a while and they took me off of that and took us into Waterloo and taught us how to go out and determine, make dealers. So they gave me a territory from Marshall County, two counties wide from Marshall County to the Missouri line. And, I didn't– I enjoyed the work, but I didn't like being away from the family, I just couldn't stand it. And so I had a chance to go to work for Herbert Yeisley in the Chrysler dealership and I was with him for two years. And then he sold it to Mr. Eisenman And Mr. Eisenman took me right along as if I was one of the pieces of machinery of it and I enjoyed my eighteen years with him immensely.

JG: Now where, turning back to the Yeisley connection, where was that garage located?

SF: That was on Main Street and it's where Jack Bierman's office is today.

JG: Right down in the middle of things.

SF: Right down in the middle of town. And we, I believe in 1960, Mr Eisenman bought what was the old sale barn over on West Street and built the new garage which is now the Ford garage. But we were there till I retired at the end of 1972 I was going to be sixty-five the following month. So I retired. And I enjoyed my relations with Mr. Eisenman and everybody who worked there. We had a great great bunch. I remember the proof of the pudding was the day we moved into that new building. It was the 13th of September 1960, Sunday. And every man of them, to the very last one was there at eight o'clock and worked till dark, getting moved over to the new building and having fun while they're doing it. We were, we were a great bunch. And ah, my days there were wonderful. I loved the automobile business. I didn't think I, didn't think I would like it, but I sure did.

JG: You were primarily in sales, weren't you?

SF: Yes, I was in sales and I was always– He determined me as his assistant manager, I was to take over when he was gone and he made provisions to do anything he could do at the bank.

JG: Can you tell me of some of the relationships you developed with customers and how it was handed down maybe from one generation to another?

SF: Oh yeah, we had, you had that with well, practically everybody. We hoped everyone was a repeat business, and frankly, most of them were. We had one family down in Brooklyn. It was a family of– They had sixteen children, John and Mary Kriegel. And we sold them New Yorkers. John and Mary always bought a New Yorker. I think we sold them three in those eighteen years I was with Mr. Eisenman. Either three or four New Yorkers. And all of their kids bought cars. After I'd retired I got to thinking about it. I wondered how many cars in those eighteen years that I'd sold to Kriegels. So I went down and we always had a card for every car. White one was a new one and a yellow one was a used one. I went through all those, it took me about seven hours, I guess, and I found out that I'd sold the Kriegels ninety-eight cars. [laughs]

JG: I'll be darned. That's really something. Why don't we visit a little bit more on the personal level about how things were in this, in these particularly tough times. You indicated that you were raised on a farm. Why don't you tell me the name of your parents and where your farm is located and so forth.

SF: Well, I was son of of Mr. and Mrs. O. J. Flanagan and our farm where we–was just east of Grinnell Reinsurance Building, across the railroad track [where] it turned south and the first house was where we lived. And I stayed there most of the time. The first year I was in town I stayed at home and drove in all the time. Then the winter of '32 the weather was awfully bad. And Johnny Smiths and I rented a room together. He was working for Link Thompson's grocery. He was in charge of the fruit department, fruit and vegetables. And we had roomed together for

about three or four of the bad months of the winter there. And he later became a Catholic priest. But we enjoyed our living in town. It was our first experience for both of us. In 1934 I was married to Blanche Comerford on June the 12th. And we, our first home was on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Spring Street, southwest corner, which would be catty corner across the street from the parking lot of Fairway. We lived there about two years, maybe a little more than two years. Yeah, I guess it was just a little over two years. I came home one noon and our little one-year-old daughter– My wife said, "That little gal was out on Highway 6 while I was hanging out the wash." And she said "We've got to move from here." So we went out house hunting that very afternoon and rented a house up on Spencer Street and that was our dwelling till 1951.

JG: I see, and that's when you moved here?

SF: That's when we moved here, to 1528 Eighth Avenue, yes.

JG: OK. People probably wonder about, you know how, how we lived in those days. Out on the farm I'm sure that there's an obvious answer to this question. Did you have indoor plumbing?

