

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview With Lawrence DeWees

Mr. L.B. DeWees was 89 years old at the time of this interview. He shares memories of the first automobile (including the first time he heard the word), airplane, rural mail delivery and other events of the early years of the 1900's. As he was a Greyhound Motor Coach operator, we learn a bit about the busses and several anecdotes about passengers.

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Interview with Lawrence DeWees  
Conducted by: Carolyn Wellso  
Date: June 28, 1985

DeWees: My name is Lawrence Barclay DeWees, usually referred to as L.B., nobody ever calls me by my first name and don't ask me why 'cause I don't know. You wanted to know a little about my early recollections I believe, is that right? I'll be 90 years old my next birthday so I remember back quite a ways.

I remember very distinctly . . . well, the first thing I remember, and nobody believes that I remember but I know that I do. I had a sister that's about two years younger than I--two years and two weeks--and I remember when she was born. It's very hazy, but I just know that I remember. At any rate, that's beside the point. But I do remember when the Spanish American war was on. I wouldn't remember it only I've heard the folks talk about it all the time, everybody talked about it. Mother explained to me what the word "war" meant. One day, while I was playing out in the yard in my little wagon and a neighbor was blasting rocks directly across the road from our house. There was a pasture that had never been broken up and now and then he would blast the rock and make a loud noise and I always went in the house hard as I could run because I thought that that was part of the war and I thought it was dangerous until Mother explained it to me.

I remember when William McKinley was assassinated, not too many people remember him, I'm sure, some do, I suppose several. I

wouldn't remember that, of course, except for the fact that everybody talked about it. People talked about it at the dinner table and everybody was badly upset about it.

My grandfather DeWees, my father's father, came out here from Ohio in 1852. They settled east of what is now Springville, in those days it was Linden instead of Springville, but he settled about three miles east of there. There were a few people who had come out here ahead of him from Ohio. They told him he was very foolish to settle so far out from town because he'd never live to see the day it was settled that far out. But he had to pay \$4 a acre for the ground because the Homestead Act wasn't yet passed. If it had been three or four years later, he could have gotten all he wanted free, but he took forty acres. Everybody told him he had the whole wide world outdoors to use for his own and he didn't need to buy anymore. And he did see the handwriting though a few years later and took more and wound up with 160. But anyway, he built a log cabin there. I have heard him say when he stood out in front of his log cabin that he could look every direction far as he could see and he couldn't see a house or a tree or a bush, nothing but prairie grass. Now where he got his logs, that's a good question. Well, he took a little ground up near Stone City because that was timber up there. And he hauled his logs from there and still after I was born since I can remember, he still went to Stone City to cut wood for heating purposes. And after he retired from the farm, my father lived on the farm there and he always went for timber at Stone City to get his wood. But before grandfather died, every house that's

out there today was there then. He lived to see it settled up all the way out there for miles and miles. It settled that much faster than people thought it would.

I remember when we had the first telephones in the country.

Springville had a few telephones just around town. They were a great novelty. But the country, nobody ever heard of telephones in the country and they didn't have any telephone company, of course, but my father and a lot of the neighbor men went to the timber and cut poles and planted the poles and they bought the wire and put it up. Then they turned the thing on and that was the greatest thing that ever hit the country. At night everybody was on the telephone, didn't have to ring. I remember one night, we had a neighbor and the neighbor's name was Charlie Tolbert. Dad wanted to talk to him about something and he went over to the phone and just picked up the receiver and said, "Hey Charlie!" and Charlie said, "Hello!" and dad talked to him for a while, it didn't have to ring, he was there. Everybody was on the phone, night after night after night. (Laughter) They didn't have such things as lightening arresters, nobody had ever given lightening a thought. But I remember one time some poles got struck by lightening just outside of our house--well, within a quarter of a mile--and the telephone fell off the wall onto the floor and the house started to burn where the telephone had been. Dad and--he had a hired man at the time--they ran back and forth from the old cistern pump in the kitchen with washpans--nobody knows what a washpan is, I don't suppose now--and they carried water and threw on the wall there and put the fire out. So much

for the telephone.

We never did have rural mail delivery till after that. Dad came home one time with a thing that he explained to us was a mailbox. They were going to have the mail delivered. So he planted a post out by the road front of the house, put this thing on the post. The day the mail was supposed to come for the first time, we went out, Dad and Mother and my two sisters and myself and sat on the bank, it was summertime, beautiful day. After a little over the hill south of the place came a team of horses and a sort of a home-made van-type sort of a horse-drawn buggy. Dad said, "I think that's the mailman coming now." And sure enough, it was, Billy Palmer from Springville. He pulled up and stopped and they said a few words and he handed Dad the paper and Dad said, "No, put it in the mailbox, I want to take it out of the mailbox." So he laughed and put it in the mailbox and went his way. (Laughter) Since then we've had rural mail delivery, but I remember the first one.

