JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with
William B. Quarton

Conducted by Sandy Miller
November 7, 1984
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Transcribed by Renae Blasdell

William B. Quarton was born in Algona, Iowa in 1903 where he lived until going to the University in 1921. In this interview he tells us about the early years of radio and of television in Iowa, Cedar Rapids in particular. We are enlightened in areas of early advertising and programing as well as the people that brought these forms of communications to us.

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SM: This is William P. Quarton, this book. Is it B or P?

Quarton: B as in Barlow.

SM: Barlow, okay.

Quarton: We're very proud that my great-grandmother was a Barlow. And everybody seemed to love her because we all have that name.

SM: Oh, it's a nice one to have.

Quarton: I'm William B. Quarton III.

SM: Are you?

Quarton: Yes, but I never use it but . . .

SM: The interview is done by Sandy Miller on November 7, 1984, at Sandy Miller's home, 305 Crescent Street SE in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Her topic today will concern mainly the early media. Mr. Quarton, in what year were you born?

Quarton: I was born in 1903 in Algona, Iowa. I lived there until I went to school in 1921. I had one year at the University. Then

there was a farm depression on, and I had to go to work. So I got a job through civil service and my dear United States senator, Senator Dickinson, and we went off to Washington. I went to night school at George Washington. Finishing that, I went up to New York and got a job.

SM: What kind of job could you get in New York?

Quarton: Well, I got a job with Thomas Edison which I will get into a little later because it leads me, really, into broadcasting.

SM: Okay. So did you grow up on a farm?

Quarton: No, my grandfather was a farmer, but my father was a lawyer and a judge. I think he was more interested in raising Guernsey cattle than in being a judge. (Laughter) But it was quite an experience. He tried to get one--I had two brothers--and he tried to get one farmer out of the three but it didn't work.

SM: Why did you choose the topic of communication?

Quarton: That's the subject that I know best having been in radio and television almost all of my working days. We people who have had the good fortune to live in the twentieth century from its earliest years have shared probably the most exciting and revolutionary times in world history. Just think how completely two areas--transportation: the automobile and the airplane, and communications: the telephone, radio, TV, satellite--have changed our lives and the lives of everyone on earth. Having spent all but about two or three years of my earlier years in

broadcasting, 55 in all, I would like to devote time to that subject. As I told you, the first radio station in Cedar Rapids went on the air on July 30, 1922. It's important, I think, to define "first" and in order to do that let's just sketch briefly radio from its beginning.

An Italian, Marconi, first sent sound through the air in 1896, when he was 22. The Italian government wasn't much impressed but the British were, particularly the navy. So Marconi went to Britain and built stronger and stronger transmitters and in 1901 was able to transmit sound from England to Newfoundland. Many were experimenting, but it took Lee Deforest and his vacuum tube to make possible the wireless transmission of the human voice. And here lies the Cedar Rapids connection.

In 1917, when America entered World War I, there were quite a few experimental and amateur stations on the air. They were all shut down except those the United States government took over. Deforest continued to work for the government. Associated with him was a young man by the name of Perrill who later moved to Cedar Rapids and built the first station. So we are back to defining "first."

KDKA Pittsburgh is generally accredited with being the first radio station as we know them today because on November 2, 1920, KDKA started broadcasting regularly scheduled programs day in and day out. In this part of the country, WHA Madison, WSUY Iowa City, and WOC Davenport were among the first who regularly scheduled programs, though the University stations and others had been experimenting for years.

In 1922, the year WJAM Cedar Rapids was born, there were 28 broadcasting stations on January 1. And on December 1, there were 570. Well, obviously something had to be done because they were interfering with one another. KDKA Pittsburgh and the Chicago stations could no longer be heard clearly. The president asked Mr. Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, to begin licensing frequencies. Soon the government was into broadcasting and other fields other than licensing.

In those days, of course, there weren't any commercials and there was a plate name. While Mr. Perham was building the station, there was another fellow by the name of Harry Paar who lived here who was an enamoured with this little operation and he helped Mr. Perham build it and helped him run it for a little while. About a year later, Mr. Perham told Harry that if he was so interested in the thing, why didn't they build one for him? So in 1923, Harry Paar had a radio station here too.

Well, the novelty finally wore off about 1926, and there still wasn't any way of--commercials were not being used--they thought of commercials in those days by getting the light company or Iowa Mutual, or the Gazette to give them a few thousand dollars to keep going. So when Mr. Perham decided to move to California, he sold this pile of A-wire to a fellow by the name of Harry Shaw who lived in Waterloo and was the owner of the Waterloo Morning Tribune. And that's how WMT got its call letters WMT. In the meantime the Cole brothers had decided to branch out from the Des Moines Register that his father had established. They bought a little station down in Ottumwa. Then they came

to Cedar Rapids. Cedar Rapids' Harry Paar station split time with the station in Fort Dodge and one in Boone. So they had to make financial arrangements with all three to get a decent station here.

