

Interviewee: Virgil Jones
Interviewer: Valerie Vetter
Date of Interview: March 12, 1992
Transcriber: Valerie McKee

Virgil Jones
Side One

Valerie Vetter [VV]: Today is March 12, 1992. This is Valerie Vetter. I am going to be talking to Mr. Virgil "Bill" Jones at his home in Grinnell for the Friends of Stewart Library oral history project, Grinnell's Voices from the Past, about the Depression and World War II. Why don't you start with telling me where and when you were born?

Virgil Jones [VJ]: I was born in Grinnell in 1912; it was right before the first of the World War I. I was born in Grinnell. My folks – My mother was like a grade school graduate, by that I mean they dropped out because of needing some work, and at that time she could get a little work in a factory here that made overgaiters – at that time we called them – spats, today. I was born in Grinnell and my mother and my dad – my dad was a Grinnell boy.

VV: Was your mother also from Grinnell?

VJ: Yes, all her life, yeah.

VV: Were they both born in town?

VJ: My dad was born, I imagine, was out in the country, down near, oh, down south of Searsboro, near New Sharon.

VV: Where was your family living when you were born?

VJ: Well, over on, I think it was over on East Street.

VV: About where?

VJ: South of the tracks someplace there, I can't remember. It's been changed. I lived across from the Mayflower, but I wasn't born there. I lived across from Mayflower for quite awhile.

VV: So you lived quite awhile around that area, across from Mayflower? Did you have any brothers and sisters?

VJ: I had a sister, named Norma.

VV: How old was she with relationship to you, was she older?

VJ: There would be – She would be about five years younger than I am.

VV: So, when you were growing up, though, you said you lived in a house near the Mayflower?

VJ: We moved, like several times, until we moved in this home my grandmother bought, right across from the Mayflower; right where the Assembly of God Church is, exactly.

VV: Could you describe the house a little? Do you remember much about it?

VJ: Two story, with a fireplace. Luckily it had a bathroom upstairs, and –

VV: So you had indoor plumbing?

VJ: We had indoor plumbing. I can't remember of any home we lived in but wasn't indoor plumbing. I can remember one, oh, that didn't have lights. We had gas lights, but it wasn't very long they put in electricity.

VV: You mentioned earlier when I first came in that while you were born south of the tracks, and there was this feeling "south of the tracks" and "north of the tracks." How did you feel about living south of the tracks when you were growing up?

VJ: It didn't bother me any.

VV: It wasn't –

VJ: No, never bothered me. The south end kids played together, and they all of them went to Davis School. Davis School was built by the time I came down here. Old Cooper School and old Parker School – I started school in Parker School, because we were living right north of the tracks at that time. We moved around. The Parker School was right where Fareway is now, named after a professor I believe named Parker, and Cooper was named after a man, I'm not sure whether he was one of the men that founded the town or not.

VV: Why do you think your family moved around? Were you renting different places?

VJ: Oh sure, yes, you bet, you bet. Just rented. At that time I think my dad worked at the washing machine factory and earned like forty-five cents an hour.

VV: Most of the time when you were growing up, was he working at this washing machine factory?

VJ: Oh no, no.

VV: He did several jobs?

VJ: He started out as a kid for the old Spaulding, and started out carrying a big – Or a water bucket and a long-handled dipper, and that's the way they got their water to drink. He carried it around to the men in the shops; and if one had a

cold, they all had a cold, and the guy that chewed tobacco, why, [laughter] that was something different!

VV: You mentioned that your mother had a grade school education. What about your dad?

VJ: My dad the same way, a grade school education. My dad should have had more education but he was a very good reader; he could read real good. He was very good with tools, and his brother (my dad was the baby of the family), his brother was older, was very good with tools, excellent. And now, one more thing you probably don't know about: my father's father was a full-blooded Indian.

VV: Now isn't that interesting.

VJ: Yep, that's right.

VV: Do you have any stories or recollections that have come down about your grandpa?

VJ: The only thing that I remember my dad telling about, was that he was a baby, and he'd gotten a letter which he couldn't read, and my dad's mother couldn't read; at that time it was very common, because you didn't have the schools. And, they always take it up to the banker. The banker could read it for you. It seems like they wanted my dad's father back East; and he goes down, and they get his clothes ready, and they go down to see that he could go back to Pennsylvania, is where he's supposed to have come from.

VV: Oh, so it was an Indian group in the East?

VJ: Yeah, of course, there was probably fifty to seventy-five tribes at that time, and that was something to do, I suppose, right after the Civil War, and they — He never come back.

VV: Did your family ever try to hide the fact that you were part Indian, or —

VJ: No, no. Why, my Uncle Ed never shaved; did you ever seen an Indian with whiskers?

VV: Well, they don't have a lot of facial hair. That's right, they don't have a lot of facial hair. Getting back to you, besides Davis School, or after elementary school, did you go on?

VJ: I went through high school, and I graduated in 1930.

VV: Was it — Did most children you know go to high school?

VJ: The kids — I believe every kid that we run around together — I've got a list of them — every one of them went through high school.

VV: And these were —

VJ: I'm just sure that they did.

VV: – kids that lived in your neighborhood, so it was pretty usual for kids to go on?

VJ: Every one of them. Nineteen of us. Only five of us left, but every one of them graduated from high school. Become successful, quite a few of us. Very successful.

VV: Would you say these are, mostly people that you knew that lived south of the tracks?

VJ: Well, yes. They was born and raised, most of them, south of the tracks, moved here – some of them moved there, that's right.

VV: Did you ever have to miss school because you had to do things at home, or for the family?

VJ: Not too much that, no. You'll find most all of those kids south of the tracks, those that didn't was a different situation, but those that where their dad and mother was trying to make a living for the family, which you have to take – they were that type of people, they weren't [unclear]. They wanted to raise their kids better than they had. That was their object, and every one of them become – I'd say every kid of those nineteen – they weren't President of the United States – but they all become fairly successful in their work, for the simple reason that they had a goal to shoot for and they hit it.

VV: So in your family, your family had a, put a high value on education?

VJ: That's right.

VV: For both boys and girls, do you think?

VJ: Both boys and girls, I think so, you bet.

VV: So your sister also went through high school?

VJ: Yeah. Turned out to be very good students.

VV: And, you mentioned earlier that you, did you go to Grinnell College right after high school? Where did you go after high school?

VJ: I went to Grinnell College that summer after school. I graduated Spring of '30, I went that summer, and the next year, and dropped out – I quit, didn't go to school anymore. Let's say it that way – I had a chance to get a job with J. C. Penney's, at I could say, I believe, fifty-five dollars a month, and that was quite a little money, and the Depression was on, and terrible depression of the farm and all over the United States. It wasn't only the Iowa farmers, but it was clear from one end to the other of the United States, and they needed – I found this job, and I had a very good boss. And I stayed with them for three and a half, pretty near four years.

VV: How did your family feel about you dropping from college?

VJ: Well, not—they did— My dad was not that way. He was, and my mother, were not that way. Sure, they'd like to see me finish college, but that was beside the point. They said, "Well, you know what you're doing."

VV: When you did take some courses there, how did you, did your family pay for your tuition, or was there some way you could work?

VJ: If I told you, you probably wouldn't believe it. I run into the old Secretary and Treasurer of the College, Lou Phelps, right after graduation.

VV: From high school?

VJ: Yep. Lou said, "Are you going to school?" and I said "Lou, I don't know." Everybody knew him. And, very well liked. And I said "Well, Lou, I don't know what I'm going to do." And he said "Go on up and go to school; don't worry about what it's going to cost you. Just go on, it'll get paid." So, when I got done I think I owed them eighty-five dollars. For a year and a summer's school.

VV: Do you think that he somehow adjusted what you would have had to pay, or that's what everyone just paid at the time?

VJ: I don't know. I don't know. But that time the tuition, they was lucky to even get anybody. It's unbelievable to the ordinary person except a few of the older people, how things were in that Depression.

VV: Maybe we should start talking about that. When did difficult times for you and your family start?

VJ: Well, I— It wasn't difficult. It was a time when everybody knew the Depression. I always thought difficult was because it was singled out to a certain family, or this family. Well it's a shame—it was a Depression. Everybody, everybody had—

Ona Jones [OJ]: They just accepted it.