We might get back to the log cabin for just a moment. His log cabin was a little bigger than average. It was a two-story cabin. There was a hole in the ceiling in the Northeast corner and a home-made ladder on the wall and this is the way they went upstairs was to climb that ladder. We used to play in it when we were little kids but it's gone now. He had it moved in 1873, he had it moved a little ways away from the original site with a yoke box and then a capstan. He built the present house in the summer of 1873, so it's been there quite

awhile. Now, getting along here. We started to school 1901 probably, I think it was 1901. I had a sister just eleven months older than I. We started school the same day. I remember the morning I was supposed to go to school. I was playing in the sand out by the windmill. Mother came out to have me come in and get my neck and ears washed, and change my clothes to go to school. I didn't know what the word "school" meant, but we went and I remember every detail of that day. We had a neighbor living--well, the next neighbor to us--Hunt was their name; a bachelor and three maiden lady sisters, Ella and Julie and Jane and Lem. They had a big mutt dog named "Moses" and he was so big that we were afraid of him but he was very gentle, harmless. On the way to school that morning, Ella was out to see us go by and they had white picket fence in front of the house. She was standing by the gate and Moses was on his hind legs with his feet on the top part of--she had her arm around the dog's neck so we wouldn't be frightened. She had cookies for us. Seems like yesterday but it's been a long while. Anyway went on got to the side of the school house and a couple of big boys came down to meet us. One of them picked me up and put me on his shoulders and carried me all the rest of the way to school. The other took my sister by the hand and led her. They're both gone long ago, of course. Practically all my schoolmates are gone.

I heard my father tell about when the first railroad was built in this part of the country. The Milwaukee goes from Marion--it didn't go through Cedar Rapids, the main line didn't--it

... through ... logville and ... through

goes through Marion and missed Springville and went through Peralta and headed for Chicago. Then there's a branch line branched off went up from Springville and Anamosa, Monticello and up that direction. When they finished that branch line, my dad used to tell about the day that his father took all of his children--he had three boys and two daughters--in a wagon, took them over to Viola and bought tickets for all of them to ride the train from Viola to Springville. Then he drove the team and wagon to Springville to pick them up when they got there. Of course, they got there before he did, I would presume. That was his first train ride; he never forgot that. I thought it was rather interesting. Yeah, we're getting down to automobile days now.

Oh, I don't know how old I was. I was a good-sized boy, I would guess. Probably seven or eight years old when I saw the first car that I ever saw in my life. Prior to that time, in school one morning, the teacher brought a clipping from the newspaper which she read to the school. It was about an automobile. Someone had made an automobile. She explained to us that "auto" means ones-self and "mobile" means move and that an automobile was a machine that was capable of moving itself without being drawn by a team of horses. Sounded like a big deal but that's the first time I ever heard the word. We had a car at one time. My younger brother and I made it. We spent quite a little time making it. That was after there were a very few Model T's around the country but most people didn't have them. We were going to a party one night--we used have lawn parties



and house parties--this was a summertime lawn party and we got there a little bit late purposely because we wanted to be the last ones there to show off our car. We spent the day arranging and making the thing. We took a buggy, took the shafts off of it--if anybody knows what shafts are now, but that's what the horse pulled the buggy by. Then we fixed a two-wheel cart behind the buggy, couple of poles from it that ran up to the back-end of the buggy. So we put the horse between those poles behind the buggy. Then my younger brother sat back on the cart back there and drove the horse--old Mattie, Mathilda. I sat up in front and had some ropes on the front axle and steered it. So we were not being drawn by a horse; however, we were being pushed by one. But we pulled in a little late. It's quite a novelty and everybody thought it was nice and I guess it was. (Laughter)

