

ADH35/6

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT ARMSTRONG

Interviewer: Laura M. Derr
Date: January 25 and March 26, 1985
Transcriber: Mary Bowden

2005.10.4

INTERVIEW TOPICS

CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

1. --When were you born? Where?
1. --How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
 - What are your parents' names?
 - Where did you go to school?
5. --Are you married or single? Esther Armstrong
5. --Did you raise a family? How big?
 - What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?
- 2,3 --Parents/Grandparents

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

1. Transportation

20. --Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
20. --Trolleys (the Interurban)
19. --Horses and First Automobiles
 - Mud roads and the seedling mile
- 20-23. --Hunter Airport and the first planes
 4. --Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications

- Newspapers
- Radios
- Advertising
- Telephones

B. People in the Community

1. Amusements/Recreation

- Motion Pictures
- Cedar Rapids Parks
- Dances
- Carnival Week
- Chautauqua
- Community Theater
- Little Gallery
- Symphony Orchestra
- Circus
- Greene's Opera House
- Amusement Parks (Alamo)
- Camps
- Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

2. Famous Characters

- Cherry Sisters
- 33-34. --Grant Wood
 - Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
- 33. --Marvin Cone
- 7-8. --Mamie Dowd Eisenhower
- 7. --Sir John Cooper
- 10,11. --Louis Sullivan

3. Lifestyle
 - Life before air conditioning
 - Winter Activities
5. --Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
 - Clothing
 - Toys
 - Saloons/Taverns
 - Farm Life
4. Family Life
 - Household Help
 - Women's Roles
 - 6,8 --Childrens' Activities/Behavior
 - 9. --Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)
 - 9,10. --St. Pauls
 - 11. --Churches
5. Ethnic/Minority Life
 - Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
 - Indians
 - Segregation of Blacks
 - Jobs Available

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community

1. Education
 - 33. --Cedar Rapids Schools
 - 12-16. --Coe College
 - Mount Mercy College
 - Cornell College
2. Government
 - City Services
 - Streets/Roads
 - Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)
3. Medical
 - Hospitals
 - Patient-Doctor Relationship
 - Broken Bones
 - Polio, TB, Debilitating Diseases
 - House Calls
 - Home Delivery of Babies

4. Business and Economy

- Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
- Local Brewing Companies
- 5,23-31. --Retail Businesses /Department Stores - Armstrongs
- Professions
- 29-32. --Banking and Finance
- Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
- Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
- Farmers Market
- Mills on Cedar River
- Buildings Erected
- Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
- Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)
- 3-4 --Cedar River Tower Land

5. Attitudes/Values

- Children/Discipline
- Sex/Petting
- Charity
- Divorce
- Work
- Working women, Voting Rights for Women
- Patriotism (World War I)

D. Historic Events in and Outside the Community

1. Catastrophic Events

- Clifton Hotel Fire (1903)
- Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
- Bank Closings (1933)
- Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
- Public Library Murder(1921)

2. National Historic Events

- Womens' Suffrage
- 15-18. --World War I
- Roaring 20's
- Prohibition
- 28-32. --Great Depression

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- 3-5. --Trolleys (the Interurban)
- Horses and First Automobiles
- 4-5. --Mud roads and the seedling mile
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10-12. --Hospitals

- Patient-Doctor Relationship
- Broken Bones
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- Home Delivery of Babies

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 - Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
 - Local Brewing Companies
 - 19-21. --Retail Businesses /Department Stores
 - Professions
 - Banking and Finance
 - Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
 - Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
 - Farmers Market
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 - Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
 - 15-25. --Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)
 - 7. --Greater Downtown Assoc.
- 5. Attitudes/Values
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 - Working women, Voting Rights for Women
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Robert Armstrong was born in Cedar Rapids on July 4, 1897, the son of Samuel G. and Anna Cooper Armstrong. He is a graduate of Coe College and Harvard Business School. Mr. Armstrong's father founded Armstrong & Fletcher Men's Clothing about 1880*. Under the direction of Robert the store expanded to include women's clothing and become one of the leading department stores in Cedar Rapids. The Armstrong family has been active in support of many local institutions, especially Coe College, St. Luke's Hospital, and St. Paul's Methodist Church. He remembers businesses and fashions that have thrived and disappeared and the Depression years as a downtown businessman.

*(Two years later the store became Armstrong & McClenahaus, and then about 1916-17, the Armstrong Clothing business.)

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

Oral History Project

Interview with: Robert Armstrong
Interviewer: Laura Derr
Date of Interview: January 25, 1985
Transcriptionist: Mary Bowden

LD: This is Laura Derr on January 25, 1985, and I am interviewing Mr. Robert Armstrong.

RA: This is Robert Armstrong, testing.

LD: Mr. Armstrong, I would like to begin by getting some basic biographical information on tape. Would you tell us the year you were born and where you were born?

RA: I was born here in Cedar Rapids at 1015 Fourth Avenue, the only house that is still standing on Fourth Avenue in that medical block. I was born there; my sister was born there. I was born there on July 4, 1897.

LD: How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?

RA: All my life.

LD: What period were you away from Cedar Rapids?

RA: I was only away from Cedar Rapids, during World War I and then afterwards, I was at the Harvard Business School, having previously graduated from Coe College and Washington High School.

LD: That would be the years 1918 to 20.

RA: 1918 to 1920, yes.

LD: Will you give us your parents' names and tell us how long they lived in Cedar Rapids and where they came from?

RA: My father was a farm boy, who had the experiences , sort of, that you read in some of the traditional books in which the farm was mortgaged, they lost the farm, the father went off looking for work, and never came back. So they moved to Marion. Father was the main support of the family. The boys worked till they got the sisters, three sisters, to get teaching certificated and the girls worked so that the boys could get teaching certificates. Then he came to Cedar Rapids and started working in a clothing store. Later, in 1890, founded Armstrong's.

LD: So your father's father then would have been affected by that period of depression in the farm . . .

RA: Yes. Yes, he was.

LD: Back in the 1880's.

RA: Yes, 1870's. Then he left and, looking for work, died in Ohio. He never came back then. My mother, you asked about my mother, her parents were millers here in Cedar Rapids. Both my grandmother and my grandfather, on my mother's side were orphans. They had been orphaned in the potato famine in Ireland. We went over to Ireland, a year ago last summer, and visited Ballymoney, the very orphanage where my grandfather and grandmother had been taken after their parents had died.

LD: I remember reading that you said, i one of the, I think it was in Mr. Murray's book, that your mother's family were millers. Do you remember mills on the Cedar River?

RA: Oh, yes, I remember my grandfather's mill, it was great fun. I would often take my little friends down there. It was great to plunge around through the wheat, which was carried up in a bucket, all of which--the whole--all the machinery in the mill was run by this great rotating mill wheel. It was great --it a very fine mill. My grandfather had been indentured by one Sir William More, in Ireland at Ballymoney. He had bailed him out of the orphanage. He (my grandfather) learned the miller's trade on the estate of Sir William. My wife and I and our daughter and granddaughter visited this very estate a year ago last summer, and saw where Sir William--looked down and sat in the very room where, later, after my grandfather had been a miller in this country for a good number of years--he went back to Ireland. Sir William More was then a very old man. He (grandfather) sat in this very room which he had described to me that looked out over the board lawn to the river, and beyond the river and the bend, was the mill where he learned the miller's trade. Sir William, later, provided his passage, we think, to this country. It only cost \$12.50. You went in the storage. Your brought all your food with you. It was a miserable way to come over, took six weeks, often times.

LD: How long did the mill continue to run?

RA: It continued for many years, up until the time that the property was sold to the Iowa Electric Light and Power Company for the hydroelectric plant. then when the hydroelectric plant was abandoned, Peter Bezananson and our

family bought the land. We have the Cedar River Tower over there, that 25-story building.

LD: You have taken advantage of that spot.

RA: Yes, there is a rock out in the river, that I remember very well. My grandfather would say that when that rock was exposed a certain amount, then people could ford the river at that point. The rock is still there, you can see it.

LD: I know that in the past the river was used for a subtransport. Do you remember . . .

RA: Yes, well, no, I don't remember that. I remember some very crude bridges, iron bridges that were over the river. But the pioneers--actually the main fortal was down near the Penick and Ford, or in that area where there was a rock bottom to the river. It was down near Ninth or Twelfth Avenue, where the pioneers crossed the river.

LD: There were a couple of pretty serious floods.

RA: Yes, there were. There were floods.

LD: I presume that would have been about in the 20's, there was one . . .

RA: Well, there was a very bad flood later like 1926 or 29. The water was as high then . . . I remember that people from the area of--I'm trying to think of their names . . .

LD: I know People's Bank was affected. I read in their history about that. And I guess some of the Czech area, over in there must have had . . .

RA: I remember that we were all ready to take the merchandise out of our basement of our old store, that time.

LD: Where was your store at that time?

RA: Our store was at Second Avenue and Second Street. We occupied that whole corner of that block, clear back to the alley.

LD: Until--at what point did Armstrong's move?

RA: We moved over this store, built this building, entered this building on August 13, 1959.

LD: So this is a fairly new building.

RA: Yes.

LD: I have only been here for five years, so you will have to excuse me, I ask questions that probably a lot of people know the answers to. I would like to ask you some questions about--oh, before I go on, please tell us the names of your wife and your children.

RA: Oh, my wife's name is Esther Armstrong, Esther Youel Armstrong. She came Flandreau, South Dakota. Her father had been a graduate of Coe College and she always says that as she was growing up, she never knew there was any other college, than Coe College. So this is the college she came to and graduated. I have to say that my marriage to her was the best contract I ever entered into. That's for a fact. I always tell her she is such a good manager that if she had been running this store, she would have done a much better job than I do. Our daughters are Mary. Our second daughter is Goldieor Ester, named after her mother. She became a missionary and went to India, that was a good excuse for us to go to India. Our third daughter is Anna.

Our fourth daughter is Mimi, who is married to Dr. Bill Meffert.

LD: Thank you. I know that we could spend hours talking about just the things that your children have done for this community because I have quite a newspaper file on that. But most of the focus for this particular project is in the past. So I'm foing to ask you to go back in you memory, to the days when you were growing up, when you were a youngster here in Cedar Rapids. I guess I'm thinking pretty much of the period from 1905 to 1915, probably about the time you were college age. I would like for you to describe a typical Sunday in your household, when you were growing up, because I know that you've been, your family has been very involved in the life of St. Paul's. If you would just tell us about that day. How you would go through that day.

RA: Well, let me begin by saying that when I was a little boy about 9 or 10, I was a member of a little club called the Hungry Six. We had orginally called ourselves the Hungry Five, because we were five boys, all of whom were about 8 or 9 years of age. It was with great, great discussion that we would admit little Johnny Cooper, who was the younger brother. And two years younger. Of course, as little boys go and as little firls are at that age, they think anyone who is a year younger or two years is just a little drip. So little Johnny Cooper was admitted to our Hungry Six club and this Hungry Six club devoted itself to activities that little boys engage in, including Halloween activities. I can remember with what diligence we met every night after school to tear up confetti--so we could use in on Reverend Maggart's lawn when comes Halloween. And little Johnny Cooper joined us in this. I remember very well that we had a great circus. It was an annual event and there was the little Wallace twins across the street. One of the acts consisted of putting Bob Cooper--Bob Cooper was the name of the Cooper's dog, who was a

great favorite in the neighborhood--we would put him in the sausage machine and ground sausages out of the machine. The little Wallus twins loved little Bob Cooper so much that they began crying in the middle of the performance and they wouldn't be comforted until we actually, had to stop the show and pull Bob Cooper out of the machine--to assure them that he wasn't ground up into sausage.

LD: So this was a homemade circus?

RA: This was homemade.

LD: You were doing this?

RA: Yes. This leads me to say that little Johnny Cooper, about 12 years ago, was awarded by the Queen of England--he was made Sir John Cooper--Ninth Commander of the British Empire. He had been the top managing director of the Kuwait Oil Company for many years, which is one of the great oil producers in the world. We grew up over that district, which was beautiful--Fourth Avenue was a beautiful residential area with over arching elm trees. So was Tenth Street and Fifth Avenue. That's where we grew up and went to old Jackson's School. Now over there is a picture that Mamie Dowd Eisenhower brought back from the White House, when she and President Eisenhower were here and this included her picture and in this picture I'm a little kindergarten boy. They included the kindergarteners probably, most of them six. Mamie was ahead of us. Her picture there is there in the second row and I happened, for some reason, to be in the second row, too. I'm the little boy there in the center of the picture, in the second row. Mamie Dowd lived right across the street.

we envied her greatly because she could be sitting in her house when the bell started ringing, and in her classroom when it quit ringing. That was a great event. So, this picture is one she brought back. I have it on loan from the headquarters of the school board because it was originally placed in Jackson School. But I grew up and thought the teaching was excellent at Jackson and in high school, too.

LD: While we are on the subject of growing up and being a little boy here in Cedar Rapids, I remember reading one of your comments in a book that was published back in the Twenties, called, not Who's Who, but Why is Why, or something of that sort from Cedar Rapids.

RA: Oh, yes.

LD: And you said that the most exciting experience you had as a child had to do with the jumping of bikes somewhere. Do you remember that event?

RA: Oh, yes. This is in connection with one of these circus' that we had in the vacant lot, just east of 1033 Fifth Avenue--a house that still stands across from the medical complex on Fifth Avenue. I was the one who was given the questionable honor of riding a bicycle from up in the tree, down a ramp, and jumping over a jumping gap. The first time the wheel struck so that instead of it going up, it went the reverse and I landed in the weeds. My parents were terribly concerned about it and thought I was going to be killed, but I had to do this several times.

LD: Freak show?

RA: Freak show, yes.

LD: And you survived.

RA: I survived.

LD: How old were you when you did this?

RA: Oh, I think I was about 10 or 11.

LD: Well, if I can steer you, then, in the direction of your memories about St. Paul's. I know that your family has been involved with St. Paul's for many years.

RA: Yes.

LD: I would like you to tell me what your memories are of a typical Sunday morning there, when you were about that age.

RA: Well, first I will have to go back to the old church, which stood where the present YWCA stands now, looking out across the window into Greene Square. Our church was there. I can remember one of the older boys, Marvin Cone, the artist, later, pumped the organ for which he received the magnificent sum of 50 cents a Sunday. He pumped the organ. I can remember also that, at the old church my sister and I both had been in Mrs. Cone's Sunday School Class. She had been the teacher of the beginners and was a very quiet, little, mousey person, but very much loved by all the children. I can also remember that we didn't have any classrooms and, as a result, I can remember on blustery, blizzardy, winter days, we would be having our class under Mr. Stull, in the corner of the Vestibule. As people came to church they would open the doors and the snow would blow in on us in that class. That was the reason that the officers of the church were very anxious that we would find a church school-room for the different classes. So that was the basis, one of the important

things about the new church. Then I can remember that my father was on the committee. Louis Sullican, who was one of the two great architects of the day, had fallen on evil times--he had become a drunkard. He had lost his high position in his office in Chicago--I believe, is where it was located--and was doing jobs around the midwest. He was brought here to do a bank building. The committee, headed by a Mr. Thomas Simmons got him to become the architect of the church. He was a very imaginative and a very fine architect, very famous. But he was a prima donna of the worst kind. I can remember that he had plans that cost four or five times as much as the church could afford. My father would come home very much discouraged because of the terrific costs that Mr. Sullivan wanted to impose on the church. One of the fine things they did put in the church, in addition to the separate rooms, was the gymnasium. There were no gymnasiums in any of the high schools or public schools. It became a great headquarters for activities in the church.

LD: There was a lot of social life for youngsters in the church, then?

RA: Oh, yes. Then I can remember, too, my father felt that it would be a great thing for me to learn the various verses of the Bible. So, every Sunday afternoon, after dinner, my job was to learn several verses in the Bible. I can remember my little friends, outside the windows, waving at me because they knew I couldn't come out until I had the verses learned. We concluded that it was a great system to enforce rapid learning of our verses. As a result of that, I have learned, oh--chapters, at least forty or fifty psalms that I could say verbatim, and many chapters in the Bible. Later, I got a Bible from Mrs. Helen Gould Shepard, who gave Bibles out to those who had learned verses, certain verses that she thought were

important--well, I had nin tenths of them already learned so I just went ahead and learned a few more and that was it.

LD: You were all set.

RA: Yes.

LD: Do you remember if there was rivalry or competition between the various protestant churches when you were growing up?

RA: Oh, I don't think--I don't remember any serious rivalry. I do remember that there was a lady, a girl, by the name of Mehitabel, I can't think of Mehitabel's last name, but she was adopted by one of our previous ministers and became Mrs. Weaver Witwer. I was Mehitabel Barkly. Mehitabel Barkly, she was adopted by our minister and lived with him in the parish, the minister's home, right next door to the Presbyterian minister, who lived on the other side of the alley where the present Christian Education Building of the First Presbyterian Church is located.

LD: Well, the reason I asked that question is because I knew St. Paul's wanted a very different type of building from the Westminster Presbyterian that had built.

RA: Yes. You see Louis Sullivan was a great architect from the standpoint that he believed in the principle that form should follow function. The old churches had all been built in Gothic style which is about the worst style that could be, from the standpoint of the audience, the congregation being able to hear what the minister has to say, or the sermon, or the services. So he believed that form should follow function. That was his great principle. His most famous student was Frank Lloyd Wright, you'll remember, and that was his motto, too. So the church was built in the form of a semi-circle--the

sanctuary was built in that form. I can remember as a young boy it was called a Methodist Roundhouse.

LD: A Roundhouse?

RA: Methodist Roundhouse. But it put people closer to the minister than any other form of sanctuary.

LD: Still works beautifully.

RA: Yes, it does.

LD: O.k., I would like to move on then to your memories of Coe College. Of course, I know everybody in this community knows that your family has been involved on the Board of Trustees and in the development and support of Coe for many years. If you could tell us briefly about your father's role at Coe, and then your years at Coe.

RA: Well, let me go back a little farther, my grandfather's role at Coe. My Grandfather Cooper, William Cooper, had formed a partnership at La Crosse, Wisconsin, with a man whose wife was a squaw. In the summer of 1861, apparently, there was an Indian massacre there and my grandfather's partner was scaped by the Indians and his wife and children were carried away into captivity. This caused my grandfather to think that La Crosse might not be a healthy place to raise a family. So he immediately, the same day, bundled his whole family, consisting of his wife Margaret Mary Cooper and his two little children, into the covered wagon. They left their property--all his worldly goods, most of them invested in the mill. He left and came down the east bank of the Mississippi River to Dubuque and forded the river. Came to Cedar Rapids, founded a mill here, and very shortly there afterwards became one of the founding fathers at Coe College. So he was one of the founding

fathers of Coe College and was on the Board for many years. Then my father came along and he was on the Board for many years. Then I came and I was on the Board for a good many years and have just been rotated off and probably won't be on again. But I've been on the Board for many years, and now Mimi is on the Board. So there are four generations on the Board at Coe College, which is, I consider, a very fine college, excellent teaching, and a college which has done a great deal for me, including--I found my wife there.

LD: Well, you mentioned that she came to Coe, now she was there a little later than you were.

RA: Oh, yes.

LD: So, you must have been back.

RA: Oh, yes.

LD: Can you talk about that?

RA: Oh, yes, well, she was a friend of my sisters. She and her date were over at our house and they were playing some game when I came home one Saturday night from the store. That was the first time I ever saw her, but she is a wonderful person.

LD: Well, she is going to be interviewed, too. When you were at Coe, did you have particular teachers that made a great impression on you?

RA: Yes, I think we had some very wonderful teachers, including, for example, Dr. Charles Hickok. I took every course he offered. He was basically in economics, economics and sociology--as a matter of fact, the science, if it may be called a science of sociology, was actually founded by a graduate of Coe College, whose name was Ross . . .

LD: We can get that.

RA: You can get the name. He went to the University of Wisconsin, became a sociologist, and was really the father of the studies of Sociology. But I took Sociology by Dr. Hickok and every course--he offered some other courses-- I took everyone. He was a very excellent teacher. He was a man that knew how to make, I would say, complicated subjects simple and understandable.

LD: I've heard other people say that Dr. Hickok, along with others, didn't just stop, in their relationships with students, in the classroom. Do you remember the commitment that teachers had over and about just simply teaching class?

RA: Oh, yes, he would be out in the summer, going around getting students for Coe College. This would be true of Dr. Weld. He was another great teacher that I had. He was in physics and science. I took a year only of chemistry. I think I needed a year more of science and I took it under Dr. Bates and Dr. Ben Peterson, who was an assistant at that time, to Dr. Bates, who was the chemistry professor. Ben Peterson was my classmate, but he was also an assistant in the department and became very famous as perhaps the instructor of more Ph.D.s in chemistry than any other current professor of his time.

LD: When you were going to Coe, were you living at home or on campus?

RA: No, I was living at home.

LD: You were at home?

RA: Yes.

LD: Did you have any involvement with college fraternities?

RA: No, my parents--fraternities became a great public nuisance, apparently. My folks felt that fraternities were undemocratic. They didn't think it was a good thing and I was so busy anyway, I never joined--although I had many numerous invitations.

LD: You were at Coe in the years of 1914 to 1918?

RA: Yes, that is right.

LD: Preceding our involvment in Worl War I ?

RA: Yes.

LD: Can you remmber if there was a lot of talk or discussion about the war when you were there?

RA: Oh, yes, there was a great deal about it. I can remember very well that my colleague, John Hanford, after whom the local legion post is named--the very large American legion post--was a member of the Washington High School debate team for two years, on which I was also a member. He came to Coe and was a member of our college team for a year. Then he went off to war. I always think of him as an example of the people who are for peace and don't want us to be prepared. Tens of thousands of American young people were killed in World War II because they hadn't enough training.

LD: Was John Hanford killed during the war then?

RA: Yes.

LD: After you left Coe . . .

RA: Then I was going to say that Max Parsons was among the four or five, I think Jim Yuill, who was a great athlete, a very outstanding high school athlete, was in our group who left Washington High School at the end of our junior year, because we all had enough credits. We thought we would go to Coe College. We would get our--that made up our finishing credits. So we actually finished--went and graduated with the class that graduated in 1915, you see. But we were there during the war. They organized the area ROTC. I can remember, very well, I was the chairman of a committee to keep Dr. Marquis from leaving the college. I can remember it turned out Dr. Marquis had been elected as the . . . Do you just want to turn this off a minute. (Tape restarted)

I can well remember the strong sentiment that there was among the students at Coe College that we should try to do everything possible to keep Dr. Marquis from leaving Coe College. He had been elected to the number one position in the Presbyterian Church and was going to leave. I happened that I was made chairman of a committee to seek to hold him there. So we got all the leading bigwigs in Cedar Rapids to be present and sit on the platform. But unfortunately, it was just prior to certain examinations and the students were not there in any number. The members of the committee, were in terrible dither because we had more people sitting on the platform, almost, than we had in the audience. I can remember at that time there was a Captain--I'll think of his name, Captain--I'll have to get his name. He was drilling a group of Coe College students and others in this area. He had three companies down on lower A Avenue. I hiked out of the meeting, went down there, and I said to Captain, ah--he was very well known . . .

LD: I'll bet we have his name.

RA: I said to him--we are in terrible trouble. We've got this meeting going and we are trying to keep Dr. Marquis here. We hon't have any audience. He sai, "I'm almost through drilling these troops." He had three companies there and he marched them file on file up into the chapel and we filled the chapel up. It was a great, every speaker mentioned how even the recruits, the young men who were training to become soldiers, were opposed to Dr. Marquis' leaving.

LD: Did he leave?

RA: Yes, he left.

LD: But you tried.

RA: We tried, yes.

LD: Would you comment on your attempt to be a part of World War I?

RA: Well, at this time, there were a number of us who were too young to be drafted and we wanted to get into the Army as fast as we could and into officers' training. So there was an opportunity, apparently at West Point, wherein students who were of a certain rank in their college and who were graduating, would be taken into this special section of the U.S. Military Academy. So, I got under that. Came there in the end of May, 1918, at a time when we thought that the war was going to last for three or four more years and went into boot camp, there, for training. I, because of the fact that I have a very loud voice, I suppose, was chosen to march B Company, Fourth Class Detail. There was about 35 or 40 boys in this contingent. I didn't know anything aobut military drill and I

was always getting demerits for marching this detail to the wrong place. I remember one time I was marching them across the green. I had been instructed to take the detail, the B Company Fourth Class Detail, down to the target practice, down along the river, the Hudson River. There was a place in the road where there was a hairpin turn. I didn't know what to command and I whispered to one of the guys, marching beside me. I said, "What's the command for a double left turn?" He said, "Search me." They were all glad, you know, to get me in bad, anyway. So I came to that and I didn't know what the command was—I knew they weren't going to march off down into the river, jump off the cliff or anything, so I said, "B Company Fourth Class Detail, double left turn. March," and they made the left turn. I got down there and said to the officer, "B Company Fourth Class Detail reporting for target practice." He said to me, "Hell, this is not the place for target practice, it's up there on the plain. What's your name?" I had to give him my name and I got 10 demerits for marching them down there.

LD: Well, it was good exercise. You remember the name of the Captain, so go ahead.

RA: Captain Penellrow, Penloft . . .

LD: Penningroth?

RA: Penningroth, yes.

LD: Well, moving on, to the, Twenties when the transportation scene was changing so much. I would like to ask you about you, quickly, you memories of trollies verses early automobiles verses horses. I know that you were involved with all those forms of transportation. Did your family take advantage of the

new automobiles in those days?

RA: No, my father was not in a financial condition to own an automobile. We had a bicycle. He was greatly interested in inducing companies to come here. I remember how we would ride that bicycle, I would sit, I was a little boy, and ride on the handle bars. We'd go out over the bumpy railroad tracks to 17th Street and E Avenue where the Pandy Oats was being built by various citizens who bought stock in the company. It later has become the National Oats Company. But that was one of my early recollections. I do remember riding in automobiles--some of the first automobiles in Cedar Rapids. I believe one of the first was owned by Billy Haskell, I remember riding in that. It was like one of those love tops that they have around: you would come in and step up from the back into the car. This was an old Maxwell. I remember having the first automobile ride that I ever had. I was just a little boy and I think it was about 1903, or something like that.

LD: It goes back that far?

RA: I think so.

LD: I didn't realize there were any in town at that early time.

RA: I think Billy Haskell had the first car and I think we had a ride in it.

LD: Did you use the Interurban Line for anything?

RA: Well, they came along later and I can remember going to Iowa City. I had some bad allergies, was kind of undiscovered. I was always having trouble after Sunday meal because I would get my nose stopped up and I couldn't breathe, hardly. My parents didn't know. It turned out later that I was

allergic to chicken, we always had chicken for Sunday dinner. So, the only way they had of relieving people, if a person had this chronic allergy, was to enlarge your--they would cut you turbinate bones. I can remember going on t the Interurban, down to doctor--down to Iowa City. There was a doctor there who operated on my turbinate bones. I can remember, as a little boy I could hear those things crunch in there when he put a sissors up my nose to give me more air. It's not necessary today, but it was then.

LD: Was it effective?

RA: Well, it opened up the passage so I could get more air through.

LD: I bet you do remember that day.

RA: Yes, and I went down on the Interurban.

LD: Oh, you went on the Interurban?

RA: Oh, yes, that was before the good roads.

LD: Right. Was that the same thing as the Crandic Line?

RA: Yes, and that was before there were good roads. I can remember that the roads were so bad that you couldn't get to Iowa City any way, except on the Interurban in bad weather.

LD: I am shifting a bit in time here, but I know that you have been a pilot and have flown for many years. I believe you have memories of the earliest airports in Cedar Rapids.

RA: Well, I can remember Ted Saxon, I learned to fly at his airport, out near Alburnett. Then I finished and finally got my license in the year 1940,

out at the old Hunter airport, which is out on what is now 218. The first time I went out there, I remember, as we approached the airport, there was an airplane hanging by its tail on the wires near a telephone post, not far from the airport, right at the end of the northeast runway.

LD: That's not too comforting.

RA: No, that wasn't too comforting. So, I got my license in 1940. It only cost me, I think, \$250 was the whole thing. You had to agree that you would fly the mail. Apparently, this was one case where the government seemed to have some sense of the feeling that the war was coming and they would need more pilots, who were then flying a few airplanes, would go into the Air Force, which they did. Then these pilots that were being trained would take over--flying the mail, maybe, and things like that. The mail was flown from Denver to Omaha, and Omaha to Chicago and so forth. We all had to agree to do that. I never had to fly it, but I've had a license ever since. I love to fly. We've had an airplane in the family--various kinds of airplanes, and I have flown the equivalent of over 3,600 hours, which is more than the equivalent of 16 times around the earth--different aircrafts.

LD: Why did you decide you wanted to become a pilot?

RA: Well, I thought it was just great. I thought it was very interesting. I like fine views and you get such wonderful views of the landscape from an airplane.

LD: Did the Hunter Airport have smooth runways?

