Interviewee: Martin Pearce
Interviewer: Barbara and Russell Tabbert
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Transcriber: Russell and Barbara Tabbert

Martin Pearce

Side One

This is Barbara Tabbert [BT] and Russell Tabbert [RT]. We're interviewing Martin Pearce [MP] on February 28, 1992, for the Friends of Steward Library's oral history project about Grinnell during the Great Depression and World War II.

BT: Mr. Pearce, where were you born?

MP: Well, I was born right on this farm that I'm living on now. In fact this farm goes back well over a hundred years. My great grandfather was one of the first settlers in this Westfield neighborhood. It was back before 1850—I can't say the exact date. I live in the Westfield community, which was an earlier community than Grinnell. They was starting a city here. It had a stagecoach stop about a mile from here, north and west. And there was a brick factory, I think it was. But when the railroad came through it was up about four, five miles north of here. It went through where Grinnell is. Then J. B. Grinnell, of course, started the town and Westfield dried up, except that we do have a cemetery and a church that's still operating, a nondenominational version.

RT: What's the name of that church?

MP: Westfield Community Church, I guess they call it. It's still going.

RT: What year were you born?

MP: 1916.

BT: Do you remember much about the community of Westfield? Was it still a town when you were growing up?

MP: No, the town was gone. There was a barn that they could drive a team of stagecoach horses into and unhitch them and put new horses on. And then across the road from the barn was an inn—or tavern—I guess it was an inn—all built of native lumber. I've seen it. It was getting pretty shambles [?shambled] when I was a kid, but I played around in it. All the big beams were hewed out of solid black walnut.

RT: How many were in your family—brothers and sisters?

MP: My mother and dad had nine children. One boy died before I was born at two and a half years old. And that left eight of us. I had five sisters and two brothers. We grew up here in this community.

BT: Were you the youngest in the family?

MP: No, I'm kind of in the middle. My brother Bill was the oldest and he managed a grocery store in Grinnell for years. Then my sister Mathilda [sp.?]—she married Dave Morrison. He was a relative to the Morrisons [not distinguishable] the glove factory. She lives in California. And then there was Wilma. She married a man from West Des Moines. She passed away a couple years ago with cancer. And then there's Myrtle. She married Rex Frank who used to manage a famous shoe store in Grinnell back in the '40s, I think, the '30s and '40s. Ethel May married another Morrison, a brother to the one that married my older sister. Paul Morrison. And he was a professor at Minot State University. He passed away about a year ago. Oh, I forgot me. I'm in there right after Myrtle—I'm right between Ethel May and Myrtle. I was born here on the farm, and for a short time we lived close to Grinnell on an acreage. My dad got so that he couldn't run the farm. And we moved up there, lived there for five years, I think it was. And then we moved back to the farm. So I've practically lived on this farm all my life, except for—I went to grade school, kindergarten up through second or something up at Davis School. Oh, I have a brother George who lives in California and I have a younger sister Gladys and she lives in Sigourney, Iowa. Her name is Mrs. Frances Keller.

BT: What kinds of things do you remember about your family and the kinds of things that you kids did for fun? Maybe family traditions that you celebrated?

MP: Well, for fun— My older brother was a pretty good athlete. He liked to play all kinds of sports. And we used to have a basketball court in our barn where we could play ball. And we had jumping standards out in the yard and a big sawdust pit to land in. And he used to practice pole vaulting on that thing. For—oh I don't know how many—twenty, thirty years—he had the record of pole vaulting from Grinnell High School. But they had the solid poles. Then they got this flexible pole and that way they shot his record all to pieces. I don't know what he would have done with it. We played a lot of games and all kinds of ball. He had all kinds of stuff: shot puts.

We didn't have four-wheelers those days. We used ponies. People that had enough money bought their kids ponies. My folks didn't have that much, so my riding horse was an old work horse. But I got along real good with it.

RT: What do you remember about the school that you attended near here? Was it a one-teacher school?

MP: Yes, one teacher from first grade through eighth. It had a rail all around the school yard. And some [of] the kids rode a pony or drove a horse and buggy to school. And we could unhitch them, unharness them, and let them run in the yard. I guess our main sport was baseball. And we used to play all kinds of other games like dare base and touch the ice man and all that kind of stuff, you know.

RT: Did the teacher live with families in the community?

MP: Yes, there were different instances. Sometimes a teacher would board and room with one of the families close. Now when I started school the teacher drove a horse. I think she must have driven that about seven miles to come to school every morning. That would be quite a thing because the school teacher was also the janitor. She had to get there early in the morning and start a fire in that old furnace in the basement. They did have coal to burn. Most of the neighbors and everybody burned wood at that time. There wasn't hardly any fuel furnaces. Everybody heated with wood. And our old houses then, of course—they didn't go in for the insulation good and good windows. The wind would blow in around them. We used to stuff paper around the windows to keep the wind from blowing in. You'd have a roaring hot fire and you could almost burn on front and freeze on back.

BT: Were bedrooms in the upstairs?

MP: Upstairs bedrooms were just as cold as it was outdoors. I had a little three-cornered piece broke out of the bottom of one of my windows, I remember, and snow blew in there on the window sill and it stayed there all winter. It seemed like we had colder winters—a lot colder than it has been this winter, that's for sure.