The next step would be the airplane. I suppose we read about airplanes long before I ever saw . . . First time I ever saw one in my life, it was in the summertime and we'd been cutting--shucking oats and came in at noon to eat dinner and my little sister was out in the yard and she came charging into the house and wanted us to come out there quick, there was a thing going over the field out near the buildings. And went out there and it was the thing we'd been reading about, it was an airplane. That was the first one I ever saw. It was very small one, of course, but it was quite a novelty. The first plane I ever rode in was 1928, the 16th day of August. I went out here and paid Dan Hunter a dollar to ride over Cedar Rapids in his

plane. He had the Hunter airport in those days. We sat right outdoors in the thing and the wind blew past us there and couldn't talk to each other, so much noise--the plane made so much noise. We had to sit there and hold onto our hats with one hand and hang onto the seat with the other. I didn't want to fall off. I remarked to him when we were right up over Cedar Rapids, what would happen if the motor'd stop. And he said nothing and reached over and shut the switch off. I don't know if he shut it off or throttled it down so it was just barely running. Scared me half to death. But it hadn't occurred to me the thing had soared for a long ways and we weren't very far from the airport. That was my first plane ride, I've had a lot of them since. I've crossed both oceans three or four times. But I never forgot that first ride with Dan Hunter. They've gone a long ways since then.

Well, time goes on, nobody can stop it. At last I became a man and I was married in 1921 on the 22nd day of January. We were married and very happily married, I may add, for 53 years and a half. She's gone now. But the first day of March in 1928, I started to drive a bus out of Cedar Rapids. They just started the bus line. They had just closed down the InterUrban from Cedar Rapids that used to go out to Mount Vernon and Lisbon. The first run I had was two round-trips every forenoon and two round-trips every afternoon between Cedar Rapids and Lisbon and Mount Vernon. I suppose that line was originally put in there because the college in Mount Vernon probably. I didn't intend to drive for very long. I'd been teaching school at the time

for three years. I intended to teach school the rest of my life at that time. But these busses were a great novelty and I was the first driver out of Cedar Rapids--well, I wasn't the first one really there were two others ahead of me but they got fired pretty soon. We won't go into the details. That made me the oldest one. I drove there for over thirty years after that. But I was the oldest driver, had my first choice of runs and days off and all that sort of thing. In the mean time, by the way, I owned a threshing machine. They're long gone now, but I had a threshing machine steam engine. I loved that. I ran that for two or three years and I sold it finally and bought a brand new one in 1922 with a tractor--a Hartpar tractor, they don't make them anymore. That's quite a novelty. I thrashed for 32 years. But when I say I thrashed 32 years and drove a bus for 30 years, that sounds like a big story. But being the oldest driver, I had my first choice of vacations and I kept the machine and always took my vacation at thrashing time, went out and thrashed. I never will forget the thrashing dinners we used to have in those days and the good times we used to have. After dinner, the rest of the men would lie around the yard and tell nice stories and laugh, the young ones would stand on their heads and do tricks. I, of course, had to go down to the separator and start the grease and check all the chains and belts, so I didn't get in on the fun much. But I always loved the old separator. Something kind of soothing about it--it rocks back and forth all day. It's a great place to doze when everything is going right.

Well, we haven't mentioned the famous Depression yet, have we? We were on the farm when the Depression hit. And anyone that lived through that couldn't very well forget it. I remember one farmer in particular that paid \$300 an acre for a farm, that was unheard of. Nobody ever heard of \$300 an acre for a farm. But he lost it. Lost everything he had when the Depression came in 1929 when the famous stock market Crash--everything crashed. In the meantime, by the way, we'd moved here to Marion. Lived in this house where I live now--lived here all these years. Paid \$1200 for it, which was a little too much I was afraid. But anyway, I went out to the country north of Springville--the neighborhood where I was raised, bought a hog to butcher--that was in 1932. It was a nice hog, weighed 220 pounds, it cost me \$4.20 for the hog, which is a pretty good price for a hog if you're on the market to buy a hog, but I'd hate to raise them for that. Then I found out there was a fellow out there that would butcher it for a dollar, so I didn't even butcher it, I paid him a dollar to butcher the hog. A lot of the fellows lost their farms in those days. That's a far cry from paying \$3000 or \$2000 an acre for farms like some of them have done in recent years and they're now paying a penalty I guess you might call it. Cause you can't pay \$3000 for a farm and pay for it with \$2.50 corn. We had an old landlord when we were on the farm that had a number of quaint sayings. But one of them--I thought that we were one of the sharers and I thought we should buy some more hogs 'cause they were pretty good price at that time. He said, "When the crowd runs," he

