

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with
Eleanor Cook Thomas

Conducted by Laura Derr
June 14, 1985
Sacred Heart Convent, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Transcribed by Renae Blasdel

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ELEANOR COOK THOMAS

Eleanor Cook Thomas was born November 3, 1909, in Cedar Rapids, the daughter of Robert Sutherland Cook and Fawn Hamilton Cook. In this history, Mrs. Thomas discusses her ancestry, which includes many names familiar to Cedar Rapids history and development. She provides first-hand knowledge of the origin of Childrens Theater and gives insight into early Community Theater, especially the efforts it took to produce a show-- often drawing on her degree earned in Theater-- a major in technical work and a minor in acting. We learn of her special friendship with Bruce more cousins as well as Grant Wood. We also learn of neighborhood life, toys, and homes in the early 1900s.

INTERVIEW TOPICS

CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- 1-4,5¹6 --When were you born? Where?
- 1-4,5¹6 --How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
- 6,9-10,12 --What are your parents' names?
- 1-3,53,54,56-57 --Where did you go to school?
- 66 4=6 --Are you married or single?
- Did you raise a family? How big?
- What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

- 1. Transportation
 - 9 --Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
 - Trolleys (the Interurban)
 - 16,49,50 --Horses and First Automobiles
 - Mud roads and the seedling mile
 - Hunter Airport and the first planes
 - 18 --Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)
- 2. Communications
 - 85 --Newspapers
 - Radios
 - Advertising
 - 15 --Telephones

B. People in the Community

- 1. Amusements/Recreation
 - Motion Pictures
 - 21 --Cedar Rapids Parks
 - 44,55,94 --Dances
 - Carnival Week
 - Chautauqua
 - 56-62,63 --Community Theater Majestic Theatre--49,59
 - Little Gallery Children's Theatre--63,64,66-70,72
 - Symphony Orchestra Junior League's Children's Theatre--65-66,68-
 - 16 --Circus
 - 47,48-49 --Greene's Opera House
 - Amusement Parks (Alamo)
 - Camps
 - 18,19,58-60,61 --Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)
 - 44--C.R. Country Club
- 2. Famous Characters
 - 46 --Cherry Sisters
 - 53-56,61 --Grant Wood
 - 49,50-51,62 --Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
 - Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle 16,31-33
 - 74 --Life before air conditioning
 - 35 --Winter Activities
 - 30-31 --Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
 - 11,35 --Clothing
 - 16,34,37-38-Toys
 - Saloons/Taverns
 - Farm Life
 - 13,14-15,17,19-22,39,40,55-56--Homes and schools
4. Family Life
 - 30--Household Help
 - Women's Roles
 - 31,33-34,40-45--Childrens' Activities/Behavior
 - 23-24--Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)
 - 23-28--Churches
5. Ethnic/Minority Life
 - Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
 - Indians
 - Segregation of Blacks
 - Jobs Available

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community

1. Education
 - 1-2,36-38,53,58,63,65,66,--Cedar Rapids Schools
 - 68,78,88 --Coe College
 - Mount Mercy College
 - 78 --Cornell College
2. Government
 - 16 --City Services
 - 18-19 --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. Chamber of Commerce--73
 - Junior League-- 88-89

4. Business and Economy
 - Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
 - Local Brewing Companies
 - 69 --Retail Businesses /Department Stores
 - Professions
 - 8,74,83 --Banking and Finance
 - Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
 - 8,10,11,20,22,76,77 --Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
 - Farmers Market
 - Mills on Cedar River
 - 10--Buildings Erected
 - Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
 - Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)
 - 72-78--Roosevelt Hotel
5. Attitudes/Values
 - 31,33--Children/Discipline
 - 51--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)
 - 49--Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
 - 82-86 --Bank Closings (1933)
 - Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
 - Public Library Murder(1921)
2. National Historic Events
 - Womens' Suffrage
 - World War I
 - Roaring 20's
 - 78,79-82 --Prohibition
 - 64,73,74,88--Great Depression
 - 8--Civil War
 - 9--War of 1812
 - 8--Spanish War
 - 9--Revolutionary War
 - 78--WWII

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ID: Mrs. Thomas, would you give your full name and when you were born and where you were born?

Thomas: My name is Eleanor Cook Thomas. I was born on November 3, 1909 in a little red brick house in Cedar Rapids, on 10th Street, between First and A Avenue on the alley.

ID: How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids? Were there, for instance, years when you lived out of the community?

Thomas: Yes, I went away to school at 14 to St. Katherine's, which is the school that my mother went to, and her cousins before her in the 80's (1880's). It was run by the sisters of St. Mary, which was an Episcopal order. They had the same superior running the school that was there when my mother was there.

ID: That's tradition. So that was about the mid 20's, 1925 or so?

Thomas: I went in 1924, in February. I transferred from McKinley at that time to go to Washington High School, which was the dirtiest place I was ever in. We were not oriented at all to our classes, told where they were or what we were supposed to be doing or anything. I was at a complete loss; and we were so full that we had to go at 7:30 in the morning and we were out at 10:00.

ID: That's right, they did split the days then, didn't they?

Thomas: Oh, it was terrible! There was nothing to do, you know. Maybe we got out and we'd wander around town and go to the movie or something; go home and spend the day. I didn't know what we were supposed to study. It was really bad.

ID: So your mom decided that this was a better alternative?

Thomas: That's right. My family felt that I was getting no place and I better go away to school, and I loved St. Katherine's. I was on a half-year, which is part of the problem. You see, we went to McKinley right after it had opened and I was the second class in there; the first class opened that fall. Barbara Dixon was in that class, and all that group, and I came in in January along with a split group; Bill Ellwood and some of the rest of us. So we were there on that. So when we went, we had to go down there and it was just jammed, the place was just jammed full. And it was so dirty.

ID: That was still the old Washington?

Thomas: Oh yes. The floors were oiled and you got it all over your shoes and your clothes; and you didn't know where your classes were. There wasn't anybody to help you, there was nothing. So I was very glad to get out of there, quite frankly.

ID: How many years were you at St. Katherine's?

Thomas: A year and a half.

ID: And then you were back in Cedar Rapids?

Thomas: No. I went right to Mary Lyon in Swarthmore. My family went down and they looked over all the schools in the East, and they decided that that would be the best one for me. I had apparently started

acting at an early age, and they had used me as a lead in a play at St. Katherine's and I had done some work there. They wanted a school that was oriented toward the theatre, which Mary Lyon was. I went there and graduated in 1927, then I went to the junior college for one year to do a lot more work in the theatre. And it was such a good course that when I went to Carnegie Tech, all they could do was repeat that--the first year and the theatre work that I had done. But anyway, it worked out.

ID: So when did you come back to Cedar Rapids to live?

Thomas: I came back in 1932.

ID: 1932?

Thomas: Yes. And I went right down at Iowa City that summer and took some more work and started in the theatre down there. That was the year when . . . I'll come back to it--tread the green grass--but that was an interesting year because it was Paul Greene and a musician with him who had written an original play which was for movies, and music, and acting, and all kinds of different things. Of course, they didn't have the cameras because they couldn't do it the way it was written. But I held book on that show. We had to work with Lemar Stringfield who was the composer and we would work all night doing segues between the music and the speaking and all this kind of thing. It was a terrific job and I just loved it.

ID: When you were living in Cedar Rapids during that time . . .

Thomas: I had lived down on old Berkley in Iowa City, which was on one corner and the Methodist Church was right across the street and the convent and the school were right down there. I used to

complain about the bells ringing at St. Angeles at six o'clock when you'd been up all night in the theatre. (Laughter)

ID: It was not easy living there?

Thomas: No, I lived down there at old Berkley and we had rats down there, and cockroaches. And I'd never met up with either one of them while I was at . . . oh, God, it was such a place.

ID: It was a real learning and growing experience?

Thomas: Those were the days when we went down there and we drank beer, but we had to go down to a place next door to Smitty's to buy the alcohol to spike the beer. You see you couldn't get it-- nothing was open at night and you had to have something to hold you, you see, while you worked all night.

ID: Sure, to help you.

Thomas: Yes. So we got into the habit of drinking beer and alcohol which was a good foundation for my later problem.

ID: Well, I want to come back to your community and into your theatre experience but just for the beginning of biographical background; you were out of the community again when you married?

Thomas: That's right, yes. I was very active. I married Stan Mullholland; I had met him up in Rochester but I knew about him because I had been out to visit my cousin Barbara Burke, was her name--Barbara Douglas Burke. We had gone up to Santa Barbara for a weekend and he was supposed to be there because she was planning to play two pianos with him because they both had the same teacher. So I knew all about him before I ever met him. But it happened that we happened to sit down together at a table at Weber and Judds in Rochester and we started talking and we found we had all these

contacts and everything. I think it was kind of love at first sight or something.

ID: And that was the beginning. How long after that were you married?

Thomas: Oh, we were married that summer.

ID: That summer?

Thomas: Yes.

ID: And you just moved out to the west coast then?

Thomas: Yes.

ID: How many years were you out there?

Thomas: Well, we were there off and on. It was several years he had to come back for surgery, to Rochester where he had come from. And then we went back there to live for a year while he retrained. He was an ear, nose . . .

ID: To Rochester, New York?

Thomas: No. Minnesota. Mayo Clinic

ID: The Mayo Clinic?

Thomas: That's right. And he was a good friend of--especially of Joe Mayo, but Chuck as well. He knew everybody because he had been raised there, you see. He was boast-town and gown, you might say.

ID: Right.

Thomas: So he had a long background, he'd had a lot of surgery--he was not a well man. And he died in 1945.

ID: At that point did you come back to Cedar Rapids to live?

Thomas: I had been coming back anyway because he was a sick man, it wasn't working out. So I started my--I went to business college one summer and then I started the nurse aide training.

ID: And you have lived here since then?

Thomas: No, I was remarried again in 1951 and we went to live in Chicago, where my husband taught at Main Township High School. We went out to Park Ridge first and he taught at the high school and then that didn't work out there so we went and lived downtown. And then we took some courses from an old friend of his that had been a--the two of them had worked at the community theatre at Grand Rapids and they had done "Stock" together over in Detroit.

ID: And your second husband was Thomas? Dwight?

Thomas: Yes, Dwight Thomas. He'd gone to Carnegie Tech for a while where I was, but he wasn't there for very long and then he went on to New York to start out. He came from the farm, near Roseville and over in Illinois. His family were farmers but he had a bent for the theatre and he was very good--he was marvelous. He trained a lot of amateurs and he was very good. He was over at Des Moines also, and trained up one of the girls who came over here later and, again interested in the children's theatre. She laid the foundations for the present children's theatre.

ID: So did you meet him at a theatre?

Thomas: Well, I met him at school, at Carnegie Tech.

ID: So you had known him for a long time?

Thomas: Well, yes, I had known him since 1932.

ID: That gives us an overview, then, of where you were and when. I'm going to go back just a moment and ask you to give us your father and mother's names and a comment on the number of generations that your family has been in this community.

Thomas: My father's name was Robert Sutherland Cook and his father was Joseph Sutherland Cook who came to Cedar Rapids in about 1855 or 1856.

It was Joseph Sutherland's brother, T. Z. Cook, who came here first. I think his brother must have come out and explored first and decided what they were going to do, anyway, T. Z. set up the original store. It was a general store. They had come from Jamestown, New York, where they had been partners in a woolen mill--I don't know about T. Z. but whatever it was--my grandfather was. He sold out his partnership and shipped it down by river to Pittsburgh, down the Ohio and up the Mississippi and up--I don't know whether it was Iowa but they did also come up the Cedar River. And they started a general store, and they handled everything. They handled food, they handled groceries, they imported all their own tea and coffee. They used to say they brought the sand burs up in the coffee bags from New Orleans. (Laughter) But anyway they did that--my grandfather having had a woolen mill, he was immediately interested in the Amanas. He became great friends with the people down there because, of course, that was the same business that he had been in. So he carried a lot of Amana woolens down there in his store, and that eventually turned into J. S. Cook and Company, which was a dry goods. He had his brother also, they had hardware and things, so they had Cook and Lawrence Company founded. This turned into a hardware and glass, and china--they imported all their own Haviland China and their glass from Europe. On the backs of the plates, it was put Cook and Lawrence and I had a coffee set with that on. A great deal of the china--my grandmother had a new china set practically every year, which was kind of fun. Then the other thing it turned in--he made a partnership with

Mr. P. C. Frick and so that was Cook and Frick which eventually turned into Frick and Kaupke which were a wholesale food, hardware and dry goods. Those were the three companies in which my grandfather was associated.

LD: So your family has been in this community for a long time. Almost since the beginning of Cedar Rapids as a community?

Thomas: Yes. And this Cook was also one of the original incorporators of the Merchants National Bank, the S. Cook name is on there in the original group--Mr. Frick and some others. But he was also in on a lot of other things that were going on. You know, they had the gas company and the light company and things.

LD: As they developed, he was a part of that?

Thomas: He was a part. His brother was very popular and was in--he got his own company up to go to war. All that's left of that is the T. Z. Cook auxiliary or something that the women had. His name--Z. was put into his name--it was simply a letter for Tom Cook because there another Thomas Cook some place in his life that had a very bad credit record. It was always getting them mixed up. So he put the Z. in so there would be no question. He was a very popular and delightful man. His son looked exactly like my father, they were almost twins. I saw them at my grandmother's funeral and he was a lovely man.

LD: I'm wondering, was it World War I that he got his company up for, then?

Thomas: No, it was the War Between the States.

LD: The Civil War?

Thomas: Yes, he was in the Civil War. And my uncle Will Dows was in the other war. Our family doctor, that was the Cuba thing--Spanish American. But, you see, we have a long history because Joseph

and T. Z. Cook's father was a surgeon in the War of 1812.

ID: You go way back!

Thomas: Yes, and then of course before that his father who had come over from Ireland and owned land up in--he had gone into the dry goods business, too, but he had a farm up in New England. He had to fight the Indians as well as in the war. We have his record, also, from the Revolutionary War.

ID: It's wonderful to have that much specific knowledge of your background.

Thomas: Oh, yes.

ID: What about on your mother's side? On that side you're related to the Dows family?

Thomas: No, no. Dows is my father's sister, Margaret, she married Colonel Dows.

ID: Okay.

Thomas: He had four sisters, all old enough to be his mother; one was Margaret, that married Colonel Dows; one was Ella that married Edward Henderson Smith, he was the son of the first wife of Dr. Smith. Dr. Smith remarried and had another son which is Issac B., who became the president of the light company; my father had worked for the light company as well. He had even gone out and worked on the railroad. He had helped to build, in his youth, the Inter-Urban line out to Mt. Vernon and Lisbon. I think he worked on the one to Iowa City, and I know he worked on the railroad out in Buffalo, Wyoming.