VJ: That's right, they just accepted that, that's right. It's the right idea; they did accept the fact that it was hard times, tough times.

VV: Did you think it was hard times in the early '20s? You would have been about twelve.

VJ: Kids never thought about it, because we had clean clothes. We had shoes when we needed it. But you could buy things different then. I remember when I started working for Penney's how high a pair of overalls was. A pair of overalls today is probably well above twenty dollars; I don't know, I haven't bought any, I suppose they're twenty to twenty-five dollars, pair of overalls.

VV: How old were the overalls at Penney's in the '30s, when you—

VJ: How much were they then? You could buy a pair of overalls for less than two dollars.

VV: How much do you think overalls were in the early '20s?

VJ: I don't know what they were back in that time, but they were – boy's clothes – All boys wore the same clothes. I mean, you wore to school it was overalls, you wore overalls. My mother said, "Well, I'm going to try to keep you out of overalls; I'd rather see you wear pants and a shirt," and this and that, but that's – You stayed like the rest of the kids. We were all alike.

VV: Were your, both your mom and dad, working throughout the time you were growing up?

VJ: My mother, after my dad and my mother – I never heard my mother work, after I started to school. She, that was her job, to stay home with the family.

VV: So she stayed home?

VJ: That's right, and take care of her family, and then – which was me – then my sister came later on. And, but, that was, my mother – But my dad always seemed to have a job. If you'd have read that before you came here, you'd –

VV: Oh, sure. Maybe I can take a glance at this.

VJ: It was when my dad finally through acquaintance found out there was a job in Chicago. He went clear into Chicago and worked in the Case and Martin Pie Factory, as a painter.

VV: So did he move up there, or commute?

VJ: No, he stayed there, and stayed there, and sent money home. I know one Christmas time my mother got a big barrel of dishes for her Christmas present.

VV: What Christmas? Do you remember how old you might have been?

VJ: Well, I was probably in first or second grade, along in there, so I couldn't have been much over eight or nine.

VV: So, how long was he working in Chicago?

VJ: He worked in Chicago about a year and a half. And then they had a change of the mayor in Grinnell, and they were reorganizing the fire department and this and that, and he applied for the job to drive the fire truck. And he and Harry Case were partners for many years. They'd switch it, and figure out their times when they was to, somebody was always there to drive that fire truck. For years.

VV: What were you doing, well, I guess first, right when you graduated from high school in 1930, there'd already been the 1929 crash, but had you, did you feel like there was a depression going on at the time, or not yet, or –

VJ: Well, we did, yes. Pretty near every kid that graduated from high school did, for the simple reason when that stock market crash came in October of 1929, we all begun to realize in our economics classes. We had a nice teacher named Rosemond Rule, and Rosemond Rule and the other teachers tried to— Their money they were going to get— Money was getting hard to find, and those teachers were teaching just because they could teach, not because they was getting a living out of it. It was because they could teach. And it was not only Grinnell. It was a good many other towns, and a lot of them gave them— what was it they called it on a, a piece of paper that says you can draw the money later on.

OJ: Warranted.

VJ: A warrant, yes, on their salaries.

VV: Now, this was already in 1928, 1929?

VJ: Well, it was coming on, yes. It was coming on then. Post World War I time. We— It was always a scare after a major war that things like that—

VV: So did you feel it was kind of a gradual feeling of—

VJ: Well, I did, but I was like all kids at that age, a young kid's time was pretty valuable, but what we studied about it was mostly in school. And what we could hear from my mother and my dad, "Well, son, take care of your shoes." And we weren't the only ones. There was the rest of us. We had clothes, we had food. My mother could make bean soup and cornbread. We'd still like it.

VV: So she probably used to—

VJ: Yes. She cooked it, according to what her pocket book was. Times were different then. I remember, if you'd have read that, you could have told you could remember, I can't tell you where it is, but it's, it was a Christmas. To get something for Christmas you knew, unless you were real small, you knew it wasn't going to be too many toys. It was going to be clothes.

VV: This was during the '20s?

VJ: Yes, that's right. And I remember we could go up the alleyway there and go up where they were drilling a well, there in Grinnell, where, and they had this big tower, and of course it wasn't closed in, it was just enough to keep the wind and the snow from blowing in, and those fellows worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, Christmas day. Christmas morning I got a new pair of coveralls.

VV: Were you excited about it?

VJ: I'll tell you what, I was excited about the coveralls. They were men's type of coveralls. Now the boys' type had drop seats in the back. Men's didn't have. I've got to explain it that way. It's the only way I can explain it. And I got them for a

Christmas present. And I goes down to where they were drilling. They had a great big stove in there. They kept it white hot pretty near, to keep warm. To keep their hands and their body warm, and sure enough, I backed up against it and burnt the back. And I go home, and I knew that crying wasn't going to do me much good, because my mother said "Bawl babies cry," so I showed them to her, and she said, "Don't let your dad know about it, because it cost \$1.75!" Today they'd be eighteen to twenty dollars. Eighteen dollars probably coveralls are what it is – Kids don't wear it like that too much. And, so anyway, I, my mother said "I'll see what I can do." They were burnt, and they were crisp. And about three or four days later, over come one of the men from the drilling, they were from a Des Moines outfit, with a new pair of coveralls for me. And those fellows, I always wondered, you don't forget that, because they said, "Well that kid probably, he's probably catching a lot of trouble if his dad knew that he done that, because he knew better than to back up against the –" See what I'm trying to get at?

VV: Yeah. Do you think you could describe a Christmas, maybe in the mid-'30s?

VJ: Well, Christmas was like all kids then. We had a tree, which, if we could get one, which we, and decorations were not boughten. Old magazines we'd clip out pictures or colors out of old magazines –

OJ: Popcorn.

VJ: Yeah, popcorn. We'd take popcorn and put it on a string and decorate it, and you'd always make a star to put up on top, and my mother'd make one, and we'd have a stand made out of two two-by-fours, and it'd set on top of it. We'd always have a Christmas, and of course my younger sister was always a great thing for her for Christmas, five years younger, and I'll never forget when she was about, oh, she couldn't have been much over two, walking, and jabbering, talking, and she got a doll for Christmas, and my Aunt Ida, which was very talented with a machine, with a sewing machine, and needle and thread, and she made some clothes for her. And she came downstairs, and all she could say was "Santy Claus been here! Santy Claus been here!"

VV: Oh, that was so special.

OJ: Clothes, mostly clothes

VJ: Yep. And yep, mostly clothes. But anyway, she had a big time, and so next Christmas, same aunt makes her another set of clothes.

VV: For the doll?

VJ: Yes, sure.

VV: That's wonderful. When you were in school at Grinnell College, were you still living at home?

VJ: Oh yes, yes.

VV: And what about when you went to work at J. C. Penney's?

VJ: We were living over on Summer Street. That was the first house that my mother and dad had ever bought. They bought the house, and that—

VV: When was that?

VJ Oh, they bought that when I was in about eighth, seventh grade. Or eighth grade. Eighth grade. I was going to Center High School, they called it.

VV: And was this south of the tracks on Summer?

VJ: No, it was over on, yes, it was south of the tracks, no, north of the tracks, it was north of the tracks, over on Summer street, just about a block south from what we used to call the little store, over on Sixth Avenue. Cooper School was— And there was Cooper School there, and the little store, and then we lived south of that, a block south of that.

VV: So, when you were working at J. C. Penney's, were you living at home then?

VJ: Yes, I was living at home.

VV: And did you live at home until you were married, or—

VJ: I went to— Yes, well, I'll tell you, there's only one way I can tell it is my wife was working for a lawyer there in town, and Glenn Shifflett—a secretary, and she went by every morning.

VV: By J. C. Penney's?

VJ: No, no, she went back, that was after I left J. C. Penney, and I was working for Arnold's Shoe Store, and she would, till I found a job going on the road selling shoes. But anyway, she would go by there, and I thought, "Boy, there's a nice lady!" And I finally got acquainted to her, and we got going together, and we got married in 1938. It'll be fifty-four years.

VV: Can you tell me something about your wedding?