said, "you walk. When the crowd walks, then you run." I never forgot that. When nothing's worth anything that's the time to buy everything you can buy. But when it's high, that's the time to sell it, at least not to buy it. So much for that. About the next thing, I guess in order, would be Ronnie Reagan. Now, I used to play with Ronnie Reagan. That sounds strange, doesn't it. Well, I don't know as we exactly played, but after I became a Greyhound bus driver--and by the way, there is no such thing as a bus driver in the Greyhound language, it's a motor coach operator or preferably a highway transportation engineer for the Greyhound Corporation. But, to you listeners, it was a bus driver. Anyway, I used to stay there in Des Moines every other night at one time. Way back, years ago, 50 years ago, Ronnie Reagan was on WHO at that time, and every Saturday night they had what they called the "WHO Barndance Frolic" and charge admission. You could come in and listen and used to have a lot of fun, it was very expensive. But I used to go about every Saturday night 'cause I enjoyed it so much. It cost 10 cents, by the way. But Reagan was on the radio, of course, nobody had ever heard of a television then, but he was on the radio--sport's broadcaster I believe he was--and we'd listen. A lot of the time, he wasn't on duty, and then he mingled with the rest of us. We danced and square danced and they had musicians and we had a lot of fun. So that's what I know about Ronnie Reagan, it isn't too much, is it? Going back a little farther, Richard Nixon was a distant relative of mine. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not proud of it. (Laughter) His

mother was a Milhouse and my mother was related to the Milhouses. I can remember when I was a little kid, old Uncle Isaac and Aunt Rebecca Milhouse used to come to our place to visit. So we're a little bit of relation but not enough to hurt.

Now, I have a lot of questions to answer in regards to the bus business. We didn't have any paved roads in 1928. The old seedling mile halfway between Cedar Rapids and Mount Vernon was there and it's there yet far as I know, it's covered up with more cement. But we had all dirt roads. I used to leave Cedar Rapids at 7:30 in the morning, go Des Moines and right back, get back at 10:30 at night-- all day long, just to go to Des Moines and back. Dirt road and the square corners--horse and buggy corners. That's all been changed since I quit. The last trips I made down there went out at noon and was back at 6:15, nothing to it 'tall. Paved all the way and great big curves where we used to have square corners. As far as the busses were concerned, they were a far cry from the diesel busses we have nowadays. The first bus I ever drove was an old Mack. It was a great big old thing, four-cylinder. Of course, there wasn't such a thing as four-wheel brakes just brakes on the back wheels and they were just mechanical. If you'd get it up to 35, 40 miles an hour with good luck and there was a cow ahead of you on the road, you'd be very lucky if you got stopped before you got there, but the cow had a lot of time to move. We had every kind of bus, I can't begin to name all of but we had Rios and Buicks and Cadillacs and Kistles and . . . oh, you name it, Chevrolets. The ceilings were low, you couldn't

stand up straight in one of them. The old Rio had a swinging plate glass, if you please, doors in the middle. And anybody that wanted to smoke went back in the back end of the bus. I remember very well when I saw the first woman smoking a cigarette I'd ever seen in my life. She went back there with the men, and they were smoking cigars, of course, and she fired up a cigarette and I watched her in the mirror because it was quite a novelty. Of course, I looked ahead occasionally but the bus didn't go very fast. I only hauled one female that chewed tobacco. She had a ticket from somewhere in Arkansas. I got her out of . . . that wasn't so long ago, though, that was more modern. But she had a black hood and a black shawl, kind of a somber-looking character. She had a lump in her jaw, I supposed she had a bad tooth maybe but when it come to take up tickets and leave town, she was my passenger, I discovered she was masticating the weed. That was long before we had air-conditioning. The windows were all wide open, it was a hot evening. She sat next to the aisle not next to the window. There was nobody on the same seat with her, but she would look toward the window and . . . she'd expectorate every so often and it was beautiful to watch. She (Laughter) was very, very skillful. But that's the only woman to date that I've ever seen chew tobacco, I'm sure there are some others. Yeah, that's a far cry from those days to this.

People ask me oftentimes about Prohibition days and what it was like before they had Prohibition. See, Herbert Hoover was our President in 1928 and incidentally, our national debt was \$28

billion, wasn't it at that time, I believe. Everybody thought it was terrible. It's over a trillion now. Anyway, he ran again in 1932 but he was defeated by Franklin Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt repealed the 18th ammendment. We had bootleggers before that time. I know if you'd see a car go through town and the rear end of the car was way low over the hind wheels, it was a pretty good symptom that he was a bootlegger with a big load of liquor in the trunk and they used to get arrested sometimes to check 'em for that. They used to go up to Dubuque, I don't know where they went, whether it was Dubuque or East Dubuque but they used to come back from there with cars pretty well down on their springs lots of times. That liquor business was one of the problems we used to have. We didn't haul drunks on the bus, never let a drunk on or one that showed signs of having been drinking. But sometimes one would get on and have a bottle in his pocket. Now, we can't search everybody of course, and then maybe he'd get down low maybe after night when you couldn't see him and get to the destination, he's drunk or maybe before he gets there he gets unruly. I've had to get rid of a good many of them but some of them were peaceable and some of them were very much the other way, if they showed symptoms of wanting to do battle, I just went to the next town, pulled up in front of the police station and had them come and get him. I wouldn't bother with them. But they were a nuisance. I don't think they've been near as bad for long well, I guess, well, I don't know whether they're getting educated or not. They needed some education. After the liquor



got easier to get, that's for sure.