BT: How may students were there in the school approximately?

MP: Oh I think it run around ten or twelve, something like that. I know we used to have enough there for a couple ball teams.

BT: Did many of the students go on to high school or did most of them stop after the eighth grade?

MP: Well, before my time a lot of the kids would quit at the eighth grade. But I think when I graduated the eighth grade, I think most of them— I had neighbors down here that the boys quit and went to farming. And most of them did real well too without any more education. They were pretty smart in a way and good hard workers and some of them proved to be pretty good with that eighth grade education.

BT: During the time that they were in school, did a lot of the boys miss school to work on the farm?

MP: Well, I think most of them that went to our school, I don't think they missed too much. Oh there'd be days that they'd stay out to help. But it seemed like most of them got to school pretty good.

BT: And those who went to high school went in to Grinnell?

MP: Yeah, Yeah. Of course there was no buses then. You found your own way to get to school. They used to get together and neighbors would ride with a neighbor.

I got detained in school. My dad got sick when I was in high school. And he was milking about fifteen cows and had a lot of hogs. And the mud was deep in the lots. So I quit school and took over. I'd milk those—I think we were milking about thirteen cows. And I'd milk them night and morning—separate the milk—and mix the milk with ground oats to slop hogs and feed them. And it was too much chores to do morning and night and still get to school. So I quit for ten weeks straight. I remember you get a report card every six weeks. I'd missed at least one of those. Anyway, my brothers and sisters had all graduated from high school and they said you got to go back to school. I'd have quit for good but—so I did go back and I think I failed about everything except PT—physical training. I could get that right. But I was so far behind in algebra and science and stuff—no way I could catch up. So that made me kind of a half-year student that I went and graduated with the next year's class.

RT: Do you remember when the country school closed?

MP: Yeah, I remember, but I can't tell you the date. It must have been [in the 1950s]. Let's see. Yeah, my son went to school up here for a while—my son and daughter. Boy those dates have kind of left me.

BT: When did you really start farming? You helped your dad when he was sick.

MP: Well, Dad was renting the farm on shares and still trying to pay for it and barely making interest. I graduated in 1936 and in '37 I decided that I'd run the farm and we'd get it all instead of half. So in '36 I bought some used machinery. I bought a new tractor, a small one, and a bunch of machinery and started farming the place in 1936.

RT: How many acres did you farm at the time?

MP: Well the farm was 210 acres, something like that at that time.

RT: Did you use horses still at that time?

MP: Well, like I say, I bought a tractor, and we had neighbors that did all their farming with horses. And I still had horses because there was certain jobs that I just did with horses: planted the corn and used them on the manure spreader and a lot of different things. And picking corn, of course. I picked all my corn by hand. There were a few corn pickers in this country, but very few. Almost everybody picked corn by hand. Well at the start we all picked by hand. I didn't have an elevator. I used to pick all that corn and scoop it all into a crib. And that was before aluminum scoops. The old scoop shovels were made of steel. You pick up one now and you don't think you could even scoop with it. You can't hardly swing the scoop, leave alone if it was full of corn. That's all we knew so we just filled our cribs with a scoop shovel.

RT: Did you have hired help or exchange help with neighbors on big jobs like harvesting?

MP: Well, especially during the Depression neighbors were really neighbors. It seemed like the Depression brought us together. If I had an implement that a neighbor could use, why he was welcome to it. And I used several pieces of equipment that was borrowed for the first few years that I farmed.

I used to hire a man once in awhile to help, especially in haying and planting time. Of course, after I got married I had a good hired hand in my wife. She used to run the tractor and get the ground ready for planting. She didn't do much physical work but she did run the tractor quite a bit. And we worked together.

BT: Was that usual around here or kind of unusual for a woman—a wife—to work out like that.

MP: Well, I think a lot of the women helped their husbands drive tractors.

RT: Did you belong to a threshing ring?

MP: Yeah, that was quite a thing. Everybody threshed their oats. Very little wheat in this part of the country. Everybody had a few oats. We had a neighbor with a separator, a threshing machine. And he'd just go from neighbor to neighbor and we all worked together. There were those that had bundle wagons. Of course first you had to cut your oats with a binder. And then you had to shock them all up. That was one job I hated was that shocking. I didn't mind it after a few years. I got so I could do it a little easier. But it was so hot and dirty and— But anyway we'd have all these oats shocked. Then they had guys that they called pitchers. They'd go out with a fork and they'd pitch the bundles up to the man on the bundle rack, the hayrack. They used to make a lot of fun out of it and play jokes on each other. Like maybe slip under a wagonload of bundles and tie a bundle down to the bottom and when he got to it it wouldn't come up you know. [laughter] Or something like that.

The dinners were the big thing. The women all tried to outdo everybody. And—Oh!—you had more food than you could imagine. I used to—for a big family I wasn't used to getting all you could eat. And, boy, I used to stuff myself at those threshing dinners.

BT: What would be served? What were the dinners like?

MP: Oh, they'd have two or three kinds of meat. And they would have, oh I don't know, everything: pie and cake and different kinds of drinks: some iced tea and coffee and lemonade. I don't know, but they sure put on a feast.