In those early days, there wasn't any network. You just picked up what you could. There was an amazing amount of local talent. When I came to Cedar Rapids, I was told that 40 percent of the population was of Czech descent. I don't know if that's true or not, but they like music. There was all kinds of funny programs. I remember one where we had four coronet players--if you can imagine that! (Laughter)

But Harry Shaw was quite a fellow. He was one of the first presidents of the National Association of Broadcasters. He was one of the owners of Broadcasting Magazine which was established way back in the early thirties. He used to go down to Washington quite frequently on business. His attorney was a fellow by the name of Phil Laux and his engineer was a young man by the name of Tam--it comes from his initials--Tam Kraven. One night when they were having a drink, which they usually did, the young engineer said that he had discovered--now that sounds crazy today, but this is the story--that he had discovered that the lower frequencies which were longer would go further. So the next time Harry was down in Washington he told Tam, he said, "You're perfectly right, I switched over to 600 kilocycles and I'm getting letters from all over the country." And the attorney said, "You did what!" And he said, "Well I switched over to 600." And he said, "You can't do that." He says, "Well I did,

and I'm not going to change it." So he sent Laux over to the Commerce Department, and they told him what he expected to hear, that he'd have to change back. And he said, "Well, my client won't do it."

Now, today, if that happened, you'd be off the air tomorrow, before tomorrow, probably. So he kept at them there all summer long and finally they said, "Well, let that hayshaker stay on 600 kilocycles." So that was what the Cole boys were after.

Harry Shaw was on of the early stations on the CBS network. Some of you will recall that NBC at that time had been broadcasting for a long. time. But the networks had to charge the stations, instead of the other way around. And Harry got in debt to the network and finally that's where the Cole boys came in, and he sold his station for something in the neighborhood of $150,000. The Cole's organization brought it back to Cedar Rapids. Actually, as I pointed out, WJAM was the original station which was started in Cedar Rapids.

But before that happened we had put this little KWCR on the blue network which was one of the two networks that NBC operated. It was kind of interesting to check over some of that old programming. We were just delighted to, of course, have a network that could fill up this time. Up to that time we were using a lot of all local talent and the recordings in those days weren't very good. We had everything from Madame Missouri on on the thing.

But when the networks came on, I noticed that in the early programming, they used a lot of orchestras--Ozzie Nelson, Phil Harris,and Frankie Masters, and Eddie Duchin. And, of course, the U.S.

Marine Band and opera.

SM: What year was this?

Quarton: This was about 1933 and 1934. Then we took over WMT in 1935. The biggies in the daytime were "Vic and Sade" and "The National Farm and Home" on"Today's Children," and programs like that. There was very little news, very little. As a matter of fact, the newspapers would not let radio have the AP or UP or INS. Those were the three national sources for news that the newspapers used. So we had one of our own, that is radio had one of its own. It wasn't very good. It was called the Press Radio News Service. Being owned by the Des Moines Register, we would take a little, a few things, out of there and a few things that we could gather locally and one of our people would get on his bicycle about 11:00 and go out to his home and copy down a few news items from a radio station in New York. There was a long-distance station.

That young man was a fellow by the name of Bert Pocket. Bert became famous because he had been working with Arthur Collins on some equipment. He was the first one, and the only one, for a number of days who could pick Admiral Byrd, who was then at the South Pole. Bert had a very good voice, and we decided that he ought to do our sports. Well, there weren't much sports going on that we could broadcast except we had a good baseball team. It was called the Three I League--Iowa, Indiana, and Illinois. But there again, the Gazette had an editor by the name of Vern Marshall who was not too crazy about having the

competitor, the Des Moines Register, whose motto was "the newspaper Iowa depends upon," as a competitor over here. He told the ball club that if they let us broadcast in the park, the news would stop. So they wouldn't let us in the park. As a result, we built a little thing that folded so that we could put it over our roof. It was a little house that was over left field across the road, and Bert would get up there and broadcast the game. Well, much much later we able to get AP and UP. And Bert continued to do broadcasting--as a matter of fact, he got very good at it.

One day I got a call from a top station in Indianapolis, and he said, "You have a fellow by the name of Puckett or Buckett or something like that out there that I hear good things about." I said, "Yes, and he's going places." He said, "He's coming to my station if it's all right with you." I said, "Well, if you'll send him on up the ladder, why that'll be all right with me." Well, Bert ended up as Bert Wilson who broadcast the Cubs' games for many years. And Bert was famous because he said he didn't care who won as long as it was the Cubs. But in that same period , WHO had most of the power, was the most powerful station in this part of the country. They had two fellows by the name of Dutch Reagan and Gross who did the news at noon. It took us about a year before--they were so strong in the area--that it took us about a year and a half before we were able to get commercials on a competing program. But Reagan went to Hollywood, and Gross continued for a long time, but we were finally able to compete with them, and very favorably.

