JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH William J. Stewart

CONDUCTED BY Laura Derr

DATE April 19, 1985

TRANSCRIBER Hazel Storm

William J. Stewart

William J. Stewart was born January 21, 1909, in Clinton Township about seven miles west of Cedar Rapids on Highway 30, the son of William and Mary Elizabeth McKernan Stewart. His father was born in Iowa on his father's farm settled in 1848 near Otis. His mother was born in Belfast, Ireland. Mr. Stewart grew up at 411 Eighth Avenue S.W. and attended St. Patrick's School. He graduated from Coe College in 1931 and married Catherine C. Monohan in 1933. They had one son, James F. Stewart. After his wife's death in 1965, he met and married Catherine E. Riley in 1966. Mr. Stewart left Cedar Rapids after college and worked in Chicago until 1933. Not long after he returned to Cedar Rapids, he joined his father-in-law in his funeral home business. He has been a funeral director here for almost 50 years, first on the southwest side of town, and since 1958, on the southeast side. His memories include growing up in Cedar Rapids, the Depression years, and circuses, in addition to the evolution of the funeral home business over the years.

Interview With: William J. Stewart
Date of Interview: April 19, 1985
Interviewer: Laura Derr
Transcriber: Hazel Storm

LD: This is Laura Derr on April 19, 1985, and I am at the Stewart Funeral Home on First Avenue and Nineteenth Street. Mr. Stewart, will you just give me your name and your birth date so we can check your voice?

Stewart: William J. Stewart, January 21, 1909.

LD: Where were you born, Mr. Stewart?

Stewart: I was born in Clinton Township, about seven miles west of Cedar Rapids on Highway 30.

LD: And when did you come to Cedar Rapids?

Stewart: I was five years old. We came to Cedar Rapids in 1914.

LD: And moved to what address?

Stewart: To 411 Eighth Avenue, S.W., and we lived there until my parents died.

LD: And you would have been grown then?

Stewart: Oh, yes. I was gone, I had graduated from school and college and was living in Dayton, Ohio--Chicago and Dayton, Ohio, at the time.

LD: You grew up on that southwest side of town.

Stewart: On the southwest side of town, yes.

LD: Where did you go to school?

Stewart: I graduated from St. Patrick's School on A Avenue and Fifth Street, N.W., in 1927.

LD: And then later attended...

Stewart: Then I attended Coe College and graduated from Coe in 1931.

LD: I want to go back for just a moment. Will you give me your parents' names.

Stewart: My father's name was William Stewart, and my mother's name was Mary Elizabeth McKernan Stewart.

LD: Can you remember the background of your family? how did they come to Cedar Rapids? how long have they been here?

Stewart: My great-grandfather came here about 1848 and settled on a farm southeast of Cedar Rapids, which - well, it's close to Otis, which was known as Otis at that time.[1] And then he lived in Cedar Rapids. He was a blacksmith and owned quite a bit of property in downtown Cedar Rapids. And my father was born on that farm, and I have an older brother born on that farm. But they were pioneers. My mother was born in Belfast, Ireland, and came to Cedar Rapids in - well, she was 14 months old when she came to Cedar Rapids.

LD: You have the Irish in you.

Stewart: I've got Irish in me.

LD: So, when you moved to Cedar Rapids, what was your father's occupation?

Stewart: Well, my father worked for the Quaker Oats. His first job was with the Quaker Oats. Then he had an uncle, Robert W.

---

[1]The farm was in horseshoe between Cedar Rapids and Otis. Otis was actually a signal tower for Northwest Railroad--it was on main line. Cedar Rapids had a spur off that line for passenger cars.

Stewart--Colonel Robert W. Stewart, by the way--who was the president of the Standard Oil Company of Indiana. And through him he got a job with the Standard Oil Company. He worked for Standard Oil until he retired. He opened the first gas station in Cedar Rapids on Fifth Street and Second Avenue where the Iowa Mutual Insurance Company is. In those days you pumped the gas by hand, and you either got a gallon or two gallons or five gallons. Five gallons of gas was quite a bit of gas at that time. Then he opened up the first station on the west side at Second Avenue and Second Street, and then he opened up another station on Second Avenue and 11th Street. In those days, that was the Lincoln Highway, and this station was at the bottom of the hill, and, of course, those cars - they took a good run from the railroad tracks, which was about Eighth Street, to get up the hill; and there was never any business at that station. Finally the Standard Oil closed the station up because people going up the hill, they didn't want to stop and get gas and then try to make the hill. They couldn't make the hill.

LD: Can you remember the dates when that first gas station would have been opened?

Stewart: Oh, I would say it probably was around 1916, around that time. And another thing, they had no safe in the station, and my father would take the money home in a cigar box and sleep on it at night. And my mother was scared to death that they would be robbed. And then he would carry that back to the station the next day, and then the manager would come and pick up the money. But there were no safes in those days.

LD: That was a different time.

Stewart: Oh, it was a different time, yes.

LD: Well, I would like to come back to that, but let me backtrack for just a moment and ask you for a little bit more biographical information about your adult life. Are you married? And tell us about your family.

Stewart: Yes, I was married first to Catherine C. Monahan in 1933, and she passed away in 1965, and we had one son, James F. Stewart. And then in 1966, I married Catherine E. Riley, and she had four children.[2]

LD: And what have been your adult occupations? I'm not going to let you give me an in-depth yet, but just to keep me on the track.

Stewart: Well, I have been a funeral director almost 50 years, here in Cedar Rapids. I went to embalming school in St. Louis, the Hohenschuh-Carpenter Embalming School in St. Louis, in 1936.[3]

LD: I want to go back and talk about that at length, but I think we'll start with a kind of chronological process here. I would like to ask you about your growing-up years in Cedar Rapids and your memories of those, and I'm thinking of the time period between about 1915 and 1925--let's see, you would have been...

Stewart: Well, I was six years old...

LD: Yes, 6 years old in 1915 and 16 by 1925, so really right up to about 1930 you were here as a youngster growing up. Let's

---

[2]Riley is maiden name. She is the widow of Mr. Howard Michael.

[3]Mr. Hohenschuh had the first embalming license in the state of Iowa.

start with your memories of the southwest side, and maybe just specifically, can you talk about St. Patrick's School, the kind of school it was, the routine you had?

Stewart: It was a school that was run by the Sisters of Charity out of Dubuque, and we had from kindergarten to high school. Now, that was in the old St. Patrick's School, which was torn down in 1929; and the new school was built that same year. In fact, the kids got out of school along about April because they had gone to school on Saturdays and long days so they could get out. And they started the school and they built it and they opened it up about 19... I think in January about 1930. They built it pretty fast.

LD: What was a typical day like at St. Patrick's? When did you go?

Stewart: We started school at nine o'clock in the morning, and we went until about 11:35. I lived nine blocks from the school, and we walked home for lunch and got back to the school as fast as we could so we could play softball. And school took up again at one o'clock, and we stayed in school until about 3:40. And that was a full day of school. There were no lunches served in those days; the kids from the country, they "brown sacked" it, and anybody that lived quite a ways from the school brought his own lunch. But very few of them ever had their lunch there; they all went home. Then during the noon hour we either played football or softball. There were no gymnasiums in those days--we had no gymnasium in the school. We just had a full day of reading, writing and arithmetic.

LD: That was my next question--what are the topics you remember that you covered?

Stewart: Well, we had a lot of them. We had Latin. In high school we had Latin, and we had chemistry, commercial--we had a commercial course there, which I took. I took a commercial course; typing, I know shorthand and accounting.

LD: Did they also have a college-prep sort of curriculum?

Stewart: No, not in those days. No, no.

LD: Do you have any idea how many of your classmates would have gone on to college?

Stewart: I would suppose that, oh, probably 80 percent of them went to college.

LD: Oh, that's a high number.

Stewart: That is, of the, let me see, I'd say there was about 80 percent--maybe I'm a little high on that. But some of them didn't graduate out of college; they just went and were exposed to it. Let's put it that way.

LD: I presume you also had religion courses at St. Patrick's.

Stewart: We had religion, yes. We had a half-hour religion course every day.

LD: Was chapel a part of every day?

Stewart: No, chapel was not a part of it. No, that was-- you could go to church in the morning. They had mass at eight o'clock and you could go to that. But there were devotions during Holy Week, though, that we had to go those.

LD: Are there any outstanding teachers or principals or administrators that you still remember that very strongly influenced you?

Stewart: Yes, there were several of them that were very good teachers. Of course, in those days, you either got it or you didn't get it. If you didn't want to go, they'd beat it into you because that was their job. And they were very disciplinarian.

LD: They were very rigorous.

Stewart: Oh, you'd better believe it! They were... In those days, you didn't fool around too much because they didn't take anything off you. If they felt like hitting you with something, why, they hit you with it. And if they didn't have a book or ruler or if they didn't have anything handy, they used their hands. But today, they don't do that; I mean, they wouldn't dare to do that today in any of the schools. And I think they should go back to it because a lot of these kids override their teachers, I think, today.

LD: Did you ever see much disciplinary problems, then, in those days?

Stewart: Not too many, not too many. First thing, we had a principal that was very strong minded; and if you went to the principal, that was it. It stopped there. But if it continued, then we had a pastor who-- they would threaten you by saying they were going to send you to the pastor. And that was the end of the road.