VJ: Well, our wedding! Can I tell it, Ona?

VV: Well, of course!

VJ: When we decided to get married, we told our folks, and we didn't run away and get married. We told our folks, and we went down to Missouri, Lancaster, Missouri, and got married on a Sunday in a church, a Methodist church. And a couple in Grinnell named George and Helen Hargrave went with us. We come

home, and our wedding dinner that night was at Red's Barbecue in Des Moines. It cost two dollars for all the chicken you could eat! Oh, that was wonderful!

VV: How did you get around, did you have a car then?

VJ: Yes, she had a car, I didn't; she had a car. Then of course George and Helen had a car, and our honeymoon was at Newton.

VV: Oh. So, at that time did people used to have receptions, where they invited people, or did they –

VJ: Yes, they did, some. Some didn't. Some of them did. We couldn't afford it, in the first place.

VV: Well, do you think your wedding might have been a little different if it had been ten years earlier? Do you think it might have been about the same?

VJ: No, it would have been about the same. The only sad part of it was that she was working for Glenn Shifflett, and I can tell it, too, she was making sixty-five dollars a month, and I was only making fifty-five dollars a month at the shoe factory. So she was making more than I was!

VV: Getting back to – Let me just get this so I have this straight: you, after you went to college for a year and a summer, then you got a job at J. C. Penney's, and how long did you work there?

VJ: About three, three and a half years.

VV: And then you went on to something else.

VJ: That was probably foolish that I didn't finish college, but I, the reason, one of the reasons is my sister was going to school, she was a real cute little lady, and I could make a little money and help buy her clothes, there. They did give us a little discount for clothes or anything you bought there, and it made a little difference. I'm talking about J. C. Penney's. I'll never forget, one of the nicest little old ladies, gray haired – I can't tell you her name now – used to come in nearly every Saturday with a dressed chicken. Now she had two kinds you could fry or one that you could bake or bake noodles and chicken and noodles. She'd sell them to you for a quarter. Dressed. Now that's hard to believe, isn't it?

VV: Yeah.

VJ: That was the Depression time, '31-'32. That's when corn was practically like one dollar, like ten to twelve cents a bushel.

VV: How do you think that affected for instance the business at J. C. Penney's?

VJ: Well, J. C. Penney was a store that was selling those at the price people wanted to pay, or maybe could nearly afford to have paid, but they bought there.

But they had ladies clothes, shoes, men's clothes, even dress suits, and I've always felt that Penney's leaving Grinnell – But that's beside the point. But Penney's was a good store. We had other good stores.

VV: Did you have as much, well, you weren't working there before, but would you say J. C. Penney's did a pretty good business, even during the Depression?

VJ: Yes, J. C. Penney had a good business, and it was originally under the old system and transferred over to the new.

VV: So you mean people could afford to buy there.

VJ: Yes. It was clothing, and it was necessities of life for clothing and shoes, and overalls and underwear and so on, that they could afford to buy.

VV: Could you describe a Saturday for you back in '31, '32? What was a Saturday like for you when you were working at J. C. Penney? Would you have to be at the store?

VJ: Oh yes, it was a big day. Saturday was a big day. Big day. They stayed open until ten o'clock, nine-thirty, ten o'clock.

VV: When would you go into work in the morning, for instance?

VJ: Oh, we'd go down, I'd go down by six-thirty.

VV: In the morning?

VJ: Yeah, on Saturdays. It was a big day. Because you wanted to be sure all the shelves and everything was on display and then like on a weekday I'd go to work at about seven o'clock and work until six o'clock and maybe if you had a customer you'd stay until the customer was done buying.

OJ: Stores were open until ten o'clock.

VJ: Yeah, but on Saturdays stores were open until ten o'clock.

VV: Did you stay at the store until what time then, if the store was open until ten o'clock.

VJ: Oh, it would probably be about ten-thirty, eleven o'clock before you got out of there; not always, but sometimes.

VV: So does that mean you never got to go to the movies?

VJ: Oh, we went to the movie on Sunday.

VV: Oh, so you could go on Sunday. Was that when you and Ona would go?

VJ: Why, sure. We'd go to the show and see a movie.

OJ: We went during the week.

VJ: Yeah, we could go once in awhile during the week. We could go during the week. You could go – That was back, lady, when you could have, in my high

school, in those days, you could have a date for one dollar. Imagine one dollar, a whole dollar, you could have a date!

VV: This is when you were in high school, you could –

VJ: Yes! You could take her to the show, thirty-five cents apiece, and then, that would be the top time, and then you could also go over to the Candyland and get a Candyland for fifteen cents apiece. That's thirty, and seventy was one dollar. Now, I don't know what it'd cost a kid now, with a car and gasoline at \$1.00 and \$1.25, \$1.00 right now, a gallon.

OJ: We had about three movies then, houses.

VJ: Yeah, that's right.

VV: You had what? Three movie theaters?

VJ: Yeah.

VV: What else did you do during your free time during the '30s then?

VJ: Well, mostly work.

VV: So you felt you didn't have free time.

VJ: You just mostly worked, yes. I'm not, well, I was, although I remember there one time Ona and I, it was after we were married, and George and Helen, we went in just especially to Chicago and you could get a room in a hotel then for oh, gee, I don't remember now what it would be Ona – \$3.50 at the most? – downtown, and we went into – And to go to the Aragonne, that would be, was that north and then south was the Triagonne? And that was two big dance halls. Now I wasn't a very good dancer, and neither was Ona, but George and Helen were pretty good at dancing, and we wanted to go down and go to both of them.

VV: So George and Helen; are these the Hargraves, again?

VJ: She's still living. George passed away a few years ago.

VV: But are these the Hargraves?

VJ: That was with us when we went to Chicago? Sure.

VV: When you got married also, so they were your good friends, then.

VJ: You bet, that's right, you bet.

OJ: We had picnics on Sundays.

VJ: Oh yes, sure.

VV: You went out on picnics –

Side Two

VV: So now, Ona, as you were saying about the kinds of things you did in free time?

OJ: Well, the drug store stayed open in the evening.

VV: Every evening, or just some?

OJ: Yes. And they would gather there for talks, and a few of the kids had cars.

VJ: Very few, but a few.

OJ And they would run around the cars like they do now. [laughter] Maybe not like that, but—

VV: What about family gatherings or family reunions?

OJ: A lot of those.

VV: Can you, did— Now, let's say after you were married, did you gather over at Virgil's family's house, or did you go to your family's house?

OJ&VJ: Both.

VJ: I'll tell you, talking about food. The first T-bone steak I ever had in my life was at her mother's and eating at her mother's dinner table one day. That was oh, a treat! Oh, lady! A T-bone steak! I never knew what that was till she showed it to me! A T-bone steak!

VV: Now Ona, were you more used to having something like T-bone steak?

VJ: No. No, they had killed a beef.

OJ: My folks lived in the country till they moved to town, and they had their own meat, mostly. Later, and we always had meat in the freezer, when freezers came in.

VV: Now, when you were growing up, Virgil, did you always have an electric refrigerator, or did you have an ice box?

VJ: Ice box.

VV: Was this in the '30s?

VJ: Oh, ice box. Ice box for years. You bet. I heard the story (now Ona, please don't get mad) but I heard the story that when your dad would say no to her mother, her mother'd say, "Well the ice box was all right." He'd say, "Now where are you going to get the ice?"

VV: He didn't want to switch to electricity?

VJ: Oh yeah, that's right,

OJ: He went on the theory that freezing spoiled meat. Took away the flavor. That meat should not be frozen.

VV: But how did he think it should be preserved then?

VJ: You'd eat it as quick as it was killed.

OJ: No, they preserved it by canning it; canning it, and – Mostly canning.

VV: Did you know anyone who was on welfare during the '30s?

OJ: There were, but I can't think of off-hand who.

VJ: There were, but we didn't discuss it.

VV: Did you yourself know of anyone who did?

VJ: Yes, you were bound to know of people, yes. They're getting help from Matt Lincoln, it was at that time, they were getting help from him, yes.

OJ: Overseer of the poor, that was.

VJ: Overseer of the poor; and Old Man Lincoln, they always called him, overseer of the poor.