ID: You mean actually went out and worked on the line?

Thomas: Oh **yes**, sure. You know, those boys go out and work in the summer

and he was one of those that did that. He was quite a good athlete.

LD: We got sidetracked.

Thomas: Yes, I'm sorry.

LD: What was your mother's name?

Thomas: Her name was Fawn Hamilton Cook.

LD: How much can you tell us about that part of the family?

THomas: All too much, I'm afraid. (Laughter) Her father was John T. Hamilton, one of four brothers and a sister. They came over from Geneseo, Illinois; they had come out from western Pennsylvania. They were Scotch Irish with some good old Pennsylvania Dutch in there. One of our ancestor's names was Hannah Schrotch, and also that name appears in Eleanor Taylor's family here in Cedar Rapids. So we have a common ancestor. Of course, her name was Taylor; I don't know where it all came in but oddly enough, we were related. These four brothers all came to Cedar Rapids and bought farms. One of them up near Coggon was the father of Wallace Hamilton. Three of them were out on farms--their farms were on 30 Highway going west. Anyway, my grandfather started out by selling McCormick Reapers. He and his brothers all went into business together. They met every Sunday with the entire families--children, grandchildren, and everybody--and had Sunday dinner. They saw each other everyday and they worked together very closely, they were very fond of each other. And they were an unusual group of businessmen. The building downtown that they built, which is beyond Smulekoff's, is a very handsome old brick building. From the west side, you used to be able to see Hamilton Brothers and Company still painted on there. They had Mimm's and some restaurants and other things in there, but it's a handsome-looking old red brick building. And

then they moved later and had Hamilton Seed up on where 13th Street goes up to Center Point Road. That was a thriving business; they had coal and things like that. But my grandfather always had other businesses as well.

He also went to Congress. His son Jimmy--that was my mother's brother, James E., James Everett--also was in Annapolis, he was. We have a picture of James in his Annapolis uniform and mother, who is somewhat of a toddler because there is 10 years difference, and Grandmother and Grandfather visiting Washington's Tomb. All this long dresses and garments, you know, and little muffs.

ID: So your grandfather was in Congress? Do you remember when that would have been?

Thomas: Well, it was 1888 or 1889.

ID: House of Representatives?

Thomas: Yes, he was in the House of Representatives. It was Cleveland or something like that. I don't know, my grandfather was a Democrat. He lived on I Street and I know I was taken to see, when I was very young, we went to Washington to see the old house on I Street where they had lived.

ID: Where they lived?

Thomas: Yes, of course that's all gone now.

ID: You also have connections with the Douglas family because I know you are a cousin of that family.

Thomas: That's kind of complicated.

ID: Kind of complicated?

Thomas: Well, it's not that complicated. But Irene Douglas--who is the mother of Margaret Hall, Ellen Williamson, and Barbara Douglas

Burke Dixon--Irene and my father were first cousins. Their mothers were sisters. Does that help any?

ID: That's not complicated at all. As long as you know how to say all that as well as you do.

Thomas: Also, the fathers that they married--it seems that cousin Irene's father, that was my father's Aunt Ella Hazeltine. Dr. Hazeltine, who was her husband, had a brother who was the mother of Maude Hazeltine Hamilton that married my mother's brother, James E. Hamilton.

ID: So you have a connection that way as well.

Thomas: Yes. So we're cousins all the way around. And all related, all of us--Barbara Douglas Dixon, and John T. Hamilton II, and I, of course, my brothers and sisters--are all cousins, first cousins and second cousins. It's kind of interesting.

ID: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Thomas: Nellisa, who died, who was born in 1911; Doris, born in 1912, who is married to Bill Ellwood, I went to school with him, he's a little bit younger. And then my brother, Sutherland Cook--his name is also Robert Sutherland Cook. Our great grandfather was Robert Cook, you see--and Joseph Sutherland. So they carried the names and each generation goes Robert, Sutherland, Robert, Sutherland; except I think Rob is calling his son Rob.

ID: I believe he is.

Thomas: But that name goes back a long way, way way back.

ID: Did you grow up in the house you were born in?

Thomas: No, it was too small. When my sister Nellisa was born they had to put her on the piano because there wasn't any other place.

I can remember crawling up the stairs in that house as a baby. We must have moved out of there even before she was a year old. And we moved to 1601 First Avenue, which is still standing. It's a gray stucco house, and it was a very nice, comfortable-- roomy. It had cement floors which was just great because you could mop up after the kids. Only it was a red cement floor, and one day mother went out and she came back with Aunt Ella Smith and Aunt Margaret Dows. We had opened up all the pillows and thrown all the . . . we had had a pillow fight and all the feathers were all over the place. The only way to get them up was to get great big dishpans full of water and put their hands in the water and scoop up the feathers, you see, and take them off. All the dye came off of the floor from the red cement all over everybody, and they had pink feathers. (Laughter)

LD: I'll bet you were in some trouble for that?

Thomas: I don't doubt it because with four of us at various ages, we got into everything! There wasn't anything that we didn't do.

LD: Did you grow up in that house, then?

Thomas: Yes, we grew up in that house until there was a fire. That house had been built by Mike Ford who built the house at the corner of Third Avenue, where Linden Drive is. It's a great big stone house with those great big yellow and red, and you know, brown stones. Anyway, he built the house, or he owned the house at least. But he did this repair work when they took the chimney out and they just had the fireplace downstairs. They took it out upstairs, but he only put lath and plaster across it. It was a very cold winter, the winter my sister was born--in 1912. The furnace over-heated

and caught the lath on fire. And we wakened up in the middle of of the night and one of my sisters was near the door and I was near the edge. We had put a couch in front of where the old fireplace was and my other sister Doris, who had just been born, was in a bassinet. She cried and my mother came upstairs--they were all going to midnight mass at Grace Church. She said that's a funny cry, and her friend said, oh well don't worry, the baby's all right. Mother said, I never heard her cry that way before. Went up and opened the door and the whole wall was in flames!

ID: Oh, for heaven's sake!

Thomas: And my sister Dory in her bassinet was choking to death, so she got her out. Then she got my sister--we were both in brass cribs with sides that you had to let down so we couldn't get out--she took my sister out, Mellisa, who was next to the youngest. She put her on the top of the stairs and then she got me. My bed-clothes were all on fire. I'll never forget it. Then I was the last one out. She gave us a push and then yelled fire. Of course, there were polished risers in those days, we didn't have carpet up the stairs. They were very, very shallow so that she could push us down and it wouldn't hurt. And of course there was a landing, and by that time they could come and get us at the landing. She yelled fire-- and they came up, and, of course, what have you got to -- you don't have any pails sitting upstairs, only the pottys they used.

LD: You bet, anything that was wet, right!

Thomas: Yes, from under the bed. Of course, they called the fire department.

I remember going downstairs and the fire department coming in. And here were all of mother's friends. I know the Winslows were there, and a whole lot of other people that--the Jordan's and so on that we knew, Andy Hillman and Charley and others. We were taken down to my grandmother Cook who lived at 710 First Avenue. See the Dows had built on the corner and then the Shavers were next and then my grandmother Cook. And so we went spent the night down there.

ID: What happened to the house, was it a total loss?

Thomas: No, it wasn't a total loss. They got it all fixed up and we moved back in; replastered and everything. The damage was to the room. It was owned by the bank, Merchant's National Bank, at that time which was why we were living there. And it was nice. Abbey Abbot lived right across the alley facing Second Avenue. There were a lot of interesting houses around there that had been built by Major Hamilton, that was Dr. John Hamilton's father--Henry Hamilton that was his son who was also a doctor. It was his wife that just died lately.

ID: Did you have a telephone in your home that you called the fire department with?

Thomas: Yes.

ID: So phones were quite current?

Thomas: It was 1912.

ID: They must have come rather quickly?

Thomas: As I remember, I can't remember when we didn't have a telephone. I think we always did, and our number was 3696. When we moved out to the house on Crescent Street, why we had that number for years

until they finally changed the different numbers around.

ID: Then things got real complicated, with numbers now. You were just three years old but I'm sure this was quite an experience. Do you remember, was the fire truck--it wouldn't have been a truck--was it pulled by horses?

Thomas: I was not aware at that time. I'm sure it must have been pulled by horses because there was an awful lot of horse stuff going on. People would come up to the house--all the ice was delivered that way.

And we had an ice box, and of course, a lot of vegetables and things--people would come hawking the vegetables and we'd go out and take a look. Sometimes it was bakery, sometimes it was other things.

I know that both the Douglas' and the--Colonel Robins--the children all had pony carts, you know that went down the street.

ID: I've seen pictures.

Thomas: They're wonderful. We got to ride in them periodically.

ID: Well that kind of works right into my next question which was, what was the neighborhood like where you were growing up? You've mentioned some of the families that were there. This was a neighborhood that I am presuming at that time, was on the edge of town, wasn't it? I mean the city didn't go a lot further out there.

Thomas: Well, at 10th Street, where we first lived you see--then we moved to 16th Street. They used to have the circus over on Third Avenue. I don't remember particularly--I remember vaguely going there. But then, of course, they put in a fountain you know and things were growing. Some of those houses were quite old at that time.

ID: That were closer down toward town?

Thomas: Yes. But it was a nice neighborhood. There were still beautiful houses--all Second Avenue from Turner's and up--were all these magnificent old houses. Particularly below Turner's, there was quite a high hill--which there's been a lot of it cut down now--and there were great stone walls all along and steps going up the stone walls and then there'd be a piece of lawn and more steps going up. And the houses, they all had verandas and things like that, and beautiful windows coming clear down to the floor. You see, those were out of the sixties.

ID: Those were, then, the first families, really, of Cedar Rapids?

Thomas: A lot of them. I remember being, especially, in one house that the husband was one of the vestrymen over at Grace Church. His wife had a beautiful voice, she was a friend of my mother's. I took some lessons from her, not at that time but later. The house that the Cooks had was on First Avenue above the tracks. My grandfather had lived there. It was high up, almost where the viaduct was. I can remember the house being up there and being told that that was the house, but I never was in it. But it was a beautiful house with windows clear down to the floor and a veranda and that kind of thing.

ID: Were they primarily brick homes, those homes?

Thomas: Yes, almost all of them were. I remember that house was. But you see, his father told him that where the railroad came through was an arm of the slough. There has always been what you call the Fourth Street problem. You know the tracks, and it was always lumpy and bumpy. This was all an arm of the slough. It came through

there. There was a big high hill, you see, that came down and then you had to cross over the slough for First Avenue and stuff. They kept trying to fill it in and it would go down. There was a bog underneath there, it was running water. There was running water in all those hills, and quicksand under all of that land. That's why they had so much trouble building the Y and other places there because of the running water. There was always running water in the basement when we worked in the theatre in the Y because you could hear it, right under that stage! There was loads of water in the hills there.

That was an arm of the slough and they had to build a wooden walk over it so that you could walk down First Avenue and then go over. Now, the street itself went down and they had to fill that in. But the walls were built up and the stores were--you had to walk up to the stores.

ID: To go to the stores?

Thomas: Yes.

ID: This was when you were growing up?

Thomas: No, this was before, this was my father's memory.

ID: Your father's memory?

Thomas: Yes, my father's memory. I can remember the old iron bridge that went across First Avenue before they did that. I remember that very well.

ID: But your dad remembers that there were actually raised entrances then to the stores?

Thomas: Yes. It wasn't filled in until later. They had a ferry, you see, so that the drop would be as you see the bridge now, right down

to the water's edge. And where the post office is--when it was finally filled in and paved, they put in these entry ways in the pavement where you could put in coal and the goods and stuff like that, because they had had to raise it up.

Now there were walls and then there were steps going up and an iron railing around the top. Nowadays, people don't understand that the sidewalks in Cedar Rapids are part of the building that it belongs to. Like the Roosevelt; the sidewalks--we did have the clubs and things down underneath that because that was all owned by that person.

ID: It wasn't part of the city property. And even the old Post Office building by the river owns clear out to the edge, and the rooms and things underneath there. The first original Y was the same way on the other side of First Avenue. All of those buildings the sidewalks covered. And then you went and you delivered coal or you delivered goods down chutes or elevators. You know, they would pop up and the elevator would come up.

So you see, all that was the way the city was laid out?

ID: Originally, yes. What other memories do you have about the way the neighborhood looked that you grew up in?

Thomas: Well it was a nice neighborhood. Some of my mother's friends lived right across the street on the west side. And these houses that Major Hamilton built; and around the corner we had friends, the Elys lived in what you call "Old Town" now, you see, my father's age--his friends . . .

ID: The Centenarians.

Thomas: Yes--lived on the south side of Second Avenue in that block between

Park Court and 16th Street. And Abbey Abbot lived behind us-- all nice people lived all up and down there. We knew all the families and all the people all the way downtown, practically, on both sides of the street, and First Avenue, too.

LD: That was all your neighborhood right in there?

Thomas: Oh, yes. The Seargent girls lived up--oh what was his name, lived next door. There were **apartment** houses, there were some Robinsons across the street, some Lefebures. There was another name there and they went down for Quaker Oats, down to Memphis. There was an apartment building over there and there was Bonnie's Grocery down where we have the Hy Vee. And there was a drug store.

LD: That was my next question. Was there only the downtown or were there some stores and shops out where you were that you could go to?

Thomas: Well, yes, they had neighborhood stores periodically around. But it was not a commercial, particularly commercial, no. Because people lived, you see, there were houses and then somebody would build a front on like Pearlies or something like that down there. But really, that big building on the corner which Weaver bought for a Me-Too and then it turned into what it is now, that was two different stores--Bonnie's Grocery and then there was a pharmacy there. That's where we bought all our little chocolate babies, you know, candies, and little rats, you know those chocolate candies.

LD: Things you can't get anymore?

Thomas: No! Of course not, no whips and stuff.

ID: Isn't that a shame? You also had some memories of the Bever family, I believe?

Thomas: That's right, who lived down there--you see Jim was my age.

There's James Lorenzo, and there was Pauline who lived in the house behind Grace Church which the Faulkes bought later. But that was a Bever house and they had given the land, as I said, for Grace Church.

Wren was older than my mother and father but--oh, let's see, what was her name--one of them married a Blake and they had a huge house on First Avenue on the corner of 18th Street and First. It was a great, enormous red brick building that the Cherrys bought later. But the Blakes lived there, and Jamie Blake and George Blake and their mother was a Bever. Jamie eventually married Colonel Dows' sister, Henrietta, and then they lived on the corner of Second Avenue and 18th Street.

ID: So they even got connected to you?

Thomas: Oh yes. You see we're all . . . who would you marry except the people . . .

ID: . . . that you spent all of your time with?

Thomas: Yes.