LD: That was terrifying!

Stewart: Oh, you'd better believe that was terrifying! And not only that, but your parents stood behind them. I mean, I can remember one time I got into a fight, and I got beat up. And

I got into the classroom and the nun took a couple of whacks at me, and I went home and told my mother and she whacked me because she felt if the sister did it, why, I had it coming. So after that, I never told my mother if I ever got beat up, because two beatings up was enough in one day. You know, what the parents did, they stood behind them in those days. Whatever they did was right--you had it coming.

LD: Who were your classmates? Did you have a lot of Czech classmates?

Stewart: Yes, we had quite a few. Well, maybe not so many Czechs in those days up there. You see, we had St. Wenceslaus in the southeast part of town, and most of the Czechs went down there. But we did have a few that infiltrated up to the north end, and one of them still--I think she's a nun, she's over there at St. Patrick's. Then there was Don Stark, his father was in the contracting business and Don was in that. Then he went to Ottumwa and became the head of a big contracting firm down there. Then three of the girls in my class became nuns.

LD: So that was not an unusual thing?

Stewart: Oh, no, no. Most of our class were of the Irish.

LD: So there were a lot of Irish people in that part of town?

Stewart: That's right, yes.

LD: Is that still typical of that part of town?

Stewart: Well, there's quite a few, but they're intermingled now.

LD: Did most of the parents--and I'm presuming that was mostly the fathers in those days--were they blue-collar workers? were they business owners?

Stewart: No, they were blue-collar workers. Laborers and blue-collar workers in the factories, yes. Rock Island Railroad, Quaker Oats, Penick & Ford, places like that.

LD: Big employers, weren't they?

Stewart: Yes.

LD: What were the typical Sundays like for you?

Stewart: A typical Sunday, when I was-- I started carrying papers when I was 11 years old, and a typical Sunday was, I was with the old Cedar Rapids Republican-Times. We carried papers all during the week but Saturday, and on Sunday we carried the Sunday paper. So that meant that at four o'clock in the morning you got up and you either rode your bicycle or you walked over to the Republican building, which now is the Art Center on Third Street and Fourth Avenue, East, and we picked up our papers. My route started on J Street and 15th Avenue, S.W., and during the winter, you walked that--you couldn't ride a bicycle. After you got through with that, then you-- when I was in grade school--well, in high school--we had a nine o'clock mass at St. Patrick's, and you had to be there. That was it! Required! Because on Monday morning they'd want to know where you were if you weren't at the nine o'clock mass. But even if you weren't at the nine o'clock, you either went to the six o'clock in the morning with your parents or you went to one of the other masses. And then in the afternoon, you either rode your bicycle up to Ellis Park or you walked up there and fooled around with a bunch of your pals up around there.

LD: So Ellis Park was a gathering place?

Stewart: It was a gathering place, and Riverside Park was a gathering park in the summer. We used to play baseball down there at Riverside Park, which is very small now compared to what it was then. That's back of the old Penick & Ford cereal plant down there.

LD: So it was larger? the Riverside Park?

Stewart: Oh, yes, Riverside Park was much larger. It went from, well, from the end of the buildings there at Penick & Ford way over to 15th Avenue. And it went from First Street to the river.

LD: Do you know why it changed? What cut it up?

Stewart: Well, it wasn't used so much and it would flood; every year it would flood. So I guess the city got tired of taking care of it.

LD: Well, this leads into an area that I wanted to ask you about, and that is, what sorts of things did you do as a youngster growing up for fun? in the summertime, for instance, and in the wintertime? How did you entertain yourself?

Stewart: Well, you made your own fun. We played baseball in the summertime. Or when you were old enough, you went to work. Of course, we always had the paper routes. You had to be over there by 3:30 to carry your papers. And then you picked strawberries in the summertime and during the season, and I picked strawberries for the Klubers out on - which is Williams Boulevard now. That was a farm. But Williams Boulevard and the Klubers were way out there. Their land was right there where the hotel or motel is out there now.

LD: The Holiday Inn?

Stewart: Yes, the Holiday Inn. The old barn was still there a few years ago--I guess it still is--where we brought our berries over there and they checked them in. We used to get three cents a quart for picking strawberries.

LD: Did they sell them around Cedar Rapids or send them off?

Stewart: No, they sold them in Cedar Rapids.

LD: Did you play or did you swim in the Cedar River?

Stewart: Oh, yes! Out at Beverly--there's where we played in it a lot, is at Beverly. There'd be three or four of us, and we would walk out to Beverly. That was a five-mile walk.

LD: Quite a walk!

Stewart: Yes, it was. And we used to take the old Northwestern tracks at Eighth Avenue and Rockford Road, and we would walk the tracks out to Beverly. And we'd go out there and swim on Sunday. Later, there were some friends that had an automobile, and they used to take us out there. But we'd walk out and back to Beverly--we never thought anything about it.

LD: Was there ever anybody to life guard?

Stewart: Oh-hh, lifeguards? You didn't hear about lifeguards, not at Beverly. But, I'll tell you, there was a... we used to swim there on the Cedar River. There was a bathhouse right where the Linn County jail is now.

LD: Okay.

Stewart: Yes. And there was a bathhouse there, and I think it was a quarter if you went into the bathhouse and got a locker. And then you had a shower afterwards. But then, there was a men's

bathhouse and a ladies' bathhouse. And between the two, they used to put up some canvas; and you could go in there and take your clothes off and put your swimsuit on and leave your clothes on a bench and hope they would be there when you got back. Which they were; nobody ever bothered them. And you swam for nothing, then. And then they moved the bathhouse up to Ellis Park, and we used to go up there and swim. Then we used to swim out at Marion at Thomas Park after they got that later on.

LD: This would have been in the twenties?

Stewart: Oh, yes, in the twenties. Well, in the twenties we swam down there at Fourth Avenue--at the Fourth Avenue Beach.

LD: There were no public swimming pools in those days, then?

Stewart: Well, the Fourth Avenue Beach was, that was public.

LD: But, I mean pools?

Stewart: Oh, pools? Oh, no pools; there was the river. And then there was another one down off 16th Avenue, below the 16th Avenue bridge. There was a bathhouse down there for the public, yes.

LD: Do you remember any drownings or any... ?

Stewart: Oh, yes, sure.

LD: It was not unusual?

Stewart: Not unusual to have drownings. Up the river, of course, but not so much in these public places. They had lifeguards in those days at the public places; they had lifeguards. In fact, there's one of the lifeguards still living--Dick Zvacek--and he was the lifeguard at Fourth Avenue and he was also a lifeguard up at Ellis, and he is still living.

LD: Did you have bicycles?

Stewart: Oh, yes. That's the only fast transportation you had. We never owned a car. My folks never owned a car. The first car I bought, I was in college, and I paid $45 for it. It was a touring car, and it had a top to it. It was a Model T Ford. We went from Cedar Rapids. When I was in college, I was in R.O.T.C., and there were four-- let's see, one, two, three, four, there was about five of us, and we had to go to Fort Snelling, Minnesota for summer camp in 1930. We piled into that car and went up there with all of our gear. I don't know how many tires we had on the back of it, and we blew out tires one right after the other. It took us, I think, twelve hours to go to Minneapolis. In fact, we even took the car apart while we were up there and put in some new bearings. And Louie Burkhalter of the Burkhalter Insurance Company, he was one of them that was with us. And coming home--we left Minneapolis, and it took us about twelve hours to come back-- it was raining; and we got into the rainstorm and lightning and thunder, and every time there was lightning the car would stop. I mean, it didn't lose momentum, but the engine stopped. Then, all of a sudden, it would come back on again. And if we put the top down... or if we had the top up and it quit raining, it was still raining underneath there because there were so many holes in the top. I'll never forget, we were coming down through Waverly. And Waverly had grass in the middle of their streets--they had quite a wide street-- and before we got to Waverly, Louie Burkhalter... Of course,

the Burkhalters were oldtimers here, and they had a shift car. And, so, Louie said... and I was doing the driving, and Louie said, "Can I drive?" And I said, "Yes, sure. Did you ever drive?" "Oh yes, sure," he said, "I drove." But he never drove a Model T, see. So he got behind the seat and then under the wheel, and he said, "Now, what do you do?" So I had to tell him what to do. Well, I fell asleep before we hit Waverly, and going down through Waverly--it must have been two o'clock in the morning, or so--I kind of, I got jolted awake, and I said, "Louie, where are we?" And he said, "Oh, we're some place." But he had two wheels up on this curbing and driving on it, and I said, "Louie, you're up on that curbing." "Oh," he said, "I didn't see it." (Laughter)

LD: Did you take over at that point?

Stewart: I took over from then on.

LD: What were the roads like?

Stewart: Terrible, terrible. Narrow.

LD: Did you have any paving?

Stewart: Oh, yeah, we had paving. Oh, yeah, we had paving, I think, all the way up there, but they weren't good--they were awful narrow and curbings and all, you know.

LD: Well, I'm going to ask you to go back a bit. Before we turned the tape on, we were talking about winter activities.

Stewart: Oh, winter activities.

LD: Some of the things you did in the winter.