SF: No, we did not. And we didn't have electricity. My folks didn't get electricity on the farm down there till I believe, 1939.

JG: How was your home heated, back in '29 when you were young?

SF: We had a big old range up in the kitchen. And–well it wasn't a potbellied stove, but it was similar to–in the living room and that was the source of heat. The rooms upstairs were mighty cold.

JG: Maybe you could tell me a little bit about your connection with St. Mary's. You've been a life long member of that church. Were you around when the church was built?

SF: Yes, yes.

JG: The current building?

SF: Yes, that was in, well it was dedicated in 1927. I think it was started perhaps in, maybe in '25, I'm not sure just when they did start it. There was a house there that the parish bought. Originally there was a house on that corner that they tore down, a great big house. And all, a lot of the men in the parish went in and tore this house down. I know my dad bought a lot of that lumber and himself built a hog house. He was quite a guy with wood. He could do anything with it. Built a–

Side Two

JG: [When was the dedication] of St. Mary's Church?

SF: Well, it took quite a little while. They used quite a lot of local man power. A lot of men went in and donated their time wherever they could do best. And then I remember that in February, I think it was the 27th of 1927, the church was dedicated. Not the 27th, the 24th. And the first people married in that church was Joe and Vera Hotchkin. They were married in that church before it was dedicated. And I remember the church overflowed with people the day of our dedication. We had them in the aisle and everywhere else. Several sisters had come from Clinton, the mother superior had come from Clinton, and they were all there for this dedication. We– I think that day I helped usher for the first time and I was a constant usherer I think for fifty-two more years before I stopped ushering. St. Mary's at the time of dedication was sixty families. I believe the count is 424 at the present time, which shows the tremendous rate of growth, and there are lots people there. That's about all I can think of that stands out on St. Mary's.

I would like to go back to rationing a little bit. I think we skipped over a little of the– People were not only rationed gasoline and all that sort of thing, but you had to have stamps to buy meat. You had to have stamps to buy sugar, and many more things, I just can't even– Those are the things I'm acquainted with. But farmers were a little different. They had their own meat and butchering and so it didn't bother them very much. And it's good they didn't because farmers worked awful hard and they needed good food or they couldn't produce. And they were called on to work during the war, you know. Everybody was so short of help, whether in town or whether out there in the country. I know after my brother left, he was farming with my dad. And after he went to service, and the other brother was married, I used to close the station at six o'clock and go down and run his tractor till midnight for him to get his crop in. And Mom would have me a sandwich or something or bring it out to me. And that helped them get their crop in. But, things are, well, things are different.

JG: Was that–could I interrupt here–was that a steel wheeled tractor or was it on rubber?

SF: No, that was steel wheeled. That was before tires.

JG: That's a little tougher on the back, too.

SF: Oh, yes, that's rough, that's rough. [JG laughs] Then, came the war days, and one day the manager of DeKalb came into the station and I said, "Sam," I said, "I would– I got an idea." I said, "I think a bunch of businessmen could go out and detassel for you." "Oh," he said, "I doubt it. You think they know how to do it?" And I said, "Sure they know how to do it." And I said, "Their heart's in it, too." "Well, all right," he said, "I'll give you thirteen acres out south of town to go out and try."

JG: What year was this?

SF: This was about '43, I believe. Because we did '43 and '44 both. Maybe it was '44 and '45. Anyhow, my dad had a big old truck and I went down and got that to haul these men out. And I went out around town and asked them who would like to do it. I think they were probably going to be paid about two dollars an hour [sic], but nobody cared whether they got paid or not. One Sunday, I took out fifty-eight businessmen and we detasseled, we wound up detasseling seventy-

four acres that nobody else had to touch. And it never got away from us, or anything else. That was one thing he said. He says, "You businessmen, I'm afraid you won't– It'll go over the hill, as they call it." The silk came out on the corn and the tassel came out and that pollinates the corn and if you didn't have that tassel off of there, you couldn't– Off of those certain rows and let the other two rows, the male rows we call them, they fertilize all the rest of the corn, but we had to get those tassels off of those other rows or we had a cross. And we never had a bit of trouble. We got it all off of there. We did two years, and everybody just loved it.