In 1937, we moved from the early studio that we had on top of the Montrose Hotel on the seventh floor to the Paramount. By that time we really were in production. We had four studios and when they remodeled that just recently, that is in 1982 or 1983, the people that had to tear out those studios wondered what in the world we needed all that space for. I looked it up and those four studios were needed. In those days, as I mentioned earlier, the recording wasn't very good yet. We had five orchestras that played each week day, We had two that played once a week like the Bohemian Band, We had a trio. We had an organist. We had a piano. We had two singers, plus a soap opera that was called"Toby's Corntussel News."

Shortly thereafter, because there was a great demand, need really, for better transcriptions, several organizations did make very acceptable transcriptions for the special use of radio stations. But they were too expensive for the general public. The line-up in those days got to be pretty good, and really from then on up to 1953, this is radio's heyday. By that time, though, the recordings had gotten to be very good. That plus the coming of TV completely changed radio.

One of the things that World War II did, of course, was to make radio. The immediacy of radio was needed at the time and the broadcasts of Ed Merle from London were dramatic and it made radio very, very popular. After the war I had a call from a friend of mine who ran the CBS station down in Kansas City and he said, "The son of a friend of mine has been with the United Press in Moscow. And he's coming back and I want you to come

down here with some other people and talk to him about representing some stations in the Middle-West and in Washington. We've got to find some way to make radio news stronger now that the war's over." So I went down and it was Walter Cronkite. And we hired Walter along with seven other stations. And Walter did a fine job for us for about 18 months until there was a special program--I think it was an inauguration or something--and CBS had hired him to do one of the many tricks on that occasion. They heard him in New York and that was that. But he's always been a good friend, as a matter of fact, he used to come out once in a while when we needed him. I remember he came to WMT's 25th anniversary and we made that into quite an occasion.

Just before the war was over, the Cole boys traded WMT for WOL station in Washington, DC. The WOL people--WOL was a mutual station. The then manager of WOL had built up a stable of commentators. During that time Fulton Lewis was very popular, and he was one of them, and Henry Taylor was another, he was an ambassador. Then there was a chap that worked for the Sun Oil Company News along the East Coast. They had quite a group of them. So the new outfit that owned WMT was also very interested in news as I was.

Before going on to the beginning of TV in Cedar Rapids, I'd like to comment briefly on how I happened to return to Iowa from New York, the"big apple"in the city that had everything. After college, in 1926, I got a job in New York City with Thomas Edison. He was 80 at the time but still active. At the turn of the century, Edison was probably the most famous

man on earth, and for good reason; his inventions were changing the world. I was impressed and wanted to be a part of the change. After three years of being impressed, I finally woke up to the fact the Mr. Edison was indeed a legend but also a poor businessman. and his remaining businesses weren't going anywhere. There was a very successful utility magnate in Chicago by the name of Hensell who had been a secretary of Mr. Edison's when he was a young man. And they said that he made more money out of Mr. Edison's inventions than Mr. Edison ever dreamed of. But Edison made and lost several fortunes, but he still was wealthy and he had wealthy friends like Henry Ford. But the thing that he was proudest of was the phonograph because that was his from beginning to end. But most of the other things like the electrical things, were built on somebody else's inventions.

It was fun to go out to his home on his birthday and see the laboratory and couch that he had there. That's another story. He smoked about twenty cigars a day, really he chewed them mostly, particulary in his later years, he got a little sloppy. In those days they wore three-piece suits and he'd go down in that laboratory with those cigars and he'd drip on his dress. About the third day, Mrs. Edison would have to go down and bring him home, and give him a bath, and get him some new clothes, and get him a good night's sleep. And back he would go. One of his stories was that finally she got sick and tire of it so she sent a bed down there.

But I was living in a residential hotel over in Brooklyn

Heights, mostly occupied by older families. There were a few young occupants that found a roof garden a delightful place late evenings. I looked over the roofs of Brooklyn and I noticed changes. There were more and more lines strung up between poles like clothes lines, but they weren't clothes lines. They were the first radio antennas and there was a sea of them. This was a new business that I was looking for and it looked terrific. But I couldn't find a job. Lots of young people wanted in and I was one of them. About that time my older brother, Sumner, had moved to Cedar Rapids to run a radio station for his brothers-in-law, the Cole brothers, and the Cole brothers' father, who was the principal owner of the Des Moines Register. The younger Coles were out to build something of their own. So I kept visiting New York radio stations and making suggestions to my brother and finally he sent for me. That was 53 years ago, my lucky day! It has been exciting to have been a part of the beginning of commercial radio and the excitement of early television, and the beginning of cable, too. In 1964, as chairman of the National Association of Broadcasters, I was invited to Greenfield Village in Michigan to launch national radio month at the opening of the special radio exhibit at the Henry Ford musuem.

Edison's friend Ford had moved his whole Menlo Park Laboratory--Edison called it his invention factory--to Greenfield Village. It was fun to see what a good job the Ford Museum had done but I never regretted for a minute leaving Edison for the new business--broadcasting.