Stewart: Well, I'll tell you, Universal Engineering over on A Avenue, between A and C Avenues--B and C Avenues--the railroad tracks

out there, that was what they called Chandler Steel. Well, Chandler had the Pump Company on First Avenue and they owned all that property, and it was a square block and there was nothing in there, only they had a baseball diamond. And it was a sunken square block, and they'd flood it in the winter time. And so we'd go up there and ice skate. There were no warming houses. We used to scrounge for coal and wood and everything else and build fires. Then in the summer time we played baseball up there and we played soccer and we played football up there. In fact, that's where we used to practice for St. Patrick's, 'cause we used to go up there on that field and practice football.

LD: What are your memories of the bobsled? Will you share those with us?

Stewart: Oh, the bobsled. We had a lot of fun with that. The only place we could run the bobsled was on First Avenue because that was the biggest hill we had around, and we didn't want to carry it too far. Now, Don Stark had this bobsled made--his father, as I said, was in the construction business and they made this bobsled and it was, oh, it must have been about twenty feet long. You could steer it from the front; it had an automobile steering wheel on the front to steer it. But you'd get quite a few kids on there, and it would go almost to the Northwestern Railroad tracks there on First Avenue. Then we'd have all the kids pull that thing back up the hill. If they wanted to ride, why, they had to pull the thing back up. Don and I never pulled it. We always had somebody pull it up.

LD: Since you were in charge, you could...

Stewart: We were in charge, yes.

LD: At that time you said they would close traffic.

Stewart: They would close traffic off--when the snow was good, they would close traffic off from Twelfth Street on First Avenue all the way down to the-- they closed off the side streets.

LD: As a child growing up, do you have memories of the terrible cold of the winters?

Stewart: Oh, yes, I should say. We used to have-- winter would start along about Thanksgiving, and in those days they had a lot of snow and all the wagons would be horse and wagons and they had bobsleds. The milk trucks would have bobsleds, the railway express had bobsleds, and the lumberyards--they had bobsleds. And then what we would do is shack rides on those bobsleds. We'd take our sled--we always had a rope on it--and we'd throw it underneath the sled there, the big bobsleds, and hook onto that and ride down the street behind these-- shack rides on there.

LD: And they didn't mind that?

Stewart: Oh, they never mind, no. That wasn't much more for the horses to pull, but that's what we used to do. Sometimes they'd run you off, but not very often.

LD: So there was no street cleaning in those days. They wanted the streets to keep the...

Stewart: No, they never cleaned the snow off the streets. They didn't have anything to clean them off with. It came on like Thanksgiving and stayed until it melted off in the spring.

LD: Did you find in the summer time, alternatively, what are your memories of how you kept cool in the summer time?

Stewart: Well, you had a fan. And you opened up the windows, and you had a fan and you just fanned yourself in the summer time. That was it! There was no air conditioning. There wasn't even electric fans in those days.

LD: Did you have an icebox in your home?

Stewart: We had an icebox. And when I say icebox, a lot of people, if I refer to a refrigerator today, sometimes I'll say icebox, and they say, "You date yourself." But we had an icebox, yes, and the ice man--you had a card you put in your window how many pounds of ice you wanted. There was 25, 50, 75 and 100 pounds, and you turned the card which way, whatever piece of ice you wanted. And they brought that ice in and put it in the icebox. A lot of times they used to drag mud and everything else into your house if you had it inside. Then we used to follow the ice wagon because they'd chip the ice, see. See, all that ice was river ice. It was made up the river. And they would chip that ice. So we followed the ice wagon, and when he'd go into a house we'd get the little pieces of ice to chew on.

LD: That was a treat.

Stewart: Oh, that was a treat, you bet.

LD: Well, I have a lot of other questions about that period, but I think I'm going to shift here because we really want to talk about Coe and your occupation as a funeral director. So, I hope we'll get back to some of these. You started to Coe in

1927 and graduated in 1931, which is right over the period when the bottom fell out of the economics?

Stewart: The bottom fell out of the economics--well, it was starting. It had fallen out and it wasn't... they were on the downhill pull. Although, I did have a job in Chicago after I got out of college. I went with the A.R. Smart Accounting Firm, and we had about four offices--one in San Francisco; Chicago; Dayton, Ohio; and New York. And they had another one in London, England. In fact, old Mr. Smart was from London. So, I went to work for them in the fall of 1931. And then the next year I was sent to Dayton, Ohio, to the office. And the Depression really hit about that time, because our firm had all of the United Airlines, which was known as the National Airlines at that time, they had all of those accounts and they had the American Airlines out of New York. Well, in 1933, the government took over the airlines, and we lost a tremendous amount of accounts there, because that was a year-round job with them. Being the youngest man in the office--I got married in June, and in September I had lost my job, and I couldn't find a job. I couldn't buy a job in either Dayton, Ohio, or Cincinnati, Ohio. And, so, I came back here to Cedar Rapids.

LD: I want to come back to that period, too, but during your years as a coach, were you living at home?

Stewart: I was living at home, yes, ma'am.

LD: Were you involved with one of the college fraternities?

Stewart: I was, Alpha Delta Alpha, and we were located, let's see, where were we? We were out here on about 17th, 16th Street. We had our house out at 16th Street.

LD: Some of the young men lived in the house?

Stewart: Oh, yeah, there were a lot of out-of-towners that lived in the house--most of the out-of-towners lived in the house.

LD: How big was Coe in those days, do you remember?

Stewart: Oh, we had about 750 students in those days.

LD: And it was still very closely tied to its religion?

Stewart: Oh, it was definitely a Presbyterian college, yes. We had to go to chapel every day. All but one, all but one day. We were allowed not to go to chapel, and it didn't make any difference what religion you were, you had to go to [chapel]. Because if you didn't go to [chapel], they took a percentage off your grades that we missed. And they had a monitor. Now, I went there four years, and I never knew who my monitor was. That was how secret it was. And if you weren't there, they knew, because you sat alphabetically in your seat; and for four years I never knew who my monitor was.

LD: But you had one!

Stewart: I had one, because a couple of times I'd miss and they'd jack you up about it.

LD: Who was the president of Coe at that time?

Stewart: Gage was the president, yes.

LD: Do you have any memories of him as a character?

Stewart: He was quite a guy! He was a very learned man. And we had chapel--as I say, we had chapel four times a week--and it

would last about twenty minutes or so. And when I think about him, we would have a good speaker there, and he would take about fifteen minutes to introduce the speaker.

LD: Then the speaker would have five.

Stewart: He'd have about five minutes, yes.

LD: What did you major in?

Stewart: Well, I majored in accounting, um hmm.

LD: Were there particular teachers in that field that had an impact on you?

Stewart: Well, we only had one teacher that handled accounting, and he was kind of a dry sort of a fellow.

LD: Academic.

Stewart: Academically, yeah.

LD: What were the-- beyond the chapel, what were the rules at Coe in those days?

Stewart: Well, you had to take religion, too, in order to graduate. Yes, we had to take religion, and that was required. You couldn't graduate without taking religion; it didn't make any difference whether you were Jew, Catholic, or Protestant--you had to take religion.

LD: Did you find that ever came into conflict with your Catholic...?

Stewart: No, because I talked to the old professor, Professor Morris, and he was a gracious old man. He was a Welshman. And I told him, I said, "Now, Doctor," I said, "I'm a Catholic, and when you give an exam, I will write this according to my belief." He said, "That's o.k., Stewart, I'll give you credit for it."

And then later, after I got out of college, I met him downtown one time right in front of the library. And he stopped me and he said-- and I always remember this-- he said, "Stewart, you're a Catholic. I'm a Protestant. I'm going to Heaven by express and you're going by horse and buggy." (Laughter)

LD: The old-fashioned way.

Stewart: The old-fashioned way, yes.

LD: But we're both going to get there. That's great!

Stewart: Oh, he was a great guy!

LD: Those were the days of Prohibition, when you were in college?

Stewart: Oh yes, definitely!

LD: Did you find that that was a law that was much broken?

Stewart: Oh yes, it was broken. Yeah, yeah, it was broken.

LD: Were there very strict penalties for drinking?

Stewart: Well, it wasn't so much, it wasn't prevalent around the college. I mean, it might have been in some of the fraternity houses, but we never had it. We were kind of a strait-laced outfit, our fraternity was. Yeah. But I know some of the fraternities that did a lot of tipping, yes.

LD: Do you remember anything about-- you hear so much about bootlegging during that period.

Stewart: Oh yes, there was bootlegging, but, as I say, you didn't see so much of it. It wasn't around the college. You never saw it around the college.

LD: It wasn't necessary to have a good time, then?

Stewart: Oh no, you didn't have to have liquor to have a good time. No, we never had it. No.

LD: How were the women students treated in that time, compared to the men? Were there stricter rules?

Stewart: Well, they were pretty strict, yes. Yeah, they had curfew over there at Voorhees Hall, and all. Yes, they were very strict.

LD: Do you remember any differences in the classroom? In the attitudes the professors had toward women?

Stewart: Oh, no. No, there was no-- no, they were on an even keel with us.

LD: I've heard a lot of people say that, that it was a very democratic....

Stewart: Yes, it was very democratic.

LD: Did you experience "flunk day"?