JG: I suppose it was a change of pace.

SF: The smallest crowd I ever took out there I think in one evening was twenty-eight men.

JG: Now, identify the man, the manager that you talked about. Stan was his first name?

SF: [chuckling] I'm trying to think.

JG**:** I see, OK.

SF: I can't remember his first name, Jorgenson, Stan Jorgenson was his name.

JG: OK.

SF: And he was the, he was actually the first manager of DeKalb corn when it come to town.

JG: Was hybrid corn fairly new at that time?

SF: Yes, it was totally new. When I was a kid at home we always went out in September, my dad and I, used to take a green sack over our shoulder and go out and pick out good ears. And those were the ears that were the seed for next year. That's how we used to get our seed. But it's here and the yield was so much greater and everything even though it cost more. Probably was the best thing for the nation and most all corn companies, whether it be DeKalb or any other one. I always favored DeKalb because of the closeness.

JG: What was the size of your family at home?

SF: There were four of us. I had my sister who was older than I, and then I had two younger brothers. And we were raised over northwest of Kellogg on an eighty that my dad had over there. And as the boys started to get bigger he thought we ought to get to a bigger farm. So he came down here in 1919 and bought that 160. I think he paid 270 dollars an acre for it, which doesn't seem like anything today, but in those days, it was mighty hard to pay for it. In fact, we always paid for it–he always paid for it with his cattle. Cows from the–cows we milk. And one year– He always vaccinated for black leg. One year the vaccination was no good and he lost the entire herd and we lost the farm. That was in 1934. [pauses] I couldn't help him or anything else.

JG: And then, did they have to move to town then, or–

SF: No, they rented another farm just south half a mile and lived there for a few years and then it was getting too tough for. them. Why, then he come to town, he bought a house up on the corner of– Well, let's see, it was out on Eleventh Avenue and it had several lots. Well he thought he wanted them, he thought he'd bring the tractor into town and put in a little corn there or something. Well, he didn't, and it wound up to be an awful good idea to have those lots because eventually they became valuable. But he worked around town with I think a fellow of the name of Will Hotchkins, also had a tractor, and he had more work than he could get done. So Dad would go and help him. But that was their time in town and my mom liked it very much. They had indoor plumbing. They never did have indoor plumbing down on the farm. They had electricity but that was it. This was different.

JG: What kind of a car did you drive when you were oh, a young man and also first married?

SF: My first car I, well I'll go back a little bit. My dad made me a deal, when I graduated from high school in 1926. He said he'd give me two female hogs, sows, and whatever they produced, that was my salary. We took them away from all the rest and put them out north of the house, in a little pasture out there and we had a shed for them and everything. Well, I was pretty lucky. Each one of those sows produced. One of them had fifteen and the other one had fourteen pigs that survived, so I had twenty-nine hogs to sell, eventually. And that was my– So after, when I sold my first bunch of hogs, well, maybe not the first, it was the second I guess, I went to town and Harley Birch sold me a 1928 Chevrolet, two door, and oh I was proud of that little car. And one day (it always set out, we didn't have a shed for it)– Well, I didn't know the nature of hogs as well as I should've for the years I'd been on the farm, But that particular night there was a bad storm coming up and it looked like it could be anything. In this hog house that I just mentioned a while ago I decided I'd go down and drive that car in the driveway of that hog house and get it in out of the weather, of the storm. Well, the storm came and went and I went down the next morning and hogs like something new. They had rubbed all the paint off of all the fenders that they could scratch on and they had beautiful oil cloth tire cover that they got a hold of and pulled off and tore all to pieces. And I didn't have very good thoughts for those hogs that morning. [JG laughs, SF laughs] It was my first car. Well, I got the fenders painted again and so I, so it was passable, and I traded– I think I traded off for a real sporty Chevrolet 1931, which was our car when we were married. And in the station, I had two boys working for me that were real handy. And one was Keith Goreham. The other one was Eli Hanna (everybody called him Ike). But those boys– I had a chance to start buying car radios. Nobody had radios in their cars in those days, nobody. Well, the first one that came, they put it in my car and I just loved it. And I said if they went to the bank, if I'd send one of the kids to the bank, they'd drive that car and turn that radio up and the windows down you know. We sold a lot of– I don't know how many but we did sell an awful lot of car radios. And those guys got so they could–you could bring any car in you wanted to and an hour later they had it installed and ready to go. They were good at it, very good.

