Interviewee: Richard "Dick" Sears

Interviewer: Paul Decatur

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Transcriber: Jennifer Wolfson

Richard "Dick" Sears
Side One

PD: My name is Paul Decatur [PD] and I'm talking today with Dick Sears [DS] at his home seven miles north of Highway 6 on Penrose Avenue extension. This is a part of the project of Grinnell Voices From the Past, the Depression and World War II Oral History. The date is March 20, 1992.

PD: Here we go. Now, Dick, you can start by telling us something about your personal life, history of where you've lived, family, etc.

DS: My name is Dick Sears and I was born and raised on this farm, I've lived here all my life. The only time I've moved at all was when I moved to the little house on the farm when we was married.

PD: Little house on the prairie [laughing]

DS: [laughs] I lived in this neighborhood all the time, I've never lived anywhere else. When we was married, I went into partnership with my father on the farm and we worked together and farmed together for all my life. And it was a new and different experience when he passed away and it was my responsibility to carry on. This is a century farm, which means it's been in the family for over a hundred years, and we did get through the Depression and almost lost it, but we was able to hang on. And that was due to the kindness and thoughtfulness of some people by the name of Madill that lived in Grinnell, and they had the mortgage on the farm, and if we couldn't meet the payments on time they said, "Well, you'll get it some time and we'll just wait for it". And that's the quality of people that we had to work with. And without their cooperation it would not be a centennial farm, and I would like to give them credit for what they did for us.

PD: When were you born?

DS: I was born June 28, 1914, so I'm 77 years old.

PD: And you were married–?

DS: In 1935, and my wife's maiden name was Baustian, Elmer and Myrtle Baustians' daughter, and they had grown up in Sheridan township. And when my folks passed away we bought the farm from the brothers and sisters, this farm, and then when her folks passed away we bought the farm where she lived from the brothers and sisters. So we have the farm that she was– She was

not born and raised there, but in that same neighborhood. And our own family, our oldest child is our son Larry, he's living on the farm that Lola's folks lived on. And the second daughter, or our second child, is Marilyn, course she was born and raised here, and at the present time is living in Madison, Wisconsin. Our youngest child is Glenda, and she is living in Ames, and her husband is a professor at the State University in Ames. So we've grown up in the same neighborhood that I grew up in.

PD: What years did you start the farming operation? Was that when you were first married?

DS: Well, that's the first I had ownership in.

PD: But you were farming long before that?

DS: I graduated from high school and kept right on helping with the farm.

PD: Was that high school Chester High School?

DS: Just two years, first two years of high school at Chester, and then I went to Newburg. At that time we got to chose the high school we went to after the first two years. So I had relatives who lived in Newburg, so the folks decided that that would be an advantage.

PD: Tell me a little bit about the high school. Where was it located?

DS: It was located on the extension of Penrose which was two miles south of where I live now.

PD: Is that where the church is?
DS: No, it's a mile south of–

PD: –a mile south of where the church is.

DS: And one of the reasons that that high school was developed there was that we were quite a ways from any town, and to get back and forth to school or have a place to stay was an expensive thing to do if you didn't have relatives in Grinnell or somewhere else had a school. It was so the kids could stay at home and have a home life while they were still quite young. So that was the reason it came about. And it attracted students from as far as eight or ten miles away which was in Sheridan township, and of course they were a long ways from Tama and Malcom and Grinnell. So they rode horseback over to this school, and they had a shed built there to house the horses in cold weather. So it did serve a purpose, and at least we felt that it was well taken care of and a viable way of getting an education when we were still quite young.

PD: How many students would be typical in the two grades?

DS: Oh, in the two grades I would say ten is kind of an average.

PD: Would there just be one teacher?

DS: One teacher. Also in the same building they had the grade school and there was a teacher in that part of the building, too. So, there was two teachers there.

PD: What about the administration of the high school, was it local?

DS: It was the county, they had a county–

PD: –superintendent.

DS: –superintendent, OK, you helped me out on that one. [laughter]

PD: OK, so then, as you say, you graduated from Newburg.

DS: Right.

PD: And after graduation you started farming with your father?

DS: Well, in those days all the boys went right on farming, or helping their parents, until they were 21 years old. We considered that we owed that to our parents. So that we did stay on and help until we was 21. If the family had a large number of boys in it, then sometimes some of them would work for some neighbors or someone else, but we was still responsible to our parents.

PD: That's kind of a lost– Modern day people, they don't feel that obligation.

DS: No, I'm sure they don't, and I'm sure some of them need to have the obligation to their parents for longer. I think there's an advantage to it.