(Mouth organ music)

CW: I've asked Mr. DeWees to play the mouth organ.

(Mouth organ music)

CW: Play some more!

(Mouth organ music)

CW: That's nice! Play more!

(Mouth organ music)

DeWees: Let's get back to the busses here for a moment, I've just thought of a little incident that I always enjoyed remembering. When I first started going through the Amanas on the way to Des Moines, that was nearly 50 years ago, I suppose. They hadn't changed their mode any at that time, they still used kerosene lamps and tallow candles and they used horses on the fields and in the road. Fine people, I thought a lot of them, but they didn't get away from home very much. When the paved road went through there I think that was the beginning of their big change. The cars going through there and they didn't have cars, it wasn't too long till some of the young men got to riding bicycles and well, it was the beginning. But anyway, I came through Marengo one night, winter night, lots of snow on the ground, cold. And I pickd up a gentleman there in Marengo for Amana. He was very ill at ease, he wasn't used to being so far from home in those days. He tried to explained to me where he wanted out when we got there. And he seemed quite disturbed, but I tried to make him feel at ease. I asked him to observe that cord along the side of the bus. I said, "When you get to

where you want out, you pull that cord and the bus will stop." And he said, "All right." So we got about there and he proceeded to pull the cord, but he should have done it while he was sitting down in the first place. He made his mistake when he got to his feet and got out in the aisle and then reached over and pulled the cord. Just as he pulled it, there was a horse run across the road right in front of the bus. There was lots of snow and it was a white horse, too. I very nearly hit the horse, but we had airbrakes by the time and I stopped, you might say, on a dime, not quite. It caused him to run as hard as he could all the way down the aisle, clear to the front end and he grabbed the door bar and bounced back and he jerked the door open and he fell out in the snow on his head. The snow was soft and very deep right there and by that time I had gotten stopped. So I got out and got him by the heels and dragged him out of the snow. He wasn't a very big fellow. Rather an old fellow. I felt sorry for him but I was amused and I couldn't hardly help laughing. I didn't dare laugh, though. I got him brushed off and then he took an eight-penny nail out of his pocket and asked me to dig the snow out of his ears, it was cold in there. So I dug his ears out and fixed him all up. That was that. Well, the very next night coming through Marengo there was this same fellow again. I suppose he had been going over there to see a doctor perhaps. I don't think they had doctors in the Amanas then. Be that as it may, he proceeded to tell me where he wanted out. He didn't know I was the same driver, of course, we all looked alike to strangers



## INTERVIEW TOPICS

## CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

## I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- 1--When were you born? Where?
- 10--How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids? Springville, Iowa.
- 12--What are your parents' names?
  - Where did you go to school?
- 8 --Are you married or single?
  - Did you raise a family? How big?
- 8,9--What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

## II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

## A. Technology in the Community

- 1. Transportation
  - 5-6--Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
  - 8 --Trolleys (the Interurban)
  - 6 --Horses and First Automobiles
  - 12 --Mud roads and the seedling mile
  - 7-8 --Hunter Airport and the first planes
    - Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)
  - 11,12,16--Greyhound Bus
- 2. Communications
  - Newspapers
  - 11 --Radios
    - Advertising
  - 3 --Telephones
  - 4--Rural mail delivery

## 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
  - Grant Wood
  - Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
  - Marvin Cone
  - 11--President Reagan

3. Lifestyle 3,6-7,17
  - Life before air conditioning
  - Winter Activities
  - Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
  - Clothing
  - Toys
  - Saloons/Taverns
  - 9--Farm Life
4. Family Life
  - Household Help
  - 17--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
  - Jobs Available
  - 15--Amanas
- C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community
  1. Education 5
    - Cedar Rapids Schools
    - 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 10,11
  - Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
  - Local Brewing Companies
  - 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
  - Mills on Cedar River
  - Buildings Erected
  - Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
  - Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)

5. Attitudes/Values13
  - 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
  - World War I
  - Roaring 20's

13-14--Prohibition

10--Great Depression



