Interviewee: Isadore Berman
Interviewer: Jim George
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Isadore Berman

Side One

Jim George [JG]: Hello. This is Jim George. Today is February 26, 1992. I will be talking with Isadore Berman for the Oral History Project of Friends of Stewart Library. The project: "Grinnell Voices from the Past." The subject is the Depression and World War II. How are you, Isadore?

Isadore Berman [IB]: Fine. Thank you, Jim.

JG: Let's get into the subject of the Depression first. How old were you in 1929 and what do you recall about your life in those days?

[IB]: Well, I'd have only been five years old in 1929. I don't think I have very vivid memories of 1929 as such. Probably have to go into a little later period—

JG: Right, well. . .

IB: —between the early, a little bit in the early '30s, a vague recollection of probably going to school. And—and being in the winter time, probably in the spring time, having to cross the muddy streets and that were really quite prevalent in the city of Grinnell back in the early '30s.

JG: Okay. Well. We are covering the Depression period which, you know, started in 1929 but reached on into the mid-'30s. So, we'll talk about that whole period.

IB: Well, I know in the '30s we must have managed to survive. I know in 1929 my dad had a new Whippet truck and he was able to do business. He said that he was a real hard worker and so he was able to make a living for the family. My mother was an extremely good manager in the household. I remember when she went shopping everything was bought in bulk. She tried to buy sacks of flour — forty-nine pounds or hundred pounds of potatoes. We ate lots of oatmeal. We had lots of apples, apple pies, and things like that that she could make in in quantities. And we managed to exist and survive during the Depression without a great deal of difficulty because I think our tastes weren't—and our wants weren't too great. And as long as we had a place to stay and a house to live in that was good enough. I know our home was heated by a big pot-bellied stove; it was just the downstairs that

was heated and the upstairs was cold. And as far as taking a bath, my dad carried water upstairs to a bath tub. And I know that we heated by coal because my dad would go to Oskaloosa in a truck and bring back a ton, a ton and a half of soft coal. And what he did was sell to other individuals. Why, he would store it in the basement and so that there was plenty of fuel to keep us warm. And I remember during the Depression that there seemed to be various agencies that distributed food to people. We noticed a lot of throwing out cheese, round cheeses that people who couldn't, didn't like to eat it would throw it out. I remember that. I know in our home we didn't throw out any food! But seems like some of the individuals on welfare, they got too much of one thing and they didn't like it, why, it would go out.

JG: Excuse me. How prevalent were the welfare roles here? Do you have any sense of that?

IB: Well, I think there must have been quite a number that got relief of one sort or another. There was a county welfare agency that managed to see that food was supplied to individuals and that coal was probably supplied. And people's wants and their needs weren't quite as great as their wants are today. So they managed to survive on whatever was available. As far as employment, I know there was plenty of people available for work, because my dad, if he needed anybody, would go to the local taverns and get lots of day laborers. And there was no problem. If you wanted to hire somebody, why, you just go to the local tavern and get two or three people or whatever you needed to help you out and that was that. Wages were probably— If you paid a quarter an hour you could get plenty of people who were willing to work and that was the prevailing wages of the time. And they were satisfied. I know the price of the items that we sold weren't very great but the expenses were not very great either at that particular time. So I believe that people who were willing to work could find—in the rural areas—could find some form of employment, enough to keep them going.

JG: Isadore, when you were a youngster during the Depression, what sort of things did you do to earn a little money?

IB: Well, primarily, I delivered newspapers. I know that at one time during the early '30s, I delivered the *Marshalltown Times Republican* and I covered about three-fourths of the city of Grinnell. I don't remember how many subscribers I had but I don't think it was over twenty-five or thirty. I probably made fifty or seventy-five cents a week. You only got about two cents if you were lucky per customer. Later on, I delivered the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* and there we picked up— The papers were delivered to the city of Grinnell by a train. They came in from Iowa City in the

evening at any time from about five-thirty to six-thirty in the evening and were thrown off the train. And we'd go around, pick up our bundles of newspapers and deliver them all over town. I carried a route from, I think it went from Third Avenue clear up to Tenth Avenue to Spencer Street and back. I think I walked three or four miles every night delivering about twenty-five or thirty papers. I don't remember exactly how much I made but probably at that time probably I made probably a dollar a week on that. And later on, I decided to drop that newspaper and I went to work to deliver the *Des Moines Evening Tribune*. And I delivered in the south part of Grinnell—the southeastern—no the southwestern part of the city of Grinnell—known as the Happy Hollow District. And there I had good luck with all the people who took my papers. At least they paid for them. I didn't have much difficulty getting my payments each week, sometimes I'd have to go back a couple of times, but nobody moved out on me, left me holding the bag at all. And I enjoyed doing that area—in that section of town. And I think— I don't recall how much I made, but I know at one time I sold on the corners, on Saturday night I sold newspapers, too, and therefore you got those papers that were known as the "Bulldog" edition and you got— You sold them for ten cents apiece, and, if you sold you made two cents a copy. One night I think I started working at seven-thirty and I didn't sell any papers until about ten o'clock and someone gave me ten cents or twenty cents—gave you a tip—and I lost the twenty cents so for my whole evening's work I was in the hole! [laughter] So, that was only one of my vivid memories of earning money. I don't know how long I delivered papers—until I was about a junior in high school.

JG: When did you graduate from high school?

IB: I graduated from high school in 1941.

JG: Well, that was just coincidental with the start of the war. And you were in a business that was essential in those days, right?

IB: It was—essential, but of course everything was regulated right away, the OPA, the—Price Administration—set ceilings on all commodities: scrap iron, everything had a certain price. You couldn't— The mills didn't have to pay—exceed a certain price. And the foundries paid only a certain price. And there was limits on how much you could obtain. Also a strict price and controls were in effect and, of course, there was the barter system that was in effect. For people who needed something that someone else wanted, there was a barter arrangement that could be made where you could obtain something you wanted for something somebody else wanted and get around some of these strict controls that were held on rationing. We had no problem on obtaining gasoline for our vehicles because we were an essential

business at the time. And we had no problem getting tires for our vehicles. And so I guess there might have been a bit of a bartering system that someone— If you needed meat coupons, you could trade some of your gasoline rationing coupons for those.