Stewart: Oh, absolutely! You bet! Boy, that was quite the thing, you know. You never knew when Flunk Day was coming until you got over there and everything was closed, see. Oh, yeah, we had Flunk Day every year. But it generally was a day like this. Now today, they have Flunk Day, and sometimes it's so cold that they can't enjoy it. But they always waited until they had a nice day or figured they were going to have a nice day. We were never rained out to my knowledge. But a lot of times now, it rains out or snows out.

LD: This would be a perfect day.

Stewart: Yes, this would be a perfect day.

LD: How would you evaluate the education that you received at Coe in those days?

Stewart: Oh, I think it was very high. It was very high.

LD: They prepared you then?

Stewart: Oh, they prepared you. Oh yes, it was very good.

LD: O.K., let's go on to the period then that we had been talking about earlier, 1933, when you came back to Cedar Rapids.

Stewart: Yes.

LD: How did you get into the funeral director position?

Stewart: Well, I'll tell you. We'll go back a little bit further than that. After I came back here, I applied for a job at Quaker Oats, and to this day they have never called me. (Laughter) Now, that is 52 years I could have worked for Quaker Oats and been retired.

LD: Years ago.

Stewart: Years ago. But they have never called me. So, about that time they were changing from manufactured gas to natural gas, and I got a job with the gas company drilling holes in burners and changing filters in meters. And it was the dirtiest job! Fifty cents an hour, and we worked eight hours a day. There were a lot of us that were out of work, and they used us. And we did that all over the whole city. And then the next time around, which was several months after that, they found out that I had been in accounting; so I had charge of payroll. So I used to go to work at midnight and work until seven o'clock in the morning working on payroll and also lining up job slips for the fellows the next day. Then I left there, and I went to work for Fifth Avenue Market, and I delivered. My brother was ahead of me there, and he went to California, and I got his job. So I delivered groceries from Tenth Street all the

way out on the northeast side of Cedar Rapids. I worked there for about a year or so. We had a special day of selling canned goods, and I happened to-- one of my people was a lady out in Country Club Heights, and I was trying to sell her some canned goods. I did sell her, and her husband was the assistant manager of Metropolitan Life Insurance. And I guess I did such a good selling job on her, she told her husband and they asked me to go to work for Metropolitan. So I went to work for Metropolitan, and I worked there for about a year. Then, my father-in-law had a nephew working for him, and he quit and went to DeWitt and opened up a funeral home. And he [father-in-law] needed some help. But I'd worked for Metropolitan for about a year and it was during the Depression, and everything was bad. You couldn't hardly get the money out of people at all. I had a debit--what they called a debit--and it was a nickel and a dime every week for insurance. And a lot of these people didn't have a nickel and a dime. So I got a little tired of that, and I thought, I'm going to get on the other end of this insurance thing. So I took out an apprentice license and I went to school in 1936, got my license, and I've been in it ever since. And I took over the business in-- Well, we were in business together for a while, and then I took over the business after he died in 1959.

LD: You had described then earlier to me how you literally had to walk from one home to....

Stewart: Oh, I had to walk from one home to another because there was no paved street. When my debit was down on the southwest side--it started at First Avenue but went all the way to the Northwestern Railroad tracks down around J Street and from J Street on west--and it was all dirt roads. And in the spring of the year, it was mud and you couldn't drive your car. You kept it on paving, and then you walked through the mud to get to these houses.

LD: Not a happy job!

Stewart: It wasn't a happy job, no. It didn't pay that much either, as far as that was concerned.

LD: Where was the first funeral home then?

Stewart: The first funeral home was in the Sokol Building on Third Street in the 400 block. He had a little-- there was an entrance to the Sokol Building, and then on either side there were two small rooms. And he had the one on the south side, which would have been up next to that-- which was Borden Ice Cream Company at that time. Of course, in those days, when he started in 1908, you took everybody home--even did a lot of the embalming in the home in those days. But you took everybody home.

LD: So, it was more of a storefront operation?

Stewart: It was a storefront operation, yes. And then you either took them-- you had the service in the home, or you took them to a church, rather than in a funeral home. Funeral homes didn't come around until, oh, along about in the Twenties.

LD: As a concept, then?

Stewart: That's right, yes.

LD: I'm going to stop--we're almost at the end of Side 1--and turn this over.

End of Side 1, Tape 1--Beginning of Side 2

LD: O.K. How many people, then, were employed at the funeral home when you were first involved there in the Thirties? You?

Stewart: I was it! I was the embalmer, I was the funeral director, I washed the cars, I did the painting, I did the clean-up work, I did the yard work. I was it!

LD: It was a good way to get the total picture. (Laughter)

Stewart: That's right!

LD: Talk about, for a moment, what your qualifications were, what kind of licensing did you have to have in order to... ?

Stewart: We had to go to school. In those days we went to school for six months. It was a very thorough school; we did a lot of embalming and all. But when I got out and we got to the State Board, they were changing from a six-month schooling to a nine-month schooling. So when we got to the State Board, they said, "We've got the questions. This will be the nine-month-course questions." Well, we almost died right there. And not only that, there were sixty some of us in the class to take the State Board, and the opening remark was, "Fifty percent of you will flunk it." And I thought, well, why don't you give us odd and even numbers and put them in a hat and we'll pick them out and see who-- but, luckily, and thanks be to God, I got through the first time. But some of them took it three times and still flunked out.

LD: What was a typical funeral like? In the Thirties, those were hard times. How-- I know you talked about how you generally went to the home and things of that sort. Did families observe the same kind of visitation process?

Stewart: Oh, yes. Around the clock. Twenty-four hours when you took them home.

LD: Somebody stayed with the....

Stewart: Oh, they stayed with the body. Oh, yes. And several of them got pretty drunk before you had the funeral. Because they'd drink all night.

LD: To kind of keep them going?

Stewart: To keep them going, see. Oh, yes. But it was a twenty-four hour deal. And maybe two nights of it. In those days, you know, if they died in the morning early, why, we had them home between four and five o'clock. And then you'd have that night and all the next day and another night and maybe the fourth day you'd bury them, see. But then it finally got down to they only had a one night wake in the homes. But, oh no, that was a twenty-four-hour deal. Somebody stayed there with them all the time.

LD: So the term "wake" literally means you stayed awake with the body?

Stewart: You stayed awake with the body, yes.

LD: Well, that's it. It finally hit me.

Stewart: Then when we'd have it in the funeral home, we'd have maybe a couple of days of wakes, too. And then, oh, gosh, I've seen

the time when I'd be up until midnight with people. From six o'clock in the morning until midnight.

LD: Those are long hours.

Stewart: Then, finally, we got it down later that they could have one night, and then we cut it back to nine o'clock.

LD: What was typical in terms of caskets?

Stewart: Typical, when I started, cloth-covered. And maybe you had a few hardwoods and one or two metals, and then later on it became more metals and less cloth-covers and less hardwoods. Now it's turned turtle again and we've got quite a few hardwoods and metals and very seldom do you use a cloth-covered casket anymore.

LD: Was the open casket the norm for services and for the wake?

Stewart: Oh yes, definitely. Unless the body was too far deteriorated, like a mutilation or a drowning or something like that, and then you had to close the casket.

LD: Most of the people that were your customers, were they southwest side people?

Stewart: No, they were like northwest side, well, west side. In those days, when they first started, it was west side; and then with the business over here, later, up on-- then we moved up to 824 First Avenue, which was across from the Masonic Library, and then we had a lot of the people on the east side then, too.

LD: I wonder if it was typical, for instance, for the Czech people to go to a particular funeral home.

Stewart: Yes, they did. There were two or three Czech funeral homes in those days, oh yes. Definitely.

LD: So you really did not have many of those funerals?

Stewart: Not too many in later years, because they stayed pretty well to their people. Um hmm.

LD: What happened to indigents in those days? Did you ever have responsibility for those?

Stewart: Oh, we had a lot of them. Oh yes, you buried them.

LD: How was that handled?

Stewart: Well, sometimes the county would pay for them--a hundred dollars. And then we'd take them out to paupers' field, out in the Oak Hill Cemetery. There's a paupers' field out there. They don't call it "paupers' field" anymore, but there is a paupers' field out there. And they just buried one right after the other. And the city opened the graves, and it didn't cost the family anything for that. If you got a hundred dollars out of it from the county, fine. And if the county decided they didn't want to pay you, why, you were stuck for it.

LD: Did you have a high percentage of those during those days?

Stewart: Oh yes, there were quite a few. But there was one funeral director here that had a lot of them. He used to do a lot of that work. But we'd have quite a few. We'd have our share of them.

LD: What sort of identification would they have, then? Would there be a plaque or something with their name?

Stewart: Oh, they'd probably put a marker out there at the grave, yes.

LD: But very simple.

Stewart: Very simple, oh yes. It's still out there. They still bury once in awhile out there in that paupers' field.

LD: What sort of transportation did you use to take the body out to the cemetery?

Stewart: Well, in my time it was-- well, when they started, it was horse and buggy and horse-drawn hearses. But in my time it was all automobiles.

LD: Did you have a particular brand that you used generally, or style of limousine?

Stewart: Oh, it was either gray or black.

LD: That's shifted.

Stewart: That has shifted now, oh yes.

LD: When did that happen?

Stewart: Oh, that happened probably in the Forties, the latter part of the Forties. Different ones would get a different color or something like that.

LD: There was no general reason why it happened?