PD: So at what time, you continued working on with your father then up until the time–

DS: Till I was twenty-one.

PD: Till you were twenty-one. And then what did you do?

DS: Got married and went into partnership with him.

PD: Oh, I see, OK. And lived–when you were first married you didn't live here.

DS: Not in this house, the house across the road.

PD: The small one.

DS: Yeah, it's a part of the farm. So that's where we lived until the children got–

PD: Now I think you said you were married in '35, so you were not married during the early years of the recession, or Depression.

DS: No, I was at school all those years.

PD: Oh I see, yeah. I guess that's about right, that figures. I should have figured that out for myself. [a little laughter] Your recollections of farming and how it changed through those recession–Depression–years, tell me something about that, starting with the Depression. You already indicated to me that you'd had some trouble maintaining the farm and it was only through the Madill's that you were able to– Tell– What I'm asking is just tell me about farm life in those days.

DS: Well, it was restricted in more than just ancient transportation and farm equipment. And the money situation was unique. I know we've never seen anything like it since. We've talked about depressions since, but it really wasn't depressions, it was little holdups, but it wasn't depression. I was five, I guess it was five or six years old at the time World War I come to an end and that's about the first things that I remember as a historical thing. And I had an uncle that was in Germany at the time that it ended, and I realize now why my mother was so excited when the word came that the war was over. And our grade school was down at the corner north here, and I can remember her taking a handbell and walking down the road to call to the people that the war was over. And so that's about the first I remember about the First World War. I think one of the things that we had then that we miss the value of now is family life. And we didn't have radio, we didn't have television. Our family grew up as a family and we enjoyed the same things. At that time *Wallace's Farmer* printed a continued story and even books, and they came once a month. And when that came, one of the highlights was when the family got together and my dad read this story in *Wallace's Farmer*. And some of them were excellent books, really true moral values and uplifting. And this is the thing that has changed that I think is almost detrimental to family life now. There just isn't a time when a family gets together, because one's got to go to basketball practice and somebody else has got to go to band practice and families grow up now not even eating at the same time. It's one of the values I think that we miss, valuable things that we miss.
PD: Ok. You're talking about the years in the late '20s and early '30s when you're still at home and the family–

DS: I'll correct that, we had radio before.

PD: Tell me a little bit about the radio programs.

DS: Yeah, I remember the first time that we ever heard a radio. My uncle that was in the service in World War I came back and he had a radio, and Pittsburgh was the only broadcast that we could get. So we went with a team and wagon to Newburg on evening to hear that radio. And when we got there all it would do is squeal. [laughter] So we knew that that didn't have any place in this life. But the next time we went we could hear him talking, so it was a little better.

PD: Later on, of course, we got stations in Iowa I suppose ?

DS: Yeah, Davenport was one of the first stations that we got and then Des Moines was about next.

PD: Let's get back to farming. How did you farm in the early '30s?

DS: Well, there was a few tractors that had come in in the late 1900s, I don't mean that, 1920, a few before that. They were tractors that–they didn't have tractors that even resembled what they have now. But I farmed with, or we did, farmed with small tractor and horses until two years after we were married, until 1938. And about 1935 when the real transition came, you was pretty old- fashioned if you didn't have a tractor by then. And then they raised their own power, we raised some colts and grew them up. We usually kept them until they was three year olds and we rode them to work, and it was fairly economical because it didn't take the cash out. And that was the thing that bothered during the Depression, was to get any money and to hold on to it. And you had to have some land to pay your debts and get the work done. And actually we made money on our horses, we'd raise 'em and when we got them broke we'd sell them as a team. And we had young horses most of the time and we actually was getting some cash in instead of paying it out. So that was one of the financial things that helped us out, and without that I don't know how we'd ever made it.

PD: What you're telling me, then, is that the grain farming was an insignificant source of income in those days.

DS: That's primarily true, we sold some grain but most of the money come in through livestock.

PD: Did you have other livestock beside horses? Cattle?

DS: Oh yeah, we had, we never fed fat cattle too much, we didn't any after I bought in on the share. But people did, and a lot of the grain was marketed to livestock. And they called that the mortgage paying, because you got a little money in all at the same time.

PD: How did they market cattle in those days?
DS: Well, there was two ways, they were shipped to packing plants, a lot of the car load lots was shipped to Chicago. The small farmers was selling theirs to people who'd come through the countryside, and they'd just look at your cows that you wanted to sell and make you a bid on them and you took it or left it. And usually you had to take it [laughs] because you had to get rid of them and you had to have the money. There wasn't too much choice.

