Interviewee: Velma Hiser
Interviewer: Mary Lou Clotfelter
Date of Interview: February 10, 1992
Transcriber: Rhonda Huber

Velma Hiser

Side One

Mary Lou Clotfelter [MLC]: This is Mary Lou Clotfelter. Today is February 10, 1992. I will be talking with Velma Hiser in her home on Penrose Street in Grinnell. This is for the Friends of Stewart Library Oral History Project about Grinnell during the Depression and World War II—the '30s and the 1940s.

MLC: Velma, we might begin talking today by finding out a little bit about how long your family had resided in the Grinnell area.

Velma Hiser [VH]: Well, I was the only one of my family that came here, and I came to teach at the college. I decided— I was teaching in high school. We had a wonderful little town high school. All of the teachers were so outstanding. We had a wonderful professor, and I was there five years. Then he was going to leave and teach in the southern part of the state and I could have gone with him, but I decided that I wanted to teach at Grinnell.

MLC: What year was that?

VH: That was in fall of '36.

MLC: '36.

VH: '36.

MLC: That was right in the middle of the Depression years, wasn't it?

VH: It was. Of course that wasn't my first introduction to Grinnell. I first came here after I graduated from my little high school. Dexter High School. Some people know that town by the Drew's chocolates. Of course, I knew Helen Drew well, and because of the Depression, she was having a little struggle. So she used to make candy bars and I'd take them to students and sell them for her. Well, any way in '36 or early '37 that I guess it was I knew there was going to be a change, and I had gone my first two years to Grinnell College.

MLC: Oh, I see.

VH: And then from the time I was in high school I wanted to be in speech, the communication field, and so I went to Northwestern School of Speech, and I wanted to come back and teach at Grinnell. So I wrote to Professor Ryan, who I knew. I took

his courses while I was here in college. And he said—he taught business class in Des Moines—and he said, "I'll meet you down there." And so we met and chatted and he said, "Now when there's a vacancy, you'll hear from me." Well, very fortunately that vacancy came very soon. And in the fall of '37 I started to teach at Grinnell for the big sum of $1500, and that was quite a raise in those days. I had been teaching in public school for a $1080

MLC: Really?

VH: And that shows you what the Depression—

MLC: It certainly does. Where did you live while you were teaching?

VH: When I taught I was in Panora—

MLC: Umhmm. But where did you live here in Grinnell when you started teaching?

VH: Oh, when I came, I lived, what was the name of the street? We lived on High street. I had an apartment in one of the lovely old homes in Grinnell. I was on the second floor and the people who owned the house and lived in the first floor were people who ran the Birch Hotel. I don't know just what is in there now, but it became, I think, it was a bus station.

MLC: Is this the hotel which was on Broad Street?

VH: Yes.

MLC: And later became the Park Hotel.

VH: Yes, that's the one.

MLC: Uh huh. And what was it called then?

VH: Hmm. Isn't that strange. I don't recall what it was called. It seems to me originally it was the Park Hotel.

MLC: I see.

VH: But I think various people changed the name.

MLC: Well, I remember that hotel. You wouldn't remember what you paid rent when you started living in their home would you?

VH: It seems to me it was twenty-five dollars.

MLC: Really? A month?

VH: Yes, twenty-five dollars yes a month [laughs]. Today it would probably two hundred fifty or three hundred. But I lived right across the street. That was from Professor Steiner's house and it was on High Street.

MLC: Do you remember the number on High Street?

VH: I think it was 920.

MLC: 920.

VH: I think it was.

MLC: So it was on the east side of the street?

VH: It was on the east side of the street. Today there are, I think, four apartments. At the time I was there there were two apartments upstairs. And the Powells who owned it and the brick hotel on Broad Street lived downstairs. And then there was a drama teacher—[pause]. That's strange, I can't recall his name. He went from Grinnell to Newton and I think became a principal of one of their schools. Becker.

MLC: Becker.

VH: Joe. And he was—lived— I just happened to think of a story that Professor Ryan told me about. He said one of the young men when he first came to Grinnell occupied that apartment, and there's a fireplace in it, and I think he came very near the beginning of this century. Anyway, young men even were not supposed to smoke, but they'd gather at this friend's house and they'd just see that most of the smoke went up the fireplace opening. [laughs]

MLC: [laughs] Totally different times weren't they?

VH: They certainly were. I also—when I was here in school—not when I came back to teach—which was—I was here in '26 to '28 and very interesting. There were two things—no cars, except after spring vacation we could have a car, and no Sunday dating.

MLC: I see.

VH: That's what they thought. We used to crawl out of the windows.

MLC: Did you? [laughs]

VH: [laughs] And some way they never were the wiser about it.

MLC: And where did you live when you were a student? Were you on campus?

VH: I was on campus. I lived at two different buildings and they were numbered then. One of them was James. I don't remember where. That's the first one. I lived cottage three and cottage two and—the first and second years—Where was I? [laughs]

MLC: Well, so you were saying then that you were there from '26 to '28 as a student, weren't you, at Grinnell?

VH: No. Let's see '22, '23, I left in '24.

MLC: Uhhuh. Then you came back to teach in thirty—

VH: Seven.

MLC: Seven. Umhum.

MLC: Tell me a little about what the college was like when you came. How many women faculty were there, for instance?

VH: Well, very, very few. I think that Beth Noble, I believe, was in the language department. Evelyn Boyd was in English. There was another woman there. What's her name? I can't recall, but Evelyn Hunter—Grace Hunter was there. And I believe there was some in Music. Oh I know. A very good friend of mine who I've been seeing through the years—she retired to Santa Barbara and I have heard indirectly, and I've been going to investigate it, but I think that she did pass away—Edith Sternfeld in the Art department.

MLC: Yes, yes, lovely painter, wasn't she?

VH: Umhum. Yes. Did some lovely things and I think that, yes, Marianna Ketnan was in that department, too.

MLC: Also in the Art department.

VH: Umhum, umhum.

MLC: What was the status of the women faculty then? Did you—

VH: Well, I wouldn't say very good. It was very difficult for the women to get raised in rank. Of course no one got raised in salary in that day, but later as things got a little better the salaries began to go up a little.

MLC: Were men—you felt men were paid more [VH: Yes.] I presume [VH: Yes.] at any level [VH: Yes.] than the women were?

VH: And the college really, during that time had some financial troubles and just were like the rest of us—not very much money.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And they had a little trouble squeaking through, I think. I know I heard Professor Ryan talk about it. And Louis Phelps was treasurer then. And I guess he had to work hard to get the money around where it belonged.

MLC: I heard that students during the Depression sometimes used barter to pay tuition. Can you tell us about that?

VH: No, if that occurred, it occurred. [dog barking loudly; pause in tape.]

VH: If it did exist I didn't know about it. They—the college, still though during that period—they said that if a student was intelligent, extra intelligent, they saw that they got to come to Grinnell.

MLC: I see. They made arrangements.

VH: They made it possible.

MLC: To follow up on the college experience, can you tell me anything about the changes that came during World War II.

VH: Oh, there were great changes, of course. Just as the Americans went into the war the dining room was added on the men's campus, on the north campus. And so then very shortly there was an adjutant general school started here. So the men were all lawyers who were enrolled in that school. And they would be in Grinnell a period of two months and then they would graduate. I remember the—it must have been bars or something—because I substituted one time for a girl who couldn't pin the bars on the particular men. She was interested in them. There were some marriages came out of then, and it made of Grinnell more of a city. I mean the people who came were—

MLC: They brought in the rest of the world with them.

VH: That's right. They did. And they weren't all small town people. And, as I say, they graduated. We had a new group come in. There were some interesting things— I'd suppose you'd call them scandals. There was one man who had two wives in town. [laughs]

MLC: That was—that is a scandal!

VH: I was working at, of course I was working at the Hotel Monroe then. And then the one wife—the older wife—lived at the hotel. And the younger wife—I think who had a child—he had married her when he was in Puerto Rico in the service. Well, anyway, it was quite the thing for these men to come to the hotel for their Sunday dinner, and the people who knew the second wife told me she couldn't understand why he never brought her to the hotel to Sunday dinner. [laughs]

MLC: And that—

VH: And I think the first was aware of the second wife.

MLC: I see.

VH: She was very lovely person. She lived at the hotel.

MLC: But the second didn't know about the first.

VH: The second wife didn't know about the first.

VH: Right.

MLC: But the first wife.

VH: I've often wondered how it came out.

MLC: Yes, I wonder too.

VH: Uh huh.

MLC: What were salaries like then for faculty during World War II? What happened to your salaries?