- RA: No, they were just gravel. They weren't hard, they were gravel runways. When you landed you would stir up a lot of dust. Most of the fields were not hard surface fields, they would be grass fields.
- LD: Was it always manned with someone out there to help you?
- RA: No, not necessarily. If you get in there late at night, sometimes--I remember, several nights I came back, maybe from Dubuque or places along the Mississippi River and it was dark, there were no lights on the field. I just had to figure out--I would see a few lights on the roadway--then I knew where the runway was. Maybe there would be a light in the terminal. They had forgotten to turn a light on at the end of the runway.
- LD: So, you just had to work it out yourself.
- RA: Yes.
- LD: You didn't have radio communications?
- RA: No, there was no radio communications. All they would do is flash a red light at you. The controller would flash a red light at you if you were not supposed to come in. If there was no red light, you would come in anyway.
- LD: So, it would be just maybe weather conditions, or something.
- RA: Yes, and you would always try to come in, figure out which way the wind was blowing, and so forth. Now it takes more. What you learn about your radio operation is really more complicated than getting your pilot's license. Of course, I just have what's called a VFR pilot's license. A VFR rating means Visual Flight. I have to fly by visual flight regulations. Our son-

in-law, Dr. Bill Meffert, last week, got his instrument of flying. He can fly by instrument regulations which means he can fly over a solid overcast. I cannot fly over a solid overcast. I, at all times, have to be able to see the ground.

LD: Well, you probably learned how to follow a road, I mean the ground, very effectively.

RA: Oh, yes.

LD: You get where you wanted to go.

RA: Yes, you do. You get so you begin to get headings and so forth.

LD: I'm going to shift to your involvement with Armstrong's and Armstrong's place here in the community, not only as a business establishment, but as an institution. I know that you came back from Harvard Business School in 1920 and you had some new ideas to share with your father and his partner. I would like you to talk about that.

RA: Well, I came back from the Harvard Business School and had been taught there that it was very important to have women's apparel, women and girls' apparel, in the store. That as a matter of fact, women and girls' apparel amounted to about 60 percent of the total volume if you took in men's and boys'. We, my father, whose picture in the center up above there and whose senior partners were Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Miller, were adding up the store. The store at that time, was probably the leading men's and boys' store in . . .

END OF TAPE SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF TAPE SIDE TWO

LD: And you were talking about your accounts with the leading men's apparel manufacturers.

RA: Yes, we considered that we were probably the number one store, men's and boys' store, in Iowa, because we were the leading number-one account with such firms as: Hart, Schaffner, and Marx, Munsingwear, Arrow shirts, and so on and so forth, Osh Kosh B' Gosh overall, and so forth. But when I came back and proposed to my father and his partners that we would put in women's apparel--oh, they didn't want to get into all that trouble! They had heard that women, whom they like to have come in with their sons, to outfit them, but--when it came to their own clothes, they had heard that women were terrible. They were not about to get into it. They didn't want to mix in. They were told, everywhere, that they were just inviting trouble--when they got into women's clothes. So, finally they said, "O.K., we'll buy the building next door and you're going to be in charge. If you think you can run a women's store, why then, you just do it." So, that was fine. We proceeded to employ very capable young women, who had excellent taste and buying experience. We started completely from zero. We had only women's outer wear, outer apparel: coats, suits, dresses, furs, a limited amount of sportswear, and just enough slips to go under the dresses. That was our line up, but we had very competent buyers. And while we didn't have the selections that our main competitors would have, we would have the best. We began have the best, and we made a point of having extremely competent people--we thought we had more competent people than most anyone. Pretty soon the business just took off, kept growing and, pretty soon, it grew and it grew out. We didn't have enough room. Then we put another story on top of the store . . .

LD: Was this in the Twenties, still?

RA: This was in the Twenties, yes.

LD: When you added another story?

RA: No, I think we put on the fourth floor in 1936. It was quite a few years. The women's store went on, we were doing tremendously fine business there. They found out that women weren't so bad after all. You had to have the right people, and they were. You just get some very competent women to take care of them, give them good service, and pick out the best numbers and that was it.

LD: You still do that very well.

RA: Well, we have some very competent women.

LD: The concept of one price for everything, or stated price, was that an idea of yours, or was that your father's?

RA: No, that was my father's. I was a little boy when he founded the store. He had read in the paper about a man by the name of John--John, what is his name in Philadelphia? John--I will think of it--who had established a great one price store and my father thought that was great. He believed in treating everybody alike. Before he got into business here in 1890, before he founded our original store, he had been with other firms. No merchandise, at that time, was marked at a fixed price. There was no price on anything, it was a great haggling job. People would come in and haggle, walk out, and come back and haggle some more. It took a long time to buy your clothes. Father thought it would be great, he had heard about this one price store, where the price was fixed at a price that could allow the store to have a modest, reasonable profit--there was no argument about it. You didn't have to haggle about the

price. You just decided whether you wanted it or not. If you didn't want it, then there was no use and it started to work. These farmers would come in, I remember father telling me about it, they would be so astonished. When he started this store in 1890, a one price store. Everything was marked in plain figures. The idea being that you would send your little boy in to buy you a pair of overalls or something for himself and he would get the same price. You didn't have to have the mother or the father there to have a big argument. So the business prospered. It turned out that these two men, who were, became partners of my fathers. But they came from other stores and would sell two or three times as much as they would formerly been accustomed, because they didn't have to have all these arguments. The customers offering to buy and, you know, they would (salesmen) come, and sell twice or three times as much as the average salesman. They would thereby earn more, you know. The business prospered and these men became partners of my fathers and pretty soon other stores began having a one price policy. But father's was the first one price store in Cedar Rapids. It was great, really.

LD: When you came back again with many new ideas, I'm sure, from your schooling, did you bring ideas about advertising? Did you have an impact on it?

RA: Oh, I had a few. I had gone from the Military Academy and about two-thirds of our class resigned from the Military Academy along in March of 1921, no, March 1919. Because we were all there to get into the Army for military service, we were'nt there because we wanted to be military men. When I got back to the store, I had some ideas. But I'm sure that I learned a great deal more about merchandising in the store than I ever learned in the Harvard Business School, although I think that it was a very excellent course that we had there. This was one of their ideas: Dr. Charington, Paul Charington,

was head of marketing at the Harvard Business School and I remember him. At one time he got together with the fellows in his marketing class and he said, "Now you fellows that are going to be in retail stores, if you don't have a real good competitor in your community and you're operating a department store your first duty is to get a very good competitor." That, you know, was not the going philosophy.

LD: I know.

RA: But he said, "Women are not content to shop in only one store. They feel, if they have to shop in only one store--pretty soon you find they are leaving town, buying in Chicago or Des Moines or someplace." and he said, "That is your first duty." Well, he had other ideas, among them, he said, "How many of you are only in the men's and boys' retail business?" There were quite a number of us and that's the stores that we were thinking about going into. Well, he said, "You want to get into women's business, because the women are going to be the purchasing agents for the family, the American family."

LD: He saw that, didn't he?

RA: Yes.

LD: Well, I just wondered, because that was the period when radio was beginning to come in and general advertising . . .

RA: Well, it wasn't until quite a little later.

LD: Well, yes, I guess in the late Twenties.

- RA: See, I had been working in the store ever since I was about 10 years old. I had worked at delivering packages and I can remember on a cold, winter day, riding in my sleigh. I had a sleigh, open sleigh. It was one of those kind that you see in the pictures, you know, the old prints. I would get an address over on the far west side and then another out in Vernon Heights.
- LD: Well, I know that Armstrong's has a philosophy toward employees, that has really kept a very stable working force. You even have some shareholding members.
- RA: Yes, we are very proud of the fact that about 104 of our people here are stock-holders in the store.
- LD: Does that go way back? Did your father institute that or did you institute that?
- RA: Well, no, my father made both of these men, Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Miller, important. They owned a third of the store ultimately and father owned two-thirds, so that was substantial. He believed in people participating. He felt that when people were operating at their best level, if they had the incentive to work on their best level, they could do so much better. As you can I can do when we are operating on our best level. We do so much better than when we are just doing enough to get by.
- LD: I want to move on to the depression period. I read a story in the newspaper about how you were in New York, shopping for your line, buying merchandise, when you discovered that the banks were closed.
- RA: Yes, well the merchandise manager for Newmann's Department Store, which was right across the street in what is now the Woolworth building, you know, met me at 6 o'clock in the lobby of the old New Yorker Hotel. This was in

19, I think it was about 1930, and he said, "Bob, all the banks--ALL the banks in Cedar Rapids have closed." I said, "Great Scott, I spent \$10,000 today and all the banks are closed!" Well, I immediately got on the telephone. Fortunately, I found that our bank was not closed. It was still open and it stayed open. It was one of the few that did.

LD: Was that Merchants?

RA: That was Merchants. My father was the director of the largest bank in Cedar Rapids, the Cedar Rapids National Bank, located where the Merchants National Bank parking ramp is, but that bank had so many loans to farmers, so many loans to farmers, and the banks which were dealing with farmers--corn was selling for 10 to 11 cents a bushel--and they couldn't pay. That bank was already to fold, until it was suddenly taken over by Merchants. That was what recued it.

LD: So Merchants took them in.

RA: Took them in, yes. But one of the first things I had to do when I came back to Cedar Rapids was . . . Esther and I were married by this time, let's see, we were married in 26. My father had a \$100,000 to make up for the stock that we owned. See it was double liability. If you lost your stock, you had to dig up an equivalent amount. Lots of people couldn't do it.

LD: So, you really had a role in the financial stability of the bank then, didn't you?

RA: Well, it was terrible when I found out that all--this buyer, this merchandise manager from Newmann's had said--that all were closed. Well, fortunately, we had deposits in the Cedar Rapids National which was in turn, taken over

by Merchants Bank. But we had to dig up my fathers involvement there.

LD: The capital?

RA: Yes.

LD: What happened to the store during those years, did . . .

RA: Our sales just plummetted. Our sales went down so we were only doing--there were 2 years that we only did \$440,000 in the whole year.

LD: Total business?

RA: Total business for the year was \$440,000 and that represented a decline, a very big decline from what we had been doing. It is very difficult to do business, when you are doing just even a little less than last year. Especially if you've got buyers, because, you know, they buy to what they sold last year and you don't want them to be--they are supposed to be pessimistic buyers and optimistic sellers. But, it was terrific when you wre only doing, we dropped down to \$440,000, less than 60 percent of what a normal year had been.

LD: Did you find it necessary to lay off a number of employees?

RA: No, we were very proud of the fact, and pleased, that we were able to weather that depression without really laying off any regular people. We did reduce. We did lay off people who were extras, part-time people. But there were enough slough-offs or enough people who were about to retire so that, as far as we know, we didn't have to lay off any regular person. That was something that we were very proud of. We did all take from top to bottom, a 10 percent--everybody took--a straight 10 percent cut in their total earnings. Whether the earnings were their fixed salary or whether it was a profit share, everybody took a 10 percent cut.

LD: But you survived.

RA: Yes, we were able to survive.

LD: I've been told that there were a group of businessmen here in Cedar Rapids during the Thirties, the term I heard applied to them were the Horse Buyers Club. Were you a part of that organization?

RA: No, I wasn't.

LD: It was a very loose organization, I believe.

RA: Yes. Of course, I think that it is a Christian duty for people to take care of the needy people, whether members of their own church or not. I think that we have turned over entirely too much responsibility, today, to the Federal Government--responsibilities that the church, itself, should be looking at.

LD: Well, there were, I presume, a great deal of up-charitable actions.

RA: Yes, there was.

LD: The churches . . .

RA: Yes, the churches really dug in and helped people. They didn't get as much help as they probably needed, but they made due and prices fell. One of the things that I remember, Esther and I went down to New York together in January of 19--it was January of 1930 and then we were going on a cruise after I finished my buying in New York. See, I had these women buyers with me. But I was buying. By this time, I was buying furs. I became a fur buyer. Yes, well, like anything else, I didn't know a thing about it, but I would take these women with me and, they would know whether the fur would

sell, whether it was right. Then I had to learn how it would wear. But anyway, there were terrific bargains available. I bought eight fur coats to sell, four styles, two of a style, to sell at \$100.00, well let's see, one of the four styles sold at \$125. These were fur coats that never before had women been able to get for less than \$250. Well, they sold like hot cakes. Well, I was going to say that later, after having bought those, I took Esther--she was pregnant at that time with our second child, Goldie: Esther. I insisted that she be named after her mother, which was a mistake, because it became little Esther, big Esther, old Esther, young Esther. So we decided to call her Goldie. But anyway, Esther was pregnant and we went on this boat. There were two stockbrokers that jumped off the boat and committed suicide while we were floating down the Bermuda. That was the kind of thing--and this was happening all the time--stockbrokers were committing suicide. It was really sad. But there were terrific bargains available, not only in furs, but fur trimmed coats, boy, you could get beautiful fur trimmed coats, you know, at very unbelievable prices. There was one of those styles that we sold over 200 fur coats. Imagine, all alike and they would . . .

LD: See them all over town.

RA: We would try to be careful about where we sold them. But we would say to the lady, "Mrs. Jones, we sold this to your friend Mrs. Smith," she said, "I don't care, I want that coat." She'd never had a fur coat before.

LD: Well, it was a great opportunity.

RA: On the East coast it looked like they were trimmed. That was a big seller, sold all over, I think, it was over 250 of that one style. We just kept that furrier busy making coats for us.

LD: I'll bet. Well, I know that I have kept you for quite a long time and I am going to let you go, but, we have not talked about a person that I know you knew well. I believe that you have memories of Grant Wood that perhaps would be useful for future generations to know. Were you, presuming he was older than you . . .

RA: Yes, he was. When I got to Washington High School, he was a memory, a famous memory there and they were still using the scenery that he and Marvin Cone had painted in various athletic farces, that were customarily to be put on. But when I got to the store--see, I graduated from the Harvard Business School in 1920, we went until about July 1. They tried to give us the full treatment in a year and a half, so we went all summer of the preceding year--well, anyway, when I got back, we needed certain decorations and the display department needed some counselling. So we employed Grant Wood, who was working as an impoverished art teacher with Miss Prescott over at McKinley High School. We employed him here in the store as a consultant on interior decoration and on our display windows. He did a real fine job for us. We found that he, unlike most artists, had the human touch. He was able to get along very well with people. If we were going to re-decorate a department, he wouldn't go down there and tell them, "throw everything out. Throw all this old junk out of here and let's get started from scratch." He would go down, consult with them, and pretty soon they would all be for him. He would show them the color scheme he worked out and the plan for the carpet and the decorations. He would have them all on his side, which was entirely contrary to most interior decorators. He did the same thing with the windows, the display department. He just knew how to get along with these people.

LD: Do you, by chance, have any artifacts, or memorabilia from that period?

RA: I wish that we did, because he really bought some beautiful things. He bought such beautiful imitation Oriental rugs. They became hangings, you know. He could use them as hangings in a department. I remember a beautiful Oriental rug that he used as a hanging in our women's coat department. I just wish that I could find it.

LD: You don't know what happened to it?

RA: I don't know what happened to it.

LD: I appreciate all of the time that you have given us and I would like to close by asking you for a personal comment on comparing the Cedar Rapids of the Twenties and Thirties, when you were a young man here and really making your impact for the first time on the community, to the Cedar Rapids of today. I know that that is a big order, but if you have any observations about how the community has changed and whether it is for better or worse, I would appreciate your giving those to us.

RA: I think I would have to think about that, I would like to do that some other time.

LD: I would appreciate that. If you have time later on, we could briefly talk about that. I would love to get your comments for the future.

RA: Very good.

LD: Thank you.

RA: Thank you.

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with: Mr. Robert Armstrong
Interviewer: Laura Derr
Date of Interview: March 26, 1985
Place of Interview: Armstrong's Department Store
Transcriptionist: Mary Bowden
Follow-Up Tape

LD: This is Laura Derr and I am in Mr. Robert Armstrong's office on Tuesday, March 26, 1985. This is a follow-up session for the Oral History Project of the Junior League of Cedar Rapids. Mr. Armstrong, we were talking just a minute ago about your memories of Chautauqua as a boy and that whole opportunity for people, before the days of television and radio, to be entertained and educated. Would you recount those memories again for us?

RA: Yes. Way back in about 1908, 1907 and on through the years, the Chautauqua was a great educational feature in smaller communities and even in larger communities in Mid-America. My father felt that it was a great educational enterprise and therefore, when the Chautauqua came to Cedar Rapids, he would always buy a hundred tickets for the following year. When I was about 9 years old, it fell to my lot to sell these tickets, so my father paid me about 10 cents a piece for selling a hundred tickets. Finally after selling a hundred tickets, I would sell a few more and the Chautauqua Company would pay me 10 cents a piece for selling them. Later, when the price for the season ticket rose from the munificent sum of \$1 for the whole week's entertainment: all these wonderful programs, an opening with musicians, who were very talented, musicians and speakers, such as William Jennings Byran and other notable speakers--the price

became \$2.50, in the following years--and after selling a hundred tickets for my father, then I would begin to sell tickets for the Chautauqua organization. At that time, Howard, Mr.--I am trying to think of his name. Mr. Keith Vowter, was the head of the Chautauqua. He lived in Cedar Rapids but these Chautauquas operated all over the mid-west in states like Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and so forth. It was a great source of employment for young men at Coe College. They would put up tents, act as routeabouts, live out in the open air all summer, and for from town to town, setting up the Chautauqua for a week's stand.

LD: Did you actually go and work at Chautauqua?

RA: No, I just was here in Cedar Rapids. On Saturdays, during vacations, I would work at the store, beginning when I was about 10. There were no laws against youthful work at that time.

LD: Did you have an opportunity to hear William Jennings Bryan?

RA: Oh, yes, several times.

LD: What are your memories of him?

RA: My memories of him are that he was a very great speaker, time went very fast when he was speaking. He was a great, really great orator. I can remember also, that where we had a store at Lincoln, Nebraska and my father wondered why my uncle, who was the head of the store, a staunch Republican, was going to be voting for William Jennings Bryan for President. To make a long story short, my uncle reported to my father that he would always like to have the man in the White House wearing Armstrong clothes. That was the reason he was for William Jennings Bryan. Actually, Charlie

Bryan, who was the brother of William Jennings, succeeded my uncle as the mayor of Lincoln, Nebraska. My uncle served two terms as mayor of Lincoln, Nebraska, much to the disgust of my father, because whenever there would be an issue in the City Council, including a big fight they were having with a gas company, 25 or 30 people would close their account because of anything my uncle ever did.

LD: It's one of the problems with families, I guess. You also were here and growing up during the period of Interurban, here in Cedar Rapids. I have a couple of questions about that. What are your memories of it? Is it important to you business, your father's business?

RA: The Interurban to Iowa City, was built before the advent of good roads in Cedar Rapids. It was a very successful enterprise for many years, because Iowa, with its rich soil presented very bad roads whenever there was rain. The result was the roads were simply impassable. The Interurban, was always operating and it was very successful during the days prior to the good roads. So, the Interurban, or electric railroad, to Iowa City, built by the Iowa Electric Light and Power Company, was very successful for many years.

LD: Did the Interurban actually come through the downtown?

RA: Yes, it landed at Fourth Avenue and Second street, and it was a real asset to the people of this community. People from Iowa City would stream over here because we had larger stores, better market, and people from all the towns along the route would come in. They could go home anytime: every hour there would be an Urban car that would go back to Iowa City.

LD: So, it really was an important asset to the downtown area.

RA: Yes, but as soon as the good roads came in the Interurbans died, everywhere, were in this category. For example, The Iowa City Electric Light and Power Company built an Interurban to Mount Vernon, and Lisbon, also, the Waterloo. Cedar Falls Northern Railway built an Interurban from Waterloo and Cedar Falls to Cedar Rapids. That was very good for several years. I can remember that father was very strong for this Interurban. He felt that these bonds had sold. By that time, I was a little teenager, young teenager, and I went out and was selling bonds, for which my father paid me the commission.

LD: He encouraged you as a salesman all the way along.

RA: Yes, he did.

LD: Well, your father was also instrumental in the Seedling Mile.

RA: Yes, father was greatly interested in a campaign, which began around 1921, 22, to get Iowa out of the mud. By this time I was back at the store, I had graduated from Coe College and done my military service. There was a campaign on to get Iowa out of the mud and one the crucial features of it, was the Seedling Mile. The cement company would put in what they called a seedling mile in a strategic location, in different areas, in order to encourage the development of hard surface cement roads. This seedling mile was midway between Cedar Rapids and Mount Vernon. My father, I remember, in his last days in 1928--that was after I was married--would take Esther and our little baby and go down every day to see the progress on the building of this seedling mile, which was such an important factor in getting Iowa out of the mud.

LD: Oh that must, again, have been his foresight to see that that was going to be a very important thing.

RA: Yes, it was, although it resulted in the demise of the Interurban. As soon as people could travel in their cars, every day of the year, regardless of weather, the Interurbans were out.

LD: Did you feel that it made a difference in the drawing of people to the downtown area of Cedar Rapids?

RA: Yes, it did. Previously at the train depot at Fourth Street and Third Avenue there were something over 110 trains, in and out daily. People would come from far and wide-- leaving their homes--on the train, like Springville and as far as Elkader north, and McGregor. They could take the train, and come down to Cedar Rapids, and then go home in the afternoon. That was the mode of travel. People would stream over from the depot to the stores and then go home in the evening. Prior to the time when the automobiles were, well, prior to that time, the Interurbans were very important. They became less important as more and more people owned cars and could travel over hard surface roads. Finally we got Iowa out of the mud. We had a campaign in Linn County about 1923, the slogan was "Let's get Iowa out of the mud." We got the road paved all the way from Cedar Rapids to Mount Vernon, all the way from Cedar Rapids to Iowa City, these were

LD: How was that accomplished? Was that with Linn County bonds, or were they state bonds?

RA: It was often times with Linn County bonds and then with state bonds.

LD: Was there Federal money involved at that time?

RA: I don't remember that there was.

LD: In the Twenties, I'm not sure of the exact date but I believe it was the early Twenties, Cedar Rapids finally succeeded in getting the Court House moved from Marion to Cedar Rapids, apparently after many attempts in the past, that had been failures. Do you have any memories of that event?

RA: Yes, I do. I can remember as a boy, there was some lawsuits going on and I would go up to Marion and sit in the Court House, which was on the railroad tracks across from the main park in Marion. It was very annoying at times during the court proceedings when a train would go by. But there was great feeling between Cedar Rapids and Marion. Cedar Rapids had greatly out grown Marion. It was very inconvenient when the majority of the trials would involve Cedar Rapids people, to go to Marion to the Court House, which by this time had become rather old, obsolete, and out of date. So there was a campaign in the Twenties. We finally, by vote of the people in Linn County, moved the Court House to Cedar Rapids, but it was a time of very many hard feelings.

LD: How do you account for the fact that Cedar Rapids grew and Marion didn't?

RA: I think it was partially due to the fact that we had so many good boosters in cedar Rapids, people who believed in this community. Marion sort of felt that they were a larger community, they didn't have to pay anything to get the railroads to come through. So in the early days, as I read history, the citizens of Cedar Rapids, under the very progressive leadership of Judge Robert Greene got the railroad to come to Cedar Rapids, whereas normally it would have gone to Marion.

LD: So all along it was the more aggressive.

RA: Yes, and I think that was largely because we had more progressive citizens here than they had in Marion.

LD: Do you think the rivers affected it at all?

RA: In the very early days, according to the history that I have read, the river was very important. Steamboats would come up the river from St. Louis and tie up next to where the Smulekoff's Furniture store is now.

LD: In fact, I even heard that there was one named after Cedar Rapids.

RA: Yes, I think so.

LD: That is amazing, isn't it?

RA: Yes, it is.

LD: We were talking about the more recent events that occurred with the big controversial Greek columns. Can you remember how that whole situation developed and what happened as a result of it?

RA: Yes, I can remember quite well, because it was probably the middle Sixties. This occurred in connection with putting an underground passage, I believe, from the Court House to connect, hopefully, into an underground connection with City Hall, and in connection with more space that was needed at the Court House. The engineering firm reported that the pillars were too heavy. If we put any underground passageway underneath, so much concrete would have to be poured that we should tear the pillars off the Court House. So we had a great battle, it was in the newspapers and numerous stories appeared about tearing the columns off the Court House. A group of citizens,

including myself, got together and opposed it. Finally, the supervisors were willing to leave the pillars on the Court House.

LD: That was the Greater Downtown Association wasn't it?

RA: No, it was a loose affiliation of downtown businessmen. I can remember Mr. Abbott Lipsky was among those--and Mr. Smulekoff. We had a meeting with the supervisors and they finally agreed not to tear the columns off the Court House, which would have been a great tragedy.

LD: How far back does the Great Downtown Association go?

RA: I would say it might go back about 25 years.

LD: As a formal group.

RA: Yes.

LD: Before then was there a less formal kind of consensus group that helped to set the public policy?

RA: Well, yes, I think that the Chamber of Commerce, in those times, was very active, a great help. Also the Retail Merchants Bureau was a very active organization. It is still active in retailing. But the Greater Downtown Association was formed to supplement the activities of the retailers. Because property owners, people all over Cedar Rapids, felt that it was important to maintain the heart of the city. The central location was better for most people.

LD: This is certainly out of the time frame, but I am interested to know, do you feel that the downtown, as it has been so significant to Cedar Rapids

and in America, is losing its place to the malls? Is there a trend here that is inevitable or do you think that the pendulum will swing back again, so that there will be a new interest in that section?

RA: I think the pendulum is swinging back again, because downtowns are more convenient for the people on the east side of the river and if it were moved far eastward, it would be less convenient for people on the west side. A central location is certainly most convenient for the most people, providing we provide adequate parking and so forth. At the present time we have more than 16,000, I believe, parking spaces downtown and we need more. We need more parking on the streets. We need less one-way streets because downtown Cedar Rapids is a market which is dependent, very largely, not only on Cedar Rapids, but it's equally dependent on the outside, the people who come from areas within 50, 60, 75 miles of Cedar Rapids. For example, most downtown stores will do 40 percent of their business outside the boundaries of Cedar Rapids and Marion. This is true of our store and true of other stores, and it has always been that way. This community couldn't possibly support banks or business firms or retailers, of the size that we have, if we didn't have this large market extending out 50 to 75 miles from the center of the city.

LD: The whole one-way street pattern, was that a fairly new pattern in downtown Cedar Rapids?

RA: I think that one-way streets, while they speed up traffic--there is a great distinction between a destination area and a true traffic area. The trouble has been that many people have confused the downtown area, they have not recognized that it is primarily a destination area, so they have applied, enoneously, in my opinion, the thought of one-way streets to downtown. This is all right for people who are traveling one-way streets everyday and

who live in the city, but for this forty percent of the people who live outside of the city and don't come here except once a month or maybe several times a year, it's very confusing. Most people get frustrated when they get into a one-way street, because, at times, they find themselves going away from their destination, that is very confusing.

LD: One of the things that Cedar Rapids has that is so fine is the medical facilities. I know that your family has been involved in helping to support the St. Lukes Hospital facility. What are your memories of St. Lukes, in the period when you were a young businessman in the Twenties and Thirties and how has that facility grown as a result of your involvement?

RA: Well, originally, St. Lukes Hospital was built by the Episcopal church and maintained by the Episcopal church. In the Twenties, well, no before that, considerably before that, the Episcopal church was just not able, financially, to support the hospital. So as a young boy, I remember that Arthur Poe, who was then assistant general manager of the Quaker Oats Company and very active in hospital work, came to a committee of the Methodist Church and said that there was a great need for a fine new hospital here, but the Episcopal church simply didn't have the membership or the funds to build it. They would give the whole lock-stock-and barrel, the land and the buildings, which were rather run down, wooden buildings, to the Methodist Church if, the Methodist Committee would agree to build a \$350,000 facility. My father, I remember, was on the committee, perhaps chairman. After much thought, they did agree. The Episcopal church did turn over all the land and buildings of the hospital to the Methodist Conference and the local Methodist Church agreed to raise \$350,000 and build the 1911 building, which you see standing at the north end of Eleventh Street, in the hospital complex. I remember

father was very active in seeking to raise that money. The Methodists and other citizens contributed and raised about \$250,000, the balance they had to bond. They sold bonds and then built the building. I think the building was dedicated along about 1911 or, maybe it was a little later than that. Yes, it was later. I think the building was dedicated around 1925. This agitation had been going on for some time. Mr. Morris Sanford was president of the board at the time. He was the head of the Sanford Book Company, Sanford's formerly across the street. But the board appointed Mr. Arthur Poe, Episcopalian, as chairman of the executive committee of the hospital. They got the building built and dedicated. I think the dedication stone indicates that this was completed about 1925. Then we got into bad trouble, the depression came along in 1929, 30, 31, and 32 and we couldn't pay the interest on those bonds. They were 6 percent bonds and we couldn't even get enough money in to pay the interest on the bonds. By this time I was back in Cedar Rapids and got to be chairman of a committee that had to raise \$10,000 for about two years. I think that would be about in the years like 1931, 32. Then after paying this interest, we concluded, about 1933, that we couldn't go on with this. So we conceived the idea that we would get the bond owners to except 50 cents on the dollar and give them the balance in the form of hospital service for blood relatives in their family. This was the settlement we made with them and we got most of the bond holders to agree to this. I remember going to see Mr. Jim Hamilton in the bank, to whom we owed about \$86,000 at Merchants bank, and saying to him--we had this planned--"Would the bank be willing to settle for 50 cents on the dollar? Otherwise," I said to Jim Hamilton, "you will be running a hospital." He said, "For heavens sake I don't want to run any hospital, I know nothing about it," and he settled his bank loan at 50 cents on the dollar.

