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JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with
Gordon Fennell

Conducted by Michael Bourgo
May 4, 1985
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Transcribed by Renae Blasdel

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

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- When were you born? Where?
- 2 --How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
 - What are your parents' names?
 - Where did you go to school?
 - Are you married or single?
 - Did you raise a family? How big?
- 1 --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)
- Trolleys (the Interurban)
- 26 --Horses and First Automobiles
- 26, 27 --Mud roads and the seedling mile
- 5 --Hunter Airport and the first planes
- Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications

- Newspapers
- 6 --Radios
- Advertising
- Telephones
- 7 -- Other

B. People in the Community

1. Amusements/Recreation

- Motion Pictures
- Cedar Rapids Parks
- Dances
- Carnival Week
- Chautauqua
- 20, 21, 22 --Community Theater
- Little Gallery
- Symphony Orchestra
- Circus
- Greene's Opera House
- Amusement Parks (Alamo)
- Camps
- Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

15 -- Baseball Leagues

2. Famous Characters

- Cherry Sisters
- 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 --Grant Wood
- Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
- 10 --Marvin Cone
- 5 -- Arthue Collins
- 8 -- Walter Cherry

3. Lifestyle
 - Life before air conditioning
 - Winter Activities
 - Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
 - Clothing
 - Toys
 - Saloons/Taverns
 - Farm Life
 - 18,19-- Social 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

- 1,4,6,8 --Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.) National Oats, Collins Radio, Cherry Burrell
- Local Brewing Companies
- Retail Businesses /Department Stores
- Professions
- Banking and Finance
- 19,20 --Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
- 13,20 --Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
- Farmers Market
- Mills on Cedar River
- Buildings Erected
- 16,18 --Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
- Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)
- 3-- Gordon Fennell Company

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
- Prohibition
- 2,4,16,17,18 --Great Depression

Biography

Gordon Fennell was born in Greeneville, Tennessee on June 27, 1898. Gordon moved to Cedar Rapids in the late 1920's when he was promoted to the position of Secretary of National Oats. Later, he was elected to the Board of Directors of National Oats. Mr. Fennell resigned from the company to start his own exporting company called Gordon's Mill Company. Mr. Fennell passed away October 27, 1965.

Mr. Fennell's memories include much about Grant Wood, Marvin Cone, the Community Theatre, and the Depression.

Re: death date
Mr. Fennell is shown as
residing on Thompson Dr. in
Cedar Rapids in the 1985 City
Directory, but Ruby Fennell is widowed
in the 1986 edition

Cmrb
1/18/06

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS
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Interview with Gordon Fennell

Conducted by Michael Bourgo

May 14, 1985

Cedar Rapids, Iowa

MB: Today I'm going to have the pleasure to interview Mr. Gordon Fennell of Cedar Rapids for the Cedar Rapids Junior League History Project.

Mr. Fennell, perhaps we could start off with you telling us a little bit about how you came to arrive in Cedar Rapids many years ago.

Fennell: Yes, that should be easy. I was working for the Cornell-Mills Company in East St. Louis, Illinois which was a firm that manufactured horse and mule feeds and other kinds of feeds; little pig feed. The Cornell-Mills Company bought out the National Oats Company plant here in Cedar Rapids because they used oatmeal in the feeds. They also bought another mill in Peoria, Illinois but I wasn't concerned with that. They got me transferred up from East St. Louis, Illinois to Cedar Rapids to work on sales here. I had pretty good success in working for them in Illinois--the Cornell-Mills Company--and my sales record at cost per ton sold had been very low. I came in here as secretary of the company and also as sort of a trouble-shooter in sales. I finally went up the line where

I got to be on the board of directors. This was prior to the time--this was the entire time from 1926 until in 1935 when I resigned from the National Oats Company and started Gordon's Mill Company.

MB: Mr. Fennell, I understand that some of your experiences in exporting National Oats products are what led you to go into business for yourself. Is that true?

Fennell: Yes, that is exactly correct. I worked very hard to start an agency organization of sales representatives throughout the world to sell oatmeal. The oatmeal brand in Cedar Rapids was the Three Minute Oats. In the early days they called it the Three Minute Oat Flakes.