Stewart: No. You see, when they first started, now, like an older person would have black horses and a younger person would have gray horses or white horses.

LD: Oh-hh. So it really identified the...

Stewart: And you see, when I first started, if anybody died, the first thing you did was put a crepe on the door to let people know that there was a death at that house.

LD: That is not done any more.

Stewart: No, that is not done, but, you see, that kept all your solicitors and beggars away.

LD: What was the-- and I know this is hard to generalize, but what was typically the cost of a funeral in those days?

Stewart: Oh, three hundred dollars, probably.

LD: And how would the family pay for that? Did they have insurance that would cover that?

Stewart: Well, some of them had a little insurance, and otherwise, they'd pay you by the month.

LD: So it was often done on a time basis?

Stewart: Oh yes, on a time basis, yes. But a lot of people, oh, they might have had a hundred dollar insurance policy or something like that. Nothing like today.

LD: The techniques that were used in those days for embalming, have they changed a great deal from recent...?

Stewart: Not a great deal, no. Although we used to do it by gravity and now we do it with a machine. I mean, to get the fluid into the body. But we used to do it by gravity or with a rubber hose and a rubber bulb.

LD: Have you often dealt with people who were opposed to that?

Stewart: Oh yes, sometimes.

LD: Is that a religious...?

Stewart: No. Well, not exactly. Some years ago they were opposed to embalming--some of them were, but not too many. The Jewish people were. That's their religion. It was in the old orthodox. They didn't believe in it. But if they died like this morning, we buried them before sundown today.

LD: I see. It was done very quickly.

Stewart: Oh yes, very quickly.

LD: Did you handle many Jewish families?

Stewart: No, we didn't. My father-in-law handled them. But, you see, when he started, they didn't even use caskets. I mean, they'd put them in a casket and take them home, and they'd take them out and wrap them in a sheet. And then they'd put them back in the casket, take them to the cemetery, take them out, and bury them in the ground. And the casket was used all the time.

LD: Just for transportation.

Stewart: Yeah, and it got so that it got pretty soiled. So they went to the health department and told them that these Jewish people were going to have to buy a casket, because they couldn't be using it. It didn't make any difference what disease it was, see. You didn't embalm them so you didn't take care of it. But they would just bury them in the ground with a sheet over them.

LD: Did you have any other unusual requests or traditions that you had to deal with under....

Stewart: Oh yes. I didn't particularly, but my father-in-law did. There was a bunch of gypsies that came through here one time, and they lost a little boy. And he had the funeral, and they put him in the casket and they put in a sandwich and they gave him some money and they had a comb and soap and a washrag. So he asked them what was the deal. And they said, "Well, when he gets to-- he'll get hungry on the way, and when he gets to

the River Styx, he can wash himself and comb his hair and pay his way across the River Styx.

LD: They literally believed that that was going to be the process.

Stewart: That's right.

LD: There were so many immigrant families coming to Cedar Rapids in those days, and I just wondered if you had a variety of backgrounds and traditions that you really just had to adjust your schedule to?

Stewart: Oh, sure. Oh, yes.

LD: We talked earlier about Union Station and your memories of Union Station and what your bodies were delivered there.

Stewart: Oh, yes, the bodies from California or from the East would come in to Union Station, and nine times out of ten they'd come in during the night. And you'd have to be down there waiting for them. Maybe the train would be late--an hour late or so--but there were so many trains during the night, you'd be standing out-- even in the winter time, you'd be standing out there waiting for the passengers to get off because they had the ticket for the body. And we had to show the ticket before we got the body, see? So, we'd wait in there, and then maybe a train would come in and you'd be in between two trains and standing out there in the cold and waiting for this train, waiting for these people to get off, and you'd pret' near freeze to death down there. It was the coldest place in the world down there, because it came right down from the slough and that wind and it just-- and it was raining. You were out in the rain.

LD: Nowadays, how is it? I guess it's mostly air, isn't it?

Stewart: It's all air, um hmm.

LD: And a much more comfortable process.

Stewart: Very, because we know what time the body's going to get in, and we go out there and it's right there for us.

LD: What were the most popular cemeteries in town?

Stewart: The most popular cemeteries in those days was Oak Hill Cemetery, which was an old cemetery. It was founded about 1850, Oak Hill. And Linwood Cemetery over on the west side. And those were-- and St. John's Cemetery, a Catholic cemetery on the southwest, and Mount Calvary Cemetery. And then later on the Syrians got their own cemetery; the Islams got their own cemetery. Well, and then Bohemian National, too. That was the Bohemian National Cemetery which is now Czech Cemetery, but that is what it was called. So those were the prominent ones.

LD: So they were generally owned by the churches in...?

Stewart: Uh-hhh, the Catholic cemeteries were owned by the churches. Oak Hill and Linwood were owned by people; Mr. Ely had charge of Oak Hill Cemetery, and there was another family that had charge of Linwood Cemetery. And then the Czechs....

LD: It was just a private business, then, for them?

Stewart: Yes. And then the Czech Cemetery, there was an organization that owned the Czech Cemetery.

LD: How did people generally make arrangements for cemetery plots? Was it the same as it is nowadays, or did they pay for them ahead of time?

Stewart: Not very often. They generally didn't buy anything until the time that it happened, and it's still that way today, some of them. But people are buying ahead of time and paying for them monthly. But in those days they didn't-- they waited until it was time to have a funeral and then they'd go and buy a bunch of graves.

LD: Did you ever deal with cremations in those days?

Stewart: Very seldom. Very seldom. There weren't too many in those days. Now, today, there's quite a few cremations.

LD: When did that begin to change?

Stewart: Oh, after World War II.

LD: Which brings me to World War II. We were talking about the effect of the war on your business and the bringing home of soldiers.

Stewart: They brought all the soldiers home that they could find at that time. We buried quite a few of them.

LD: I'm sure those were always closed caskets because of the long lengths of time.

Stewart: They were all closed caskets, yes.

LD: Do you have memories of particular times that were... I guess I have some questions about what are your memories of the fanciest funeral you ever did versus the most tragic or the ones that impressed you in your mind as being particularly either extravagant in one way or another or...?

Stewart: Well, that's kind of hard to answer. I can tell you about the cheapest funeral....

LD: Well, that might be interesting.

Stewart: ...that my father-in-law ever had. It was a Greek. A young lad about 21 years old died, and that's when he [father-in-law] was still down in the Sokol Building, and he hadn't been over here too long. And so he had his office and his embalming room there and caskets, and he had wooden boxes that the caskets came in. So, two or three of the Greek men came, and they wanted to give this fellow a nice burial. Well, they didn't look at the caskets--they saw the boxes, and they said, "How much are the boxes?" And he said, "Fifteen dollars." They said, "We'll take it." (Laughter) Well, that wasn't too bad, but the day of the funeral they started at the Sokol Building with a lead horse and buggy, and then the hearse, and they went right on up the street, past the gas company, with all the rigs. Each man had a rig of his own, see, he rented a rig. And they took a picture of it so that they could send back to his people in Greece to show them what a wonderful funeral he had. But they didn't get the picture of this box in the hearse, see. And that's what it was-- fifteen dollars.

LD: From the outside it looked pretty.

Stewart: From the outside it looked... Oh, boy! They really sent him off nicely!

LD: When would that have been?

Stewart: Oh, that was way back in the teens, yes. See, he started in 1908, and I suppose this was, I don't know. It was back in the teens. I'd have to go back over the-- we have records from 1908.

LD: The reason I asked you about the fanciest funeral was that I think typically the way in which a funeral is handled is often considered, or was, an expression of the family's position in town.

Stewart: Oh, yes.

LD: And I'm sure you saw that, too.

Stewart: Oh yes, sure.

LD: What were some things that, for instance, an upper middle class family or one with more income would do that in a normal situation....

Stewart: Oh, well, they would buy the fanciest casket you had in the house, and rent a lot of cars and have a lot flowers and all.

LD: It would just be more laying on of trappings.

Stewart: Be more laying on of the trappings, yes, sure.

LD: When did you move to the present location--where you are now?

Stewart: We came up here in 1958. We started business here in 1958.

LD: You have some stories about this house that are very special.

Stewart: Yes, this was a home, and then it was sold. A woman ran a nursing home in here. She lived downstairs here, but she had her nursing home upstairs. And she had it here for a couple of years, and then she wanted to sell it, so we bought it. But this home was built in 1908 by the Dunshee family, who was also related to Chandler Pump Company. They were brothers-in-law, and they were in the pump business.

LD: I'm sure it was a very substantial home when it was built.

Stewart: It was a very substantial home. And Mrs. Dunshee was the head of the Garden Club of Cedar Rapids for many years, and they

held their meetings here and all. The back yard was full of flowers--exotic flowers--when we came here. There were lilacs and all different kinds of lilac bushes, and tulips, and you name the flowers, she had them.

LD: Is that garden still there?

Stewart: No, no, no. We had to take that all out to make room for parking.

LD: Do you remember particular catastrophic events in the community?

Stewart: Yes, I do. The Douglas Starch Works explosion in 1919.

LD: You were very young then.

