

ADH1152

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Erwin Wasta

Interviewer: Laura M. Derr
Date: May 7, 1985
Place: 2131 First Avenue SE
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

10-07

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Erwin Wasta was born in Vienna, Austria in 1906. He was born the son of Leopold and Francisca Wasta. In 1907, Erwin, his parents, and older brother immigrated to America. His father had decided to leave Austria because he no longer wanted to be a German soldier. During Wasta's early years, he attended Polk Elementary, Polk Junior High and Washington High School. He sold newspapers for the Gazette during this time. In high school, he worked in a clothing store, various drug stores, and for Holden Koehler Company. When Erwin Wasta graduated from high school in 1925, he went to work for Metropolitan Supply Company. He called on schools in southeastern Iowa, and businesses in Cedar Rapids. In 1928, he married Louise Lilja. They had four children. In 1935, Erwin purchased a printing company called Pioneer Litho. He served on the Young Men's Bureau of the Chamber of Commerce, later known as the Junior Chamber of Commerce. He was the president of this organization and helped be responsible for the building of Ellis Pool in 1941. His memories include being a news carrier, memories of his father, the Douglas Starch Works explosion, prohibition, the Seedling Mile, Hunter Airport, the Depression, and Greene's Opera House.

Ann Hampton Larson

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

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

1. --When were you born? Where?
1. --How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
1. --What are your parents' names?
4. --Where did you go to school?
4. --Are you married or single?
- 4,5. --Did you raise a family? How big?
5. --What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

1. Transportation

- 27,28. --Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
--Trolleys (the Interurban)
- 28,29,30. --Horses and First Automobiles
- 29,30. --Mud roads and the seedling mile
31. --Hunter Airport and the first planes
--Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications

- 5,12,13,14,15,16. --Newspapers
--Radios
--Advertising
--Telephones

B. People in the Community

1. Amusements/Recreation

- Motion Pictures
- Cedar Rapids Parks
- Dances
- Carnival Week
- Chautauqua
- Community Theater
- Little Gallery
- Symphony Orchestra
- Circus
- 35,36. --Greene's Opera House
--Amusement Parks (Alamo)
--Camps
--Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

2. Famous Characters

35. --Cherry Sisters
- 16,17. --Grant Wood
--Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
--Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle

- Life before air conditioning
- Winter Activities
- Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
- Clothing
- Toys
- 10,11. --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

- 1,2,3,9,10,21. --Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
- Indians
- Segregation of Blacks
- 5,6,7,10-16,26,27. --Jobs Available

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community

1. Education

- 4,5,12,17-19,25. --Cedar Rapids Schools
- 8. --Coe College
- Mount Mercy College
- Cornell College

2. Government

- 24,34,37. --City Services
- 29,30,31. --Streets/Roads
- Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)

3. Medical

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

4. Business and Economy

- 19,20. --Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
- 21. --Local Brewing Companies
- 6,7. --Retail Businesses /Department Stores
- 5-7,10-12,25-27. --Professions
 - Banking and Finance
 - Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
- 5,6,7. --Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
 - Farmers Market
- 24. --Mills on Cedar River
 - Buildings Erected
- 5,6,7,10,11,12. --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)
- 19,20. --Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
 - Bank Closings (1933)
 - Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
 - Public Library Murder(1921)

2. National Historic Events

- Womens' Suffrage
- 11. --World War I
 - Roaring 20's
 - Prohibition
- 6,20,21,32,33. --Great Depression

INTERVIEW WITH: Erwin Wasta

INTERVIEWER: Laura M. Derr

DATE: May 7, 1985

PLACE: 2131 First Avenue SE, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

TRANSCRIBER: Laura D. Cogan

LMD: This is Laura Derr. Today is May 7, 1985, and I am in the home of Mr. Erwin Wasta at 2131 First Avenue SE. Would you please give me your full name?

Wasta: My name is Erwin Wasta. I live at 2131 First Avenue SE. I have lived here almost two years.