VV: Did he work for the city or the county?

VJ: He worked for the county, I believe it was the county.

VV: What about the churches – did they –

VJ: Oh, they tried to help, they tried to help, yes.

VV: Did you go to church?

VJ: Oh yes. Methodist Church, Sunday school, what was the boys' – the boys' – oh, that's awful, my memory on things like that! But yeah, I went there.

VV: Did you know of any specific things that the Methodist Church did to help people?

VJ: Well, they probably did. They probably did.

OJ: There were a few families, very poor, with a lot of children that got help, I don't like –

VJ: You didn't discuss it.

OJ: I don't like to mention the names, because now they're still here and doing pretty good.

VJ: They've become successful.

OJ: They were very poor and had a lot of children.

VV: Well, were people embarrassed about getting welfare?

VJ: No, not so much as you would probably realize, because there was so many that had the same trouble, lady, had the same trouble.

OJ: I think they were a little embarrassed back then. It's a little different than today. They didn't get help unless it was absolutely necessary, that they could keep from the kids going hungry, and so on.

VV: Did you know about Sam Regan? Did he have anything to do with welfare?

OJ: He came in –

VJ: Who?

VV: Sam Regan.

VJ: Yeah. Sam Regan.

OJ: He came in after Lincoln.

VJ: Yeah. Sam was right before World War II and right after, and then till he had to—

VV: Was he with the county?

VJ: He was through the county, yes. Sam you could talk all you want to about Sam, those that says I never did like him is very few and far between. I just always figured that Sam was trying to do the best with what he had to work with.

VV: So, was it hard for him?

VJ: Well, to say it was hard for him, no, Sam was good at what his job, but—

VV: What exactly was his job?

VJ: Well, to oversee the fact that people maybe were down, destitute, needed help bad. And Sam would see to a lot of it. And—

OJ: They was called the overseer of the poor at that time, and he, where people actually needed help, he saw that they got it.

VJ: You bet he was good at it.

OJ: But he screened them pretty well.

VV: Oh, I see. He had to decide if people really needed it or not. Were there sometimes people who tried to take advantage of it? That maybe they might not have needed it as much, or did that happen much, do you think?

OJ: He took everything into account, pretty much, and if they actually needed help, and how much help they needed, that he saw they got it.

VV: Were you affected by the bank closings in 1934?

VJ: Yes, I was. I don't like to bring it up, but I was. I had, as a kid, and during my jobs before when I was in high school. I had a job all during high school, working at what used to be the Broadway.

VV: Oh, the department store.

VJ: Yeah, the department store. And I'd go down in the morning and lower the awning, and then go to school, and then work till six or six-thirty at night. Saturday's we'd stay open. It was a very good job for me.

VV: And this was when you were in high school?

VJ: In high school. And I raised, put some money away, and, for college, and then when college hit and the banks begun to, here and there, and I was getting a little proud about my clothes when I got up in high school, so I was buying suits. I'd

buy a suit, and this and that, and I had one from Penney's, I could buy clothes there. But I had a little money in the bank when it went closed, and I didn't have enough to draw anything out of it, so I lost what I had, and that was savings.

VV: How'd you feel about that?

VJ: Well, I was in the same boat as hundreds of others, but I mentioned it in the book, how many people that were older people that they took their savings, their life savings.

VV: So you felt that older people were hit harder?

VJ: Well, yes. Why should I squawk when there's other people got hit a lot worse than I did. Why should I squawk?

VV: How about your parents, were they affected?

VJ: My dad was not great for bank accounts. Of course, back in those days, when you cashed your check, you took it and put it in your pocketbook until it was spent, so you didn't have a chance to—

VV: So he didn't really have savings?

VJ: My dad and mother did save enough to buy a house, there on Summer Street.

VV: But you don't remember that they were necessarily—

OJ: Mostly a cash deal.

VJ: Oh, everything was cash back in those days, everything. You could buy a new car, you know, for six hundred, seven hundred dollars, You could trade every year for one hundred fifty, two hundred dollars at the greatest.

OJ: I don't think we had a bank account when we were married.

VJ: No, we didn't have a bank account.

VV: Do you think it affected the business at J. C. Penney's when that happened, for instance?

VJ: No, no, J. C. Penney's stayed right at it, because they had the merchandise to sell at the price that people wanted to pay.

VV: When did you go to work for Margaret Arnold?

VJ: Well, I worked for Margaret Arnold when the store opened, I forget what day it was in 1939? Or was it before that?

OJ: We was married in 1938.

VJ: It was about in 1935 when that store opened.

VV: So from J. C. Penney's did you go to Arnold's Shoes?

VJ: Yeah, after, when I went to Penney's, I went up to Wisconsin for a year, and I run into a snag and the, I got out of there. I was there for a year. That was enough of that.

VV: How was it that you went to Wisconsin?

VJ: As an assistant manager to a store, J. C. Penney's. I was the fourth man that the store had been open for three years, and I was the fourth one in three years. And nobody could get along with this guy. Finally I come home, and the manager here said "I wish you'd have stayed, because we're going to fire him and get him out of there." But he was under the old system.

VV: This was up in Wisconsin and you couldn't –

VJ: You couldn't fire him. Everybody knows all about it.

OJ: So you came back and went to work for Margaret.

VV: You started working for Margaret when she opened?

VJ: Margaret, then Dave, yeah.

VV: So at that time both she and her husband were running the shoe store.

VJ: You bet, her and her husband run that store. Dave's dead now, and anyway, the store, you could buy the very best of ladies' shoes there for \$3.98, \$4.00 – I think \$3.98 was their – And they finally got up, I think, to \$4.95, and that was it. Good ladies' shoes.

VV: So how long were you working at Arnold's Shoes?

VJ: Oh, I worked off and on, until I went on the road and sold shoes out West – California, Utah, Nevada.

VV: You mean you were travelling out West?

VJ: Sure, you bet.

VV: Were you married at that time?

VJ: I got married on the eighteenth day of the month, and I started, I think on the twenty-second day, to go out and sell shoes on the road – Utah, Nevada, California.

OJ: For Lannom Manufacturing

VJ: For Lannom Manufacturing, down – It's that big building down there that – What's their name in, that's real good outfit. Sign company.

VV: How did you travel?

VJ: By coupe.

OJ: They furnished a car.

VJ: They furnished the car, yeah.

VV: When you were driving around these different areas, did you feel like different areas were affected differently by the Depression than Iowa?

VJ: They had been, yes. There were a lot of them just coming out of it. California was, they looked like they, in '38 and '39, it just seemed like something was going to happen, and California was the same way. Manufacturing was going and the airplane factories weren't established quite yet, but there was, something was boiling, it was boiling, and hadn't come to a head yet.

VV: So you felt like there was going to be a change in the economy?

VJ: Manufacturing did. A lot of manufacturing companies down there. Fact of the matter is, a lot of companies where they had people on the road, and went and got tires, so they'd have tires during the— Hoping there'd be no war, but there could be, see, and the companies, they would have an extra automobile. Not the company I was working for, but I'm talking about companies done that, and it was something you can't believe, that people was— Yyou asked a lot of people at that time if they was right in Grinnell, it didn't quite affect Grinnell. Grinnell's a very fortunate town, lady, very fortunate town. The growing up in Grinnell was probably one of the best places in the world for raising a kid to me. They were going to have troubles. If you read this, you'll find out there was three of us, we didn't steal it, we "borrowed" that car that night, and then we had run over and hit—

VV: What is this? When did this happen?

VJ: We were in, let's see, we were in seventh grade— Junior high school. And it— things were different, but kids then were scared. All they had to do was say "Ah-hah! You be careful, or you're going to reform school." Today it's different. We haven't got bad kids.

VV: You said that when you were travelling, you saw that you thought it felt like things were going to get a lot better—

VJ: Something was going to happen

VV: Because you saw the manufacturing going on?

VJ: You could see things being different; you just felt that something was going to happen, and I wasn't the only one. You talked to some salesmen that weren't selling shoes, but selling other things: "Boy, I don't know, I'm getting along pretty good, but don't you think something's going to happen?" All at once this war busted out, and then that changed everything.