LD: Those people who had done that were in business.

RA: However, later about 1935, 36, the hospital began getting more prosperous. Although we had no legal obligation, we went back to all these bond holders and said you've already settled, most of you haven't used up your families grat of hospital care, so we paid them in cash. We had another campaign, I was chairman, and we raised enough money, I think to pay them off another 45 cents and they took 5 cents, the balance, in hospital care. So that was the way we finally got it settled.

LD: That was a pretty creative solution.

RA: Yes.

LD: So, all of your fund raising then, you were literally going to private sources then.

RA: Oh, yes, it was all private money.

LD: People here in Cedar Rapids?

RA: That's right and in this center. We would go to people in the church and the bond holders themselves would subscribe. Many of them had bought the bonds to help the hospital out: they would make a contribution of X dollars and then they might buy X bonds.

LD: The period right before that, when you were in your teens, I guess I'm actually going to go back even further than that, had some, what we call, catastrophic events in our Oral History Project that made an impression on a lot of people. I would like to ask you if you have memories of some of these events. Apparently, there were a couple of great fires in Cedar Rapids in the early 1900's.

RA: Yes, I remember as a very little boy, I think in the year 1903, there was the Clifton Hotel fire. The Clifton House, as it was called, was at the corner of First Avenue and Fourth Street, where the old Allison Hotel, recently torn down, was located. This terrible fire broke out. The fire departments were not, in those days, able to shoot streams of water up very high. The hotel fire got beyond their control, a number of people died in the fire and it was a terrible catastrophe. After this terrible fire, which lit up the sky all over this area, seen in Lisbon and places as far away as that, a group got together and built the Allison Hotel on that site.

LD: Then a couple of years later, there was the Quaker Oats fire.

RA: Yes, and that was a terrible fire, I can remember how the whole area was lit up and great sheets of corrugated metal were flying through the air. There would be explosions and these things were shot high in the air. The Quaker Oats was covered with corrugated iron sheeting and these things were blown all over the country. It was dangerous almost to be outside your house, because during this fire, if there was an explosion, these things were sailing around and one large piece was found, oh, several miles away, I think. It was thrown through the air.

LD: It was fortunate that there weren't more fires that resulted from that.

RA: Yes, it was spontaneous combustion in the milling process at the Quaker Oats Company.

LD: You would have been very young.

RA: Yes.

LD: Maybe like six years old?

RA: The Quaker Oats fire, I'm not sure of the year, but it was after the Blifton House fire.

LD: 1905.

RA: Was that when it was, well, I was a very little boy. I was born in 1897.

LD: Do you know if the community campaigned to change or improve fire fighting techniques after these fires?

RA: Yes, they did. There was a great effort made to get water pressures up so they could shoot water to higher floors in public buildings. They would have to just let a fire burn itself out. They could get up the second maybe to the lower reaches of the third floor, but after the fire was on a little while, the pressure would go down and they could hardly get the water up to the second floor.

LD: What are your memories of, I believe you said you were not here in Cedar Rapids during the Douglas explosion.

RA: No, I was not, but I came back shortly thereafter. That was a terrible explosion--another explosion on spontaneous combustion at the Douglas Starchworks. It was called the Dougl's Starchworks, and was in it's present location, Penick Ford is now the name.

LD: It is interesting that in both those cases the companies rebuilt, although I guess Mr. Douglas did sell to Penick Ford, so they didn't completely devastate the business.

RA: Well, it was very natural, being in the heart of the food belt of the world, the Quaker Oats Company should be here or that a Starchworks should be here. I understand, for example, that corn sweeteners are doing some of the things that the old starchworks used to do. Although they are concentrating now on making fructose out of corn, nevertheless, that is natural for this area. We should have more, more institution, more business, more manufacturers such as that. The Quaker Oats Company today, I understand, has 87 acres under roof. Well, if we had one or two more Quaker Oats Companies here, one or two more corn sweeteners have a capacity up to 50 to 60 car loads of fructose a day. That is a tremendous capacity and a tremendous usage of corn. But we are in the center, the Garden of Eden of the worlds, really, and we should have more food industries here. It is a natural place for them to be.

LD: Why do you think that you seem to be losing, rather than gaining?

RA: Well, we have gone through that period, all the United States has, but I think that, eventually, everyone in the world has to eat and we are in the center of the world's food resources. This is the Garden of Eden of the world. We are supposed to have 10 percent of the world's best land--in the whole whorld--situated in this part of Iowa and the western part of Illinois. This food industry is going to grow, it has to grow. The reason for example, that we originally got Collin's Radio here, is prmarily because Arthur Collins lived here was, I think, a genius in radio. I think he will become the Marconi of the present age, because he really is the father of long distance radio, long distance communication. I think the second reason that we have Collins' here is because, as a by-product of these food industies, we developed many able machanics and millwrights, who were operating and knew all about machinery. They could transfer their abilities to Collins' Radio and

other manufacturers. So that is what has made Cedar Rapids such a great industrial center.

LD: Do you know Arthur Collins?

RA: Yes, very well. He was a neighbors of ours and I knew him as a little boy and I think, didn't we discuss that before?

LD: Go ahead and talk about him.

RA: Well, I remember Arthur as a little boy, he was in high school, just a little high school boy about 15 or 16. He was working on the radio--he was a genius at it--only he was doing this in his father's basement. When Admiral Byrd went to the South Pole, a year or two later, he had heard about the fact that Arthur Collins was building these wonderful radio sets that had a long, long, long range communication, so he took one of Arthur's sets with him to the South Pole. When he got to the South Pole, he found that Arthur's set, in bad weather and under difficult conditions, when the other radios wouldn't communicate, Admiral Byrd could communicate with Arthur. So here was little Arthur, a 17 year old high school boy, communicating with Admiral Byrd at the South Pole. All the news writers had to telephone Arthur to find out what was happening at the South Pole. Later when Admiral Byrd went on his second trip, he had all his equipment, all his communications equipment, was built by little Arthur, who was by then about 17 or 18. He had been moved to a garage and had somebody help him.

LD: I have been told that, ironically, Art Collins had a difficult time getting started with Collins' Radio here in cedar Rapids. Do you know anything about that?

RA: No, I don't think he had any difficulty getting started. The company grew so fast, because he had these far out communication's facilities built into these radios and because of the fact, I think, that he is the inventor of the single side band radio, which is the long, long, long distance communicator. It was kind of developed so that the communications with the moon were all, ready, a development of equipment originally designed by Arthur. I remember one time, Arthur stopped, it looked like it was raining, and he said, "Bob would you like a ride," and I said, "Well, I believe I do." I got in and said, "What is all this equipment under the instrument panel here?" He said, "Well, I can talk to anyplace in the world from this car." This was his single side band radio that he had developed in his car and he lived just two blocks north of us.

LD: It must have been hard for a lot of people to believe in the value of what he was doing in those days.

RA: Yes, but the company began growing so fast. As soon as the Army and Navy found out, as they did from Admiral Byrd, about this fine equipment, the thing just exploded. It grew by leaps and bounds. It was using all the buildings they could find around and they built buildings. First they built the ones near the Elmcrest Country Club, then later they built out on Blairs Ferry Road. At one time they employed 13,000 people. There were 500 research engineers out there. I had a friend who was head of personnel and he said, "You know, I walk through that engineering building and I see engineers sitting with their feet on their desks. I wonder if they're thinking about radio or if they are thinking about their next weekend's golf game." I said, "I don't know." But the trouble was that Arthur believed in such fine tuning and so much research that the company, its capitalization, became completely lopsided. They weren't able, finally, to pay their bills

and that is how they got taken over by Rockwell Collins.

LD: He was much more of a mechanical . . .

RA: Well, he was a great electrical genius, a genius in radio. He went to MIT and just thought it was kid stuff that they were teaching him, because that was all behind him. He had had that.

LD: Well, I'm going to shift you just a bit back to the earlier time again and ask you what your memories are of the Lyman-Stark Building fire that took place here in, I believe, the Thirties, wasn't it? No that was another date.

RA: I'm not sure of the date, but I remember well, I was at a football game at Coe College and the word spread that there had been a collapse of the Lyman Building, now known as the Century Building, located at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Third Street. Those were the days in which masonry was so important that it, would be sold from Cedar Rapids. This was a great sale market, lead by Lyman Brothers. They were building this building and the concrete was too green: they were pouring the building too fast. So, I remember, during the half, leaving the football game and running down to the site of the building. It was a terrible sight to see--that whole top of the building had slid into the alley and it was green. Several people were killed.

LD: Did it occur then? It must have been a . . .

RA: It was on a football Saturday, yes.

LD: I guess that would have been.

RA: Either a football Saturday or it might have been, I don't remember the date, but I remember being at a football game.

LD: Was that a period of intense building downtown?

RA: Yes, quite a lot. You see the Lyman people had occupied what is now the Sanford Building across the street from our store, here. That building was not large enough, they had salesmen out all over the west. They would sell millinery out in Wyoming and Montana and this was the headquarters. They would have hats, millinery hats from many distinguished designers. Samples would be taken out by these men and sold to Milliners all over the west.

LD: What happened to the Lyman business?

RA: Women began not wearing hats and doing things to their hair so that they couldn't wear hats. You know, that has been unfortunate. Personally I think that most women, certainly most men, particularly older men, look better in a hat. But the women began eliminating the men or visa versa and the millinery business began to slide and communication got better so that the hats were sold in larger stores. We used to do a very fine millinery business in our store here.

LD: Well, there does seem to be a bit of a return to hats.

RA: Well, now the millinery business has become a weak business. Formerly, we used to do 99 percent of our business in women's hats and 1 percent in accessories, now it is 90 percent wigs and 10 percent hats, maybe a little more than that, maybe a little less, but it was 90 percent wigs.

LD: You really did change with the times.

RA: Well, Yes.

LD: Were there other things back in teh Twenties and Thirties, really hot items that no longer sell very well? Any that you remember?

RA: Well, I can remmber that when I was a boy in our store, which was strickly men's and boy's store, we would sell collars that went on shirts. The shirts were like Grant Wood's famous picture "American Gothic". They had a shirt band and the collar would fit on that shirt band. A man could wear that collar maybe two days, then it had to be sent to the laundry, because the average home couldn't--it had to be highly starched. We would have to have a great variety of collar sizes, a huge department of collars and sizes from, 14 up to 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ and in all, you can imagine.

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RA: You have heard of the Arrow collar man?

LD: Arrow shirts, with Arrow collars.

RA: Yes, they didn't make many shirts.

LD: When did that change? In the Forties or Thirties, do you remember?

RA: Well, yes. Men found that these collars were too difficult to get on, hard to wear. It was a very wise change.

LD: So, it was just a move toward a more informal . . .

RA: Well, yes, and a more comfortable shirt. As a boy, we would wear blouses that would not tuck into our trousers tops, but would blouse out. Then when

you got in long pants, a real grown up feature, we would tuck the shirt inside, and we would buy shirts.

LD: And, I suppose collars.

RA: With collars attached. I don't remember when the collars--you would have one or two or three collars attached shirts, all the rest would be shirts with neck bands and you favorite collars. You had to send all those collars to the laundry. I can remember going to Europe, after I was finished at Harvard Business School and came back to Cedar Rapids, my roommate at Harvard, who was the tallest man at Harvard. He always still wore collars, rather high collars, and there was no place in Europe where he could get these collars washed. So, he had to take enough collars with him to last through the trip.

LD: That would have been pretty inconvenient.

RA: Yes.

LD: I presume that women's foundations and undergarmets have changed dramatically too, corsets and things.

RA: Oh, I suppose so.

LD: I guess that is really good for business, fashions to keep changing.

RA: Well, I think there is a great misunderstanding of fashion. People tend to think it is something foisted on them, which is not the case. The basic cause of fashion changes is very simple to understand. It is the natural human desire for a change in apparel diet. People don't want to have the same diet all the time. You might be very fond of roast beef, for example, but you don't want to eat it every day, week in and week out, continuously, you want a change. This is the reason for fashion changes, and those fashion changes have

to be slow enough, they have to be very slow for men, and faster for women, but not so fast that it will jar them. That takes the hardest street to do it. That's where we get these fashion designers, who design something that women will like, but which will not jar them too much as a change.

LD: Mr. Armstrong, I think I have covered most of the areas, that we had wanted to pick up on today. The last time we were together, I asked you to make a comment on the changes in the community and you said that that was something that you wanted to wait on, for a while. I don't know whether you feel that this is the appropriate time or not, but I am really interested in perceptions, not just so much whether the changes in Cedar Rapids have been good or bad, but maybe what you think the future holds for Cedar Rapids. We have talked a lot about the changes in business, in the downtown area.

RA: I think that we are in a period of a shake down, wherein we are going to move to better times. I think the downtowns will become better, because they have lots of things going for them. For examples, in a time when people are very sensitive to price, a downtown area, such as Cedar Rapids, can offer people better values, whether it's clothes, foods, or whatever, because there is lower overhead, it is more central. The reason that cities, in my opinion, across the country, downtown are just deserted, is because they haven't done the things that are necessary. I think to a considerable degree, more than in the average city, we here in Cedar Rapids have responded to the needs of downtown. As a result of that, downtown has not suffered the way that it has in many places. We have a lot more things that we need to do, but we are on the way. For instance, with these 16,000 parking spaces, we have, a great advantage. We are finding that people can leave their home, without going outdoors. They get in their car, come downtown, get out of their car, undercover, walk, undercover, through a skyway to their store, or the bank or their office, or where ever

they want to conduct their business, and they can go home without ever going outdoors. This is a great change, great benefit. I think with the skyway system, which we are gradually expanding here, that we may have a compact downtown, very convenient for people to shop, with maybe connections of 15 or 16 bridges. We now have about half that number, and we are getting more. It is a lot more convenient shopping. In the old days, as per a picture which I showed you, I think when you were here the last time, the sidewalks were made very wide, so that merchants could show their wares out on the sidewalks, grocers could have their fruits and vegetables out on the sidewalk, and so horses wouldn't bite the passer-by. We don't need the sidewalks near as wide as they are and I am a believer that these sidewalks should all be narrowed down. We should double the parking downtown, which we can do very readily, if we narrow the sidewalks. Instead of parking cars parallel, we'll park them at an angle. When you go to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, all along the beach there, which is very crowded for about a mile and a half, they have angle parking. It is a section, which is extremely busy and it works fine. They get two and a half times as many cars as they would if they were parked parallel. The sidewalks can be narrowed. Skyways are a new feature that is going to become increasingly so, there are going to be more people living downtown. Our Cedar River Tower--yesterday, I was talking to a lady, she said, "My what a magnificent view we have out of here. We are up in the fog." They were in the upper reaches of the tower, in the north, between the Twentieth and Twenty-fifth floor, but you get these magnificent views and people love that. It gives them freedom too. If they decide they are going off for a few days to see Uncle Joe and Aunt Tamella, they can just turn the key and away they go. They don't have to make arrangements for the house to be watched, or their lawn to be mowed, or the snow to be shoveled, or the newspaper not to be delivered.

LD: Convenience is really the key, isn't it?

RA: Well, it is one of those keys, yes.

LD: I think the other thing that impresses me about the downtown of Cedar Rapids, is most of the people here, are local merchants. In other words, people who have made a commitment to Cedar Rapids. Often, things you can't find in a shopping mall.

RA: Yes, it is. The shopping malls are primarily giant national chains that do nothing but suck the money out of the community, send it to New York, Chicago, or the west coast and that is the last we see of it here. Whereas the downtown, the downtowns, for the most part are made up of local people. We have been fortunate, here in Cedar Rapids, that most of the downtown is locally owned. There are problems when you've got absentee ownership. Cities that have absentee ownership of the downtown, are in terrible trouble now.

LD: I think these are much better for the people.

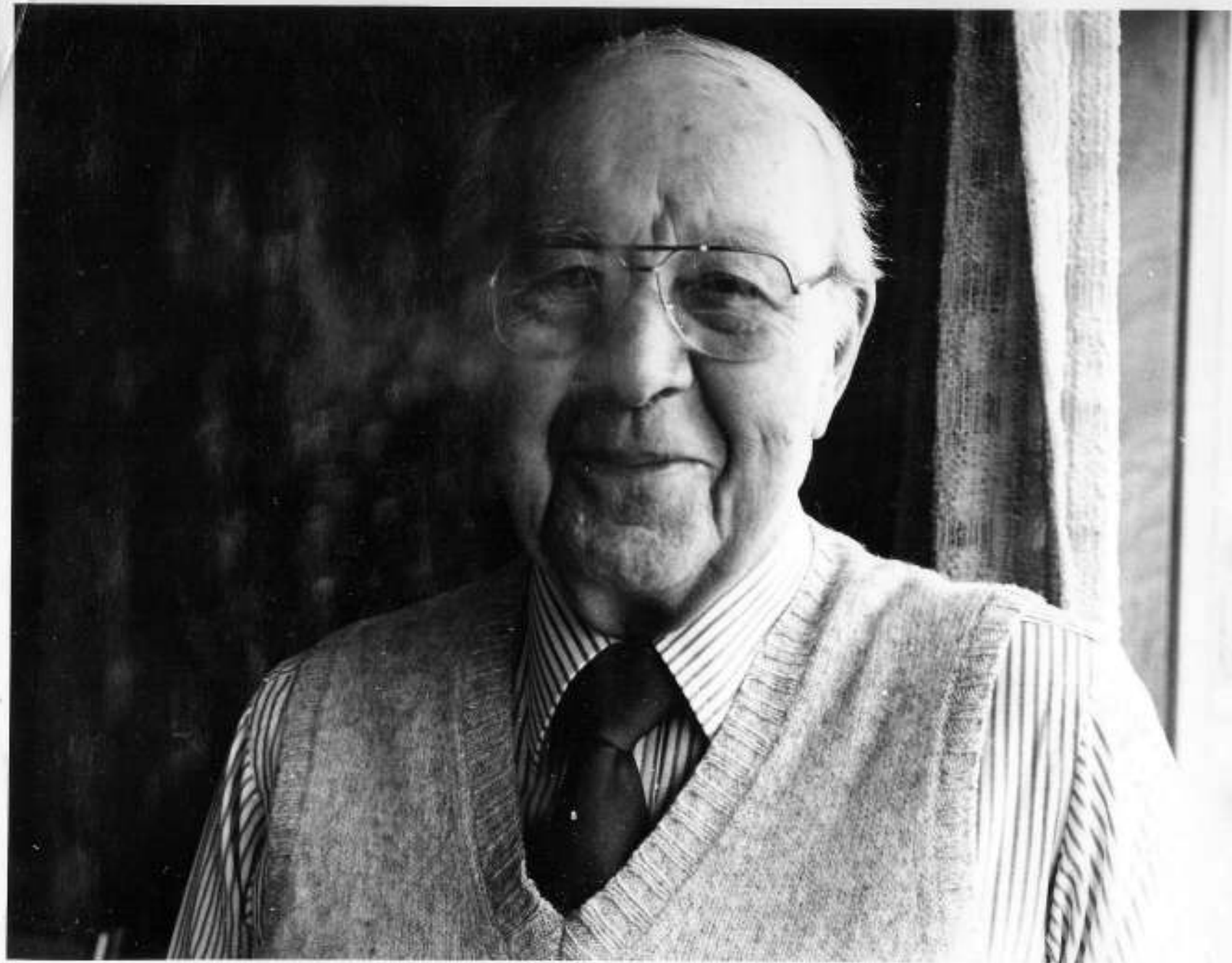
RA: Yes, because the absentee landlord is interested in money that he draws out, he isn't interested in improving. My father believed, came here as a poor farm boy and started this store on credit because his credit became very good and people knew he was going to take care of his obligation. He felt this community had been very good to him and he believed that any surplus money he had should be invested here, rather than stocks and bonds to build up buildings in far away places.

LD: Well, I hope that kind of thinking continues to dominate in Cedar Rapids.

RA: I hope so too.

LD: And I appreciate your giving us a second chance to follow up.

RA: Thank you, Laura, I thank you.



Goodbye, Robert Armstrong

Death of retail pioneer, 93, kindles memories

67-22 NOV 1990- P.1A
By Dale Kueter
Gazette staff writer

Al Peremsky refers to his "dogged" determination to make downtown succeed.

Reg Watters recalls him as an employer who addressed people by their first names and preferred the term associate to employee.

Dr. Percy Harris pays high tribute. "I remember him as my father."

Robert C. Armstrong, 93, died early Wednesday at Mercy Medical Center where he had been admitted last Saturday. He ranks among the top business and civic leaders of Cedar Rapids' history.

Ironically, Armstrong's death comes just three weeks after the downtown department store that bears his name went into bankruptcy. It will close in January.

"He had strong beliefs in many areas, and he seldom wavered from them."

Al Peremsky

Peremsky worked at Armstrong's for 23 years, 16 as president. He noted that in 1959, Armstrong at the age of 82, opened a new store in downtown Cedar Rapids.

"That takes determination. It was a point when most people are considering retirement. But Armstrong was his own man. He had strong beliefs in many areas, and he seldom wavered from them. His death really brings an era to a close."

Peremsky said one of Armstrong's favorite phrases was, "Do the non-

traditional thing." In an era when stores were moving to the malls, "he chose not to do it."

"We've lost a valuable leader in the community," said Mayor Don Canney. "He has had a tremendous impact upon our city." Canney said he visited with Armstrong at the store's 100th anniversary celebration in September. "He will be missed."

Armstrong's determination was never more evident than in the late 1950s when he helped Harris and his wife, Lileah, who are black, look for a home. Armstrong personally accompanied Harris in the search. "It astounded me to find that people wouldn't sell to a black," Armstrong said in an interview several years ago.

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Robert Armstrong
Death "brings era to close"

■ Please turn to 8A: Armstrong

Armstrong, C.R. retailer, dies at 93

RE-22 NOV 1990 - p. 2A

By DEBORA WILEY

Of The Retailer's Cedar Rapids Bureau

CEDAR RAPIDS, IA. — Robert C. Armstrong, whose family name has been synonymous with downtown Cedar Rapids for 100 years, died Wednesday morning at Mercy Medical Center. He was 93.

Although the cause of death was not immediately determined, Armstrong had been in failing health for the past year, said Esther Armstrong, his wife of 64 years. He was admitted to the hospital Saturday complaining of abdominal pains and his son-in-law, a physician, speculated that an artery had broken.

Armstrong boosted the modest men's clothing store started in 1890 by his father and a partner into a large department store that anchored the downtown retail district. He served on numerous civic, church and community boards, but Esther Armstrong said he was most proud of "the store."

Patrolled the Racks

He was a stickler for details who would personally patrol the racks of merchandise to make sure they met

his standards.

After losing majority stock control four years ago, Armstrong and his wife sold their interest in the company to the majority stockholder, the employee stock ownership trust.

His death was one day short of three weeks after the department store's management, citing pressure from suburban shopping malls, filed for bankruptcy.

The news that the store will close early next year had saddened her husband, said Esther Armstrong.

"Robert Armstrong was almost an institution to himself," said Cedar Rapids Mayor Donald Canney. "His total conviction to the central business district was truly amazing, even though change was all around."

Canney called Armstrong "a man of very strong convictions. He would take an issue, think about it, make up his mind and he would stay with that. And put his money on that decision."

Degree From Coe

Born July 4, 1897, and raised in Cedar Rapids, Armstrong received de-

grees from Coe College in Cedar Rapids and the Harvard School of Business Administration. Returning to Cedar Rapids from Harvard, he persuaded his father, Samuel Armstrong, to open a women's clothing section. It was the beginning of many expansions of merchandise and store space.

Becoming president after his father's death in 1928, Armstrong guided the store to a prominent place in eastern Iowa retailing and served as general merchandising manager for four decades. He retired from active involvement in the company in 1972.

A teetotaling non-smoker and longtime Methodist church member, Armstrong for years refused to buy wine glasses to sell at the store and was known to scan greeting cards to make sure they didn't contain references to sex or violence.

"Mr. A"

Known as "Mr. A" to his friends, Armstrong had been a private pilot since 1939 and took thousands of children on rides in his Cessna as rewards

for perfect attendance at St. Paul's United Methodist Church Sunday school, where he taught for 26 years. He continued to fly until the last couple of years.

"I love to fly," Armstrong said in a 1987 interview. "I don't think there's anything I've ever done which has been as much fun or which has been as productive of as many friendships as flying."

Armstrong helped shape the physical landscape of downtown Cedar Rapids as a partner in building the 25-story Cedar River Tower apartments. As recently as a couple of years ago, he envisioned building a new high-rise condominium complex downtown.

Retailing Innovator

Recognized as an innovator in retailing — he was the among first Cedar Rapids retailers to install air conditioning — Armstrong also championed social causes.

Despite the loss of customers and friendships, in the 1950s he urged his church to sell some property to a



Robert C. Armstrong
"Mr. A"

black professional — Percy Harris, now a well-known Cedar Rapids physician.

Memorial services will be at St. Paul's Methodist Church at 10:30 a.m. Saturday. After cremation, interment will be at St. Paul's Columbarium. There is no visitation.

Survivors, in addition to his wife, include four daughters, Mary Dusek of McLean, Va., Esther Cooper of Philadelphia, Anna Johnston of Camp Hill, Pa., and Mimi Meffert of Cedar Rapids; 11 grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

CEDAR RAPIDS-BIOGRAPHY-A
(ARMSTRONG, ROBERT)

3 OF 3

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DOES NOT CIRCULATE

me, work is fun."

As a 50-year veteran pilot and an active member of the Octogenarian Aircraft Pilots Association, he said his one extravagance was flying his own plane. At age 90, he flew himself to Rochester, Minn., for heart surgery.

Armstrong met his wife, Esther, when he was a student at Coe. They were married in June 1926. From 1934, they lived in a large stone house designed by friend Grant Wood at the corner of 34th Street and Bever Avenue SE. Four daughters were reared on the estate they called Pleasant Hill.

Armstrong was active on a number of boards and in a variety of community agencies. Among them were St. Paul's United Methodist Church, St. Luke's Hospital board and the YMCA. Robert Armstrong was a man who left his mark.

In an interview four years ago, he perhaps composed his own best epitaph: "I've been right at home in this life, and I'll feel right at home in the next."

(OVER-7)



1985 Gazette photo by Rita Reed
Robert Armstrong rides the escalator in 1985 in the store that bears his name. Although Armstrong was no longer officially associated with the store at the time, he stopped in almost every day for lunch and to visit.

ROBERT COOPER ARMSTRONG/ 1897-1990

From boyhood, 'I just loved being in the

Editor's note: The following story by Gazette reporter Tom Pruebing is based on interviews with Robert Armstrong in recent years.

Robert Cooper Armstrong was born in Cedar Rapids on July 4, 1897, seven years after his father and a partner founded a men's and boys clothing store at Second Avenue and Second Street SE.

The business became Armstrong Clothing Co. in 1915.

Armstrong spoke with admiration about his father, Samuel, who rose from working for others at \$7 a week to become a leader in Cedar Rapids business and civic affairs.

The younger Armstrong started working in the family store as a child, delivering packages on a pony called "Roxie."

"I just loved being in the place," he told a Gazette reporter.

Armstrong went on to graduate from Coe College in 1918, earning summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa distinction, and maintained lifelong ties with the school. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from Coe in 1983 and was an honorary trustee at the time of his death.

A year of officer's training at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., followed Armstrong's college graduation, but the end of World War I also ended his service career. In 1920, Armstrong earned a master's degree from Harvard University's business school.

With his Harvard degree, he came back to his hometown and his father's store. Over the next seven decades, he put his own stamp on Cedar Rapids and on Armstrong's.

It was Robert Armstrong's idea to expand into women's clothing. In 1924, his father bought an adjacent building and gave his son license to run the expanded operation.

"I hired two very competent women, and boy did we go to town," Armstrong recalled.

At the age of 30, upon the death of his father in 1928, Armstrong became president of the business. Assisted by longtime associates, Addison Ramsey, Joe Miller and Miller's son, John, Armstrong guided the growing department store through the Great Depression of the 1930s.

He pointed with pride to the fact that no workers were let go

place'
"I've been right at home in this life, and I'll feel right at home in the next."

Robert Armstrong



during that time, and the business never lost money despite a 40 percent drop in sales.

In the 1940s, Armstrong began a stock ownership plan for employees. When he and his wife, Esther, sold their 36 percent interest in the store two years ago, the employee trust gained majority ownership.

In the face of competition from Lindale Mall, Armstrong relocated the store to its present site in 1959 and quadrupled its size. The move was part of his unshakable belief in the downtown

shopping district.

In 1948, he built the first parking ramp in the state next to the Roosevelt Hotel. He generally is credited with being the prime mover behind the downtown sky-walk system.