Early television was based on the facsimile technology going back to Scotsman, Alexander Baine in 1842. This was a mechanical process that was never very successful. I recall seeing an RCA demonstration in New York City in 1926. It was exciting but just terrible. Until the electronic camera tube invented by Zwarken, nothing much happened. But this invention brought on intense development in the thirties. Much progress was made but was interrupted by World War II. Shortly after the end of the war, there was a number of television stations on the air. The first in this area was WOC Davenport, October 31, 1949, and the next one was WOI TV in Ames, in February 1950. During the late forties, the FCC found that allocating frequencies to the various areas of the country could be a tremendous problem. Finally a freeze was put into effect which lasted until 1953. Before the freeze went into effect, WOC TV and WOI TV had received their grants so they could proceed. Probably this was a good thing because at least it built up some sets for us for people like us who had to wait until 1953.

But eventually on the sixth try the FCC went ahead with granting stations. Two were allocated to Cedar Rapids, channels two and nine. WMT immediately applied for two along with a broadcaster from the Quad Cities. There were several applications for channel nine including the Gazette, the Blank theatre chain that ran the Paramount Theatre, and Sutherland Dows and others. When the shake-down concluded, the Gazette ended up with channel nine and WMT with channel two. We thought that there was an advantage to being first on the air in this area, and we hurried around and

we won. WMT went on the air September 30, 1953. We decided that a medium-high tower wasn't proper for the downtown area, so we located in what we call now Broadcast Park which was a very good decision. I remember vividly the first program. We were CBS and had been since 1940, but we had arranged with a friend over at NBC to broadcast the World Series. I was to go on for about five minutes at noon and then we were going to start in a big way with the first World Series. About 11:30, the telephone told our engineers that they had never heard of this hook-up. There was a frantic phoning around but finally, on time, we started with the World Series.

One of the great problems of those days was there hadn't been enough stations in operation and the training of people was difficult. We finally, at great expense, got a good program director from Florida, and he and his wife came up and spent one Iowa winter here. She had never lived in a northern climate before. No place, as a matter of fact, except Florida and in the spring they went right back there!

But the big problem in getting into television was could Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, and Dubuque be built into a viable market? Up to that time there were very few smaller cities that had television stations. We finally decided that it could be and it was. This market competes very favourably now with Des Moines and the Quad Cities and markets of that type. But color was not yet in use. The inventors were trying to accomplish color by mechanical means. As early as--this goes back to Isaac Newton in 1670, he devised a prism that divided light into

color. Then in 1928, John Beard and another Englishman demonstrated another system. His mechanical systems used color filters to break light into color components by scanning the scene and sequence through red, then green and blue filters. You'll notice that these are not the primary colors that you learned in school. The primary colors of the television are red, green, and blue. About this same time Bill Labbs and RCA were working on the electronic color system. I saw a demonstration in 1940, in New York, and it didn't work out well at all. Peter Growmark who was the chief at the CBS lab used a mechanical system of whirling disks--it was wierd! But the demonstration that he put on was much superior to the other.

Well, there was an intense political and legal battle, but by the end of the war, the electronic system was adopted, and it should have been. And in the early fifties a lot more progress was made. But until 1955, there were few programs in color and fewer color sets. From 1958 to 1964, only NBC telecast an extensive schedule of color programs. The 1966 - 1967 season brought total color from all three networks to primetime viewers, and the color set sale boom was under way.

Getting back to that frequency thing, the television stations between two and six have 100 kilowatts of power--use 100 kilowatts of maximum power--the ones from seven through thirteen use 316, and the UHF stations that use still higher frequencies can go up to a million watts. This is roughly a compensation for the difference in frequencies and the coverage-it tries to make the coverage about the same. There are a number of exciting things along the

way that came along. One of them was the tape machine. Ampex finally beat RCA to it and came out with a tape machine which was a God-send for a lot of things, particularly television. It took a good many years before the Japanese could make a set cheaply enough to sell to the individuals. But this was a great improvement. Trying to make a film for news was excruciating, so the Ampex tape was looked on with awe. It was a wonderful thing. In the beginning, the tapes weren't very good but 3-M finally got it so that it was doing a good job.

The next thing that came along that made a great improvement was called ENG or Electronic News Gathering. This gear in the beginning was very expensive, but now they've got it down to where it's light and they can pick up news events from all over and it's a wonderful thing. Another thing that I think about is the weather gear that they have today. We heard that Collins had a weather set-up for airplanes, and it was a little dish. After the war there was some excess--they had excess stock and we decided that we would try it out. You know it's one thing getting up there in an airplane and getting a picture, but off of a two-story building we didn't know if it would work or not. But we tried it and it worked quite well. But compared with what they have to work with now, it was very, very meager.