VV: What, when the war broke out, what was your reaction, when the United States entered World War II?

VJ: I always felt that those that were in the power of our United States, the way it is, I always felt that they had a reason, and the bad things was the Pearl Harbor and I always felt that it wasn't necessary. But that, to me – I always felt that we had to do something, and we had to get into it, and we knew that it was going to cost a lot, cost a lot of lives; we knew that. I was in the Navy during World War II.

VV: What was your reaction, then, at the time the United States entered World War II. Did you go down to your draft board right away, or what happened?

VJ: No. I was married, and I was told, "Just hang still. You don't know what's going to happen. It isn't going to be settled that quick. War isn't going to be over with that quick, because Germany is in there." But immediately they built the war machinery, and went to war, and it changed things. I went in in '42, and I stayed till the war was over. And I was over on Guam. I was in the Navy.

VV: How did you feel about that, Ona, when he went?

OJ: Well, you just accepted it. You knew you would be drafted, so when you were drafted, you just accepted it.

VV: Did you have any children at that time?

OJ: No.

VJ: I was in the first married man's draft in Grinnell.

VV: When was that, do you remember?

VJ: 1942.

VV: But you don't remember the month?

VJ: There was some of them turned down on age, and some of them was turned down on there being they just weren't physically – And –

OJ: You just felt it was your duty, you know, that the war was on.

VV: Where were you living at this time, you and Ona?

VJ: We were on Summer Street. Bought that little house over on Summer.

OJ: Yeah, we had just bought a new house for \$1800.

VV: Do you remember the address?

OJ: 818 Summer Street.

VJ: My folks' was 1011.

OJ: There was a picture in the paper for its being sold, for sale, you know, in the *Pennysaver*. It's changed hands several times, of course, but I noticed in the *Pennysaver* this week it's for sale. It was kind of a nice little house.

VJ: Open stairway, nice little living room, dining room.

OJ: You're not the folks that bought the Renaud house, are you?

VV: No, but I know them. Ona, don't go away, this is just when I wanted to ask you about what you did when Virgil went away to war. Did you stay in the house?

VJ: Stay in the house! Lady, when we got home from the service, it was paid for!

OJ: I was working. And I stayed in the house.

VV: How did shortages and rationing affect you?

OJ: Gas rationing affected me worse than anything.

VV: How was that?

OJ: Well, I couldn't drive the car too much. I wasn't granted much allowance for driving.

VV: How did it change your life, then? What things could you not do?

OJ: Oh, not too much. I went along about as usual.

VV: Were you still working at the lawyer's office then?

OJ: Yes. Those things, we just accepted them and made the best of them; that's all I can say. The worst thing in keeping the house was the old coal furnace. We had a coal furnace.

VV: So how did you keep that stoked?

OJ: By hand. Dirty thing.

VJ: Buy a ton of good coal for—

OJ: Couldn't buy good coal.

VJ: You finally, now, you said, that that guy, once in awhile he'd call and say "I've got some good coal, Ona."

OJ: But it was so dirty.

VJ: Ona would say "Bring it down" and they'd— She'd be at work and the fellow, he knew where to go in the house. Well you never locked the doors then.

OJ: But I was busy working then. You just accepted it. All of the Depression business; you accepted it and made the best of it.

VV: You and Ona both had jobs and were working during the '30s. Did you know of people who were on any of the government programs such as CCC or WPA or PWA?

VJ: Oh, yeah.

OJ: WPA was quite prominent. Probably had friends that were working on it.

VJ: Yes, once in awhile I'll run into somebody about my age, and they'll say, "Well, I got into the Four C's, too." They had to go from one— They did everything from chop trees down to—

OJ: That did a lot of good.

VJ: Oh yeah, they done a lot of good.

VV: You think it helped a lot? How did you feel, then, about it?

VJ: I thought it did, yeah. Mothers would come in and say “Well, I got a letter” – when I was with Penney’s – and they’d come in, or when I was working at Arnold’s, like on a Saturday, they’d come in and they’d say, “Oh, gee, I got a letter from my son,” and I’d know them. And one time, I’m not bragging, I think I knew everybody, and how good a coffee she made, and how good of rolls she made, for twenty miles around Grinnell, when we had the barn, because I went to them and it was marvelous.

VV: Now, when you talk about “the barn” –

VJ: The sale barn.

OJ: You’re getting ahead of yourself.

VJ: Way ahead.

VV: Oh, I see, that’s more recently. Well, let’s talk, then, about when you got back from the war. How had things changed?

VJ: Well, I thought it had changed quite a little bit, myself. People were – What changed was people were so happy that it was over with, but those that lost parents, and lost brothers, and lost some sisters and lost dads, you know, those people. You couldn’t say things to them like you used to, you know. You were afraid you were going to say the wrong thing, because it held, you used to say, it held in their craw for a long while.

OJ: Everybody was relieved it was over.

VJ: Yes, was relieved when it was over.

OJ: Felt better about everything.

VV: Were people’s lives different when you got back from World War II?

OJ: It affected them differently.

VJ: I think that a lot of fellows, a lot of them that weren’t quite old enough to go to the service, and then the War was over and they hadn’t been drafted. They hadn’t got into the service. They were eighteen and graduating high school. A lot of them they were trying to feel, they kind of felt now was the time I’ve got to try and make something in life for myself. I’ve got to have a job; what can I do, where can I work at, what do I need to be able to do that, what kind of education? I think you’ll find that there was quite a few of them, right after World War II, a lot of colleges weren’t – They didn’t have more than they could handle, but they were getting a good class of kids as a rule.

OJ: I think everybody had an “up” feeling about everything. Most of that was a general feeling of good times coming.

VV: So, when you got back, did you have a job, Virgil?

VJ: I could’ve went to work for Sharp Lannom at the shoe factory, and Sharp and I graduated from high school together, and I had a lot of respect for Sharp Lannom—I’m talking about young Sharp, now. His dad, I knew his dad real well, but Sharp and I got along real good. And he would have hired me and I could have worked down there. But my father-in-law had the sale barn across the road over here, and he said to me, “Do you want to work for me?” And I said “Yes, I do.” And that was something different. But I was born and raised in town. I didn’t know the difference between a ewe and a yo. Now, when I say that to you, you say “What is the difference?” None. It’s the way you pronounce it. [Laughter] And so, I worked for him. And he was, talk about a good teacher, one of the best. And he told you what you were doing wrong in a nice polite way; he never got mad, never said “You’re dumb. Why’d you do it this way or that?” He was a good teacher, and he died in ‘55, and what else was we to do?

OJ: We run the sale barn from 1955 to 1973. You remember it over here.

VV: Actually, I remember it was still there when we moved here.

VJ: Ona kept the books and I done the running. Like I said, for probably twenty, thirty miles around, you’d go out to look at livestock, and you found the farmer, the people that are on the farm, or have been on the farm, your farmers, I don’t know what change there’d be today, because I don’t think there could be a change, They’d have to be like they did. Mother and Dad and the older people, they were people that were dedicated to their work, dedicated to their— And sure, they were honest people. The only way they could make their living was by work, and they were honest. And I always said that, like I said before, when you’d go out to look at something, livestock, you’re always invited in the house to have coffee and donuts or they’d have cinnamon rolls or something homemade.

VV: So you got to know just about every—

VJ: Oh, I knew them all. Now, that I meet them on the street, their faces have changed quite a little bit. They seem to know me, I suppose, and boy, it’s embarrassing, when you can’t remember their names. Ona’s got a good memory, and once in awhile she misses, even.

VV: So at the sale barn, then, when you started work there after the war, what was it like when farmers were bringing all this livestock in? What could you say about how farming was going for them?

VJ: Well, the farmers, you had some farmers that the machinery they'd bought may have been a little high, or they had bad luck with their farrowing, or their crop where they were they had a hailstorm that took them out, and sometimes it don't take much to destroy a whole man's – one farmer's absolutely income outside of that little garden he's got, and his wife had canned, or a little money saved under the mattress.

OJ: Most farmers had a small herd of cattle and raised a few hogs and chickens, even back in '55. But later it got bigger, like everything else.

VV: I see. So right back after World War II it was on a smaller scale, is that what you're saying.