JG: And you went to school here in Grinnell?

SF: Yes. Yes I did. My sister graduated in '24, so the two of us drove a team buggy into school every day for those two years. Well then we got so– Margaret Higdon also rode with us, and then at the end of 1924, my sister started teaching school so she wasn't going and Margaret Higdon

had changed schools and gone to Mount St. Clair, to school, high school, and I was alone. So I rode horseback awhile. Finally I got so, I'd help chore in the morning, the folks always milked ten, twelve cows and I'd go out and help milk and we'd get the milk to the separator and then I'd go out to the silo and throw down all the–that dad was going to need that day. Then I would head for the house and change clothes and clean up a bit, go out across the road to the railroad track and walk up the track to the Norris building, then a block up to the high school. And I did it in forty minutes, and I got so I hit every other tie, from out there, and it's, I suppose it would be four and a half miles anyway. Then in the evening, I had it real good. I'd ride the old Monte Branch, came down the main line of the M & St. L to half a mile north of our house where it turned and went down to Montezuma. The line went down through our field, cut off twenty two acres, I think. And I could ride that, well I don't remember, part of the time it was eleven cents, the highest it ever was was fourteen.

JG: To go to–

SF: To ride down there, yes.

JG: What– You'd go down to the depot then?

SF: I'd go down to the depot and get on that train and ride down there and, then only had a half mile to walk home.

JG: Now was the depot where it is now? Which would be just a little over a block from the school?

SF: Yeah, about two blocks from the school, yeah.

JG: Two blocks.

SF: And it left at a quarter to four, so you couldn't get in any trouble. School was out at three-thirty and you didn't dare get in any trouble or you'd have to walk home. [JG laughs] So they had a pretty good hold on me. Anyhow, that was my high school days.

JG: What did you do for entertainment, back in the late '20s, early '30s?

SF: Well, it was before TV, and we had radios, of course. And we never went to the theater too much. We would have parties at different houses, And the Comerfords had a great big house up there. We'd have a dance up there once in a while. And I guess, well, we had a dance at our house once, once or twice. And Uncle Emery Schmitz's had a dance over there a couple a times. They'd throw their house open, move the furniture out and we'd have square dances mostly. But those were kind of, that was about it.

JG: Was it– At these dances you'd have live music?

SF: Yes, usually a guy on a violin and one on a banjo, or something like that–was no great heavy music, but you got by.

JG: How about a phonograph? Did you have one in the home?

SF: Yes, we had one, we had a– I think about everybody had a phonograph. We hardly ever even thought about dancing to that, however. We used to play it a lot. Yeah, we used to play it a lot.

JG: How about, how about card playing? I'm guessing that that might be–

SF: Well, very little back in those days My dad tried to teach my sister and I how to play euchre one year and we played with him some but I really never did get it down very good. So we didn't play a whole lot of cards at home, no, not very much.

JG: Well Slim, getting back to your youth and the early married days, what can you tell me about, oh shopping and this type of thing? Where did you go for your provisions and clothes and things like that?

SF: Well, most of the shopping was of course, like it is now, groceries. And when it came to men's clothes we had two places to go in town. We had, well I guess maybe there was three at one time, men's department stores. There was Prestons, and Ike Bucksbaum on Main Street, a good friend of mine. And I remember I bought my new suit when we were married. I bought my suit, I think it was twenty-six dollars, and it was a very nice suit. I think the shoes were four-fifty, and I bought a Panama straw hat, dress hat, it was two dollars. And I was dressed pretty sharp and hadn't spent very much money. [chuckling] But anyhow, that tells you what prices were in those days. And now when we got married we rented that house on Spring Street, and the rent there when we first moved there was, I believe, sixteen dollars a month.