JG: If I may interject here, I think we've gone along talking here with something that we both know. But we haven't identified yet what business your dad was in, so I'm wondering if we can kind of turn back the clock here a little bit and find out, where did your dad come from and when and how did he get in the business he was in. Tell us about the business.

IB: My dad came to this country from Russia in 1923. His uncle who had been—who preceded him—brought him into the Grinnell area and since my uncle was in the business, my dad went into the scrap iron metal business, too. He got, managed to borrow money enough to buy a horse and a wagon and went through the country being one of the original recyclers.

JG: Now, what year would that have been?

IB: That would have been 1923.

JG: Oh, I see.

IB: So, my dad went through the country buying old scrap iron and probably newspapers.

JG: Go to farms, I suppose?

IB: Farms, and various households. You pick up newspapers, and rags and paper and you sent them into or took them to a central place where they build up a bigger quantity so they could have enough to ship out in large quantities. And I think, my uncle had decided to go into the used car—the car business—in the early '20s and he went into—become a Whippet and Willys dealer.

JG: Now, was that here in Grinnell?

IB: Here in Grinnell.

JG: I see.

IB: And the place of business was on Fourth Avenue, where the fire station and the police station are located now. My uncle had a Whippet agency and I know—

JG: What was your dad's name?

IB: My dad? Sam.

JG: Sam, right.

IB: My uncle's name was Dan and he had this car agency and he was kind of unusual. He was one of the first ones to give credit. That's the reason, I think, it

broke him. He started selling lots of cars with ten dollars down and ten dollars a month. Well, of course, then he was hit by the Depression in the early '30s and I think that it nearly broke him because he had a lot of cars out on credit and then the people who couldn't afford to pay for them. And you couldn't hardly take them back because they weren't worth anything then after a few years. Life of a car in those days, if you got twenty-five, thirty thousand miles, that was probably the life of it. But anyway, my dad went in the business and I know in the early to late '20s, he had a partner by the name of Sam Specter. So, he and Sam Specter was partners in the scrap iron metal business up until about 1936 when my dad's partner Sam Specter went and moved to St. Louis after the death of his wife. So my dad ran the business with the aid of us. There was four of us boys and we helped my dad. And he'd go out in the country or go to various towns and buy lots of scrap iron and we'd process it in the yard.

JG: At what age did you start working in the yard?

IB: Well, I think we started working at the age as soon as we were able to move around. Because I know at the early ages of probably five, six, seven years of age we were probably dismantling carbo—generators, and starters to remove the copper. That was one source of income. We got paid so much a pound. I know during the Depression that we probably got seven, eight cents a pound for the copper. Why, in comparison to today's price of seventy to eighty cents a pound. So really maybe the level has gone up, but maybe everything else has gone up about ten-fold since the Depression. So the price levels have stayed relatively the same.

JG: Were all you boys born in Grinnell here?

IB: Yes. No. My older brother was born in Russia. He came with my folks as an infant, about six or nine months old. I was born, and my other two brothers, my brother Harry and myself, were born in the old St. Francis Hospital, which has been torn down. And my younger brother, I believe, was born at home. I know we were all working. I know my older brother— Let's see, in 1936, my dad had a new Chevrolet truck.

JG: Is that the first truck he had? You mentioned—

IB: No, We had a Whippet. We had a Whippet, no horse, a Whippet truck in too in '29. That was very progressive. They had late model equipment in 1936 yet, a nice Chevrolet truck. My older brother—and I would think—in 1936, my older brother would have had to been about twelve to four—no, thirteen years—of age. Had taken that—was driving that out in the country and picking up scrap iron at the age of thirteen or fourteen. And I know he did run into the ditch and it didn't

damage it too much. [laughter] That's one of the vivid memories of— And I know that one of our jobs when we were sixteen or seventeen, we'd take that truck on Sunday afterno— Sundays we'd go to the neighboring towns with our other little dealers and bring back—we'd load up that with big loads of scrap iron and bring it back to our yard in Grinnell and that part of our Sunday job. Every Sunday morning we'd have— Two of us would have to go out and take care of this particular customer in maybe New Sharon or Tama and bring back a load of scrap iron. I don't know who had the driver's license but I know one of us must have had. It was me, because I remember when I went to apply for a driver's license in about, let's see, I was sixteen, that had been in nineteen—well nineteen-forty. I went to the driver's license station to pass the test. When I went to pass the visual examinations, they told me to read the chart, read the letters in the chart. And I said "What letters?" [laughter] So, we at an early age, had learned to drive and were out working and so—

JG: With four boys, I'd imagine that you truly had a family enterprise and your dad was fairly well staffed for help there.

IB: Well, he was fairly well set for help until after 1941 when— In 1942 my oldest brother went in the service and then later on, let's see, in January 1943, my other brother Harry went in the Army. And in the fall of 1943 I went in the service. And since there was— I had a younger brother and he wasn't quite old enough and I think he may have had a little health problem, I don't know. But the draft board decided not to take him for some reason or another. They thought with three boys in the service, that was enough. I think that's what they said: "Well, we'll keep him out for a while."

JG: Yeah, I think there used to be a rule on how many from a family.

IB: Well, anyway, after we all served three to four years in the service, we all came back home. My older brother decided to stay down in Florida. He didn't come back. He did come back for a short visit after he was discharged, but he had already been married. Then he went back to Florida. My other brother came back and he worked with us in the scrap yard until about the early '50s, maybe 1950, and then he went and moved with his wife back to Florida, too. He was— And so during the war years my dad was pretty well tied down. He had to work very hard. But, as I say, my younger brother helped him out tremendously during the war years.

JG: Do you have any sense of how the war changed his business? Or how it impacted on his scrap metal business?

IB: Well, of course, there's always a tremendous number of drives to collect scrap iron—scrap metals. And I know that they had a big pile of scrap iron in the city park, and then we had to go over there and clean it up and cut it up and prepare it so it could be used. And also at one time, the city had a tremendous large canon in the city park—in central park. And I know we took and cut it up and then we shipped—

JG: Was that a— Made in the Civil War or World War I canon?