ID: The Bever family is an interesting one because, of course, Bever Park is such a well-known land mark now and yet there are few of the family, apparently, that are really left in Cedar Rapids. Except for a couple of young . . .

Thomas: Yes, the two grandsons are here. Well, of course, that was one of the original plat makers, you see, who came out here. And Bever bought up a lot of the land, too.

LD: He was a real estate kind of fellow, wasn't he?

Thomas: That's right. Well, what they did was, they divided up the land among themselves, I mean whoever it was--that Green who came out here early on. Then they all put money in the pot, you see, and they each got so much land. Then they would go out and buy some more land. So that actually all of their money came from the land and the investment that they made. That was the quick way to make money in those days.

LD: And they had the foresight to buy in the right place where the city would grow?

Thomas: That's right. And they built houses--the Bevers built houses all the time. They would build a house, go and live in it, and then they would sell the house and move out while they were building another one, you see. So they always had one to move into, therefore, the part along Grande Avenue--Blue Roof which is next to the park--which the Clarks bought, and Barbara lived in that for awhile, she rented it--Barbara Dixon. Then there's one down on the corner, it isn't Garden Drive, it's the next one, the next house there. They all look--you can kind of tell a Bever house, I can't explain it.

LD: They have the same kind of solid look?

Thomas: Well, yes. During certain periods and types, and things. Mrs. Bever's house, family house, was on the corner of Second Avenue and 18th Street. It was directly back of the Blake house. That family's name was Denecke?

LD: Of the Denecke's downtown department store?

Thomas: That's right, Denecke. There are several--one of them lived

across from us on 16th Street, Gertrude. She had a daughter and I think they went to live out west someplace. But they were delightful people, they were really awfully nice. They were great friends of my mother's and they enjoyed themselves a lot. Their mother was a Gramling, is all I can say. But that's another old family. They were a Catholic family, but Mrs. Bever became an Episcopalian in a sense, and went to Grace Church. Of course his family, part of them, lived in the front of it. So Jim was brought up an Episcopalian, and the children were. Of course Jim was my contemporary and married Audrey. Their two sons, Tony and the other one, anyway they're both in town here.

LD: Well that brings me right up to another thing I want to ask you about, and that was Grace Episcopal and it's importance in that little neighborhood or that part of the community where you grew up. It really is a centerpiece, isn't it, of that?

Thomas: Well yes, and they built a magnificent church there. That was started a long time before and some of the Pastors like Ringold, and some of the rest of them are all buried out in the cemetery in a special lot. The man named Arthur, the Reverend Mr. Arthur, one of his children is buried out there. His daughter was Murial, who married a Trewin, Martha Trewin, Sandy's mother, also friends. Now that Trewin family lived right across on Second Avenue--they had a beautiful house--from my grandmother Hamilton, in that lot. That house has been moved onto A Avenue between 20th and 19th Street. You can still see the beautiful cut glass windows in it. It was a beautiful house.

LD: Do you have many memories of Grace when you were growing up?

Thomas: Oh, yes. I went there from a tiny toddler, as I remember. There was a brief period of Sunday School out at St. John's, which was just that teeny chapel part there. You could get about eight or ten people in it, period. Before they built the church my grandmother Hamilton was very prominent in that business. She was a Canadian and Canadians are usually low church, and Grace Church turned them into a high church when they got up a Catholic minded priests, the Anglo Catholic priests down there. That was what I was brought up in. I went to Sunday School, of course. It was a magnificent church; there was a huge undercroft. Downstairs was a theatre and stuff, and I even did one of my children's theatre's things down there one time. We went down there and we had classes; we had marvelous classes. I had learned everything that I knew down there, and of course, then as we grew older, why, we got more interested in going up to church. But they had a custom, of course, we had Holy Communion. They'd start out with morning prayer first and people could come to morning prayer. Then if they didn't want to stay for Communion, which we called Mass, then they would leave. But we had a marvelous choir loft, and the altar behind it was just huge.

ID: Now this church is no longer here?

Thomas: No, they had to tear that down because the top of it was leaning, or something like that. It was a free-standing thing, it was marvelously built so that there were no pillars in it at all, you see.

ID: A great open space, then?

Thomas: Yes, a marvelous open space with a great big center aisle, and

then they had some side aisles, and they had the most beautiful stained glass--just enormous things. They had one of Rayfield's transfigurations over one one side, and one of Sistine Madona on the other. All done in glass with all the angels and everything. It was just huge. And then they had a lovely circle window in the back. The Bevers had put a lot of money in this church. You entered from Sixth Street, and there were two stairs; one to the front side and one to the back. So you could go in the back and come down. Then there was a center cross aisle as well. Our family sat right on the cross aisle in the first pew, all the Hamiltons.

ID: You had seats?

Thomas: Oh yes, we had pews.

ID: And you didn't sit anywhere but in your pew?

Thomas: That's right, you sat in your own family pew. The Hamiltons were a prominent family so the Hamiltons sat there. Now my father had been brought up a Presbyterian, and most of those people went to the Presbyterian Church. But Margaret married a Dows and they were all Episcopalians and were brought up in there, and so was Sud Dows--they were all brought up in Grace Church. My father was about six years older than Sud Dows but they were brought up together and played together and they would go down and ring the bell, you know, at the church. (Laughter)

ID: I believe he wrote something about ringing that bell.

Thomas: Oh, he got caught and everything, you know, they just had a wonderful time.

ID: What happened to the windows when the church was torn down?

Thomas: Well, they packed them away and I don't know if they were put in a garage back there, and I don't know what happened. They took the ones of the Saints, the Virgin Patronesses that were along under the Sistine Madona--and they were narrower panels--and they put those in the present Grace Church. After they took it down they opened the wall--they built this wall--and they put in some of those.

LD: Some of them are in . . .

Thomas: St. Agnes, St. Margarets, St. Katherines, I don't know who all; But anyway they got three or four of them in there. Thank heaven because the other glass which was in the chapel was a lot older but was totally undistinguished. In those days it just had the names of the people underneath it. But of course, when they could afford that, it's beautiful . . . I don't know what happened to them . . . they were really something.

LD: When did that church get torn down, do you remember? I'm sure we can find that somewhere.

Thomas: Well, it was there during the war because they had a special altar set up in the back for people to pray for the people that were gone to war. That was the Baptismal Magnificent Pond. You in from A Avenue and they had set it up inside the church.

LD: So this was World War I?

Thomas: World War II.

LD: It was still there during World War II?

Thomas: Yes, because when I was active and working there the place had been built as an attachment to the original church which is the one that is still there. There were ramps, you see, that came down from

where the vestments were--and the robing room and all that. And the Sunday Schools were all downstairs. But the way the church was built there was . . .

ID: Tell me about the bats. (Laughter)

Thomas: Well, anyway, they had laid down reams of guano. Now the boys--we used to try and shoot the pigeons later on. But of course we had bat trouble; they would come in, you see. The best way was to open the sliding door between the church and the vestry. And they would stand there with tennis racquets and beat the bats! That was the only way they had of killing them; they were very effective, too.

ID: Yes, that's still effective.

Thomas: Sunlight they would go to. They'd kill all these bats and they didn't know what to do with them, so they got the stuff downstairs in the kitchen for canning and all that kind of thing. They would fill up these bottles with bats! I just couldn't believe it, but that's what they did -- and put them in where the vestments were. And people began discovering all these things with the bats. Well of course, it was a neat way to do it because all they had to do was throw them in the garbage, you see. And that was one way of disposing of them.

But it got so bad in the summer--and especially during the

1930's , you know, the summer of 1936, and so on, when it went up to 120. (That was when Barbara was married.)

ID: Oh yes, I've heard about that summer.

Thomas: We'd go down there and go to daily mass or whenever they had the masses down there. And Sunday especially, they would have to get the incense pot rolling early before. They would have to go through

that entire church because the guano was a little heavy. It had been rotting upstairs for years, and you couldn't go in the place until they had thoroughly incensed it all out. And you had to do that in there and in the adjoining chapel, which is now the church, so that you could go there.

ID: So that the fragrance was strong enough to overcome?

Thomas: That was exactly it--overcome the difficulties. But that was a beautiful church, and they had a wonderful tracker-action organ--that is, when you stepped on the pedals it moved wands which would go up and open up the tubes, you know, to let the air through. And, of course, in the old days they had to have a compressor with somebody standing behind it pumping it.

ID: Pumping it?

Thomas: Then they got the electric part, you know, where it would work. But they still had to repair it. We had a wonderful guy over there who was an organist, and he would buy fishing poles and split them and use them to repair the trackers.

ID: He had it all worked out?

Thomas: Yes, he was a genius. He worked for the Quaker Oats. He was delightful.

ID: Do you remember what his name was?

Thomas: Oh dear me, it will come to me. Anyway he was quite a remarkable person. We also had midnight masses every year, and Roland Moehlmann would come down and conduct the masses. Now that was about the 1930's or the 1920's, the late 1920's.

ID: Most of your social life must have revolved around that church? Much of what you did as a child growing up?

Thomas: Yes, well, it was very important. And Arthur Poe, who headed the Quaker Oats at that time, was superintendent of the Sunday School and the Senior Vestment. So he was always there and Father Campbell, who had come there to be the priest, he also was the canon because he grew up in Milwaukee at the Episcopal Cathedral. He wore a black cassock with red buttons, and seams, and a huge red sash and all that kind of thing.

LD: Extremely impressive?

Thomas: Oh, yes; and a beret and the whole works, you know. But he was such a loving man, everybody loved him. He was a Scotsman. He had been married to a dress designer in New York and his daughter later worked for the head man at Vogue and Frank Crowninshield of-- what's the other magazine--Vanity Fair. She is still writing, by the way, and she used to come back and visit. They had gone to a little church in New York but he decided he wanted to be a priest and it didn't work out to be married to a fashion designer. He went to Nashotah House in Wisconsin which was founded by celibate priests for Anglican-Catholic training for priests.

LD: You know, speaking of people and their connections with other people--it made me think, someone else mentioned in an interview that Arthur Poe was related to Edgar Allen Poe.

Thomas: That's right.

LD: Is that true?

Thomas: Yes. Arthur Poe was--what was there, four or five Poe brothers--that went to Princeton and were famous football players--every single one of them. And Arthur was one of them. And they all were related, and his daughter, Ella, went to Baltimore to school which was where Poe lived, and went to St. Timothy school

there. Because of who she is--you know, she's really something special. She's lived in Washington for years and she was married to a famous lawyer who came from Iowa originally. And she headed up--I remember when I was down there one year she was running the Red Cross; she and somebody else were running the Red Cross for Washington. She was a woman of . . .

ID: That family has really been an intricate factor wherever they have lived.

Thomas: That's right. She's really something still; known as Dolly Poe.

ID: Well, I'm going to move us along a bit, but I did want to ask you about household help in those days. Did your mother have people who lived in?

Thomas: Well, we always had what was known as a hired girl. That name comes down for a long ways. My grandmothers--I knew their hired girls and they grew up to be quite famous because one of them worked for years for--what do you call it--the ball that we used to have.

ID: The Charity Ball?

Thomas: The Charity Ball; and she made all the sandwiches for years. She worked at both of my grandmothers' houses.

My grandmother Cook was a magnificent cook. I've never eaten such food. We got the oysters at Thanksgiving time in a barrel, and she kept it in the summer kitchen in the back. All she did was keep it watered down, you know--with salt water and corn meal on the top. They always lasted through Christmas.

ID: Where would they come from?

Thomas: From the east. They were shipped in ice, you see. All they had

to do was keep them cold and watered and everything. We had them on the half-shell, we had them in soup, we had them in everything. We stuffed them in the turkey--but we always had them during that period. This was customary because that was the way things were done in those days. This was not the only family that did that; but I know my grandmother always had them; my Aunt Margaret always had them--Aunt Margaret Dows. I don't know when Aunt Ella was running her house--of course, she didn't have any children, you know. But she always had the best of everything as well and it was a marvelous time to live for eating.

ID: Talk a little more about that. What would a typical holiday dinner be like in your home when you were growing up?

Thomas: Well . . .

ID: I'm sure it was laid on with silver and linen and all the trappings.

Thomas: Well, silver, as far as families was concerned--everybody had silver, and you used it because you've got to use silver everyday.

ID: It was not--it was--an atypical thing--you used it everyday.

Thomas: It was routine, we always ate with silver even as little children. You had to learn to handle the forks, yes. But we had a wonderful thing that looked like a hoe, it was called a pusher. But we had little teeny silvers for ourselves, you see, you know for the family--and the youngest one always got that with the pusher.

ID: The pusher? To help you get the food on the fork?

Thomas: Yes, that's exactly why, to get it on the fork.

ID: That's great, I think we should use them now!

Thomas: Well, yes. I think they're just wonderful. Finally my Aunt Ella, when we were traveling east one time--she took us east and we had

a wonderful time. Anyway, we used to go down every summer and stay at Scituate, or where ever it was my father had gone down and stayed before me. Not Rockport, but what ever it is.

The Ellys always went down to Scituate, too, and they're still going--people are still going. Mary Roche is still going to Scituate.

ID: Where is Scituate?

Thomas: Scituate is on the inner shore before the curve of Cape Cod. And it's not very far from where--we called them the talcum powder's children went.

You see when we first went down to Plymouth Rock, the rock was just sitting there.

ID: It was no big deal?

Thomas: No, well we went and climbed all over it, you see. And then later when we came down, why it had a gate around it and you weren't allowed to climb on it any more. But you know, you lived well.

ID: Were meals quite a . . . what was the most important meal of the day?

Thomas: We got up on the morning; you had to be at breakfast. Then we had hot cereal, usually oatmeal or rolled wheat, things like that. And down at my Grandmother Hamilton's we always had corn meal mush Sunday night. You know in an iron pot that went (bubbling sound) you know, and the little things pop like volcanoes.

ID: The boiling

Thomas: Yes. They drank Sanka down there. Nobody had stainless steel--there was some kind of kitchen silver that you had out or would take on picnics or something so you wouldn't loose it. But you

always ate with silver; the table was always properly laid. And we always used table cloths and later on mats and things like that--place mats. But it was always properly done and you went and sat down at the table and you ate your meal. There was no getting up--you left the table, you left and you weren't allowed back. So wherever you went for your family dinner, you had to stay at the table and behave and sit and eat.

ID: Dressed very properly as well?

Thomas: Dressed properly as well, but if you left the table, especially at the Hamilton house, you never got back for dessert or anything else. So you had to be well-pottied and everything before.

ID: It was an affair?

Thomas: You betcha, and you kept the rules. And of course where there were big families, the family would sit around maybe in the dining room. There would always be a table for the children and we had to behave ourselves, too.

ID: Just as well?