During the depression, my agents overseas suffered very greatly because there was a world-wide depression and they were anxious for more accounts. I was getting many letters from these different agencies; can you get Rath Packing for us, can you get Anheuser Busch, what can you get us, we need some more accounts. I wanted to keep all these agents friendly to the National Oats Company and to me so that they would sell my product. So I spent an awful lot of time getting other accounts for these foreign sales agents and distributors. Even to the extent of spending a good deal of money going to other cities to line up the other accounts for them. Suddenly it occurred to me--why this is a peculiar thing, here I am getting all these accounts for these agents, see. About that time we had, perhaps, 55 or 60 foreign agents. Some of them were little countries like Salvador where we had one man but another group would be a

distributor in such as Indonesia where the company representative there had 96 salesmen. I was just getting these people one account after another and I got to thinking, this is silly, why don't I start getting these accounts and do the office work and the sales work for these different companies and get them to make an agreement with the company I wanted to form so that we would furnish these people overseas with the accounts they wanted instead of simply giving them to them from somebody else.

By representing the factories--representing the corporations--of these products we could act in such a way that we did everything connected with exporting, shipping, translations, sales work, foreign traveling, do everything that's necessary except manufacturing. And thereby the manufacturing corporation would charge us only for manufacturing plus a nominal profit and all other expenses that they would have if they had their own export department would be born by Gordon Fennell Company. That idea I sold to the National Oats Company. In fact I was ready--I was going to resign and start this company but they decided that they would give me a contract to handle their business. They gave me a quite long term exclusive contract to handle their sales for the world outside the United States--if I took on the National Oats Company as our first account.

So I started out with a good account and that enabled us to get other manufacturers of food products.

BM: Something that strikes me is, as we look back now, 1935 was the middle of the depression. It doesn't seem like that was a very good time for you to go into business.

Fennell: Well, the reason for it was all of these firms overseas were needing more business and this was a way for me to get more business and to get them more accounts so that the good representatives could stay in business. Or maybe some of them would stay in business that weren't so good, too. But it certainly helped.

MB: Sure.

Fennell: Also, it was a time when the prices of everything were so terribly low that we could buy from local factories at a price a fraction of what it was a few years later in 1935.

MB: One of the things that strikes me as interesting--now here, as I understand it, throughout most of your business career you've been concerned with exports and, yet, here you remained in Cedar Rapids, Iowa where one might normally think that San Francisco, or New York, or New Orleans might be a more appropriate place to be in the export business. Why did you stay in Cedar Rapids?

Fennell: That's correct. The reason for staying in Cedar Rapids was that Cedar Rapids was the oatmeal center of the world then. Quaker Oats Company had the largest cereal plant in the world in Cedar Rapids at that time. And today I think it's also still the largest cereal plant in the world. Then the National Oats Company was here and that was a large one, and growing. Between the two they probably manufactured 96 or 98 percent of all the oatmeal in the United States.

One of the stipulations of the National Oats Company if they would give us the account was that I would remain in Cedar Rapids

as long as my contract existed. When the contract expired I kept on working just the same for them. But then, it really didn't make much difference. The use of the airplanes were coming into general use then. After all, this isn't too far after Lindberg made his famous flight. The airplanes developed so fast, and one of the earliest and best developments about airplanes was the mail flights. Not the passenger but the mail. We could get mail by air in Cedar Rapids, really about as quick as any place else. We could get it to Cedar Rapids by air--if it was coming from the far East, we'd get our mail here quicker than people in New York would get it. If our mail would come in through the east and be on it's way to the West Coast, we would get in Cedar Rapids before exporters on the West Coast would get it.

So it didn't really make any difference where Gordon Fennell Company was located as long as we could handle our business properly and promptly, which we did.

There turned out to be other advantages, too, because the cost of doing business in Cedar Rapids was, perhaps, one third of what it would be in New York City.

MB: As I understand it, during your career as a business man in Cedar Rapids you had the pleasure of knowing Arthur Collins. I thought since he is one of the other interesting figures in Cedar Rapids business of your time, perhaps you could share a few memories of Arthur Collins with us.

Fennell: Yes, Arthur Collins was one of the remarkable men of the world. I suppose more will be known in the years to come. It's been pretty widely publicized at different times--when Admiral Byrd

went to the North Pole, Arthur Collins was the only person who could talk to him on a ham radio. Arthur Collins developed a ham radio that was working in his basement. He did this as a boy. I don't remember exactly what his age was when he communicated with Admiral Byrd, but I believe he was about 17 or 18.

Arthur Collins was like a Thomas A. Edison--he didn't seem to require any sleep, very, very, little. He constantly, all of his life, worked out of his office and factory. He would work during the day and frequently wouldn't come home until one or two o'clock in the morning. And he would work night after night.