Stewart: Yes, I was just ten years old. And we lived-- let's see, the Starch Works was at First Street and it started at the railroad tracks at Ninth Avenue and extended on down to about Tenth or Eleventh Avenue. And we lived on Fourth Street and Eighth Avenue. And my older brother and I were out between the two houses, and we were beating a rug. It was in May, and we were house cleaning. And we were beating a rug, and when that explosion hit, it blew us right up on our feet. And we ran out to the sidewalk and looked down there and we could see men and debris and everything else flying up in the air.

LD: You could literally see the fire?

Stewart: We could literally see those, yes. And that burnt for months down there.

LD: Did you know any of the families that were affected?

Stewart: Yes, I was in school with a family by the name of Getz, and they have one son living yet over on the west side and he runs

a stationery store or office supply store across from the police station. And his father was just about ready to jump out of a window and a beam hit him and killed him. That was one that I knew, and I knew other people that were just going to go to work about that time. It was around six o'clock at night.

LD: It was kind of between shifts, wasn't it?

Stewart: It was between shifts. They were just about ready to get off the shift. But that was a terrible thing.

LD: How did the community react? Now, you were young, so I'm sure you don't remember a lot of it.

Stewart: No. Well, it was quite a tragedy and people were very saddened about that. But the Douglases took care of those people and all.

LD: Do you remember any of the specific things that were done for the families?

Stewart: Oh, yes. I'm pretty sure that they gave the families money to bury their people.

LD: Of course, that was way before you had any involvement in...

Stewart: Well, yes. That's right.

LD: Shifting a bit to the medical community. In your business, what is your relationship to the medical community?

Stewart: Well, it is very close to the medical community. See, we have to go through them to get our certificates signed and all. So when a person dies, we make up a death certificate, send it to the doctor, he signs it, we take it and file it at the Linn County Clerk's Office.

LD: Has that process changed over the years?

Stewart: Not a bit.

LD: That's just the way it used to be?

Stewart: Well, it has changed, too. I'll go back. We used to record those in the City Hall. And then later on, why, they changed that, and we have to record them in the County Clerk's Office. But the City used to record them. They would record them and then send them over. At the end of the month they would take them over to Linn County. But they bypass the City Clerk's Office now. So they have nothing to do with that.

LD: Did you ever have situations where the official explanation of death was at odds with what you could see or with what the coroner could see?

Stewart: Oh, sometimes, yes. Sometimes they might... Sometimes we had cases where they didn't know what caused the death. I know there is a doctor here in town whose wife died, and to this day they don't know what happened to her.

LD: Was it typical in those days, then, to go through the process of an autopsy, or was that unusual?

Stewart: Oh, that was unusual, unless there was a fatal accident or sometimes if they didn't know exactly what caused the death, they would have an autopsy. But, oh, we had quite a few of them in those days, but I don't think as many as they have today.

LD: So, the role of the coroner, then, took place before you were involved.

Stewart: The coroner was elected, yes, and then he could appoint his deputies. And I was a deputy coroner for about 12 years.

LD: So could you sign the certificate yourself?

Stewart: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LD: And that would cut through some of the red tape?

Stewart: Um hmm.

LD: So the process then of the certification was merely viewing the body and....

Stewart: Determining what caused the death, yes.

LD: That has become much more specific in the present, hasn't it?

Stewart: Well, yes, there's a doctor now who is a medical examiner, and he has his deputies that work under him.

LD: I wanted to ask you, and we never quite got around to it. We were talking about how hard the Depression times were. Did the Depression have an effect on your business? You know, one of the jokes you always hear about, it's one of the professions where there's always business no matter what.

Stewart: No, it didn't have an effect. Not that way. I mean, they died, you buried them.

LD: That's right. (Laughter)

Stewart: The Depression didn't stop death.

LD: That's right.

Stewart: Nor taxes.

LD: Did you find it necessary to do more time payment sorts of arrangements?

Stewart: Oh yes, definitely, yes.

LD: What about the bank closings in 1933? Did that have an effect on your cash flow?

Stewart: Well, I-- of course, see I wasn't there, but I was in Dayton, Ohio, when they closed the banks. And when I left Chicago-- I put my money in the postal savings when I was in Chicago, and so when I moved to Dayton, Ohio, I transferred my money to the postal savings. I had them transferred to Dayton, Ohio. And the banks closed, big banks closed in Dayton, Ohio. And our office didn't have any money. And I was the only one in the office that had any money, because I could go down to the post office and ask them for my money. So I went down there and borrowed some of that money just to pay some of our expenses in the office until they got money out of Chicago. There were three big banks in Dayton, Ohio. Now, there were 200,000 people in Dayton, Ohio, at that time. There were three banks, and they all closed. There were 22 savings and loan associations in that city. I came to work one morning and I heard a siren. And I thought, gee, what's this? And I looked down the street, and here was a great big Cadillac car--black Cadillac car--with a siren on it, and they pulled right up to the front door of this savings and loan. And people were going to bust into this savings and loan and get their money out. And the doors opened up and a bunch of detectives came out of there with guns--shotguns--and whatnot to disperse the people.

LD: Wow!

Stewart: Oh, yes, they were going to make a run on that savings and loan association.

LD: So, the panic was very great then in those days?

Stewart: Oh, it was great. Yes, it was great. And that went on for a few days until then they finally opened the banks up again.

LD: After that point, when you did come back to Cedar Rapids and you were newly married, what are your memories of the effects of the Depression on being a young family trying to make a living during that time?

Stewart: It was rough! Twenty dollars a week!

LD: That was your income?

Stewart: That was my income, yes. Twenty dollars a week. I'd start work at seven o'clock in the morning and be through at six o'clock at night.

LD: Did your wife have a job at that time?

Stewart: No. Absolutely not! Women didn't work in those days.

LD: Did you have things that you did to try to supplement that? Did you raise your own garden and things of that nature?

Stewart: Oh, yes, you'd have a garden. Sure.

LD: Do you remember how the people in the community helped each other?

Stewart: Oh, they helped each other.

LD: Those were different times; they didn't have all of the welfare....

Stewart: Oh yes, sure. Sure, they would help each other. And that was it. If you had it, why, you helped the other guy. You made your own entertainment--you didn't go as much. You visited the homes, and that, and that was it, see.

LD: So you don't have memories of much institutional charity in those days?

Stewart: Oh no, there was... nothing like it is today. Oh no, that was one of the worst things they have done, I think.

LD: It certainly changed the whole attitude of...

Stewart: Well, it has, because people say, "Well, I don't have to work." But you worked at anything you could get.

LD: We have shifted a bit, and I know we're getting close on time; but I'd like to go back because I left off on some of the things I wanted to talk to you about, particularly transportation when you were growing up.

Stewart: Well, I've been on everything but a motorcycle... I mean, I've driven everything but a motorcycle and a spaceship. I grew up with horse and buggy. My folks never owned a car; I was the only one in the family that had a car, and I was in college when I bought that. So I've been in airplanes, bicycles-- no mopeds, I detest mopeds.

LD: You said you had ridden the interurban quite often.

Stewart: We would ride the interurban. I rode the interurban from here to Iowa City and from here to Waterloo and from here to Lisbon. They used to run down to Mount Vernon and Lisbon.

LD: Do you have memories of-- someone told me that there was actually a dining car on that at some time.

Stewart: I don't remember that, no, because it was a short-- an hour from here to Lisbon, forty-five minutes to Iowa City, possibly about an hour and a half to Waterloo. They went from Cedar Rapids to Waterloo and Cedar Falls.

LD: Well, I particularly want you to describe Hunter Airport and your memories of that.

Stewart: Well, Hunter Airport, Dan Hunter used to-- well, about where the tennis courts out on Eighth Avenue West, he used to land there on Sundays. He barnstormed on Sundays, and he had a plane and it was five dollars to ride around the city. And we used to go up there just to watch the plane come in and land. And he would take one or two people at a time and fly around the city--it took him about ten or fifteen minutes--and land. And then later on he had his airport down on J Street, I think the Goss Company is down there now, and he had quite an airport down there. That was the Cedar Rapids Airport, I mean Hunter Airport. They called it Hunter Airport.

LD: So, it was a private business, then?

Stewart: It was a private business....

LD: He charged landing fees and...?

Stewart: Oh yes, sure. Then the mail. My dad was with the Standard Oil Company, and then he was up at the main plant. And he used to carry gas down there, haul gas down there for these mail planes that would land here. When they first started to carry mail in open cockpit planes, see, they would about run out of gas. So they would land here. And I can remember him telling one time, they didn't have any strainer for the gas and they made him strain the gas into the tanks so there would be no impediments to it. And this fellow had a chamois around his neck, see, and he took that chamois off and my dad had to put that gas down through that chamois to strain it into the tank.

LD: Yes, because if you stalled, it was....

Stewart: If you stalled, there was no place to go but down. Yes.

LD: What was the first plane you flew in?

Stewart: The first plane I flew in was a Standard Oil tri-motor plane. I was in Chicago visiting this great-uncle of mine, so they took me out to the airport--I think that must have been Meig's Airport at that time, because O'Hare wasn't around. And so they flew me out over Lake Michigan and up Lake Michigan, up north, and way up north and back. We must have been gone a half hour or so. That was the first airplane ride I ever had.

LD: How did you feel about airplanes after that?

Stewart: Oh, I thought they were great. And then they came here one time; they brought that plane here and landed out to Hunter Airport. So my neighbors, they had a car and they took me out there, and they wanted to take me up. Of course, I knew the pilot and all, so they said, "Well, we'll take you up." And I said, "No," I said, "you took me up in Chicago." I said, "Why don't you take these neighbors of mine up?" So they did.