Thomas: Absolutely. No throwing of food or anything like that. But when we got through at my Grandmother Hamilton's we would go upstairs and turn the furniture over and make those hidy-houses. They had transoms up there and we would throw water over the transoms.

ID: So it was really just at the table that everything had to be . . .

Thomas: Yes, but the rest of the time it was something else! But you see my Grandmother didn't mind, we were out of the way and there was nothing that we could harm up there, except this idea of throwing water through the transoms. Johnny Hamilton was long-legged and he could get up there. You know, he would hide in one room and they

would be in the other--I tell you, it was just a wonderful house.

ID: That kind of answers my question of what you did for fun, I'm sure that's not the only thing you did for fun; but as youngsters growing up . . .

Thomas: We had roller skates, and my cousin Ann Hamilton, she had two-wheeler roller skates. Just two-wheelers.

ID: Were they wide wheels?

Thomas: Well, just about the same as the other ones but they were larger wheels. They were shoe skates, you know. And these two-wheelers, I tell you, she could really wheel.

ID: I bet she could. She could get a little edge on that, couldn't she?

Thomas: Yes. It was marvelous because she was the only one that I knew that had two-wheelers; the rest of us had the kind that we put on our shoes and skate to school with. And they had the keys and all that thing. Hard on the shoes, but we could get there faster. Of course we had our share of bumps--none of us were really badly hurt ever by something. But we had those things, we had sleds, we had everything.

All I want to say about the sleds and things--we used to play, what was it, around in a circle--goose something or other.

ID: Duck, duck, goose? They still play that one.

Thomas: I can't remember. We used to do that--we made angels in the snow. Our whole front lawn--you see, we had a terrace out there--and so the snow got piled and we used to try and make igloos and things like that. We had that but we could fly down the hill, you know, belly-flop.

LD: Do you have memories of . . .

Thomas: And the country club, too.

LD: I wanted to ask you about the country club but--of particularly bad winters or summers when you were growing up that just really stood out in your mind? Or air conditioning in the days before--well you always had all kinds of heating devices and things.

Thomas: Yes, but not cooling.

LD: Not cooling?

Thomas: I can remember feeling the cold because we sat--we were all put around in the hall upstairs, at 1601 First Avenue, and we would come out in the morning and all our clothes--my father would lay out all our clothes the night before, everything we were to get into. I suppose we did too as we got more responsible. But we had to wear long underwear, and you had to turn it at the ankles. There was no rubber or anything like that. And we rolled the socks down, he showed us how to roll the socks down. And we would put the socks down and flip over the underwear so that it would be flat, and then we would roll up--all the way over, up until we had to have garters. And we wore funny little belts, you know, with funny little tops--they were kind of attached with buttons, I forget what they were called. But anyway we had all this long underwear that we had to wear to school. It was just terrible! Then we had to get into golashes and everything else that we had to go to school in, and it was terribly cold. And the snow--I can remember when the snow was just so deep.

LD: Yes, others have said that, that there was much heavier snows than you see now.

Thomas: Yes, much heavier. And it really was terrible because you walked. If people didn't keep their walks clean, you know, you tried to walk in the street or ruts. If it was cleaned up it was banked up high. We had to walk--we walked straight across 16th Street until we hit Third Avenue. Then there was a three-way thing; it was Third Avenue going up, and Grand Avenue was going up, and the street was going across and it was a park. It was a wonderful park because it had a water fountain for horses there. And it ran summer and winter, practically, because the horses always needed some water. And so we would drink out of it, too, and the dogs would drink out of it.

ID: Everybody would drink out of it?

Thomas: Yes, that's right. And anyway, that's how we went to school--we went across there. And sometimes we would cross the street and cross over in the other, but you see there wasn't as much traffic then. That was all laid with brick, up Grand Avenue.

ID: Did you go to Johnson?

Thomas: Yes.

ID: Okay, so your elementary days were at Johnson?

Thomas: Yes. I started right in at kindergarten over there. In kindergarten you came in the old Johnson--it was a wonderful school. I'm so mad they tore it down, it was the best school in Cedar Rapids. But this was built in 1910. I was born in ought nine, so it was fairly new by the time I got there. And it was all tiled--all the stairs were tiled and all the halls were tiled--upstairs and downstairs. We went downstairs and there was a big kindergarten room. And of course they had built it so that there were

windows up along, you see, on the edges. So it was well lit on one side--big windows in the other two stories.

So we started kindergarten. We sat on the floor and we learned all these things. And there were little rugs--there may have been wood down there on the floor, I can't remember, probably. But there was nice shallow risers on the stairs for the kids, and the same going upstairs so that there was plenty of room and way to get there for little feet.

LD: That was a two-story?

Thomas: It was a two-story thing, yes. Now the center part of the basement had the heating equipment, but when they had band stuff they had to go in there. They had this one-legged guy who came from World War I or something, or some war. Anyway, he came and taught there. Then the other end--I think it was one, two, three, four, five--fifth grade was downstairs and then we went up for sixth, on the top floor. I can't remember all about that because by the time we got up there we were eventually moved over to McKinley Junior High School.

LD: Was there a gymnasium there, in the elementary school?

Thomas: No. We played kick-ball outside and there was some, not basketball, but volleyball, which was a very dull game. We liked kick-ball better.

LD: What was the land like around Johnson in those days? Now all they have is that concrete--or asphalt . . .

Thomas: It was dirt.

LD: They just have a little asphalt play area. No land around the school, it's all houses.

Thomas: Well, there were what you might call the half-block was all school, and three quarters of that--of the back part of it--was all land, it was school land. I think there were three or four houses that went to the alley part. That was it, there were no other houses on that property at all. It was all playground; and it was a mixture of grass and dirt or whatever was worn off. On the front it had an entry way that was like a half circle. You weren't allowed to go on the grass on that center part. You were supposed to leave that alone.

ID: Keep that nice?

Thomas: Yes, keep that nice. But the rest of it was mostly play. I don't remember that they had any iron works up, except maybe for the volley ball thing. But when children are running it's better not to have a lot of obstructions. We used to go out and play or walk around or do something like that during recreation time. But I can't remember exactly what--oh, we did a hell of a lot of jump rope and stuff like that.

ID: Oh, yes! Would you go home for lunch everyday?

Thomas: Oh, yes. We had to walk. When we lived at 16th Street we were never allowed to take our lunch, and if we tried to stay over and eat lunch with someone else our families called and asked immediately, where are our children and why aren't they home, or where's Eleanor or where is so-and-so. And we had to walk from Crescent Street back and forth; we also had to walk back and forth from Arthur School.

ID: That's a long walk!

Thomas: Well, my family felt it was getting too crowded so we had to walk

to Arthur, and that was hell! That was up to 27th Street and there weren't very many houses up there. Of course there was the Ely house. And there was 22nd Street, and around in a circle. Some of those houses were built up there. The man who built our house--who was the carpenter at 222 Crescent Street, also built himself a house on the corner which is still standing up there. But otherwise it was windswept and snow and nothing between us and the mansion up there. It was bitter!

LD: So you could really say "when I was your age I had to walk two miles to school" or whatever!?

Thomas: Yes, it was just terrible. It was. And there was a green house where the Lutheran Church is now, that was up at the top and also down at the bottom. That was all green house; it was the green house. They also belong to Grace Church.

LD: This is fascinating, I hate to go on but I would also like to get some impressions from you--now I'm talking of course when you were older and maybe a teenage youngster. What kind of parties do you remember from those days? What did you do to socialize?

Thomas: As a teenager?

LD: Yes, or perhaps even dating. What was that like when you were growing up? What sorts of things would you do?

Thomas: Well, as we were kind of in those changing years, we had a group of girls from Johnson School and a group of girls from Jackson School. And that was Jane Carey; see, Careys lived back of I. C. Church. On the corner was May Hill and her first husband lived there. Then the Careys had a house and Judge and Mrs. Grimm had a house. And beyond that was I. C. School. There was Jackson

School and there were all the people who lived--that didn't go to Johnson School--were there. One of them was a girl named Smith and she was a cousin by marriage. And there were the . . . she's now . . . I'll just have to wait a minute. Not Chadima--who's the guy that started the Paramount Pharmacies--Chehak. Ruth Chehak; and Ruth has got all those records. Are you going to interview her about those years?

ID: I have her name.

Thomas: You should, because she lived down near the post office in a house that Mr. Abraham lived in, and went to that school. Now that's at Sixth Avenue and--is it Sixth or Seventh Street? The lower part of the post office and it's on this corner and there's a hair dressing place behind it. The next is Seventh Street, and that's where that little church is--Father George's Church. But I would interview her because she and her sister have a lot of memories. Now, her sister's still alive and living in Chicago, and Ruth, I understand, is going to be married again. But she also has a sense of history and she lived in a different part of town. You see, over there--which wouldn't be covered by some of the people that you have been talking to. And she's a delightful, very bright woman.

ID: But you palled around with this group of girls?

Thomas: Yes, well we met once a month; we called them the monthlies and somebody said we mustn't call them the monthlies any more!

(Laughter) I said why not! I hadn't got to that stage yet. Well anyway we met at garden house.

ID: At Brucemore?

Thomas: At Bruce more, right. Of course we went right through there. And that had been used for a house--Ellen Douglas had lived there--it was built as a guest house. It's just a jewel of a building. And the proportions were so good that when young Suddy Dows built the house on Aunt Margaret's farm, he used the same proportions in that house as inside the garden house. Then a whole series of people, including Earle Muzzy and some of the others who eventually became heads at Quaker Oats and top people--lived in there, too. And Mr. Lenders lived there for a while I think--when Mr. Douglas first brought him to Cedar Rapids--until he was married and had another house. There were lots of people living there, and of course we were part of this, I mean it was a family affair.

ID: Right. So you would go there and just have your get togethers?

Thomas: Yes, it was all us girls. And we always wore costumes; we made-- you know that was the time when Egypt land and the discovery of King Tut's Tomb, all this kind of semi-oriental type of music came out. And we would go down and buy cheap brassieres and put all kinds of do-dads all over them. (Laughter)

ID: And dress up?

Thomas: Yes we dressed up, we wore snakes on our heads and we did all kinds--every time we had a party we had kind of a different thing.

ID: I can see how you got interested in theatre.

Thomas: But we all enjoyed it, you know. I don't remember that we were thinking much about men and women, particularly in those days. Except eventually the boys began raiding these.

ID: Began raiding your parties?

Thomas: Yes. I mean they would come over. You see, in those days there

wasn't--we didn't do much dating, we went in groups. And one thing that is very different--the families of the boys as well as the girls did the entertaining.

ID: I was going to say, was a lot arranged through the families?

Thomas: Yes, a lot of it was arranged by families. And your family took turns giving a party, and you included boys and girls. Some kind of dated and things but you didn't think about that--you were invited. If you wanted a particular boy maybe you might ask him or who do you want to go with, you know--who do you want to go with you.

I know I gave a great big party--a circus party, and we got those ice wagons. And we started out and we had a regular parade from downtown up, practically. I forget where we started, anyway, we had ice wagons and we sat on top of the ice wagons all dressed up. I went with Tom Sinclair or something. It was marvelous, and somebody came in a chariot. I think it was Dr. Halpin and somebody-or-other. They had a regular chariot and things--it was a marvelous party.

ID: This was in your teenage years?

Thomas: Yes, this was a party that I gave.

ID: That's wonderful because that was kind of an imaginative experience that I don't think we have that much any more.

Thomas: Well, not as we used to. Of course, we did a lot of that treasure hunting business all over town. I know they came over to my house one time and they needed some false teeth so the cook loaned hers. (Laughter) They were just crazy things like that. But it was always a kind of a group thing--you went and everybody danced with

everybody. I remember this one boy, Billy Whelihan, that was a terribly nice boy. But it was a mixed age thing. Now for instance, the party that I gave would include my cousin Ellen, who was older, and Tom Sinclair and some of those people that there was . . . you know people used to be stuck in just a certain age group. But we were lucky in our girls group that we had some that were older, like Ruthie Brandt, and some that were younger like me.

ID: But that has its advantages.

Thomas: Yes, but you see the boys and the girls--and we all went to dancing school together.

ID: Where was that?

Thomas: There was a nice floor, and there was music--I don't know if it was victrola music or whatever, maybe a piano. But we learned how to dance.

ID: That would be ballroom dancing?

Thomas: That's right. But we were all taught together. Everybody went--the mothers all arranged all this kind of thing. And the boys went, too. And it was none of this business about being a sissy and dancing because . . .

ID: It was expected.

Thomas: Yes. And the fathers danced with the girls at the country club and the mothers danced with the boys so that they all had experience. Most everybody everybody belonged to the country club, but if they didn't there was the parties that we brought them to, you know.

ID: Do you remember the old country club?

Thomas: Very well, it was beautiful.

ID: I've heard a lot of nostalgia for that.

Thomas: Oh, it was lovely. It had a beautiful ballroom and the balcony all around the edge that you could go out. And doors that you could open up, and they made this hideous thing up there now that nobody has liked. And we had a beautiful room with a huge big old stone fireplace where we ate. It was a comfortable nice kind of place. They got this architect --pardon me, if I forget what his name was but he was no good as far as I was concerned.

ID: In other words, it was not that there was anything wrong with the building but they felt that they needed something more impressive?

Thomas: Well, we out-grew it was the point. But they didn't think ahead to the aging and stuff. And even now you have to walk up those steps. And I have always said, that like Sisyphus, who had to pull the stone up, you know, and it roll down hill, and he had to do it-- that whoever put those steps in had better spend his purgatory or hell running up and down . . .

ID: Going up and down?

Thomas: Yes, because the risers are spaced wrongly so that you trip and fall. They have improved somewhat but if you've got risers that are different heights then it breaks your rhythm wrong.

ID: How did you used to enter? Was there a more gradual way?

Thomas: Well it was built on a hill so you always had to come in and climb up some stairs to get upstairs--to get to that floor. We had fun parties like that, I think we went as ghosts or we went as something one year. And Billy Whelihan and I went and we were all in one garment.

ID: So together you were the ghost?

Thomas: Yes. You know, a lot of dress-ups and a lot of crazy things like

that that we did. And of course when you got to running around in cars, why that was when we did all this hunting and stuff.

ID: Scavenging?

Thomas: Yes, but otherwise there were fun parties at Brucemore and there were fun parties at our house and fun parties over at the Carey's and the Morrison's, Dr. Morrison's. But there were always groups and there was some kind of dating but it was a concerted effort on the parts of the families to do this.

ID: That explains, too, why so many of the families that you grew up with had the same customs experiences that the young men and young women . . . they would intermarry and you would have this very closely woven family.

Thomas: That's right. And we still are close friends even if we don't see anything of them much. But we were brought up together-- you are very comfortable with all of these people.

ID: A shared experience.