He only required two or three hours of sleep a night, as I understand. Really, he was a modest, modest, quiet, unassuming man.

And of course he had remarkable ability.

Mr. Bourgo, if I may call you Mike I'll say Mike--Mike, I remember two vice presidents from National City Bank of New York which was the largest or second largest in the United States then--came out here to see Collins Radio and other firms. The New York bankers began to call on us a lot because of drafts that we had to pass on overseas branches to them. I remember these two vice presidents coming down to see me, and they'd been out interviewing Arthur Collins. They were completely--they were very, very, enthusiastic about some inventions that Collins was working on, I don't know whether he had completed that or not, but they made the very amazing and unbelievable remark that Collins' ability and inventions were so terrific that it wouldn't be long--and you won't like this Mike, but it wouldn't be long before Collins Radio would be far ahead of IBM. And I do remember in San Francisco

one time--and this was in the early days, too--I had to transfer a ticket from American Airlines to United or from United to American. I went down in the square across from St. Francis Hotel, and as I looked across the square and see the office of the other airline I said "I want to transfer this, if I can get out of here and make a connection with Ozark." I think Ozark was the other line in Chicago coming to Cedar Rapids then. I said, "If you can get me on the Ozark flight so I can get into Cedar Rapids tonight."

And the man said, "Oh, I think we can see." So he took a little time and punched a lot of buttons and he said you're confirmed such and such and such. And I said, "Yes, you've got me transferred over to, let's say, American Airlines." He said, "Yes, that's transferred."

"Well," I said, "yes, you're sitting right here and you can do that, you're across the street, but I've got to get out of Chicago and into Cedar Rapids."

"Oh", he said, "that's confirmed, too." I said, "I don't know how in the world you did it."

He said, "I did it with these little buttons. Don't you know how I did that?" He says, "No, this came through Cedar Rapids, Iowa. This message went to Cedar Rapids and was handled by this machine that Collins Radio has in their factory in Cedar Rapids. The confirmation and the clearance and everything came right through where you're going to Cedar Rapids tonight." Which was really startling for me to find out.

MB: I understand that another one of Cedar Rapids' prominent business

men of the time that you knew a bit was a gentlemen by the name of Walter Cherry, who founded Cherry Burrell.

Fennell: Yes, Walter Cherry was a very fine gentlemen, very highly thought of. When I arrived in Cedar Rapids, the name of the company was J. G. Cherry Company. After a few years they--I guess the word is Amalgimated--with Burrell Corporation located someplace in upstate New York. Walter Cherry was the president.

I forgot the exact date, in the early thirties I think it was-- Walter Cherry was nominated to be a director of the United States Chamber of Commerce. Cedar Rapids' citizens wanted a few people to go to Washington, D.C. and assist him in his campaign to be elected on the board of directors of the Chamber of Commerce, which was really an honorary situation. I don't think a director--any director--got a dollar in those days. I don't believe they even got any money for traveling expenses, but that's beside the point.

Anyway, I was chosen to go along and support Walter Cherry. There was a man who manufactured boxes--head of some box company that sold boxes to Cherry Burrell, packing boxes, wire-bound boxes--he went along. And Charlie Manson, the executive secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, went. We went to Washington and worked on this for around a week to ten days. I would go out and contact the delegations from other parts of the country to get them to vote for Walter Cherry.

I remember every evening--Walter Cherry had a suite of rooms in one of the hotels and the doors would open out on the hall. But all the rooms, maybe five or six rooms, connected with each other

inside. Every evening, maybe it was only one or two evenings, that we didn't play poker. There was a poker game almost every evening and I was a little amazed at how steep it was. To me at that time I think it was a dollar limit. But you could lose a good deal of money at poker with a dollar limit. But I was lucky the first half hour or so and won maybe \$40 or \$50. By being careful every evening and getting out of an awful lot of pots instead of trying to stay in, I managed to come home with \$300 or \$400 profit on the trip from playing poker with Walter Cherry.

He was really a very fine gentlemen, and he was elected. He was a very great credit to Cedar Rapids, also his two brothers.

MB: So that trip was a success all the way around?

Fennell: I would say it's a success in every way.

MB: You know, as you talk about Mr. Cherry, I know that the Cherry Company was instrumental in giving Grant Wood one of his early commissions. There are some paintings in the museum of the Cherry factory which Grant Wood did. I was curious, was there other business men in Cedar Rapids at the time who tried to help Grant Wood out?