JG: What year was that again?

SF: That was in 1934, and the place was owned by somebody in Davenport, some insurance company in Davenport. And the operator, the man came around, and I told him one day I was thinking about moving and he said let me sell you that house. And I could have bought that house for twelve hundred dollars at one time, but I didn't have twelve hundred dollars. [laughing]

JG: Well, you mentioned it was owned by an insurance company. Is that due to the fact that somebody had lost the home in the Depression?

SF: Well I suppose, I suppose probably it might have been. I don't know. That I don't know about the origin of it. But that was the story of–

JG**:** Did you eat out much?

SF: Oh, hardly ever

JG: Either back home on the farm or after you were married in the early days?

SF: No, you didn't do that much back in those days. You might stop and get one of those– They used to have what they called nickel hamburgers, around up at a place where Ted Staffanou once bought. And then after he– Then he sold it to Bill Welsh. And at one time, you could go in there and buy, I think it was fifteen hamburgers for a dollar. I guess that's what it was. We called them nickel ones. They weren't very big, either. But, no, to go out and eat, rarely did you do it back in those days.

JG: How many children did you have in these difficult times. When were they born and so forth?

SF: Blanche and I had five children. We had four girls and a boy. And we lost our boy at birth, and then, that was number two. Then we had– Our oldest was Sally, and then our boy we named him after Father Hannon, Maurice Joseph was his name. Then our Pat, Patricia, came along, and then Mary Lou. And Mary Lou died when she was seven months and eighteen days old. That was during the war when there were no doctors around. I think one doctor taking care of the whole town and, poor guy didn't have a chance, you know. But he came up, and he said, he didn't think there was anything wrong with the child and he told Blanche that she was a nervous mother. Well the day he told her that she was a nervous mother, the next day at noon the child died. So, it was a very hard blow to us because when they're seven months and eighteen days old they're an awful lot of fun and we were very crazy about her. So after that, then along came our Judy and that was the end of our family. Judy now lives in Wisconsin and Patricia lives in Iowa city. Sally lives with us, so we have close connections with all.

JG: How have you found Grinnell as a place to live, not only back then when times was tough but over the long stretch? I know that, that you've celebrated how many years of married life and that type thing.

SF: We are on our fifty-eighth year right now, come June it'll be a total of fifty-eight years. Oh we love Grinnell. We always have. I don't think either one of us would be satisfied living any place else. Grinnell's home to me and our two children are buried out in Hazelwood, and we have our lot and stone there waiting for us, so it looks like we're going to be here from now to eternity.

JG: How old are you?

SF: Eighty-four, I'm eighty-four years old. Now, I came to town at twenty-two. I had just been twenty-two in January before I started working in the service station in March.

JG: Slim, I'd like to sound you out on the feelings and attitudes of town people versus country people and that sort of thing back in the days when you were growing up in the Depression times and how it might have changed since then.

SF: Well, it was kind of, I wouldn't say it was a joke, but we used to think that there was a division and that the poor people lived south of the tracks–we always called it south of the Rock Island tracks–you didn't amount to much. The rich people lived north of the tracks. That was an old thought back in high school. And of course, it was only a kid's thought. It was nothing–it was something I remember. The farmers had different associations. There was the Farm Bureau

and there was another farm company, organization. I don't recall the name. They were kind of competitive. I don't think my dad was too active in Farm Bureau. In fact he wasn't too active in either one of them, Dad was a hard worker that stayed home and worked. Didn't do too much about businesses. We used to–down there where we lived, the main line of M & St. L had a stockyard right about a mile south of us down at what we called the Harris place and it was called the Oak Grove Stock Yards. My dad was an officer in that for several years and we used to ship our hogs and cattle to Chicago through that stockyard. And a lot of people did. Lot of people would just open the gate and drive their hogs out on the road and drive them for maybe a mile and a half, or drive their cattle a mile or two or three down there to ship them.