LMD: Mr. Wasta, where were you born?

Wasta: I was born in Vienna, Austria.

LMD: And when did you move to Cedar Rapids?

Wasta: We came to the United States about a year after I was born--a year, a year and a half.

LMD: And what year was that that you were born, and when did you come?

Wasta: I was born in 1906, and we came here later in 1907.

LMD: Okay. What are your parent's names?

Wasta: My dad's name was Leopold and my mother's name was Francisca, which would be Francis, of course, in America.

LMD: And your name would not have been pronounced "Wasta"--it's pronounced Wasta

now, isn't it?

Wasta: Well, originally, in the German language, there was no "W". It was a "V", and our name originally was "Vashta" which is the "V" instead of the "W."

LMD: Why did your parents immigrate to the United States?

Wasta: Well, Father belonged to the so-called aristocracy, and, as such, he had to serve in the military as an officer. And to make a long story short, he served in the Austrian army, which was controlled by Germany, for three years and then had a heart attack, and he was mustered out, and he thought he was through. About a couple years after that, he met my mother and they were married and they had my brother, who was four years older than I, and when they called him up for re-examination, and at that time, they found his heart had healed well enough so they wanted him to come back in. Well, he had no means to support his family, and the army pay, of course, was not great enough to support them. So, he had one of two choices. Leave the country or abandon his family. So, he chose to come to the United States.

LMD: Why did he end up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa?

Wasta: He had had a brother who had come over here earlier for somewhat similar military reasons that was located in Cedar Rapids. And that's how he happened to come here.

LMD: I see. Do you have any family stories or remembrances from your parents about the trip over and how they actually got to Cedar Rapids?

Wasta: No, I'm afraid I don't know too much about it. As I say, I was a year to a year and a half old, and basically, I remembered, or I thought I remembered, Ellis Island and seeing the Statue of Liberty. But I'm sure that wasn't

rememberance. I think basically, that was remembering what they had told me.

LMD: Did they have any difficulties as far as getting through the Ellis Island immigration...

Wasta: To my knowledge, they had no difficulty. No.

LMD: Did they travel here, then, by train?

Wasta: I assume we did. I'm not sure.

LMD: Sure, you were with them, but you wouldn't remember that!

Wasta: I assume we did.

LMD: So they really didn't talk much about that experience.

Wasta: Well, yes, they did early, but keep in mind, by the time I was four or five years old, we had been here, and our life here was the important part, not the trip over.

LMD: Right. Where did you live in Cedar Rapids when you were growing up?

Wasta: Well, originally, when we first got to Cedar Rapids, my folks rented a house down on about 12th Avenue and 7th Street. And we lived in that area for about a year or two.

LMD: Southeast.

Wasta: Southeast. Then, later on, we moved to the northeast side--a short street called Lake Avenue. Lake Avenue was off of 13th Street between 12th and 13th.

LMD: As a young boy growing up, where did you go to school?

Wasta: I went, almost entirely, to Polk School, which was the grade school. Then later on, of course, I went to Washington High School.

LMD: Was that the old Washington High School?

Wasta: That was the old Washington High School down by Greene Square.

LMD: I see. When would you have graduated? In the twenties?

Wasta: I graduated in '25. That was then a three-year school.

LMD: Oh, really. Ten, eleven and twelve?

Wasta: Yes.

LMD: Did Polk go up to the ninth grade?

Wasta: Polk was changed from a grade school to a junior high before I graduated from there. So I went not only to grade school there but also junior high.

LMD: And now it's switched back to an elementary school.

Wasta: Right.

LMD: Would you tell us, just for the record, when you married and your wife's name.

Wasta: Louise Lilja and I were married in 1928. We knew each other originally in grade school and started going together in high school. She had lived in Cedar Rapids and also had lived on a farm near Columbus Junction and Washington, Iowa.

LMD: And have you had children in your marriage?