RT: Did they feed suppers to the crews too?

MP: Most generally it was one meal. People would usually have a pretty good time to quit. Everybody had cows to milk and chores to do when they got home and get their teams put away. They had a not too set a time to quit, except Saturday night. Saturday night everybody went to town. The town was just stacked with people on Saturday night. If a guy had to work a little bit late Saturday night he was real irritable. I've heard them really complain about that because they had to get home and get them chores done and get to town because he's going to town Saturday night!

RT: Was going to town mainly for shopping and business or was it for entertainment or for both.

MP: Well, it was both. We didn't go to town every day, that's for sure, like we could now. We had dirt roads the whole way to town and most of the people had some cars, but if it was muddy the logical thing to do would be to drive a team to town because they could go through the mud.

BT: How long would it take you to get into town?

MP: Oh, about an hour—forty-five minutes to an hour—to drive a team to town.

BT: So it really was kind of a big trip when you went in?

MP: Yeah, it was a big deal when you was up town. [Laughs]. I don't know.

BT: What did people do in town on Saturday night?

MP: Well, us kids— Mom and dad would be picking up groceries and maybe buy a few clothes—some overalls and that [?] stuff we'd need—some workshirts and stuff like that. Us kids just used to walk around and around the block and just meet people and say hi. Or maybe we'd—I don't know. We got a little older, we used to drive around the block—we got to drive in cars and, of course, whistled at the girls and [laughs].

RT: Was there a movie theater?

MP: Oh, yeah, we had two theaters in Grinnell. Yeah, the old town of Grinnell—I don't know if this is appropriate—but back when I was a kid, I think, was less than 5,000: 4700, I think people in Grinnell. And now, do you know what is it, about 15,000?

RT: It's about 8,000, I think.

MP: 8,000 now?

RT and BT: Umhumm.

MP: Well it's almost doubled then.

BT: Did you have—did your Dad give you some money to spend on Saturday night?

MP: Well, not very much. I usually would get a dime to spend and you could go to the drug store or grocery store and they'd sell three candy bars for a dime. And what I mean is, Milky Ways were bigger then than they are now. I used to buy three of those and bring some of them home and keep them until the middle of the week when I'd get that candy bar out and eat it. [Laughs] Boy, it's so different now. A candy bar costs you fifty cents, but we could buy three candy bars for a dime.

BT: You talked about starting farming in about 1937, '38. Was that a good time to get started, or was that a tough time?

MP: Well, that wasn't too bad. It seemed like things went pretty good. We, ah, I don't know. Price of livestock had come up. My Dad had struggled for years and years and he still owed a lot on the farm and he couldn't believe how we raised quite a few hogs and we had a dairy herd to milk, like I say, about thirteen cows and I didn't take anything for wages. Dad would let me— I had spending money after I got out of high school and was farming the place. We had one bank account. It all went into his and in just a few years—he couldn't believe—we paid the old debt off on the farm and paid off the debt on the machinery that I bought and we couldn't complain at all, really. I farmed for nine years before I got married and in that time I just worked for my dad, you might say. Like I say, we had one checking account and sell hogs and it'd all go in there and if I needed money, I could write a check on Dad—on Dad's account. The only thing that I'd do was buy gas or something or maybe a little entertainment, go to the show or go roller skating or go someplace or something like that, but ah—

RT: Did your wife grow up in this area?

MP: Yeah, she grew up over in Montezuma and Malcolm. Her parents lived over north of Malcolm before we were married.

RT: What was her maiden name?

MP: Doris White. Raymond and Lois White's daughter. They had two kids—my wife and she had a brother, Kenny.

RT: When you got married, then did you live on the home place?

MP: Yeah, my parents lived in the big farm home. And we bought a house up by Gilman and moved in here—pulled it down here with the tractor and put it on wheels. I think it was originally—part of it was a box car. It was something like a mobile home. It sat right here.

RT: Did your parents eventually retire to town? Was that common for retired farmers to move to Grinnell?

MP: Yeah, my parents had retired. Well, Dad used to help me a quite a little bit when I first got started. He was pretty old. He lived to be ninety-four. Mom and Dad moved to California and lived with my older sister out there their last few years.

RT: Do you remember when times really started getting hard when you were a kid during the Depression? What were some of things that you saw?

MP: Well, even before the Depression when we lived in town up on the edge of town there on the acreage Dad still milked a few cows. We had a team of horses that he would drive down to the farm to haul wood back home to burn.

BT: This was in the '20s?

MP: That would be in the '20s. So eight of us kids at home, it was pretty hard for the folks to keep food on the table. Back then—it seemed to me like that was Depression because we went without a lot of things. I remember some of the kids would bring these boughten cookies—marshmallow stuff—in their lunches. And I'd look at them and wonder what they tasted like.

Side Two

MP: Because any time Dad'd sell anything the biggest part of his money would go to pay off the debt on the farm. Yeah, that was his main deal. I remember, my brother—we had a team and a wagon. And to make a little spending money to buy some gas or to take a girl to the show or something he'd take the team to town and drive up and down the alleys and haul the ashes away—everybody burned coal or wood—and for a little of nothing he'd clean up the back yards of people. That's the way he made a little bit of money to spend.