VH: I think that they had gone up slightly. I don't recall the amount. They had gone up slightly, but no big amount. Really I think that during World War II

was when the Depression ceased. And when we went into World War II, we were still in that depressive state. And of course college enrollment went down because the young men went off to war. I remember one of the fellows was a flyer and he flew over Grinnell very low one day [laughs].

MLC: One of the former students?

VH: Yes, he was a former student.

MLC: So you had a lot of women students then? During that period?

VH: Yes, more women, of course, than men.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And because of the—I don't think they made quite the exception for being in school. During that war we needed them desperately. And they came back, many of them, following the war. And they were wonderful students. They had come to appreciate what an education meant, and so they really applied themselves.

MLC: Well now, you were teaching speech therapy, is that right?

VH: I taught about everything. I was a speech therapist, speech pathologist. And we had some basic courses and I taught those. And also we had Grinnell College clinic, and at that time, speech pathologists were a little rare. I was one of the the early ones. And the public schools were not at that time able to find someone to employ. And so I thought that this is a good practice set up for my students so they learned enough about therapy. And I supervised them and for a number of years that was the set up.

MLC: I remember their working in the public schools because two of my children benefited.

VH: Is that right?

MLC: Did it bring maybe extra emphasis to your area having more women students? Did they tend to go into speech therapy more than men?

VH: I had about the same amount. There were usually about five or six, and the most of them went on to graduate school.

MLC: Did they?

VH: In fact, I was sending students to graduate school when practically nobody else was.

MLC: Very interesting.

VH: And I sent many of them to the University of Iowa, the University of Indiana and one, I think, went to Michigan and of course I had a good— I took my advanced work at the University of Iowa, so I was very well acquainted with most of the faculty.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And we used to do a field trip down there and visited the various departments, especially the cleft palate set up. And then we also took field trips to Des Moines to the public schools and—

MLC: You must have seen a lot of changes in the treatment of cleft palates during the time you have been associated with speech pathology?

VH: Yes, there have been and there were at that time. They used to, when I first had contact with that department, they used to wait until the child was several years old before they attempted any surgery.

MLC: Yes.

VH: Well, then they began to realize that, wait a minute, it was the opposite. They operated very soon.

MLC: Did they?

VH: And then they found out that the the growth interfered with the functioning. The repair that they did didn't grow with the child

MLC: Yes.

VH: So then they started doing it.

MLC: Holding off, waiting a while.

VH: Somewhat. Three or four years old.

MLC: That's very interesting. I didn't know that. That's very interesting.

VH: Uh hum.

MLC: How long did you teach at Grinnell college?

VH: Oh, my it was a long time [laughs] Lets see, I came in '37 and I retired in '76, I think. No, [pause] I always get mixed up on when I retired. It was in the '70s.

MLC: In the '70s.

VH: In fact I did the last teaching in that department. It was closed, which I've never forgiven Grinnell college for.

MLC: That's right.

VH: And students I taught public speaking to, and if you don't teach them anything else you have to teach them to project.

MLC: Yes.

VH: So many people, you know, mumble and talk so softly that they don't get their message across.

MLC: So true.

VH: If they are talking to a number of people— Well, anyway, everybody left but me and I taught the courses the last year. But it was in early '70s, I think, because— Yes, I know it was. It had to be.

MLC: It must have been.

VH: Uh huh.

MLC: Can you give me anymore information about just the profession and maybe experiences you've had in that profession while you were teaching at Grinnell college?

VH: Well, let me see. [laughs] We had lots of experiences with children. One I remember vividly. This child—she was at Davis School—the lower economic—in fact, her mother was retarded. And she had an occlusion of the ear canal, so she was quite deaf. And I think she was about the second, third grade. And so, as we often did with critical cases, took them to Iowa City for evaluation. We didn't know what the trouble was at first, but we knew she wasn't hearing and they knew she wasn't hearing in the classroom. So they discovered there this occlusion. So they wanted to do surgery. And of course they had to have the mother's consent. And she would not consent if the doctors wouldn't tell her there was no danger. And of course there's always a chance in surgery that something may happen. So they couldn't make that sort of promise. Well, I worked on her, the school worked on her, the doctors talked to her, but she finally wound up with a statement. She says, "I've been dumb all my life. I guess it won't hurt her to be dumb."

MLC: Really.

VH: And finally the outcome of it was she moved—the family moved, and I don't know what happened.

MLC: So you lost track.

VH: But it was a crime that—

MLC: Yes, isn't that sad.

VH: —that that child didn't at least have a chance.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And she seemed intelligent otherwise. I don't think she was as retarded as— I saw another case of an— down there—of an older woman, she must have been early thirties. And she had a cleft palate. And her parents didn't believe in surgery and nothing was done. And it was the kind of palate that disfigured the looks even. It came through the lip. We were there when the orthodontist had made a prosthesis that could fit in the roof of the mouth and it closed the lip. And he showed her a picture showed her what she looked like with the mirror and they had

the pictures what she looked like before. And I never saw such a look of joy on a woman's face.

MLC: Yes, her self-esteem must have been raised a great deal.

VH: I'm sure it was, I'm sure it was. An interesting thing was that we had very few stutterers and especially in the early grades. And I think it was because we educated the teachers and educated the parents. And some of them I had sit in the classroom where their child was so they'd realize that they weren't the only one that had children that repeated.

MLC: Yes.

VH: Dr. Johnson, Wendell Johnson, for whom the clinic is now named—the building and so forth in Iowa City—he was a stutterer himself. And he felt—in fact he's written about—and he's written a good stuttering—my book right there—has written a book for parents that was very fine and for teachers. So we saw that they got that and and tried to educate the parents to quit calling the repetition of the child to attention.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And it worked out very well with the young children. We had a few— I had one boy from a country school and he developed marvelously, a very bright young man, and we did therapy with him. We didn't know as much about good therapy then as we did later on and we still wonder sometimes. But he doesn't stutter very much and didn't. He even gave the baccalaureate address at the high school of his. And today I think he's with Upjohn; it's one of the big drug companies. He took pharmacy at school at university. He went from us to the University of Iowa. He went to Mount Pleasant and I knew a doctor down there and he and I both told him that we thought he was too smart to be just poking pills in bottles. So he quit and went to Iowa and did advanced work and then he went—I know it's Upjohn—anyway he went with one of the big drug companies and did very well. He traveled a lot for them in Europe and all over.

MLC: You've probably enjoyed keeping up with many of your students and watching their careers, I suspect.

VH: Oh yes, I was very pleased this summer. One of my college stutterers—we had a number at college. Well, as one of our psychology teachers said, we in speech therapy have really more opportunity to do psychological counseling than they did because a person didn't have to admit they needed it. Well, I had this one boy—he was from the Chicago area. And his father was a factory worker. And his father had lost his wife; they had lost their mother. There were three children in the

family. I think he was about five or six years old or so. And I think there was a child very young and then an older sister that was four years older than he was. And I realized—in fact he told me—he'd cry and he'd say, "Our father just rejected us. He couldn't keep us together." Well, I said, "Did he ever come to see you?" "Oh yes. He hardly ever missed a weekend." "And what did you do?" And told me, "We went to the playground" or "We went to a movie" and and so forth. So he finally realized he wasn't rejected. And his stuttering got increasingly better. And when he first went in he was a physical therapist. And then he changed—went back to school—and took considerable psychology, and went into personnel work. He now lives in Georgia. And this summer, well, I hadn't heard from him for a number of years. And all of a sudden I got this letter. And his wife was leaving him and he had two grown children that were almost college age. And so I wrote back to him and I said, "Well, I think you can handle this." And he has, very successfully, he has. This summer he drove clear out from Chicago. They'd had a family reunion and brought his son and they only stayed a few hours. [laughs]

MLC: Really. How nice. Isn't it nice to have students return that way.

VH: Oh yes, very much so.

MLC: I wonder in those days during Depression and during World War II, did you have a larger percentage of Iowa students than Grinnell has now?

VH: Yes, Much larger. I don't think we— I'm sure we did. And interesting thing happened though. My maiden name was Bissell. And a friend, she called—used to call my sister and me the Bissell Sweepers.

MLC: [laughs] That's right.

VH: Well anyway—

MLC: Some people may not know what Bissell Sweepers are.

VH: Not today. [laughs] Then they knew more about them.

MLC: That's right. They were sweepers that didn't have a vacuum, weren't they?

VH: That's right.

MLC: That's right.

VH: You just picked up all the clutter on the floor with the Bissell sweeper.

MLC: Right.