Thomas: I can remember when somebody tried to kiss me one time, and of course I wasn't ready for kissing, you know. And I pushed him away and he wouldn't stop. I hit him and broke a coat hanger over his head. When you're trying to learn how to handle things sometimes . . .

ID: You just do the best you can.

Thomas: Yes, you just do the best you can. But anyway, we just all laugh over all these things.

ID: Well, I'm going to shift to things that are perhaps more general than the neighborhood experiences. First of all, just some people whose names are remembered over the years-- you have memories of the

the Cherry sisters or do they go back too far for you?

Thomas: Well, I did see the Cherry sisters perform.

ID: Do you have any explanation of why they achieved so much fame?

Apparently they were not excellent performers.

Thomas: Well the problem with the Cherry sisters was that they were very serious about what they were doing.

ID: They took themselves serious?

Thomas: Very seriously, indeed. I heard all these wild stories about them-- I knew Mr. Henderson who was Mrs. Herb Cherry's father. I knew him, he was a fun kind of person. I don't know how many times-- you can look through the roster and see--everybody took turns being mayor, too. He was the only one who could handle the Cherry sisters. They would call up from New York and say you've got to hurry out here, the Cherry sisters are raising hell again. Now what it was that they were raising hell, I don't know. But they fancied themselves actors and they were very tempermental. I don't know whether they were beautiful or whether they weren't beautiful. But I can remember going and seeing one of them clinging to the cross--the old rugged cross and singing, and all these lights and stuff like that. I don't think that was at the opera house, I kind of think it was at the Majestic. They had netting up.

ID: But they also were booed and received a lot of . . .

Thomas: They made fun of them because they were singing religious songs and stuff. And it was kind of like a theatrical revival show, you know.

ID: But people came?

Thomas: But people came because they obviously were something out of the

sticks, the like of which nobody had ever seen before. But they took themselves very seriously indeed.

ID: So you remember Greene's Opera House?

Thomas: Oh, yes.

ID: You were there?

Thomas: My mother started taking us when we were in diapers, to see theatre and music. And of course, by the time she got four it was quite a handful, but we all went to everything. I can remember seeing The Bluebird at the Greene's Opera House. I will never forget that. That was one of my terrific experiences.

ID: Now, I don't know anything about that production. Was it a musical?

Thomas: Well it was a play made from a fairy story--I cannot remember who the author was and it was about Mytal and Tytal. Mytal and Tytal I think they called it. The Bluebird is a famous story about the children who were looking for the bluebird of happiness. And it turned out that they had it all the time at home.

ID: Oh yes.

Thomas: Do you remember that there were clocks and all this kind of thing. Well it was a beautiful production, beautiful. Just loved every minute of it. I remember a real thrill. Then I saw Tilly, a play called Tilly the Menonite Maid.

ID: Tilly the Menonite Maid?

Thomas: Yes. Of course you know, all this . . . well it was kind of . . .

ID: Kind of a comedy?

Thomas: Yes, it must have been. But I think that she was serious. I can't remember, and I can't even remember who the actors were.

ID: But these were traveling companies?

- Thomas: Oh yes, and the very best, too. And I can't remember how many other things that I saw.
- ID: Did you see the production of Ben Hur? A number of people have remembered that. Said that was an impressive play.
- Thomas: I don't know whether I saw that one or not. You know it rings bells but I can't--it's kind of . . .
- ID: Did Greene's Opera House connect into Judge Greene at all? Was that part of his family?
- Thomas: I presume that that's why. You see, the Roosevelt bought that land and that place and made it into a parking lot. And there were still things way up on the top floor, and the chandeliers were still up there.
- ID: What happened to them?
- Thomas: I don't know. I think they may have saved some of them but I don't really know. Because it was already owned by somebody else before we bought it. We had somebody to run it and we could park on the upper floors, you know.
- ID: It was quite an impressive . . .
- Thomas: It was a beautiful place. Oh yes, I mean red velvet all over, and the seats were beautiful and there was a lot of gilding. It was a very handsome place. And very good seating; you could see from practically every seat in the house even though they had nigger heaven up there.
- ID: That's right, I've heard about nigger heaven. And so it would have been at least three or four stories?
- Thomas: Three or four tiers, I don't know how many tiers they had in there. You would have to go back to the books and get that because I

can't remember. I remember sitting up on the top and I remember sitting up on the top at the Majestic. You see, my cousin, the one--Jane, where I went when the starch works blew up--husband owned the Majestic Theatre. His name was Bolton, Malcome Bolton. He was kind of an entrepreneur, you know, on land and so on. And he tried to keep vaudeville alive. We went to see the vaudeville; we got free tickets.

ID: Oh you did?

Thomas: Yes, we got free tickets to that and of course they had stock company things. I didn't see too many of the stock company things so there was a period there. I don't know why I missed out on that because that was a very famous company that was there and they did a lot of good work. But they also were from southern Iowa. I think I was away a lot of the time when these things were going on there. But I saw an awful lot of vaudeville and things like that there.

ID: Well, someone else who was really influenced by those early shows and scenes--and probably before vaudeville days--was Carl Van Vechten. Because he was away from here by the time that you were growing up.

Thomas: Well, you see, he was older. My grandmother lived on Second Avenue and my mother lived there. The Hamiltons were living across the street. Where the woman's club is now was the Van Vechten house and then there was the Averill house and the Averill house across the street and the Averill house on the corner. You see, my mother's cousin, Carlota Hamilton married an Averill. Everybody had horses, you see, in those days, and my mother had horses. And there was

a barn out in the back of my grandmother's house. That was the one that was torched last year--I think substance abuse was in there, two or three years ago. A great big old massive--built by the Eaton's in the 70's (1870's). It was a shame, but it was a wonderful barn out there. Of course the barn was great. Uncle Jimmy parked his car out there when he decided not to use it any more, one of those great big Packards with all the brass lamps. Oh, it was just marvelous to ride in one of those cars in those days.

ED: When Van Vechten published The Tattooed Countess, did that make a big stir? Do you remember?

Thomas: Well everybody in Cedar Rapids just loved the whole idea. They weren't mad at all! They thought that he did a very good job. I heard nothing . . . there were some people, you know, that were unkind about it. But it was a very good picture, apparently, of Cedar Rapids. Now my Aunt, my father's older sister, who was a raving beauty who eloped in Europe, was the first woman to smoke in Cedar Rapids. Mahala tried to claim that but that was not true. Mahala and my Aunt Bell were very good friends in spite of the fact that they were both going out with Mr. Douglas. Because Mr. Douglas, Walter, courted my Aunt as well. They were friends and they went out. Mahala came over and raised hell with her one day and said you leave Walter alone, he's mine! That was before she was proposed to, of course you know, all's free in love and war. But it was-- The Tattooed Countess is a mixture of my Aunt Bell who is the most beautiful woman who ever came out of town, and Mahala who is also one of the most fun persons.

Because some of the instances in the book have to do with my Aunt more than Mahala. [Dutton Douglas]

ID: You can actually remember some of the things being personal?

Thomas: Oh yes, they were very personal. And my mother had a book and it was supposed to be mine. I don't know who--somebody stole that book. It had every single name of all these people.

ID: You know, the library is searching for that book today. They would just love to have a copy.

Thomas: Well of course they would like to have that copy but somebody stole it from my mother who had the whole thing down.

ID: In all her notes?

Thomas: She and Carl got along very well. Now, the problem with Carl was that he lived over across the street and here were all these beautiful Hamilton girls. You see, there was my mother of course, and Jimmy, and then there were three from the W. W. Hamilton; that was Steele, Louise, and I can't remember the other one's name. She married and went away. Anyway, in the Hamilton household you came and you were at meals on time. If you were late you didn't get anything, you had to miss. Carl would keep the girls in the barn out back and not let them come in until he got kissed, when in those days the girls didn't kiss.

ID: He was a real stinker, wasn't he?

Thomas: He was, and he also was mean to cats. He'd kill them and you know, strangle them and he'd do all kinds of things like that. He was mean to animals. They grew up not liking him very well because they didn't get any supper half of the time.

ID: Well yes, that's a good reason.

Thomas: Well, you know, lots of people do this kind of thing and you don't think very much of it but these girls were not brought up, you see, to behave that way. And they never liked him. But my mother and Carl always got along for some reason. In later years when we went to New York we would go and stay at the Algonquin; he would be down there with his luncheon group having lunch or something. He would come and have dinner with us, or cocktails and dinner or something like that. And Carl sent my mother a telegram every birthday and she'd send him a telegram, too, periodically. But he always remembered her birthday; August 8. He was a perfectly charming man. I never knew him except as a delightful person.

ID: As someone who was very kind to your mother?

Thomas: Yes. This didn't bother my father in the least. Of course we liked to stay at the Algonquin because it was right by the theatre district and it was a homey, comfortable place. And it had absolutely marvelous food so that's why we stayed there. We had stayed at all kinds of other places but we'd rather stay at the Algonquin.

ID: Did you ever meet any of the famous literary characters that you said frequent that area?

Thomas: Oh, I think he introduced us perhaps to one or two. The only person that I ever knew intimately--well one or two--was Paul Green that I mentioned before. There was some people that went to Carnegie Tech with me but I'd have to remember the names; one of them played in a soap opera all the time and one of them became a very famous comic actor that played with Reagan in different things.

ID: Did you interact much with Grant Wood or have memories?

Thomas: Well, I have good memories of Grant because of course, he was teaching--he was in the junior high school that year when we were all . . .

ID: That's right, when you were at McKinley.

Thomas: That's right. And Barbara's class was the first one to graduate out of there because they came in and graduated right out.

ID: Right away, yes.

Thomas: Yes, and we had to stay a little bit longer. But that one was where they put on the profiles--that's where he did the profiles of everybody. You knew who they were immediately with even no names on them. They were wonderful, I wonder if anybody has got any of those.

And all these people took these classes, and of course, I can remember when he did the luenetts for the library up there. They were nice and finished; and he carved the bench and you know, all that kind of thing while I was going to school there. It was absolutely fantastic. I just loved it, he was a nice man.

ID: So you actually took class under him?

Thomas: No, I never took a class under him. But I was also a friend of-- what's his name--Rowan, from the art thing. Now this was as I was going through school and coming out of college, you see. Not only Grant through the high school, but through prep school and college. And I knew the man that did the iron work with him and lived over on 19th Street. There were two brothers and one of them made all the iron work with Grant and taught Grant all about that, and they worked together.

ID: So this went into homes, didn't it?

Thomas: Yes it did. He had a brother who was a very fine poet and made a lot of etchings; he lived in California. I'm sorry I can't remember his name.

ID: This is Grant's brother?

Thomas: No.

ID: This is the two brothers that were the metal workers, or iron workers?

Thomas: One was a metal worker and one did etchings and was also a poet. The one from California came out during the time that Grant was having the Stone City experiment up there. I spent a good deal of time--I did not live up there--but we went out there frequently along with Eddie Rowan, who was the head of the fine arts then, in Cedar Rapids. He was a good friend of mine and he was always interested in theatre and things like that. But I spent a lot of time out at Stone City.

ID: That only lasted one summer, didn't it?

Thomas: Oh no, it was two summers at least. It was two, and I can't remember whether there were three or not. But I came home in--what was it, 1932 I think it was--and I went down to the university in the summer. Eddie brought one of his friends down to see me while I was going to the university. At this time then, Paul Green was there; I was doing that work. And he brought this other young man who came down who became quite a famous industrial designer afterwards.

Then we would go up on the weekends to visit maybe two or three times. We used to have dances in what was the old hotel at that

time, and the band came down from the reformatory. And we all danced; we danced with the people that came from the reformatory and we danced with the artists--we danced with whoever was there.

ID: You just had a good time?

Thomas: We had a wonderful time. We'd bring food down and picnics and things like that. Because of the house--and Mary and Paul Engle then moved into that house later on. The people who had come in there had stripped out all the plumbing which was a terrible thing. I had to help Mary take a bath in the rain barrel. They finally got some water pumped into the house but they had the outdoor biffy and all. Of course there were rathskeller there, of course, that was left over from Grant Wood. Some of the wagons were around there for quite a while.

ID: Do you know what gave him the idea to organize the Stone City group? Did he feel that there was a need to get out of Cedar Rapids to a place that was more open?

Thomas: Well, he wanted to have some place where they could do some teaching.

ID: They founded this as a school situation?

Thomas: Yes, that's what it was. But it was a place where artists could come and work also. But they could all work together and have some fun while they were doing it. There was this tower, which had originally been a water tower and had been gutted of course, in the years before. But they used it to live in; but the birds lived there so often that everybody got lice from the birds!

ID: Very primitive.

Thomas: Very primitive! The whole place was pretty primitive. They had

moved in--nobody had lived in the house for years, you see, or anything like that. It still had wall paintings that the artists had done the original stuff right onto the plaster. Oh, that house was something else.

ID: When the Engles moved in, they were still there?

Thomas: They were still there. I just loved that place, we had a lot of fun and spent a lot of time up there. And of course, Grant had the thing like a stage on the side of his wagon. I went into a couple of wagons where friends of mine were living to see what it was like on the inside. It was very primitive, you were right! But it was a beautiful spot and everybody was having so much fun.

ID: Who cooked?

Thomas: I can't remember who cooked. I think they had a cook.

ID: Somebody?

Thomas: Yes, I think they had a cook. The kitchen was very large and a fine kitchen. Of course the water was a problem. The hotel didn't do any cooking, and of course they had the church down there. It was a wonderful place to go. Then of course I spent all of my time down there when Mary and Paul lived down there, too.

ID: That leads so nicely into my next area so I'm just going to go right on. And that is your involvement over the years with theatre; with community theatre and with children's theatre. How did you get involved with the community theatre here in Cedar Rapids?

Thomas: Well I went to Carnegie Tech which is a theatre school. It's a fine arts college and they have a department of architecture and music and theatre and painting and sculpture and . . . all that kind of thing is contained in this one unit. They have a huge

engineering school there, they do printing--it's a trade school. It takes about ten years of apprenticeship off of your work. When go out you are prepared to do something; you are prepared to go right into your field and you have all the skills that you need. For instance, the theatre--you have a major and a minor--you can major in either one or minor in either one. That was either acting or technical work. I majored in technical work and minored in acting. You have to do them both, it doesn't make any difference. Because in those days when they had traveling theatre or theatres like the one in Detroit, stock company, the only way that you got in to a stock company if they didn't know you was by--you would get working back stage. We learned everything, even how to make dimmers out of great big huge jars full of water and salt--how to make dimmers out of them by moving them up and down.

ID: So you had to be electricians, too?

Thomas: You did everything, you built--of course I was used to building scenery at Mary Lyon because I did a lot of work there, both acting and technical work. At a private school, at a girls school, we built our own scenery--we did everything.