So that the '20s seemed to me like depression. Of course—what was it, '34, I think—that's when we had the real drought [says "drouth"]. And that's when it

really hit the farmers. I know we had a field that we seeded to barley. And that's when this drought hit. And it came up and got about four, five inches tall, and then the dry weather hit. And I imagine it was chinch bugs, because that field that fall was just as bare as plowed ground. It never raised a weed or a spear of grass. That dry weather just cooked that whole field. And the corn yielded horrible that year. Everybody cut it for fodder. We werelucky enough. Dad was renting the farm and the renter had a corn binder. So they cut all our corn with the binder and shocked it. And then later on we run it through a shredder. That shredder—you put the stalks through it by hand and it would pick out the corn and then shred the fodder and blow it in a big pile. That was what we used for feed because the hay was a failure that year. I think not very many people raised alfalfa. Alfalfa did survive if you had it. But very few—everybody raised clover and timothy in those days. And it just dried up and was nothing. So people had a hard time finding food in this area for their cattle. They was in a dilemma. They didn't know whether to try to borrow money and buy feed or sell the cows. And they did both.

RT: I suppose the prices of livestock went way down?

MP: Yeah, the price was down. You couldn't get much for them. And my dad held on. I don't know where he got the money, but he bought hay. It seemed to me like it was clear out of this country. But there was truckers that was hauling hay. I think they was buying it up by Marshalltown, which don't seem too far away now. They would bring truckloads of hay down here and we bought hay and fed it to the old cows to try to keep them alive.

RT: Did your dad participate in any of the programs that the government tried to get going to try to reduce hog numbers and so on?

MP: Yeah, that finally did come on. I suppose that old Franklin Roosevelt's the one that brought that on. And he's the guy that brought us out of the Depression, you know—made the banks sound—the first time that they were backed by the United States government. People could put their money in there and not be afraid they was going to lose it. What was it? The Corn-Hog Program or something like that? I'm sure my dad took advantage of that. I can kind of remember. I don't know what that involved really. I don't know how that worked. Let's see. What year was it? Roosevelt of course, he was elected in '32. Yeah, he run for three sessions.

BT: Four

MP: Yeah, four.

RT: Did any young men from around here go off and work in the CCC or WPA or any of those projects? Any of your friends or neighbors do that? Or did they all stay—

MP: Well, I knew a lot of people in town that— I was well acquainted with a bunch of the people in the south end of town. They were the poorer part. Most of them—a lot of them worked for it. But I don't know of any farmers that joined that.

BT: They were really needed on the farm?

MP: Yeah, they had a job to do, most of them. Now the people uptown that were out of jobs. It gives them something to do. That was the only way they survived, I'm sure. We had some good friends up there.

BT: Can you tell us a little bit about the things you were telling us about before we turned the tape on about how the farm people survived during the Depression?

MP: Of course the price of grain was not very high and the price of livestock was down. You couldn't get very much out of them. And that was once or twice a year that you'd sell them. So in between we had to eat. The farmer had advantage of his town neighbors because every farmer had, oh, from forty to two hundred chickens. And every farmer milked a few cows. And out here we didn't sell whole milk. Everybody separated their milk and sold cream. And every grocery store had a place in the back that they would candle eggs and weigh out and test your cream. That's one thing. Saturday night you took the cream and eggs to town. That would buy your groceries and maybe a pair of overalls and a work shirt or something like that.

RT: Did you trade the cream and eggs for things in the store or did they usually give you money?

MP: No, they'd give you a slip for what it was worth and you'd take it up to the cash register and they'd cash that egg check and cream check for you. And, boy, you was rich for awhile. They sure had to watch it—Dad and Mom—they couldn't deal out too much to the kids for spending. They'd have to see what they had left after they'd bought their groceries and things that we had to have.

BT: Did you have big gardens on the farm?

MP: Yeah, that's another way that we survived. We always raised a big garden. My mother canned a lot of stuff. We used to butcher our own pork and maybe a beef. They used to salt a lot of that down. And then they had some big crocks. I remember that. And they'd fry meat and fill these crocks and pour the grease and stuff in there. And that would keep it, buried in its grease.

RT: Did you keep those in the basement?

MP: Yeah, we'd have a big crock full of fried meat in there. I don't suppose it would be too good for cholesterol [laughter], but I used to dig that meat out of that thing and wipe the grease off and eat it. If you ate too much it would make you sick. It was pretty rich. And then they used to can a lot of it—can this beef. We always put it in two quart jars because it would take that much. Boy! That was good meat.

RT: Did you cure hams in a smoke house? Or send them to town to be cured?

MP: Some people did have smoke houses.We didn't have. I think the folks—well, they used to just cook that—what did they call that bacon?—it wasn't even smoked—it was just slab.

RT: Side pork?

MP: Yeah, side pork—and they'd fry that down and then they got to getting smoked salt and you could rub that on the meat and cure it yourself with smoked salt. It would give it that smoked flavor that you get in ham. We used to do that ourselves.

BT: What kind of things did people go without? I'll bet your sisters didn't have too many clothes.