VH: Well, anyway, I knew the family history, part of it. They came over here in the 1600 and settled in Connecticut. There was another branch that settled in the South. I think it was Georgia, but I don't know anything about that one. It seemed to

die out. But anyway, these people settled in Connecticut and they ran a ferry there that was known as Bissell's Ferry. Well in—

Side Two

MLC: Continue our story of of the Bissell. [laughs]

VH: Let's see. Yes, well, she calls the name Bissell and she came from where the Bissell's Ferry was. And she knew some of the background—that they came early and fought and I think some of them were in the Revolution.

MLC: Really.

VH: And—

MLC: And I wondered, how did you feel as we began to have fewer and fewer Iowa students. Did you regret the—

VH: No.

MLC: The change in the college population?

VH: No. I think it was good.

MLC: You think it was good.

VH: I think it's good. I think it's good to have people from various regions. And one thing I notice about the eastern students: most of them love Grinnell.

MLC: True.

VH: And they stay some stay in the summer. The air is so clear.

MLC: That's true.

VH: And they get the small town hospitality. Of course there always is—I think as long as I can remember, there is a group in town of one might say lower economic status who resent these people. And they also— Now I only remember one Black student that was here when I was. And he was on the football team. And there also was one student from Hawaii. But of course that wasn't during the war. I remember his name. I remember both those names. The Black student's name was Kitchen.

MLC: Kitchen?

VH: And the Hawaiian's name was Nagata (?). And they were about the only different race of people. Of course, Barten Nagata was— I suppose, he was what many Hawaiians are: part Japanese, part native Hawaiian, and so forth. I think Edith Sternfeld visited him one time in Hawaii. I think I'm about the only person in Grinnell who's never been to Hawaii.

MLC: No. [laughs] I haven't been either.

VH: You haven't been either. [laughs]

MLC: That's very interesting. Do you think it was very much a town-gown feeling, say during the Depression period like it was later during the Vietnam War?

VH: No, at least I don't think there was. At least I was not conscious of it at all.

MLC: People were accepting, for the most part?

VH: Accepting and very hospitable and very interested in the college.

MLC: Yes.

VH: The college doing well and so forth.

MLC: Well, let's shift gears a little bit. When did you marry?

VH: Well, I had a first marriage.

MLC: Oh did you

VH: Uh huh.

MLC: I didn't know that.

VH: Most people don't. I was married first in '27, I believe, to a young man who was a Northwestern student. He was a CPA. He wound up later on being what we used to call the G-men.

MLC: Oh really.

VH: Uh huh.

MLC: The secret service or—

VH: Of course. They hire accountants to go in and get the facts about finances if they need that. And let's see, I was only married about five years. I had been divorced several years when I came to Grinnell, and then I remarried Mr. Hiser in 1940.

MLC: I see.

MLC: Did he already have the hotel? Was he managing the hotel when you married him?

VH: Yes at that time. And I always say—see he retired in 1960—and I always say that I didn't lift a hand for about twenty years. [laughs]

MLC: [laughs]

VH: And he, strangely enough, thought I couldn't cook, but I could cook.

MLC: Did you live in the hotel during that period?

VH: Uh huh. All that period.

MLC: I'd like you to tell me a little bit about the hotel. It was torn down not too many years after I came.

VH: That's right.

MLC: Now it was on the corner of Park Street and Third Avenue.

VH: Third Avenue.

MLC: I see. How many rooms were there in that hotel?

VH: I would say— I think there were thirty-some. It was big.

MLC: It was frame, a frame building.

VH: It was frame. I'll always wish it had been made of brick.

MLC: Oh yes.

VH: It would have still been there.

MLC: Yes.

VH: It was very interesting in that day because that was the day that travelling men came out and sold all the things. Now the grocer orders his groceries from the wholesale house, and largely in a town of this size they order from the big clothing companies. Of course, you get a larger town and they go to the market. There were all sorts of salesmen who stayed at the hotel and—

MLC: Came in on the train, I guess, right across the street, probably?

VH: Well, at that time most of them were driving automobiles.

MLC: By the time that you married—

VH: Speaking of train makes me think of during the war there were two trains came to largely on the M & St. L, which— Well, during my college days here there were passenger trains on that line. And one time they had a wreck and—

MLC: Really? When did that occur?

VH: Well, and between here and— What did that go through? I don't know if that went through Newburg or not. It sort of ended—

MLC: Gilman?

VH: Anyway I remember it wasn't far from Grinnell, because I remember Grinnell went up to see it.

MLC: I see.

VH: I can still see those—

MLC: Do you have any idea about when that would have been, Velma?

VH: Umhum it had to be during the time I was here you see.

MLC: Uh hum.

VH: I think it was the last year, which would have been, let's see, '24. I think around then.

MLC: Around '24.

VH: Uh huh. It was before the war and during the period I was here in school.

MLC: Tell me a little bit about what it was like running a hotel. You know, where you did your ordering and—

VH: Well, of course you did your ordering from the travelling men.

MLC: From the travelling men.

VH: The dining room had an excellent reputation. George specialized in steaks and aged steaks, which you can't hardly buy today. He had his own aging place that he aged his steaks and—

MLC: Did he do the cooking?

VH: No, we had chefs. And unfortunately we had a very good chef and he dropped dead just as the war started.

MLC: Really?

VH: And so it was a case of finding others. We found one good chef but he would have periodic drunks so— [laughs]

MLC: [laughs] That's not too good.

VH: No, he— Really, the man that dropped dead was really excellent, but this other one was even better. He was a wonderful chef but he would have to have these drunk periods.

MLC: So that you couldn't depend on him.

VH: Umhum. And one morning, travelling— We had a counter and the rest were tables with tablecloths on. And one morning the travelling men, four or five of them, came in and sat down at the counter— There was a counter at one end— And that was one of the times that chef was on a drunk. So George was in the kitchen. He didn't often do that. But, anyway, they all ordered eggs done in a different way. [laughs]

MLC: [laughs] Did he manage to get them all?

VH: Oh yes, he did. I don't know but they all had a lot of fun. [laughs]

MLC: Did you hire very many local people as maids and waitresses?

VH: Oh yes, they were all local. One woman raised three sons here, and one of them became a top chef in what was a very famous restaurant in Des Moines. It had two names. It was out just across from the airport.

MLC: From the airport?

VH: Uh huh. On the drive—

MLC: I guess I don't know that one.

VH: They sold it finally, but he was a chef there, and he had periodic drunks—

MLC: [laughs]

VH: But he was very good. And let's see, what did that second boy do? I don't remember. I know he was he was killed in an automobile accident the same time that the chef that went on the drunks was killed.

MLC: I see.

VH: And the youngest boy became a Greyhound bus driver, and the last I knew him still lived in Des Moines. Oh there was the boy, too, who helped out behind our desk, and he became a head clerk at the Fort Des Moines when the Fort Des Moines was in a heyday.

MLC: So you trained him in the hotel business, didn't you?

VH: My husband did. I used to—on Sunday's when the business was heavy, especially when the cadre of the army was here—of the adjutant general—I used to do head-hostess work. I didn't know this till years afterward. A friend of one of my student's father owned a good hotel in Burlington, and so her father'd been looking for a good hostess for the dining room. So when he came to visit her she said, "I've found her, and she's down at the Monroe Hotel." It was me. [laughs]

MLC: [laughs] Well, you could've taken on a new job.

VH: I could've taken on a new job. It was fun doing that though.

MLC: Yes, I'm sure it was.

VH: I enjoyed it. Once in awhile I even waited tables.

MLC: Did you keep— Were a lot student's parents— Would they stay there?

VH: Yes. Oh I remember one night there were a pair of twins in college and their mother and father were here. And so they took adjoining rooms. The twins were in one room and the parents were in the other. And the twins' room was fairly close to our bedroom. And one of the nights they were there, I think a couple of nights, the clerk came rushing down the hall. And about that time I woke up, and there was smoke coming out of the twins' room. We dashed in and it was in a wastebasket. Apparently they had smoked and not seen the cigarette. So they just picked up the wastebasket and took it out. Those twins nobody ever woke up.

MLC: Nobody? [laughs] Oh my goodness. That was very dangerous in a building.

VH: Oh, a frame building.

MLC: And didn't the hotel eventually—then did burn, didn't it?

VH: No, it never did burn. One other thing happened, too. The second story had the old ropes that people used to have. In fact I have a room, the back room, it's above this one, that has really no exit to it except the doors and the window, so I've got a rope put under the bed there and put a note that it was there.

MLC: A rope ladder to come out through the window.

VH: Uh huh, to come out the window.

MLC: And you had those all the upstairs rooms.