ID: So you were a natural when you came back to Cedar Rapids to get involved in the local theatre?

Thomas: That's right, because when we really had to get our own theatre we built all our olivetts, we built all our own lighting equipment.

ID: I hate to ask you what an olivett is but I'm going to have to.

Thomas: It's a large light that takes a very large bulb of many thousand watts bulb. And it's painted on the inside or it has got a

reflector surface. It is made so the front part is flat so that you can slip what we call gelatin into it, which you would say was like plastic--different colored plastics--which the light went through and changed the atmosphere on the stage. It is for general lighting; spotlights are for other kinds of things. And then there are carbon lights that are sticks of carbon that flash by putting the two together to make the light.

LD: So you were involved in actually making these things?

Thomas: Yes.

LD: They didn't always have them so that you could order them somewhere?

Thomas: No. Well, you could order them, but they were expensive and we couldn't afford them. There was--what's his name, Dick Lord and another young man, and they had a metal place over on . . . So we made a lot of that. We also had to make our own board in the beginning, light board and dimmers and things like that. When we moved to . . .

LD: Now where were you when you first started?

Thomas: McKinley School was where we first started. The Community Theatre was working up on the second floor of Killian's in the Killian's Annex. I saw my father perform up there--there were a number of things done up there. Later on there were a number of things done over at the Congregational Church.

LD: The People's Church?

Thomas: No. Not the People's, the Congregational Church right near Johnson School. There were a number of things done over there. We settled at the YMCA Theatre.

LD: This was the old Y?

Thomas: This was the Y on the lower corner that was built on top of the Douglas place. I can remember that Douglas place had the fence-- I think I told you about that before. They had a cafeteria out in the front and they didn't run it in the summer I don't think. I don't know that they ran it in the school year or whatever, or maybe it was in the summer that they did run it. However, they put their ice boxes out in the hall and the garbage ran down the seats. Now at great expense . . .

LD: Because you were down below, you were down in the basement?

Thomas: Yes. Now there's a deli shop in the front but right back of that where the double doors are was the corridor and then there were double doors there into the theatre. We had the box office there and the light booth in the back. But the garbage used to run down the aisles. They had got the seats out of the old opera house, see, or out of--I don't know if it was the opera house or the--Majestic Theatre I think it was. They had got these velvet covered seats out of there, and you know they're all hooked together in rows of metal, and we put all those--drilled them into the floor. Then they had to build a stage down there and the water ran underneath it. We made dressing rooms where the laundry was outside. Of course with all that food we were overrun with cockroaches and everything. Oh God, it was just terrible. And the dressing rooms!

LD: Did you ever have rats over there?

Thomas: I can't remember about that, I think we probably did. We had an awful time getting rid of the vermin around there. And of course, our backstage, then, got down to part of the laundry room where

they brought down all those sweaty mats from where they were wrestling upstairs. And they did not do their laundry regularly and it stunk like mad. Here were the laundry room plus the heating boilers for the place.

ID: This was primitive, too, wasn't it?

Thomas: Oh, believe me. And we had to start out in that kind of condition and build this. Now they periodically rented out the auditorium to other groups on top of that. We had a terrible time with them because they would schedule . . .

ID: You had to schedule?

Thomas: Yes, we had to schedule. Well, we finally got it so that I would go down and turn the lights out and turn them on and figure out how much kilowatt it would cost them to run the lights, you know. So that we could have a charge for that kind of thing. And we worked down there, and of course we had--it was quite a deep slope. Of course, we had to have ladders that would go up because we had to do our lighting, you see, on the ceiling. And I would get up ten or twenty feet and I was up here. And the only thing that we could use were wires to wire these things into position. We wanted them on the stage and we'd have to have them running so we'd know whether they were going to be spotted for it and cover it. And then we had to hook them into the switchboard which was an old--first we had knife switches and then we got some of the old dimmer equipment. But some of it was not wired terribly well so that it would skip, you know, so that you would get a jump in the lights. We had that up on a stand with a metal rack so that we wouldn't fall off. I insisted that everybody

wear rubber shoes and wear gloves because I had gotten myself burned and knocked around a little bit. Even in school with all this kind of stuff, we were twenty feet up, you know, up a ladder. You had to crawl up. Well anyway we did that and once in a while I burned myself but I'd go right to Henry and he'd fix me up. You know, the pliers would burn right up in your hand.

LD: Who was supporting the theatre in those days? Was it mostly individual contributions that paid the bills above the costs of subscriptions?

Thomas: Well, I think the Y was reasonable in giving us the rent. Of course we had to keep the place clean. They never kept their part clean, they were a dirty bunch. Well men are not always careful.

LD: That's tactful.

Thomas: Hazel and Mary and Grant were part of what started the group.

LD: Hazel and Mary who?

Thomas: They ran a little shop.

LD: Downtown?

Thomas: Yes. I'll have to go back and collect this for when you write it up. Anyway they started in a big house on Third Avenue down in the same block as I. C. but across the street. It was a Mansfield house and they started doing theatre there. Now amateur theatre in Cedar Rapids--in my stuff I had a whole lot of pictures of all the ones that were back in the 1870's and 1880's that were doing this.

LD: 1800's?

Thomas: Yes dear. And that was members of the Wilcox family and my family and the Douglas family; all of the Douglas' were in it and my

my family.

LD: So it just has a really rich history?

Thomas: Yes, and all these people were doing this way back then. Putting on all kinds of shows. My father's sister, Daisy, ran away and joined one of these companies. She was a perfect beauty; she was a good actress, too. But you know all this kind of thing, you don't hear too much about.

LD: No. It's one of those things that it all seems so well organized and the new setting is so wonderful, and you don't think, boy, where did this come from?

Thomas: But all these families that we've been talking about were always involved in this kind of thing. Including the Van Vechtens and all the rest of them; they all did this--The Dows, it didn't make any difference who you were or what. Maybe you started out at the social club, but you used the best people that were available and those that were interested. And so there's been this growth all the way up, you see, and it finally--it dies out for a while and it comes back. We had the same problem when the war came along. It was very difficult.

LD: To man a production?

Thomas: Yes, but you see, what happened was--coming back there were two friends of mine, John and Margaret Young. Margaret was a graduate from here, from the school days. She went to school up here and I think she went to the University of Iowa or whatever it was. But she was trained under Sister Mary Lorenz, up here. And a lot of people who did acting were trained by her including--who were the ones that you hear about that went to St. Berckman School

LD: At McKinley?

Thomas: No, she taught English out at Marion at the Marion High School. She was excellent, she'd had all kinds of Shakespeare training and everything else like that. And she was a beautiful girl; she married Douglas Kirk, whose mother was Julia Douglas. Her father was a pharmacist up in Independence and he became a--he was a democrat so they got him a plush job as postmaster. But he played the horses and got caught.

LD: A checkered career?

Thomas: Yes. But he had a wonderful house right on the river. They were very nice people. Marion was just beautiful.

LD: How did this all interact with the beginning of children's theatre? That was much later, wasn't it?

Thomas: John and Margaret had come back down there and they wanted to start a children's theatre.

LD: So we're still in the depression?

Thomas: Yes. So Margaret said, why don't we do it, you know. And I said, I'd love to. And she said, well, let's get going on this and we'll do it together. Because I had already been asked to do the Christmas Pageant down at the First Pres Church, you know, and the men all objected to getting out of their underwear and everything, and into the draperies. We did a beautiful production because we based the costumes on Sargeant's pictures that are in the library in Washington. So that's what I used as a basis for that. And then we got together things. I took the cocktail shakers that were popular in those days, those aluminum ones, and I made a good censor out of that. Oh we had a lot of smoke, you

and things like that? A lot of people have come out of Cedar Rapids that did good work. They came back to live here because they had been at the theatre at Sioux City or something and it had closed. And they started a children's theatre there and you know, it was the Depression and what were you going to do? And they didn't hardly have enough money to hold them by, and so together--their mother lived here in town. So they rented a house and they had a dog, and we saw an awful lot of them.

LD: This was Burke, now?

Thomas: No, this was John and Margaret Young.

LD: Young?

Thomas: Yes. Her family was the Lacey family from the -- near--around Anamosa.

LD: What were the most memorable productions from those days? Do you have some that really stand out in your mind like the Bluebird did at the Greene's Opera House, for instance?

Thomas: Well, MacDonald Carey came out from Iowa City; he was down there that part of the summer that I was down there. I spent a lot of time in Iowa City--going down there. He came up and directed one of the first shows. When I first came back, we worked down at the McKinley Junior High School. They were putting on productions and I was in--oh my, what was it? She had the lead and the gun didn't go off. I was Mazie.

LD: And it was a bad moment?

Thomas: Well, it was, yes. But we got through it all right. She was a fine actress. She studied in New York and had been in some New York productions. She taught English . . .

know, and all this kind of thing. We just had a good time. Well, anyway, then they got a job or had to move and I was left holding this bag with the theatre--the idea. We talked about it so Lowell Pirnie went down and we incorporated through the bank--The Children's Theatre, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. And we started out cold. I got a play out of the library and it was Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. There was this Mrs. Somebody-or-another in England who had written all these fantastic books. I also started out working at the woman's club down there when it was still the Van Vechten mansion, with a woman called Sarge or Sargie that everybody just dearly loved. I worked with her on some shows.

LD: I was thinking that it was connected with the Junior League--the early children's theatre.

Thomas: Well, it was not connected until they took it over from me.

LD: So you were the initiator and then at some point they decided that was a good project?

Thomas: That's exactly right, yes. I was the founder of the Children's Theatre. I put on these fantastic plays; I was trying to remember-- I did the Princess and Ourdie one, you know, The Silver Thread. And oh my, we had all those boys down there. Little boys for elves, you know, and little kids. Oh, it was just a wonderful thing, and we did Sleeping Beauty.

LD: So where were these first productions, then?

Thomas: The first productions were put on at McKinley School.

LD: Just like your community theatre, they were in the same place?

Thomas: Yes. Then the Principal, [Frances Prescott] said we could put it on down there so we took it down there. Ruby Byers up at the other one--

up here at Benjamin Franklin--was interested in that. So we took plays up there. And we also took them to Harrison on the west side. We took it, also, to the School for the Blind--a production up there.

LD: That must have been an interesting experience because they could hear . .

Thomas: It was fascinating because the children could hear but not see so we brought all the actors out and all the people so they could feel them and touch their faces so they could feel the make-up. And they could feel the kind of costumes and everything.

LD: That's wonderful that you could do that.

Thomas: It was just so fascinating. I was so grateful for that opportunity.

LD: You were really ahead of your time on that, too.

Thomas: Yes, I think so. The thing about my theatre that is different from the Junior League theatre--I use children. And I felt that this was so important for the children to have a feeling of this. I got my friend, Peg Collins, who is Arthur's wife; Arthur and I were in class together, and his brother and all these people went through school together. She was a wonderful person and a fine artist. So I used all my fairy tale books and things like that because I had had history of costume, of course, at Carnegie Tech, and everything technical that you could imagine, we had to do. Because as a freshman we went in there and we cut out costumes, we sewed them--I was no good at even a sewing machine. But jewels on gloves--whatever it was we had to know all about it. We did tracings from the beginning of time up to. . .so that we had a thorough grounding in that. Also because it was a school of

architecture and a history of ornament, we did a lot of other kinds of work, too. We had to do a hell of a lot of research because we did Greek plays, we did contemporary plays, we did them all up and down the scale. And we did a Shakespeare every year, in proper costuming. We were told, do it for the person that knows.

ID: Because they would look at it and say, that's correct?

Thomas: That's right. And this is the way I judge productions, and believe me, there's some mighty poor holes and bad education.

ID: They come up short?

Thomas: Yes. Anyway that was fun so we researched the costumes and did everything. Then Peg would make the drawings. Then we went down to Welch Cook Beals which was Grandfather's company. First they bought the--what do they make-- overalls and you know, they did all kinds of things like that. Anyway we went down and we got all this stuff by the bolt; we learned how much it would cost and where it was sold. We could get things 5 cents a yard or whatever it was. So we would attach the swatches to the material that they were to get to the pictures. And then the parents were supposed to make the costumes. Now all of this, mind you, cost them one dollar a year to belong. Can you believe it?

ID: No.

Thomas: One dollar a year. And of course, they paid for their own costumes and things like that. And I paid for whatever it was that we used.

ID: Most of the other stuff, right?

Thomas: Yea, John would carry in, the Cone Brothers--and Sammy and Joe were

good friends of mine. I used to go out with them. We went all three of us together on a date.

LD: What fun!

Thomas: Oh, it was just great. We just had a wonderful time, I loved the Cone brothers. And of course, they were a great source of help for us. We would get all the piping that we wanted over there. When we had the Princess and Curdie and the little dwarfs and they were beating on things we got all the ironware and everything like that. Poor John Choate was so busy practicing hitting that he hit Marion Taylor in the back of the head and it bled all over the place. We were working down in the Coe College then.

LD: Hazards of the occupation. When and why did you decide to hand it on? Did it just become too much for an individual?

Thomas: Well, it was too much but it was also the fact that the Junior League was very much interested in this kind of work. I had some surgery at the time that whoever it was from the main office came out here and came to talk to me about it. They came to the hospital. So we had a good talk with whoever it was that was sent from the main thing. But the Junior League was very much interested in doing this work themselves because there were other Junior Leagues that were doing this all over the country.

LD: Were they an actual Junior League at that point? As they started out a service league.

Thomas: Yes. And I was in the first group that came in when Henrietta Sheehy was President when they moved over in the League.

LD: The national organization?

Thomas: Yes. Jane [Carey] DeLay and Liz I think. At least Jane DeLay and I. There were some of us that came in--maybe she was ahead of me,

I can't remember. But anyway I was in the first class.

ID: The Provisional?

Thomas: Yes.

ID: So you actually came into the League after or at the same time that the Children's Theatre . . .

Thomas: I was already doing this.

ID: You were doing Children's Theatre?

Thomas: Yes.

ID: That would have been about 1934?

Thomas: Yes, someplace in there. You see, I had all this stuff up in the attic and I think it was thrown out. I had all the drawings, I had everything from Peg.

ID: I'm sure that they were tickled to have something like that as a project that they could walk into?

Thomas: That's right. And of course, I couldn't carry it at one dollar a year. And the rest of it was just with what little money I had. But Lowell Pirnie and I were the ones that incorporated. And he worked there--John. We had it down at 222 you know, where it was brought up. We had a great big playroom in the basement and we made everything down there. We made all our flats and we put them together and we sized them and we painted them. And then also the Baker Paper Company--I went down and bought huge sheets of cardboard when we did Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. And I made the most beautiful carvings and things. We just cut out, you see, the whole thing so it looked like the lattice work on the Taj Mahal.

ID: That was a tough set to do, wasn't it?