Nothing has been said about FM. While FM is now well-established, the story of its beginning is sad. By the early 1930's, Major Armstrong had perfected FM to where it was unquestionably a better system for radio than AM. But by that time the networks were well-established and there were millions of AM sets on the

market. The industry was not about to dilute the system, so FM didn't develop nation-wide until the sixties, even though there were several experimental stations on the air as early as 1940. They used as the excuse for this, "Well, television is just around the corner," but it was really that they didn't want to upset this money-making system that AM had developed into. To get from a radio to television is like having a hundred million dollar bank and now you have to have about a billion dollar bank to get into--it's much more expensive than radio. By the early 1960's, even though it would be a money-losing proposition, if WMT wanted to be the first in FM in the area, as it was in AM radio and television, it was necessary to stake out a position. And in February 1963, WMT FM was the first commercial FM station in the area that went on the air. FM offered static-free service with a program line-up that gave the public another choice. It was a shame Major Armstrong did not live to see the development of FM. He knew he had perfected a better system, but was so frustrated by years of trying to establish it that he finally just committed suicide. Today, there are hundreds of successful FM stations and even our TV system uses FM for sound. I've been involved with both, but if you have any questions, I'd be pleased to answer them.

SM: You've given us a good background in communication, it's really interesting. I'm going to get back to what the radio was like when you first came to Cedar Rapids in the thirties. Can you describe what the clarity was like?

Quarton: Oh, it was a mess. You know, it had been used as a toy and, of course, Mr. Parr tried to get some commercials. For instance, the early morning started out with--they would go down to the Sunshine Mission and Betty Ward would preach to the bums for a while. But he really was a very dovoted man and we kept that on for quite a while. I remember one of the late night shows was from "Jack's Barn", which is out someplace--out where the Marion pool is now. It was kind of a night spot. One of the early announcers told me that he was instructed--he would have to call in--they had a call-in thing and if no one else was calling in, he would call in! (Laughter) But that didn't fool us very much, we knew we were buying it. If there wasn't much there, we would have to build it up--which we did. Did you ask about some of the early programming?

SM: There are a couple of other things that I wanted to ask first. We talked about programming, you mentioned that there were a lot of orchestras and bands and that sort of thing, so initially it was all entertainment? There weren't any newscasts until later?

Quarton: No.

SM: And when did the newscasts start?

Quarton: Oh dear, that didn't start until along about 1933 and 1934.

SM: I wanted to know, were people skeptical of the radio initially? Did they think it would last?

Quarton: Oh they loved it. It was a toy. So many of the young people would get one of those round Quaker Oats boxes and make a crystal set. All they had to do was buy this little crystal and a head set. It was such a novelty that it wasn't any problem to build it up. It took quite a while for them to get sets that could be plugged into electricity. They had to have batteries and that caused . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SM: Can you tell me more about Harry?

Quarton: Well, Harry was quite a character. I kind of got a kick out of him. After we took over, he was always having snakes and gila monsters and birds and things like that, unusual things around. I remember one time he had a python. It--some way or another--he was in a very strong cage, but he got out and the people going to church down on--that station was across from the Roosevelt. And people going to church across to St. Pat's saw this thing. It had gotten out of the window and had gotten down on an awning. He was trying to figure out how to get it. But he got ahold of Paar, and Paar came down and got him in there. He was quite a character.

SM: In the thirties, how many hours a day was the radio on? What time did it start in the morning?

Quarton: By that time we were going on the air about 6:00 and we would continue on until 11:00 or 12:00. It was quite complete. But television was different. Television was expensive and for quite a while we broadcast starting at 5:00.

SM: You mentioned that with the radio there were three main sponsors: Iowa Electric, Farm Mutual, and the Gazette?

Quarton: I just happened to mention them because they did contribute, say, $5,000 for Mr. Perrim to keep going. Incidentally, I remember--it's kind of funny, you're talking about the frivolous part of it--the first number that was ever broadcast on that station was "Don't Send Me Posies When It's Shoesies That I Need". It got letters from Vinton and all over.

SM: So when did advertisers start using the radio?

Quarton: That started along about 1927. That was when the network of Columbia started that year, too. They were--the advertising then thought more about sponsoring programs, and then that got a little expensive, so they split them down, so they got into the shorter one-minute things. They'd have programs with just music in the morning and they would call it something like "The Musical Clock" and they'd intersperse it with announcements.

SM: Did you have to go out and look for advertisers?

Quarton: Oh yes! By the time I came here in 1931 it was . . . I remember the longest, let's see, a one year contract of one-a-day cost--a one-minute announcement cost $1.25 in the daytime and $2.00 at night. That was the cheapest. It was plenty cheap!

SM: Was it $1.25 a day?

Quarton: Yes, per announcement. You could use them all in one week if you wanted to, if there was time. But if you had--I remember

the contract. You could string it out for one year, that was all you could do. But you had to use 365 announcements.

SM: I see.

Quarton: Then you could get down to $1.25 in the daytime and $2.00 at night.

SM: Could businesses tell that it made a difference?

Quarton: Yes, oh yes. It was a novelty and we had a pretty good go at it. Of course it was tough competing with newspapers in those early days, now it's not. There's a place for both. Lots of people learn more by listening and others learn more by reading. It's just a difference in people.

SM: Can you remember who some of the first companies were here in Cedar Rapids that advertised?