Wasta: Yes, we have four children. All of them, which lived in Cedar Rapids, of course, at one time, but now are married and only one lives in Cedar Rapids-- that's my son, Jim.

LMD: What was your occupation during your career years?

Wasta: Well, I started out, if you want to start way back, as a news kid...

LMD: Oh, I do. I want to get more on that.

Wasta: Alex Fiddler was in charge of street circulation for the Gazette, and I worked for him from the time I was about nine years old until I was about thirteen. Basically, I had various corners downtown and also routes. The best corner that I had one summer and part of the fall was the old Post Office Building, which is catty-corner across from the present Merchants National Bank main building.

LMD: And that's the Witwer Center now.

Wasta: Yes, that's the Witwer Center.

LMD: I want to talk to you more about that, but go on and tell us about your... when you were an adult here and supporting a family. What were you doing in those years?

Wasta: Well, while I was going to high school, I also worked, and, at one time, I worked for Mr. M. M. Thompson, who had the clothing store where the Merchants Bank now stands. Later, I worked in three or four different drug stores in town--Kanneally and Beasley's, Hintz's, Wicksteads, and also Dysart Candy Company.

LMD: Those are all gone now.

Wasta: Yes. Most of those are gone.

LMD: What sorts of things did you do when you were working for those companies?

Wasta: Well, mostly, I was stock boy, soda jerk, and at one time, at Kanneally and Beasley's, I was assistant cook, which meant basically, preparing chicken, which was not very much of a cooking job, but mostly just cleaning chickens and working on them--cutting them up and that sort of thing.

LDM: Well, you probably worked with very fresh material in those days.

Wasta: Oh, yes. Very fresh.

LDM: And then, you worked with Metropolitan Supply?

Wasta: Yes, before I went to work with Metropolitan Supply Company, I worked for Holden Koehler Company, the last two years I was in high school. And there, again, I did stock room work and delivery.

LDM: And what was Holden Koehler?

Wasta: Holden Koehler was the predecessor of the company called Klinger's. And Klinger's now is out of business, and is now called Fiddler's --I guess is the name.

LDM: Then, in the depression years, I believe, you actually bought your own business.

Wasta: Well, I started with Metropolitan Supply Company in 1925 when I graduated from high school. And I worked for them for 11 years. Both calling on schools in southeastern Iowa and calling on businesses here in Cedar Rapids. In 1935, because of business conditions, Clark Beams, who was the head of

Metropolitan Supply Company decided they wanted to eliminate Pioneer Litho Company, which was the small end of it, to have more capital to concentrate on the school supply business. And I asked him if I could buy Pioneer and go into business for myself, and he assured me that I could if I wanted to, and that's when I bought it.

LMD: Now, I would like to talk to you about those businesses at more length, but I wanted to get that for the record at the beginning. I'd like to shift for a moment back to your early years in Cedar Rapids--growing up here. And, you've already touched on this just a bit, but let's go back to your memories of downtown Cedar Rapids when you were a newspaper boy. How was it different from downtown today?

Wasta: Well, of course, alot of the things that are old now were very new then, and alot of the things that were older then are gone. The Grand Hotel was where Stouffers is now, and that was torn down quite a number of years ago. The Fair Store was on the north side of First Avenue approximately where the Roosevelt parking garage is. I don't remember...

LMD: F-A-I-R? Fair?

Wasta: Fair.

LMD: And what did they do?

Wasta: Oh, they were a general department store, and later on that became Liebsons and, of course, later that was sold. And Liebsons was a furniture store at one time.

LMD: Liebsons? How would that be spelled?

Wasta: I don't know. You'd better look it up.

LMD: Better look that one up, okay.

Wasta: There are Liebchens in the phone book. My strong forte isn't spelling.

LMD: What was your favorite store as a young boy? Where would you hang out, or were there such places?