OJ: Yes. And they had a variety of livestock on hand.

VV: Not just one kind.

OJ: Yeah. And didn't depend on corn and beans for their living. Today a lot of farmers went to corn and beans, and got rid of their livestock. And that's where they got in trouble a little later.

VJ: Everybody had a few cows. Sometimes you'd find the missus at a house not only had a garden, but she had maybe ten, twelve, fifteen ewes, to have lambs for.

OJ: They were more diversified, so if one thing wasn't a good income, they could fall back on the other thing. Later, they depended on one source, and if that wasn't good, it was bad for them. But of course that meant hard work, harder work, too, back then. Today it's too much work, compared –

VV: Before I forget, going back to your war experiences. Where were you?

VJ: I went to boots, what they called boots in the Navy, out at Farragut. Then I went to ship's company there, on what they called ship's company, and I fitted recruits in shoes, naturally, being in the shoe business before I was in the Navy at Farragut, Idaho. I was there, and then I was put into an outgoing unit, OGU, they called it, outgoing unit, until they found out where they wanted to send me. And all at once I get notice – there was ten of us – to go back and go through school there at Farragut. So we stayed there and for sixteen weeks we went to school.

OJ: Then you went to Mechanicsburg.

VJ: Yeah, then I got done there, and we went to OGU, and all at once they give all ten of us, there was ten of us together, and they sent us back to Mechanicsburg. Harrisburg was the town we lived in, Mechanicsburg was where this big depot of the Navy was where they had everything that you can think of that the Navy handles.

VV: Now were all these people from Iowa? Did they train together?

VJ: No, they were from all over.

VV: So you were from different areas. The ten of you were—

VJ: No, they were all scattered around: Minnesota, all over the Midwest. Then we went over to Guam and we were over there for a year, and I spent my time, quite a little bit, going to school for the Navy and fitting shoes for the Navy. It wasn't a year, but—that was quite an experience, too. I enjoyed the Navy. Met a lot of nice fellows, and a few, that, I'd say 99.44 percent of them that I knew were pretty nice guys.

VV: How do you think it changed your life being in World War II and going these different places? How did it affect you, having gone to these different places and meeting these different people?

VJ: It makes you have a different outlook on life.

VV: How did it change your outlook?

VJ: Well, I always thought that you don't find too many people but what they, you don't have to associate with the dishonest ones, because you find him real quick. A man or anybody's dishonest, you find out real quick. I, all the experience at the sale barn, I can't really say, truthfully, I ever dealt, did business with a dishonest person.

OJ: You get along with them whether it's in the Army or the sale barn.

Side Three

VJ: You bet. You can get along with people, you just make it.

VV: I wonder about, going back to south of the tracks and north of the tracks. Do you think that your family tried to, made a conscious effort to move north, or not necessarily?

VJ: No. No, that didn't bother us, didn't bother Ona and I. People that I knew were still south of the tracks, way south.

OJ: We never got north very much!

VJ: I have something here that—

OJ: I have a lot of friends that,—

VJ: As I mentioned earlier, our town had a nationally known college of twelve hundred, thirteen hundred students. Coeducational and highly rated. College athletic teams played many major schools in the Midwest. The homecoming football game with Drake University in Des Moines created much excitement. If Grinnell

won, its season was a success. The night before the game a pep rally was held with a shirt-tail parade with torches. (When I said a shirttail, it's like your sleeping gown. They looked like – They all wore them – nightshirts.) The parade ended at the north end of the football field, where a large pile of paper and wood boxes were burned. The kids attended the rally that lasted beyond curfew hours. Many kids looked forward to this fall event. There was three Boss boys, three of us boys that run around together, and when you saw one, the other two were not too far away. We stuck together. The night of the College pep rally, one of us had permission to use his dad's Model T for an hour or two, with the reminder to stay out of trouble. We walked over to the garage, which was then where the fire department is now, where his dad's car was parked. His dad worked for the county, as a road grader and so on. We had the keys to get it, but discovered one of dad's employee's spanking new Model T coupe needed to be moved before we could drive his dad's car. We used the dipstick to check the gas in the coupe, and found it had plenty of gas; that was important. Besides, it was shiny new and more appealing to three boys. We took the coupe and rode around about an hour, and we decided we'd better take it back where we found it. Everything was working out fine until we started through an intersection and got broadsided by another car. Nobody got hurt, but the bent fenders and broken glass certainly made it look different. We set it back on its wheels and drove it back to where we had found it. The next morning, three boys got lectured. Stealing a car, having a wreck, could send three boys to boys' reform school at Eldora. The scare tactics our dads used were the best. All three boys were grounded for a time. Now you see, kids were no different then than they are now, except we didn't have a car that cost twenty-eight to thirty-five thousand to ride around in; we had a Model T that probably only cost \$680, brand new. One of the Model T days (now, I'm going to read this, and then I'm going to quit reading out of this – you can take it and read it). One summer Sunday during the Model T days, one of the three boys talked his dad into letting him take the family Model T touring car for a short drive. He stopped by my house, and away we went, to take a couple of girls for a ride. The road east of town was recently brought up to grade, and some gravel. It was the best road to take the girls for a ride. Everything was perfect until he tried to turn around in the road and start back to town. He drove too near the side of the road and over we went. Nobody got hurt, but the cloth top and the fenders were still sad looking. Some cars came along and helped put the car back on its wheels. We took the girls home. When we drove into the driveway at his house, my friend didn't notice his dad on the front porch, reading the Sunday paper. His

dad, looking through his reading glasses, said “Son! Where’d you get that car?” The answer was, “Gee, Dad, this is *your* car!” One jump and his dad came off the porch. My friend got a lecture that could be heard two blocks away. He was grounded for awhile.

VV: When did you learn how to drive, then?

VJ: Please, don’t ask me that! It’s in here, too. She taught me how to drive.

VV: You didn’t learn how to drive until after you got married?

VJ: After I got married. My dad didn’t have a car. He drove a fire truck, but he never had a car.

VV: So you didn’t have a chance to learn.

VJ: I never needed to know. When I met her, she had a car.

VV: Could you describe a date that you had with Ona?

VJ: We’d go to the show.

VV: Why don’t you describe one of them? Would Ona come and meet you someplace?

VJ: Oh, I’d walk down to her place lots of times.

OJ: We used to do a lot of walking; people don’t do that now.

VJ: She lived south of the tracks.

VV: So you’d walk down to her house?

VJ: Sure, I’d walk down to her house. I was over east of town. She was west of town. I’d walk over there, sure.

OJ: I’d probably drop him off, when the evening was over.

VV: Once you went over to Ona’s, did you go in and talk to her parents? Were you living with your parents then?

VJ: Why, sure. Nice mother and dad. They’d invite me for Sunday dinners, or dinners; that’s where I had the first T-bone steak I ever had.

VV: Oh, that’s right! So then, Ona, you’d drive the two of you?

VJ: Oh yeah. There’d be two or three of us couples, we’d go on a picnic.

OJ: I guess how you learned to drive was different. It’s different now, of course, you take driver’s ed, but I suppose I got under the wheel, and just gradually got experienced enough to do it. I don’t remember.

VJ: I drove all through the West.

OJ: On weekends, we’d go on picnics, mostly, or go—

VV: Where’d you go to picnic?

OJ: Ledges Park, or—

VJ: Ledges, or state parks, anywhere.

OJ: We'd go to Des Moines to a show.

VV: So you used to go to Des Moines?

VJ: Sure. Park our car downtown, never lock it. Today you walk away from it, your tires are gone.

OJ: A lot like we'd do today; we'd go to Des Moines, go to a show, and eat. Of course, it's different now.

VV: Did you use the train much?

VJ: No. We didn't trade very much downtown, except Ona always bragged the fact that she was going to get a card from Younker Brothers that would allow her to buy stuff there. I said "Well, you'll never buy anything anyway! We never have enough money to buy!" She'd say "Yeah, but I'm going to have one!" And she bragged till she got one!

OJ: What?

VJ: A card. A Younkers Brothers card.

OJ: A charge card?

VJ: A charge card. Today we still have them. I've got them in my billfold.

OJ: Well, we have a lot of charge cards today we didn't have then!