IB: I think it's a World War canon, a big World War I canon. And I remember that we cut the gun barrel in two and we shipped it, I believe, to Inland Steel Company and then we got a rejection from the steel mill because that iron in a canon was so tough that it would kind of ruin the melt. They objected to— I went to all the trouble of cutting up the canon and I didn't realize that the canon barrels were made of layers of steel and it was a tremendous job to cut it with a torch. But we had a lot— And we had a lot of scrap tires and rubber, rubber was in demand. There was no—

JG: So whatever scrap that the community had and was devoting to the war effort came through your yard—

IB: Yes, because we knew where to go with it and had the mills that needed it and the farms that needed it. And so we managed to get it to the proper channels. And during the war years with such rigid price control you got a big volume of material and that's why you were fairly profitable. But it wasn't until after the war in the early '50s, after the people came back from the service, there was such big pent up demand for various consumer goods that the prices on everything went—skyrocketed in the early '50s and those were the real boom years, 1955 and '57. Everybody needed a car and everybody wanted to buy and have cars and it was one of the better prosperous years for the country and so— In the early '50s and middle '50s—

JG: Now were people pretty loyal to the drives? In other words, did most everybody pitch in with whatever they had?

IB: Yes, I think during the war years everybody was very cooperative and the fever was to get plenty of scrap and so forth so that our foundries and steel mills would have plenty of raw materials to make the weapons that were necessary for the war effort.

JG: Well, Isadore, you indicated that your dad settled in Grinnell because you had an uncle who was located here. Can you give me any sense of whether you were

in the rare minority here? In other words, were just you and your uncle the only two families of Jewish persuasion in the community?

IB: No, I think in the early '20s there must have been several Jewish families in the community. There was the Bucksbaum family that ran clothing stores. There was another family—

JG: What was the name of that store?

IB: Star Clothing Company. And it was in the early '20s, probably, and maybe later on. And then there was another that ran a grocery store and, of course, then my uncle had the car agency. But he moved to Des Moines—I believe in the early—in the late '20s, maybe—the late '20s. And then the other Jewish families seemed to migrate away. Several of them moved to Marshalltown and to other larger communities. So I believe during the early '30s as far as Jewish families in Grinnell there was just the Bucksbaum family and our family and maybe one family or so connected with the college and that was about it. As far as attending religious services, we probably went for the holidays to the synagogue that was located in Marshalltown. They did have some services there. As far as discrimination, I think there was a certain amount of it. We were subject to name-calling—of "kikes" and "Jews." I did feel a little bit the sense that that maybe we weren't probably accepted at that particular time and probably being on the north side— Being on the south side of the track we were still considered "south-enders" too, so—

JG: So you had the combination—

IB: Combination. But, it never affected us too much. We went about our own business and ignored the element that would make remarks. And as far as being active in other social functions, we didn't participate in many community functions in the early '30s—no, in the late '20s or early '30s—and so what we didn't know, we didn't miss. We got along fine in the Grinnell area. And my dad was very well accepted—was pretty, rather, popular among the individuals in town and he enjoyed himself and was well thought of by in the city. As far as the other families, they didn't seem to be bothered too greatly by any remarks and by— There was no— I don't think any outright discrimination. If you wanted to move to the other end of town, if you had the money and could afford a home you could probably buy wherever you wanted or wherever you could afford. There was not that type of discrimination. And as far as joining any clubs, we never intended to join any clubs, so we didn't have any problem there. We didn't have any sense that we were being discriminated against.

JG: Did, and then, did you see any change or dissipation of this as time went on up to the present time?

IB: Well, I don't think you have too much name-calling today as you might have had years ago, but I know that occasions when I was off the establishment and a person was on the telephone who wanted to tell somebody where he was at, he didn't say that he was at Berman Scrap Yard or something like that. He said he was at the Jews.

JG: When was this? Back in—

IB: No, that's not back— That was early in— Maybe in the late eighties. And I called the fact— The attention to the individual that we do have names. Oh, then he apologized. But it's still seemed to be ingrown in individuals to kind of describe individuals by their religious background or something like that. And maybe some people aren't aware that it's kind of a negative way of telling—calling—telling where they're at.

JG: I'm guessing that people would be more enlightened on that sort of thing now.

IB: Well, I don't know. I think, for the most part I would say yes, but I suppose it's the same way that individuals would say this "nigger," or that individual. They don't realize— They've been saying it for so long, they don't think about it being offensive.

JG: And lots of times, that was not the intent, I'm sure. How far did you live from school?

IB: Well, from schoo— Well, I went to— My first school was Parker school which is located on Sixth and Spring Street. It wasn't very far to go because we were on Third and Spring so it was just a matter of about a three block walk. I attended Parker School until about fifth grade and then went to sixth grade. There was a so-called Center School downtown where the present city building is. And I was going to go to the sixth grade there but I'd become ill back in—let's see, that'd be when I was ten or about twelve years old—in the early '30s. And I went, they signed me to go to Davis School. And I went to Davis School, which is located in the south part of town. It wasn't over a five or six or seven block walk. And so I went to Davis School and then after I was through with going to Davis School then went to local junior high school, which was downtown. So it was always within a five or ten minute walk. Schools were not very far.

JG: Did they have school buses in those days?

IB: No, most— They didn't have school buses in those days. Youngsters went to school— Why, most of them had some sort of vehicle. They would have some old car that they would drive into town. They'd have a driver's permit. I guess you obtain that when you're fourteen years of age. And they managed to get into school without too much difficulty—didn't miss too many days. Of course, I remember the only time they closed the whole school down was probably in the early—because of weather was probably in 1936—when we had a very cold day and they dis—well, they didn't really dismiss school, but they let individuals stay in school and have lunch. And that was in 1936 and the temperature got down to about twenty-seven degrees below zero. And that wasn't a wind-chill factor because they didn't think of wind-chill factors in those days. It was cold, it was cold! But—

JG: The early '30s were known for severe weather, with the cold and heat.

IB: I remember the summer of 1936, the tremendous, well— I don't know how you describe it, the flocks of grasshoppers. They devoured everything in sight, they would be thick on the fence posts during that summer. And they ate everything that was edible or inedible. Just a tremendous crop of grasshoppers. Of course, that was followed up in the winter with a very severe winter and tremendous snows. But I don't know, we managed to survive those and thought nothing of it. As a matter of fact, I'd probably a prefer a winter like that to the winter we've had this year, with all the sloppy and muddy, muddy weather that we've had because you find with the present day heating systems and the convenience of your heated automobiles you get around pretty, rather well.