Wasta: Well, of course, we lived most of our life down on North 13th Street--Lake Avenue, and, of course, I hung out mostly at Coe College. We played basketball in the gym, we snuck into football games, and did the things that kids normally do. We had a ball diamond within a block of our place where we played baseball, and then, of course, Daniels Park wasn't very far away, and we used that, and I started playing tennis in early high school and we played at Daniels Park and, also, at Coe. Later on, the Cedar Rapids Tennis Association, of which I was a member, rented the Coe College courts in the summertime, and that's where we played most of the time.

LMD: Did you compete?

Wasta: Oh yes. As kids will, sure.

LMD: But there weren't regular tournaments or things of that sort that were organized or...

Wasta: Well, later on there were. Later on, we built our tennis courts out to what is now Elmcrest. And we had our own courts and we had our own Cedar Rapids Tennis Team, and we played different cities including Des Moines, Iowa City, and so on.

LMD: So the Elmcrest Country Club, that area was originally a tennis...?

Wasta: No, the Elmcrest Country Club originally was a public golf course, privately

owned by a man by the name of Nick Carter. And we rented some land from him for the tennis courts.

LMD: The neighborhood that you grew up in...the folks around you, were they primarily people who were immigrant background or can you remember some of your neighbors and who they were?

Wasta: Oh, yes...

LMD: What they did for a living?

Wasta: Well, a good many of the neighbors around us worked at the Rock Island Shops, which, at that time, was a big part of Cedar Rapids. The predominant background of neighbors near us were Bohemian--Czech. We also had quite a few Scotch and Irish near us.

LMD: Now, was this when you were down on Twelfth Avenue or even after you moved to Thirteenth?

Wasta: No, this was out on Thirteenth Street and Lake Avenue. Some of the neighbors that were Czech were the Kozas, and some of the others were the Spinass, and the Jerabeks, the Irish neighbors were the Peddycoarts and the Gunns. Those are two that I remember particularly well.

LMD: How did all of those different backgrounds get along together?

Wasta: Oh, I don't believe there was any problem that I could see. Sometimes when somebody would get mad at someone, they might use their background in a derogatory way, but basically, most of the time, I think they respected each other. And they all brought something good to the situation.

LMD: Right. Were families still speaking their native languages in their homes?

Wasta: No. We spoke our native language in our home until World War I, and when World War I came along, you just quit speaking German because it was very unpopular. And when you spoke German and some people heard you they might report you, and somebody would paint the front of your house yellow. So, German was not very popular. We did not continue to speak it. Whether my mother and dad spoke it privately, I don't know, but at the table, we didn't.

LMD: Do you still remember German? Are you still able to speak it, or have you lost it?

Wasta: I've lost most of it, but we've traveled a little bit more recently, and as a result, we were in Europe, and I found German to be of little help, so I started kind of listening and started to pick it up a little bit. But I can't speak it. One of my favorite phrases is "Ich kann besser essen [than] sprechen." Which means I can eat better than I can talk.

LMD: I think that would be appropriate for me, too. What did your father do when you were growing up?

Wasta: Well, Father, when he came, or before he came, he was a sales/serviceman for Singer sewing machine company in Vienna. In fact, that's how he happened to get to Vienna--because they needed one there and he went there from his original home area.

LMD: Those were the early days for Singer.

Wasta: Yes, they were. But Dad, as a hobby, was an artist. He liked to paint, and his brother was quite good as a sculptor, so both of them did this sort of a thing as a hobby. And the first couple years that Dad was in the United States trying to learn the language, he'd set up his easel in a saloon and paint pictures. For, first, of course, they painted pictures on the walls

of the saloon, and then they painted pictures of children and so on that people would bring to have their portraits painted.

LMD: Did he work with--primarily with chalk or...

Wasta: No, he worked mostly with oils. He did that for awhile, but as soon as he was able to speak, he got a job at the Rock Island Shops painting the interior of cars. Originally, railroad cars were made with wood interiors, but laws were passed that you couldn't use wood interiors because of the danger of fire in crashes. And so the cars were made of steel interiors. But his job was to grain the interior of the car to make it look like wood.