MP: No, my mother was a real good seamstress and she done a lot of sewing. She had an old pedal machine and she used to sit up nights and just run that machine sewing—making clothes. I don't know, I guess we got by pretty good. Never had anything too fancy, that's for sure—not with a big family.

BT: Were there farmers around this area who lost their farms during the Depression?

MP: Yeah. Big share of them that bought farms, especially right after World War I. They gave a pretty good price for them, and then the price of everything kept getting cheaper and cheaper. You know, two cent hogs and ten cents a bushel for corn. There's no way. I mean, a lot of people lost their farms.

RT: Was there a lot of resentment and anger against the bankers and insurance companies that held the mortgages?

MP: I suppose there was some. But I don't remember too much about that. I was pretty young when they was losing those farms. And my dad was just barely was able to hang onto this one. And there's a few years that all he did was pay the interest and they carried him over on the principal. If they'd wanted to, they could have taken it away from him.

RT: Was he buying it from his parents?

MP: Well, it wound up he was buying it mostly from his brother. The brother who had made it out pretty good. And he lived out in California and owned some property out there. He went along with dad. I know I used to feel guilty about my Uncle Seth who lived in California because we owed him everything. I mean every time we'd get any money, Dad'd send it out to Uncle Seth.

RT: Do you remember if there were any of the Farmer Holiday-type activities around here? Attempts to keep products off the market to raise prices and organizing farmers to work for higher prices?

MP: Oh yeah, that's always been out there. Of course you know, the farmers old gripe is that I have to pay whatever they ask me when I buy something and I take whatever they'll give me when I sell. Of course, I've heard that from the time I was a little kid and listened to the old folks talk. I've almost always belonged to the Farm Bureau. And then the NFO came and it sounded like a good deal to me. And I kind of went along with NFO trying to—they were trying to organize the farmers. And they had some pretty good ideas. But they got too radical. I had to drop out because—oh, like a union they tried to push their weight around. And they were putting sugar in trucker's gas and they were burying things in farmers fields to blow out the tires if they didn't cooperate. I couldn't go along with that at all. Their idea at the start might have been all right if we could have pulled together. But I couldn't go along with their thinking. They went too far, I thought.

RT: Do you remember during the really hard times of the Depression people travelling through here and then stopping to ask for meals? Any Hoovervilles in Des Moines or the larger towns? Any real signs of the real depression that you saw?

MP: Oh, when we lived uptown we were about a quarter mile from the railroad track. And that would [have] been in the early '30s, the later '20s. And those railroad cars were always loaded with hobos or bums or whatever you want to call them—people out of work, people migrating around.

I can remember seeing coal cars stopped where we could see them across the field from our house. And some of the people in the slum part of town there, you'd see them out there throwing coal off the top of that car letting it roll down the bank and then later on they'd go and carry it home to keep their houses warm. I suppose that was kind of wrong, but people were desperate. I think some real good people reverted to those tactics to survive, you know, I mean, I know my heart went out to them. I saw them. I knew they were stealing coal, but I thought, "Gosh, they need it." [laughter] And they didn't have money to buy it.

But that old WPA and stuff, that helped them. I think that gave them a chance. The whole south end of the town of Grinnell, I remember, every house had an outhouse behind it down on the alley. They didn't have sewer down through there, or if they did they couldn't afford it or something. I remember when that was just the common thing. And, oh, another thing that was different then. Out here we didn't have electricity. And a lot of people in town [also didn't]. There was the iceman that delivered ice for iceboxes to keep stuff cool. It was before refrigerators. But now that goes back—that was probably in the '20s, maybe in the '30s.

RT: Did they deliver out to the farms too, or was that just in town?

MP: They didn't deliver ice out here that I know of. If you wanted, you could pick up some and bring it home. They had—

RT: When did electricity come to the farm approximately?

MP: Well, let's see, in the '30s—that was before the war of course. I know every little community had a ball team. And Westfield—our community—we bought an old generator from Norris's place in town that had used this before electricity got to Grinnell. And we got that generator to running to light the ball diamond. So we—the Grange sponsored it, Westfield Grange, and had ball games over here run by a generator that'd generate the electricity. Now that— It must have been in the early '40s or late '30s before electricity was out here. I don't know. Maybe you know that better than I would. We didn't get on REA. We had ISU out here. We were real fortunate. When we lived up by town my dad got used to electricity. He was one of few that put in a Delco plant. And we had electricity. I remember getting rid of that old Maytag gasoline engine and putting an electric motor on the washing machine. Boy we got rid of a lot of headaches.

RT: So you ran the power when you needed to wash or something?

MP: Yeah, we had—Delco was a whole group of batteries that they put up in your basement and a motor—engine—that you could start. We'd usually run that once a week. That'd be Monday—wash day. And we'd run the generator while we was washing. That'd give the electric motor plenty of power. It didn't run the batteries down.

RT: And then did you use it for electric lights and—?

MP: Yeah, we had— That was the main thing: washing machine and electric lights. We got to do away with the old lamps.

RT: Did you listen to radio a lot during those years?

MP: Well, everybody had a radio. The first ones of course were all battery. They weren't electric radios; you didn't plug them in. Had the A's and C's and B

batteries. Anyway, you had to buy these big batteries and keep them up. We used to listen to the radio quite a bit in the evenings and stuff.