JG: Where was your dad's yard located?

IB: His scrap yard was located on Third and Spring Street. We moved off there in 1967 and it was sold for parts. They built a parts store there. I don't know what the building is being utilized for now. But it was located at Spring and Third. We had— We just outgrew that area.

JG: Now was that— That was located right along the rails.

IB: Right along the railroad track. Because railroad transportation was essential if you were going to do any buying business at all. And so in 1967, we decided we'd outgrown that neighborhood and recycling scrap was not a popular item with the community at that particular time too. So they preferred you to be elsewhere and, of course, we needed the additional space with the growth of industry in the city of Grinnell. We were taking care of that— We needed additional room so we moved out to the edge of town and purchased a piece of ground that had belonged to the McNally family for years. They used that for a slaughter house.

I know that people say, "What was this area used for?" and I say, "Well, it was a slaughter house." And, of course, most of the youngsters don't— Weren't aware that McNally's slaughtered a tremendous number of cattle that were sold in the various meat markets and in their meat market downtown. And it's kind of interesting that, well, the older individuals knew that. But— And I'd show them that there was still a locker out in this building that we utilize that was used for storing the carcasses of meat after they had been butchered in it.

JG: Now, and when would the McNallys have vacated that? Was it the same time you—

IB: No, I think in the early '60s they had outgrown that little market in the early '60s. They outgrew their market on Main Street and moved down to where the so-called McNally's grocery store is now, which has changed hands two or three times. Jim and Ed McNally sold it to a party and it's been sold subsequent to that. But Jim and Ed used to do a lot of butchering of cattle out where we're established now and—

JG: And now you're still along the railroad?

IB: Well, we're along the railroad, the Iowa Interstate Railroad, and we put a railroad spur into our establishment so we are directly— So cars are going to be placed in our yard for scrap loading.

JG: Do you still, do you still use rail then or do you use trucks some?

IB: We still use rail. And, I think that was one of the most important things when we were making a decision to whether to move along the Northwestern or not.

Side Two

IB: Rock Island Railroad ran— Because we thought the Rock Island Railroad was in a stronger financial position and had been in existence for a hundred years and it wasn't going to go out of business. And, much to our chagrined surprised, in the early eighties it went belly-up and we were out of railroad service for a while. But, I recall back during the early '30s when you saw the Rock Island Railroad and you saw those powerful locomotives chugging up the hill and belching black smoke, that was a powerful railroad line and they would always exist. And because I recall, they'd always come up from— When they were coming up from the west going east, there was a kind of grade and if they were pulling a big load, you could just see them—how their engines would belch black smoke trying to increase the amount of

power. And it was always—we lived along the Rock Island Railroad—and it was interesting to see the various loads of merchandise that was being shipped. And our greatest thrill was during the '30s to see the circus trains being pulled through on the Rock Island line. Every so often, we'd be fortunate enough to see a circus train go through and we'd see the colorful cars and maybe once in a while get a glimpse of the animals in some of the cages. And that was a highlight. And, of course, being along the railroad we made contact with a lot hobos. There was always a tremendous—during the Depression years—a tremendous number of people riding the rails. And I know they would stop up at our house for a little food. Mother always had— Well, all she could give them was probably a bread, and she made her own homemade bread, and jam and sandwiches. And apparently that must have gotten word around to the rest of the hobos because they were there quite frequently, different ones, for a little handout of something. And, they were harmless individuals. We never any problem with any of them along the railroad. It's an interesting experience to live along the railroad. Of course, when those big engines went around, the house shook, because they were—they vibrated and the ground shook when they went up the grade.

JG: A couple of questions on my part. One, you mentioned that you'd get to see the circus trains. Did you ever get to see a circus performance as a kid?

IB: Well, probably we got to see a circus performance on the local level, whatever they showed in Grinnell and then probably some circus with one or two animals and something like that, or a couple of elephants. But, of course, that brings back to mind the highlights during the summer were the tent shows. That was interesting.

JG: Oh, yeah. Tell us about that.

IB: In several areas, they'd build up the Toby Show, which would come and then stay for a week. And they'd put up a big tent and have the performances of their various troops and that was also interesting. I don't know if we ever bought tickets or if we tried to sneak in under the canvas half the time, I think we did that. The troop would always be going around during intermission and they'd sell boxes of crackerjacks and things like that to get a little extra income. There was a prize in every box.

JG: I've heard people refer to Chautauqua. Is that—was that a type of tent show?

IB: No, I was not familiar with Chautauqua shows with— There were regular—

JG: Maybe they didn't hit Iowa, but I remember the Toby Shows, too.

IB: Toby shows, those were the ones that hit Grinnell. There was two groups of them. I don't know which ones—probably one would come in the spring and maybe another one in the fall or something like that. But, they'd be there every year during the '30s, I believe, probably prior to World War I—II, rather. That was interesting. I suppose that was excitement for the community at the time and, of course, going back—going to movie theaters was always an interesting experience, too. I remember when they— Of course the Iowa Theater, which used to exist on the corner of Main and Fifth Avenue, was refurbished in the early '30s and they were going to make it into a nice movie house and they did. You could go on a Saturday afternoon and for ten cents you saw a serial show, and then you saw the news reel and the comedy and then the feature attraction and then some advertisements. And that was a great way to spend a Saturday afternoon and then for— Well, if you had ten cents, you were really wealthy and if you had an extra nickel then you could buy a whole big box of cookies or candy to take with you in the movie house. And—

JG: How often would you go to the movie?

IB: Well, I don't think I went too often. I don't think I went over, oh, maybe once every two weeks or so. But they used to run these series and you had to go because you'd lose out on what was going on. So, you tried—

JG: Who were some of the movie stars in these serials? Do you remember?

IB: Oh, of course, mainly you would go to the westerns and see Tom Mix and Buck Jones, and mostly with cowboys. Anything with romance. You didn't go to any of those at that particular age, when you were in the early—ten or twelve years old—you didn't go to those. But it was interesting to go to the movie houses. And I never went— I always just went to a matinee on a Saturday. Well, I suppose I never bothered to go to the evening performances. Probably, I don't know, our folks didn't let us out, for one thing, and probably it cost a little bit more money to go to the evening performance. And I remember too during the early '30s where they had those bank nights. That was another interesting feature when they had—

JG: How did that work?