PD: You say you shipped them. I suppose you had to take them to a railhead somewhere.

DS: Right

PD: And how did you transport them? Drive them?

DS: Hogs, we took them with team and wagon. Five or six head of hogs in a wagon and take them to Newburg or Grinnell. Most of ours went through Newburg. And the cattle, practically all of them was driven to market. They took the five mile walk or five and a half mile walk to Newburg and then they were shipped on train. And the railroads connecting, when they went from Newburg they usually went close to Ferguson where the grain elevator, the big elevator Continental put up. It was on the Milwaukee railroad, and it went to Chicago. And there was

little stations around that had a little stockyard that stopped the train and put them on the car there.

PD: Were there any sheep raised to any degree in those days?

DS: Not a big item.

PD: How about poultry? Did you or your neighbors raise much poultry?

DS: We didn't raise much. To be honest with you, we raised just as few as I could. [laughter] But the poultry did play a part in our living and living standards because as all livestock was, we had something to eat. There was very few farmers that were hungry, they just didn't have money. Because practically all of them had hogs and chickens and livestock, and as a result we could go out we could butcher a beef, butcher a couple of hogs, and we didn't go hungry. We went without many clothes sometimes.

PD: Did you ever barter for services and that sort of thing, say in Grinnell or something, did you ever pay a doctor bill by bartering a side of beef or something like that?

DS: Well, yeah, there was some of that done. And usually they were willing, particularly a doctor or veterinarian or something like that. A side of beef would look pretty good to them, or a hog. That brings another thing into play. When our oldest child was born the doctor took care of Lola, and when we went to pay the fee it was twenty-five dollars. [laughter]

PD: I have no idea what it would be today but it would certainly be much greater than that.

DS: I don't either but I'm sure it's in the thousands.

PD: That's right. What about crops–what type of crops did you raise?

DS: Well, we had a rotation, corn, oats and hay, or pasture. So the farm was divided into four fields so we'd have two years of corn, one of oats, and then seed the oats, and then there'd be one of hay or pasture. So there'd be four equal sized fields.

PD: Now soy beans of, course, a big crop now– What time period did you get involved–

DS: Well, the first soy beans that was raised in Poweshiek county was right out here in this field out here. And when we put them in we didn't know how we was going to harvest them or– Came up to time to harvest them and we cut them with a grain binder and tied them up, shocked them up and then run them through a threshing machine. And we wasn't equipped with bins for it then, so we didn't know just what it was going to do. They all went for seed, we had ten acres out here and all that went for seed. My dad was kind of a pioneering sort of a fellow that enjoyed doing something that was unusual. And so we brought that seed in and sorted it and we brought it in and put boxes on the dining room table in here. And we run those, had a little tray and we run the seeds through the hole in the box, just pull them out of all the beans there was on that field.

PD: You hand sorted them, you mean?

DS: Yeah, hand sorted beans, just pull them down through and they run off the end of the chute into the basket or something. We spent a lot of time in the winter doing that.

PD: Interesting. Well what about seed corn?

DS: We went through the fields and we picked the biggest ear we could find for seed. And there was– Hybrid seed didn't come in to be popular with farm people until about 1939. And that was when hybrids took over. Iowa State University had put out one of the first hybrids that farmers really bought in volume.

PD: I presume those people who got in on that early probably prospered quite a bit from the increased yields, or did it come so gradual that it was–

DS: No, the people who switched over come in– Pretty popular about that time.

PD: Everybody was doing it, in other words. Trying to do it, at least.

DS: It was practically all produced by seed companies because they had to detassle it and it took a lot of work.

PD: Ok, during those years, we hear a lot about the drought, and how did that affect your operation? Your–

DS: Near put the operation out of order. 1934 here was the worst that we ever had. In the north part of the state '36 was worse, but here '34 was worse. And we were farming the home place here plus another eighty acres west of [Highway] 146 and we only harvested 325 bushels of corn that year. Off of the probably been sixty, seventy acres of corn.

PD: That was all hand picked?

DS: Yeah. Well I think that an interesting thing to me was we had almost a parallel to it as far as land prices were concerned in the early '80s. There were a lot of farms lost in the 1920s. The universities and land-grant colleges was all saying the same thing in early '80s or late '70s–that there's only so much land.

And everybody was saying, "Buy it, get a hold of what you can." And then a lot of those lost their land. And it was the same thing back in there, and I read this from a history of later years and a lot of the farms that were lost was caused by people who owned their land and had it clear, borrowing money to buy more land. And quite often they were doing real well and they put up a new home or expanded, many ways you just had to get big to– So that was one of the things that was the same thing in '70s.