RT: Did you have favorite shows? Did the family listen to particular shows?

MP: Oh yeah, there was a lot of those good old—Amos and Andy, and—what's the old boy's name?—George Burns and Gracie Allen. They were good. And then all the kids used to listen to— Well, there was Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy and—boy, there goes my memory again—Buck Rogers, that used to portray the future of space, flying in space. He had air belts they could just fly with it like a bird, you know. And a lot of that stuff kind of come true, I think. Old Buck Rogers, he was way out back then in those days. The kids all used to listen to those.

RT: Did the churches do much to help during the hard times during the Depression?

MP: Well, I don't know— I don't think our little church did too much of that. If somebody was in trouble or something—a fire burned them out or something like that—they'd take up a collection and people'd all go—neighbors were really neighbors—they'd go help in any—people really enjoyed getting out altogether and doing the work of a farmer that was in trouble. But the church, of course, here—it just barely did kind of keep going anyway. They didn't have any money really to pass out to do that kind of thing. They used to sponsor missionaries and things like that, but that was just part of their budget and funding.

RT: What was the general feeling when the world war started? Did it seem like a necessary war to get into? Or did people oppose it?

MP: I didn't know anybody that really opposed it too much. That thing broke out and my two brothers—both of them were called to service. And I was in—What is it?—1-A. But I had started farming and was well-situated and taking care of the place when it broke out. And I didn't know anybody else to take my place. So I really didn't feel quite right about it, but they chose to leave me here to farm. And things sure changed after the war broke out. Like every little community had a ball team and that was a big deal. Two or three times a week we'd go play ball with all the little towns and communities around. War broke out and all the guys left; there were no ball teams left. And of course— Well, I know I spent a lot of long, long hours trying to keep the farm going, doing the job that used to take two guys and you were there alone so you did it yourself and found ways to do it. So we did put in long hours during the war.

RT: Was it sometimes hard to get parts or seeds or things you needed to farm?

MP: Yeah, everything went on ration. A lot of food supplies—sugar, I think, and flour. You couldn't buy new tires and gas was rationed. And you had to have coupons to buy gas—even for your tractor. Some people took advantage of that and slipped a little tractor gas into their car [laughter]. I shouldn't have said that. But, you quit going to Marshalltown to go dancing or skating because your tires were about wore out and you couldn't buy new ones and you couldn't buy gas to go that far anyway. It put the clamps on us pretty good. But we all thought it was a good cause and we was ready to sacrifice anything we could to help the boys over there.

RT: Did the prices of farm products rise during the wartime? Was it pretty good times economically?

MP: Yeah, it seemed like prices did come up. I can't remember now too much about the— Yeah, it seemed like we got along pretty good. I think probably we're closer to a depression right now maybe than we were then. I know I bought a brand new Ford in '40 with some extras on it and it was $800, which was hard to get, but it wasn't as hard to get that as it would be $12,000 now for a new car—in that neighborhood.

RT: During the war did you pretty much continue farming like you described before, using horses and one small tractor? Or did you go more toward tractor farming?

MP: Well, it was after the war before I got a corn picker and quit picking corn by hand. Yeah, I don't know, we got more and more tractors.

BT: Did the war have any effect on the kinds of crops you raised?

MP: No, I don't think that made much difference. We might have increased our beans a little bit. Before, in earlier times, we didn't go for beans too much—soy beans—but they got to be a pretty good price and we got to raising more beans. We raised beans and corn and hay. That's about just like everybody else—raise about the same kind of crop.

RT: Did hybrid seed corn come in about that time?

MP: Yeah, that no doubt helped us quite a bit. The old open pollinated, it didn't do too bad. We thought we had some pretty good seed that we'd keep year after year. We had one kind that had such a tough shank that you'd just about break your wrist trying to pick it by hand. It was awful hard to pick. And the stalks would break off and the corn would go down a lot more than the hybrid. It helped us a lot—increased the yield and standability of it.

BT: Can you tell us a little bit about that picking corn by hand? How long it took? And what it did to your hands? What kind of work that was?

MP: Oh man! It's probably one of the hardest jobs. If you want to get anything done picking corn by hand, you can't just go out there and take a leisure deal. You got to act like you're in a race with some guy. And you got to push, push, drive, drive, just as fast as you can go and grab, grab, grab. I remember talking to a neighbor and he says, "Well, I want to get broke in and get my wrists and stuff used to this. But," he says, "I don't go out there and pick slow. I don't want to get in that habit. I go out there and pick just as fast as I can pick, but a shorter time to get broke in." And that made good sense to me, because if you take your time, you'd never get your corn picked. You had to fight it all day long.