VH: In the hotel?

MLC: Uh huh.

VH: Well, one night there was a couple fellows there and one of them had been a—what were those soldiers that raided night raids into Germany? I'll think of it after a bit. Anyway, he was showing the other fellow how they did things and George had just had all of those ropes, he thought, replaced. But they missed this one, and that fellow fell a ways.

MLC: Oh my. It was the rope was defective then?

VH: Yes.

MLC: Oh dear.

VH: The fellows that had put it in had missed that room.

MLC: Oh my, That's, that was scary.

VH: Yes. I don't think he was hurt badly. I think he was kind of shook up.

MLC: Well, that's good. [laughs]

VH: But that was one episode that—

MLC: You must have been kept rather busy if you were helping out some at the hotel and teaching at the same time—

VH: Oh yes.

MLC: Those were busy days.

VH: And then I had a saddle horse I rode almost daily too.

MLC: Did you— Where did you go to ride? At the college?

VH: Well, I rode some up there. And we had good instructor up there, too. And then there were more dirt roads then. One road I rode on a lot is an extension of— Let's see, where does that come in? It's an extension of this street.

MLC: Penrose out south or north?

VH: Out south.

MLC: Out south.

VH: The south end of it.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And I think this road after it left the city line, which was much further back, was a dirt road. And the road that ran up that way, I remember, and this way.

MLC: Umhum. Well, tell me a little bit about the stables. I bet you know more about those stables then most people—

VH: Yes, I probably do.

MLC: —that we might be talking to. Yes, tell us who ran them and how long they'd been there?

VH: Well, there was a man—this man—who really was good with horses and knew something about riding. The first one was from Centerville.

MLC: Centerville.

VH: Umhum and he has friends here. He called me one time. I don't know if he's alive or not. A woman brought up a female for me to breed for Centerville, but she didn't know him at all.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And he was a very kind person.

MLC: Could I put a pillow behind your back?

VH: No, I'm fine.

MLC: Are you fine?

VH: Good for me to wiggle around. Helps me think. [laughs]

MLC: [laughs] Yes. OK.

VH: The second people— I was trying to think, were they ever—? No, I don't think they were ever connected with the stable. They lived at the hotel. They really taught me to ride. We had the centennial, you know. When was it: '54, '6? Somewhere in there. And we had a big parade. So a girl who often rode with me—Phyllis Ryan—she lives in Phoenix now. I saw her not to long ago when she was back. Anyway, we got a couple of side saddles and then we had to learn to ride in the side saddles.

MLC: Oh yes.

VH: And I always thought they looked so unsafe.

MLC: Yes.

VH: But in a way you're really safer.

MLC: Really.

VH: Uh huh.

MLC: Well, why is that?

VH: Well, it's the way the saddle's built. It has a horn and then one leg goes in front and one behind.

MLC: I see. So, I see. I didn't know that.

VH: And you can grab ahold. Well, then we had to get costumes. Then, let's see. Well, Kent, Kent Andrews was the head of the drama department then. And he just loved to make costumes. Well, for some play he had made this exact replica of

Godey [editor's note: probably a riding habit pictured in *Godey's Ladies' Book*] riding habit.

MLC: I see.

VH: And, of course, they wore skirts then.

MLC: Yes.

VH: That flowed down. I have a picture of that someplace.

MLC: That would be interesting.

VH: And so we both managed to get good replicas. Then we had to get hats at the— I think we—yes, I know—we lead the parade that day. [laughs]

MLC: Well, that must have been fun.

VH: It was fun.

MLC: Umhum.

VH: I lead another parade on horseback. They used to have parades while everyone was very enthused about being loyal and—

MLC: Yes.

VH: And I had to learn to carry the flag on horseback then. The hardest part was getting the horse used to it.

MLC: Yes. [laughs]

VH: But the thing that sticks in people's minds about the hotel, and it is a myth, that there was an underground tunnel.

MLC: I have heard that story.

VH: Yes.

MLC: That wasn't true?

VH: It was not true.

MLC: Well, now there's another story that's interesting and that's the silver dollars in the floor.

VH: Oh, yes.

MLC: Tell me about those.

VH: Well George put those in. He had saved silver dollars. I think there were fifty-one of them. It's interesting. He happened— During the war the bus station was at the hotel, and of course they made a rest stop there. And there were a lot of people. Well, the one woman came in one day and she said "Oh, we're in that hotel that has a thousand silver dollars in the floor." [laughs]

MLC: [laughs] A thousand?

VH: Yes.

MLC: Were they set down? What were they set into?

VH: Well, it was after the war that George put in a floor. It looked like this but it was poured.

MLC: Umhum.

VH: So when they poured it—

MLC: I see they put—

VH: Well, after the hotel— George left and it went terribly downhill. And it needed a new roof and this and that. But for awhile they ran a bar and dance floor there. But anyway, it was really people— What was it? Oh, the water pipes broke one night and just about ruined the place. So the bar moved out, and people just went in and vandalized—I saw it afterward—and broke mirrors. There were some lovely old door knobs in it. I got some of those—

MLC: Do you have any idea when it might have been built, Velma? How old? Do you know when it might have been built?

VH: I knew at one time.

MLC: I've heard so much about it.

VH: A woman built it, you know.

MLC: No.

VH: Yes, and she was a character. The family told me about her and Norman Hall, who was a Colfax young man.

MLC: The writer?

VH: Yes. And he was a Grinnell graduate, and he tells about it in his biography which is up in the college library.

MLC: Yes.

VH: That would give the date, I'm sure.

MLC: I bet that's true.

VH: At least you'd know when he was in school. But it was an interesting thing. After it was built then they moved the Grinnell, the old Grinnell House, out half of it. And then built an addition on the end of it. And there were two apartments in that: one downstairs and two up.

MLC: Now this is interesting to me. Was it where the Grinnell House is now?

VH: No, it stood were the hotel was.

MLC: It stood where the hotel was?

VH: But half of it was down on Broad Street. But I think that's been destroyed.

MLC: Now did they move it then to the present locale of Grinnell House or was that—

VH: No, it was down across the tracks.

MLC: I see.

VH: And they moved half of it.

MLC: Umhum.

VH: Now I think they must have destroyed the other half, I don't know.

MLC: That's something that I hadn't heard before. That's interesting.

VH: And they moved half of it. It was right near that lumber company on, let's see what street is it, Broad, I think.

MLC: Park Street or Broad Street? There's one—

VH: It isn't Park.

MLC: OK. Then it's Broad.

VH: It's a block over west.

MLC: Yes, I see.

VH: And it stood there. But I think that was destroyed, moved out or something. Too bad.

MLC: Now is that where the house where J. B. Grinnell had lived or—

VH: Yes. Yes. And in the back yard—this is interesting—in the back yard was a huge elm tree that Horace Greeley supposedly planted when he came to visit J. B.

MLC: Really.

VH: And it was getting old. And George had spent considerable money on it with tree surgeons but the wind was always breaking it. Well, one day I was uptown when it happened and a real strong wind came. And I said, "Oh dear. I'm afraid that maybe took the Horace Greeley elm." Sure enough it did.

MLC: It took the Horace Greeley elm?

VH: And it kept then and I'm sure that was taken out when they built those government housing units.

MLC: Yes, Monroe Park.

VH: They left the stump and it was labeled, but probably not there anymore. But that's where the Horace Greeley elm stood.

MLC: Well, I think I interrupted you. Did you have anything more to say about the myth about the underground tunnel?

VH: I was just thinking about that myself.

MLC: I'm sorry I interrupted you.

VH: George's daughter has quite a sense of humor and she says that she started that myth. Well, the reason why I think it lived so long— During the war and that was, no, Civil War, J.B. Grinnell was a station on the underground railroad for

the black people that were coming up from the South. And they hid them. He had a big basement under his home and that basement was still there when the hotel was extended. And I think that's why it stuck, because of J.B. and people thought underground tunnel.

MLC: Yes, I know I've certainly heard that story.

VH: You hear it over and over, and people want to believe it.

MLC: Yes, that's true.

VH: So they keep it going. But George, my husband, said that he went down and looked for it through the basement, and there wasn't any evidence. And when they tore the hotel down there was no evidence. The underground railroad, yes, he harbored the slaves in that basement. But—

MLC: Yes, but now [let] me be sure that I understand. That basement where he would have kept people would that have been over by the— Would that have been where the Monroe Park—where the hotel was, or would have been over there by the old lumber yard?

VH: No, it was where the hotel was.

MLC: It was where the hotel was.

VH: You see, the north end of the hotel was where J.B.'s home was

MLC: Yes, OK.