Quarton: My first half-hour sale was to Hamilton Seed and Coal. Mr. Cling, the manager, had been secretary of the union and he was one of those Czechs that liked music, he played the clarinet. At that point he was a business man. We hired a band and we had a couple of good singers and that was one of the early ones that I remember.

Another thing that was quite unusual, WMT was the first station that had a regularly scheduled "Man on the Street" program. As far as we could tell, we used to say that and no one refuted it. But we had a fellow by the name of Art Shepard that would conduct this thing. We weren't married then, but my wife had a

flower shop and we couldn't find any--we didn't have the money to advertise so I made a deal with Art that if he would not sell the program to somebody that insisted on having it in front of his place he could do the show and get that income, and the flower shop would pay for the line over there and then the sponsor would have his commercials. This was the way that the little flower shop got its publicity. But it was so successful that when we combined with Waterloo, we kept the studios up in Waterloo. A fellow by the name of Mike McElroy had been a manager of the dime store next to the flower shop. He would come down when we needed somebody to talk to on cold days when there wasn't much of a crowd out. He got kind of excited about this and we hired him and sent him up to Waterloo and he did the same thing up there. So we would have a quarter of an hour down here and a quarter of an hour out there and it made a nice noon-time feature.

SM: So the man on the street would stop people?

Quarton: Yes, he would stop people and talk about, well you know, today we would talk about the results of the election or whatever the subject was prominent at the time.

SM: That would be interesting. Let's talk about some of the early talent in radio. Who would that be?

Quarton: Well, I remember Fran Allison who later became quite famous on the "Don McNeal Breakfast Club" in Chicago. Let's see, they called it "Kukla, Fran, and Ollie." Fran used to be on the

Hartmen--Wes Hartman had a band up in Waterloo and he was always on at noon along with some others, and Fran was a feature on there, along with a character Lyle Harvey. We called him Joe Dokes. Fran and Joe Dokes carried on and really, she got off to a good start and for many years she was quite famous with that group. I remember one other little girl that had a beautiful voice. We had her on several times when she was a senior in high school. We thought that she was so good that we sent her to Coe for four years so we could keep her. Her name was Rosemary June. Her mother was divorced and worked over at Quaker Oats. Rosemary later established herself in New York. She did a number of recordings which proved to be quite successful, but she got off in this little niche, making commercials. This is a special field and with the residuals that you get as a union member, you can become very rich,which she did. She lives in New York, I think it's Central Park West, and still does quite a few commercials. But there were a lot of them, I think more from the business end of all the ones that we've supplied at one time . . . The program director of WCCO Minneapolis which is one of the great stations of this area, came from our station, a fellow by the name of Ron Lender. And Jim Boreman that came from this station, Jim was a Cedar Rapids product by the way, a fine, fine newsman -- head of the news department. Another one that I recall was Bill Roberts. I hated to see Bill go. But when Washington DC and Time Life calls you feel like a heel if you keep them from, you know that's the mecca of the news department--for a news

guy. Bill went down there and got to be president of the correspondence organization in Washington and he worked for President Ford, and I think he's still down there doing a good job. Later, of course, old Dick Threlkeld who was a product of this area--he still does a lot of work for ABC--he really wanted to be a news man. I remember Dick had his front teeth--they were parted--and I thought for a long time, I said, "Gee, if he'll do it all, I'll pay for getting his teeth fixed. Well, we never did it and he still has that separation in his two front teeth and doing fine.

SM: They didn't make any difference to his success?

Quarton: No.

SM: You mentioned that there were a lot of musical programs and that there was one soap opera. Did things eventually move to more soap opera type things?

Quarton: Yes, NBC had a Vice President in Chicago and he got started on this thing. Really, Chicago was the cradle of the soap operas. He got Proctor and Gamble interested. There was a time there when Proctor and Gamble had four or five of these things going. They still have quite a few. In the early days, we had one too, we called it "Toby's Corntussle News." This was the two Schaftner's, Neil and Carol Schaftner. Later NBC did an hour program with them, but they were the last of the players that traveled the tent shows in small towns around Arkansas, Illinois, and Missouri.

SM: Toby and Susie?

Quarton: Yes, Toby and Susie.

SM: Can you tell me, did the Depression affect the radio?

Quarton: I don't think so. It wasn't--everybody was poor, it didn't seem to make any difference. As a matter of fact, I enjoyed it for a long time and then I got awful sick of it.

SM: Why did you enjoy it?

Quarton: Well, I mean we were all in the same fix and it was kind of a challenge to try to work around to support yourself and keep going.

SM: What age were you then?

Quarton: I was, well, in 1929 I was 26 but it really didn't hit me until 1931.

SM: That's when you moved here.