Thomas: Yes, but we made everything so that we could move it quickly. And in lots of places that we went to, like McKinley and the schools, you couldn't put any screws or braces in the floor. So you had to build it so that you could . . .

ID: Just go back and forth?

Thomas: Yes, or fold up. We had all kinds of tricks we had to use to be able to move our scenery and be able to move it quickly. We had the most wonderful time, I tell you, it was just gorgeous. Some of the mothers would frouzle out or they would make the costumes different that we told them so we had to go back and make them over again. And finally we got a Mrs. Janis or somebody to be the costumier, you know. You used to take your kid over there and she would make the costumes.

ID: She'd do it?

Thomas: Yes. And they had to pay for it. But the materials were very inexpensive but they were colorful and they looked well when they got on the stage. Everything was integrated--the whole design, the lighting, the works. And we made up our own lighting. I bought a reactance dimmer and some other things like that which we traveled around--which eventually the theatre had. I borrowed back and forth. But it was very effective. And the kids, they were just wonderful. They were all the Taylor kids, and I can't tell you. The Stamats and everybody else.

ID: Why did they stop using children, do you know?

Thomas: Because that wasn't the policy in the Junior League at that time. It was to use the League people.

ID: Had to be adult volunteers, right?

Thomas: Well you see, and then Liz took over the directions.

LD: Liz Glanville?

Thomas: Yes. I did a good job, too. Because part of what we learned in school, we had to have eurythmics, we had to have ballet, we had to have . . .

LD: To choreograph.

Thomas: All of the English Folk dancing. Ballet dancing from a Russian teacher. We had to have the whole works--why--because wherever we went we had to be able to do this.

LD: You had to have an encyclopedic kind of knowledge.

Thomas: That's right. You had to have a thorough . . . and this is what we got. It was a fantastic school. They never have advertised or anything. But they turn out top role people all over. And very--a lot of famous actors and people. Of course they've got this one in New York now which is a wonderful place, too. But you should see the people that came down to Kirkwood from the Guthrie in Minneapolis. Where were they from? Carnegie Tech. Anyway it was wonderful. We took the drawings for the play and the costumes--that was for Sleeping Beauty. We took that and Angevine and I went to the national thing and we won a prize with my design and the costumes and the pictures that we had.

LD: That would have been Angevine Shaffer?

Thomas: We went, I don't know if it was 1935 or whatever it was. Anyway that was after our first production and I played the wicked witch in that. It was so much fun. I just had a marvelous time.

LD: I wish you were in charge now. I do think that now it has become such a rote sort of experience with the high school kids. Some of

of them are wonderful productions.

Thomas: I want to tell you that the people who were in my children's theatre, when there was that hiatus during the war--because I was doing this during the middle 1930's. Every one of those people went on the Board and carried on and then started the theatre all over again.

ID: Because they had that commitment?

Thomas: Yes. But they loved it. And the Fischer boys; I can't tell you how many people were in there. There were children under me and they caught some . . .

ID: A spark?

Thomas: Yes. And it made the whole thing worthwhile when I saw the generation come up and they were the ones that carried on and made it possible to keep on going.

ID: And that's because of that incredible energy at the beginning that you exhibited?

Thomas: Yes. But I had help from everybody, believe me. They were very helpful.

ID: You had help but still . . .

Thomas: It was a community affair, you know.

ID: Everybody had to help?

Thomas: It wasn't just me but it was something special.

ID: Well, I think you may have done something special to start it, though. The Roosevelt; your family has been connected with the Roosevelt for many years. When did you get involved with the Roosevelt?

Thomas: Well, we got involved with the Roosevelt right from the beginning,

you might say. And there were certain other families as well. The Simmons and other people who had land in that area or who helped to raise the money. It was originally Edith Rockefeller McCormick. And her lover, whose name was Krenn, of the firm of Krenn and Dato who were architects . . .

LD: Who planned to build this hotel?

Thomas: That's right.

LD: When was this, I'm afraid I don't even know?

Thomas: I don't know, it was 1924 or some place in there.

LD: The twenties?

Thomas: The middle twenties. It was before the depression that they planned all this. And Krenn came out and they had to buy the land on the corner that it's built on--what was known as the Commercial Club which is of course now the Chamber of Commerce. And then next to that People's whatever it was store and I don't know what else was in there, was part of my Grandfather's--where he had his store. So that the family owned the land. And for the land we took stock. And whoever did anything they all got stock, you see. But mainly it was the Rockefeller-McCormick money that Edith had that started it. Krenn was a Swiss. He was almost a dwarf, he was quite small and very particular, and he always carried jade in his pockets to feel. He was a very interesting man, I liked him a lot.

LD: Kind of eccentric?

Thomas: Well he was extremely eccentric, believe me. And the family didn't like him at all--I mean the Rockefeller family didn't like him at all. But he came out. Anyway they put the hotel up and so on, and then they started to run it.

LD: And he designed it then?

Thomas: He designed it, yes. His firm was flourishing because it was his patrons, so to speak. So he designed the hotel and put it all together and got it up but they needed some more money so they sold bonds. Well they got the thing up but of course, the stockholders never got paid anything. Of course we immediately ran into trouble you know, here was the depression and everything and another. My father began to realize that some of the people-- not only were they not doing that but they were welching out on the bonds. So immediately the stockholders got together and said we're not going to save a cent out of this unless we get somebody to run this hotel that's going to put it into a basis because they let the fabric go to pieces. Now when my father took over, he had steel doors on all the doors with louvers for ventilation and stuff and things like that. There wasn't any air conditioning. You opened the windows but you could get a breeze through the hall or whatever it was. The door jams would just fall right out of the wall. It had no maintenance whatsoever; they were milking it for all it was worth.

LD: This was in the 1930's? This is what happened in ten years?

Thomas: Yes. Well it wasn't even ten years before they were in trouble, really. My father--he and the stockholders, they elected my father because the banks had started to fail and my father was the receiver for the Cedar Rapids National Bank across the street which the Merchant's took over. Also he had something to do--he said the White Bank, for instance, went under and it should never--it was Ernie Morris' bank and should never have gone under. Well that's

the White Bank on the corner that's katty corner from the Roosevelt, Bezanson owns it now. It's a white building; it's called the White Bank but I forget what the name of the bank was. But my father was receiver. Anyway what they did--they saw there was no point in--the stockholders were never going to be paid a cent, obviously. So he was put in as president of the hotel company to run it. Well he immediately started making a lot of changes but the main thing was to buy up what ever profit came out of the hotel or when ever any of us had any money we would buy bonds. They bought the bonds up, you see, so that the bond holders would be us and the community around here--instead of in Chicago and in New York and everything, we bought everything up as it came along. We just said be quiet and we bought bonds. Well if you were just buying a bond here and a bond there, nobody paid any attention to it. So eventually we controlled the bonds then we started to pay the bond holders off. As we bought them, then the hotel would retire them as fast as they could. But at least they were in the right hands and then they began retiring them. So then we got all the bonds so that we could retire the bonds and then the stockholders would eventually have something. In the meantime they tried to pay something for the bonds but the thing was, we had to keep up those payments. But as long as they were in control, they didn't have to do that, you see, for the outsiders. So then, simply, as they bought the bonds they retired them. So then there weren't any bonds left. And then the stockholders had control. But my father had to do that very quietly.

LD: How long did that take?

Thomas: I don't know. It took a number of years. But meanwhile they were putting money back into the hotel and making it a nice place; a unique hotel, it's got quite famous because it was very different than the other hotels.

LD: Was it the nicest hotel in town?

Thomas: Oh, certainly it was. See, the Montrose had been built for Major Hamilton--that was Dr. John Hamilton's father and Henry Hamilton's grandfather. He had run the hotel on First Avenue, the Grand Hotel. I don't know which war he was in.

LD: It's all gone now?

Thomas: It's all gone now. But they had built this new hotel for him to run, and it was a nice hotel, too. But it needed another one because it kind of went downhill with the management. It was sold several different times. But we needed this nice new hotel and of course, we wanted to see it work. And it did work. We got Billy Cadow there who would run it for some time, and his wife. And various and sundry people. We always got good people to run it, that was as manager. You have to have good managers and a good control of the back of the house. I even went to hotel school so I could learn something about what was going on. Not that I ever had anything to do with it but I ended up being the largest stockholder because I had put so much into it.

LD: And you didn't know how it was done?

Thomas: Sure.

LD: What was different about it, say in the 1930's or 1940's from now? Of course, it's turning into a whole different sort of . . .

Thomas: In the first place we tried to make it--what we call pseudo Spanish.

And everything was Spanish. The desk was in a different place and we had one of these great big kind of Grant Wood type or, what would you call it, work something.

ID: Stations?

Thomas: No. The Work Progress Administration. It was for the arts.

ID: Oh, not W. P. A.

Thomas: You know what I'm talking about. And so we commissioned some artist to make a big painting over there. I don't know what ever became of it. Showing the industries of Cedar Rapids or something like that. Anyway we got Eddie Elton--Eddie Elton had worked as a scene designer. He had started out in Cedar Rapids working for an interior decorator. He worked over at Martin's up on the second floor, I think in materials and interior decorating. He got his start there, then Kramer hired him and he went over there for years; then he went over to Killian's and did all their work. We began using Eddie at the hotel, of course he was a friend of ours, anyway. We used him at the hotel and started buying all of our decorations from him. And you know, they were so bitchey over there that--here was Eddie making all this money, thousands and thousands of dollars from the hotel thing and they gave it all to the head of the interior decorating department instead of Eddie who was doing it.

ID: Who was doing the work?

Thomas: Oh, that was a ——— arrangement, pardon my language.

ID: We may have to leave that one off the transcript.

Thomas: So we hired him and brought him over to the hotel. Well we were sick and tired of this because Eddie wasn't getting anything out

of it and he was doing all the work and he was getting all the money so we hired him. And Eddie paints well, himself, you see. So we began the refurbishing of the hotel and we changed it all around so it was a perfectly lovely place. It was quite charming. And of course, during prohibition until that got straightened out we had a key club there. And then eventually we also had the the Pick Wick Club.

ID: I was going to ask you if the Pick Wick went back to that period?

Thomas: Oh yes. That was a men's club that was kind of made up of business men and people who had been in the fraternities and things like that. We opened that up downstairs as a private club. At that time, World War II, these officers would come in--we had the Army at Coe and the Navy at Cornell. And the officers would come in there and they were very angry to see a guy just in his middle and his pants and his sailor's cap on. It was John Turner who owned Turner's Mortuary who was in there who was in charge of taking care of all this brass and entertaining and seeing that everything was. . . And they were putting him down, "Get that man out of here, we don't want to be in there." I said, "Well, this is your host."

ID: Guess what!

Thomas: They were snotty as hell.

ID: That military tradition is a whole different thing.

Thomas: A lot of military tradition that comes along is just military tradition from someone who just got in the army and got in that job, you know.

ID: Then, going back to your mentioning the key club, etcetera, that was a way for people to have a drink?

Thomas: They brought their own bottles. Technically that was the way that was handled. Everybody had a locker for their bottles. The liquor was legal but you couldn't have it by the drink. All of this kind of thing was crazy. Of course Roosevelt, one of the first things he did was get rid of the prohibition thing. That was one of the worst things that ever happened to this country and it happened to people. It was just dreadful.

LD: It probably stimulated more drinking than would ever have occurred otherwise.

Thomas: Yes, it did. There were only a few people that drank, well, a great many of them drank to excess but those things were hidden in those days--in the family--it wasn't treated as a disease, it was treated as a sin and you were a social leper. I know my grandfather Hamilton always kept a keg of whiskey in his cellar--good Scotch whiskey. He and Dr. Cogswell would come home from their Masonic meetings and say well now, I think we ought to have a nip. So they would have just a little glass of whiskey and they would down it, not as a shot but sip it. They would just say goodnight and go home. There never was any drinking. My grandfather--when prohibition came he got rid of his whiskey and never had another drink.

LD: That was not typical for sure.

Thomas: No, not of most people but my grandfather Hamilton was quite a guy and he also was the Speaker of the House over here. He was in the Legislature and he even ran for governor. He was quite a guy anyway. But he followed the law, but of course everybody was a scoff-law dring prohibition. It was really bad. I'm so

glad we're all over with that experiment because, as you say, it just exaggerated the situation.

LD: What other memories do you have of prohibition and how it affected your social set or the people that you knew during that time?

Thomas: Well, most of the time I wasn't very much aware of what was going on.

LD: You were young, you were only in your teens?

Thomas: That's right. It didn't begin to affect me, except that I saw how some people behaved. I began hearing stories about what was happening. Now mind you, this is back in the 1920's, the early 1920's. When someone would begin to emerge as an alcoholic, you would say-- our family doctor would be called in because "this man was out in the snow by Blake Boulevard." Or that "somebody had broken into one of our relatives houses and was found sleeping in the bedroom when the family came home." You know, all kinds of things like that. Accidents happening. And of course this was all fairly well removed except in family circles it was discussed and who was doing this and what was happening. These were unusual circumstances. And history of alcoholism in different families and how it affected them--and sometimes the person would be in such bad shape that they would try and shoot somebody and then they'd shoot themselves, you see. And there were great tragedies everywhere. But as children, we weren't so much aware of that. I was aware that when somebody had some dandelion wine and if our families had a drink we would go out and taste it the next morning if they were left on the tray. Dandelion wine was sweet and sticky or something like that. We would see what the drinks tasted like.

Children are curious, they want to try everything. It tasted terrible, mostly, if you really were interested. But of course came the time when we were starting to grow up and there was all kinds of stuff available. Well our doctor always tested everything to see if the flame was blue or whether it was yellow.

ID: Because you could really get some very terrible liquor?

Thomas: Yes, and it was really bad. But the thing to do was drink. All of a sudden--they had had things before but nobody had really done very much drinking. And all of a sudden it was fashionable. I can remember one time at our house there were quantities of people that were there and we had run out of liquor. There was some in the back room and mother said the party had gone long enough and wouldn't give daddy the key. And he went and got the screwdriver and took the door right off. Because all of these people were clammering, you see.

ID: Because they wanted a drink?

Thomas: That's right. I remember that incident because the people wanted it so much they were about to tear up . . .

ID: They get to a certain stage and then it seems like a fun thing to do.

Thomas: Yes. Of course we were all upstairs but we couldn't help but hearing.

ID: You knew what was happening?

Thomas: Yes, that's right. Other drinking for the rest of us--when we really started it--of course we were coming home from school, prep school, and that's when I first had my first experience. And it was over at the Carey's house and they were having Manhattans;

that sweet, sticky kind of drink with bourbon and vermouth. And I got violently ill.

ID: Oh sure, that's the first thing . . .