With fellow businessman Peter Bezanson, Armstrong constructed Cedar River Tower, a downtown apartment high-rise.

Planning for a 30-story downtown condominium building occupied his later years. However, the project did not reach the construction stage.

His last major development ventures involved the seven-acre Grant Wood Forest subdivision on the Armstrongs' wooded estate in southeast Cedar Rapids and the opening of a mini-mall, called Armstrong Building — Center I, in the former Kubias location.

Even after severing ties with the department store, Armstrong ate lunch there daily and continued to invest in and promote downtown properties.

He officially retired in 1972 but stayed active in the day-to-day operation of his store until well into the 1980s. He was head merchandise buyer for about 40 years, and it was said that he knew every item that was sold there.

In later years, Armstrong paid himself \$1 a year as a consultant and chairman of the board. "When it was raised to \$2, some people thought the increase was inflationary," he joked.

At the time of his last major interview with The Gazette about four years ago, Armstrong still was putting in a full work week out of a downtown office overlooking the city he had such a strong hand in developing. "To

62-22 NOV 1950-? 28

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Mr. Armstrong was a member of St. Paul's United Methodist Church where he served as trustee, had served as Chairman of the Board of St. Luke's Hospital, chairman of Coe College board and YMCA board, Downtown Association; member of Methodist World Missions board, Iowa Electric Light and Power board and 67-year member of Kiwanis Club. He was honored by the Chamber of Commerce, a member and former board member and benefactor of Linn County Historical Society and member of the Meth-Wick Retirement Community board. A licensed pilot, he had operated his own plane since 1939, and had logged enough miles to have made 17 trips around the world.

Drs. J. Eugene Young, Richard Newhall and Joseph McCabe will officiate. Memorials may be made to charities or organizations of the donor's choice.



Armstrong's archive photo

Robert Armstrong talks to shoppers at Armstrong's 1959 opening at its present location in downtown Cedar Rapids. The new store, quadruple the size of its predecessor, was opened to meet competition from Lindale Mall.

Armstrong: 1st to hire blacks

■ From page 1A

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Harris said the Armstrongs' involvement in finding his family a house caused many store customers to cancel their accounts. "And they had friends who didn't agree with what they were doing in helping us. They put those friendships on the line.

"I talked with them daily during these times. They felt that in the eyes of the Lord it was the thing to do. They didn't worry about anything else."

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"He was the first to hire black sales people," Watters continued. "I remember during inventory he would take everyone out to dinner. It required a big place to feed everyone. We always went to Bishop's because the two hotels wouldn't serve our black employees then."

"He gave me the opportunity to be the store's first black buyer, in fact the first in Iowa," said Arbelia (BeBe) Davis. She has worked at the store for 29 years. "He was a fine Christian busi-



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"He was a superb churchman and a major supporter of the missions. He helped start the pension program for ministers. He and Esther (Armstrong's surviving wife) usually arrived at services early. They were always there, even if I had a Bible study class on Sunday night."

Hancock said the Armstrongs financed and helped arrange for construction of the columbarium at the church, a depository for ashes of the deceased. "It doesn't bear his name because he didn't want it mentioned."

Abbott Lipsky, president of Smulekoff's, said Armstrong "gave a great deal of himself to the city. He contributed a lot of his time and his money. Some substitute work for a contribution, but Robert did both if he believed in something."

"He loved his store," said Maxine Schoonover, Armstrong's personal secretary for nearly 31 years. "He believed in the dignity of every job. I think I



Mayor Don Canney

Mourns loss of "valuable leader."

can speak for all associates in that each of us is better off because of having worked for him."

Robert Armstrong, who sold his interest in the store four years ago, had been aware of its pending closing.

It would be a sad day, he told a Gazette reporter the day of the bankruptcy filing, if he lived to see the Armstrong name taken down from the store his father started a century ago.

CONT. NEXT PAGE

DEATHS / LINN COUNTY

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By Dale Kueter

Gazette staff writer

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■ Please turn to 8A: Armstrong

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Norway Sa

8-19-86

Mr Harold Ewoldt
@ R Sa.

With all the Justifiable publicity that R.C. Bob Armstrong has recently Received, I thought with all the highly interesting stories you have written about the early history about C.R., I am enclosing a Good picture of The Ohio Literary Society from Cos College - Cleaning Brick from the Cooper Grist Mill that was located on A Ave. about 1 Block East of the River - I think,

Now the Coopers were Bob Armstrongs Grand parents on his Motherside - This Brick salvage operation was organized by My friend R.C. Bob Armstrong, as a money earning project for the Ohio Literary Society at Cos. So R.C. was at. Good projects for the good of Cedar Rapids, at and all surrounding areas, like My tours of Norway real early in life.

I ~~am~~ treasure this picture + would like it Back
We all read your stories about early C R + saw

Royal Tottle

Norway

Sa. 52318

Only 3 of this Group - Named on the Back, are still among the living - Me at the wheel Barrow, Tom Tracy ~~at the wheel~~ prominent, Self Made Attorney in Manchester and Bob Branch with his cap turned backward in the L. front



Also Tillery among
off in E R - 1915 - 3.5 \$ per hr.
and Williams (at 46). Bel. connecting - Henry Wicks - Gordon Byrd
and Thomas - Clyde Parker - Ed's Purdy - Henry Nelson - Or. Patten
with V. nick - Royal Tuttle
tanking back row - Renee Kern - Edwin Korman - ? Tom Tracy
by Bang-ter -



ROBERT C. ARMSTRONG.

Manager, Store for Women, Armstrong Clothing Co. Res., 2233 Meadowbrook Drive, Republican. "Bob." Born, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, July 4, 1887.

Why do you like Cedar Rapids?

Because it is a beautiful, ideal place for a home, the most attractive place of which I know; because of the interest this city shows in its churches and schools; because of the diversity of industry here which keeps business good and steady; because of the fine class of people who live here.

Why do you like the clothing business?

Because I like people, and the retail clothing business gives one constantly a chance to meet new people and to see old friends often. There is something new every minute. The clothing business caters to one of the most fundamental human needs and therefore when rightly conducted performs an important service to the community. I have been in a store all my life outside of school and I certainly enjoy it.

Why do you like advertising?

There is so much to learn. It is one of the coming professions but it will be a long time before it will approach an exact science.

Why?

The hymns are great poetry with inspiration to make the chills run up one's spine. The old-fashioned songs have the melody I like, and besides, they have to be good and old-fashioned before I can get next to the tune.

What sort of reading do you like?

Biography, history, the Bible, and books on religion as applied to our personal and social lives.

Why?

Biography, because it shows what men living in less advantageous times than ours have been able to make of themselves; at the same time it gives an intimate picture of the life of any given period. The Bible, because it holds what I believe is the only solution of the mess in which the world finds itself today.

What do you like best in the theater?

Shakespearian plays. Last summer I saw them at their best enacted in the theater in the poet's home town, Stratford-on-Avon.

Why?

Because Shakespeare has such a keen insight into human nature.

What was your most exciting experience as a boy?

Leaping the gap on a bicycle at one of the annual circuses which the Cooper boys, Max Parsons, Phil Crisman, and some of the rest of us used to hold on a vacant lot in Fifth avenue. Instead of going over the gap, after descending the incline from the tree branches, the front wheel of the bike stuck at the foot of the incline and the bicycle and I turned a couple of figure eights backwards in the air.

What was the most interesting sight on your trip abroad last year?

The city of Jerusalem and the Garden of Gethsemane as seen from the Mount of Olives on a beautiful Sabbath morning.

Do you think that the European countries will engage in war in the next twenty-five years?

I hope they won't, but am afraid they will.

Why?

Mussolini is putting the spirit of the old Romans into modern Italy. The German "Hiking clubs," "Outdoor clubs," and "Marching clubs" seem to have all the young men of Germany enrolled with the former kaiser's officers as leaders. These clubs as far as an army is concerned, have everything but the guns.

Do you think light wines and beer will ever come back?

No.

Why?

No one wants to see the saloons back, and in spite of much talk to the contrary, that's what we would have if light wines and beer were returned.

What public improvement do you think Cedar Rapids should work toward next?

A solution of the Fourth street problem. I'd like to see a beautiful river drive, including a road far up the river on the west side to some point above High Rock, then crossing the river there and connecting with another boulevard on the east side.



—Gazette photo by Carl Pranka.
Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Armstrong and their daughter, Mimi, are shown arriving at Municipal airport in Cedar Rapids Saturday following a four-months around-the-world tour.

Sun., Feb. 6, 1955

Around World Trip Concluded By Armstrongs

A seven weeks visit in India with their daughter, Esther, was one of the highlights of a four-month around-the-world trip concluded Saturday by Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Armstrong, Thirty-fourth street at Bever avenue SE.

Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong were accompanied by their daughters, Anna and Mimi. Anna went directly from Boston, their arrival port, to Delaware, Ohio, where she is a student at Ohio Wesleyan university. Miss Esther Armstrong is with the Methodist church in India, living in Delhi. The Armstrongs traveled extensively throughout India during their visit there.

They visited Col. and Mrs. Forest S. Rittgers and their son, Corky, in Hong Kong; Bishop and Mrs. Jose Valencia in Manila, and Miss Vida Rumbaugh in Bangkok. All are formerly of Cedar Rapids.

The trip also included a visit in Hamburg with Miss Christel Letzien, who lived with the Armstrongs last year as an exchange student, and in Liverpool with the Rev. Mr. and Mrs. Gilberthorpe Harrison. Mr. Harrison was an exchange minister at St. Paul's Methodist church here for two summers.

The Armstrongs and their two daughters were entertained by relatives of John Costas, 352 Forest drive SE, in Athens. They spent a day in Framingham, Mass., visiting Dr. and Mrs. Ralph Dusek before returning home. Mrs. Dusek is a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong.

The Armstrongs left Oct. 11 by plane from San Francisco. Their itinerary included Hawaii, Japan, Kanawa, Formosa, Singapore, Beirut, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Israel. Typhoons Pamela and Ruby struck while they were in Hong Kong and Manila, respectively.

Will shows Armstrong estate goes to his wife, Esther

2/6/90
By Tom Fruehling
Gazette staff writer

Except for a \$5,000 bequest to the Greater Cedar Rapids Foundation, the estate of Robert Armstrong will be placed in a trust for his wife, Esther, according to a will on file in Linn District Court.

The will states that when Esther Armstrong dies, a charitable trust will be established for "religious, charitable, scientific, liter-

ary and educational" institutions.

The Armstrong will does not specify who benefits from the trust, saying those decisions are to be made by trustees.

However, listed as the type of institutions for which the funds are intended are St. Paul's United Methodist Church, the world mission program of the United Methodist Church, Coe and Cornell colleges, the YMCA, United

Way and the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.

Money from the trust is to be used for "specific and special programs and projects," not for operating expenses.

The will directs that part of the trust be used for an endowed chair in forensics at Coe College.

"I have found that my involvement, while a student at Coe College, in forensics to have been a great value to me throughout

my life," Armstrong wrote in his will. "I accordingly ask that my trustees explore with Coe College the feasibility not only from a cost aspect but, more importantly, from a student interest aspect of establishing an endowed chair in forensics."

The will says that the Armstrongs' four daughters are not named in the will because each received benefits while Robert Armstrong was alive.

Weather--

Mostly fair tonight,
Sunday. Colder. Lows
tonight 0-5. Highs Sun-
day 15-20.

The Cedar Rapids Gazette

VOLUME 91 — NUMBER 354

CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 29, 1973

ARMSTRONG THREAT

Cedar Rapids Gazette

CITY
FINAL
10 CENTS

CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 29, 1973

ASSOCIATED PRESS, UPI, NEW YORK TIMES

WONG THREAT FOILED

Two Men
Are Held

of 132 A avenue NW.

The men have been charged with malicious threats to extort, police said. They are being held in Linn county jail in lieu of \$10,000 bond.

Arrested at House

Police arrested the two at 12:15 a.m. as they left an abandoned house in the 300 block of First avenue SW.

They were carrying a box that was placed in the building by Armstrong, police said.

The box did not contain the money.

Armstrong notified authorities after he received a note in Friday afternoon's mail stating that he should turn over the money or his business and residence would be bombed during January or February. No threats against his safety were made.

Note Typewritten

The note was typewritten and poorly worded, Armstrong said. Text of the note was not released.

The note was received at Armstrong's home.

"It was difficult to tell whether it was a joke, but we felt it ought to be taken seriously," he said. "I have real confidence in the police."

A man who drove the suspects to the house where the box was left and then returned as they were leaving was detained for questioning, but was later released without charges.

FBI Help

The arrests were made by the police and the FBI, who joined efforts on the case.

Police say they have not located any explosives.

The men were sober when arrested and were unarmed.

Armstrong said he is not acquainted with the suspects and had never heard of them before.

Federal charges against the two suspects have been authorized by U.S. Assistant District Attorney Robert L. Sikma and will be filed next week.

A third unnamed person will also be charged by Sikma in connection with the incident.

The Sowan
Summer 1963



“—tribute to a by-gone age.”

The Armstrong House

This home at Cedar Rapids reflects the strong influence of the old stone homes throughout Iowa's countryside.

By JOAN LIFFRING

A COPY of early Iowa farm houses of native stone, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Armstrong of Cedar Rapids, is a tribute to a by-gone age. It has enduring charm.

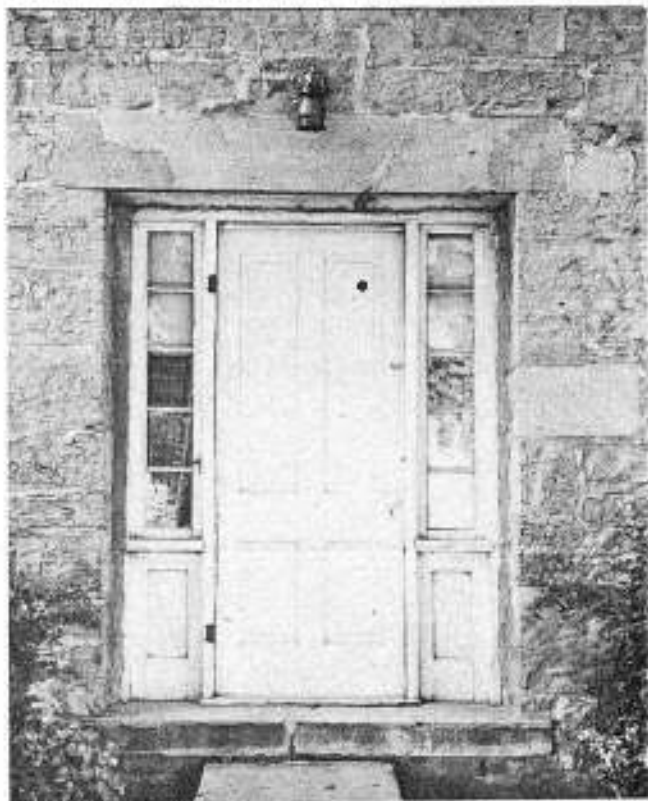
Built on one of the highest elevations in Cedar Rapids, the home is in the midst of a wooded area with native flowers. An old ridge road, now lined with rock walls, runs through the property. One side is walled for early spring flowers, the other side blooms in August and September. Pioneers once drove their wagons on this road from Prairie Du Chien to the village of Cedar Rapids.

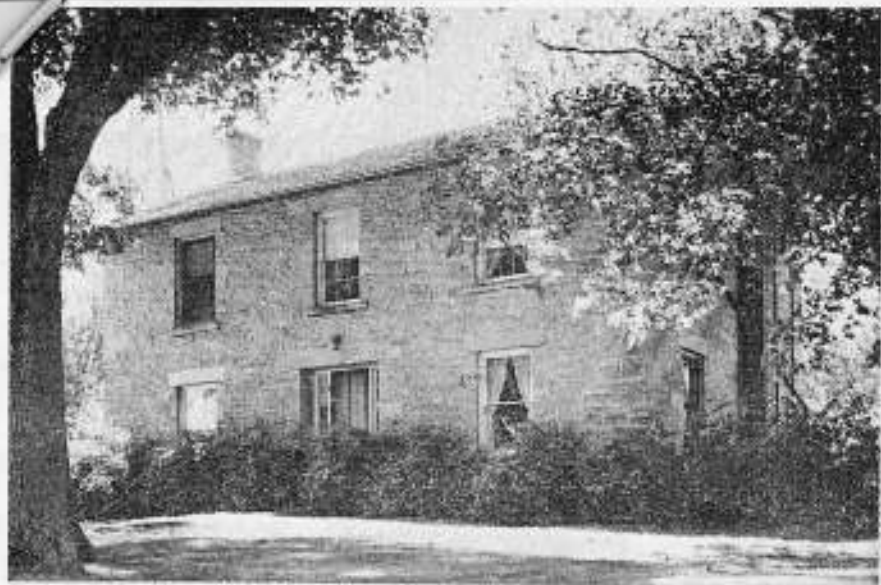
Famed Iowa Artist Grant Wood assisted Mrs. Armstrong and the late Architect Bruce McKay in designing the house. As a starting point, the three explored old Iowa settler's homes like the John Doe house in the village of Waubeek. They copied from many different crumbling stone houses, dating back to pre-civil war, using details of paneling design, and fireplaces of pioneer simplicity.

The Armstrong entrance, recessed into thick stone walls, repeats in detail the Doe front door. A derrick hoisted the half ton slab over the doorway.



Mr. & Mrs. Armstrong at doorway. Round circles near the doorway are lights. Grant Wood refused to let any lamps hang from house. Stone masons chiseled holes for lamps. (Below) Doe entrance. Panels hinged to form trap door.





Eugene Doe house, built in 1860 at Wanbeck. Original windows had divided panes.



The old John Doe home, still occupied at Wanbeck, provided many of the architectural details for the Armstrong home. This is the Doe home today. Gone is entrance copied by Armstrong. (Below) Old stone house shows carved slab over doorway.



View of Armstrong home from the old territorial Doe house. Trim on the porch is copied from an leaf picked each time for color when the shutters





roadway back of their home. The windows are the same as in the John old house. (Below) Paint for the shutters matches the green of an oak need painting. Design for porch arches was worked out by Grant Wood.



Iron hardware, with steeple-shaped hinge pins and china door knobs are exact copies from the old houses. The plaster center-light medallions refer back to the time of the pull-up-and-down hanging lamps with opalescent, ruby or amber overlay chimney shades. Grant Wood made the mold for the ceiling plaster work and cut the scallops on the porch cornice. The black walnut stair rail and bannister copy one in the old Perkins tavern near Waubeek.

Mrs. Armstrong furnished the house in early antiques, collected in the midwest—furniture that came from the East in covered wagons. Other treasures came from the Amana Colonies, brought west from Ebenezer, N. Y. in the 1840's.

In this lovely setting, the Armstrongs reared four daughters. They are Mrs. Ralph Dusek of Natick, Mass.; Mrs. Lee Cooper, missionary to Cameroun, West Africa; Mrs. Thomas Johnston of Princeton, N. J.; and Mrs. William Meffert of New Haven, Conn.

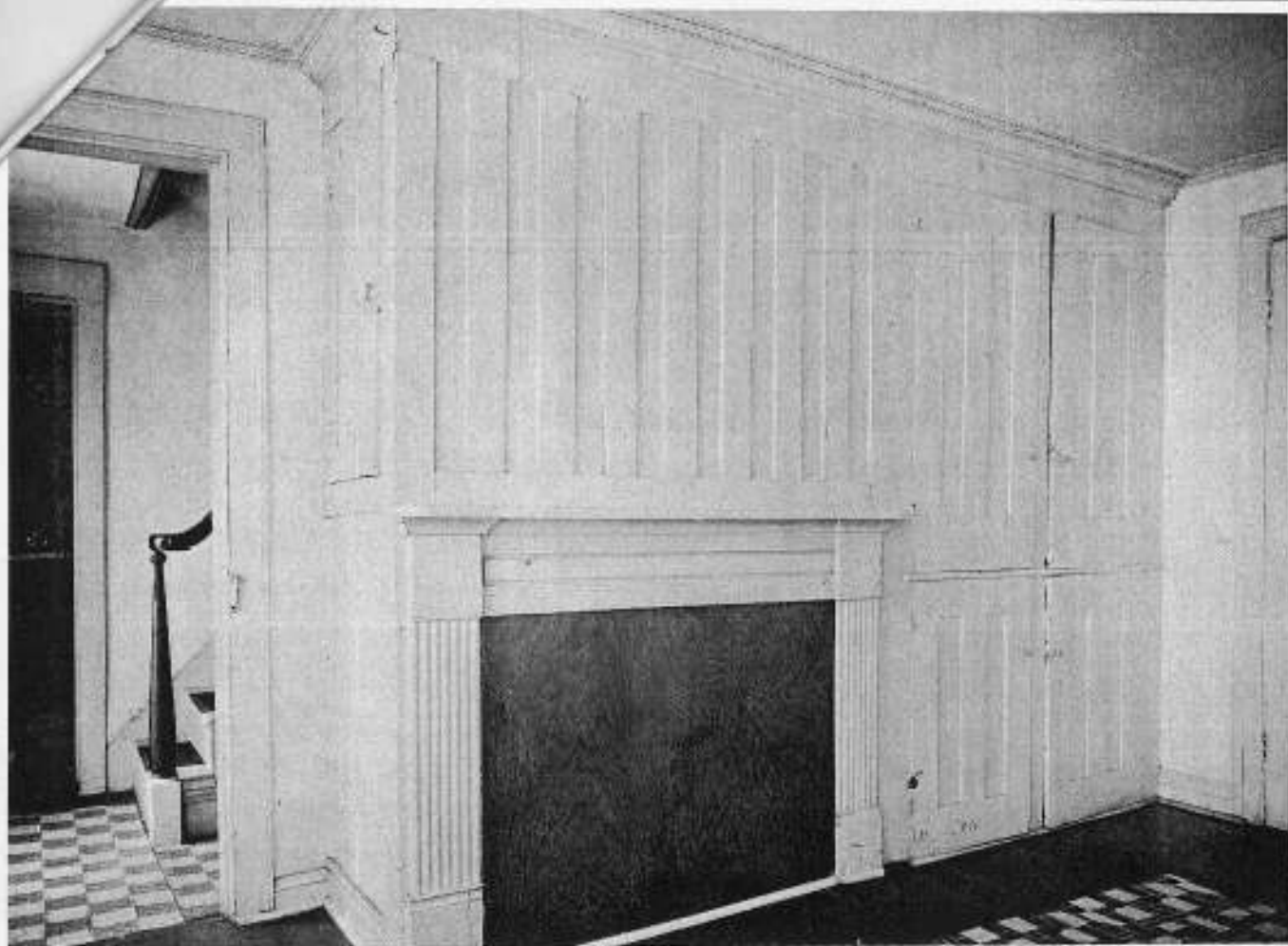
Bruce McKay once wrote, "As to the house, a century from now, when the last of Iowa's old stone houses have crumpled to ruins, posterity will still have one authentic copy of the early Iowa houses"—the Armstrong house in Cedar Rapids.



Portrait of William L. Cooper hangs over walnut sideboard.

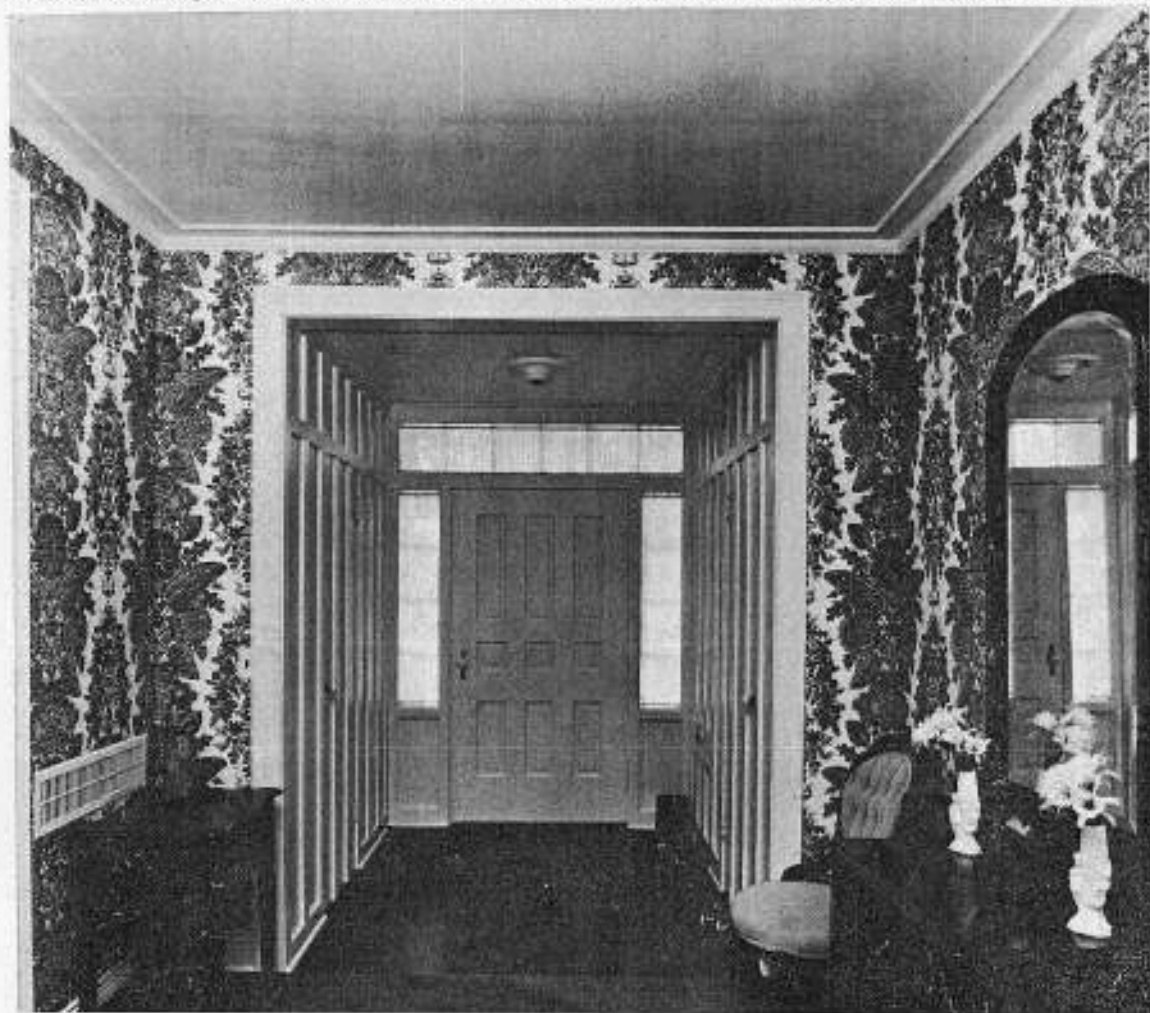
Ceiling decoration in the plaster shows detail of early homes.





Fireplace (Perkins' Tavern 1855). Fireplace copied in Armstrong house, also design for trim, base, doors and hardware. Front entrance way, identical to old Iowa settlers' home. Woodwork and ceilings painted white and off white.

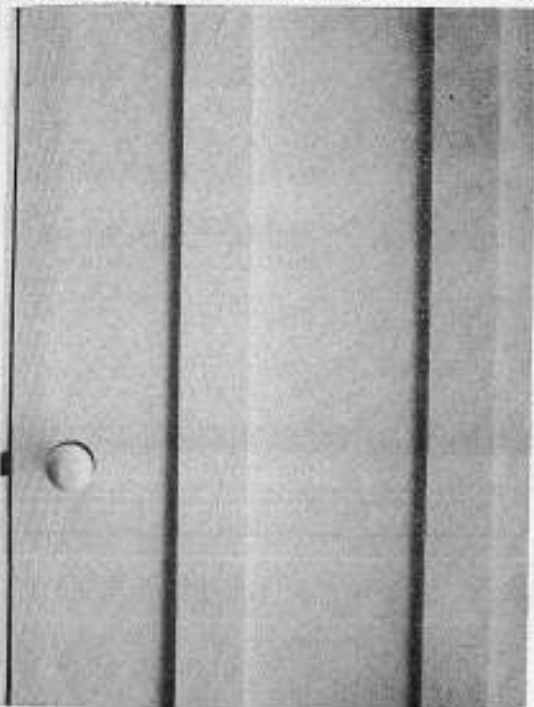
The search
Numerous
came when



Black walnut front sta



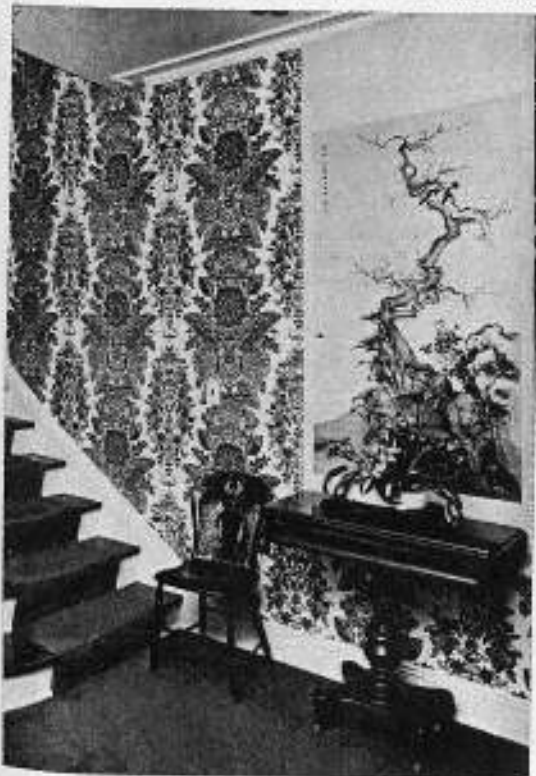
for authentic hardware presented the problems, hardware companies were contacted and success a wholesaler was found who had the old hardware.