LD: It was a very special thing to get to do.

Stewart: Oh yes. Oh yes, I should say. So they flew them around the city with that Ford tri-motor plane. They called it the Standolin Number One.

LD: Shifting to communications, when you were growing up, you were a paperboy. So papers were real important to you.

Stewart: They were very important. And there were no radios in those days, and if there was a disaster somewhere or a president died, why, we had extra papers. And I can remember that

Woodrow Wilson was dying, and they had the obituary all written up for weeks before he died. And as soon as he died, they put the date in and the age and the time; then they would call us up and we would go out and sell papers. They were a nickel a paper. We'd buy them for a penny and sell them for a nickel or ten cents. And we'd run up and down the street just hollering our head off. "Extra, Extra, Extra!" And people would pop out and they would buy the paper. Because that was the only news. They wouldn't get the news until that night, see, and if this was early in the morning, why, that was swell. They got the paper.

LD: How did that shift when radios began?

Stewart: Oh, well, then it dropped off. Oh, sure. It worked for a while, but then people got radios, see, and they'd just be tuning it in on the radio. So, that extra paper, that was no good.

LD: Do you remember your first radio in your home when you were growing up?

Stewart: Yes, I made one.

LD: You built one?

Stewart: I built one out of a....

LD: Was it a crystal set?

Stewart: It was a crystal set made out of a Quaker Oats box. And we'd take that and wrap copper wire around it, and then we had the little crystal and we had what we called the cat's whisker, and that went down on part of this crystal. And you moved that around until you got a station. I lived at Fourth Street

and Eighth Avenue, and the radio station--old KCRG--was up on Third Avenue, which was right straight up the street, see. And I could get that, and we had earphones. Then, like Philadelphia would come into this station, and they'd rebroadcast it. And we'd sit there and my mother would be crying, "Sh-hhh, sh-hhh. I got a station, I got a station."

LD: But it was always with earphones?

Stewart: Oh yes. Oh yes, earphones. And then they finally came out with great big phones. Or, I mean, well, you wouldn't them a phone. They were a funnel....

LD: Amplifiers?

Stewart: Amplifiers, yes.

LD: I guess that's why the originals were so big.

Stewart: Oh yes. Then there were three dials on them, see. Superhetrodyne. Oh, and those things were that big. On the top you had three dials. You had to get those dials just right. And then they were run by batteries, and the batteries were down underneath, you know, and you had to recharge those just like automobile batteries.

LD: Superhetrodyne was the name of a trademark or...?

Stewart: Superhetrodyne. Boy, if you had a Superhetrodyne, you had it! You had "the" radio, see.

LD: How was that spelled? Is it...?

Stewart: S-u-p-e-r-h-e-t-r-o-d-y-n-e. Superhetrodyne. Then there was an Atwater-Kent radio, and that was...

LD: I've heard of the Atwater-Kent.

Stewart: Oh yes, that was quite a radio. Atwater-Kent, yes.

LD: What were your favorite programs? Do you remember any of them?

Stewart: Oh, we'd get bands mostly.

LD: Lots of music.

Stewart: Lots of music, yes.

LD: Was that a live...?

Stewart: Oh yes, they'd be live.

LD: Event that you received?

Stewart: Oh yes, yes. They were all live, yes. And then later on you'd get Burns and Allen, Amos and Andy, and all those kinds of things. And you'd just wait every week to listen to them.

LD: Even I.

Stewart: Oh yes, sure.

LD: Do you remember scheduling your day so that you actually listened to a particular news broadcast? Or was it primarily....

Stewart: No, there wasn't too much news in those days.

LD: It was primarily entertainment, then?

Stewart: It was entertainment and mostly at night. Mostly at night; see.

LD: One other thing that I particularly wanted to ask you about because you were at an age when it would have impressed you, Armistice Day in 1919.

Stewart: Armistice Day. I remember very vividly Armistice Day. There was a neighbor-- there were two neighbors. One of them had a flat-bottomed truck. His father was a carpenter. And I was about nine years old. Let me see. About ten years old,

maybe. Anyway, I got to ride on this truck, and I got to ride on the fender. And all hell broke out that day. We were up and down the streets and down town and all, and we were pulling an effigy of Kaiser Wilhelm. You should have seen the effigies of Kaiser Wilhelm hanging from trees and downtown and....

LD: Very strong feelings.

Stewart: Oh! If you were German in those days, you were nothing!

LD: I was going to say, that really had an effect on people.

Stewart: Oh, you better believe it did. Yes. You kept your mouth shut if you were German. Oh no, that was a day. Noisy! It went all day long, into the night. The streets were full of people cheering.

LD: Compared to the end of World War II, was it a greater celebration?

Stewart: Oh, it was greater. Oh yes, much greater. It was greater than that, yes. Oh no, the streets were full of people, and hollering, and yelling, and flags were waving.

LD: So everything stopped that day.

Stewart: Everything stopped, that's right.

LD: You mentioned that it was tough being a German during that time. You came from an Irish Catholic background, and there were lots of different immigrant backgrounds in Cedar Rapids. Did you feel, growing up here, that there were times when you were discriminated against? when you were treated differently because of your background?

Stewart: No, not so much, not so much. No, we weren't....

LD: You never had....

Stewart: We were discriminated against because we were Catholic.

LD: That was a stronger differentiation?

Stewart: Oh yes, we were called "dirty catlickers."

LD: By whom?

Stewart: Oh, kids. Oh yes, I've gotten into a lot of fights over that.

LD: The Protestant kids?

Stewart: Oh, you bet. The Protestant kids would call you dirty catlickers. Because we went to Catholic school, we were Catholic, and, oh yes, I've gotten into a lot of fights over that. All you had to do was call us a dirty catlicker, and the fight was on.

LD: Yes, I'll bet! (Laughter) I think that's changed a great deal.

Stewart: Oh, it has, yes. Definitely.

LD: There used to be a lot of religious bias.

Stewart: Oh, there was terrible religious bias. Oh yes. Cedar Rapids was one of the worst.

LD: I guess even by the time you were in college, it was probably refreshing that you were-- here you were going to a Protestant college but you were allowed to demonstrate the things that you believed in.

Stewart: Oh yes, I was. Yes, they were very lenient about that.

LD: In your work or as a young man, did you find that that opinion still continued, that there was ever any question about that?

Stewart: Yes, some people resented it. I mean, they wouldn't call you because you were a Catholic.

LD: For the most part, the people that have been your customers over the years, have they been from the Catholic community?

Stewart: In the earlier years, yes. But now it doesn't make any difference.

LD: It's a matter of, you've built a reputation.

Stewart: Yes, built a reputation, yes. And, no, today we will have quite a few Protestant services.

LD: Are there areas that I have missed? Things that you particularly remembered that you wanted to share with us?

Stewart: Circus days.

LD: Circuses! We forgot the circuses!

Stewart: The circus would come to town. They'd get here along about four or five o'clock in the morning. Of course, we'd be sitting up waiting for them, because, you see, I lived just about two blocks from the railroad track. And the circus was held between Fourth Street and Sixth Street and Twelfth Avenue and about Fifteenth Avenue, or Fourteenth Avenue. And so we would wait until the trains came in and watch them unload. Then we'd go down to the circus grounds and help them build up. Oh, yes, water the elephants.

LD: So you got a real up-close view.

Stewart: See, then, my grandfather was a sergeant on the police force, and his duty-- that day, he wasn't at the station; he'd go right directly to the circus grounds. Well, my grandmother would come down, because that's where we lived, right two blocks from there. And my aunt and uncle lived down the street. Well, my grandfather, that was his duty, to go to the

circus ground. So, he and John Ringling--who later became very dear friends--we had parades in those days. And they paraded all-- they paraded from Sixth Street Southwest, up town, all through the different streets, back and forth, back and forth, and back down to the circus grounds. And the circus parade started at eleven o'clock and then lasted a couple of hours or so. So my grandfather rode with John Ringling in the horse and buggy. See, it was all horse and buggy in those days. And he would point out where to go. Well, then, Grandpa would be on duty down at the circus grounds, he was the policeman...

End of Tape 1, Side 2

LD: You were talking about how closely involved you were with the circuses as a young man.

Stewart: Yes. So my grandfather would work at the circus in the afternoon and in the evening, and Mr. Ringling would give him tickets--free tickets. And maybe in the evening there would be another policeman there to help him, or he would take over after six o'clock. My grandfather would get these tickets, and John Ringling said, "You know," he'd say, "you have the biggest family of anybody I know of." Of course, we'd get these tickets and we'd go in the afternoon with the free ticket that we worked for, and then at night we had reserved seats. And we'd take all our friends and everybody else. And we all had reserved seats, so we sat up there in the reserved-

seat section and watched the performance at night. My granddad, in the afternoon then, he would go into the sideshows, you know, just checking things out, and I'd walk in behind him. And they'd say, "Where's your ticket?" And I'd say, "I'm right with him."

LD: So you saw everything!

Stewart: Oh, I saw....

LD: How many performances would you see?