PD: Let's break here while I change the tape and then we'll continue.

DS: OK

Side Two

PD: We're talking about the drought years. Of course in other areas of the country there was the dust bowl. Do you remember any particular effects of that in this area?

DS: I sure can, there was the dust area, they called it the dust bowl, which was in the Dakotas and Oklahoma and Kansas and Nebraska, and it would blow that dust so thick in the air that sometimes the sun would just barely show through like in the fog or when the moon was out at night. And I can remember plowing down by the road north here, and the groves was there, and the wind came up and blew that dust out of the grove until I couldn't even see where I was going with the teams. And that was one of the big things the government did, as far as that was concerned, was they made it possible to help put in shelter belts. They never got as far here as they did in the Dakotas and Nebraska and Kansas and Oklahoma. They had places in those areas where they had got trees planted around so that the field would have trees clear around the area of it, cut down the wind terrifically, just really cut it down. And now they're getting too many going out and cutting those trees out now, and if that doesn't stop it's going to go back to a dust bowl.

PD: What kind of control did you have over insects and what kind of insect problems did you have in those days?

DS: Well, in the summer of 1934–I can't think now what it was– Chinch bugs. Chinch bugs came in and so we put barriers in. They came out of the fence rows, and so we put barriers in that would stop them as they come out of the grass. If we could stop them there then they wouldn't multiply through the field.

PD: What kind of barriers?

DS: Well, almost seems like we used a plastic, some way.

PD: This was just a physical barrier–

DS: Yeah.

PD: There wasn't any water–moat–or anything like that. How about grasshoppers?

DS: Grasshoppers just about took for everything green.

PD: Was there any control or things tried?
DS: Well, there were some things tried but they never come up with a poison until later, later years, in the late '40s. And the stuff that we sprayed for grasshoppers they outlawed several years ago. It'll kill you. [chuckle]

PD: So did the grasshoppers–? What effect did it have on your income and your crops and stuff?

DS: Well, we never had a complete loss by them, but, and it's hard to know just what percentage loss you take, but it was, this is just being us, but I would say that in the worst years grasshoppers would probably cut the yield up towards a half, in the worst years.

PD: They preyed on all crops, is that right? Or were some things more resistant?

DS: Alfalfa was one of the things that they liked real well, and they went right in, helped themselves.

PD: Ok. You said earlier that if there was an excess of boys in the family they might work for the neighbors. What about labor in those days, did you have hired men or did you have–what kind of help did you have when you thrashed or made hay?

DS: Well, I had three older brothers, I was the youngest in the family. And so with me being the youngest, we had help and the others worked out some but I never did–only just occasional help. But at that time we just about figured that it took a man to every eighty acres, so that meant that it took a lot of labor to– Especially with livestock, to get by. Then I wanted to, if we have the time, I would like to go into some of the social changes that took place. This was real interesting to me because we had fun as we grew up, and I think more fun than I do now because we couldn't go so far so fast [chuckling]. It was just–we had good clean fun. There was no such thing as drugs then. I think I was fortunate to grow up at a time when we had prohibition and there wasn't the damage being done to cemeteries or things like that. People just had good clean fun.

PD: You never– You alluded to prohibition. There was never a bootlegging problem in the rural area, particularly this area that you recall?

DS: Not in this area.

PD: Yeah. Go ahead and talk about the social changes and the social life, your personal social life, I mean what you did for entertainment. I mean you've already said that you had a strong family relationship and a lot of that to do, was your social life, but there were churches I'm sure and–

DS: We had a–there used to be a church, Sonora two miles east here, and then this church down here and they kept– Because of rural people moving out and quitting. Well anyway, we went together simply because the churches was three miles apart. And so young people would get together and have a party once a month and they would play games. And young people wasn't too much different than they are now, they mature and they grow up and–

PD: Get smarter [laughter]

DS: Well anyway, we used to look forward to when young people would get together. And it was exciting and you met a pretty girl somewhere, [chuckling] probably as far as you'd–

PD: Probably where you met your wife.

DS: It was, yeah. So we just had fun, and we had softball games and play different townships and leagues in Grinnell. So I think we had an advantage by being poor and reserved and having to find things to do.

PD: I gather from what you're saying is that you, well I shouldn't put– Let me just ask you straight out, are people happier today then they were then, with all the material goods they have? What do you think about that?
DS: Well, I think we should be happier, but I don't say that we are. We are so money-minded now that if we don't make so much money, why it spoils everything for us, I guess.