Side Three

The first thing you'd do is go out to the barn and feed and harness the horses early in the morning before daylight probably. And then I'd come in and eat breakfast. I was fortunate that most of the time my dad would milk the cows in the morning and give me a chance to get out to the field. Of course, there were times when I helped do the milking too. If at all possible, you'd want to be out to the field as soon as you could see in the morning. If it was cold, you'd peal off your coat down to your shirt-sleves and swing your arms and run up and down the row a ways to get your blood circulating so you'd get warmed up. And then just start picking corn as fast as you could pick. By noon you was supposed to have a good load. When I finally got to not being so particular—take every ribbon off—I could get my fifty bushel load by noon. And then scoop her off and try to go out and pick another fifty bushel load in the afternoon. Try to get a hundred bushel a day. I didn't do that the first year or two because my dad was a stickler. He always picked corn so clean. He'd have every ribbon off of it and all the silks. And if you got thirty bushel twice a day, why you'd picked a lot of corn. But we got so that we found out that those shucks didn't hurt. We'd hit it with our hook and throw it in the wagon. And if it had some shucks on, it just stayed. That way you could get your hundred bushel in a day.

RT: Did you use a little snapping hook to break the ears off?

MP: Yeah, I used mostly a thumb hook, a leather strap around your wrist with a hook on it. You hit that with a sweep. [He demonstrates.] The hook pulled the shucks back. Then you grabbed the ear and broke it off with [?word not clear]. Just one sweep and you got that whole thing. The hook up here pulled the shucks back. Then you'd get your hand in on the ear and then throw it.

RT: Were you picking alone usually or were two people picking together?

MP: Well, most of the time I picked by myself. Once in awhile I'd hire a guy or a neighbor would come to help sometimes. And you'd take two rows when you were by yourself. When you was two guys. you'd take three rows. The guy by the wagon'd take the first three and the other one'd take the outside. And maybe once in awhile get the middle row.

RT: How long in the season did it take you to pick all your corn? Did it go into November?

MP: Oh yeah, if you were done by Thanksgiving you were awful lucky. A lot of times it ran on up into January. Sometimes most of December. It depended on how many acres you had to pick, you know. I usually raised on this farm, I'd have about sixty acres of corn. And you could pick, I suppose, an acre a day or maybe acre and a half. There'd be, of course, good days and bad days. There's days you'd have to do something else and not get your full two loads but, well, that'd make it sixty days. That'd be two months for sixty acres.

RT: Did you go out in the bad weather too, when it was snowy or rainy?

MP: Yeah, I've picked in some pretty bad weather. Oh I suppose I would lay off on some real stormy days. I know a neighbor of mine that got so disgusted he said, "I'm going to pick every day regardless of what." And he'd tell you about it. But we've picked in deep snow. I had— One year the corn was down pretty bad and we had a foot of snow or so. And you'd have to jerk the stalks up out of the snow and pick the ear. Bent over all the way down across the field kicking that stuff out of the snow and jerking it off. I did hire a guy to help me do that. And he was a real hard working guy. And I sure appreciated it.

RT: I suppose you got all wet and—?

MP: Oh yeah, your gloves would get soaking wet.

RT: Did the horses move ahead on voice commands?

MP: Yeah, they were trained pretty good to keep you beside the wagon. And once in awhile you'd have to give them a lesson. They'd get to getting ahead of you too far. And you had the lines back along the side of the wagon. And if they wouldn't stop when you said "Whoa!" you'd reach over and jerk those lines back and they'd get so they'd stop when you say "Whoa!" But you'd get up close to the front there and "Git up!" a little and they'd move ahead a little bit and "Whoa!" and they'd stop and just keep that wagon right beside you.

RT: I suppose during later times you had an elevator so that you could elevate corn into the crib?

MP: Yeah, I think that was after I was married, probably about in '45, '46, '47. I'll bet it was about '46 that I bought an elevator.

BT: That made life a lot easier?

MP: Oh yeah! Boy! I rented an elevator from a neighbor before that too. I remember hiring some corn picked with a picker. I didn't pick corn by hand that year then. But we still didn't have an elevator, and that picker picked corn and we had several wagons and we scooped that all in the crib. Boy, that kept you busy, scooping corn in as fast as that guy could pick corn with a corn picker. So we finally got an elevator.

RT: Were the first pickers power-takeoff drive or were they bow wheel?

MP: Well, there were some bow wheel pickers, but that was pretty much before my time. My first picker was an old converted bow wheel picker converted to a power takeoff. It picked corn and run it out an elevator and you drove a team and wagon underneath the elevator to catch the corn. But I didn't keep that very long. It was kind of out of date.

RT: Did you do a lot of converting of horse-drawn machinery to pulling with a tractor?

MP: Oh yeah, we did some. We put stub tongues in the mower and in manure spreader and—yeah—and we got using a tractor on the hay rake instead of—threw the tongue away and put a short hitch on it so you could pull it with a tractor.

RT: Did you put up loose hay for most of the years that you farmed?

MP: Yeah, I put up a lot of loose hay. Boy, as a kid I worked for neighbors. Day after day—they had hay loaders at that time. Course before that I'd done a lot of that too—pitching. They'd rake it in cocks and bunches and pitch it on the hayrack. Then they got these hayloaders. And a bunch of neighbors went together and made hay from one place to the next. And I learned how to load hay and then if I set the fork I knew how to take it off. You know, load the back separate from the front. I load the back clear up there and then when I got that up high push it ahead. And the guy driving the team—usually had a team pulling the hayrack and hayloader—and he'd walk from side to side and I'd fill that up and then you take that off first and then you take the back off so it wouldn't bind in. And you could take big fork loads. And then some of them got—where they had fields close—they got to using buck rakes and pushing the hay up by the barn. That was terrible trying to set the fork in that loose hay. Oh that was a terrible job trying to get that hay to stick to the fork. You had to re-pile it every time. It'd take a bunch out and then you had to stack it

together and make a place to set the fork. Oh! I never worked any harder in my life as I did trying to set the fork in that kind of stuff.