Fennell: Those paintings that he made for the J. G. Cherry Company are really terrific; they're really terrific paintings. And very interesting in large. I don't think there were many other companies--the National Oats Company did buy one, or two, or three paintings. Mr. John C. Reed, who was executive vice president and general sales manager, and later became president, he bought one or two. They have quite a large one. I remember now,

I don't know where it is right now. I believe it's out at the National Oats Company in the president's office today, I'm almost positive it is. Very good painting of the Three Minute Mill, a large one.

That's the only other corporation I know of that got him to do this work in addition to the J. G. Cherry Company.

MB: Since we've moved along to one of the other major interests of your life which is art, I know that you had a personal acquaintance with Grant Wood. I thought, perhaps, you might like to tell us a few things about the sort of impression he made on you when you got to know him.

Fennell: Yes, I liked Grant Wood very much. He was a friendly man, and a quiet man, and a modest man. In that way he was like his great friend, Marvin Cone, who was very modest, too. But Grant had a way of just a few words and a few quiet remarks getting in plugs for his paintings. Marvin Cone, I don't think, ever tried to sell a painting. He would even suggest that you should buy from some other struggling artists sometimes.

I remember one time I bought four Marvin Cone paintings at one time. He said, "Why don't you divide this up and let some other young artist have some of this?" I said, "No, I like your paintings and I'm decorating a new office space downtown and I'd like the paintings to feature the reception room or at least a place in the office." So I did buy four almost under protest from Marvin Cone. I let him pick them out. I said, "You pick out the four best you have and I'll take them." As I'm talking to you today, I still have them. I'm very glad I have, too.

MB: One of the other things I've heard you mention once was Grant Wood's fire sale during the depression when apparently he put everything on sale because he had no money at the time.

Fennell: That's right. Word went around town that Grant didn't have enough food and that he and his mother didn't have enough to eat. They were then living in the apartment that he made in what he called "Five Turner Alley" which was the old stable house behind Turner Mortuary.

So some of his friends went to see Grant and said, "Look, you can't eat these paintings, you've got maybe a hundred paintings standing around here. Why don't you have a fire sale?"

In Cedar Rapids, things weren't too good, this was about '32 I believe, 1932 or early '33. I'm almost sure it was '32 though. There were vacant stores all over. Across from Coe College there were two or three vacant stores where there had been a drug store and another store or two. His friends borrowed these stores and they set aside a day for this sale. The talk was that publicity was by telephone. I don't know whether there was any written notice of it or not--that all of Grant Wood's paintings would be on sale. And they were!

I had never been able to afford a Grant Wood painting, I didn't feel. I got into a lot of debt buying common stock in 1929, which the last of my common stock was delivered after the crash!

It was taking me years and years to pay off my stock losses. I hadn't been able to buy any pictures, although I admired his work very much, and also Marvin Cone's. But I decided that finally I could get a painting for \$20. The small ones were to be \$20

and all large ones \$40. I took \$20 down to the store where the sale was going to be. My wife and I were the first people to arrive and at the door was Miss Francis Prescott, the principal of McKinley High School, who was Grant's great friend and school teacher.

I said, "I hadn't ever been able to buy a Grant Wood painting until today, Miss Prescott. I'm here early because I know how you know his work and I'd like you to pick me out the best one, please."

She said, "Well, it's not in this room, we'll go over to one of the other rooms." We walked through a back connecting way and went into another room where it was full of Grant Wood paintings. She took me to one of Indian Creek painting. She said in my opinion this is colorful and is the best of all of them that is here. I said, "Gosh, that's fine. I'll look around at the rest of the paintings and see what I choose."

A little later Grant came in and I didn't tell Grant that I'd talked with Miss Prescott. I said, "Grant, I'm finally going to buy a painting and as long as anybody can pick out any one they want, you tell me, please, which one you consider the best of all of them that are here."

So he said "O.K., come along with me." So he went right over to the other room and he picked out the same one that Miss Prescott did. It didn't seem to me that it was a very big one, but he had it classified with the big paintings. Actually, it's a painting of Indian Creek; it's called Iowa Autumn. The painting is something like 14 inches high and 16 inches wide. I would have

considered that a small painting but he had it classified as a large one. He said, "This is the best and it's only \$40."

I said, "Oh, Grant. That's a terrible disappointment. I've been wanting to buy a painting of yours for a long, long, time and I've only got \$20."

"Oh," he says, "that's all right. Give me the \$20 and take it home and give me the other \$20 anytime you want, two or three months from now, any time you want."