IB: Well, I think you had to attend a movie or be present and you had your name in a drawing and on a Tuesday night they would draw a name out of a box and if you were there in the theater, why, you might have a chance to win ten or fifteen dollars. Those were big attractions. Lots of people went, and a lot of people didn't go but they'd stay outside and if their name had been called, then they'd buy a ticket and go inside. And, of course, then I think they always gave away, on certain

nights, they gave away dishes and glasses of some sort to attend the movie as a premium. Oh, I don't remember— We never went and never got any, but I suppose they'll be collector's items today, those. But those were some of the interesting things. And, of course, on Saturday nights it was always interesting to go downtown. All the farmers would come into town on Saturday nights and you'd see all the friends and acquaintances from outside of town would be there. And of course the highlight was maybe to get an ice cream cone because there was a little competition for the business and I think the Smiths had a dairy that sold ice cream. There was a party called Lynch with a five and ten cent store, but their big source of income on Saturday nights was selling the big double-dipped ice cream cone for a nickel.

JG: When you went up town on Saturday night what other kind of business activity did you notice?

IB: Well, I noticed the number of farmers who brought in their week's supply of cream and eggs. There was quite a lot of competition for that sort of business, because at one time, I believe, there was probably four places in the city of Grinnell that were buying cream. And there was one on— The Swiftson Company bought eggs and cream, and there was the Christiansen family bought e—bought cream. And then there was there was this fellow by the name of Sage who was located in an alley and they bought chickens and poultry, right down in the alley back of probably where Ben Franklin is—in that area. And then there was another buying station, where—oh—where the travel agency is located on Fifth Avenue. And that was quite a bit of activity, and now that you look back on it you wonder how sanitary those containers of cream were. I don't know that they'd meet any of the health standards set up by the state department of agricultural today. But people managed to survive and I guess their bodies got immune to any type of bacteria. So it was an interesting period of time to see the changes that developed. Now I don't believe anybody, well, nobody outside your major dairy producers sell milk in the any volume at all. There's no little dairy producers or people who raise milk or cream on a small scale.

JG: I'd like to pursue a little bit the practice of your religion. You indicated that you went out of town to synagogues. Where did you go mostly?

IB: Well, mostly we just went for what was called the high holidays, just a couple two or three times a year to Marshalltown. And in Marshalltown, they didn't have, in the early '30s, maybe the late '20s, they didn't have an established synagogue. They would rent—the individuals would rent a hall or so forth and somebody would conduct the services. It wasn't until late in the '30s that the kosher

community in Marshalltown got large enough that they bought a building and made a syn—had a regular synagogue. Prior to that time, they would rent a place above a fire station, or above somebody's hall, or someplace above a building and conduct services. And they'd have usually lay people to be the leaders. And as far as any religious instruction, that we got at home. My dad tried to teach us to read Hebrew, but he didn't have too much success. He didn't have the patience and we didn't have the will, so it wasn't accomplished. But [pause] my parents did keep a ver—, a kosher home at the—in the early '30s—well up to the last. My mother was very religious and very devoted to her position on that. There was no items brought into the home that was not kosher and met the requirements of the Jewish religion.

JG: When did your mother and father pass away and at what age?

IB: My mother passed away, let's see, when I was thirty-five, so that been in nineteen- sixty—[subtracting: 69, 35, 24]—it was about 1959, my mother passed away. And she died from a Parkinson's disease that they say was result of the influenza attack during World War I. She had influenza and began— Then acquired Parkinson's as a result of that. My father lived to be a pretty ripe old age of—it's debatable—according to some records it shows that he was ninety, and other records show that he was eighty-eight. And, so he passed away in 1981, in April. And both my mother and father are buried in the Jewish Glendale cemetery in Des Moines.

JG: Now your dad stayed active in the business up until a pretty good age, didn't he?

IB: Well, he was active knowing— Now that I look back we boys kind of eased him out because, really there were two of us still in business in Grinnell and he had to help take care of my mother. My mother was not in good health because of Parkinson's, so he stayed home quite a bit of the time. So, when he became sixty-five he kind of retired and took life rather easy. It worked out real well. He spent quite a bit of time loafing around town and visiting with people and then if he wanted to go out of town, he had plenty of opportunity to go wherever he wanted to go. He did have a cousin in Newton that he visited quite frequently and he'd get by. Then he'd go down to Florida and stay there and visit with his other two sons in Florida area.

JG: Let's talk a little bit about your education after high school and your service time. Did you go into service right out of high school or how'd that work?

IB: No, I didn't go into service right after high school. I remember the war broke out in 1941 and I was seventeen years of age at that time and I wasn't—didn't want to think about going into the service, so fooled around for a year. And then in

1942, I started going to Grinnell College.Then I completed a year at Grinnell College in the school year of 1942–1943. And then in the fall of '43, I elected, well, I said to the dra—, "Well, I'd like to go into the service and get it over with." So I was kind of semi-drafted to go. I entered the service—military service—in August of 1943 and was sent to Camp Dodge and with the luck of the lottery there I took a little six or eight week basic training course there. And then I was sent down to Camp Crowder by air. They said after I got down to Camp Crowder, why, they didn't know I wasn't supposed to be there! So then they sent me back up to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. I arrived at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri three or four days after I was supposed to be scheduled to arrive. I was supposed to be—go to a class for a laboratory technician. Since I was too late to get in with the classes, they assigned me to be the office clerk. The army has some place to put you if, and if one thing doesn't work out, they've got something else for you. So I stayed in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and worked in a general hospital as kind of a clerk, in a laboratory. I never saw so many pink and blue slips in all my life as I had to file for laboratory reports. And, of course, along with that went janitor details, too. That was part of the lab clerical job. And then when I went overseas and I was still with the general hospital unit, and they didn't have a position for me then, so I became the official librarian for the medical staff. And that consisted of taking care of three crates of books, medical books, and a little library in England. Nobody ever entered it, so I became a—did the reading on medical facts. And then after that, why, I just went along with them and then went overseas to France after the invasion in the early part of August or—wait a minute—July. And we followed along after the troops until Paris was taken. And after Paris was taken, they set us up in a general hospital right in the city of Paris. So by the luck of the draw, I had a good tour of duty and I became an administrative clerk there in the general hospital. And, it was rather interesting because my job was to escort patients after they had been discharged from the hospital to try to get them on the train station back to their units, wherever they were located in France. But, as soon as these soldiers got a taste of Paris in there, I think half of them went AWOL. I never got half of them on the trains. I got them down to the train depot, but they disappeared after that. [laughter] So I don't know what happened to half of my patients. But I got them to the station, that was all my job. And after that, why, then I was transferred. I went to Reims I went to Barleduc, France, and I went to the supply company after that.