VJ: Yeah, we never use them very much.

VV: Did you ever use the train to go to Chicago, maybe?

OJ: Yes. I did, more than him, because I had two aunts living there that worked there, and I'd go up to visit them. I went on the train quite often. Even to Des Moines, I've gone on the train.

VV: Did you used to see any Hoovervilles? Do you know what I mean? I've read about there were things called Hoovervilles, or people who were transients would set up these —

VJ: You'd see some.

OJ: Not on the passenger trains. You'd see them on the freights quite a bit. I never noticed any on the passenger trains. They might have been there and I didn't know it.

VJ: You can't believe, lady, in the Depression days, before WWII, and back right after WWI, the people that was going anyplace to try to find a job, and they had no other way to go there, because we didn't have the cross-country roads like we do today. They would hop a freight; that was their expression, "Well, I'll go down and hop a freight." They'd take their clothes in a little bag of some kind, what was necessary, their smoking tobacco, and that would be Bull Durham in sacks of

Bull Durham and some papers, and they would maybe, if they wanted to go to California, they'd hop freights all the way to California.

OJ: Talking about what we did then, we probably did then, and more, about what we do today, like going to Des Moines to shop or eat.

VV: You mean you think you did it more then? You travelled more then?

OJ: Yeah. Really. Like, last week, we went up to the Ingersoll Theater, but I hadn't been up to Des Moines for quite awhile till we went up there.

VV: But back then you seemed like you –

OJ: We were younger, of course. That was part of it.

VV: But do you think in general people used to go out of town more?

OJ: They used to go quite a bit out of town, I think. Marshalltown. We've driven to Chicago. That's when you worked six days a week, or five and a half at least. When we got off work in the evening, and take off and go to Chicago, it'd probably take us ten hours, or eight hours. Now, you could probably go in five at the most. But that was because we were younger.

VJ: The World's Fair, '33-'34.

OJ: Oh, the World's Fair!

VV: Did you go to that?

VJ: Why sure!

OJ: We went to all of them, whatever there was.

VV: When you say "we," who was we?

VJ: All of us.

OJ: We, and then I went with some gals.

VJ: That's before we were married, and Ona would stay with her aunts. Her aunts lived out in Oak Park.

OJ: Talking about going in the Depression. You did go, but it was a little different than now. But as far as going, you still went.

VJ: A ten dollar bill would take you across the United States then, lady! I'm not kidding you! A ten dollar bill won't even get you downtown, now!

OJ: I even went to Des Moines on the train, but I've gone to Chicago a lot on the train. And I enjoyed it; there's something about trains that's fascinating.

VJ: My father, when he worked in Chicago, there, for pretty near a year, for Case and Martin Pie Factory, I was a kid, in the summertime I went in on the train myself, and I couldn't have been, I was long about second or third grade, something along in there. My mother gave me a little satchel and clean clothes, enough to supply for a week, ten days, and my dad met me at the depot in there, and I'd like

go in on a Saturday, because he could get off a little early on Saturday afternoon. He worked six days a week. And he'd get off and come down and pick me up. And then he was always happy to see me. My dad was a lovable type of fellow, he was. And he then, when I left to go home, after maybe four, five, six, eight or ten days or whatever it was, I went in a couple of times. Then there was always tears, because I hated to go home. But I went every place you could think of in that place— museums, and all that. Oh yes, I got to go to both ball parks, and—

VV: So your dad took you to all those things in Chicago?

VJ: Yeah. You bet. When I left to go home, I think he was happy in a way, because I wore him out, because every night he took me someplace! He'd have to get up and go to work at seven o'clock

VV: What did you do during the day when he was working?

VJ: He had an apartment, what we'd call a one-room apartment, and I stayed there. And there was a little restaurant oh, about a block away, and—

OJ: He probably wouldn't leave him alone now, in Chicago.

VJ: Oh, no.

VV: But back then it wasn't—

OJ: Getting back to what you did then. Truthfully, you did just as much then, going, because the money you had went quite a ways. And you could go. Today, you can still go, but it takes a lot more and you, it kind of balances itself out.

VV: So you didn't feel, during the Depression, did you feel like you were, they were hard times for you?

OJ & VJ: No.

VJ: No, you didn't.

OJ: I didn't.

VJ: No, I didn't. No. Wonderful times.

OJ: We accepted what we had, and that was it.

VJ: You bet. You could buy a suit of clothes for twenty-five dollars.

OJ: If they had to go back now to it, we probably would feel differently.

VJ: We had one time a man could buy a suit of clothes in Grinnell in four different places. You can't even buy a suit of clothes in Grinnell.

VV: That's right. No men's clothing shop.

VJ: You can buy underwear, and maybe overalls, and socks, work shoes.

OJ: But from the time I was old enough to realize Depression, till about after the War, we had to get along with what we had, and make it stretch, and that was the way it was. And we just accepted it and made the best of it.

VJ: We were no different than any other kids that age.

OJ: And we got along pretty well. Then things got a little better. And right now you feel pretty prosperous. But, if we had to go back now to the Depression, that'd be a different story.

VJ: Absolutely.

VV: What kinds of things would it be hard for you to accept?

VJ: You'd have to buy things that's necessity today.

OJ: No, for me, it would be now, if I see something—I don't mean some exorbitant thing—something for the house, new curtains, whatever—I can go out and get them, and I don't have to feel that I'm spending too much money. But back then you stopped to think before you bought anything. Now if I want to go someplace, I can get in the car and go.

VJ: Even if it is an old car.

OJ: That's right. Now I have an old car.

VJ: And you're going to say, "Well, why don't you buy a new car?" I've had fifty people that every week, "When you going to buy your wife a new car, instead of letting her run around in that old—" Why, what's the matter, it's a nice car, it's got brand-new tires, good battery, runs good, she enjoys it, she can get it in and out of the garage. What else you'd want?

OJ: The main reason is, that the one I want costs about twenty-five thousand dollars, and I don't have twenty-five thousand dollars!

VV: Did you belong to any organizations in the '30s?

VJ: Recently I did, and then I dropped out.

OJ: You belonged to the Elks and the Masons.

VJ: Yeah, I belonged to the Elks. And I'm a fifty year Mason. I was given the fifty year badge and fifty year certificate, which I'm very proud of.

VV: You joined the Masons about 1940?

OJ: When we bought that house over on Summer, you joined the Masons.

VJ: '41.

OJ: Beause I remember we couldn't spare the money, really.

VJ: Might have been '42.

OJ: Besides, we had just moved in this house, and it needed a little work on it.

VV: What did it mean in terms of meetings for you? For the Elks. How often did you have to go to meetings?

VJ: I'd go to meetings, I was going to quite a few Masonic meetings, going to the Elks, quite a few times, but my wife says, "He's not very good at it anymore." I

don't know; I got out of the habit when we had the barn, because I might end up in Missouri looking at some livestock; or I might end up because I had an order, might have had an order for some of it, something particular, and the result was that I sometimes missed too many of them.

OJ: We talked about this house on Summer. Here it is.

VV: They're the Chenettes that moved into the Renaud house.

OJ: Oh, did they live there? Well, we lived there. It's a nicely arranged little house.

VV: It is a nice house.

VJ: The porch got closed in after we lived there.

OJ: They're just around the corner, on Fourth. Our neighbor down here, Renaud, sister who died owned that house. Yeah, that's where we lived. Of course that's about how many years ago we lived there? We moved down here in '48.

VV: You bought that house in—

OJ: About '40 or '41, before he went in the service.

VJ: Then when I got out it was paid for.

OJ: We paid eighteen hundred dollars for it.

VJ: I'm going to let you take this, but I want it back. Let you read it. It's— first thing you've got to understand, it's written in, I'm not a great author, so it's written just the way I wanted, and it is not in chronological order; it doesn't start in kindergarten and go way on up. It's just what I thought of, and I just kept adding to it all the thoughts I had, from the time of first grade on up to I was in high school, and Ona said, "Well, why don't you go on and write some from when you were in high school?" Well, my high school was going to school and working, and it would be nothing to write about.

VV: So you weren't involved in sports.

VJ: I didn't get out for football, didn't get out for any sports. I worked, and that was it. It taught me one thing, that you're not going to get anything unless you do work for it!