Stewart: Well, they were here for a day, so I'd see those. Then I got acquainted with some of the clowns and whatnot, and I'd get into the back lot. I could go to the back lot--the circus alley--and I could go in and watch the clowns make up. And we had a friend, Danny O'Sullivan, from Kansas City, Missouri, and he would come with the circus. We'd have him at the house. And then in Chicago, when Ringlings were in there for a week and I'd be in there, why, I could go to the circus alley and see the different clowns and watch them make up.

LD: That's quite an experience.

Stewart: Oh, it is. And they never made up until about five minutes before they had to go on, see. They'd be sitting there talking to you and then they'd give them a five-minute bugle and then they'd start putting the make-up on.

LD: And turn into clowns.

Stewart: They'd turn into clowns in five minutes.

LD: Were the freak sideshows a very--did they make a great impression on you?

Stewart: Oh yes, they were freakish.

LD: What sorts of things do you remember?

Stewart: Oh, I remember Alligator Boy, with skin like an alligator; the Fat Lady, four hundred fifty to five hundred pounds; the skinny guy; and a fellow with no arms and he could light a cigarette--put a cigarette in his mouth, he'd light the cigarette--and shave and do everything with his feet. You'd wonder how he could get his feet up there, but he could. He could!

LD: And you could watch all this.

Stewart: I could watch him. And then they had this one fellow that had little arms--they were only about this big--and he was a roustabout, but he was also in the freak show, see. But he would keep us guys working on the....

LD: He was a roustabout?

Stewart: Well, he was a roustabout, but he was also a freak and he could do these things with his feet. And the roustabouts, you know, the roustabouts are the ones that put up the tents and all that.

LD: So he must have been a very agile person.

Stewart: Oh, yes, he was. But when the circus left town, they never left a stake. They picked up everything. You could go down there and never find a stake. And there was a man that would put up the big tent, the big top. He would ride on a horse, and he had stakes--they were about three-foot stakes with a red ribbon on them. And he laid out the big top, where the big top would go. He would just go around and put those stakes in the ground on horseback. He never measured it. He

rode around on a horse and just took these stakes out and put them in the ground, all the way around, and that's where the big top was. And he never missed it a foot.

LD: Now, that's a professional.

Stewart: And then, to drive those stakes, they had colored fellows. And there would be six of them with mallets. And those stakes were about this tall, and they'd start that stake and they would sing. They had a sing-song.

LD: Did they all hit at the same time, then?

Stewart: Those mallets wouldn't miss each other over two inches. They would all come down and just-- that's the way it was. You've seen something like that, you know, well, these mallets would come down and the next one and right around, there was a rhythm. Just like this here, that's the way the mallets were. I mean, they would come down and go up and by the time they got around again, the stake was in the ground.

LD: So they must have traveled with the circus.

Stewart: They traveled with the circus all the time.

LD: It was a world unto itself.

Stewart: Oh, it was, yes. They had their own-- the first thing up at a circus was the commissary. And they had a fire started. They'd get a fire started, and in one hour they'd have breakfast started. And they had pancakes from here to over there. And bacon.

LD: How many people were there, do you remember?

Stewart: Oh, there'd be four or five hundred people.

LD: So the train must have been quite a train that brought them in.

Stewart: Oh, it was a big train, yes. It would take up several tracks. That's the way they traveled, by train.

LD: There's nothing like that for children nowadays. It's all so canned.

Stewart: Oh, no, no. They come in here with trailers and park down here at Five Seasons. You don't see anything outside of the performance. No, I've helped put up a lot of those circuses.

LD: That's a good memory to have. Anything else that you'd like to share with us?

Stewart: Well, let me see, what else would there be. Now, we've covered quite a bit, haven't we?

LD: We have. We've done real well.

Stewart: We didn't cover the big flood of 1929.

LD: That's right.

Stewart: Yeah, that flood was quite a thing.

LD: You were in college at that time.

Stewart: I was in college at that time, and the flood extended from - Third Street East to Third Street West. I mean the water was running. And I worked at a bicycle store next to the library, and the electric light company men that put up meters rode bicycles. And there was a fellow by the name of Tony Miller there, and he said, "Do you want to go across the bridge, Bill?" And I said, "Yes, I would." Well, I had on my military uniform, I had a sword and I had a book case in my hand. And he said, "O.K., we'll walk down to Third Street." And I

got on his shoulders and he rode across Third Avenue to Third Street, from Third Street East to Third Street West. And when we got on the bridge, the water was up to his knees and going through those spindles like mad. And if we had fallen off, we'd have just been swept right over the other side of the bridge.

LD: You were very lucky.

Stewart: We were lucky. And I never got off his shoulders until I got onto Third Street West.

LD: Did that run a lot of people out of their homes?

Stewart: Oh, a lot of homes up around Ellis Park and down below and all the businesses downtown had water in their basements. They'd pump it out of one window and it would come in another.

LD: They did a lot of dredging of the river after that, I believe.

Stewart: Well, not so much dredging, but they built banks--levees. But that was the worst flood we ever had, to my knowledge.

LD: I know we're getting close on time for you. One of the things that I wanted to ask you about is--and maybe this would be a good way to conclude--what is it about your business, since it has taken up such a great portion of your life, I think you could say it in terms of the community, what has been the hardest and what has been the most rewarding?

Stewart: The hardest part of this business is burying small children. It's heart-rending. We wish we were doing something else when we have to bury a small child. It's hard on the family and it's hard on you. You get quite emotional about it. But the most rewarding thing is to help those who are left behind, to

see that we do all we possibly can to make things so easy for them and take a lot of the burden off their shoulders by doing all we can to ease their pain, suffering. There isn't much you can do for the person that dies. We try to take care of the people who are left behind.

LD: You've been in Cedar Rapids for so many years, do you or are you willing to make a comparison about the community today and the community when you were growing up here? Has it changed for the better? Has it changed for the worse? Or is it just....

Stewart: Well, I think as a whole, it has changed for the better. Conditions are better for people working. I suppose they'd have something to say about that at this day and age, but people worked for very little back when I was a kid. But they have better facilities, transportation as a whole is better, there are more people who own their own homes, the city has grown. There was a time when I knew every vacant lot in the city.

LD: Oh, yes, you told me that.

Stewart: When I was carrying papers, because I was a paper route checker and I knew every vacant lot in Cedar Rapids. But, as a whole, I would say the city is-- we've got a real nice city. Our manufacturing plants have been very good, it's been very stable here as far as workers are concerned. Quaker Oats--we used to have the Quaker Oats and Penick & Ford or the old Douglas Starch Works, and the Sinclair Packing Company. They

were always busy and people had jobs here. Everything's better than when I, well, much better than when I was a kid.

LD: I guess the big difference is that you can't keep track of all the people the way you used to.

Stewart: No, you can't, and the only thing I don't like about it, there are too many people who are on the hand-out today, where years ago, everybody helped each other and everybody seemed to be able to work and take care of themselves.

LD: It was a personal ethic in those days.

Stewart: It was a personal thing, yes. It was pride in working. Regardless of what you did, there was pride that you had a job.

LD: Many people have shared that same feeling about that era. Well, I thank you, Mr. Stewart, for the time and the memories that you have shared with us.

Stewart: Well, I thank you. I just hope I had some good memories for posterity.

LD: Oh, you have some wonderful ones. I feel very good about that.

END OF INTERVIEW

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?
2--What are your parents' names?
1-2--Where did you go to school?
4--Are you married or single?
4--Did you raise a family? How big?
4--What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

1. Transportation

--Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
44--Trolleys (the Interurban)
13-14--Horses and First Automobiles
--Mud roads and the seedling mile
45-46--Hunter Airport and the first planes
11-12,57-58--Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications

46-47,59--Newspapers
47-49--Radios
--Advertising
--Telephones

B. People in the Community

1. Amusements/Recreation

--Motion Pictures
10--Cedar Rapids Parks
--Dances
--Carnival Week
--Chautauqua
--Community Theater
--Little Gallery
--Symphony Orchestra
52-57--Circus
--Greene's Opera House
--Amusement Parks (Alamo)
--Camps
--Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

2. Famous Characters

--Cherry Sisters
--Grant Wood
--Carl Van Vechten (<u>The Tattooed Countess</u>)
--Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle
   17--Life before air conditioning
   14-16--Winter Activities
   --Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
   --Clothing
   --Toys
   --Saloons/Taverns
   --Farm Life

4. Family Life
   --Household Help
   --Women's Roles
   --Childrens' Activities/Behavior
   --Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)

5. Ethnic/Minority Life
   --Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
   --Indians
   --Segregation of Blacks
   23-24,43-44--Jobs Available
   50-52--Irish Catholics

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community
1. Education
   --Cedar Rapids Schools
   19-22 --Coe College
   --Mount Mercy College
   --Cornell College
   4-9--St.Patrick's School
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
2 --Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
--Local Brewing Companies
--Retail Businesses /Department Stores
24-25 --Professions - Insurance
--Banking and Finance
--Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
3 --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)
25-33,40,58-59--Funeral Home business
5. Attitudes/Values
--Children/Discipline
--Sex/Petting
--Charity
--Divorce
43-44--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)
38-39--Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
--Bank Closings (1933)
--Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
--Public Library Murder(1921)

2. National Historic Events
--Womens' Suffrage
49-50--World War I
--Roaring 20's
21--Prohibition
13,24,41-44--Great Depression