RT: Did you ever use slings?

MP: There was neighbors that had slings but I never got in on that too much. We used the harpoon to start with and then the grapple forks.

RT: One more thing about the war. Did people in your family or neighborhood go off to work in factories for war production?

MP: They had a plant at Ankeny that was hiring a lot of people. I had been running the farm for quite awhile. And my younger brother was just graduating from high school. That would have been in '41. Yeah, cause I know I was going to see if I could get a job at Ankeny and let my brother run this farm for a little while. I went to Des Moines and Ankeny was all filled up. But they checked me out. They thought I'd be a pretty good guy, off the farm. They got me a job at Iowa Pack. And I worked there for awhile.

RT: Was that a meat packing plant?

MP: Yeah, it was a meat packing place. They slaughtered mostly hogs. I worked there till this war got hotter and hotter and I quit and come back and run the farm.

RT: This was near Des Moines?

MP: Yeah, I lived in Des Moines.

RT: So you had a little bit of city life?

MP: Yeah, I got in on that factory stuff and found out what that was like.

BT: Like the farming life better?

MP: Oh, yeah, I think I did. I was real lucky over there at Iowa Pack, though. I started out as kind of a janitor, cleanup guy. Then I got to helping a fellow there that—he chiseled hog heads and he says, "This is the highest priced job on the whole floor." He says, "You ought to learn this." And so when I wasn't busy cleaning up around there, I'd chisel hog heads with him.

RT: Does that mean cleaning the meat off—?

MP: Yeah, it's cleaning meat off the jawbones and off the temples. You didn't use a knife. You used a thing something like a steel that you sharpen them on—similar to that. And you stick that in there and push it up across the jawbones and peel them cutlets off of there. I kept working at it and working at it. And then one day—this fellow that was doing that was a colored boy and he was an amateur boxer. He'd won some of that stuff. He was quite a fighting guy. And he got in a fight in the street one night and broke his arm. He couldn't come to work. And the

old boss come up and says, "Hey, can you run this, chisel these heads?" I says, "I don't know, I can try it." So he put me on there and I just stuck it out, stayed there. I kept that job and the guy came back and they left me on it. So I hadn't been there too long and I was one of the top paid guys on the whole floor. Real lucky.

RT: Is there anything else about the World War II time that we haven't thought to ask about how it affected the community or your family personally? Do you remember any close friends or family that were killed in the war?

MP: Well, I lost some good buddies, that's for sure. The first guy—Gene Stanley—that was one of the first ones killed at Pearl Harbor. He was killed there. He was a buddy of mine. And he used to come out here and work with us on the farm and we bummed around together and, you know, went to dances and roller skating and stuff like that. It changed the community. Like I said, every little community had a ball team and, of course, they all quit playing ball and went to service. You go to town Saturday night it wasn't the same anymore.

RT: Did things pick up again after the war? Did things kind of go back to normal?

MP: Well, not too much. We never did get to playing ball again at Westfield. I think there was some of them that—like some of the bigger towns like Brooklyn, Monte, Lynnville—places like that where they had a town, they got back into the ball games. The old rural thing, it never did get back to like it was.

BT: It kind of changed the whole community and way of life in a lot of ways then?

MP: Yeah, it seemed like it did. People became more and more independent. They quit using neighbors' equipment, and neighbors didn't neighbor as much. Lot of little farms were bought out by a bigger farmer. And the neighborliness disappeared a lot. There's still in our neighborhood—there's a deep feeling of neighborliness.

BT: Is your farm still the same size or have you gotten larger?

MP: No, I didn't get larger. In fact, I got smaller. I probably did the wrong thing, but when the highway [Interstate 80] come through here and cut me in two, I had some good land down there on that side that was kind of hard to get to. You had to go clear round the roads there four miles to get back down there to farm it. Before it was just there and we could pasture it and everything. So I sold about forty acres down there. So that cut me down from 200 to—now I own about 150.

RT: What was the feeling when you first learned of the interstate coming through the community? Were people angry and resistant? Or didn't they know quite what to think?

MP: Well, there were mixed emotions. There were hearings. People—I don't know. I kind of hate to get into some of that.

RT: Did it change your life quite a lot when that went through? Did it disrupt your farming routine?

MP: Well, not a whole lot. I still own some pasture land down there. Some that we can farm. A few times we drove our cattle down there and drove them back. Got some big "SLOW" signs to put on our cars. Get the patrolman to help watch as you drove down 146. But anymore farmers have taken their fences out along the fields. And it's not too good to try to drive cattle from one place to another anymore. And so we got a livestock trailer and we'd take them all down there. And then we got a corral that we'd catch them and bring them all back.

RT: Well, I think that's all the questions I have.

BT: Yeah, we've talked about lots of things.

RT: We want to thank you a lot for your—

MP: Well, I don't know what it's going to be.

RT: Oh, I think it's very useful.

BT: Very interesting to people.