VH: The hotel was long.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And then it turned and was shorter.

MLC: That's right.

VH: And it was the north end, the other end was east.

MLC: So it would have been right there.

VH: It was right there, and that's were they were harbored, and I think that's— I think she thought it'd be a good joke. [laughs]

MLC: So he had children.

VH: It was.

MLC: But you and he did not have children, is that correct?

VH: No, he had two children.

MLC: I see.

VH: Had a boy who was, oh, so artistically talented. He did the one the boxer that has no white on the face and he did that from life. [Editor's note: She continues to talk about George's son, who was an artist and was in the navy, cartooned, worked on Fantasia.]

VH: The sister married George Hiser. No, not George Hiser. That was my name. George Smiley, who came out of a very well known and very talented family here in Grinnell, especially the mother. And they lived first in Ottumwa. George's— Well, in fact, Gertrude had several years that she had TB and was at Oakdale. And I suppose maybe he became interested in TB because that was his specialty, and he was head of this TB center starting in Arkansas.

MLC: Was George from a long-time Grinnell family?

VH: No. He was raised in the Spencer, Iowa, territory. But the family came from Ohio. And near Findlay, Ohio, there were a number of relatives. I went back there with him one time.

MLC: Did you?

VH: And the name was originally spelled Heiser. And his father changed it to "Hi." And there's Hisers around here. There was a teacher in the public schools, Huy—

MLC: Oh, yes, a German name I guess.

VH: It's a German name.

MLC: It's a German name. Well, let's think now a little bit just about what you remember about the Depression and how your life changed during the Depression. What kind of adjustments you had to make. That sort of thing.

VH: Well, you had to help other people out, for one thing. We had no— What is it they use for meals now they give people?

MLC: Meals on wheels.

VH: Yes, meals—

MLC: Or congregate meals.

VH: Congregate meals or the things they take to the grocery store, what is it they call that meal coupons. That's what they are really.

MLC: Yes, yes.

VH: And nothing of that sort, and there really was not much help for people who didn't have enough food to eat. So there was a lot of sharing. And I look back— I mean you were closer to people some way. And I know part of that period, you see, I was teaching

MLC: Yes, yes. You were.

VH: And I remember we used to go to dances that were up near Peoria Iowa. I guess they still have them up there. [They call it Lake Robbins (?)] And during the Depression, we'd all go in one car to save—

MLC: To save gasoline.

VH: Gasoline. Of course, gasoline. I wish I could remember what it cost then.

MLC: Excuse me I'm going to stop.

Side Three

MLC: We'll get back now to discussion of some of your experiences duri— [break in tape]

VH: I remember about the Depression is that gasoline was so cheap. I think fifteen to seventeen cents, something like that, a gallon. And another thing I remember is that cars were very cheap. When I wasn't making very much money, I remember buying a new Ford coupe for three hundred dollars. Which was very— that's a far cry from what you pay for automobiles today.

MLC: Absolutely.

VH: And those were a couple of things I remembered. I remember that I had an older friend in Des Moines. I lost my mother when I was about thirteen, and she sort of filled in—became my mother. She came up to our small school, and we used to have what we call a declamatory contest. And they still have sort of a version of that. Schools compete and—

MLC: That's true

VH: And did the plays. Then we had junior and senior plays in the school. And so I used to spend a lot of weekends with her. And one of the things I remember is getting cream from one of the farmers to take to her.

MLC: Is that right?

VH: And that I know was very cheap, I don't remember exactly what it was, but it was very cheap. People had gardens a lot in that period.

MLC: Like the Victory Gardens I guess we had later.

VH: Even I had a garden—only one I ever had—and people that way had something to eat.

MLC: I've been told now that there were Hoovervilles in cities like Des Moines—places where people lived very in shanties. Were there anything like that in smaller towns?

VH: No. One thing comes to my mind that we did have and you've probably read of that. They had these corps for young men and they were housed always near a state park as a rule, and they did a lot of work with trails and built bridges. This—

MLC: WPA and—

VH: Yes.

MLC: So on—

VH: And the idea for putting these young men in them—of course they were pre-military most of them—was Eleanor Roosevelt's. I found out when I read her biography. In fact, I think a lot of the ideas were Eleanor Roosevelt's. She certainly was an exceptional woman.

MLC: She certainly was.

VH: And a woman ahead of her time.

MLC: Yes, she was. Did your family— You say your mother died when you were quite young—but did your family— How did they feel about the New Deal and about Franklin Roosevelt?

VH: Well, both my father and I became Democrats. My father had served in the senate as a Republican.

MLC: Oh, had he. State senate or the—

VH: State. And we both changed because we felt that the Democrats were doing the things that were helping people. And I still feel that way. I'm a very strong Democrat. I've been Grant Township's representative on the county committee for a long number of years. And I'm going to a caucus tonight.

MLC: I'm going to too. [laughs] Did your family—of course you had really left home by the time the Depression was really—

VH: Yes, I had left home.

MLC: You had left home.

VH: My sister was living in our home though in Dexter. And they were having quite a struggle. And I remember sending her a little money each week and finally it got so bad her husband was trying to sell vacuum cleaners. It wasn't working too well when people didn't have money. He also was very mechanically inclined. Finally they decided— In fact it was through— She had a second marriage. He was her second husband. She had a boy by her first husband. And they had always remained friendly. She and her first husband. And so he wrote them if they would come out to California he could get Glen, my sister's second husband, a job in the fruit market. And so they went. They didn't tell any of us they were going at the time. They had a Ford. They didn't know if it'd get them there or not, but it did. And the first place they went when they got to the city was to her first husband's parents' home. And so he worked at the fruit market, I don't remember how long, and one day one of his customers said to him, "Did you ever think you'd like to work for McDonald's?" Not the hamburger joint. [laughs]

MLC: It's pre-McDonald's hamburgers, wasn't it?

VH: That's right. It was the airplane.

MLC: McDonald-Douglas.

VH: Yes, it is now. It wasn't at that time. It was Douglas, not McDonald. The McDonald came in later. This woman said to him, "You know I think you could work very well with my husband." And she said, "Would you be interested? He works for Douglas aircraft." And he said, "Yes, I would." She said, "Well, bring your wife and come over." And they got together at the appointment. And he was hired for Douglas Aircraft.

MLC: I see.

VH: It was in the purchasing department. And he was there until they retired. They lived for a short time in Toronto, Canada, and then they were in Saint Louis. And I think it was, he retired when he was—

MLC: That was a fortunate coincidence that he happened on that, wasn't it?

VH: Wasn't it though. And she just sensed that this was a man who could get along with my husband. And it really was wonderful, because he had a good job then.

MLC: That's good.

VH: And they were just eking past. And they've been in California ever since. So people were really pushed in that period. It was no government help.

MLC: No government help. Did the churches take a large part in that? Or how did— Was it just neighbor to neighbor, do you think?

VH: A lot of it was just neighbor to neighbor. I think the churches did some. And, of course, they still had the missions in the big cities.

MLC: Yes, but in a place like Grinnell it would have been—

VH: But, at least you didn't hear of them, and I don't think there were so many people that were sleeping in the streets and things like that.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And people help one another a lot.

MLC: What would a typical Saturday night's entertainment during the Depression have been do you think?

VH: [laughs] Well, the big entertainment in small towns was the Saturday night band concert.

MLC: Was this summer and winter or?

VH: No, just in the warmer weather.

MLC: In the warmer weather. You didn't have indoor ones?

VH: But, anyway, everybody went to the band concert on Saturday night and I know we had a—what is it they call it—a pagoda like they just built in the park.

MLC: Yes.

VH: That was end of the Main Street. I lived in— Dexter was the name of the town. And everybody got there on Saturday night. And there were a lot more—I often look back—a lot more visiting neighborhoods, playing cards, and that sort of thing.

MLC: Did your family have a Victrola?

VH: Oh, yes. I remember.

MLC: One that you had to wind up by hand?

VH: My father— No, we didn't have one of those. We had an early Victor, and I remember it had a big horn on it. And I remember one piece of music it had on it was called "Silver Bell." And what was it— There was another I used to remember. Once in a while you hear them, those old songs. And that was quite a bit of entertainment. My father, though, he used to often tell about— He farmed the first years of their marriage. I was born on a farm. And I was not quite a year old when he moved to Dexter. And he had made some very good friends from a town by the name of Adair, which is close to Dexter, in real estate. So he decided he didn't like to farm and he didn't feel he did well at it. So he decided he'd go into real estate. And he said he went to the railroad to buy a ticket to Villisca, but something came to him, and he bought a ticket for Dexter. So he came to Dexter.