The living room fireplace copies the one built in 1835 in the old Perkins' Tavern.

erway is a copy of the one in the Perkins' inn.

Authentic early Iowa pioneer cabinets and cupboards provide much storage space.





Armstrong's archive photo.
Robert Armstrong talks to shoppers at Armstrong's 1959 opening at its present location in downtown Cedar Rapids. The new store, quadruple the size of its predecessor, was opened to meet competition from Lindale Mall.

Fourth Street railroad tracks are still a problem in Cedar Rapids

DES MOINES REGISTER 10-26-1975

By WILLIAM SIMBRO

Register staff writer

CEDAR RAPIDS, IA. — The more things change the more they stay the same.

The mutterings of hundreds of motorists who were backed up for blocks on 12 streets for about an hour recently when equipment failure stalled a long Rock Island freight train on the Fourth Street tracks here haven't been recorded for posterity. Had they been aware of a nearly 50-year-old newspaper clipping, that old cliché might have been among their more civil mutterings.

And that cliché could be said by any Cedar Rapids driver accustomed to daily shorter waits along the tracks that bisect the downtown.

Gazette interviews

In 1926 and 1927 the Cedar Rapids Gazette ran a series of 363 interviews with local business and professional leaders. The question and answer stories, titled "Why's Why in Cedar Rapids?" were published as a book a year later.

One of those interviewed was an up-and-coming young clothing merchant by the name of Robert C. Armstrong. Now 78 and a very active chairman of the board of the downtown department store bearing the family name, Armstrong recently

chuckled as he reread the nearly 50-year-old interview that he said he "vaguely recalled."

The last question he had been asked in the interview was "What public improvement do you think Cedar Rapids should work toward next?"

"A solution of the Fourth Street problem," answered the young merchant.

1910 study of tracks

In a recent interview, Armstrong recalled that around 1910 his father — who started the family business in 1890 — served on a civic committee that brought in an engineering firm to study the pressing problem of the downtown tracks.

Another major study was made in 1928. It detailed how the tracks could be put underground, elevated overhead or diverted around the town.

It's been talked about ever since. The big problem, of course, has been money.

Within two months the Linn County Regional Planning Commission hopes to launch a study of railroad service for the Cedar Rapids metropolitan area. The Fourth Street problem will be on the agenda.

Fewer daily trains

Armstrong said that the problem partly has solved it-

self because with the disappearance of passenger trains from Cedar Rapids there are far fewer daily trains to contend with. He said that years ago there were a dozen or so sets of tracks along Fourth Street. Now there are two.

Though that civic headache remains, Armstrong enthusiastically said he could "stand by" the first question asked him in the long-ago interview: "Why do you like Cedar Rapids?"

"Because it is a beautiful, ideal place for a home, the most attractive place of which I know, because of the interest this city shows in its churches and schools, because of the diversity of industry here which keeps business good and steady, because of the fine class of people who live here."

Batted .500

Armstrong noted that he batted .500 on two predictions he made in the 1920s interview.

Fresh back from a trip to Europe, he was asked if he thought there would be another war within 25 years. He said he hoped not, but what he saw in Germany and Italy led him to fear there would.

Then as now an avowed enemy of alcohol, the Prohibition-era interview included a



Robert Armstrong

question on whether he thought "light wines and beer will ever come back?"

He gave a firm "no" on the basis that "No one wants to see the saloons back."

"I missed the boat on that, didn't I?" Armstrong said recently.

He added, though, that he foresees a day — "though I won't live long enough to see it" — when medical evidence will turn the public away from liquor. He said his father had been "a voice crying in the wilderness" about the physical harm of "booze and cigarettes."

2015.10.17

• Dec. 10: The Around the Town column in The Gazette recognized Robert Armstrong for his 30 years as a private pilot. Armstrong, who began flying with the Civil Air Patrol in 1940 from Saxon and Hunter fields, logged over a quarter of a million miles during his three decades of flight — the equivalent of flying around the world more than a dozen times.

GAZ COPY IN RAILROAD FILE

12-9-92

Robert Cooper Cunningham

m

Sarah Louise Cunningham
children

Mary Helen Cunningham
m

Joseph Henschel

Sarah Alice Cunningham
m. Joe Cooper -

Anna Louise Cunningham
m

James Johnston
m

Annella (Minnie) Margaret Cunningham
m

Wm S. Huggert

Sam Anna Cooper
Armstrong

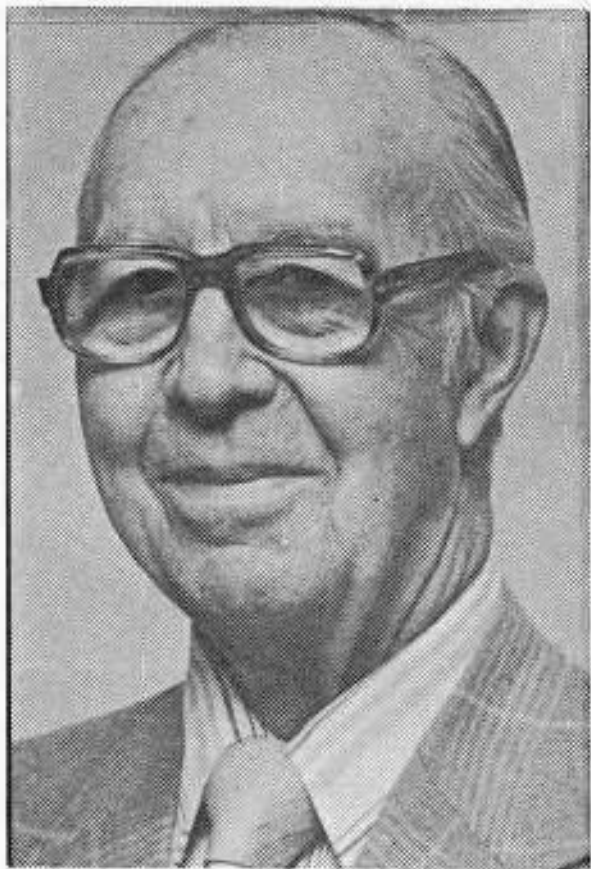
Esken Robert Margaret = Fank Race

- Margaret Race Stamps

- Fank Blackman Race, Jr.

- Virginia Race = (Div. Kulbide)

Robert Armstrong Race



Humanity Over Property

By Robert C. Armstrong

THIS is Brotherhood Week—a great time in history to really practice brotherhood as well as talk about it.

Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation 101 years ago but freedom and brotherhood are still in many ways denied the Negro. The civil rights bill, which has passed the house and now comes before the United States senate, in my opinion, involves today's greatest public is-



ROBERT C. ARMSTRONG

sue. That issue is whether our country is to be composed of two classes of citizens, first-class citizens and second-class citizens, with the latter degraded and subservient to the former because of the color of their skin.

Under our Judeo-Christian faith, we believe in one God, Father of all mankind, under whom all men are brothers, regardless of race, color, culture or creed. We believe that human personality is the supreme value in the world because every man is a child of God. Therefore, to deny brotherhood or equal rights to any man or to make one man or one race or one nation subservient to another is completely un-Christian, sinful and wicked.

Our Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights are founded on this principle. Because the individual is considered supremely important, he is given the right to vote and many other rights even though he may or may not own property. Therefore, although private property rights are important and are to be protected, they can never, under our American concept, take precedence over human rights which are irrespective of race, color, etc. Therefore, stores, restaurants, hotels, motels, theaters and places open to public accommodation should not, on grounds of private property rights, be allowed to violate, insult or subvert the supreme right of all American citizens to equal service.

Under these circumstances, it is proper that men of every religious faith, Catholic, Protestant and Jew, should unite as they now are doing as good Americans to seek equal civil rights for all fellow citizens. This means we should do everything in our power to support Iowa's U.S. senators in their present support of the civil rights bill.

Here in Cedar Rapids we should encourage equal employment opportunities for Negroes in all occupations and professions without discrimination. In the field of housing, which is one of the Negroes' most difficult problems, we should encourage worthy Negroes who are good citizens and who have the aspiration and financial potential to improve their family's living conditions to buy or rent a home anywhere they choose, including our own neighborhood or next door.

Brotherhood Week and every week is a good time to remind ourselves that human rights are more important than property rights and people should be accepted as friends and neighbors for what they are and on their own merits and character without distinction as to the pigment of their skin.

Handle with care!

Robert C. Armstrong

CEDAR RAPIDS



A

Model City
of the
Middle West



THIS BOOKLET, SIGNED BY ROBERT C. ARMSTRONG, HAS BEEN COPIED

Violence outdone by hospitality

Armstrongs treated warmly on visit to Northern Ireland

By Nancy Stevens

Gazette staff writer

When Robert and Esther Armstrong went to Northern Ireland last month in search of records of his ancestors, they saw signs of the violence that has plagued that country for several years.

But the Cedar Rapids couple also found warmth and hospitality among the people there, and experienced the excitement of Belfast's finest yearly celebration.

Robert Armstrong, chairman of the board of Armstrong's department store, even became something of a celebrity when he was interviewed by a Belfast newspaper.

Armstrong said Northern Ireland residents are particularly sensitive to how the rest of the world views the conflict there, and they go out of their way to show the country's best side to visitors.

"Both the Catholic and Protestant churches abhor the violence, and the vast majority of the people say it's a small criminal element that keeps the violence going," he said.

He and Mrs. Armstrong stayed in a Belfast hotel that had been bombed 26 times, but he said neither he nor his wife felt they were in any danger. "It is a bit unsettling because the hotel is all barricaded, fenced with barbed wire at the top. There's a security check when you go in. But nothing happened and it's just a precaution."

He said both Catholic and Protestants are upset about money sent by Americans, which they say finances the violence.



Robert
Armstrong

*They call
him 'Doctor'
in Belfast*

One of the highlights of the trip was a July 12 parade in Belfast commemorating the Battle of Boyne in 1691. "I've never seen anything like it," said Armstrong. "A parade seven miles long, all orange, and thousands watching."

The Armstrongs failed to find any more records of Armstrong's grandparents, but did get a chance to visit Ballymoney, where his grandfather had lived. The mayor of the city spent the day with the Armstrongs and went with them to the Sir William More estate, where his grandfather had been an indentured servant before immigrating to America.

"My grandfather, William Cooper, would tell me about the room from which you could look out on the river. We walked into that room and I could just see my grandfather sitting there, saw

what he must have seen as he thanked Sir More for the passage to America and Sir More congratulated him for prospering in the New World," Armstrong said.

The Armstrongs were just in time to see the estate as it had been for the last hundred years. It's being remodeled, explained Armstrong, for use as a hotel.

Word got around of the American searching for his ancestors and Armstrong was interviewed by a writer from the Belfast Newsletter.

The writer evidently was impressed with the prosperity and importance of this American son, and wrote in glowing terms about the Armstrong's department stores in Cedar Rapids and Dubuque and Armstrong's educational background.

The Armstrongs returned home July 25, before the article was published. He chuckled a bit when shown the article this week.

Robert Armstrong had been dubbed Dr. Armstrong by the publication, apparently in reference to the honorary doctorate degree he received from Coe College.

"They're very big on titles there. I never would have dreamed they'd make me a doctor because of an honorary degree, but I guess that's the way it's done there," he said.

He hopes that the mayor of Ballymoney will someday visit Cedar Rapids so the Armstrongs, who live at 370 34th St. SE, can return the courtesy shown them during their trip.

CHANGE

From page 13A

"There's no question but that he had a tremendous effect on downtown," he added. "One reason downtown is still as viable as it is on account of Mr. Armstrong and his activity — to a great extent."

To be sure, Smulekoff added, other merchants have shouldered their share of the load.

But it seems few could outdo Armstrong when it came to tenacity.

"He has a lot of determination, a lot of self-will and he has self-control," Smulekoff observed. "When he believed in a thing, he worked toward accomplishing it."

"Sometimes he may have been a little too stubborn on some things, but that also is what makes him successful."

Hladky echoed that assessment.

"He could be exceptionally difficult," he said. "I'm convinced that when he made up his mind on something, there wasn't anybody in Cedar Rapids who could talk him out of it."

HIS CAMPAIGNS weren't always successful. Records notes that he waged a battle — unsuccessfully — against the move to convert some of the downtown thoroughfares into one-way streets.

Yet, even in that defeat, Armstrong scored a partial victory, recalled a former schoolmate, William C. Crawford, who retired from his quarrying business several years ago.

"He stopped Third Street from being a one-way."

Successful campaigns were frequent.

"He's the father of the skywalks" linking a series of downtown businesses, added Smulekoff.

Merchants National Bank, with passage of enabling legislation by the Iowa General Assembly, became the first commercial user of air space in Cedar Rapids.

Armstrong was instrumental in seeing the system expanded.

"He paid for most of them to start with," said Smulekoff. "He made up his mind he was going to get them done, even if he had to pay for them himself."

"There is little good in the downtown area that hasn't been attributed to him, at least partly."

AND ARMSTRONG'S involvement extended beyond the business community.

"Early on," Hladky recalled, "he was a strong person on the St. Luke's board, helping with its finances. He's been very generous in his contributions to the community."

Crawford, a year older than Armstrong and an acquaintance since childhood, agreed.

"He's been a darn good citizen of this community, no argument about it."

Era ends: Armstrong steps down

Involved in store for 66 years, Robert Armstrong sells stock to employee plan (Money, page 6B)



Robert Armstrong

Armstrong's influence went beyond his store

By Ken Sullivan
Gazette staff writer

If you stroll through the air doors on the Third Avenue side of Armstrong's Monday morning, you probably won't sense that something has changed.

But it has.

Robert C. Armstrong no longer is running the show. He and his wife, Esther, sold their shares in the sprawling department store to the employees last week and Armstrong retired from active involvement with the company.

At 89, Armstrong has closed the books on a 66-year career with the business founded in 1890 by his father, S.G. Armstrong.

The imprint he's left on downtown Cedar Rapids, though, is not confined to the walls of the store, which takes up a full block on Third Avenue SE and part of the adjoining block of Second Avenue.

Contemporaries and sometime-competitors emphasize that Armstrong has long been a powerful force in the vitality — and survival — of the city's downtown business district.

On occasion, his dedication to a cause or a project placed him in the middle of controversy.

But despite sporadic skirmishes, "Robert's done a lot for the community," said Joseph Hladky Jr., chairman of the board of The Gazette Co.

"He's been an exceptionally good merchandiser and built up one of the finest retail stores in the entire Middle West. And, he's brought good people, such as Al Peremsky (now president of Armstrong's) into the store."

Contrary to popular opinion that no one is indispensable, "Mr. Armstrong is not going to be able to be replaced," said longtime retailer A.L. Smulekoff. "He's a great person. He's been fantastic for the community."

And for downtown Cedar Rapids.



Robert Armstrong

ARMSTRONG, FOR example, went head-to-head with the city's first large shopping center. Armstrong moved his store's base from its original site a few blocks away to a bigger building at its present location when Lindale Plaza opened in the fall of 1959.

He's said to have been among a group of merchants who sought to block development of the shopping center, an effort that dissipated in the face of the concept's growing popularity.

The Armstrong move into bigger facilities, Smulekoff recalled, came during "an important period. It helped Armstrong's and it helped downtown. It kept Lindale from affecting downtown any more than it did."

Indeed, he said, Armstrong's display of confidence in the central business district provided the impetus for other retailers to fight back instead of "folding up and joining them (the mall) like a lot of stores did."

Many of those stores didn't survive, Smulekoff said.

• Please turn to 15A: Change

Armstrong sells stock, retires

By Bruce Fishwild

Gazette financial editor

Robert C. Armstrong, chairman of the board of the department store company that bears his name, has sold his stock to an employee stock ownership trust and retired from involvement with the company.

The chairmanship will be left vacant, store officials said Thursday after the stock sale was completed.

It was the end of an era for the store. Armstrong — who turned 89 last month — had joined the 96-year-old retail company 66 years ago and had been visibly active in downtown business affairs ever since.

The sale, which had been rumored for several weeks, was consummated at 11 a.m. Thursday. Employees of the Armstrong's store in Cedar Rapids were notified Thursday afternoon, and those in the Dubuque store were to be notified early this morning.

The purchase price of the shares was not announced.

A written announcement being distributed to employees said, "After devoting over 65 years of their lives to Armstrong's store, during a period when many significant changes have occurred, Robert and Esther Armstrong and the management of Armstrong's have agreed to a stock purchase buyout plan.

"In this agreement, Robert and Esther Armstrong offered their stock holdings in Armstrong's Inc. and Armstrong's of Dubuque to be purchased by Armstrong's Employee Stock Ownership Trust,



Robert C. Armstrong

"This trust will be a major owner of the Armstrong's stores, along with other members of the Armstrong and Miller families and the Race estate. All qualifying associates will become holders of the trust, thus making Armstrong's an employee-owned corporation."

A member of the third generation of the Armstrong family will continue active in management of the store. Mimi A. Meffert, daughter of Robert and Esther Armstrong, is a vice president of the company.

Together, Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong owned 36 percent of the Cedar Rapids store and 100 percent of the Dubuque store, company officials said. As time goes by, they added, more stock likely will be added to the trust and employees likely will own more than 50

percent of the Cedar Rapids store. Armstrong's already is partially employee owned, an unusual thing in the retail industry. Armstrong had a strong belief that employees should be able to buy into the company, store officials said.

About 60 active workers and 40 retirees own stock in the company now, they said. With the trust in effect, it is expected that about 300 in Cedar Rapids and 100 in Dubuque will be qualified to participate — including some seasonal and part-time workers.

Armstrong's will remain a privately held company, officials said. Employees now holding stock agree that the company has first refusal rights if they wish to sell — and the company never has refused.

A similar arrangement will apply to stock obtained through the trust. It is not anticipated that any stock will find its way onto the open market.

Details of the plan have not been completed, company officials said, and could not be announced Monday. Once they are completed, the plan is subject to approval by the federal government.

A meeting of all employees will be scheduled later — probably in September — when all plans have been finalized.

Trustees of the stock ownership trust are Allen C. Peremsky, president of the company; Mrs. Meffert; and James Miller, vice president-finance of the company.

All other corporate officers will continue in their present positions, including Charles Gardner, vice president-operations; George

Loshbaugh, vice president-merchandising; Allyn Neubauer, vice president-sales promotion and advertising; Gary McCright, secretary; and George Baldwin, treasurer.

The Armstrong store was founded in 1890 by S.G. Armstrong, who grew up on a farm in Cedar County and came to Cedar Rapids to go to work in a clothing store for \$7 a week. The store originally was known as Armstrong and Fletcher Co., and later was Armstrong and McClenahan & Co. before it became just plain Armstrong's.

The original site was on Second Street west of Second Avenue, and the store grew to occupy a full quarter-block before the move was made to its present location at Third Avenue between Second and Third streets in 1959. The store has more than doubled in size at that location, all within Robert Armstrong's period at the helm.

One of his innovations was a women's department, at a time when few stores had such a department.

The Roshek store in Dubuque, which eventually was purchased and renamed Armstrong's, was founded by one of the original employees of the Cedar Rapids store.

Thursday's announcement to store employees concluded: "The store will continue to maintain all those qualities which have made it outstanding in the past. We look forward to continuing our very good progress in Dubuque and to the new challenges coming in downtown Cedar Rapids."



Gazette photos by John McIvor

Towers Ceremony

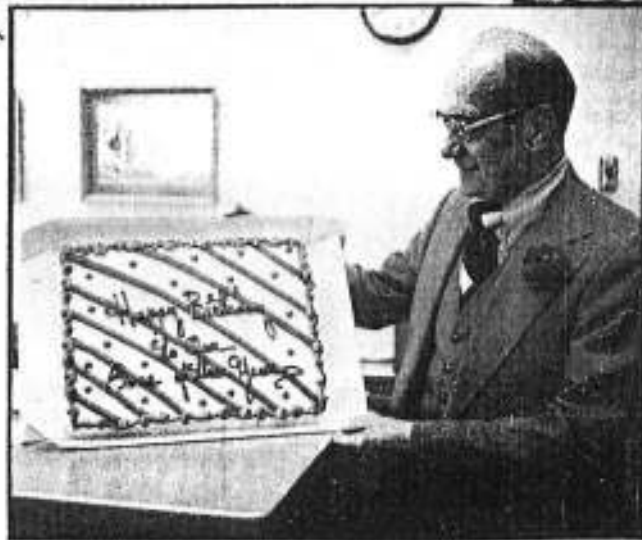
Robert C. Armstrong, left, and Peter F. Bezanson, developers of the Cedar River Towers in downtown Cedar Rapids, Thursday held a topping-out ceremony for the tallest residential structure in Iowa, 25 stories. They are pictured examining a white concrete tablet which each guest at the ceremony was invited to personally sign. The tablet will be placed in the elevator tower on the roof of the building. 7-23-74

12-25

DID YOU EVER NOTICE THAT GEORGE BALDWIN,
TREASURER, AND "SNOOPY"
HAVE THE SAME SMILE....
& HAIR STYLE?



WE LOVE YOU,
GEORGE,
(on payday)



You're right! ARNEWS doesn't visit many birthday parties....but when our amiable Treasurer is given a surprise coffee in the morning; AND a Red/White/Blue cake in the afternoon; AND a red carnation boutonnier....well, we couldn't resist. (above)

Visible to the camera at the 'surprise' coffee are: (1) CHUCK GARDNER; (center) GEORGE; DEAN METCALF (Store Sec'y.) is next to George; and, ALLAN C. PEREMSKY (President) at right. (PHOTO LEFT) George's associates in Accounts Payable presented him with the red carnation and the red/white/blue cake inscribed "Happy Birthday to our Boss of the Year". What does "Snoopy" have to do with anything? Nothing really. He was on the birthday napkins and we just "happened" to notice the resemblance.

GAZETTE EDITORIALS

Robert Armstrong

WITH THE DEATH Wednesday of Robert Armstrong, 93, a towering force in the business and community development of Cedar Rapids has passed from the scene.

What a durable and influential presence he was. The great department store he headed for more than half a century is closing — a result of forces beyond anyone's control. But the longtime viability of downtown Cedar Rapids owes as much to Robert Armstrong as to any other individual who touched its growth. No element was greater than his firm commitment to the expansion and excellence of Armstrong's through times when downtowns practically everywhere else were in dispirited decline. If ever the description "merchandising genius" fit anyone, it fit Robert Armstrong.



Robert Armstrong
A merchandising genius

In civic leadership, no lone accomplishment perhaps can top the part Armstrong played in helping open residential housing anywhere to blacks of Cedar Rapids who were limited in access opportunity before the 1950s. His spearhead work through St. Paul's Church concerning sale of property that he had owned did much in clearing barriers throughout the town. It was a wrenching change for many then, but one on which he never wavered in advancing with exemplary support and courage.

Working with his wife, Esther, who survives him, Robert Armstrong also was influential in Christian outreach and in behind-the-scenes philanthropy.

Never one to shirk toe-stepping when he felt it necessary, he showed a singular tenacity in furthering his causes and convictions. With most of the important judgments that he reached — on business matters or community concerns among the many boards and agencies on which he served — the chances were extremely small that there would ever be a change. You knew where Robert Armstrong stood, for better or worse.

In personal activities as well, the Armstrong singularity came through. Well past the age when rocking chairs claim most of us, he walked to work part-way from home and rode the city buses in an admirable show of senior verve. Even in his 80s, he also took pride in piloting the airplane that he owned, primarily on pleasure flights around this part of Iowa. He was an inspiration in longevity that few have matched.

The final balance sheet on a distinguished native son's career now shows a whole community distinctly in his debt. Cedar Rapids is a better place because of things he did and gave and helped to build.

COPY IN ST. PAUL'S FILE

ST. PAUL'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



1340 Third Avenue, S.E.
Post Office Box 2065

Cedar Rapids, Ia. 52406
Telephone 319-363-2058

A WORSHIP SERVICE OF
THANKSGIVING
FOR THE LIFE OF
ROBERT COOPER ARMSTRONG

November 24, 1990
10:30 A.M.

THE WORDS OF GRACE

Minister: Jesus said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life.

People: "Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.

Minister: "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

People: "Because I live, you shall live also."

THE GREETING

Dr. J. Eugene Young, Senior Minister

+THE HYMN OF FAITH - "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"

No. 717

+THE INVOCATION (in unison)

O God, who gave us birth, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. You know our needs before we ask. Give us now your grace, that as the mystery of death comes to us we may see the light of eternity. Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and death. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our summons comes, may we die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ. Amen

THE SCRIPTURE READINGS

Dr. Richard Newhall, Pastor of Visitation

These passages represent the memory work in the Eighth Grade Sunday School Class taught by Robert and Esther for twenty-five years.

The Ten Commandments	Exodus 20:1-17
What God Requires	Micah 6:8
Build Your Life on the Rock	Matthew 7:24-27
Jesus' Summary of the Law	Matthew 22:36-39
The Christian's Mission	Matthew 28:19-20
God's Love	John 3:16
Assurance of Christian Hope	Romans 8:28, 38, 39
Christian Love	I Corinthians 13
Right Thinking and Doing	Philippians 4:8
(Psalm 23 was also included)	

THE MAN OF FAITH

+THE STATEMENT OF FAITH (Korean Creed)

We believe in the one God,
 creator and sustainer of all things, Father of all nations,
 the source of all goodness and beauty, all truth and love.
 We believe in Jesus Christ,
 God manifest in the flesh,
 our teacher, example, and Redeemer, the Savior of the world.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
God present with us for guidance, for comfort, and for strength.
We believe in the forgiveness of sins,
in the life of love and prayer,
and in grace equal to every need.
We believe in the Word of God
contained in the Old and New Testaments
as the sufficient rule both of faith and of practice.
We believe in the church,
those who are united in the living Lord
for the purpose of worship and service.
We believe in the reign of God
as the divine will realized in human society,
and in the family of God,
where we are all brothers and sisters.
We believe in the final triumph of righteousness
and in the life everlasting. Amen.

THE PASTORAL PRAYER

Dr. J. Eugene Young

THE HYMN - "O God, Our Help in Ages Past"

No. 117

THE TRIBUTE - "A Grateful Tribute"

Dr. Joseph McCabe
President Emeritus of Coe College

THE SOLO - "The Lord Is My Shepherd"

Jackie Haveman, Soprano

Peter Tchaikovsky

THE BLESSING

THE HYMN OF BENEDICTION (in unison)

"Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

THE POSTLUDE

You are invited to the Social Hall immediately following
the service to greet the family and one another. The Family
Fellowship Sunday School Class is hosting the reception.

The Inurnment will be in the St. Paul's United Methodist
Church Columbarium.

ROBERT C. ARMSTRONG, 93, of 370-34th Street, SE, died in a local hospital early Wednesday after a long illness. He was born in Cedar Rapids on July 4, 1897, the son of Samuel G. and Anna Cooper Armstrong. He was a lifelong resident of Cedar Rapids, associated with Armstrong's Department Store until his retirement. He received his BA Degree from Coe College and his MBA Degree from the Harvard School of Business Administration. He was honored by Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, and held an honorary degree in Business Administration from Coe College. He was an Army veteran of World War I. He married Esther Youel at Flandreau, South Dakota, in 1926.

He was a member of St. Paul's United Methodist Church for 83 years. He served as a trustee and in many administrative offices, but the role that meant the most to him was that of teaching. He served over 32 years as a church school teacher, including 25 years as a teacher of 8th grade boys and girls. He was for many years a member of the national Board of World Mission of the Methodist Church and traveled extensively visiting mission sites throughout the world.

Mr. Armstrong served as chairman of the Board of St. Luke's Hospital, Chairman of the Coe College Board, Chairman of the Y.M.C.A. Board, Downtown Association, Methodist World Mission Board, Iowa Electric Light and Power Board, a 67-year member of the Kiwanis Club. He was honored by the Chamber of Commerce, and was a member and former board member and benefactor of the Linn County Historical Society, a member of the Board of MethWick Retirement Center. He was a licensed pilot and had operated his own plane since 1939. He had logged enough miles to have made seventeen trips around the world.

Surviving in addition to his wife, Esther, are four daughters: Mary Helen Dusek, McLean, Virginia; Esther Cooper, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Anna Johnston, Camp Hill, Pennsylvania; Mimi Meffert, Cedar Rapids; eleven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

The Kuba Funeral Home is in charge.