So that was it. And this is the painting that I got for \$40, which was quite a bargain. Too bad to profit by somebody's loss but that's the way to buy most anything if you can, when the market's at the bottom. Don't you think so Mike? Buy at the bottom, of course this is maybe a bad time to sell my house, too. Sale prices for homes are pretty low right now.

MB: Surely it must have been pretty low about 1932, I would think?

Fennell: I guess it was just awful. We were renting at that time.

MB: You mentioned all the empty store fronts; that there were store fronts available for Grant Wood to use. Was the downtown pretty much full of empty store fronts at that time?

Fennell: There were a good many downtown. There was an empty store right across from the Montrose Hotel. It would be on the corner across from the Montrose and also across the street from the Guaranty Bank. I'm trying to think what is there today. There was a stationary company there a little while back but I'm not sure whether they're still there. That was vacant.

There was an artist put out here by the Washington administration who had a gallery in this vacant store room. Of course, not a

very large space, perhaps as big as three or four small offices together. Grant had been working on a new painting and he decided to have an unveiling exhibit which he had in this vacant room--which wasn't vacant, it was a vacant room being used as a gallery. I'm trying to think of the man that came out from Washington, his name escapes me right for the minute. But he made it available. Grant invited people to come over to see the unveiling of American Gothic. I don't know how many people he asked, but I would say from recollection that there were somewhere from 10 to 20 people there and that was all.

This American Gothic was on an easel and there was a canvas over it. Grant made a little talk about it and what he was thinking about. I guess I wasn't too attentive. After he finished talking about it, the farmer--not the farmer's wife, but the farmer's daughter--and the little thin pitchfork. Then he took the canvas off, and this is it.

And I remember kind of looking at it and thinking, what's all this talk about? This isn't much of a painting. But evidently so. It's turned out, probably, to be the most valuable painting in the world. So my judgement on art wasn't very good at that time.

MB: What was the town's reaction when they heard that he had sold this to the art institute in Chicago to go into their permanent collection?

Fennell: Well, I suppose they were very pleased. Of course, Grant began to get nation-wide publicity right away. And I have a little story I have to tell about this Indian Creek painting that I bought for \$40.

Mike, one of my recollections on this Iowa Autumn painting on Indian Creek was that Grant painted it in 1929 but the remarkable thing is that he still had it for sale as long as 1932, three or four years. Grant told me that he actually put in about 30 days actual time on location sitting and working on this at Indian Creek and he considered it one of the finest paintings that he ever did. He said that at one time Herb Stamates made him an offer--and I'm not absolutely positive as to my recollection--but I think he said that he wanted \$350 or \$400 for it and Herb Stamates would offer him \$250 and he refused to take it. But of course I get it here at this lucky fire sale for \$40. When Grant wouldn't take \$250 for this painting he still had the painting and he didn't know that when he sent American Gothic to Chicago for the contest at the museum there that if he won first prize it would only be \$300 and maybe if the third prize was \$100 . . . He didn't consider American Gothic--I have a little laugh to myself thinking that he considered this Iowa Autumn painting on Indian Creek that I'm so proud of--that he himself considered it more valuable than American Gothic. Which I like to tell my friends.

MB: You said there was one other story you wanted to tell us about that had to do with baseball and payments?

Fennell: Oh, yes. Back about this time during the depression, different baseball leagues were being established by the city of Cedar Rapids to play in the park. I used to play baseball some when I was in St. Louis. As a kid in school I liked baseball. I had the job of organizing a team for the National Oats Company

and I was a manager, organizer, and pitcher. We wanted to do this as an enterprise that would be open for the best players that the company had. It didn't make any difference what their position was--their status with the corporation. It turned out that the star of our team was a man that worked in the mill and he played center field. He could catch most anything and he was very, very fast on his feet.

These games were going on during the depression. One day he got a message over from the mill to meet over to the office building which was a little distance from the mill. He wouldn't be able to go out to the park to play ball that day unless somebody picked him up in an automobile and drove him over to Ellis Park.

It turned out I was the only one that could do that. And, of course, I should be there early, being the manager but I wanted our star player there. I wasn't going to loose him! So I went over to the mill and got him, and we were driving out there.

I said, "By the way, you're pretty choosey saying you have to have a chauffer out to the park." Those days we had streetcars in Cedar Rapids. I said, "The streetcars are still running and the fare's only 5 cents."

And he said, "Man, do you think I can afford to take a streetcar out there?"

I said, "What have you been doing in the past?"

"Well," he said, "I've been getting a ride or I walk, but today there wasn't enough time to walk. But most of the time I walk."