PD: Let me ask you a question about prejudice. Now, we have different ethnic backgrounds in a rural community, and of course I'm sure– I mean, times of war, and that sort of thing, they come forward, or times of strife. Maybe now we're starting to see somewhat more of it than we used to. But anyway, was there any of that prevalent around the area, were there people–not openly persecuted–but that had different feelings about certain ethnic groups or religious groups or economic groups?

DS: Well, course during World War I and World War II the German wasn't very popular in World War I, and the Japanese wasn't very popular in World War II. But in the neighborhood I can't remember any– Well, I do remember a German family that lived fairly close here that people kind of watched them go by and wondered what they was doing, and so it was there.

PD: This was during World War I or World War II, or both maybe?

DS: World War I, there was no Japanese in the neighborhood for World War II. But there was some there, I just wouldn't deny it at all. And there's still, even if we're not at war, there's still some prejudice against different races.

PD: Certainly, certainly. How about religious feelings, say between Protestants and Catholics particularly? I don't presume there were any Catholic churches in the area?

DS: Not closer than Grinnell.

PD: And the people, the Catholic people went to the city for church? Were there a lot of Catholic people in this area?

DS: Well, it was predominantly–

PD: Protestant?

DS: Protestant, yeah. But there was no problems of exchanging help which was a lot of it at that time. The person shelled corn or hauled hogs, they'd take fifteen or twenty teams to keep it going.

PD: Tell me about, we were talking about labor a while back, course you had thrashing runs, explain to me a little bit about how it worked in this area.

DS: Well they usually had the area that was covered with a thrashing ring, they used to call it.

PD: Rig, you say?

DS: Ring.

PD: Thrashing ring, oh, ok.

DS: That would be the size of the group that thrashed together, worked together. And while it was hard work, it was one of the interesting times, because you worked together with your neighbors. And it was really– If they got along and was good Christians and worked with each other, it was a fun time. As far as the labor is concerned, in 1932, in the real Depression time, you'd hire extra help at thrashing time, a dollar an hour [Ed. note: DS later corrected this to a dollar a day] was the rate. Doesn't seem possible now.

PD: That sum was almost– As I would have guessed, it probably wouldn't have been that much but then that's not much, I agree. So you did hire some outside help. Now was that help local or was it migrant type workers, or–

DS: Well here it was mostly local.

PD: What about haying, that's a pretty labor intensive activity. Was that just a–?

DS: In most cases I would say a couple of neighbors worked together. The kids used to try to get a job as water-boy. They had to have a pony and a saddle.

PD: That was for thrashing?

DS: For thrashing. They'd get twenty-five cents a day, or something like that.

PD: How did they carry water?

DS: In jugs with a–some of them, if they just had a crock, would have a wet sack on the ground, and closed the jug.

PD: How did they cork it?

DS: Usually a cork, but some of them just used a corncob. [laughter]

PD: And they would, the water boy would circle around through the–

DS: You'd go to the field and make sure, they called them the pitcher, the one that pitched the bundles on the the wagon, make sure all of those had a drink. And the ones who was hauling bundles, and try to get to them every so often. So that was a pretty big deal for the kids when they was growing up.

PD: So you had to have a pony and a jug. You were an entrepreneur. OK, maybe we could talk a little bit here, and maybe we could come back if we think of something we haven't covered there in the Depression years, but talk a little bit about the beginning of World War II. Of course that I know put a big strain on the labor supply, how did that effect your operation?

DS: Well it didn't effect ours too much here. But we did increase our equipment quite a little bit. We had been chopping hay, which was fairly new, and blowing it into the barn. And then they come out with a field chopper and they finished putting the finishing touches on that right out here in our yard. John Deere had brought a forge up here, and they had just got it so it would kind of run, but they hadn't taken all the things to match the gears and the rate it picked up. And so they had that here for, it must have been two months right throughout haying. And we was haying all the time so they'd take that out to the field and they'd chop a little bit, and something wouldn't be right so they'd bring it in and use their forge to make another gear or change the shaft or something. So it was interesting to me to watch them do that. Well as a result, we bought the first one, the completed chopper, field chopper. And machinery was rationed then, and in order to get that we had to sign up that we would use it to help anybody that ask us to. That got to be quite a job because everybody wanted help and they wanted help with hay. As a result, well I remember when we hit the seven hundred acres, first crop that we had to run through that chopper. And as a result, then, I took the equipment and went all over the country from twelve miles southeast. Go to Lola's dad's place, to some of my relation over by Laurel and that got us into long, long hours and long days.

PD: The chopping–how did that, did that double your ability to make hay, or what?