LMD: Look like wood.

Wasta: Yep. That's what he did, and of course, that's one of the things that originally affected his life and shortened his life because you were working in a very dusty environment. So, they practically sealed the cars when they'd start to paint in there, and the fumes, and so on, were a little heavy.

LMD: Yeah, I'll bet.

Wasta: They didn't have ventilation.

LMD: And in those days, the kind of paint they used was really toxic, too.

Wasta: Well, it was mostly oil and lead. Of course, lead poisoning was a real problem.

LMD: Yeah. So you feel that really had an effect on shortening his life.

Wasta: I don't know, but I assume so. He actually died in the second World War I epidemic--flu epidemic, which was in 1921.

LMD: So you were very young when your father died.

Wasta: I was 15 when he died.

LMD: Were there other children in the family?

Wasta: Just my brother who was four years older.

LMD: Okay. How did that affect you? Did you leave school? Did you go to work full-time or...

Wasta: No, I continued in school and finished high school. In other words, he died when I was in junior high. I did finish high school, but it did affect me that I didn't go to college.

LMD: Was there any sort of a pension or retirement plan or anything that came to your mother upon his death?

Wasta: No. No, he hadn't been there long enough, and although there was a union at the Rock Island Shops, there wasn't the pension set ups that later came. If there was, it was so small because he'd been in it such a short time.

LMD: So, you and your brother really had to take over a lot of responsibility.

Wasta: Right.

LMD: I'd like to go back again, just for a minute, and talk about your memories as a newspaper boy. You were telling us about where you sold your papers and everything. Describe a typical day for a newspaper boy. Where...what time would you pick up the papers? How much of your day would it take? How much would you make?

Wasta: Well, that depended on a lot of things. You started out, and maybe your

income per day was not over...oh, 25, 35 cents a day. But as you worked up and got better corners...I had a friend by the name of Darrell Horsefall, who later left here and went to Hollywood, but Darrell had the best corner in town, I thought, which was the old post office building. And I had that seven days--not seven days--I had that six days a week for the evening paper, and there, I made quite well. I don't remember exactly what, but I think probably around a dollar a day. But the big pay-off was on Sunday. We not only had the Sunday Gazette, I had the Des Moines Register, and the Chicago papers, and sometimes even some others. And we'd have piles of papers, oh, two feet high, and twenty feet long on the side of the Post Office. And you got there at, say, 5:30 in the morning, put your papers in place--this was in the summer time, of course, there was light. And you'd sell them until they were gone. Most of the time, you hoped you'd be through by one o'clock. But, quite often, you were there until two or three o'clock. And there you made as much as seven or eight dollars a Sunday.

LMD: How much did papers sell for in those days?

Wasta: Oh, I'm not sure that my memory is that good, but my recollection is that the Gazette was either two or three cents a copy, and...

LMD: That's a lot of papers then, isn't it?

Wasta: And we made a penny a copy originally.

LMD: So, you bought the papers from the Gazette and then resold them.

Wasta: Right, and you were responsible for the papers you bought. You couldn't return them. So, you were in business for yourself, and you worked at it.

LMD: Why was the downtown such a good place on Sunday? Nowadays, there's nobody

downtown on Sunday.

Wasta: Well, it wasn't that good a place for business on Sunday, because all the businesses were closed. But, people went to church and a lot of people would go through town from the west side to the east side or vice versa to their churches, and the traffic largely was church people and also a lot of it was businessmen that came down to check on things on Sunday and they'd pick up the paper.

LMD: It was a much smaller geographical area in those days--where people lived versus where they worked and came to church.

Wasta: Yes. Basically when I was selling papers, the downtown was between the river and Fourth Street and between First Avenue--possibly over to A Avenue--and down to Third Avenue--at the most to Fourth Avenue. In other words the extension has occurred since.

LMD: Right. On school days, what hours would you sell newspapers?