Thomas: And that was the first time that I ever--oh, I just felt terrible, I just couldn't believe it. I wasn't used to drinking.

ID: That really tesses a lot of other memories of that time. To go from nothing to something that was . . .

Thomas: And at school, for instance, people would have beer. We always kept beer on stage because if you had a looking glass or anything else like that, you put beer over it and that would keep the lights from reflecting back at the audience and seeing all the people and everything. Beer and opson salts.

ID: That's something I never heard. Kind of a love of the theatre, I guess.

Thomas: That's right. Well of course they always kept the beer there and sometimes they had something to drink for themselves. Because you had to go--sometimes you worked all night on dress rehearsal nights. There was one girl in Cedar Rapids and she liked beer and she'd come in and snatch the theatre beer. So they filled up their bottles with the opson salt and she never tried again.

ID: That was the end of that?

Thomas: (Laughter)

ID: Do you have memories of--you were a little older at this time, in fact you would have been in your mid twenties--when the bank holiday occurred. How did that effect your family? Obviously your father was in a very key position. Did your family find that that was a very damaging thing or did you see how that

affected a lot of people around you?

Thomas: Well we saw how it affected a lot of people around us as well. My father had been one of those who saw it coming and got himself prepared. But it did change our style of living because a great deal of worth was lost.

ID: The whole cash thing?

Thomas: Yes. The problem was, I was down there when they were having the run on the Merchant's Bank.

ID: You were down there?

Thomas: Yes. We went down--and saw it, or whatever it was, you know. It was very interesting because a banking day in Cedar Rapids today is much busier than the bank run. There was hardly anybody in there. Really, there weren't big crowds in there.

ID: There weren't crowds of people breaking down the doors?

Thomas: No, there weren't. And they passed out the cash, and guess where they put it. They took it right over to the post office to postal savings because they thought the government would do it. The government took it right back to the Merchant's Bank.

ID: No way?

Thomas: You see, they just hauled it back and forth. They put it in the postal savings and the government sent the money right back over to the Merchant's Bank. It didn't make any difference how many came, they all got their money. They'd take it over to postal savings and it would come right back. We were told, stay away, you see. Anyway I was down there for some occasion or another and there was nothing more going on in there except that it was a busy day at the bank. And today's normal banking was much heavier

in traffic than any run on the bank.

ID: Do you know why Merchant's was in a much better position, then, to survive that period?

Thomas: You were required by law--there's a very interesting book here, I just got it from the Merchant's Bank telling about some of that.

ID: The history of that period?

Thomas: Yes, they put out a book like that. I went into the bank the other day--I bank out at Vernon Village because I do my shopping over in that area, a lot of it. I saw it and they said, you can take it, this is the centennial year. It's got a list of the people in it that founded it, you know, the money and stuff. Personally, we heard about it and went there, but there was nothing. And of course, they had taken over the other bank and made everything available. That was a really bad deal because . . .

ID: There were great losses with The Cedar Rapids National Bank, I'm sure.

Thomas: Well yes. You see, Van believed what he was told. His Uncle was head of a bank in Chicago.

ID: Van Vechten?

Thomas: Yes, young Van. My father was very pleased because he was--whatever it is that you do when you took over the bank.

ID: The receiver?

Thomas: The receiver, yes. My mother had a lot of money in that and a lot of stock and she had to pay double indemnity.

ID: That's right.

Thomas: It was a very difficult thing and of course it was a very fine bank. But the point was that they had to recover the bad loans

that were made. Now the person that made the loans was Arthur Collin's father. Arthur Collin's father bought up a whole lot of land and he was one of those.

LD: He was kind of a developer?

Thomas: An entrepreneur. What he wanted to do--he saw big farming coming so he bought up the land and he took the houses off the land and everything, and opened it all up for farming. Which bothered the farmers considerably in what he was doing. He sold the bank the mortgages.

LD: For those farms?

Thomas: Yes, he gave the bank mortgages for the farms but they were second mortgages.

LD: And the bank didn't know that?

Thomas: No.

LD: Oh boy!

Thomas: This was a very unfortunate deal.

LD: I'm sure it would make a scandal in the Gazette at the time.

Thomas: It was terrible. And Arthur kept letting his father run his own company and his father was greatly to blame for what happened to Collins Radio, too--because he fired people like Lowell and other people who had been working there for years. When it came--when they got up later, they were all fired the minute they hit 50. There was no protection for them. But this was Arthur's father.

LD: I'll let you know. I won't say anything that you wouldn't approve of.

Thomas: It mentions in this book if you want to handle it the way the

book handles it, it will be all right.

LD: We interviewed Jim Coquillette and that will give us some of that official version, I'm sure.

Thomas: He was also one of the authors of this book and I think he probably handled it very well. The main thing is it happened, and it would have been a terrible thing for Cedar Rapids, so the merchants stepped right in and took it right over--lock, stock, and barrel.

LD: And they kind of cushioned that blow?

Thomas: You bet they did or there would have been terrible repercussions if they hadn't done it. And they were the only ones that were able to do that so they saved their skin. Van was not a very grateful person in the first place--the man had not matured enough to . . .

LD: He was very young?

Thomas: Well I don't know that he was very . . . Well they were just having their children--well they had already had them. The main thing was--because their children were also in my children's theatre, so they'd been married enough--but he was not a seasoned banker as you might say. But my father was very pleased with his progress after he founded the other bank. He would read his statements and everything, and he said this man has turned into a very fine banker.

LD: He went on to Guaranty didn't he?

Thomas: Yes. He and Stamata --- and there was a whole bunch of other people that went in and founded another bank. Well it wasn't because the bank was unfair, God knows, to them. But Van had a very difficult personality and he was not good with people.

LD: He could not work in that field?

- Thomas: He wasn't good with the customers. He was very short tempered and he had no grace about his way.
- LD: He has a reputation as a character even today even though he has been gone for a number of years.
- Thomas: Yes, well they were both characters and I loved them dearly. Both of them. They were very interesting; we were always good friends. Angevine was a particular friend of mine, I always liked Van--I loved his kids. They were always good friends of mine.
- LD: There's some wonderful stories about Angevine. I have heard numerous stories. She just must have been one of the strongest personalities that ever came down the pike.
- Thomas: Well she was not known for her tact. It didn't make any difference to me. She made all kinds of spoonerisms and boomers and boofers and other things like that. Sometimes mal-props. But the main thing was that she was really a very sincere person and I just loved her. She played a hell of a good game of bridge; she was generous--she was generous to a fault, she was really kind. Have you got Marion Smith Miller down? I hope you do.
- LD: We have her on our list.
- Thomas: Please do, because she can tell you all kinds of interesting . . .
- LD: Congeries stories, right?
- Thomas: Yes.
- LD: In the community--you touched on this somewhat. Do you have memories of how--some of the merchants did a great deal just in the banking situation--but how did people in the community help each other during that period? There were no federal programs yet; that was an in-between time. Do you remember organized local

charity or was it pretty much a matter of neighbor to neighbor?

Thomas: Well in the first place things were run very differently down at the office. I had a friend, Gracie Bryant, whose father came from one of the colleges that Coe absorbed. He ran the athletic program there and was a professor--wonderful person. Gracie worked for the county as did some of the other people that I knew. In those days you had a car and you went to everybody's home. This is the reason why nothing is working today, it's because there's no personal contact. They take your word for what's going on. Gracie went into the home and saw who was sleeping with whom and she would make the man pay the woman.

LD: There was much more responsibility, then, at that time?

Thomas: Yes. The county had to send them out. You didn't get anything until you were looked at; your whole family picture tried to help out with that and tried to do something. I know one of the first things that happened with the Junior League was that we were taking in all of these children. Some of them were sewed in their underwear for the winter and we'd have to rip them out you know.

LD: This was the soup kitchen?

Thomas: Yes, that's where I was assigned to work. Everybody was assigned to work making sandwiches for the children. And I never liked taking care of children, anyway. But they had to bathe them and do everything--and potty them and so on. You had to wash their clothes and practically boil them to get the lice out and everything else. But we realized--and a friend of mine, Eleanor Bessener whose husband worked for Art Collins, became a nutritional director. Because we found that people were going to the

bakeries and buying day old bread, or week old bread or whatever it was. And they were buying nothing else but the bread. And you can imagine at that time there was no nourishment to the bread that was white bolted, bleached flour with no nutrition in it whatsoever. That was what they were doing. So anybody could go, their doctor could send them there or they could go themselves and find out how to spend their money so that they would get . . .

ID: They got the best . . .

Thomas: Protein. So that they could get protein, and particularly protein and fats which were needed for the body. You see, carbohydrate is not--your stomach's made for protein only.

Anyway they were living off carbohydrates and of course that's why you get so many children that are hyper and all that stuff. That has nothing to do with it, but anyway.

ID: Did you get into the soup kitchen thing for that very reason? To give them a nutritious meal?

Thomas: Yes, the whole point was that this may be the only meal that the kids had; and so they got soup and a sandwich. That was the best that we could do. Of course the stuff was given to us and we had purchase some of it. But we had to work real hard to do that. And entertain the children--we would put them down for a nap. We did all the things that you would do in a pre-school.

ID: You kept them for how long a period during the day?

Thomas: All day.

ID: All day long?

Thomas: Yes, all day long. We had a couple of shifts and that was what happened.

ID: I think you have answered my question beautifully. The community really did step in?

Thomas: Yes, everybody. There were people to feed, and people tried to give people jobs. They really did try and work together. Of course the county was a much more sympathetic group. These professionals now, they have a professional attitude with a deadpan face.

ID: Then and me, or you and me. There's a separation isn't there? You're not considered as much . . .

Thomas: That's right. And they treat them like dirt! I tell you, I've taken people down to that office over many periods of years who were alcoholics, who have this or that. And they really are not interested, they've got too many people and they're not going in and looking at the family situation. We could cut out all this graft if we had sent the people out--it would save money to pay to get your social workers out of the office and into the house. Everyday that I live, it's a soap opera.

ID: In other words, there's so many conflicts that come because of that attitude? Do you find yourself still doing middle-man work?

Thomas: Yes. I've become a--what do you call it--anyway trying to help these people. And I've got one that I've been working on, God knows it's ten years or more, trying to work with these people. And the county still won't do anything about them. Handicapped and other people like that and they won't even pay their rent, or they'll pay it three months of the year. They arbitrarily set down these rules, and what are you supposed to do? I tell their landlady, are you trying to make a beg lady out of her? I've been

down to the office, I've talked to the head people and they're just adamant because they think she can work. Well, she's retarded. And she can work, but you see they don't give her the jobs that she can do.

ID: There's just no follow through.

Thomas: No, and no compassion, no understanding about it when she loses-- she was knocked down by a pair of Blacks, a woman and a man, coming home from Marcy Hospital, robbed--all her tickets gone for her food. No, they won't replace them. It's your fault because you got knocked down. I see all these things.

ID: Things have gone downhill as far as you are concerned? In terms of community charity?

Thomas: I think so, yes. When the government takes over the charity it takes away your responsibility for doing what you need to be doing. It's cutting down--all these new rules, there's not going to be any charity left because the government is doing what we ought to be doing.

ID: They're not doing it well?

Thomas: No, they're doing a very bad job and we're getting all kinds of people who are in there for the money and not because they care about the people. And they're trained out of this caring about people. Wear the mask, don't get involved emotionally. Hell, I'm involved with a lot of people and it does me good because it makes me feel--I'm sorry for them but it makes me be charitable to the point where it hurts because of what's happening to these people.

ID: It feeds you as a human being when you are doing that for other people. If you are not doing that with the right emotions, then

there could be some damage.

Thomas: What worries me is that I run into these newborn people who've just graduated from the University of Iowa and they've got piled high in deeds or Masters or all these different things. And they don't really care about people. Some of them do but they haven't been seasoned; there are no guides for them to say, "Hey, use your judgement, now, in this case." Or they get cracked because they do.

LD: I guess the question I'd like to ask you as a final question is-- what do you see about Cedar Rapids that not necessarily has changed over the years from that period when you were growing up, and up into the freshman years--what has changed, and is it better? Is it worse? Is it a mixed bag? How do you view the community today as someone who has made such a commitment to it over the years? Or is that too tough of a question?

Thomas: I really feel that in some ways things are a lot better than they used to be. But I feel that it's grown so much that I am missing a lot of the people in the community that I would dearly love to know. Because I've lost the closeness with some of the people that I used to know which is natural coming with age and the changes in life. Sometimes I feel that there is too much politics and fiddling and playing games and nothing at the gut level.

LD: Things don't start with the right principles and emotions?

Thomas: That's right. You see all these waiverings and all these cases that you read about in the paper. The truth is not the truth anymore, it's how you manipulate it.

LD: Market it?

- Thomas: That's right. Justice--there's no such thing as justice anymore. And I think that women are so much more aware of relationships and how they affect people. Men are cut and dried; this is the law, this is justice, this is whatever it is like that. You can't have real justice. You've got to temper it all the time. You have to look at all the different circumstances instead of just throwing this piece of evidence out and that out. I think we need to get back to basics of people because we need to be people people.
- ID: And care?
- Thomas: Loving and caring, that's right. We have to pay for the space we occupy.
- ID: That's a good way to put it.
- Thomas: This is the way I was brought up, this is your contribution to the community in which you live. You have things that other people don't have so that you have to give out of what you have to make-- why are you in this community in the first place? It's to give something to them. It's your civic rent.
- ID: I have heard that term before. Well I appreciate your time and your openness with us today. I just think this has been one of the finest interviews that we have done. I think it will be very valuable.
- Thomas: Well if there's anything else, there's quantities more that we haven't even . . .
- ID: Oh I know. I wish I could go on forever but . . .
- Thomas: I know you can't.
- ID: You can't either, today. Maybe there'll be things we'll come back on. But I do appreciate what you've given us, and thank you.

You'll receive a copy of the transcript.

Thomas: Okay, and maybe some . . .

LD: If other things pop up we can get them.

Thomas: Yes, the Czech Fine Arts Society, there's just quantities of stuff. But you know, it will all come out sometime. But you need to get it all before it goes.

LD: That's right, and that's what we're trying to do.

Thomas: Yes. There are other people I know, that -- Mrs. Moehlmann [Pat Wren], for instance was, because she married Roland could tell you something. And there's some people from the Czech Fine Arts Society. There's one on the Board right now that's on our Tuesday night group. We go back--a lot of us have been interested in all these different fields. You've probably got plenty of Czech people who can tell you some of the history and things like that. We used to do the best. We used to dance out in front of the City Hall down there. Have Czech dances and festivals and things.

LD: You did that, too?

Thomas: Oh yes, I'm a good--(laughter)

LD: Thank you so much.

Thomas: Well, thank you. I just enjoyed it a lot. The trouble is, I can talk forever.