DS: Oh, way more than double. We got so we'd have them mow ahead, figuring on thirty-five acres a day. So three, four days we'd have about a hundred acres.

PD: Speaking of machinery, when did the combine come in around here?

DS: Well the first popular combine, where they really started coming in fast, was about '36 they started. But by 1940 they was getting so there was small combines and quite a big percent had their own combine. The combine thing, the machinery companies I think made a mistake, they just quit making them smaller one-farm combines, and it was pretty hard for a farmer to own a combine when they started to get so expensive, it just wasn't practical. And then they got so big now that they're $100,000 or $150,000 for a combine, so a farmer can't afford to own his own.

PD: Ah–

DS: Could I go back to the thing that's hit me was one of the saddest things about the Depression was when people lost their farms.

PD: Certainly.

DS: I was married in 1935 and by 1936 we talked about everybody moving at that time of year. And neighbors would go in when somebody was moving and help them take teams and wagons or whatever they had to move with. And that's still a sad sight that I recall was when we got the

furniture in the house loaded onto the wagons and they were leaving the farm that was theirs for part of their lifetime–

PD: This was people who had lost it–

DS: Yeah. And I don't know how many places I was when they got everything out of the house, they stood and cried– [DS weeps].

PD: I can imagine.

DS: That was the sad part. The insurance companies held the loans on practically every farm, not every farm but–then become property of the insurance companies at that time. And they took the farms maybe about the time of the crash in '29. But the insurance company, they were not farmers, so they would just rent the land back to the fellow that just lost it. So most of that change came in the early '30s. So by '36, '38 in there, there wasn't very many farmers owned their own farm.

PD: Were those people who lost their farms and were permitted to live on, did they get a chance to buy them back someday, were there many people who were able to do that?

DS: They weren't able to do it, but most of the insurance companies was happy if they would buy it back [chuckles], because they rented it just like anybody else then from the insurance company on a share basis primarily. So the farm that we bought where our son lives was purchased back in 1939, so it went back into the Baustian family. And they gave $18,000 for it and when we bought it after their deaths we gave $84,000 for it. And the contract when Lola's folks first bought it, they had to pay off $250 a year. [chuckles]

PD: For how many years or was that just–

DS: Well, that was in 1939 and we bought it in 1971, so–

PD: I see.

DS: So all they had to do about was, just was practically nothing for interest on it then.

PD: Were there any Sheriff sales?

DS: Yeah.

PD: Were you ever to one? What happened

DS: Well it's just like a ordinary sale. I am an auctioneer and I've sold and Lola did a lot of clerking, and we have sold, and the sheriff stood by the clerk's table and took the money with him when we left.

PD: Did they ever lock you up in the chicken house?

DS: [laughs] I never understood why.

PD: I've heard that story, I don't know if anything ever happened to you, but I heard it.

DS: Well, there's all kinds of stories and I'm not saying they are not true in some cases, but it wasn't a popular thing.

PD: So you were auctioneering back in those days?

DS: No, I didn't–

PD: Oh, you're talking about more recently you've been involved in that. When did you start auctioneering?

DS: 1957.

PD: Well that post dates this discussion a few years. [chuckles] Well, let's see what else we've got here. We've got a few more minutes on this part of the tape. Since you weren't a livestock farmer I don't suppose some of the programs that were involved with controlling livestock production during the Depression years were of much concern to you, or do you remember–

DS: Well, yeah.

PD: –how they affected your operation?

DS: We had dairy cattle from the time I was a kid. We milked some cows, I guess I'd put it that way. But we raised hogs at the time that they wanted to get the numbers down, and everybody that killed pigs were sinners. The pigs would enjoy being older when they got killed. [laughter]

PD: Very good.

DS: But we wasn't involved in any riots or things like that.

PD: Were there riots about the programs that you mean?

DS: Yeah, yeah.

PD: Tell me a little bit about those.

DS: Well, I wasn't connected in very much of it. But killing little pigs was one of them. And then they sent sows to market that was ready to have pigs. And most of the criticism that was, centers that did it, were politicians and town people. Whatever. But they didn't know about abortion then. [chuckles] And I'm not gonna get into that, but–

Side Three

PD: OK, continuing on here Dick. Tell me something about the roads in those days and the condition of them, how they were maintained, and who did the maintenance work.

DS: OK. The roads were maintained with, the first that I remember anyway, a farmer would contract with the trustees. The township's road maintenance was governed by the trustees in the township, the county didn't have anything to do with it. So they would contract with a farmer to take so many miles of road, maybe. They rode drags, no wheels on it, just drags. So this farmer maybe would take three miles, and then they'd have some other farmer that would take another two or three miles. And the reason for that was they couldn't go over the roads fast enough, so that– A farmer didn't want to stay out of the field for a day, even, but he could get in about two or three hours while it was right to do, couldn't go in the field. That's what they did to maintain it. And I can remember doing that.