I suppose the distance was a mile and a half to two miles.

I said, "You've been walking out there and then playing baseball

out there seven or nine innings?"

And he says, "Man, you don't think I can afford to pay carfare do you?"

And I said, "Pay carfare? It's only 5 cents."

And he said, "Do you know how much work I got last week? I got three days work. For the whole week I got three days work out of the week and that's all." And he says, "That's eight hours a day, so for three days I got 24 hours." And he says, "My pay is 40 cents an hour." So 40 times 24, what is that \$9.60? That man got \$9.60 for the week and he had five children.

That gave me at that time, the biggest jolt and the best knowledge. Something that's gone with me ever since to consider labor's side of how little they were getting and what labor lived on. To think of trying to live on \$9.60 a week and support a family. It just seemed horrible.

I even talked to some of the people in management about it and they said, we'd like to pay more but we can't because that's what the competition pays and unless everybody raised their rates it would put us out of business if we raise our's too much. So you've got that angle between labor not getting paid enough and the corporation not being able to pay more. I guess we're in the same fix today.

MB: While we're on the subject of the depression, Mr. Fennell, I understand that Cedar Rapids itself did manage to fare through the depression a little bit better than certain other cities in the United States.

Fennell: Yes, that's true, the depression was bad here. Of course it was

terrible for anybody who didn't have a job, but Cedar Rapids still had lots of jobs because of what I mentioned before, of it being the headquarters for oatmeal in the United States. During the time of the bad depression, people used to eat a lot of bacon and eggs and ham and eggs, and other things. They got pretty well content with oatmeal. They could buy an awful lot of oats for 10 cents. It's a very wonderful, substantial food, oatmeal is.

So we had the two oatmeal plants here and also the Penick and Ford cereal plant. And then the road building came along and they had road building construction which was furthered by the programs of the new deal and Franklin Roosevelt's deals. Cedar Rapids was the headquarters for certain mechanical equipment such as made by the Iowa Manufacturing Company. So Cedar Rapids was on the financial maps of the country.

I remember one time when Barron's Weekly, I guess it was Barron's Monthly then, had the map and there was just one black spot in the whole United States where business was good and that was Cedar Rapids, Iowa. So Cedar Rapids went through the Depression pretty well. In other cities there were suicides galore, right and left; somebody jumping off a building every day. There were very few in Cedar Rapids, only one or two I think.

MB: One of the things that I recall your mentioning to me is, we maybe changed topics here slightly, is that when you first arrived in Cedar Rapids in 1928 or so you told me that you found that social life here was a little different than what you had known in St. Louis. Is that true?

Fennell: Yes, it is. In St. Louis there are lots of good places to eat. One I remember, particularly, called the "Bevill Mill" that was run by the Busch Brewing Company, it was wonderful. And, oh, there were so many good eating places at reasonable prices. And lots of German people in one section in St. Louis, in South St. Louis. Lots of good German restaurants with reasonable prices. And come to Cedar Rapids, and there were very few places you could go out to eat. The entertaining in Cedar Rapids was mostly in people's homes. The different hostesses would give dinner parties but then, also, there was quite a group, including the same hostesses at other gatherings where they'd have--I'm trying to think of the right word and it's not Dutch treat--everybody takes something, potluck.

Somebody would bring the salad and the hostess usually had the meat and everybody would bring something else. But the parties where the host and hostess gave the dinner, it was dress. The girls would wear evening dresses and the men, tuxedos, always. That seemed very startling to me because in St. Louis we didn't see very much of that. Although, at the time I did not only have a tuxedo but I had tails; tails and a white tie which I didn't wear very often.

MB: So Cedar Rapids was not full of--did not have an exciting night social life in those days?

Fennell: Oh, no. There were two restaurants then, there was the First Avenue Virginia and the Second Avenue Virginia. Each of them was run by a good Greek cook, I guess you would say, the proprietors. The proprietor was usually the cook.

The Second Avenue Virginia would occasionally somehow get fresh red snapper in. And when they'd get the fresh red snapper, they'd take this--I'm going to use the word paint, but it's not paint--kind of a white smudge, and smudge up the whole front glass and say 'fresh red snapper today'. That was one of the best places to eat.