Quarton: Yes, as a matter of fact, one of the things that brought me back, when I was at the University of Iowa that one year, I liked the University students and was exposed to Cedar Rapids and I liked it. And as I thought about it after my brother came here it was a good place. Quaker Oats was doing well, they were selling a lot of oatmeal. It wasn't long until the road machinery people--we had several of those and still do, you know, like Howard Hall, Iowa Man., Universal, and a number of these plants were doing very well. They were trying to build roads during

that period. They were doing well. The economy seemed to be--with the food industry and the road machinery people, it weathered that period in great style compared with most communities.

SM: How was the morale of the people during that time of the Depression?

Quarton: Well, I was young, and the morale was fine. The only thing was that horrible spiked beer. I hadn't been exposed to that in New York. They didn't do that. As a matter of fact, I remember one of my friends came to see me and we thought it would be fun that some of them were from Iowa that we'd spike beer and most of the people that came wouldn't drink it. But that was a horrible period. I think probably that we did the right thing by letting Prohibition go above the board.

SM: Can you talk more about Prohibition? It would have been repealed by then?

Quarton: No not really. I remember in New York a funny incident, I had a connection--apparently this company. Well, it turned out that this fellow had taken over McKesson Robbins, this is a big company, it was then. They hadn't known that he was a bootlegger. He would import all kinds of cheap, not perfumes, colognes? What do you call the next, not cologne but toilet water. He'd buy that by the barrel. I guess, abroad, bring it into New York and then he'd take the--rebrew it, redistill it or something. He'd get all of that out and sell it for

alcohol. I remember one Christmas when we got a little of it and the business had been pretty good, and it was still kind of pink. You could still taste the perfume in it! (Laughter)

SM: It doesn't sound too . . .

Quarton: No, it wasn't. Of course those were the speak-easy days. Of course, New York and Jimmy Walker, that was a colorful period for New York.

SM: So you came to Cedar Rapids in 1931 and you were single at the time?

Quarton: Yes.

SM: You were about 27 or 28?

Quarton: In 1931 I was 28.

SM: That was the time of the Depression, you were poor. What did you find to do as a single man?

Quarton: Well, the Commonwealth was fairly new at that time, down on Second Avenue and Fourteenth Street. Mrs. Loomis ran it, and ran it very well. There were some bachelor apartments in the back on the ground floor and I had one of those. There was a nice dining room down below in the basement area run by a very efficient lady. We just got along very well. I remember Duke Ellis, his relative set up Ellis Park, I mean he was one of the old timers. And another one that used to be there was Ray Allen, he was a bachelor. And let's see, who else? I

can't think of any right now, but there was a good group.

SM: So what did you do for fun? Were there movies at that time?

Quarton: By that time, I was getting interested in making a go of it. I'd do anything. As a matter of fact, I was--as you can tell from this recording--I was a pretty lousy announcer, but I would even take jobs to go over to Danceland, which is, let's see, they had to tear it down when they put the overpass on A Avenue, in that area over there. And the Iowa Theatre had an excellent organ. The organist was a good one, too. We'd go over there once in a while and pick up that organ when we needed something to fill in, and this type of thing. Sure, dancing, football. . .

SM: At the University?

Quarton: Yes.

SM: That probably seemed like quite a trip to Iowa City then, didn't it?

Quarton: Yes, it was. It always was over that Ridge Road.

SM: Ridge Road?

Quarton: Yes, the old road on the ridge that goes down there, you know. It curves around and has about umpteen turns in it.

SM: How long would it take to get from Cedar Rapids to Iowa City?

Quarton: Well, before it was paved it depended on whether it rained or

not. There were some mud roads that were terrible. But by that time, most of them were paved.

SM: Was there a train that ran?

Quarton: Yes, the Interurban. They used to go down there on that. We'd hire a--take a whole car and fill it up with Pick-Wick Club or something. I remember one time there was a fellow here that worked for Penick and Ford, they were a nice couple, both of them. I can't think-- Arthur —I can't think of his name now, but he was in charge. He was checking off people as they came in. Sud Dows came down with his umbrella and his overshoes and his big coat and just got on. This fellow says, "Hey, what are you doing there?"

Sud didn't pay any attention, he just went up and sat down with the motorman. And Arthur turned around across and said, "Who is that guy anyway?"

And somebody says, "He owns it, just forget it." (Laughter)

SM: How about restaurants? Were there places to go out and eat, nice places to go out and eat in the thirties when you were single?

Quarton: Well, I guess I wasn't into that very much.

SM: Someone said that there were a lot of Greek restaurants?

Quarton: Yes. There were two or three downtown, and of course, the Chinese restaurant was always there.

SM: Is that the same one that we have today? The Dragon?

Quarton: Yes, as far as I can remember. Weaver Witwer, had a nice cafeteria, and of course, there was always Bishop's which was a Godsend!

SM: And that was downtown?

Quarton: That was the downtown one, yes. Of course, you know Bishop's started here. No, I guess it didn't either, Waterloo was.

SM: It must have been Waterloo, then. You mentioned that your wife had a flower shop.

Quarton: Yes.

SM: Did she grow up here in Cedar Rapids or did she move here?