VV: I just have a couple other questions that I meant to ask, that I haven't done. Were there gypsies in or near Grinnell, do you remember?

VJ: Gypsies. Yeah, I can remember about gypsies. When my mother was, the telephones were just, not everybody had a telephone, couldn't afford it—it cost two dollars or three dollars a month, whatever it was, but the women all in one locale, they all knew each other, and you knew them whether it was two blocks away, Mrs. so-and-so, yeah. And the schoolteachers, they walked by our place to go to work,

down to South School. And so the schoolteacher that was teaching me that grade, and my mother'd go out and talk to her, "How you getting along?" and this and that. And the gypsies came to town, boy that was just like, you didn't need a telephone! The women all got together, they knew about it! They let everybody know about it.

VV: Where would they camp?

VJ: Well, I don't know.

OJ: I can't remember. There was a band or two came through, there was not a lot of gypsies.

VV: Did you have any contact with them yourselves?

VJ: No.

OJ: Everybody was afraid of them. They were glad to see them go.

VJ: And my mother, I don't care who it was, whether they were (and we weren't too far from the railroad tracks, we were two blocks from it, that wasn't very far) – nd people would, guys would get off the trains and they'd rap at your door and they'd want something to eat.

OJ: Those were tramps. Those were transients.

VJ: My mother never turned them down. Same way with the gypsies. They'd rap at her door, but she probably would – What would make you mad is that they would try to get in your house, see, and –

VV: Why would they try to get in your house?

VJ: Something, they'd take something if they could find your pocketbook, or something else.

VV: So you were afraid they'd steal?

VJ: Yeah, they would steal.

OJ: That's what they were afraid of.

VJ: That's what they were afraid of. And they was always talking about stealing the babies. Well, how many they did, I don't know. I never did –

VV: But everyone was afraid they'd steal the babies.

VJ: Yeah. They're going to steal babies. I never knew of anything. That was more of just a tale. To scare the kids.

OJ: I don't remember any incidents with the gypsies, but they did come through.

VJ: Yeah, we had them. But my mother was great, because she never turned down anybody. They rapped on the door, and I don't care how dirty you was, black – nationality had nothing to do with it; if he was hungry, and she gave him a

sandwich and if it was real, real cold you never found too many of them then, where you'd have to, but I remember we had a well there, or a cistern out back by our door. And they'd sit there and she'd make coffee for them or hot tea, or if they'd rather drink milk, "I haven't had any milk for a long while, lady," and she'd give them some milk. A glass of milk, and she'd make him a couple of sandwiches. And if she had some fruit, she'd give it to him. And she never did pass anybody up.

VV: Now, this was when you were living nearer to the tracks.

VJ: That was right across the street from the Mayflower Home.

VV: After you moved up to Summer, did you not have as much—?

VJ: Well, we moved from there to another place, we weren't there very long, and then we moved from there, and Dad and Mother bought that place over on Summer Street; they were there for quite awhile. But that was common among people then.

OJ: During the '30s there was quite a few tramps around.

VV: So you noticed more tramps than there were before?

OJ: Oh yeah. They'd come to your door and they'd want something to eat. Then, I don't know, they don't have them anymore.

VV: What did tramps or transients do when it got really cold? I heard there were terrible winters.

OJ: I don't know. Holed up somewhere.

VJ: You didn't see too many of them. Even then, I think that they, if they acted decent, they'd even let them in the jail for the night. I know Alex Manson, some of the guys there with my dad at the old fire station, and the jail was right behind them. I know that there was times when they would put them in the jail, or for overnight, and I know they'd go over to a restaurant. "I've got somebody over there, you haven't got some day-old bread that was alright to eat, and put a little piece of meat with it or something?" Take him a sandwich, take him something like water and that, maybe coffee, if they could get it over there hot. You'd be surprised. They done things then a little different. That was common. And then we also, out at our cemetery, was what we called Potter's Field, we had one there. And I know to be a fact that at one time they was re-doing the railroad, by that I mean putting new ties and this and that, and right back of the, right along back of the fire station, about the city park, all along there on down, was, they camped there in these trailer houses.

VV: Who were "they"?

VJ: Well, mostly Mexicans. At one time they did have some Indians from the south come in.

OJ: They worked on the railroad.

VV: Now, was this during the '30s?

VJ: You bet. This was during my time.

VV: They were looking for work?

VJ: They were in that work. They had a place to live, in that, and it was a—

OJ: They worked on the railroad, mostly.

VJ: And every morning they'd go down, and I'm not spoofing you, pretty near every morning they'd go down, and they'd get in fights, and depends on— mostly the Mexicans would have more trouble than anything else— they would, all of them carried a knife and they'd get into I don't know if they was shooting craps or what, They'd get in a fight, and they'd find one dead quite often. And they didn't know their name, because they paid them in cash, and they didn't know where they come from. They didn't know whether there was a brother or a dad or what, they took them out in a box and buried them out in Potter's Field. How many, I don't know. But I remember my dad telling about the police would go down, and there'd be a couple, three in there, and they'd go down through all of this train. There'd be eight or ten or twelve of them, and go into the bunks and if there was a guy laying there they'd have to shake him, because they didn't know whether he was asleep or dead drunk.

OJ: They didn't have drugs then; they had whiskey.

VJ: Alcohol.

OJ: I don't think they had any problem with drugs.

VJ: No, no problem with drugs.

VV: About when do you think that was?

VJ: That was along in the, right after the—

OJ: In the late '20s and '30s, I'd say.

VJ: Late '20s. I can remember, long about, right after World War I, that was the early '20s.

VV: When you were a grade school boy?

VJ: Grade school boy, you bet. And they was always something— Once in awhile you'd get so you could pretty near know those— They'd come in and switch and they would, at the depot, the freight depot, they'd come in and switch their cars, because they'd have a carload of freight for Grinnell, so they'd switch around, and once in awhile you'd get so, if it was summertime, you could make friends with one of the engineers, and "Hi!" and he'd say "Hi, Son! How are you!" And he'd let you up and you'd stand there and watch him, and you'd get a little ride from one end to

the other of that, just from one block to the other – that was quite a trip! Quite a treat. But they wouldn't all of them do it, don't get me wrong. And then, another place would be to stop down at the glove factory, and the windows there on the north side, and get the scrap leather, they'd be cutting gloves, and they cut them by hand, then. And then they finally got what we called the "clickers." They were a machine that they put the leather and they would cut the leather out, the gloves. But you'd go in there and they'd give you little pieces of leather that was no good to them, and we'd use that. Well, I can't pronounce, because it's not the right, but we called them "nigger shooters," they were, that's what we called them, and we would use that and then get a piece of old inner tube.

OJ: Sling shots.

VJ: Sling shots. That's what they were. We'd fix them up. And we were big kids. Kids then didn't have the scooters, they didn't have this and that to play with. I remember my first bicycle. It cost me, was it three dollars? Two dollars or three dollars. I bought it myself. And one of the tires wasn't good, and you used rubber bands and put it in that hole in the tire, and then when it'd roll over like that it'd go "thump, thump, thump." On my birthday, tenth birthday, my dad bought me a brand new bicycle.

VV: Did Prohibition affect you at all? Did your family drink alcohol at all?

VJ: I'll tell you what. Back in the Prohibition days, and this, you tell this to the average person, they'll say "Oh, come on!" They used to, one of the stores in town – and I'm not going to name it, but it was one of the popular grocery stores – we'd get in a carload of sugar, and they would have this carload of sugar and a carload of malt extract to make beer. And to say everybody in town would be over – but there was a lot of people. And in the night, you'd go up to this store, and you'd buy what you needed of the malt extract, and –

VV: So it was only at night? People would only buy it at night? Or right in the open?

VJ: No, what you'd have to do is go up to the store, and he'd give you a ticket, and then you'd go down and there'd be a man there, and he'd give you whatever you bought in sugar and what you bought in malt. And there was just people after people. My dad used to make home brew.

VV: So a lot of people made their own home brew?

VJ: I never seen my dad drunk. I always thought he was – Always counted how many bottles of beer he had, too. I mean how many you had in the basement.