Armstrong estate sued over stock-pension deal

By Rick Smith

Gazette staff writer

Retailing pioneer and pillar of the Cedar Rapids community, Robert C. Armstrong, is having his good name questioned by those who feel shorted in the recent bankruptcy of the department store his father founded and he ran for much of the century.

Each of three groups — store employees, unsecured creditors and the department store corporation — has filed a potential claim on the assets of the estate of Armstrong, who died in November at the age of 93.

The most aggressive of the claims comes from Cedar

Rapids attorney Joseph Peiffer, who has represented the employees committee in the department store's bankruptcy action.

Peiffer, in a class action claim for more than 300 employees, is seeking to recover up to \$1.505 million plus interest from the Armstrong estate.

The amount, according to Peiffer, is that which Armstrong "insisted" that a newly formed employee stock ownership pension plan (ESOP) at Armstrong's Inc. pay him for his stock in 1986.

When Armstrong's Inc. filed for bankruptcy and closed four years later, it was not Robert Armstrong

holding valueless stock, but rather employees with a valueless ESOP, Peiffer contends.

In legal documents filed this week in a probate action in Linn County District Court, Peiffer accuses Armstrong of acting "in clear and obvious conflict of interest," of breaching his fiduciary duty, "of self-dealing" and of "fraudulent" transfer of stock.

The attorney for the Armstrong estate, F. James Bradley of Cedar Rapids, dismissed Peiffer's allegations Tuesday, and filed a legal answer asking the

■ Please turn to 7A: Armstrong

Armstrong: 'Self-dealing' charge

■ From page 1A

court to dismiss them. Bradley says much of what Peiffer is alleging is incorrect.

Attorneys Peiffer and Bradley provide conflicting information.

WHAT IS KNOWN is that in 1986 Armstrong's Inc. was altering its employee pension program at a time when Robert Armstrong was a trustee of one pension plan and a member of the department store's board of directors.

Armstrong's Inc. terminated one pension plan, arranged for what has been called "an overfunding" of the plan to be paid to the company, and had a new ESOP pension plan created that, by its very nature, tied its worth to the health of the company.

On Aug. 14, 1986, Robert Armstrong sold his shares to this ESOP and severed his ownership ties to the company.

If Peiffer's numbers are correct, Armstrong left a company, "in serious decline," with \$1.505 million in cash and an arrangement that also included a promise by the corporation to pay him \$100,000 a year for five years.

According to Peiffer, Armstrong "insisted" at the time that the ESOP buy his 98,085 shares of stock at \$15.35 per share, even after a report from a Des Moines appraiser said the stock should be worth \$10.74 per share.

So Armstrong received \$1.505 million for his stock when the appraisal company, Reiss Corp., suggested he should get \$1.053 million, Peiffer says.

Reiss cited three reasons for Armstrong to take a "discount" on the value of his stock: that he owned only 36.2 percent of the company and so was not a majority stockholder; that other stockholders might be operating in concert with him; and that the company suffered a lack of assets readily convertible into cash.

PEIFFER ARGUES that Armstrong was playing a significant role in determining his stock value when at the same time he was a member of the store's board of directors and a pension trustee. In his role of director and trustee he was bound to look after the interest of the company and the employees, and not himself, Peiffer argues.

"While occupying all of the . . . positions, Robert C. Armstrong was involved in a clear and obvious conflict of interest, which, unfortunately, he resolved in his favor and not in favor of those to whom he owned a fiduciary obligation," Peiffer writes in court documents.

Peiffer portrays Armstrong's Inc. as a company that had suffered a serious business decline, starting in 1984.

Citing a Reiss Corp. report,

\$19.6 million by January 1986.

"By insisting on the sale of his stock to the Employee Stock Ownership Trust, Robert C. Armstrong breached his fiduciary duties given the sales slump that Armstrong's Inc. had experienced and was experiencing," Peiffer writes.

ATTORNEY BRADLEY emphasizes in legal documents that Peiffer is incorrect when he says Armstrong was a trustee of the newly created ESOP. Armstrong never was and so had no fiduciary duty to it, Bradley says. The ESOP, Bradley adds, had other competent trustees and legal counsel to determine how much it should pay to buy Armstrong out.

Bradley also emphasizes that Armstrong abstained from voting as a member of the Armstrong's board when it decided to terminate the company's standing pension plan and create the ESOP.

Bradley says Armstrong received \$14.50 per share for his stock, not \$15.35 as Peiffer says, and Bradley says at the time the book value of the stock was \$24.50 per share.

In addition to Peiffer's action on behalf of employees, Thomas McCuskey, Cedar Rapids attorney for the unsecured creditors in the Armstrong's Inc. bankruptcy case, also filed a claim against the Armstrong estate. McCuskey called his claim "a contingent one."

"I have no actual knowledge, as a matter of law, whether there was a transaction that might be suspect," McCuskey said Tuesday. "But I have 6,000 creditors out there who would find me remiss if I didn't do something. Hence, I filed what I filed."

The third claim against the estate was filed this week by attorneys Dan Childers and Michael Vestle of Cedar Rapids on behalf of Armstrong's Inc.

The attorneys state in court documents that they plan to file an adversary complaint in U.S. Bankruptcy Court and have that court determine if they have a claim on the Armstrong estate.

Neither Childers nor Vestle was available Tuesday.

HOW SUCCESSFUL Peiffer and the other parties are in the legal fight to acquire assets of the Armstrong estate will affect what share of those assets are left for Armstrong's widow, Esther, his beneficiary.

Armstrong's will directs that once Esther Armstrong dies, a charitable trust be established, with St. Paul's United Methodist Church, the church's world mission program, Coe and Cornell colleges, the YMCA, United Way

Robert Age 15

LITERARY



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THE "PROFESSOR"

(THIRD PRIZE IN SCHOOL CONTEST)

In the summer of '63 I set out at the head of a government expedition for the purpose of obtaining sulphur for gunpowder from Little Bear volcano which is situated west of Yellowstone Park. Arriving at Livingston, Montana, I found several telegrams containing final instructions from the government and also a wire from President MacLaren of Columbia University which read as follows:

"Keep on lookout for American Geographical Society's party headed by Prof. J. D. White. Went to search for deposits of bauxite in 1855. Not since heard from. New York Sun offers \$10,000 for any news of expedition.

R. C. MacLaren."

The \$10,000 certainly "looked good to me" as I was situated and I resolved then and there to do all within my power to get on the trail of White and his party, although I knew many relief expeditions had been sent out and had come back with no clew whatsoever of the expedition.

Our party set out the next day and after a ten days' march, arrived at the crater of Little Bear volcano.

When all preparations were made for the descent, two assistants and myself were lowered in a wicker cage to a depth of four hundred feet where we immediately set to work scraping the sulphur from the sides of the crater. Below us at the bottom of the abyss, which seemed to go down into the very heart of the earth, a lurid flame burned sullenly sending up a sulphurous steam, which cooling as it arose, fell again in showers upon the sides of the cavity.

On one side of the crater I noticed an opening which appeared to lead into a cave, and seeing quantities of sulphur within, I decided that we would do a little exploring. Accordingly, by the aid of grappling hooks we brought the cage to this opening and fastened it in such a way that it could not be moved by those above. We then began an exploration of the cavern. Suddenly, as we were walking along, a heavy rumbling fell on our ears and at same time the earth began to tremble. We rushed to the cage but we were too late. Already the rapidly rising smoke and flame were perilously near. The cage could never be hoisted fast enough to escape that fire. We saw our only way of escape lay through the cavern. Hastily hitching the end of a ball of twine around a stalagmite we fled through the cave unwinding the twine as we ran. Through cavern after cavern we hastened, from the roofs of which innumerable stalactites, perfectly white, often several yards in length and coming down to the delicacy of knitting needles, hung in clusters, and in some places where there was any continuous crack in the roof and wall, a graceful soft looking curtain of stalactite fell. In some of the caverns there were small lakes, and deep at the bottom of these, stalagmites rose up in pinnacles and fringes through water which was so very clear and still that it was difficult to tell where the solid marble tracery ended and its reflected image began.

At last, when we were nearly exhausted and our torches burned low, I thought I discerned in the distance a sunbeam penetrating the dark recesses of the cave. Immediately hope returned to us, and hurrying to the aperture, we crawled out into the sunlight.

We found ourselves in a small valley which seemed to be the crater of an extinct volcano. On all sides walls of volcanic formation rose sheer to a height of perhaps two-hundred feet making it impossible for any creature except a mountain goat to scale the steep sides. Just then the sound of voices fell faintly on our ears. I must admit that we were somewhat startled. It seemed impossible that any human being would be in such a place. However, after a minute's consultation we gave a loud halloo. After the voice of the echo had died away there was silence. Then a shout rang out and we heard a great commotion as of people running. Soon around a great boulder the form of a man appeared closely followed by six others. "Boys," said I, as soon as I saw them, "this must be White and his party which was sent out by the American Geographical society in 1855 to search for bauxite. If it is they and we ever get out of this there's \$10,000 in our jeans." I then called out even before they had come up to us, "Is it possible that you men make up the party that seven years ago was sent out in search of bauxite by the American Geographical Society with Prof. White in charge?"

"You bet it is," rejoined the man in the lead, "My name is White." Although they looked like a pretty hard lot for members

of an exploring expedition, and the Professor hardly looked the part, I reflected that no one isolated from the world for seven years would present a very respectable appearance. However, we were glad to see them and when they had come up we shook hands cordially. After we had accounted for our presence Professor White related his story, which quickly dispelled any suspicions which we might have entertained. It seemed that he had come to the side of the crater and desiring to examine its bottom for bauxite, he and his whole company had descended on a rope ladder. He soon found the formations at the bottom of the crater rich in bauxite, and so made preparations for a stay of several weeks. In the meantime cliff rats having been attracted perhaps by the oil in which the rope had been soaked, gnawed the ropes in several places. Thus when the party attempted to ascend, the rope broke under the weight of the first man and they had been imprisoned in the crater.

After that many attempts were made to scale the steep walls but all in vain. Here, then, they had lived for seven years entirely upon goat's flesh.

As soon as the Professor's story was finished we decided to make an attempt at escape through the cave. Accordingly, after lighting several torches, we entered the cavern and by following the twine arrived at the cage after a three hours journey. Fortunately the cage had not been damaged seriously by the flames, which had subsided shortly after we made our hurried departure.

I ordered three of the men into the cage and signaled for it to be hoisted. Again it was let down and four men hoisted to the surface, after which it descended once more, and myself and two assistants were brought to the sunlight. Our astonishment can hardly be imagined when stepping out of the cage we beheld Captain Wood and a company of the Montana Volunteers standing guard, over Professor J. D. White and his party, each one of whom was bound hand and foot. "For heaven's sake, Captain," I cried, "you've made a mistake here, these gentlemen were sent out by the American Geographical Society and the gentleman whom you are guarding so carefully is Professor White a noted scientist and the man in charge of the expedition. I tell you, I'll———" "Mr. Clay," broke in Capt. Wood calmly, "you will receive the government reward of \$10,000 for handing that man over to me; your honored Professor and noted scientist is Dead Shot Joe, the leader of one of the worst gangs of thieves and desperadoes in the west."

—ROBERT ARMSTRONG, ACADEMIAN.



Sky king 'Mr. A': A lofty perspective of hometown, life

By DEBORA WILEY

Of The Register's Cedar Rapids Bureau

CEDAR RAPIDS, IA. — An encore of the smile he has shared with thousands of children plays across Robert Cooper Armstrong's face as he imagines himself high above the Mississippi River in his 1959 Cessna airplane.

For a moment, the weight of living 89 years seem to fall away.

Armstrong — a name often followed by "a pillar of the community" or preceded by "prominent citizen" — is as excited as a 14-year-old boy on his first airplane ride. He knows the symptoms well; he gave thousands of rides as rewards for perfect attendance in the Sunday School classes he taught for 26 years at St. Paul's United Methodist Church here.

"I love to fly," exclaims Armstrong, best known as the head of his family-owned Armstrong's department store from 1928 to 1972. "You get such magnificent views. I don't think there's anything I've ever done which has been as much fun, or which has been as productive of as many friendships, as flying."

Armstrong, a member of the United Flying Octogenarians — UFOs — in the Octogenarian Aircraft Pilot's Association of North America, is brought back to earth with a question about his plans to build a high-rise condominium complex in downtown Cedar Rapids.

Known as "Mr. A" to his close friends and associates,

Armstrong bristles slightly at the suggestion he could be called "The Man Who Doesn't Retire."

"I don't look at it that way," Armstrong says. "I just am very thankful to the Lord I have such good health. I think not only is it good for me to be busy, I have some things I would like to get done."

He's hunting for river-front property to build a 15- to 30-story condominium building that would feature doctors' services and a health club. It would be connected by a skywalk to other downtown buildings.

Armstrong continues a longstanding custom of investing in downtown Cedar Rapids business properties. Last month he paid more than a half-million dollars for side-by-side buildings housing the Foreman and Clark store and the vacant Kubias Hardware store. He and his wife, Esther, also own three residential properties, including their home, which was designed and built by their friend, the then-undiscovered artist Grant Wood.



Cedar Rapids community leader Robert C. Armstrong

Sold Stock in Store

Armstrong no longer owns stock in the department store founded by his father, Samuel, in 1890 or in a related realty company and parking lot operation. He and Esther lost majority stock control in the companies last year and sold out. Armstrong refuses to discuss details of the situation publicly.

"I have as much interest in the store as I ever did psychologically, if not financially," he says.

Armstrong's now is owned by an employee stock ownership trust, governed by President Allen Peremsky; Mimi Meffert, vice president and one of four Armstrong daughters; and James Miller, vice president for finance.

Armstrong, who had retired in 1972 from active involvement in the store, moved his office after the stock buy-out from the store to another building. "I just love my work," he says. "I think it's good for my health, too."

Armstrong calls himself a realist. "According to the actuaries, the average person my age will live approximately three and a quarter years more," he says. "So I'm realistic about it. I'm trying to get certain things done."

"Innovator"

Many recognize him as a man of vision.

"He's an innovator of a lot of new things," says Peremsky, president of Armstrong's. "In every facet of his career, social issues and business, he has many times been far ahead of the conventional thinking but which in due time came to pass."

Armstrong, for example, championed civil rights issues long before it was popular. Despite the loss of customers and friendships, he urged his church congregation to sell property to a black physician before it was socially acceptable.

Bob Armstrong: 50 Years of Involvement in C.R.'s Growth

By Dale Kretzer.

Robert C. Armstrong, chairman of the board of the department store that bears his name and one of the chief retail executives in Iowa, is a tough customer.

The public may view most business executives as persons who flinch from involvement, who speak carefully chosen words and shun controversy like poor credit risks.

Bob Armstrong doesn't fit that mold. He's one of Cedar Rapids' most influential leaders, a member of the city's top power structure, but is not the type to back away from a fight if he thinks it's worth fighting.

Keeps Up Pace

Last week Armstrong, who at a healthy 73 has no intentions of slowing his pace, pondered 50 years in the retail business — and involvement in the city's development and from time to time in unpopular and controversial issues.

He is independent, but not gruffly so. He does not abandon his position in the face of opposition, and for someone in Armstrong's seat that can lead to what some call sticky situations.

One of the best examples is his recent stance in the debate over granting Brenton Banks a charter for a new banking operation in Cedar Rapids. Local bankers opposed a new bank.

Armstrong, a member of the Merchants National board of directors, and by virtue of his position no doubt on a first name basis with most bankers in town, strongly supported the new bank.

"I'm a great believer in competition," Armstrong said in an interview in his handsome but not profusely decorated office last week.

"We should constantly be working to bring in new firms," he said, "firms good for the community in every way — whether it be industry, retail or a new bank. You can't say: 'I believe in free enterprise — except in my business'."

Armstrong isn't kidding. He's presently working to bring a major department store to Cedar Rapids that would back him for business. "You know," he said pensively, "Killian's is good for us and we're good for Killian's."

Armstrong, who walks a mile or two most every day from his home at 370 Thirty-fourth street SE, then boards the bus for the balance of the trip downtown, actually started in retailing when 12 years old.

"I delivered packages with a pony and cart," he recalled, "on Saturdays and vacation. In the winter, I'd use a sleigh, and I can remember getting pretty well ventilated in hauling a package on a cold day to some distant point on Mt. Vernon avenue."

Future Planned

His father opened the store in 1890 at the Second street location now occupied by Hill-brunner Music. The store was later expanded to take in that whole half-block before it was moved to the present location in 1939.

Young Robert, accustomed to the hubbub of retailing, was tailored for the apparel business. After local schooling ("I was a year behind Mamie Doud Eisenhower at Jackson") and graduation from Coe, Armstrong spent time in the army before completing his education at Harvard Business school in 1921.

He came back to the store, working in advertising. "I can remember rushing ads to The Gazette when it was located along the river (present site of Federal building)."

Several years after his father, S. G. Armstrong, died and various corporate changes had occurred, Robert Armstrong assumed the presidency of the department store in 1929, "the worst of times of be head of a business."

The crash of the stock market and resulting waves of economic depression really didn't hit Cedar Rapids, Armstrong said, until 1930, "the holiday season of 1930-31," as he recalls it.

He recalled he was in New York selecting merchandise in January of 1931 when he heard the bad local news. "I met a buyer from Newman's (a department store located where Woolworth's now is) who informed me every bank in Cedar Rapids had closed.

"You might know how I felt, just after purchasing a good deal of merchandise. But it turned out two of the banks managed to stay open." He recalled how farm prices nose-dived, "but we were better off than most areas.

"The community's diversification paid off." Nevertheless, the store's business dropped to a half-million dollars a year between 1931 and 1933. "Now we do that much business in a week during the busy season," said Armstrong.

Great Bargains

Armstrong said the apparel market, which he said moves fast with the times, adjusted quickly to depression conditions. Prices, of course, were forced to drop. "We sold attractive fur coats for \$100 to \$125, really great bargains."

Being in the retail business is like taking a couple of courses in college psychology, said Armstrong. "Most people think bargain hunters abound among the less affluent, but many times the most affluent are first to snap up a bargain," he said.

"Women are especially appreciative of good values and bargains," he continued, "and there is good reason why women are entrusted with spending 75 percent of the household budget. Most men don't know what size underwear they use.

"Women are more style conscious and know more about color. They actually were the strong factor in bringing a refreshing look in men's clothes. There was a time when new men's suits looked like the old ones."

That reminded Armstrong of the time a man came in the men's department in the rear of the old store. "It was a cold day. He said he would like to try on some trousers. The clerk made a gesture toward the dressing room.

"But the guy took the wrong door went out into the alley and changed his pants in a driving blizzard."

Which reminded him of the time in 1925 when burglars blew up the store's safe. To muffle the dynamite, the crooks piled scores of overcoats over the safe. In so doing, the overcoats were either ripped or filled with the smell of nitro.

"So we had a sale-blower sale on the damaged merchandise. We advertised the coats from \$5 to \$20, coats that normally sold from \$30 to \$90. We didn't know if anyone would come, but they mobbed the place.

"One fellow took a coat with a hole in the back. Another snapped up one without a

sleeve. He said his wife could fix it by taking some goods from elsewhere."

Armstrong applauds the change in men's fashions. "Men," he says, "have been liberated from the old dark suit and white shirt." It used to be, he said, that anyone with a little pin-stripe in his shirt was a liberal.

Previously 96 percent of men's dress shirts sold were white. Now, it is exactly reversed. White shirts account for only five percent of sales.

"There really is no mystery about fashion," Armstrong injected. "It's just a change in the apparel diet. People want a change. You'd get tired of steak if you ate it all the time."

While women may be his best customers, Armstrong doesn't hedge his remarks when the subject of skirt lengths comes up.

"Ninety-five percent of the women do not look good in mini skirts or pants in my opinion," he said bluntly. "Skirts are coming down. There is no question about it. Our design shops show them just below the knee, about two inches."

"Worst Drug"

Armstrong said the only thing that made pant dresses successful was the mini-skirt. "Oh, there will still be short skirts for the young gals. Skinny girls look good in them."

Armstrong is against tobacco, alcohol and moving out of the downtown area.

"My father opposed cigarets and tobacco. He felt it damaged youth. I thought I'd never see the day cigarets would be condemned. We have to do something about this drug problem, but the worst drug by far is alcohol."

Armstrong is a big booster of downtown. "The reason we have never expanded outside downtown is because we feel we can do more, give a better selection if everything is at one place.

"We have a compact downtown, and this has been a benefit. A customer can serve most of his interests in a short time. It's important that a customer finds what he wants the first time. I feel badly when someone says he can't find what he wants," said Armstrong, adding the store carries a \$5 million inventory.

He said Armstrong's, which employs 500 full and part-time employees, 70 of whom are shareholders in the company, will do a million dollars more business this year "because of our expansion." All employees share in profits of their departments.

The firm has some five acres of space on five floors. Armstrong said there are no plans to expand to other Iowa communities at this time, but he doesn't rule it out in the future.

"It is important that the core city be strong. A strong downtown," said Armstrong, "bolsters the tax base for the rest of the community. Those cities in a deteriorating state usually have weakening downtowns."

Local Booster

Armstrong's built the first parking ramp in the state — behind the Roosevelt hotel — in 1948. Armstrong said his downtown philosophy is taken from Woolworth's. "Woolworth knew that the highest dollar rent was the cheapest in dollar sales. So you go where the traffic is."

While consolidation has been the byword in business,

Armstrong believes there will always be a place for a well-run, locally-owned store. "Local stores can adjust to the needs of a community."

Armstrong is proud of Cedar Rapids' diversification and its excellent leadership over the years. "It is an exceptional community in terms of being a good place to live and raise a family. We have good churches and other character building agencies."

Even so, in addition to conquering the drug menace, he sees a strong need for housing for low income families "such as is being proposed in Oak Hill-Jackson. Sure we've made progress, but not as much as we have to make," he replied in commenting on Cedar Rapids' minority situation.

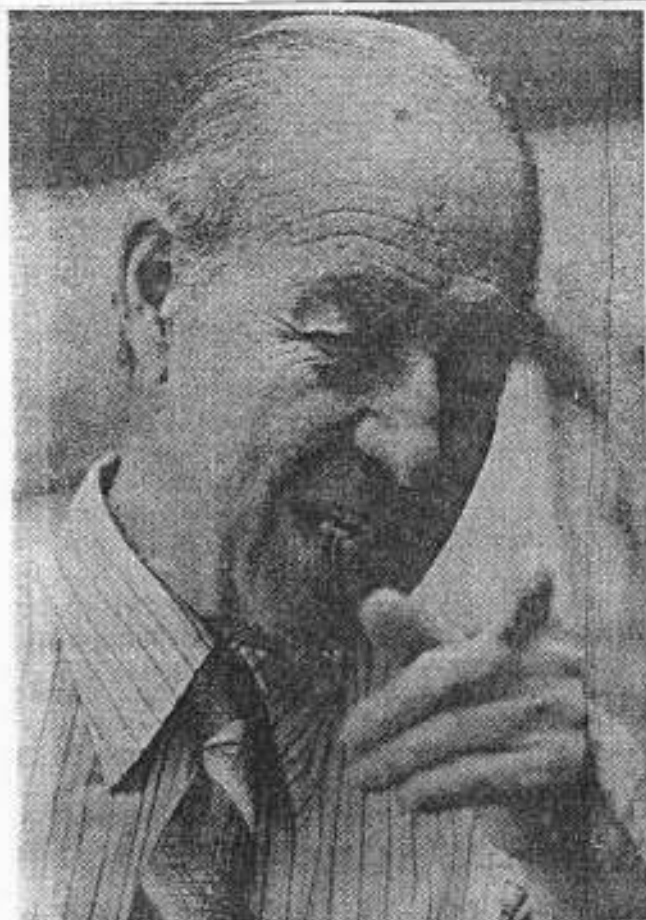
Completion of the local highway system was labeled another top priority project by Armstrong. "And I'd like to see every community around here with one or two good industries.

"We have to work on this. The Chamber of Commerce should not only be bringing good industry to Cedar Rapids, but to surrounding towns. These are industrious people," he said of small town residents. Armstrong said 45 percent of the store's business comes from outside Cedar Rapids and Marion.

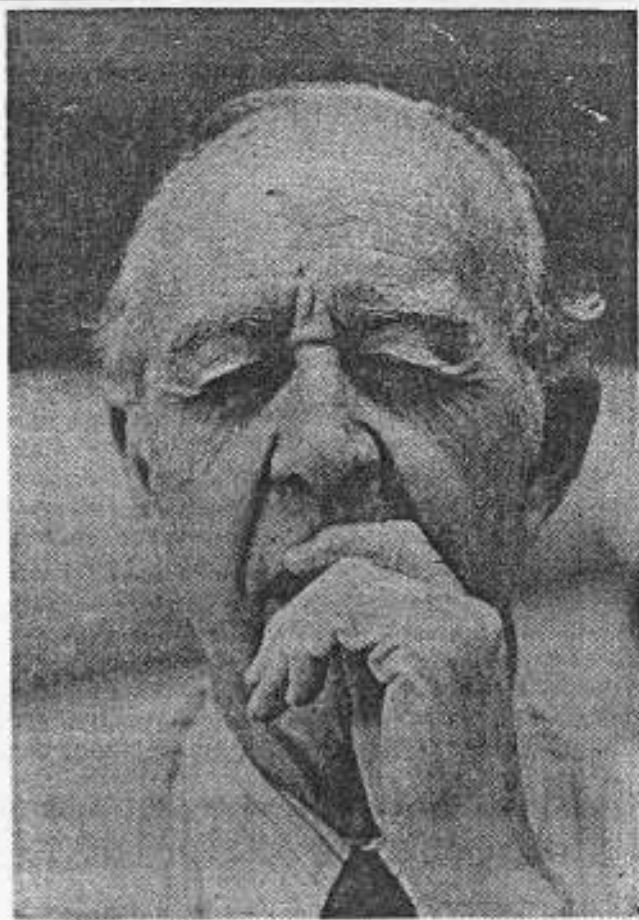
Among his many other offices, Armstrong is president of the Armstrong-Professional Park building; vice-president of Armstrong-Race Realty Co., the corporation that owns the Armstrong building, Arco building and SGA building.

He and his wife, Esther, have been very active members of St. Paul's United Methodist church. He is a trustee of Coe college; and former chairman and executive committee member of St. Luke's hospital board. The Armstrongs are the parents of four daughters.

His favorite hobby is piloting the family plane. "Never have been interested in golf," he laughed. "Some tell me about the exercise they get playing golf, riding around in a golf cart."



"We should constantly be working to bring in new firms, firms good for the community in every way . . ."



—Gazette photos by Duane Croc

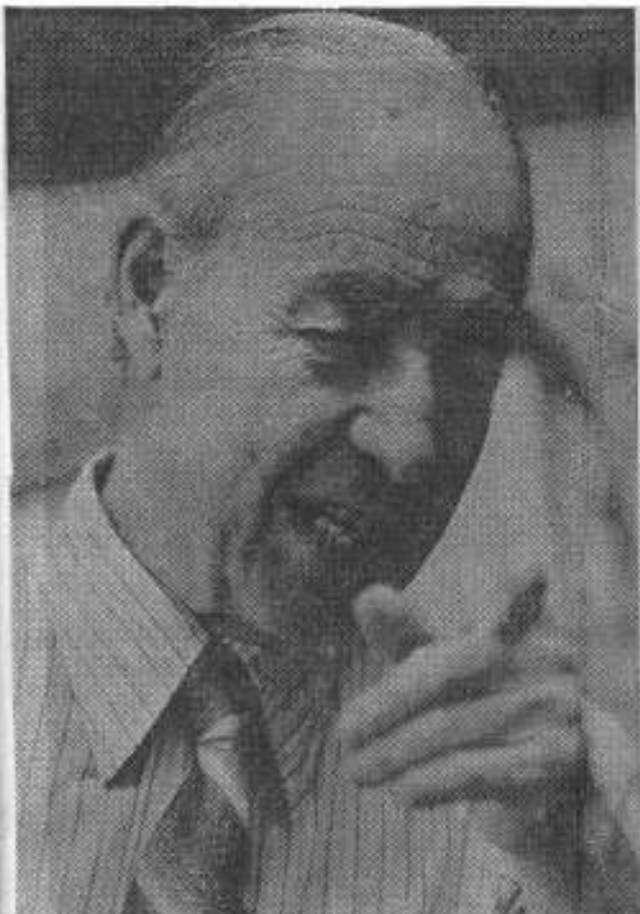
He assumed store presidency in 1929, "the worst of times to be head of a business"



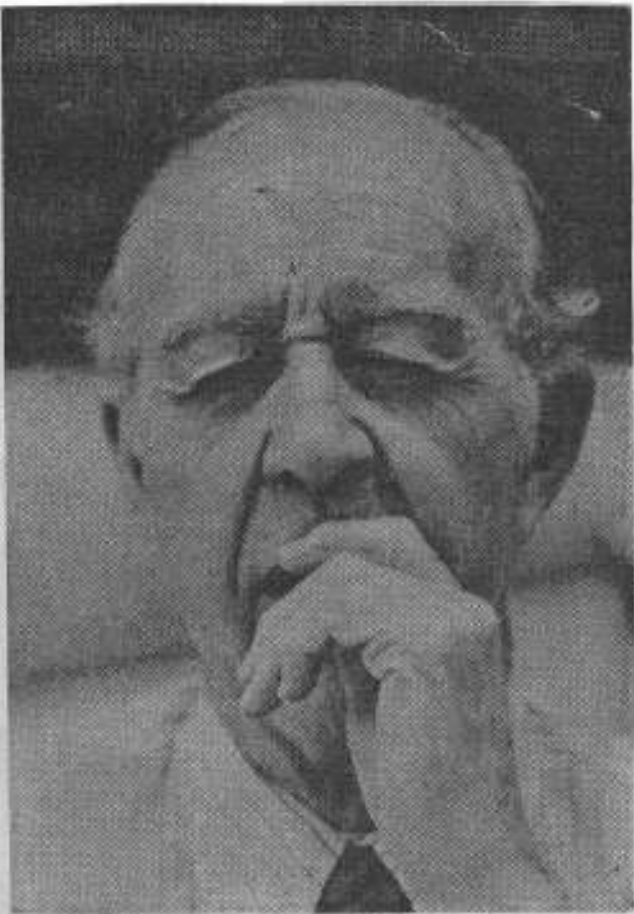
"A strong downtown bolsters the tax base"



"There is a good reason why agencies"



"We should constantly be working to bring in new firms, firms good for the community in every way . . ."