Quarton: No, she was a professional singer. As a matter of fact, she went to Coe. She was from a little town called Durant, it's a bedroom town down near Davenport. She and her sister and her friend worked their way through college by performing in Chatauqua. She started like they all do, at the bottom and then one time after she'd been on the other one for a year or so she came up and auditioned with her sister and this other girl for "Red Path Water," which was stationed here and was kind of the "top league," you know, like Lois was in the . . . Down in Florida just a year ago, we were having dinner with the Charlie Lynch's, and something came up about the old Chatuqua days and Mrs. Lynch said, "You know, my father was an official in that company." And my wife said, "Yes, I know,

I was hired in your living room!" But then she went on to the University of Nebraska and then she spent two years in the Orient with a group, and then came back. By that time, the Depression was on and business wasn't too good. There wasn't much for her to do here.

But I'll tell you one of the things that young people spent a lot of time at was the movies, and it was fun in those days, there were good movie houses. The Paramount Theatre was a gorgeous place. It's nice to have it refurbished. But they used to put on beautiful shows two times a week. They had an organ that came up, you know, just like the big boys in Chicago and New York. It was a great one.

One time I had a good friend that was one of the early managers, Rocky Newton, and Rocky had been working through a production company out in Pasadena. When Paramount took them over, they were growing so fast that they were short of men and they sent Rocky to establish theatres. He started one of the biggest, I guess that Fox Theatre down in Atlanta was one of the biggest in the country at that time. He ended up here once. Then he liked Cedar Rapids, and then they sent him over to Des Moines and he didn't like it too well over there. And then he quit and came back here and went into the laundry business with a friend of his, Doug Weinton. And I said to him one time, "Rocky, you had a beautiful job with that company, why did you quit?" He said, "Well, when I had to take care of those two shows, there was always something wrong, you know, they'd have two a day and they'd have to--somebody wasn't performing or

was sick and he'd have to fill in. He said, "When I was doing that, it was exciting." "And now," he said, "I go over to the bus depot and pick up the film for the week and take the nickels out of the Coke machines--that was quite a ways back, nickels--and pick up the dimes from the popcorn machines," "And," he said, "it's just no fun anymore."

You know broadcasting isn't as exciting, either, as radio. You know, you've got a stack of records now, but they're good records. I just don't know what --people are getting very selective. It's just the top people, now, can be successful as artists and make a good living. In those days, there were a lot of people making a good living out of it.

SM: I see.

Quarton: And they were good but, you know, not top.

SM: Eleanor had a flower shop and when did you meet her? In the thirties?

Quarton: Well, she was singing on the Hamilton Seed and Coal program.

SM: Oh, I see. That's how you met her?

Quarton: That's how I met her.

SM: And then you dated during the thirties, is that right?

Quarton: Yes.

SM: Did you think the Depression kept you from getting married?

Quarton: Yes, we weren't married until 1935. Yes, definitely that was a factor, yes.

SM: What did you two do for entertainment?

Quarton: Well, we had a group, the Brines and the Ingersolls and the Blue girls, and we played cards on Saturday nights. Like everybody, I guess.

SM: A lot of people still do.

Quarton: Yes.

END OF TAPE

INTERVIEW TOPICS
CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

1--When were you born? Where?
10,17--How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
--What are your parents' names?
1-2--Where did you go to school?
30,32-35--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
--Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
29--Trolleys (the Interurban)
--Horses and First Automobiles
28--Mud roads and the seedling mile
--Hunter Airport and the first planes
--Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications 9
--Newspapers
3-12,16-25,32--Radios
3,8,20-22--Advertising
--Telephones
12-16,19--Television

B. People in the Community

1. Amusements/Recreation28,33
--Motion Pictures
--Cedar Rapids Parks
--Dances
--Carnival Week
30--Chautauqua
--Community Theater
--Little Gallery
--Symphony Orchestra
--Circus
--Greene's Opera House
--Amusement Parks (Alamo)
--Camps
--Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

2. Famous Characters
--Cherry Sisters
--Grant Wood
--Carl Van Vechten (<u>The Tattooed Countess</u>)
--Marvin Cone
10--Walter Cronkite
10-11--Thomas Edison

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

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

5. Ethnic/Minority Life
   --Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
   --Indians
   --Segregation of Blacks
   --Jobs Available

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community
1. Education
   --Cedar Rapids Schools
   --Coe College
   --Mount Mercy College
   --Cornell College

2. Government
   --City Services
   --Streets/Roads
   --Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)

3. Medical
   --Hospitals
   --Patient-Doctor Relationship
   --Broken Bones
   --Polio, TB, Debilitating Diseases
   --House Calls
   --Home Delivery of Babies

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

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

D. Historic Events in and Outside the Community
1. Catastrophic Events
   --Clifton Hotel Fire (1903)
   --Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
   --Bank Closings (1933)
   --Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
   --Public Library Murder(1921)

2. National Historic Events
   --Womens' Suffrage
   --World War I
   --Roaring 20's
26 --Prohibition
25-26 --Great Depression

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