JG: Kind of like the Old West? [chuckling]

SF: Yes, yes, it was. But it was something that was different, much much different, of course. You wouldn't dare do it today with today's travel. Back in those days, no gravel roads, no paved roads for us. Eventually, 146 was gravelled, well, all the way through. But the only gravel we had then was from the Grinnell Reinsurance office into town. We had mud roads the rest of the way home, the other half mile. But, somehow or another you got it done, I don't know how, but you got it done.

JG: Now how about, was there any distinction, or feelings of competition, or uneasiness between the country people and the town people?

SF: Well, I never felt that there was. There might have been, but I didn't think there was ever, I was never conscious of it. We used to think, well I always, I used to think that the Catholic Church might've been looked down upon a little bit but that is all over thank God, it is all over and everybody is–I think every church respects every other one in this town and a lot of nice feeling.

Side Three

JG: Slim, I forgot to ask you a question about your high school days that I intended. Did you, as a farm boy, did you have time for extracurricular activities?

SF: Not outside the school hours. My dad was one of those of the old school that thought if you had a good eighth grade education you were ready to go meet the world. And my mom disagreed completely, that she wanted every one of her four children to get a high school education at least. So, she won. But, I had to give up sports for that reason. I had to be home in time to help chore at night. So I wasn't able to have any practice time. So I had to go through high school without sports. However, I didn't mind that much. It was for the good of the family and we were all– Our family was a family that kind of all worked together. And it was kind of everything went in one pot and that was it. So, we didn't mind too much.

JG: You're a good sized fellow. Did you get any heat to take part in football, for instance?

SF: Oh, the coach and, I think Mr. Cranny and the coach both wrote to my dad, personal letters. In fact, Mr. Cranny talked to him personally, to see if they couldn't get me to play football. Because I was big, for the time. I was six foot one and a half, which was tall in those days. That was about as tall as anybody ever got back in those days. I weighed around 160 pounds, which was pretty good, I guess. But they seemed to think I'd be real good for them in football and basketball both, but I had to say no to both.

JG: OK, how did you– For instance you indicated that your evenings were spent with chores, and your mornings. How about your Saturdays? How'd you spend your Saturdays?

SF: Well, during fall I was bringing the crop in, we had a larger farm, and it was going to be difficult to get that corn all picked by hand. That was before corn picking days, corn pickers. And we did it all by hand. So my mother was very strong and rugged and she would take the wagon that I always used. Dad would go out and pick corn both morning and afternoon, morning and afternoon, and come in. One thing, we did have an elevator, so we didn't have to scoop corn. But Mom would take that wagon, my wagon and team and go out every afternoon and pick forty bushel by herself. For a woman I thought it was terrific. And then on Saturdays, I, being left handed, would change the bump boards around on the wagon, because I picked on the opposite side of the wagon than they did and go out and pick corn. And I was always eager to get to be able to pick 100 bushel. Well, it arrived in the year I was a sophomore and I was very proud of the fact that I did get to 106 bushel in one day. So that was the beginning of better corn picking for me, and later I went a little higher than that.

JG: What, I know that 100 bushel a day was considered a top performance in corn picking. So you got up to what, would you say?

SF: Well, well, I got up to about 125. But one day, one night, I had opened up a new field and it was awfully good corn and dad said–he got after me for coming in with such a big load of corn– he says, "You're going to mash that wagon all to pieces." So I said, "Well, there's a lot of corn there." And he said, "I'll bet you can't pick 150 bushel out there tomorrow." And I said," I'll bet I can." And he bet me five dollars. So we measured the corn and I measured it and he measured it and we, after the third load, I picked three loads a day, after the third load was unloaded we stopped there by the crib and were talking about it and he said, "How many do you think you got ?" and I said "I thought I had 158,"and he said "I've got 162." [exclamation in background]

JG: Well, that's pretty close and that's pretty, what'll I say, good news to hear. What did you do with the five dollars?