MLC: That's how he got there.

VH: That's how he got there.

MLC: [laughs] Serendipity.

VH: And the first job he had— Let's see, I was less than a year old, so [laughs] you can tell how old I am.

MLC: So you were born—

VH: I am eighty-eight.

MLC: Are you really?

VH: I really am.

MLC: Eighty-eight years old.

VH: My Birthday's in July. I'm a Cancer. Well, anyway he used to tell me about the first Christmas. He only had a quarter to spend for a Christmas gift for me, and he bought a doll for me.

MLC: Really?

VH: With that first— And he was very successful at buying and selling land and managing land. Well, then along came the Depression and he was battling trying to save his good Iowa land, but finally lost it all. He then went to work for Banker's Life in Des Moines appraising. Say, I want to tell you—go back and tell you about Joe Rosenfield.

MLC: Yes, please do.

VH: Well, anyway, he went to work for Banker's Life. And he went down in the Preston territory and he and another representative had an office together. Much, much younger fellow than he was—about my age in fact. And he really enjoyed it down there and lived there until he went to the nursing home and he was in there. But he did well. He bought a lot of outside—bought a lot of cheap land when he was working for Banker's Life during the Depression. You see, companies like that had to repossess a lot of the land.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And they had to have somebody to tell them what it was worth.

MLC: Of course, and he knew that.

VH: And he knew that.

MLC: I was wondering if he if he was involved in any of the farm protests that went on during the '30s.

VH: No, no. He wasn't. I don't know— There is, Interestingly enough, all the details I know is written up in a law book. One of my students told me that who became a lawyer. Anyway, some way he and—got in a law suit and he won. And I always think he should have been a lawyer.

MLC: Yes. He and who?

VH: Brentons of the bank.

MLC: The Brentons of the bank.

VH: The older Brentons.

MLC: I see.

VH: These are generations and they were in Dallas Center at that time. They did not have banks in Des Moines. And—

MLC: And he won that lawsuit?

VH: He won that lawsuit.

MLC: So he made a successful move then from the farm to work—

VH: Very successful. And what's it I was going to say?

MLC: Now I don't want to—

VH: Oh, he bought up so much of the cheaper land—top Iowa and mid-Iowa land. It's not as good in southwest Iowa. The glaciers didn't come and glaciate that. And he sold me a farm. It had ninety-nine acres unimproved. And he sold me that for I think it was twenty-one dollars an acre. Well, at the time he passed away, farmland took a boom and that's what's made possible for me to be comfortable.

MLC: Really?

VH: Because I sold my own farm for four hundred and fifty dollars an acre. Just imagine. And then I inherited from him and that land was also way up.

MLC: Also inflated then. When did you move to this house then, Velma?

VH: In 1960. Right at the beginning of '60 is when we moved here.

MLC: I see. So part of the time you were running the hotel you were living out here.

VH: No, no. When he retired.

MLC: That's when he retired.

VH: We owned this, though. We bought it just as the war was ending, I remember that, and had people out here. We were— And well we had to have pigs and then we had cows as well. But I went down—I used to go intermittently to Creston to see my father and while I was down there I discovered that his office mate was raising dogs. He was raising Cockers and so I came back and I said to George, "I think we ought to raise some dogs out on the acreage." At that time we had a horse that we kept out there and I rode.

MLC: Yes.

VH: But, anyway, he said, "Well, if we raise dogs, I want it to be boxers." I had never seen a boxer. But we always went to the horse show at the Iowa State Fair. Well, that day there was a young man riding a horse and there was a boxer dog following him.

MLC: And this was the beginning now of your interest then in boxers. [Editor's note: Discussion of boxers and the people she met while raising and showing boxers. She began raising them in 1947. They bred, raised, sold, and judged.]

Side Four

[Editor's note: dog training discussion continues]

MLC: Well now, Velma, you have your notes that you have made. Would you like to look at those?

VH: Well, I think I've talked about a lot of them.

MLC: Have you?

VH: Let's see. There was something else.

MLC: Because I'm very interested in things that you might think of that I haven't thought of.

VH: Well, I think, as I've said, it brought into focus very strongly with me that you must teach from the positive—

MLC: Yes.

VH: You know I did an interesting thing in college teaching up here the last year. I was, for the first time, teaching general semantics. And I was really—had a background in it because of Wendell Johnson, the head of the department that I spoke of before. We went with him and studied under Korzybski, who was at the basis of that. So I started out and I think I learned a lot about the weakness of our education. I gave them projects. I gave them reading, and then they had to come in a discuss these things. And I made myself— I didn't react to anything they were saying. And if they got started well, they'd look out of the corner of the eye to see what I thought of it.

MLC: How you were reacting.

VH: Yes. And I often say too often we teach from the standpoint of expecting the student to learn what he reads and what the professor says and then we ask him to regurgitate it. Well, I found out these students had considerable trouble in the beginning in observing what was happening to language in society. They didn't have that ability. And I think that's a mistake that we make in educating.

MLC: That's very interesting. I didn't know that you had been a student of semantics and I didn't realize that had been a special interest of yours.

VH: See, I didn't teach it until the last year; I wish I could have repeated it. In a new course I think you always do better the second year or third year. It should keep improving. Korzybski was an interesting man. [papers ruffling] My pages that we haven't talked about. Oh, one thing I haven't mentioned is Ryan. Oh, I learned so much from that man. One thing I learned is about reading. I think that we make a mistake in our public schools of not teaching reading long enough and we have more emphasis on reading the words and too often not on getting the idea. And after— I got that from him.

MLC: Now who was Ryan? Tell me.

VH: He was J. P. Ryan, the head of speech here at the college.

MLC: At the college.

VH: Uh huh, chairman of Speech. And he was a very brilliant teacher. People just practically—students practically fought to get into his class. And I can almost tell if I meet somebody who gives a speech. Now our former President—

MLC: George Drake.

VH: Yes. I could tell that he was a Ryan. He didn't study. We had in the college, too, something I didn't mention. It didn't exist only about three or four years, maybe five, and that's what we call basic communication. And it was both a speech and a writing course. Drake took that. He told me about it one time, but it was Ryan technique. And I've always thought that Drake could make a marvelous speech.

MLC: Yes, he did.

VH: And he was very good.

MLC: And you give Ryan a lot of credit for that.

VH: Yes. It came out of Ryan's philosophy. And the thing he taught me anyway that you read for idea and then you put what you've read into your book. You could write in the margin the idea in a word or two and often the first sentence and the last sentence in a paragraph will give you the idea.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And that way it makes you think about the idea and make it concise and it's marvelous when you come to review.

MLC: It is.

VH: And I took several students that were having a tough time and taught them that and they came up in their grades.

MLC: Uh huh.

VH: And I think it's a marvelous. I've taught people since, too, to do that. I think it's a good technique.

MLC: It seems to be a good way to think about what you're reading—

VH: That's right.

MLC: —and be organizing it as you go.

VH: And they sort of quit too soon in our reading programs in our public schools. And Ryan put a lot of emphasis on knowing what was in the background. There were Greeks and Romans who were great speech teachers and they left some of the writing and we got all of that background and then his philosophy in his basic course which he always taught one section himself. When I first came here there were twelve sections.

MLC: Even when we came speech was, of course, still being taught.

VH: Still being taught. I think it was a grave mistake. And I know that George Drake wanted to put it back and there was a class ready to fund a professor. But some of the— They have an idea that there's no subject matter and they remember at around the early century early days there grew up in speech a very artificial thing. It's fun to get a hold of the old speech books. And they knew exactly if you talked to heaven you must have this gesture [points upward].

MLC: Yes, gestures.

VH: Yes. It was all a mess. Artificial, really, technique.

MLC: So that made some people hold it in contempt perhaps.

VH: I think that's what a lot of people think it really is. Now Ryan was very strong in that basic course in teaching people by having them make a one minute speech. And if you get that concept, you can very readily organize a speech. In fact, he called me up one time from the senior center, and some vet was going to talk and he'd gone back on them at the last minute. I remember they woke me up about eight o'clock in the morning. Well, I know dogs and everything.

MLC: Sure

VH: So I could make a very—

MLC: and VH: —good speech in a short time.

VH: If you know the subject. And a lot of them came out as good as George.

MLC: Well, that's very interesting. So then he was kind of inspirational to you and—

VH: Yes. And to students. They haven't forgotten him yet. I mean the older alumni remember him because he meant so much to them. And, you know, an interesting thing happens to some people who attempt to give a speech. I heard a man the other night—I was at a political meeting—an organization—the Central Committee. This man was running for office and he gets up and reads his speech. Well, there's a vast difference between written word and spoken word.