PD: This of course is back probably before the '30s.

DS: Yeah, during the '30s.

PD: During the '30s they were still doing that, so what you're saying is the trustees would compensate the farmer for maintaining a section of road? Was it a direct payment–

DS: Yeah.

PD: –or was it a tax type of thing, or what?

DS: No.

PD: It was direct?

DS: The treasurer would pay the farmer whatever he was contracted for.

PD: I'm going to ask you about something that you haven't alluded to yet, and that's about poll tax. Tell me about the poll tax system.

DS: OK. [chuckles] Well, everybody in the township was obligated to work the poll tax, they called it. I think it was just one day that you'd have to go with your team of horses, scrapers, or some method of moving the dirt and you'd put in eight hours with your team, and that was your poll tax. And everybody was obligated to work their poll tax, or hire somebody to do it. And they would have a township maintenance man that would decide where you was going to go to work, and that was still in effect in 1936, I remember, because it was so hot, '34 was hot. And my brother and I went a mile east here on the corner with teams [of horses] and scrapers to work our poll tax and it was, again it was a change of work. Sometimes it fun, sometimes it wasn't.

PD: This was in addition to the general maintenance that they contracted the individual farmers for? This was more specific type projects on the roads, building roads or maintaining beyond that which in general the farmer would do as general work.

DS: Right.

PD: OK, tell me something about the maintenance, first of all, when did they gravel the road by here, what year, do you remember when that was?

DS: Well, it was 1931 or ’32 they graded the road and put in big ditches and widened some of them out.

PD: Was that done by people working at their poll tax, the grading, or was that a general contract?

DS: No, it was a– The township owned a grader, and the fellow that had supervision of the roads run it or was with it.

PD: OK, now, tell me about in the winter, how you coped with the blizzards and how you got around, traveled.

DS: Well, in 1936 the roads was closed for everything but teams for a month, there was one full month that there never was a car went by here, we used teams–bobsleds–to get to where the road was open. Usually you had a bunch of neighbors who’d go in on the bobsled to get groceries in town and come out along the way. And the mail was the same way. The mail couldn’t get through, so maybe once a week or every two or three days or something, somebody would get through so they’d bring all the mail for his neighbors along the way.

PD: What about– Did you always stay to the roads, did you ever go cross country?

DS: No, we went cross country, and the snow would get hard and horses wouldn’t break through it, so they walked right over where there was fences and–

PD: Be quite an exciting thing if one of them would fall through on top of a fence. [laughs]

DS: Yeah, well they did, one of the neighbors was moving first of March–warmed up. And a mile south here, it was, this place was dry so that there was dirt showing, so we had to use wagons. And down south the snow was deeper than the mailbox and it thawed enough so it started going through. And then, of course, when the horses broke through, then the wagon come and it would break through. And we had a wagon load of furniture, and can you imagine that wagon flopping around where horses had fell through.

PD: Probably skinned it up a bit.

DS: Uh-huh, it was terrible. Yeah, just wood boxes.

PD: Ok, tell me about some of what we think of as modern day conveniences. You spoke about radio and the first time you had it, but what about telephones and refrigeration, gas stoves, how did you cook in those days? I guess I could start out by asking you that. How did you cook?

DS: Well, it was what we call the range then. Then we burnt cobs and we burnt wood, split wood, you had a wood box by the side of the range. In the wintertime it wasn't wasteful at all, the heat, it didn't cost much. There was work in getting the wood ready to burn.

PD: Did you ever burn any corn?

DS: Yeah, we did for probably a month one winter and that would have been about '34. Corn was about ten cents a bushel then, and it was cheaper to burn the corn than it was to sell it and buy the coal. But it wasn't good heat. The corn would burn fast and so you'd get the furnace too hot, and then it would soon be gone and then it would be too cold. And I guess we just didn't feel right burning corn.

PD: Ah, when you did burn it, is most of the heat in the cob or does the grain itself have quite a bit of–

DS: Well the grain itself has quite a lot of heat.

PD: I see. Was that little range a social center?

DS: Yeah, if we got real cold, you snuggle a little bit. [laughter]

PD: So did your wife, did you have a large garden?

DS: Yeah.

PD: And I suppose she canned a lot.

DS: Yeah.

PD: You said something about butchering a while ago, that you never went hungry. How did you preserve the meat?