—Gazette photos by Duane Crow

He assumed store presidency in 1929, "the worst of times to be head of a business"



"A strong downtown bolsters the tax base for the rest of the community. Those cities in a deteriorating state usually have weakening downtowns."



"... There is a good reason why women are entrusted with spending 75 percent of the household budget. Most men don't know what size underwear they use."

Prizes Autograph Book Signed
By Orville Wright When A Boy
Attending School in Cedar Rapids



10-20-1940

—Lizette photo.

Days when the Wright brothers, inventors of the airplane, called Cedar Rapids their home are recalled for Robert C. Armstrong by an autograph book kept by his uncle, the late Robert Cooper, while attending Coe Collegiate institute in 1878 and 1879. Orville Wright's name is among the signatures.

NAMESAKE

Armstrong put stamp on C.R.

By Phyllis Fleming

Free-lance writer

This history snapshot looks at the people for whom area landmarks are named.

CEDAR RAPIDS — Robert Armstrong started working in the family's Armstrong Clothing Co. at Second Avenue and Second Street SE as a child, delivering packages on a pony named "Roxie."



Robert Armstrong
 Clothing Co.

At the time, the store, which had opened in 1890, sold only men's and boys' clothing.

Armstrong graduated from Coe College and then earned a master's degree from Harvard University business school in 1920 before returning to the store. For the next seven decades he put his stamp on both the store and on downtown Cedar Rapids.

It was his idea to expand to women's clothing. In 1924 his father bought an adjacent building and gave his son the go-ahead. Samuel Armstrong died four years later and at the age of 30, Robert Armstrong became president.

In the face of competition from Lindale Mall, in 1959 Armstrong relocated the store to the corner of Third Avenue and Third Street SE and quadrupled the size. Today's Armstrong Centre is there.

Armstrong was the first to hire African-American sales people. He was the prime mover behind the downtown skywalk system and was involved in many projects.

He retired in 1972 but remained active in the operation until well into the 1990s. Armstrong's death Nov. 21, 1990, at the age of 93, came just three weeks after the store went into bankruptcy.

Chapter 5, Great Depression

Banking in Cedar Rapids suffered along with the rest of the nation's financial industry. Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in January, 1933; on March 5, 1933 he closed the nation's banks for a four-day "holiday." During that time, designed to be a "cooling off" period during which it was hoped that people would decide not to withdraw their funds from the banks in panic, the banks assessed their financial positions and many of them found that they could not reopen.

Prior to the bank holiday, there were nine banks in Cedar Rapids. When they were allowed to reopen, only the Merchant's National Bank and Peoples Savings Bank did so. The banks which had failed were American Trust and Savings Bank, Cedar Rapids National Bank, Cedar Rapids Saving Bank & Trust Co., Corn Belt Savings Bank, Iowa State Savings Bank, Kenwood Savings Bank and the United State Bank.

The economy recovered slowly but surely, with most "old timers" agreeing that by the end of 1935, the worst was over. When World War II began for the United States in December, 1941, the city's factories boomed and money rolled into almost everyone's pockets.

TO THEM, THE DEPRESSION WAS UNFORGETTABLE

Robert Armstrong, son of the founder of what is now one of the largest department stores in Iowa, has seen much of

CEDAR RAPIDS

Chapter 5, Great Depression

Cedar Rapids history unfold during his eighty-two years. His working life has been spent in the city; in 1980, he is chairman of the board of directors of Armstrong's, which occupies the full length of the block located between Second Street and Third Street along Third Avenue NE. Armstrong has delegated store operations to a capable group of younger associates. The following comments were made by Armstrong in part during an interview with the author and in printed speeches from which parts were excerpted.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

"My father, Samuel G. Armstrong, was born in 1858 on a farm down on a jog in the road about a half-mile south of Clarence, Iowa. His parents moved to a farm north of Marion, and when he was about seventeen years old he went to work at a general store, the A, B, Sessions Store in the then-thriving village of Bertram. In those days, the wood cutting gangs for the railroad, which was just being built, kept the town lively as Dad filled pickle barrels and did all the odd jobs entailed in keeping a general store.

"Around 1878, my father came to Cedar Rapids and went to work at the S, B, Dix clothing store, located where the Iowa Theater is now. He had in mind that he wasn't going to make seven dollars a week forever; Dad slept under a counter

Chapter 5, Great Depression

at the store for two years to save money. He finally got so much lint and wool in his lungs that he moved into the nearby Clifton Hotel. He shared a room with Austin Palmer, who started the Palmer School of Handwriting. Dad learned that method, became a beautiful writer, and we use a stylized 'cut' of his signature in all our advertisements and on all of our bags and boxes.

"How he ever did it, I don't know, but in 1890 my father had saved several thousand dollars and in that year opened a 40 by 70-foot store in the 100 block of Second Street SE. He had a partner, James F. Fletcher, and five employees. That store was twenty-eight hundred square feet; our present five-story store has two hundred and forty thousand square feet and is more than eighty times as large.

"There were some principles on which this store was founded, and helped it grow so rapidly through the years. Those principles were: 'We buy the best goods the markets can afford. We buy for spot cash or the equivalent, which gives us an advantage which we pass on to you. Every article was marked in plain figures, one price to all, and no 'horse trading' as in the other stores. . . Goods must be as represented or your money will be refunded . . . We sell only quality merchandise on the sound principle that quality is economy.' Way back then that was the motto that we have carried ever since.

Chapter 5, Great Depression

"The store expanded many times. In 1913 the whole corner of Second Avenue and Second Street SE was taken over. In 1922, when I was back from college, the store sold only men's and boys clothing and I thought we should add women's clothing to the merchandise. After a lot of huddles, we bought the forty-foot store next to the alley on Second Street where Hiltbrunner's music store is now, and went into the women's apparel business. Most of the store was remodeled in 1923. In 1936 a fourth floor was added and everything remodeled again. By 1957, the old store had been remodeled or expanded thirty different times, and we had sixty-three thousand square feet. We decided that we needed almost twice that amount of space.

"When we built the new store, where it is now, it had one hundred and forty-nine thousand square feet and was five floors high. We opened the new store on August 13, 1959. In the last twenty years, we've remodeled and expanded numerous times until we have about two hundred and forty thousand square feet now, and that doesn't include our warehouse.

"One of the things I'll never forget was the Safeblowers' Sale we had in 1927. On the night of December 6, some "yegg men" came into the store, planted nitroglycerine in the safe doors and piled great heaps of men's overcoats on top of it to muffle the noise. When the safe blew, so did the coats.

CEDAR RAPIDS

Chapter 5, Great Depression

"Two days alter we advertised a 'Safeblower's Sale' in the Gazette -- Coats which would have sold for fifty to one hundred dollars were marked at three, five, eight dollars. I should mention that most of these overcoats looked like they'd been through a war -- an arm blown off, torn, smelling of nitroglycerin. We didn't offer any guarantees.

"I can remember to this day . . . A man, his face flushed with excitement wearing the beautiful coat that he'd just bought for five dollars, was proudly headed out of the store with his wife scurrying alongside. She said, "But dear, there's a Cannon ball-sized hole in the back!" The husband exclaimed, 'Don't worry about that . . . you can fix it!"

Armstrong's father died in 1927.

"The Great Depression didn't hit Cedar Rapids until the beginning of 1931. When the stock market crashed in 1929, we felt little of it and sales continued just fine through fall, 1930.

"That was when we saw trouble coming. We had a slow Christmas season, and after the first of the year in 1931, our sales began slumping off thirty to forty percent compared to 1930. Later that year all of us in the store - manager, sales people, helpers - took a ten percent salary cut until things picked up again in the mid thirties. We were proud of the fact that we were able to keep all of our regulars on the

CEDAR RAPIDS

Chapter 5, Great Depression

payroll during the Depression, even though we had to eliminate extras and part-timers. We did only about \$450,000 gross business in 1931, and about the same in 1932 and 1933.

"But there were hot bargains to be had from manufacturers, and we were able to take advantage of these low prices." Armstrong, a tall, strong man despite his age, remembers going to New York with a buyer for his women's department during the early 1930s: "We were able to buy attractive fur coats that we could sell for \$100 back home. They had been selling previously at around \$200 . . . We sold over three hundred Northern Seal (dyed rabbit) women's coats at \$100 each in 1930-1932. One saleswoman said 'Those fur coats are easier to sell than handkerchiefs'."

"I was in the New Yorker hotel when the merchandise manager of Newman's Department Store spotted me and told me that the radio had just announced that all of the banks in Cedar Rapids had closed. I remember thinking 'Oh, oh!' I'd just spent ten thousand of the store's money on merchandise - I wondered if we could get at our money to pay for those purchases. As it was, we had our money in the Cedar Rapids National Bank and Merchant's National Bank (which took over the Cedar Rapids National soon afterwards) so we came out all right."

Cedar Rapids, and Armstrong's store, weathered the economic storm of the 1930's and emerged battered but intact. According

HARVESTERS, not gentleman farmers. A harvest moon by night and an Indian summer sun by day call Cedar Rapids acreage-owners into the fields to look over their crops of pumpkins, peaches, cattle and fodder. Harvesting a bumper Halloween crop this season are Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Armstrong (left), busy loading pumpkins at their country home, Pleasant Hill farm. (Thompson photo.)



SEPT. 20, 1937

ST. PAUL'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



1340 Third Avenue, S.E.
Post Office Box 2065

Cedar Rapids, Ia. 52406
Telephone 319-363-2058

A WORSHIP SERVICE OF
THANKSGIVING
FOR THE LIFE OF
ROBERT COOPER ARMSTRONG

November 24, 1990
10:30 A.M.

THE WORDS OF GRACE

Minister: Jesus said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life.

People: "Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.

Minister: "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

People: "Because I live, you shall live also."

THE GREETING

Dr. J. Eugene Young, Senior Minister

+THE HYMN OF FAITH - "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"

No. 717

+THE INVOCATION (in unison)

O God, who gave us birth, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. You know our needs before we ask. Give us now your grace, that as the mystery of death comes to us we may see the light of eternity. Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and death. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our summons comes, may we die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ. Amen

THE SCRIPTURE READINGS

Dr. Richard Newhall, Pastor of Visitation

These passages represent the memory work in the Eighth Grade Sunday School Class taught by Robert and Esther for twenty-five years.

The Ten Commandments	Exodus 20:1-17
What God Requires	Micah 6:8
Build Your Life on the Rock	Matthew 7:24-27
Jesus' Summary of the Law	Matthew 22:36-39
The Christian's Mission	Matthew 28:19-20
God's Love	John 3:16
Assurance of Christian Hope	Romans 8:28, 38, 39
Christian Love	I Corinthians 13
Right Thinking and Doing	Philippians 4:8
(Psalm 23 was also included)	

THE MAN OF FAITH

+THE STATEMENT OF FAITH (Korean Creed)

We believe in the one God,
 creator and sustainer of all things, Father of all nations,
 the source of all goodness and beauty, all truth and love.
 We believe in Jesus Christ,
 God manifest in the flesh,
 our teacher, example, and Redeemer, the Savior of the world.

believe in the Holy Spirit,
God present with us for guidance, for comfort, and for strength.
believe in the forgiveness of sins,
in the life of love and prayer,
and in grace equal to every need.
believe in the Word of God
contained in the Old and New Testaments
as the sufficient rule both of faith and of practice.
believe in the church,
those who are united in the living Lord
for the purpose of worship and service.
believe in the reign of God
as the divine will realized in human society,
and in the family of God,
where we are all brothers and sisters.
believe in the final triumph of righteousness
and in the life everlasting. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Dr. J. Eugene Young

HYMN - "O God, Our Help in Ages Past"

No. 117

TRIBUTE - "A Grateful Tribute"

Dr. Joseph McCabe
President Emeritus of Coe College

SOLO - "The Lord Is My Shepherd"

Jackie Haveman, Soprano

Peter Tchaikovsky

BLESSING

HYMN OF BENEDICTION (in unison)

Let be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
A fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

STLUDE

u are invited to the Social Hall immediately following
e service to greet the family and one another. The Family
llowship Sunday School Class is hosting the reception.

e Inurnment will be in the St. Paul's United Methodist
urch Columbarium.

ROBERT C. ARMSTRONG, 93, of 370-34th Street, SE, died in a local hospital early Wednesday after a long illness. He was born in Cedar Rapids on July 4, 1897, the son of Samuel G. and Anna Cooper Armstrong. He was a lifelong resident of Cedar Rapids, associated with Armstrong's Department Store until his retirement. He received his BA Degree from Coe College and his MBA Degree from the Harvard School of Business Administration. He was honored by Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, and held an honorary degree in Business Administration from Coe College. He was an Army veteran of World War I. He married Esther Youel at Flandreau, South Dakota, in 1926.

He was a member of St. Paul's United Methodist Church for 83 years. He served as a trustee and in many administrative offices, but the role that meant the most to him was that of teaching. He served over 32 years as a church school teacher, including 25 years as a teacher of 8th grade boys and girls. He was for many years a member of the national Board of World Mission of the Methodist Church and traveled extensively visiting mission sites throughout the world.

Mr. Armstrong served as chairman of the Board of St. Luke's Hospital, Chairman of the Coe College Board, Chairman of the Y.M.C.A. Board, Downtown Association, Methodist World Mission Board, Iowa Electric Light and Power Board, a 67-year member of the Kiwanis Club. He was honored by the Chamber of Commerce, and was a member and former board member and benefactor of the Linn County Historical Society, a member of the Board of MethWick Retirement Center. He was a licensed pilot and had operated his own plane since 1939. He had logged enough miles to have made seventeen trips around the world.

Surviving in addition to his wife, Esther, are four daughters: Mary Helen Dusek, McLean, Virginia; Esther Cooper, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Anna Johnston, Camp Hill, Pennsylvania; Mimi Meffert, Cedar Rapids; eleven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

The Kuba Funeral Home is in charge.

ORIGINAL IN ST. PAUL'S FILE



John N. Knapp



Robert C. Armstrong

Chamber will honor Armstrong and Knapp

Robert C. Armstrong, past president of Armstrong's Inc., will be the recipient of this year's Community Recognition Award, the Cedar Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce announced Wednesday.

At the same time, the chamber announced that John N. Knapp, president and chairman of the board of SCI Financial Group, will be the recipient of the Business Recognition Award.

Both will be presented at the 70th annual business luncheon of the chamber Sept. 22 at 11:45 a.m. at the new Collins Plaza Hotel and Convention Center.

Armstrong also was a son of the Armstrong store's founder and a major owner for many years.

A graduate of Washington High School, Coe College and the Harvard Business School, Armstrong also has been active in many local organizations, including St. Luke's Hospital, the United Way, the YMCA, St. Paul's United Methodist Church, and Coe College. He is a charter member of the Community Welfare Foundation and has been a licensed

airplane pilot for more than 50 years.

In addition to SCI Financial Group and its subsidiaries, Knapp also has served as a director of Source Data Systems and of CRST Inc. He serves as chief investment strategist for Securities Counselors of Iowa, an advisory firm with more than half a million dollars under management.

Knapp is president of Meth-Wick Manor and the Cedar Rapids Symphony Orchestra, and serves on the boards of directors of St. Luke's Hospital and the United Way of East Central Iowa, which he also has served as president and campaign chairman.

He has served on the boards of Camp Wapsie Y, Grant Wood Chapter of the American Red Cross, Hawkeye Area Council of Boy Scouts, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Brucemore Inc., the Cedar Rapids School District Foundation and the YMCA. He has been a district committee member and vice chairman of the National Association of Securities Dealers.

At 82, he's boss at Armstrong's

By JOHN CARLSON

Of The Register's Cedar Rapids Bureau

CEDAR RAPIDS, IA. — About 60 years ago, Robert Cooper Armstrong walked into his father's men's clothing store fresh out of the Harvard school of business with a revolutionary idea.

He urged his father to expand the business and begin selling women's clothes as well.

Samuel Armstrong was intrigued by the concept, but not enthused. Nevertheless, Armstrong's Store for Women soon opened next door.

The rest, as they say, is history. Today, at the age of 82, Robert C. Armstrong is chairman of the board of a department store in downtown Cedar Rapids that he says does more sales volume than any other store in Iowa. Last year the sales totaled \$22.1 million. This year, he says, the store, which includes 90 departments and covers nearly a full city block, will show sales of \$23.2 million.

This is despite the recent opening of a 120-store mall on the city's west side that has some businessmen in Iowa's second largest city shaking in their boots.

Was Armstrong's hurt by the mall? A little, Armstrong concedes, but it certainly was not a death blow. Take the Friday after last Thanksgiving Day, for instance. Barely two months after Westdale Mall opened, Armstrong says his store had sales of \$279,000 — the best day in the store's history.

So what makes Armstrong's work?

The answer is Robert Armstrong and a business philosophy that many would consider outdated.

For example:

The store is open only two nights a week and is closed Sundays. None of Armstrong's 600 employees (he calls them associates) is required to work

and it's still our feeling today. He came from a poor farm background and he let the customer know he appreciated their business. He took a personal interest in customers and he called them by name.

"We always believed in having quality merchandise, having wide selections of the merchandise, having the ability to take care of all our customers and not falling prey to self-service or indifference and maintaining a limited number of departments and making those departments the best in the area," he said.

But despite his own store's success, Armstrong fears for the survival of some portions of the Cedar Rapids business community.

"Westdale has had much less impact on us than we expected," he said. "Historically, though, the stores that hurt the most in situations like we have here are the small mama and papa places. The ones that are run by people who live here, their kids grew up here, they pay taxes here. They just can't stay open every night and on Sunday. They don't have the financial resources to combat these powerful chains with absentee owners.

"When you have an excess of 500,000 square feet of retail space the community can't absorb, over a period of five or six years, the community is bound to lose 500,000 square feet of retail. The first to be hurt are the ones at Westdale. But then others in the city will be gone too. I think Westdale is a lemon. But when I say that, people discount it and say that's just Armstrong talking and he's biased anyway.

"But no matter what — and mark my words — the laws of supply and demand still work. And who will pay

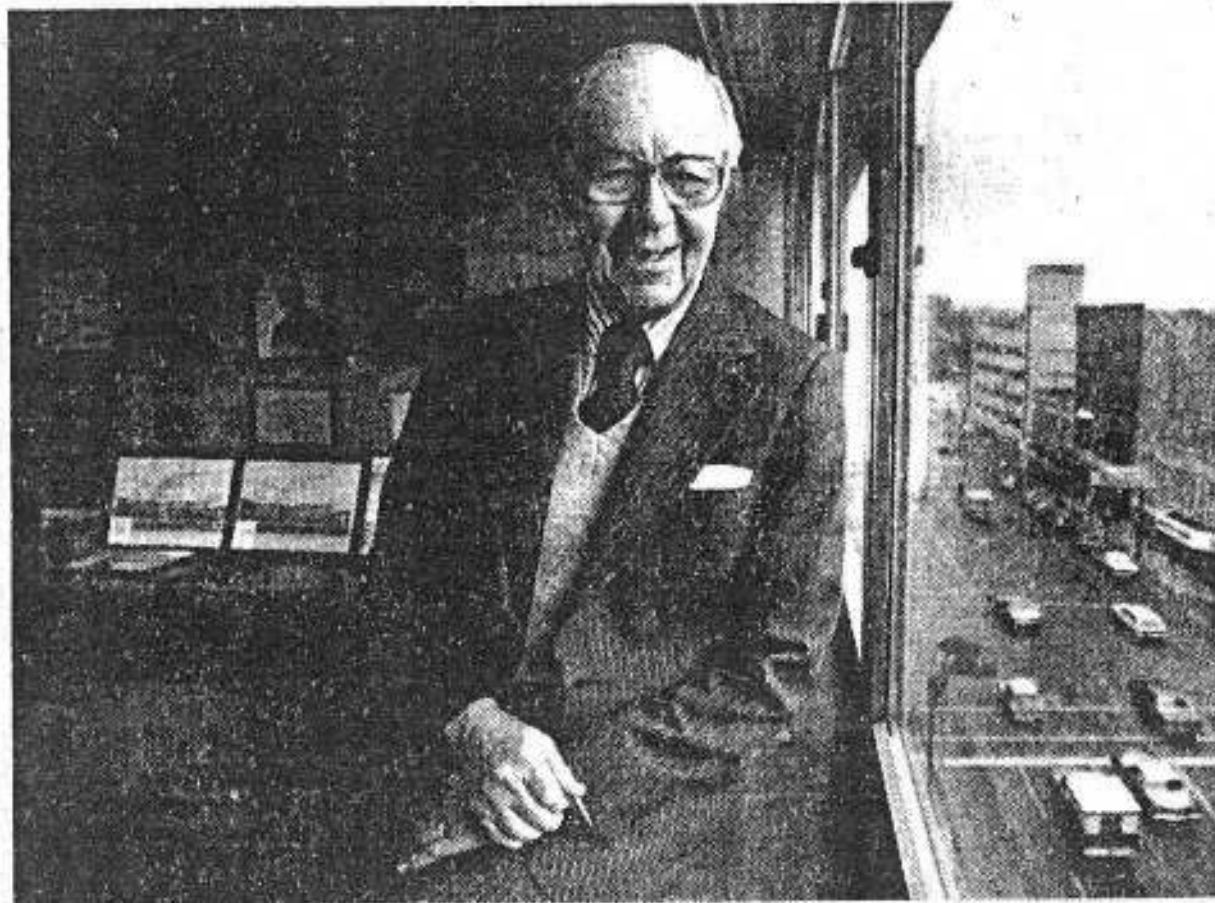


Photo by HARRY BAUMERT

Robert Armstrong, chairman of Armstrong's department store.

tions since its opening in 1890 have led the way for many retail outlets in the Midwest and the United States. Before the turn of the century it became the first store in the area to offer "one price to all."

"Customers were astonished over that concept," Armstrong said. "But pretty soon the word got out that the

are long-since retired, Robert Armstrong still walks the two miles to work every day, and as chairman he has daily contact with store operations.

His fifth floor office is small and simple, its walls covered with pictures of the store's early years and drawings for plans of the future.

or drink until they were 21. He said by that time they ought to be smart enough to stay away from it. And I think because of that I've managed to stay healthy. I can't ever remember ever having occupied a hospital bed."

He also flies his own plane once a week, is involved in Republican politics, travels extensively and is far

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The store is open only two nights a week and is closed Sundays. None of Armstrong's 600 employees (he calls them associates) is required to work more than one of those nights.

"A person's family life should be his most important priority. We don't ask our people to spend their nights at the store. They spend them with their families," Armstrong said.

And 126 of Armstrong's 600 "associates" own stock in the company.

"Workers should have a vested interest in the business. If the store is to be successful, the people who work there should want it to succeed," he said.

And that, according to Armstrong, is the key.

"Everything starts with people. The philosophy began with my father

and he let the customer know we appreciated their business. He took a personal interest in customers and he called them by name.

"We always believed in having quality merchandise, having wide selections of the merchandise, having the ability to take care of all our customers and not falling prey to self-service or indifference and maintaining a limited number of departments and making those departments the best in the area," he said.

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"But no matter what — and mark my words — the laws of supply and demand still work. And who will pay the eventual price? The public, that's who," he said.

"Our downtown has survived because of the people here who own the businesses live here. Look at a community with absentee ownership of stores. The downtowns are falling.

"We're building a skyway system through downtown stores that will let people walk from 12 to 14 blocks without ever having to go outside. That's the kind of thing that makes a town and its businesses successful. And absentee owners will never provide such things."

Armstrong's commitment to the future isn't new. The store's innova-



Robert Armstrong, chairman of Armstrong's department store.

tions since its opening in 1890 have led the way for many retail outlets in the Midwest and the United States. Before the turn of the century it became the first store in the area to offer "one price to all."

"Customers were astonished over that concept," Armstrong said. "But pretty soon the word got out that the best price you were going to get was already marked on the suit of clothes and you wouldn't have to spend two hours haggling. Salesmen started selling more merchandise."

Armstrong, although always looking forward, hasn't forgotten the past. The shopping bags and boxes with "Armstrong's" emblazoned in red is in Samuel Armstrong's handwriting. The elder Armstrong learned his penmanship from his former Cedar Rapids roommate, Austin Palmer of the Palmer writing method.

At a time in life when most people

are long-since retired, Robert Armstrong still walks the two miles to work every day, and as chairman he has daily contact with store operations.

His fifth floor office is small and simple, its walls covered with pictures of the store's early years and drawings for plans of the future. Before he heads downstairs through the store he pins on an Armstrong's name tag.

"Our sales people are asked to wear them. I'm no different," he says.

During those walks through the store his pace is brisk and many would have trouble keeping up with him.

"I've never smoked or drank. My father once told me to save myself, my health, my business and family from problems associated with drinking. He'd seen so many friends lose everything to booze. In fact he gave everybody in my family, cousins included, \$100 if they wouldn't smoke

or drink until they were 21. He said by that time they ought to be smart enough to stay away from it. And I think because of that I've managed to stay healthy. I can't ever remember ever having occupied a hospital bed."

He also flies his own plane once a week, is involved in Republican politics, travels extensively and is far from ready to hand over the reins of the company completely.

Armstrong and his wife have four daughters. The family maintains controlling interest in the store.

For a person of Armstrong's prominence, one thing about him remains a mystery. On or off the record, it's nearly impossible to find a community leader who will say a bad word about him.

"If there's one thing I live by it's what Oliver Wendell Holmes once said: 'Always tell the truth. It will astonish your friends and confound your enemies.'"

Armstrong 'left his mark'

Sun. 25 Nov. 1990
By Tom Fruehling

Gazette staff writer



Robert Armstrong

If one measure of a man is the number of lives he touches, Robert Armstrong's funeral service showed someone who left his mark in many areas.

The huge curving nave of his beloved St. Paul's United Methodist Church, where Armstrong had been a member since 1907, was filled Saturday morning.

And it was a wide cross section of people that came to pay their respects: young and old, black and white, from judges and college presidents to Armstrong's sales associates and customers, old friends and younger ones who were students in the eighth grade Sunday school class Armstrong and his wife, Esther, taught for 25 years.

Dr. J. Eugene Young, senior pastor at St. Paul's, said the quality of Armstrong's life was evident in many ways. He was, Young noted, a retail pioneer and merchandising genius, a civic leader and philanthropist, a thoughtful and caring employer, a walker and a pilot and, above all else, a "faithful churchman."

Armstrong lived a life of dignity and integrity, Young said.

Dr. Richard Newhall, pastor of visitation at the church, read a selection of Bible verses he said were among Armstrong's favorites. And he noted that students in his Sunday school classes were treated to airplane rides from Armstrong if they memorized the passages.

In fact, according to longtime friend Dr. Joseph McCabe, the reason attendance was so good in those classes was that the youngsters "loved Esther and wanted an airplane ride."

McCabe, president emeritus at Coe College, gave a moving tribute to his old friend.

Calling Armstrong "Mr. Chairman" because of his leadership in so many civic organizations, McCabe said he was told early on when he came to Coe College about Armstrong's charitable nature.

"If you owed Robert Armstrong, he'd remind you of it often," McCabe said. "But if you needed \$10,000 for a good cause, he was the best prospect in town."

He said the Armstrongs were unceasing workers and contributors to Coe College and that their generosity and good deeds carried into a wide range of works. Armstrong, a 1918 graduate of Coe, served as president of its board of trustees for many years.

It was during that time, McCabe pointed out, when he came to see a second side to Armstrong's nature. "Robert could be stubborn," he said. "That granite-like self-assurance could be irritating."

However, in a life that spanned 93 years, "Robert Armstrong was a tower of strength, a great leader and a courageous man," McCabe said.

He said he also lived with the strong convictions of a lifelong Christian.

According to McCabe, Armstrong's final words before dying early Wednesday were, "The lamb of God."