MLC: That's right.

VH: And he couldn't project. You couldn't hear him if you were a ways from him. It's a great asset.

MLC: It is an asset. Do you have other things there maybe that you wanted to discuss, Velma, because I don't want to miss anything that you had planned to tell me?

VH: Well, let's see if I had. I think we've covered a lot of it. I'd forgotten about Ryan. I thought of him when I was talking and I saw it here. Let's see, did that come that early? They're getting a lot of things that come a little latter.

MLC: Uh huh.

VH: Let's see. Well, no this came quite early. It was when the two hospitals were separated.

MLC: Yes.

VH: There was St. Francis

MLC: That's right

VH: And Community.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And during the war, I did nurse-aid work. Mrs. Korfmacher, whose husband was a doctor and she was a nurse, she taught a class. Bea Wall and I are the only two who are around here now who were in that class and we worked in the hospitals.

MLC: Which hospitals did you work in?

VH: Well, I worked in both.

MLC: Yes.

VH: Eventually. I'll never forget one night we had an elderly man who didn't want to stay in bed out in St. Francis. There was one nurse on duty. I had to keep herding him back and climb over the sides till she can get to the doctor to get something to quiet him down.

MLC: You did that during World War II, when so many nurses were gone away to serve in the armed forces?

VH: That's right.

VH: Nurses were scarce. [simultaneously with next line]

MLC: And there was quite a nurse shortage, wasn't there.

VH: You know Doctor Ferguson was, well, he was a Vietnam doctor. Now, let's see. I was going to talk about the hospital.There were two separate auxiliaries and one day, I think it was Mrs. Parish from O. F. Parish. He was a doctor.

MLC: The father of John Parish.

VH: The father of John. And she called me up and said, "We'd like you to be president of the hospital auxiliary." I didn't even belong. [laughs] But it had dwindled down. There were only four or five people doing it. So I don't know why but I did accept. And we did some new things. Of course, today, it has three or four hundred members.

MLC: Yes. Do you have any other memories about your work as an aide or you know?

VH: Well, [laughs] I remember at first I couldn't carry a bedpan. It bothered me too much. I remember that.

MLC: [laughs] That was very distasteful, wasn't it?

VH: Yes, very. But I enjoyed it a lot because of the people—the patients.

MLC: And it really gave you a feeling that you were contributing to the war effort.

VH: Yes. That's right.

MLC: Did you do any knitting for—

VH: Oh, yes.

MLC: During the war?

VH: Yes, I learned to knit during the First World War and I remember I knit a sweater. So then I knit again. Of course, we didn't have TV and we didn't have too much radio. And so I did have a nice machine like the old phonograph that I could play the music on and then radio came in stronger. So I did some handwork during that period.

MLC: Did you knit sweaters or socks?

VH: I knit sweaters, largely. And then the Red Cross would send them to the soldiers. Also, Mr. Hiser was president of Red Cross here in town and I headed up Junior Red Cross and we then had a secretary here in town, too. And we did a lot too. Oh, packing things that we sent to the soldiers. The juniors did a lot of that.

MLC: Did you knit bandages? Did you ever do any bandage knitting?

VH: No, but the women were doing that. Women I don't remember that coming in as much in World War I as it did in two.

MLC: In World War II?

VH: I think so. Of course it was World War II in which I was involved in Red Cross and George was involved with the Red Cross. You know I thought—I was thinking the other day there isn't a single businessman left that was of that period.

MLC: Are all of the—

VH: And even later. And Don Cunningham. And what was the Edwards first name in the Edwards grocery? Those two men died the same day and— That was the last of the old timers.

MLC: I see.

VH: Don Cunningham, who had the drugstore, started out working for—[pause] Talbotts. They had a drugstore. And one of those Talbotts became quite prominent in World War II. He designed a lot of the clothing, like the aviation jacket that the fellows wore.

MLC: Really, so he—

VH: And there was another Talbott, Don Cunningham told me about this, that made beautiful neckties. They're on the market. I saw some in California in a very exclusive shop. And he used to send neckties for Don.

MLC: And that's the person he got his drugstore from.

VH: That was a son.

MLC: A son. Tell a little bit about Edward's grocery store because that was an interesting little grocery.

VH: Yes.

MLC: Why don't you tell a little bit about that and also the North Market.

VH: The what?

MLC: The North Market there on Broad Street.

VH: Yes, I knew about them both.

MLC: Could you tell us about both of those?

VH: The Edward's Grocery was a family grocery store. There was a brother, Howard, and Hazel. What was the other girl's name? Anyway, there was a third girl. But Hazel largely ran the grocery part and Howard ran the meat mart and the other girl just sat around and listened and talked to people when they came in. [laughs]

MLC: Yes. [laughs]

VH: I used to, if I was in a hurry, I didn't go in.

MLC: And they delivered long after everyone else had stopped, didn't they?

VH: I was just going to say, they were delivering. In fact, the delivery—in an early day all grocery stores delivered. That was a part of it. And they were in the grocery business long before we had the big markets.

MLC: Yes.

VH: And Hazel—I don't know about Howard—but Hazel was well educated in Latin and the classics. Here she was running this grocery store.

MLC: Maybe we should say where that was located. It was on Fourth Avenue along by Hanson's photography, wasn't it?

VH: Yes, right in there. Of course we had an old business go out when Mrs. Arnold went out of the shoe store.

MLC: That's right.

VH: That shoe store was there then.

MLC: That's a very old.

VH: When I first was in college.

MLC: When you first came to town and that also was on Fourth Avenue.

VH: Right in that same space.

MLC: Do you have any idea how long the North Market was there on Broad Street where the bank now has been?

VH: Well, it was there quite a long while. He was a— And I think he did his own route. But, of course, he didn't last as long as the Edward's grocery did.

MLC: That's right. That was—

VH: But there were two places you could shop for groceries downtown. I don't recall. I don't think that during my period here—I don't believe that he delivered. He might have.

MLC: He may have. I don't know either. Do you remember any other very old businesses that go back to that Depression or, you know, pre-World War II?

VH: Yes, that shoe business.

MLC: That Arnold's shoes.

VH: It wasn't Arnold's then. But it was there when I was at college here at first, and that would be '22 to '24. And there was a shoe store in that and I think that Mrs. Arnold's husband bought that out. But that was after I had left Grinnell that first time.

MLC: Yes. Can you think of any other old businesses that go back to there?

VH: [pause] Oh, this is interesting. Around the corner on—which is the avenue that—Main. Main. Main.

MLC: Main.

VH: On Main Street about the middle of the block there was a restaurant and it had the strangest name.

MLC: What was it?

VH: It was called the Raven.

MLC: The Raven.

VH: A scavenger. [laughs]

MLC: A scavenger. [laughs] Was this on the east side of the street?

VH: It was on the east side there in the middle of the block.

MLC: For goodness sakes. The Raven. [laughs]

VH: The Raven. [laughs]

MLC: Does that go back to your college days?

VH: Yes. I'll tell you what goes back to our college days. In where the Cunningham Drugstore was that once was the one side—the west side of it—was a

Greek candy kitchen. And they called it Candyland. Two brothers ran it. And that's were the Candyland sundae came from.

MLC: That's were the Candyland sundae came from, I see.

VH: And what happened was there also was a very small jewelry store that was next to the candy kitchen. Those candy kitchens were run by Greeks. They were great candy makers. They made homemade candy that was delicious. And they were pretty well distributed to a lot of the country.

MLC: Really. There was a candy store, I think, in Marshalltown when we moved here that was quite—

VH: Well, what happened first was the one man died, and the other one attempted to run it. And he wasn't very good at it. But what happened was there was Candyland and that small jewelry store and the Cunningham drugstore, all of which the Cunningham drugstore occupies all of the space. But what brought that about was there is an upper—as there is all along that block, you know—there's a second story. And it caught fire one night and burned out. I mean down.

MLC: And wasn't the museum there at that time?

VH: Yes. And they lost a lot of things. And they always thought that there was this fellow who was kind of questionable. In fact, we always felt that he stole a dog from us.

MLC: Really.

VH: And he was a lawyer, but, I don't know why, but they all thought he was a questionable person. And they all thought that he set that fire. He left the town right afterwards or before it anyway. And that really then was when the whole thing was opened up to Cunningham.

MLC: Cunningham.

VH: Cunningham had more space. You see, right next to the candy kitchen—What did I start to— There was another store in there. [pause] Oh, there was a flower shop. And that—that lawyer was in that building. Who's in there now? It's right on the corner of the alley there right west of where Cunningham's are.