SF: I don't remember, but I tell you that night, I tell you, that was bad. That night we were eating supper and I had the shakes so bad I couldn't hardly feed myself, from that much exertion.

JG: The muscles were just gone.

SF: Yeah, they just weren't working very good. And of course Mom–you know how that would affect a mother. And she said, "You guys, that'll be all the betting there'll ever be in this house. It's all over." [laughter]

JG: Slim, in a general way, how do you think the Depression helped you and your family?

SF: Well, I think you learn how to live on a very little bit of money. I remember– I think my lowest salary in that station was sixteen dollars a week. I believe that was the lowest. Now the boys over at the United Grocery across the street, or across the alley from my station at that time, there were several of those guys working for eleven dollars a week. So times were mighty tough. But I think probably it taught everybody kind of the value of the dollar, maybe that you didn't know otherwise. And I'm sure the experience was good for anybody that it hit. Sure, some people lost their homes and all that sort of thing that was bad. And of course you wouldn't want that to be happening. But by and large, that'd be the only people that it hurt. It was a good lesson for lots of us. And I think made it lots easier for anybody to save a little money later on having gone through that. Because you could always live cheaper than you live. You could do it today, you know. You could live a lot cheaper than you do and I think even though it was destructive to some people I think it was a beautiful lesson for lots of us.

JG: And you indicated that your folks lost a farm as my folks and a lot of others did. Did–was there any bitterness and frustration over that that lasted and had an ill effect?

SF: Well, there was a little bitterness at the time because here was that 160 and there was only fourteen thousand dollars against it. But there wasn't anything any of us could do to help Dad out. We didn't have it. But I was a little bitter about it because this was kind of an act of God so to speak. His cattle all died that year, even though he had taken the precaution to vaccinate them. Those calves, the serum was no good. And so they died anyhow. And as a result he didn't have his– Well, the balance being so low, they were tickled to death to get it back. Who wouldn't be to get 160 that good a land, and it's excellent land, for fourteen thousand dollars?

JG: And who financed it?

SF: It was a bank in Des Moines. I can't tell you the name of the bank, I heard it enough times. I should have remembered it, but it was some bank in Des Moines that had the paper. And dad put in a bid on it later. It was kind of open there for a while and he put in a bid on it. And there was two bids and the one bid– Dad had bid his with five hundred dollars down and the other guy had bid the same figure, but a thousand dollars down, so dad lost. He didn't get to keep it. It was kind of hard luck to all of us and we all resented it at the time but we never held anything against anybody thereafter.

JG: Well, that's good. One final question, because this project focuses in on those difficult and interesting times. Are you glad that you lived through and experienced the Depression and the war times?

SF: Well, I think it was good for us, yes. I think it taught you the value of a dollar and well, the war times were something you worried about. I was, after Mary Lou died, I got a notice from the draft board that I was going to be drafted in April and this was in December. And I didn't know what in the world I was going to do. They did have a clause that you could, if you were in business, you could tie that business up. They had to keep it for you until you got back. So that's what I intended to do. And then the President came out with a decree that anybody thirty-five

years of age and a dependency of two children would be terminated and they wouldn't take anybody of that age. And that was me exactly. I was thirty-five years of age and had two children. So life went on as usual thereafter. So that was my brush with World War II. But I think then or any other time that you live in your life, you can learn a little every day, whether you're twenty-two years old or whether you're eighty-four. I don't believe you quit learning ever. That's kind of the way I feel about life today and I'm glad that I lived through the war times and the hard times because it's something to remind you that life is not a bowl of cherries as they call it. And I think it was a help to– I'm sure it was a help to us, that we laid up a little bit for our old age, which is something that keeps you from worrying about now that we're old. That's about all I have. I'm real glad I'm a Grinnellian and I'm going to die a Grinnellian. Thanks for calling on me Jim, I enjoyed every minute of it.

JG: And thank you very much Slim. I think we have some gems here to offer to this project and we certainly appreciate your input.