JG: Well, it sounds like you had some pretty good assignments.

IB: Oh, I had very good assignments.

JG: You could soak up some culture in Paris, anyway.

IB: Yes. It was an interesting time. By the luck of the draw I know that at the Battle of the Bulge—in our troop, in our hospital unit—they were drawing out individuals who had had infantry training and I did. But the way the Army works, if you were on somebody's black list, you got sent out, and if you weren't, you got to stay. And by the luck of the draw, I didn't cross anybody up and so I stayed and I wasn't sent to any front lines. I knew several individuals who had been sent to the Battle of the Bulge and a couple of them didn't make it back. So, it's just a big— I always thought the Army was a big lottery and [laughter] the way your numbers went, that's what happened to you. And, so I spent a little over two years in Europe and was discharged back in the United States in the early part of 1946. And then when I came back in April of 1946, I decided to go back to college. I went to Grinnell College and said, "Is it possible to get enrolled for the fall semester?" And they were so anxious for students they said, "Why wait until fall? You can start in right now." That was the middle of the spring, the second semester. And so how do you make up the work? Well, they said, "Only take two courses and take a fast review of the previous half of the semester and you can catch up." So I did start out in April of 1946 going to Grinnell and completed—graduated in January of 1949. Kind of followed things up.

JG: Did you— Do you recall what the tuition was at that time?

IB: Well, as far as the tuition, I wasn't too concerned because I was covered under the GI Bill. And the government took care of all my expenses and then we got seventy-five dollars a month, too, So at that particular time, we could live pretty well.

JG: That sounds like you had it made.

IB: Yes, and I lived at home at the time.

JG: Did you work any part time at the yard?

IB: Oh, yes, I worked full time at the yard, too, because it was still a busy time. As I say, after the war was over, there was more activity with a little slow period probably from 1946. But there was always a lot of activity. There was always something to do.

JG: Then you went on to—

IB: Columbia University

JG: For a degree?

IB: Yes, I went to New York. I'd like to see what New York looked liked so I went to Columbia University. I applied—that was the only place I applied because it

was rather expensive to apply, to send an admissions request to different schools. I just applied to Columbia Business School and was accepted. I suppose they wanted a few people from out in the country and I went and got an MBA there. And after I had been in New York for a while, I thought, "Oh, that's too big a city for me." I kind of felt lost there, so I thought, well, I'd come back to Grinnell, which may have been a mistake or not—I don't know. You always look back and think, well, things should have been different or you should have done things differently, but after the years go by, why?

JG: How do you feel about your decision now? To come back?

IB: Oh, you do have a little misgivings at times. Things were not bad, not bad now. But you just always wonder in the back of your mind what would have happened if you had really had made an effort to stay.

JG: So, so your degree was in business?

IB: Um-hum.

JG: And—

IB: Accounting and finance.

JG: That ties in with the small business, didn't it?

IB: Yes, it ties in. And it has helped me. I think I'm active now in taking care of my own finances and whatever investments I make. I think it's helped me out quite a little bit. And, so I don't regret that aspect.

JG: How do you feel about the benefits of having grown up in these—what we're calling these tough times. You know, the Depression and the World War II era. Do you feel that was an asset or a handicap? How do you look upon it?

IB: I don't think it's an asset, I don't think it's a handicap. I think you make it, take use of the times that exist at the time. We never thought we were living in tough times because you don't know. If you don't have it, you don't miss it. If you never had it, you never missed it. So if we didn't have a fancy car, that didn't make any difference. We weren't—didn't expect it and didn't want it. As far as going on vacations, we never went on vacations while we were growing up. My folks didn't go any place. They stayed right in Grinnell. I don't think— I didn't go out of the state—maybe I may have gone into Illinois—before I graduated high school, but I never stayed at a hotel at any time prior to going into the service. Well, I'll take that back, I may have stayed one night, maybe in Marshalltown or something like that, maybe have stayed at somebody's home. But we never went to any hotels. As a matter of fact, we didn't eat out at restaurants until I think I went in the service.

JG: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that too, about eating out as a family.

IB: The family never ate out. Now you think, people think they've got to go out to eat and spend a lot of money. That's the reason folks got by, because we never went out to eat. We ate at home. There was no money to waste, to eat out.

JG: There really weren't any choices.

IB: No choices. I don't know. Well, there was always restaurants in town. I remember there was the Raven—supposed to be quite a nice restaurant—that was built, maybe that was after World War II, I think. But there was always a lot of little eating spots, there was—

JG: There was one along the railroad, wasn't there?

IB: Yes, there was BVRT, or BRT or something like that. There was quite a number of them in town. And hamburger joints, I know the youngsters say, oh, they recall going to the White Spot or some place and buying a hamburger for a nickel. I never ate out at all until after I was in the service. But as I say, if you didn't do it, you didn't miss it. And as far as tough times, we didn't know what real luxury times were, so how could we say it was bad times? That was just the way things were.

JG: Having lived through that, does that affect your comparison with these times. In other words, is there any sense of appreciation? Now compared to then?

IB: I know we live pretty nicely now, but I don't look—I don't really look back and compare how things were because I think we managed to survive in our household. We didn't have— I remember heat and modern progress was heating your water with corn cobs and that was quite a progress when you could have hot water in your house and all you had to do was go down and start your little heater and put a little corn cobs in your little heater and in ten minutes you could have hot water piped all over your house. You didn't have—we didn't have an automatic gas hot water heater.