MLC: I think maybe Hamilton's Travel Agency is there now, isn't it? Or am I mistaken?

VH: Let's see. Yes, they are now.

MLC: You mentioned something early. You said you wanted to be sure and tell me about Rosenfield. Or didn't you?

VH: Oh, yes. Well, Joe was a member of my class, which was '26. They always treat me, you know, like I graduated here. [laughs]

MLC: And you didn't actually graduate?

VH: No I didn't, but I was a member of the class of '26. Joe was a member of that. And Joe, I think, is largely—this is my own idea—largely responsible for the wealth that Grinnell College has accumulated. You see they bought that radio station in Ohio and they made a pack of money. Then they had stock in Younkers and when that was sold they got more money And I think all the money they have made and accumulated Joe Rosenfield is responsible.

MLC: He has certainly been responsible.

VH: Of course, also that family was responsible for the Rosenfield lectures. I think it was his mother largely that that— An interesting thing. Rosenfield of course was our good governor. I'll never forgive him for resigning from the Senate.

MLC: No. We—

VH: Then he's gone down, down, down.

MLC: We really appreciated him, didn't we, back in those days?

VH: Oh, in those days, he was a great governor and he was on the way to being a great Senator. But he got overly bitten by religion. But what did I start to say? Oh, he says in his biography that Rosenfield backed him with money and he said, "Joe never asked me for a favor."

MLC: Really. That's very—

VH: A big complement to Joe. He's a fine person.

MLC: You mentioned one other thing that I wanted to follow up on. You mentioned the college building houses for faculty. Where were those located?

VH: Well, there are different places.

MLC: Are they?

VH: There's one now, let's see. You see, I've been in this town so long I just go. I don't pay much attention to the streets. But it's State. It's right over in this section. And [pause] it isn't Summer, east. It's a street— There's one street between it and the women's dorm, north.

MLC: Then it's probably Elm Street because— Probably Elm Street maybe.

VH: Yes, it probably is.

MLC: Was it like an apartment house or?

VH: No. It was one.

MLC: One.

VH: There were different houses.

MLC: I see.

VH: Now I don't know where the others are. But that—

MLC: Do I remem—

VH: One, Max Fuller, followed Ryan when he resigned, or retired, I should say. And he lived in one of those houses. And I was very familiar with that; it was very nice. And then later, [pause]—the name—but that isn't right [pause]. What did she do? Had charge of a lot of publications for the college and her husband was a professor of journalism.

MLC: Would that have been Bliss Carmen, Bliss [laughs]—not Carmen—Bliss Vanderpool?

VH: Oh, Vanderpool was the third head of the speech.

MLC: I see.

VH: This was [pause] begins with *i*. It'll come to me, if I don't fool with it.

MLC: Yes. Well, do you think of any other things, Velma, that we might like to have any other memories of the Depression. I don't want to wear you out.

VH: You're not wearing me out.

MLC: But—

VH: I'm hard to wear out!

MLC: That's [laughs]

VH: Thank goodness I am.

MLC: I hope I'm that hard to wear out when I'm your age. Either the Depression or World War II. We've certainly gotten some very good memories and I appreciate—

VH. And you know I look back. Strangely enough, I had a job, I had enough to eat and a nice place to stay and enough—if we all went together, we could have amusement. And my memories from the Depression are, as far as personal, I look back on it with pleasure.

MLC: That's interesting.

VH: I think we related to one another much better than we do today. And there didn't seem to be the "me" philosophy.

MLC: Maybe we responded to the real need.

VH: I think we did. And, of course, you're always happy when you're helping others. I remember when my father was in the state senate—what was early '30s—I worked as a secretary. And I would [work] some for the governor and some for my father and— [pause] Wait a second. Let me think about this. The state—[pause] What did you ask me?

MLC: Well, I was just asking you—

VH: Oh, about what I remembered about the Depression.

MLC: Yes. That's right. About the Depression. And I think that what you said is very interesting. That your memories are basically good memories, basically good.

VH: And then my sister who was having all the troubles with making a living; and her's turned out well.

MLC: Yes, and her's turned out well. Why don't we stop and let you tell me about that trip.

[Editor's note: Ms. Hiser gives details about trip to Australia and boxers.]

Side Five

[Details about trip continued]

VH: There were a lot of teachers during the Depression that just got these credit slips.

MLC: Yes.

VH: Like the teachers around Chicago. Got credit slips that were good at Marshall Fields.

MLC: Tell about the bank holiday.

VH: Well, the bank holiday came when during the Depression. Let's see. I remember when that happened. It happened I think in '24 because I had money in the Poweshiek Bank and then I didn't have it. [laughs]

MLC: [laughs] That was it.

VH: That was it. And so they closed all the banks and I don't remember for how long. It wasn't very long, I don't think.

MLC: But your husband was caught up in that. George was—

VH: Yes, he was in Chicago in real estate and lost a great deal of money with the banks closing. So he heard. At that time the college owned the hotel. That's an important thing.

MLC: The college owned the Monroe Hotel at that time. I see.

VH: Um hum. And I think he he heard that they wanted a manager for the hotel. So he came out here and got the job and his son was with him at that time. And I can't remember when he bought it. It was after we were married.

MLC: Do you remember where it got the name Monroe?

VH: Oh, there's a whole history there.

MLC: Really.

VH: I thought of it and then didn't get back to it.

MLC: I'm glad we thought to check on it.

VH: It was— Are we still on?

MLC: We're fine.

VH: It was owned and built by a woman and she originally came from the East, the New England States, I think. And her maiden name was Monroe. And she first had, in an early day, this is something— They built the hotels very close to the railroads and they had no diners. And they'd make a stop and everybody'd go in and—

MLC: Oh. Yes. Like the old Harvey houses.

VH: Yes. In fact those were, you know, very famous at the Santa Fe line. And I recently learned that the Indians were always there selling rugs and silver work that was not original with the Indians. It was original with the Mexicans. So he sent some Indians down to learn silversmithing. So that's how they got to developing—

MLC: Harvey houses. Yes. So the Monroe, then, was a was a stop on the railroad for meals.

VH: Food.

MLC: I see.

VH: And I started to tell too. During World War II, we had troop trains that came down on the M & St. L and we had to furnish lunch bags. And I remember making sandwiches. We did it. Put [laughs] down the bread and somebody came along and put down the meat.

MLC: Really.

VH: We had a regular assembly line.

MLC: And those were then taken on the train.

VH: Uh huh. And fed to them.

MLC: Well, I'm so glad we found out about that, Velma.

VH: Another thing during the— That was World War II. [pause] To do the detassling they brought in— Where were they from?

MLC: Were these the Jamaican people?

VH: Hmm?

MLC: I've heard that Jamaicans were brought in too?

VH: That's who it was.

MLC: Was it?

VH: The Jamaicans.

MLC: Uh huh.

VH: And interesting thing to me was, these Jamaicans, black as the ace of spades, talked Oxford English. [laughs]

MLC: Where did they stay, Velma? Where did they live when they were in Grinnell?

VH: Hmm. I don't know. I never thought of that. I used to see them in the park.

MLC: How were they accepted by local people?

VH: Well, I don't think there was too much intermingling. George bought me a serape. Fellow sold it to him right off. I still have it. It doesn't fit in this house. It hung in the mobile(?). But the colors they were too vivid. A little off. It was a beautiful thing.

MLC: I'm really glad I found out about this. Let me—[break in tape] Tell me about that. Describe the long house.

VH: Well, the long house was right north of, north of that building that the Lucille's Beauty Parlor and it was on Broad.

MLC: Corner of Broad and Fifth, isn't it?

VH: Yes. There were two old mansions built in there later. But the long house stood there. And it was—I don't think there was a restaurant there. It was just a place where the people could stop and sleep overnight. And go on. It was built when lots of people were traveling west.

MLC: I see. A precursor of the motel?

VH: That's right.

MLC: I see.

VH: There were no motels then or hotels. And I've never heard about what they charged or anything.

MLC: It'd be interesting to know, wouldn't it?

VH: It would be interesting to know.

MLC: Well, that's— I'm glad we got that. Your grandfather stopped there then in that early day.

VH: In that trip to Iowa and they were coming looking for Iowa land. And he eventually owned land down in Massena, Iowa, which is about fourteen miles south of Anita. That's where the

MLC: That's where he wound up.

VH: Then he sold that land to my father's father and he went up in North Dakota.

MLC: He kept moving west.

VH: That's— And that was west. I remember they lived fourteen miles from town, had no automobile.

[Tape was shut off.]