The Roosevelt Hotel hadn't been built in 1926. The Roosevelt Hotel was built in--it started in 1928 I believe, and finished in 1929. The Montrose Hotel had good hotel food. And later on there was a place that opened up right next to the railroad tracks on Third Avenue and the tracks called the Travel Inn. That was pretty good food. The owner and his wife made a hit because they had known a lot of show people and they had the walls covered with different movie stars and actors and actresses. And their food was good but there was really no fancy place in Cedar Rapids, no fancy place at all. There wasn't anything like Stouffer's Food. The food, of course, was good at the country clubs but only as good as the manager and cooks happened to be at that particular time. And they changed managers and cooks every so often. END OF SIDE ONE.

MB: BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

We **certainly** enjoyed how you got started in that arena.

Fennell: Well, I wasn't too interested in the theatre as such, but my wife was and she just loved it. She had parts in some plays, in fact she had the lead in a play or two. But her health was bad, she had very bad allergy trouble and hay fever, for instance, was a terrible affliction for her. No place is much worse for

hay fever than Cedar Rapids. Gosh, I shouldn't say this because it's not boosting the city. But the combination of oatmeal dust and the cereal dust and ragweed is really bad. There's just lots of ragweed outside of Cedar Rapids. So it's a haven for people who treat hay fever.

Anyhow, my wife had to be gone so I used to sit around the Community Players rehearsals. So I had this one little part.

Mike, did I mention about the Swedish chauffeur?

MB: No you didn't.

Fennell: Well, I had a little part where they persuaded me to just to walk on the stage, I was on maybe for three minutes or five minutes. A part as a Swedish chauffeur, and I remember I had to get a costume dressed up like a chauffeur. I had to speak with a broken English-Swedish accent. I swear I just couldn't learn a Swedish accent but I worked at it and worked at it.

Anyhow I did it. And the write-up in the newspaper afterwards said Gordon Fennell for the first time was in the cast but he only walked across the stage, but the audience knew he was there and we think a new star was born. Well, not too long after that Helen Hines, who was the wife of Don Hines who was very prominent in Cedar Rapids and on the airport commission, was writing a play. There was a play writing contest for Midwestern states and these plays were sent someplace to be judged. What happened was that Helen Hine's play won first prize. It was called, "A Murder in Town Players."

Helen Hines insisted on me taking the part of the director of the town players who was murdered. Actually he was murdered in the

play, but I should have been murdered long before the play ever started! Anyhow, it was at McKinley High School. It was to be on three nights; the first night was the opening night, the second night there was going to be a presentation ceremony, of course she won the presentation prize, and the third and the last night. Then the play was to move down to Iowa City for some sort of program they had with different players from different cities in the midwest. They would put on plays--one act plays--in a competition with a man who was head of a theatrical department there. If I remember correctly his name was Mabie, M-a-b-i-e, I think it was.

So we come back to the first night of Helen Hines' play, "Murder in the Town Players", and it came off pretty darn good. The second night it was going on, and it was to be the award and she was to be announced about the prize, that she won first prize and be presented with some honors, presents. I was being questioned as to the murder by a detective. I got the wrong line or something and I went absolutely blank, I couldn't think of anything to say. I was sitting with my back close to the curtain, close to the entrance to the stage, and the prompter there was a woman who had a soft voice, and I could hear her mumbling. But she didn't talk loud enough for me to get my cue. I sat there and I couldn't get it and the audience began to cough. Then I could hear them shuffling and then some of them began to laugh.

The man who was questioning me threw me a line which was 11 pages along from where it should have been. I picked the play

up after dropping 11 pages out of it and continued until the end of the show after losing 11 pages. By the time you lost 11 pages there, you didn't know who murdered who in the town players! All you knew was that I should have been murdered! It was really pretty terrible. They had to come out and they presented her with a bouquet of roses; I never saw so many big roses, and a script and I don't know what all. Somebody made a little speech.

All I wanted to do was to slip out of the back door and go home, and never see anybody. My wife was away and I was alone, and I braved it and I walked out the front. I said to somebody, "Hello", and Neil Montgomery says, "Hi," and eased it up for me. I was ready to cry. Neil Montgomery put up his hand in the air with two fingers which was always a signal of friendship. "Gordy, you were just great, wonderful, wonderful piece. Oh my, you did fine."

So I went across to the Montrose and had the evening supper with some people over there, and that was it. That wound up my career as an actor. Except we went down to Iowa City and I told our director, his name skips me for the minute, I'll probably come back to it. He was a director that had come from out of town. I said you'll have to take the part, you take the part, he can take any part. He said, "Positively not, I won't do it. I won't do it and if you don't do the play won't go on and Cedar Rapids won't be represented."

I said, "I just can't do it. I just can't do it, I won't do it." "Well," he says, "you've got to."