Robert C. Armstrong, 93, of 370 34th St. SE, died Wednesday in Mercy Medical Center after a long illness. Memorial services: 10:30 a.m. Saturday, St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Inurnment: St. Paul's columbarium. There will be no visitation. Kuba Funeral Home East in charge of arrangements. *Thurs. 22 Nov. 1990*

Survivors include his wife, Esther; four daughters, Mary Helen Dusek of McLean, Va., Esther Cooper of Philadelphia, Pa., Anna Johnston of Camp Hill, Pa., and Mimi Meffert of Cedar Rapids.

Also surviving are 11 grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

He was born July 4, 1897, in Cedar Rapids, the son of Samuel G. and Anna Cooper Armstrong. A lifelong resident of Cedar Rapids, he was associated with Armstrong's department store until his retirement. He earned his B.A. degree from Coe College and M.B.A. degree from Harvard School of Business Administration. He was honored by Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi and held an honorary degree in business administration from Coe. He was a World War I Army veteran. He married Esther Youel in Flandreau, S.D., in 1926.

Mr. Armstrong was a member of St. Paul's United Methodist Church where he served as trustee, had served as Chairman of the Board of St. Luke's Hospital, chairman of Coe College board and YMCA board Downtown Association.

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Mr. Armstrong was a member of St. Paul's United Methodist Church where he served as trustee, had served as Chairman of the Board of St. Luke's Hospital, chairman of Coe College board and YMCA board, Downtown Association; member of Methodist World Missions board, Iowa Electric Light and Power board and 67-year member of Kiwanis Club. He was honored by the Chamber of Commerce, a member and former board member and benefactor of Linn County Historical Society and member of the Meth-Wick Retirement Community board. A licensed pilot, he had operated his own plane since 1939, and had logged enough miles to have made 17 trips around the world.

Drs. J. Eugene Young, Richard Newhall and Joseph McCabe will officiate. Memorials may be made to charities or organizations of the donor's choice.

"He's been a very prominent citizen," says Mayor Donald Canney. "He's a profound supporter of the central business district, an astute businessman and certainly a charitable person. I have a great deal of respect and admiration for Robert Armstrong."

Armstrong says he and his wife traditionally have given away 20 percent of their annual income. When they die, all their assets will be given to charity.

"We have given a substantial amount to each of our four daughters," he says. "That's a great plenty. I think. History is full of examples of people who have been ruined by receiving money they didn't earn. The average young person is spoiled by receiving money they didn't earn."

Beneficiaries

Coe College, where both he and Esther received degrees, is one beneficiary. Others include their church and mission outreach, Cornell College, the YMCA (where Armstrong served on the board), United Way and its

support organization, the Sinclair Society, the Cedar Rapids Art Museum and the Community Welfare Foundation, he says.

What Armstrong inherited from his father, besides a department store and six parcels of land, is a wealth of doctrines about business.

"I feel this is a very wise time to build," says Armstrong, who received an MBA from Harvard University in 1920. "I like to eat lunch when other people are not eating lunch. It's the same way with building."

Like his father, Armstrong has poured more of his investment money into local real estate than stocks in distant companies. "My father felt the city had been very good to him and he should put his money back. Therefore he invested in real estate, which I continue to do."

With Peter Bezanson, Armstrong built Cedar River Tower Apartments, a 25-story downtown apartment building. He envisions his condominium building, to be called Skyway River Tower, will be popular with retirees as well as young people.

Souls Lost and Found

"This would be very helpful in retaining people in Cedar Rapids," Armstrong says. "It's a great mistake for people to retire and leave a community where they're known. They go off and they're just like lost souls."

His soul, Armstrong imagines, will never be lost. "I feel completely assured about the life beyond this life and believe we will feel just as much at home in that life as we feel at home on this earth."

Until that time, there's much to keep him happy.

Armstrong already envisions most of the details of the proposed condominiums. Attention to little things is the recipe for success, he says.

"The reason we have a good store there is we've done a lot of little things better than the average," Armstrong says. Selection of merchandise at a good price, store ambiance and good employees were all important.

As for risk, Armstrong calculates it carefully, both in the office and out.

He points to a small plaque on his office wall.

It reads: "There are old pilots, there are bold pilots but no old, bold pilots."

C.R. Gdz. 12-10-72 p. 2C ○

ROBERT ARMSTRONG HAS REACHED A MILESTONE in his more than 30 years as a private pilot. His log book lists him as having flown approximately a quarter million miles—equivalent to flying around the world more than a dozen times.

Armstrong began flying in 1940 when Civil Air Patrol was looking for civilians who wanted to fly and would volunteer their services for such duties as flying the mail. Armstrong trained at Saxon and Hunter airports, learned his lessons and has been flying ever since. He was never called upon to do any flying for the C.A.P., however.

Having owned a number of aircraft since 1940, his aviation has been mostly for pleasure, although he occasionally flies on business trips. He flies about once a week.

College. Last year she worked in Kuwait, but is back now and living in Springfield, IL.

'89 Carl Bloom has been accepted for graduate work at the U. of Hawaii in Honolulu. He had been employed with Urban Search Corp. of Chicago for the past year.

Elizabeth "Beth" Calero is a substitute teacher for the Pittsburg School District. She lives in Concord, CA.

Gregary M. Cornell is the manager for Arby's in Ft. Dodge, IA.

Rick Sloane is working as a computer systems operator for the Plano *Star Courier* newspaper. He is a lance corporal in the Marine Corps Reserve. He lives in Carrollton, TX.

Amber Steinfeld is a second year medical student at California College of Podiatric Medicine in San Francisco. She lives in San Mateo, CA.

Shahbaz Tahir has a new job as a product manager of Phillips Pakistan LTD. He lives in Pakistan.

'90 Cluster Reunion — October 12, 1991

Bryon Bruening is a graduate teaching assistant in the art dept. at Kansas State U. He lives in Manhattan, KS.

Lila Dubin is teaching English at a technical institute in Kosice, Czechoslovakia.

Michele Francis is a traffic assistant at Henry Russell Bruce Advertising and Public Relations in Cedar Rapids.

Marvin R. Heiderscheidt is a staff accountant at O'Connell, Brook & Co. P.C. He and his wife, Jean, and their children, Nicole, 3; Tyler, 2; and Travis, 1, live in Dubuque, IA.

Jill Johannsen Dilly is a first grade teacher at the Sac and Fox Settlement. She and her husband, Brian, live in Marshalltown, IA.

Ajoy Karki has received a B.S. in civil engineering at the U. of Iowa, and he lives in Burtonsville, MD.

Helen S. Mascardo is a staff R.N. at DHD Memorial Medicine Center, and lives in Dallas, TX.

Kathie D. McIntosh is the assistant manager of the Lady Fox Locker. She lives in Kenosha, WI.

Brett Raasch has received a degree from Luther College and is a physical therapist assistant at Palmer Hospital. He lives in West Union, IA.

'Mr. Downtown Cedar Rapids' — Robert Armstrong '18 dies in November

Robert Cooper Armstrong '18, who served his alma mater for 36 years as an active trustee and another 8 as Life Trustee, died November 21 at age 93.

The citizens of Cedar Rapids, who benefitted in so many ways from his forthright leadership, filled the *Gazette* with tributes to his memory. Allan Peremsky '54 and Reginald Watters '30, who worked with him professionally and shared their Coe loyalty with him, remembered him for his high principles and his fairness and generosity. "He had strong beliefs in many areas, and he seldom wavered from them," said Peremsky, who was president of Armstrong's Store for 16 years.

At Robert Armstrong's memorial service, Coe President Emeritus Joseph E. McCabe delivered a eulogy that said, in part:

The passing of Robert Cooper Armstrong from the human scene fulfills in our time the words of Carl Sandburg: "As when a lordly pine goes down, leaving an empty place against the sky."

At Coe Robert Cooper Armstrong was Mr. President of Everything — Phi Beta Kappa, president of the student body — he excelled in all.

In this city, he was Mr. Downtown. No name compares with Armstrong in the growth and development of downtown Cedar Rapids.

*He was chairman or president of every major board or organization that worked for the betterment of the city. Only of him could the *Gazette* carry the simple headline: "Goodby, Robert Armstrong."*

At Coe he followed his father on the board, chaired every major committee, and was chairman of the board. He was the trustee prime mover behind the Ford Foundation challenge grant [which Coe received in the early 1960s]. Then he chaired the financial campaign that the grant entailed and led it off with the largest gift.

His term as chairman of the board came at a particularly difficult period in the history of the college. The new president and he did not always agree. After one rather strong confrontation, we simply agreed to let the matter drop for a while. We quoted to each other, "Non est disputum" — between friends, a difference of opinion is not a quarrel. The next time we took up the debate, it did not seem so momentous after all.

He was strong-minded and stubborn or steadfast, depending on your point of view. When he took a position, he held



to it. Old Washington High down on Greene Square, Coe, West Point, Harvard — these were his watering places in the intellectual quest. In an earlier time, he could have been referred to as a merchant prince.

He was a devout churchman. When it was time to stand up and be counted, he was there. St. Paul's [Methodist Church in Cedar Rapids] became nationally known for supporting fair housing and civil rights. Robert Armstrong was the principal backer.

Visiting a mission center, he saw a hundred children poorly clad, with winter coming on. "Buy them all new shoes and send the bill to me," he told the director.

At the store which bore the family name, there were no "employees" or "sales people" — only "Armstrongs Associates."

At 70 he played a vigorous game to volleyball with student leaders. At 90 he flew his own plane to Rochester, Minnesota, for heart surgery.

Robert requested that at his memorial service two psalms be used. Psalm 90: "Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever Thou didst form the earth and the world, behold Thou art God..."

And Psalm 121: "The Lord will preserve thy going out and thy coming in, from this time forth and forever more." Between those two divine parentheses of time and eternity we live our little day.

He is survived by his wife, Esther Youel Armstrong '25, Pleasant Hill, 370 34th Street SE, Cedar Rapids, IA 52403, four daughters, eleven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

ROBERT C. ARMSTRONG 93

DIED IN CR ON WED NOV 21 AFTER A LONG ILLNESS

SURVIVORS INCLUDE HIS WIFE ESTER

FOUR DAUGHTERS MARY HELEN DIXON of MR. LEAN, VA.

ESTER COOPER of PHILA PA, ANNA JOHNSON of CAMP HILL

PA AND MIMI MEFFERT of C.R. J. II GRAVE CHILDREN AND A

GREAT GRANDCHILD.

BORN JULY 4 1897 IN CR. SON OF SAM AND ANNA
ARMSTRONG.

HE EARNED A BA DEGREE FROM COE COLLEGE

A MBA FROM HARVARD SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

HE WAS HONORED BY PHI BETA KAPPA, PHI BETA PHI

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—Gazette photo by Jeth McIvor

Veteran Kiwanians Honored

Four of the Kiwanis club members who were honored Thursday night for service to the club were photographed before the ceremony. In foreground is Robert C. Armstrong, 370 Thirty-fourth street SE, a 50-year member. At rear, from left, are Walter O. Schultz, 4747 Mt. Vernon road SE, 43 years; Ora W. Lawrence, 4749 Mt. Vernon road SE, 42 years, and Dr. Clarence L. Fenner, 2101 Washington avenue SE, 40 years. Eighteen others were honored for more than 25 years' membership each.

Sky king 'Mr. A': A lofty perspective of hometown, life

D.M. REG. 1-11-87 p. 1B
By DEBORA WILEY

Of The Register's Cedar Rapids Bureau

CEDAR RAPIDS, IA. — An encore of the smile he has shared with thousands of children plays across Robert Cooper Armstrong's face as he imagines himself high above the Mississippi River in his 1959 Cessna airplane.

For a moment, the weight of living 89 years seem to fall away.

Armstrong — a name often followed by "a pillar of the community" or preceded by "prominent citizen" — is as excited as a 14-year-old boy on his first airplane ride. He knows the symptoms well; he gave thousands of rides as rewards for perfect attendance in the Sunday School classes he taught for 26 years at St. Paul's United Methodist Church here.

"I love to fly," exclaims Armstrong, best known as the head of his family-owned Armstrong's department store from 1928 to 1972. "You get such magnificent views. I don't think there's anything I've ever done which has been as much fun, or which has been as productive of as many friendships, as flying."

Armstrong, a member of the United Flying Octogenarians — UFOs — in the Octogenarian Aircraft Pilot's Association of North America, is brought back to earth with a question about his plans to build a high-rise condominium complex in downtown Cedar Rapids.

Known as "Mr. A" to his close friends and associates,
ARMSTRONG

Please turn to Page 4B

REGISTER PHOTO



Cedar Rapids community leader Robert C. Armstrong

ARMSTRONG

Continued from Page 1B

Armstrong bristles slightly at the suggestion he could be called "The Man Who Doesn't Retire."

"I don't look at it that way," Armstrong says. "I just am very thankful to the Lord I have such good health. I think not only is it good for me to be busy, I have some things I would like to get done."

He's hunting for river-front property to build a 15- to 30-story condominium building that would feature doctors' services and a health club. It would be connected by a skyway to other downtown buildings.

Armstrong continues a long family custom of investing in downtown Cedar Rapids business property. Last month he paid more than a million dollars for side-by-side buildings housing the Foreman and store and the vacant Kubias hardware store. He and his wife, Esther, also own three residential properties, including their home, which was designed and built by their friend, the then-undiscovered artist Grant Wood.

Sold Stock in Store

Armstrong no longer owns stock in the department store founded by his father, Samuel, in 1896 or in a realty company and parking lot development. He and Esther lost majority stock control in the company last year and sold out. Armstrong would like to discuss details of the situation privately.

ive as much interest in the I ever did psychologically, if socially," he says.

strong's now is owned by an ee stock ownership trust, gov- by President Allen Peremsky; Jeffert, vice president and one of Armstrong's daughters; and Miller, vice president for fi-

strong, who had retired in 1972 tive involvement in the store, his office after the stock buy- in the store to another build- "I just love my work," he says. "I a good for my health, too."

strong calls himself a realist, ing to the actuaries, the aver- son my age will live approxi- three and a quarter years," he says. "So I'm realistic I'm trying to get certain one."

ator"

recognize him as a man of vi-

an innovator of a lot of new says Peremsky, president of ong's. "In every facet of his social issues and business, he y times been far ahead of the sional thinking but which in e came to pass."

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It reads: "There are old pilots, there are bold pilots but no old, bold pilots."

A relationship built on love

C.R. GAZ 11-30-86 p. 1B
By Tom Fruehling
Gazette staff writer

As has been his custom at the end of each work day for the past six decades, Robert C. Armstrong announces himself when he comes home by calling out, "Hi, honey," or, "I'm here, dearie."

There to greet him in the big stone home designed by their friend Grant Wood, on a wooded estate they call Pleasant Hill, is his wife Esther.

The couple married in June of 1926 and seem as smitten with each other now as they were then. "Marrying Esther was the best contract I ever made," Armstrong likes to say.

It's almost scandalous: At the ages of 89 and 83, respectively, they still smooch in public.

"The other day I gave Esther a kiss by the escalator in the store," Armstrong notes with relish, "and two sales clerks came over and gave me a kiss."

Listen to him recall the days when he was courting his bride-to-be back in the early '20s while she was a student at Coe College and his family lived on Second Avenue SE not far from the campus. "Oh, she had so many boyfriends she hardly had time for me. Why, I'd take her home and she'd have another guy waiting for her."

Mrs. Armstrong is a little embarrassed by such long-ago remembrances. But her husband is undaunted.

"She's a very beautiful gal. And competent, oh my. She could have run the store better than I did."

The store, of course, is Armstrong's department store, for many years now the cornerstone of downtown Cedar Rapids. Mrs. Armstrong says she's always tended to home and family, gardening and Methodist church activities, while her husband minded the family business.

"Robert is the entrepreneur," she explains.

"Esther is a super cook, arvon, many other things," her spouse interjects. "She could have won a beauty contest. She's a marvelous woman."

Mrs. Armstrong gives up, "He's my biggest booster," she notes. "But I'm the one that's fortunate. The happiest day in my life was the day I married Robert."

If there's a couple in Cedar Rapids who

(OVER)



Gazette photo by L.W. Ward

Esther and Robert Armstrong — in their Cedar Rapids home.

epitomizes wealth, clout and respectability, it's the Armstrongs.

They have so much class that they drive Chevrolet automobiles — not new ones either — because of their durability. Mrs. Armstrong has a small Cavalier, and her husband a 1983 Impala with a Reagan sticker on the bumper. His car has 77,000 miles on it, but he points out that it had 4,000 when he bought it used.

Armstrong, who dresses meticulously but won't abide ostentation, says it never occurred to him to spend a lot of money on a fancy vehicle. Besides, his Impala is soon to reach classic status.

He claims his only real extravagance is flying, a passion since he took lessons at Hunter Field back in 1939. He's a member of the Octogenarian

Aircraft Pilot's Association of North America and says he and Esther have flown the equivalent of several times around the world.

His plane is a four-seater Cessna 172. "It's called the Chevrolet of aircraft because so many were made. It's economical and steady."

Armstrong would rather fly than drive.

In the 53 years the Armstrongs have lived on the northeast corner of 34th Street and Bever Avenue SE, he's taken the bus part of the way to work and walked the final 10 blocks or so downtown. He used to make a point of taking the whole 4-mile trek on foot at least a couple of times a week.

Seven months shy of his 90th birthday, Robert Armstrong works as hard as he ever did. No longer

does he keep up the travel schedule that kept him out of town for weeks at a time on buying trips. He personally served as Armstrong's general merchandising manager for four decades.

But Armstrong is still in his office every morning six days a week, minding substantial real estate holdings out of a sixth floor suite at the Ground Transportation Center. He shares the spacious office area only with Maxine Schoonover, his personal secretary for the past 30 years.

After 66 continuous years in the store he took over at the death of his father, Armstrong moved out last summer when he and his wife sold their 36

• Please turn to page 2B: The Armstrongs

THE ARMSTRONGS:

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percent interest in the company to an employee stockholder group.

Armstrong, who retired from day-to-day management of the business in 1972 but stayed active in its affairs, also relinquished his position as chairman of the board.

He needs to work, though. "I'm as busy as ever," Armstrong says. "To me, work is fun."

And from high above the city in his new office with a panoramic view, he is able to look down upon the central business district he had a big role in shaping. On a clear day, Armstrong can see much of the community that he, as well as his wife Esther in her more quiet manner, have helped build.

"This community has been wonderful to us," Armstrong says. "It's the best place on earth."

HE AND HIS WIFE HAVE done their part to make it that way.

The two have been devoted civic volunteers and have served on numerous boards and committees. He remains an honorary trustee at Coe College, where both graduated; she has been a Cornell board member since the time when two daughters attended school there.

While Robert Armstrong has been in the limelight over the years, a leading business and community figure, his wife has preferred to stay less visible in the background.

The daughter of a small town dentist, she'd come to Coe in 1921 from her hometown of Plandreau, S.D. Her father Charles had grown up on a family farm known as Pleasant Hill near Inelishburg, attended Coe for three years, then left to help his brother farm in South Dakota. He got his dental degree and stayed there, not only becoming mayor of the town near Sioux Falls but continuing to pull teeth in his living room long after he retired.

"My father was always very enthusiastic about Coe," Mrs. Armstrong notes. "He talked so much about it, I didn't know there was another college. That's why I came here."

Upon graduation from Coe in 1925, she taught high school English for a year in her home state and then came back as the wife of a young retail store scion.

In her life since then, she says her husband, children and grandchildren have been her first priority. She was named Iowa mother of the year in 1960.

Then there's St. Paul's Methodist Church. Mrs. Armstrong has served on every committee there is at the church over the years and on several national boards. She's active today; a few weeks ago, she spent four straight days working the church bazaar.

Mrs. Armstrong was named national Methodist woman of the year in 1950.

The Armstrongs taught eighth grade Sunday school together for 25 years, and hundreds of children in those classes flew in an airplane for the first time as a treat from Robert Armstrong.

Mrs. Armstrong has long held a particular interest in the church's foreign missions, the result of the many trips abroad the couple has taken since the early years of their marriage. And they've made it a longtime practice to pay the tuition for a foreign student to attend Coe College each year. For over 15 years after World War II, Mrs. Armstrong spearheaded a local clothing drive for refugees.

Her one consuming hobby is gardening. Although she's slowed some in recent years, she says she likes nothing better than to spend hours on end in the dirt of her own enormous and glorious gardens at Pleasant Hill.

And, as a 53-year member of the Cedar Rapids Garden Club, she literally had her hands in a number of plantings for city projects. Mrs. Armstrong was recently honored by the Garden Club of America for her lifelong horticulture efforts.

Plants abound in the simple but antique-filled home that artist Grant Wood planned before he became famous.

BACK IN THE LATE '20s, he was a part-time Armstrong's worker and a family friend. A struggling artist and teacher at McKinley High School, Wood helped with interior decorating at the store and arranged some of the window displays.

"We had a party for him when he sold 'American Gothic' to the art institute in Chicago for \$300," Mrs. Armstrong recalls. "Everybody thought he'd really hit the big time. We were living on Meadowbrook Drive then, but I was making floorplans for a house here on a

(CONT.)

hilltop where the pavement ended at Bever.

"Grant said we ought to build something using early Iowa architecture."

Mrs. Armstrong and Wood drove about throughout the Stone City and Viola area, seeking home features to be replicated at Pleasant Hill. And when it came time for construction in 1932, Wood himself did the plastering because he didn't trust others to get it right.

Four daughters were raised in the 10-room home and played in the surrounding woods, and most of the 11 Armstrong grandchildren have spent summers there.

Only one daughter, Mimi Meffert, a vice-president at Armstrong's and the wife of a surgeon, has stayed in Cedar Rapids. The other children, and their children are spread throughout the country.

Family photographs, however, crowd tables throughout the house and cover the walls by the stairway. Except for memories, the Armstrongs have their big house to themselves.

They still enjoy entertaining, but don't do it as much as they once did. Most evenings are spent reading, often next to a fire that Robert Armstrong lays in a fireplace that Grant Wood built.

All in all, reflects Esther Armstrong, "It's been a wonderful life."

A man of firm convictions

C.R. GAZ 11-30-86 p.1B
By Tom Fruehling

Robert C. Armstrong is a man of strong beliefs, and he's never been shy about voicing his opinions.

He hates booze and tobacco, for instance, and is proud that he's never touched either.

"They've ruined too many people," he asserts.

It's been a lifelong practice to refuse any business connections with liquor establishments. Indeed, one of his irritations over the years has been the location of a bar on private property right in the middle of Armstrong's downtown parking lot. Efforts to buy The Alley Inn have been rebuffed.

It used to be that his store didn't carry wine glasses because he was head merchandise buyer.

Armstrong has also been a strong critic of what he considers unsuitable literature containing either sex or violence. He's been known to scan the racks of greeting cards at the store to make sure they met his standards. He says he would have done the same thing if books had ever been stocked.

When a local father several years ago complained to the library board about a book his child brought home, Armstrong championed efforts to have the novel removed from the shelves.

He lost that battle and led an unsuccessful drive to keep the library from being vacated for a new building. Now, however, he says he's satisfied that the art museum is going to use the structure. He just didn't want it torn down.

On another front, he's spearheaded fights against downtown one-way streets, saying they confuse out-of-town shoppers.

And, at the age of 81, he was led off by a police officer after directing traffic at the Fourth Street railroad tracks. The signal had malfunctioned, and Armstrong considered the situation dangerous.

He says such causes have been matters of principle.

While on the board of Merchants National Bank, he encouraged Brenton Banks to locate in Cedar Rapids because he believes in competition. His father, he points out, once had an interest in the rival Killan's store because he felt it was good for his business. And as a longtime member and president of the St. Luke's Hospital board, Robert Armstrong lobbied long and hard against spiraling patient costs.

"Hospital charges are just ridiculous," he argues.

Back in the late '30s, it was Armstrong who urged his Methodist congregation to sell a lot to black Cedar Rapids physician Percy Harris. The land, next to the Armstrongs' own home, had been donated by them to the church.

The issue split the parish and cost Armstrong both customers and neighborhood friends. But he says it was merely a matter of doing the right thing.

From his father, Armstrong learned the value of letting workers (whom he always refers to as "associates") share in the wealth. Some 40 years ago, Armstrong instituted a stock ownership plan

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for employees. With the recent Armstrong stock purchase, that group now has majority ownership of the store.

The Armstrongs' four daughters were also given stock in the business, and they and their children have had financial assistance from the couple for their education. All are well-schooled, and all have records of achievement.

Armstrong, a strong believer in the work ethic, says none are expecting to inherit any of their parents' considerable wealth.

"It will all go to charity," notes the family patriarch. "We've helped the children and their children while we've been alive. I think an inheritance often does more harm than good, and we don't want to do anything to injure our children."

When Armstrong takes a position, he seldom boggles.

Of the couple's decision to sever formalities with the store, he says it boiled down to a difference in philosophy on how the store should be run.

He still has a deep interest in its operation. In fact, he still eats lunch there every day. But when his sister, Margaret Race, turned over her 25 percent of the company stock to a voting trust upon her death last January the Armstrongs lost controlling interest.

"We thought it was better to part company," he explains. "I was really only a consultant anyway. For years I got paid \$1 a year. Then it was raised to \$2, and some people thought the increase was inflationary."

Still, the store stands as his crowning success.

Against the advice of some company officials, Armstrong in 1959 pushed to relocate the store to its present site and make it four times as big. The move came in the face of the opening of Lindale Mall, and Armstrong wanted to bolster the downtown shopping area.

The business is in his blood. Even today, when he doesn't have to, Armstrong maintains a regular schedule of retail hours because it's been his life.

He was born in Cedar Rapids on July 4, 1897, and was graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Coe College in 1918.

The end of World War I halted a year in officer's training at the West Point military academy, so he went on to earn a degree from the Harvard University business school.

Although his training was in

economics — he calls longtime Coe professor Charles Hickock "the finest teacher I ever had because he made hard things easy" — Armstrong actually learned the business world from the bottom up.

Both grandparents on his mother's side were Irish orphans who eventually settled in Cedar Rapids where grandfather William Cooper formed a milling company. Armstrong's other grandfather left the family farm near Marion to look for work out east and was never heard from again.

Armstrong says his own father, Samuel G., was a real life Horatio Alger: a poor boy turned business tycoon. As a young man, the elder Armstrong went to work at the downtown Isham clothing store for \$7 a week. For two years, he slept in the store and later was to room with Austin Palmer, the developer of the Palmer method of penmanship. (The Armstrong's logo still used by the store was designed by Samuel Armstrong in handwriting style picked up from his friend.)

After 10 years of working for others, Samuel Armstrong and a partner founded their own men's and boys' store in 1890 on a site at Second Avenue and Second Street SE. The business became the Armstrong Clothing Co. in 1915.

Robert Armstrong remembers working in the store from the time he was around 10. "I just loved being in the place," he says. "My pals and I would go down there and fold bills. Then my folks bought me a pony named 'Roxie', and I'd go around delivering packages."

When he returned from Harvard with new-fangled retailing ideas, Armstrong says his notion to expand into women's clothing was met with resistance from his father. "Finally, in 1924, my father bought the building next door and told me to run it. I hired two very competent women, and boy did we go to town."

Samuel Armstrong died in 1928 and his son, at the age of 30, took over as president of the company. Along with longtime store officials Addison Ramsey and Joe Miller, and later Miller's son John, Armstrong guided the business through the Depression and into glory years as the major retail operation in Eastern Iowa. From 70 employees when he joined the firm, Armstrong's now numbers about 500 on the payroll in Cedar Rapids and another 200 in a Dubuque store.

During the Depression, Armstrong notes with pride, the store kept all its employees working

although everyone from the top down took a 10 percent pay cut. The operation remained in the black despite a 40 percent drop in sales.

He's long been a home town booster and says he's followed his father's example by investing in local real estate. "My father always believed in putting money back into the community rather than stocks and bonds of companies in New York and Chicago," Armstrong says.

He built the first parking ramp in the state, near the Roosevelt Hotel, in 1948. With Peter Bezanson, he was instrumental in the implementation of the downtown skywalk system, and the two businessmen built the Cedar River Tower.

It's still Armstrong's dream to construct a 30-story condominium in the downtown area, and he's now devoting his attention to that project. "There are a lot of things to be done before I pass on. But I've been right at home in this life, and I'll feel right at home in the next."



Gazette photo by Rita Reed

Robert Armstrong rides an escalator in the store that bears his name. Though no longer officially associated with the store he stops in almost every day.



Gazette photo by L.W. Ward

Robert and Esther Armstrong have long held a special interest in world renowned artist Grant Wood. He was a friend back in the '20s before he became famous. Not only did Wood work in the Armstrongs' store, but he designed the home they've lived in since 1933. The large cloth applique rendition of Wood's American Gothic, done with the likenesses of the the Armstrong's, was a 50th anniversary gift from the couple's children. Mrs. Armstrong is wearing a dress she wore to a party for Wood in 1932 when he sold the original painting to the Art Institute of Chicago. In recent years, she's worn the gown to Wood exhibits in Minneapolis and Chicago.