JG: But did you, were all the homes you lived in have plumbing and modern—

IB: Oh, yeah, I think our first home, my dad put in plumbing apparently, but I was always familiar with—I was never subject to going to an outhouse like that until probably my only experience with outhouses probably when I went in the service.

IB: But you were one of the city dudes. [laughter]

JG: Yeah. But there was hard work. They were progressive. So in our first home, they put in bathroom facilities. I don't know of course on how long it was prior to it, but I think first thing they did when they got into a home was see that they had inside plumbing of some sort.

JG: How— Let me put it another way. What do you recall in regard to prices. You mentioned, you know, what a movie cost? Do you have any recollection what other things sold for?

IB: Well, yes, you know it always bothered me to have to go into a grocery store and see you buy a candy bar for forty-five or fifty or sixty cents. When I'm thinking of going in and buying at least the small ones for a penny and the extra large ones for a nickel and sometimes, on a special, you can get three candy bars for a dime. So it bothers me to this day on items like that to go and say if you want a candy bar, I still say, well, give me a nickel candy bar and hand down seventy-five cents. And those are vivid items as far as groceries go. Why, you take it as matter of fact and you spend more going out to dinner in the evening now than my folks, I know, they took home during the week. Their allowance, when they was partners, was fifteen dollars a week. And they managed, my dad managed to raise four boys and take care of a whole family and that was their allowance during the Depression was about fifteen dollars a week.

JG: That's what the partners took out of the business?

IB: The business, fifteen dollars a week.

JG: What did you, what did you sons get paid for your work?

IB: I don't think we got paid. We were expected to work and that was it, as far as— I just went along with the fact that you live at home and you were expected to help out and maybe if you could scrounge some little items of metal out of the business, and then you got paid, maybe you could get something a little extra. Then dad would find some way of giving you an extra dollar or two or something. And then we would take our money and we'd deposit our savings in the local Poweshiek County Bank. I remember after working two or three years we managed to accumulate a savings account of about thirty or forty dollars. And I always like to recall that the way they paid interest in those days, they paid at maybe one percent or maybe one and a half percent on the minimum balance held during a quarter. So, if you had deposited ten dollars and that was the minimum balance, you only got paid on that minimum balance no matter if you put the five dollars in at the beginning of the month and at the end of the quarter, you hit $50, you still only got paid on the five dollars. And, so, I know probably during the '30s, my dad had been depositing at the Poweshiek, had been doing business at the Poweshiek Bank, and needed to borrow a couple hundred dollars for his business. And the local banker, who ran the bank at that particular time, thought he was kind of a high risk. So he went over to the see the banker across the street and the local—other banker said,

"Yeah, I think we can take care of you." So we switched business during the '30s, or early '30s, to the other bank, and we been there since the early '30s at the Grinnell State Bank. So—

JG: What would— You indicated that your interest was one percent. Was that the going rate for a business loan, too, then?

IB: Oh, no. I think probably a business rate was three or four percent or some at five, maybe at the maximum. No, one percent was what they paid for their depositors.

JG: Did your dad, what'll I say, have to kind of work on building up a credit rating or was he pretty readily accepted?

IB: Well, I presume he'd have to build up a kind of credit rating over the years and borrow fifty dollars to pay that back and finally get established where he could borrow probably a couple hundred. But I think during Depression, they needed money for business and he borrowed on a life insurance policy that he had. And that antagonized his local insurance man because I don't think he ever paid it back. But—

JG: How many banks did Grinnell have at that time?

IB: I recall back in the '30s, the other banks probably had gone busted prior to the 1930 or '32. So there was only two banks in existence at that particular time was the Poweshiek Bank and the Grinnell State Bank. And then there was still the Federal Savings Home and Loan, and that was another thing that I remember. They had acquired a lot of homes from people who went bankrupt or busted in the— And they had to put a lot of those homes on the market and sell them during the Depression or the late '30s for whatever they could get for them. And I know that most of the homes sold for five hundred or one thousand dollars and so forth. You could buy a fairly decent home for a thousand dollars. Now we bought—my dad, in 1937, bought a piece of property with a home on it on Second and West Street. It was a big home, a fairly nice one, and it had a lot, 150 feet by about 150 feet. Nice big corner lot. Too much sidewalk as far as I was concerned after you had to mow it and shovel snow, but I think that cost him two-thousand dollars.

JG: Was that one of your homes where you lived?

IB: That's one of the homes where we lived. And we moved into that in 1936. And you could have bought other homes in other locations for a lot less but that was close to town, a big lot, so that sold for two thousand dollars. And we lived there until, let's see, I was married in 1956, and so apparently I lived there— My dad sold that property in the early '60s and the house was torn down. But I think at that

particular time, the house went up for, the property sold for about thirty thousand dollars.

JG: Is that house still there?

IB: No, that house was torn down. But even in those intervening years, various people have owned it. Right now the property is just used for a lot for storing.

Side Three

IB: Just to bring that up as an example. Certain areas of the city of Grinnell have not grown because this piece of property that's located fairly close into town, it's on a busy intersection and so forth. And yet after thirty years the piece of property has not increased because of value. Even today I don't know if it's worth much more that it was in the '30s. Because really for the interest on the investment and the tax you've had to pay on it for thirty years of time, it should be worth three times that much. But I think that commercial property and land and values outside of certain homes and certain areas have not increased appreciably in the city of Grinnell with the rate of inflation. And I suppose it reflects that fact that Grinnell has not really gained a lot of population and not become a metropolitan area. I don't think that— When I was growing up, probably in the early '30s, they said the population was about five thousand. And even today after fifty years the population may be eight thousand three hundred to nine thousand depending on if you include the college. So it's still a small rural area, a small town. But there's been a lot— The only major change has been in the number of buildings and homes that have been torn down in the years. Of course, when we grew up back in the '30s, the local stockyard was quite an area of activity.

JG: Where was that located?

IB: That was located on Third and West Street. The local stockyard where they brought cattle for shipment to Chicago and the various marketing centers. And I think it was interesting—I forgot to mention it—but one of the interesting things growing up was to watch how the farmers brought their cattle into town. They didn't have a lot of trucks and they were herded into town. And it was interesting. We got a lot of excitement to see all the herds of cattle roaming down the street, the farmers trying to coral them and every once in a while, a cow or two would get loose and run into a person's yard. And, you, know it's great excitement for us youngsters to watch them herd cattle to the local stockyards.