DS: Canned most of it. Some people–in particular German people–would use salt to preserve meat. And they could do it during winter pretty well.

PD: If you butchered during the winter could you preserve the meat by just hanging it outdoors?

DS: You could, but most people just let it age a little bit and then they canned it. They put the bacon and some of the side meat they preserved with salt and things like that.

PD: Did you do your own smoking?

DS: We didn't, but there was people that did.

PD: Did you have any type of refrigeration during those years?

DS: Yeah, this was an unusual neighborhood. We had electricity here in this house in 1919, and rural electricity didn't come in until about 1936 to '39. So we had it you see, twenty years before other people did.

PD: So did you have a refrigerator quite early?

DS: We got one in 1934. So we did have refrigeration.

PD: Tell me a little bit about telephones and their history during those years.

DS: Well the telephones was one thing that we had back in my memory time. We had telephones. But they was the old telephone that you cranked on the side and there was twenty people on the same line. So if there was anybody sick or hurt or in need of anything, when it got around that there was somebody when that phone rang their number– You see we had–ours was five longs and a short, and if that rang and if somebody sick here, everybody listened to see how they was. And it was–this was one of the things that we liked in some ways, but otherwise it took some neighborhood things away from you, because you couldn't hear the ring.

PD: You couldn't hear the ring, you say?

DS: After they come in with new phones.

PD: Oh, I see, you didn't have as good a communication with your neighbors and so forth.

DS: Right, right. And it was– Cases that it was a real handicap. Made it

impossible to have as a good a gossip. [laughter]

PD: Now you have to call everybody once instead of everybody at the same time. Those– Was it a local telephone company that provided those lines for you and maintained them or did you–

DS: Farmers had their own telephone group. Twenty was about as many as there was on any line. But if a sleet storm come and took the lines down, we had to go out and put in new poles and repair the wires, and the service wasn't as good.

PD: You're talking about the maintenance service, or you're talking about the operator service?

DS: All of it.

PD: All of it. [laughs] OK.
DS: There wasn't very many farmers that was electricians.

PD: [laughs] No, but there was a lot of them that could dig a fence post hole.

DS: Yeah.

PD: I suppose, speaking of fence posts, I suppose this area was entirely fenced in those days.

DS: The time I can remember I would say practically all fenced.

PD: Yeah. Then by the ’30s I presume all the land was cleared of timber, maybe there wasn’t a lot of timber here ever, I don’t know, but–

DS: No, there was–

PD: There wasn’t much clearing of land going on in the ’30s and ’40s in this area is that–

DS: No, this wasn’t settled as early as some places either, because there wasn’t trees here. They used trees for fence posts and lumber and things like that and while it was some of the richest ground in the country–

PD: I was going to say, their loss, that they didn’t truck the wood in and– Well, did you have a Grange?

DS: Yeah. It was started in, well Harvey Harris could’ve told you better on that, when it was started. There was a Sonora Grange–Harvey Harris lives– The Grange hall now used to be the Methodist Church, and it was on his farm.

PD: I see. Was that a big part of your social life, or was it more of a farmer organization to–

DS: Well it was both. We didn’t belong to the Grange very long. Both of us belonged to a Grange before we were married, but after we started a family, then it just seemed like it was more to go to than we could keep up with.

PD: Did you ever have any political aspirations, ever run for governor or anything like that?

DS: No, I guess the nearest that I come to having any aspirations was they asked me to run for state senator one time, the political party did. And my daughter’s husband was killed in an airplane crash and the kids was– Her children–she had four children, all young–were, I thought in a way needed my attention more to help them grow up than to be a state senator.

PD: We’re still needing some good ones. [laughter]

DS: I have been in public life a lot. From church work to Farm Bureau work and that. I was president of Poweshiek County–County Farm Bureau and all the way up to that. In 1949 I was county president and I mentioned church work and school reorganization work. I was president of the Ayrshire Breeders Association in Iowa, served as a national director for fifteen years, and I got elected to anything that didn’t pay. [laughter]

PD: I’ve found out since I’ve retired that there are a lot of jobs out there that don’t pay anything, and you can get almost any of them just like [knocks three times on the table] with an interview.

DS: Yeah.

PD: Well, Dick, do you have anything else that you'd like to talk about that you felt that we haven't covered, or–

DS: Well, I think we've–

PD: Why don't we do this. Why don't I just put this on pause for a few minutes, and we'll sit here and recollect some of the things we've said, and maybe something might come to mind rather than think on our feet.

PD: After a brief discussion about what we've talked about and what we could talk about, we've decided to terminate this interview.