So I went down there and stood in the wings and suffered and suffered something terrible until I had to go on stage. But it came through just fine that night down there. Our group won some sort of an award. I even got special mention for how well I'd done, and that was the end. No more after that, never!

MB: So you closed your career?

Fennell: I closed my acting career. After having ruined the great opening night. But helping to win the high award the next time.

MB: One of the things that you mentioned to me, Mr. Fennell, was that initially when you moved to Cedar Rapids you and your wife really wished you hadn't come here. Is that true?

Fennell: Yes, that's correct. We hated to leave all the friends and leave our school mates. We loved St. Louis and it was a good place to live. Not too expensive either. You could get awfully good food in St. Louis; good places to go.

But people in Cedar Rapids were very friendly to us. We made friends in a hurry. The city is clean and very beautiful. In St. Louis, especially the section we were in, the suburb of Clayton, there is just one apartment building after another. You look out and you see apartments, apartments, apartments. In Cedar Rapids you look out of most houses and you see nice green grass or pretty trees. Most everybody in Cedar Rapids, no matter how small the house, they always seem to keep houses and lawns up, lots of flowers and shrubs.

After a year or year and a half my wife said she sure would hate to have to move back to St. Louis again. I felt the same way, I just like Cedar Rapids and do to this day. I would hate

to leave Cedar Rapids.

MB: Another thing you told me that I thought was of interest was that you felt that you had helped a number of people to realize that it was every bit as possible to be a success here in business as it was any place else.

Fennell: Well, I'm talking about the export business. People used to think that if you're located a long way from the seaboard, it's very expensive getting your product to ship. And that exporting factories, or corporations that export a lot should have their factories located in seaboard cities or close to the seaboard. But in fact, the success of my running an export business from the center of the country demonstrated otherwise. I think the success of exporting products from the interior proved an incentive to many corporations that don't even know the executives or know much about, to actually start export departments and hire export personnel and export managers.

Of course the exporting from the interior cities of the United States up until recently the recent decline has been terrific. This moment that we're talking today, there's a bad decline on national export sales on account of the strength of the dollar and the weakness of other currencies in other countries. The balance of trade is by far very, very against the United States as of today.

By the way Mike, you're calling me Mr. Fennell all the time. Now that we've been having such a good time sitting around here chatting, not even taking time out for a beer, if you don't start calling me Gordon I'm going to call you the Reverend

Bourgo! Dear Reverend!

MB: Okay Gordon. On that note let me move to another topic that I think, often, is interesting to those of us today who have come to see our car as something that we take anywhere, anytime we choose, pretty much any place we choose. I'm sure in 1928 in Cedar Rapids that was not necessarily the case.

Fennell: The use of cars certainly wasn't the way it is today. You could look out on the street and a car wouldn't pass for two or three minutes. Today there's such a helter-skelter of cars you can hardly get across First Avenue.

I remember a time when there was a long stretch of space between Cedar Rapids and Marion, Iowa that was just waste land there, just a few cars going back and forth at night. But I don't quite get your question. Were you talking about driving cars back and forth to Chicago?

MB: Sure.

Fennell: No, we took the train a lot. After a while I began to drive my car. Especially if I had a lot of work to do in Chicago, I took my car along. I did have a charge--before I started the Gordon Fennell Company--charge of sales for National Oats in different parts of the country including Cook County. I would take my car then.

MB: But I would think in the early days, the reliability of the car and probably the absence of paved roads was somewhat of a disincentive to drive long distances.

Fennell: Yes, it surely was. I remember driving from St. Louis here, it would take two days. You would have to go out of St. Louis and

cross the Mississippi River and go over into Illinois, and drive up the Illinois side. Then cross the river at Clinton and then it was a dirt road from Clinton to Cedar Rapids. There were times when cars would get stuck in the mud there. One would block another. I remember one time I got stuck in the mud and there were maybe 10 or 15 cars ahead stuck in the mud and nobody could get through. Until you got enough farmers to come out and gradually pull them out one by one.

It was pretty bad, the mud road. We're spoiled today. Also it makes too much traffic now.

MB: Where could you find gasoline along these roads. Were there gas stations?

Fennell: Evidently there were. We some how got here. I remember the first car I drove here. The first car I had was a Model T Ford. But after that I got one of the first Chevrolets. I had a Chevrolet when I moved to Cedar Rapids. I remember if you put the accelerator flat on the floor it would do 45 miles an hour. That's about all you should do because the roads were so bad.