JG: Now, did they, would they bring them down what is now 146?

IB: Well, no, I think most of them would come down Spring Street. They'd bring them in some place— They'd get off the main highways. Of course, West Street was a gravel road up until the early '50s. It was just a little country road, gravel. I suppose a lot of them were herded down the side roads and that's where they were brought into market.

JG: Now, what's now located where the stockyard was?

IB: Well, Macy's Cement Works is there. Of course, Bill Ziegenmeyer built that cement works back in the early—late '40s probably, early '50s. But—

JG: Now, would they ship cattle and hogs both?

IB: Both cattle and hogs were shipped on the Chicago-Rock Island to Chicago and to major—to Omaha and probably wherever they were going to be sent to market. And—

JG: Who operated—

IB: The stockyard was operated by the railroad at that particular time. I think the individuals would bring their stock down to the storage pens. And then later on the stockyard facility was sold to—bought by a person by the name of Paul McConnell. And he used that for hog and livestock buying area then. Of course, after that, after the '40s or maybe the late '30s, early '40s then cattle—most the cattle were shipped to market by truck. That was quite an activity. The individuals would— Halsted, Len Halsted—the father of Keith and Kenneth—he had quite a fleet of trucks that would haul livestock to the Chicago area. And I suppose a lot of them were penned up there. But then with the advent of trucks, most of the truckers would go right to the farm yard and pick up the cattle and haul them straight in to the Chicago area.

JG: How did the farmers bring the hogs to town?

IB: Well, I think some of them were driven, but I think they tried to bring them in on wagons—on farm wagons. They herd them onto a farm wagon and bring in so many at a time because they were a little hard to corral, but—

JG: And that would be by horse-drawn wagon.

IB: Um-huh. Horse-drawn wagon. And maybe there were a few old trucks, Model Ts and small trucks. They'd bring in quite a few by truck, too. Of course I remember during the Depression the stockyard was a good place— Prior to, well during prohibition, and that took place what in the 1920s and 30s, another source of our income would be to go around the stockyard on Sunday morning and pick up the half-pint bottles that people had emptied out during the Saturday night spree.

And we'd gather those up. And I don't remember— But we'd get at least two cents—they were white clear glass—and we'd either get two cents or a nickel apiece, take them back to the local bootlegger and he'd give us two cents apiece for those little half-pint bottles.

JG: And you indicated that you would get a good many of them around the stockyard?

IB: Yes, because, I don't— It was a place to hide or hang around and—

JG: You wouldn't care to tell me who the bootlegger was?

IB: Well, I don't know—a fellow named Troxel, I don't know— That's who I took the bottles to. And we got two cents or something like that for a nice clear little half-pint bottle. I think they were half-pint. I don't know. Maybe it was a pint. But—

JG: Did you—was that how you got your movie money?

IB: That was partly—and then, so forth—but that was an interesting way of making a little money and—

JG: Won't you tell me something about—I know we're bouncing around here, but people are going to sort this out—about the college in your time there, which was right after the war. Do you remember what the enrollment was at that time?

IB: No, but I think it was about what it is today, or maybe a little bit less. But, of course, there was a lot of married students barracks built up around the college area, too. They had a lot of barracks built up for married students and a lot of those attended it. And so it was a little bit older crowd, because most of them probably would be in their late, early '20s probably from twenty-two to thirty. But the girls were the same age. They weren't the usual age of eighteen to twenty, but instead twenty-one, twenty-two. And the men were a little older and had a little more seriousness and, I don't know. It was a little different. It was more sedate. They didn't get so much radical ideas. They weren't protesting any causes. The students came to get an education and that's what they went for. And they were settled down to business and they didn't have a lot of protests and causes they were supporting. Feminism wasn't a movement, and gay rights wasn't a movement and various things that you hear about today—causes that people like to protest or to preach for. So it was strictly— The college didn't have the facilities either at that particular time. The buildings were old. They needed a lot of renovation and the college itself was just coming out of a depression, too. Because the college wasn't in very strong financial condition in the '30s they were in rather desperate straits. They didn't have a tremendous endowment and I think it was touch and go for the college too because they were a little slow in paying their bills and

JG: When did you get married?

IB: I got married in 1956. I keep track of that because I had a 1955 white New Yorker Chrysler. And that time you could buy a hard-top Chrysler, and that was a lot of money, for thirty-five hundred dollars, with a leather interior and the tremendous big V-8 engine. Well, since 1935, why, you can see what's happened to the price of vehicles, and that was—

JG: And your wife's from Ottumwa?

IB: My wife was from Ottumwa. And—

JG: How did you happen to meet?

IB: Oh, through a mutual acquaintance and he fixed us up and—

JG: We— Unless you have anything further to touch on— Is there anything else that comes to mind?

IB: Not right off hand. Probably later on something will come to mind.

JG: Those, quote, good old days.

IB: Well, yeah, quote, good old days. And somehow we managed to survive and we never went hungry. And as far as being cold and homeless, we had no complaints because our folks provided for us as well as they could. And we accepted whatever they had. I know we didn't have a lot of toys. My folks never bought us toys or things like that.

JG: What did you—did you use homemade stuff or what?

IB: I don't know if we had a lot of homemade stuff. I don't know if we had a lot of toys. I don't recall. Maybe there was little cars or something like that, but we didn't have any games or Nintendo games or or any things in the home.

JG: You were probably readers.

IB: Dominoes. We probably had a game of dominoes, and checkers and a few decks of cards and that constituted the games. And you listened to the radio programs, of course. That was always entertaining. Listened to Jimmy Allen and I don't know who all—all the popular radio shows at that time—Fibber McGee and Molly and Eddie Cantor and those shows. You listened to the radio and that was your entertainment and your enjoyment.

JG: Well, Isadore, I want to thank you sincerely for taking the time to share your memories of this period and speaking personally. And on behalf of your friends in Grinnell, we're glad you stayed in Grinnell. And I hope you are too.

IB: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I hope I was of some help to you. Probably I'll think of a lot more things to say later on, but, that's for another chapter.

JG: All right, thanks a lot.

IB: You're welcome.