Wasta: Well, on school days, it was a different situation. We would only sell the evening paper. And that's when we sometimes had routes. Because you could make as much or more on a route. I can remember when the Gazette was on the corner of First Avenue and First Street where the second Post Office--where the Federal Building is now. And, at that time, I had a route that started at the old ORC Building, which was catty-corner across the street from the Gazette, which would be the northeast corner. And then I sold papers in buildings and so on and at different places--delivering them--up to Tenth Street and then back down to A Avenue.

LMD: Did you collect each time you handed a paper over or...

Wasta: In most cases, yes. You had a few customers that you'd leave papers for and they'd pay you once a week.

LMD: But it was certainly not developed to the extent that it is nowadays...

Wasta: Well, no. The Gazette had regular home routes that people carried. But these were routes that we developed ourselves. The home routes, the Gazette billed them by the six-month period or the year period. No, they handled that themselves.

LMD: Okay. Even in those days.

Wasta: Oh yes. Or at least that's my memory. Now somebody might come up with a different idea, but that's the way I recall it.

LMD: We've interviewed several people who had paper routes, and they have very similar memories. How often did you have "extras" or do you have a memory...

Wasta: Well, or course, during the World War I, we had lots of "extras" and during World War II there were lots of "extras" because there wasn't the radio coverage and, of course, no TV. And, yes, I can well remember selling papers in World War II--let's see, I'm wrong on that--it was World War I that I was selling papers. Because, basically, what the deal was--they had a list of people they would call when there was an "extra." And they'd call us quick enough so that the papers wouldn't be off the press by the time we got down there.

LMD: So, when you said, "Hot off the press" they were literally!

Wasta: They were. And I can remember selling a paper for as much as a dollar a copy. Not that we charged that, but we were given that. When the World War I ended, that of course was...

LMD: The Armistice.

Wasta: The Armistice. Yes.

LMD: What are your memories of that day? That seems to have been a very big day in Cedar Rapids.

Wasta: Well, I don't remember for sure all the details, but I know we had the "extra" really early in the morning, and then we went to school later but school wasn't held.

LMD: Didn't really go on, huh?

Wasta: No, and so basically, we had pretty much the day off. But, there was a lot of people downtown in the streets and so on. It was, of course, a very joyous occasion. There were a lot of people from Cedar Rapids who were in the war. I just happened to run on to something the other day-- Grant Wood was in the war.

LMD: I didn't realize that.

Wasta: Yeah, he was in it, and several of my friends were in the war. Not friends that I knew then, but knew later, and I've seen crayon sketches by Grant Wood of some of these friends of mine. One of them was Orie Lawrence, who, later, was an attorney here. There were quite a number of them that had sketches made by Grant Wood. Whether he made them free for them or whether he did it at a small charge, I don't know.

LMD: But he was actually over in Europe?

Wasta: Oh, yes. He was in Europe.

LMD: Did you know Grant Wood?

Wasta: Not really. I knew of him and I met him, but no, I didn't know him well.

LMD: He would not have gone to Polk either I guess. He would have been probably older than you.

Wasta: No.

LMD: No, he wouldn't have been.

Wasta: No, I don't remember the details. Yes, he would have been a little bit older. But, basically, I went to--Jackson, I think he went to Jackson.

LMD: Yes.

Wasta: No, I didn't know him at that age at all. I knew him later when he lived at Turner Alley.

LMD: Did you ever talk to him about your father's involvement with painting or was that...?

Wasta: I don't believe I ever did. As kids, you know, you're not sometimes proud of what your folks do. In fact, you're rather reticent to talk about it.

LMD: It's only when you get old enough to appreciate it. Usually too late then!

Wasta: What they went through to get you where you are.

LMD: Right. Since we were talking about schools...What are your memories of Polk? What was a typical school day like at Polk when you were going to school there?

Wasta: Well, I think we started school about 9 o'clock, and school lasted until about 4 o'clock. And we had a recess in the morning, and we had an hour for

lunch time.

LMD: Did you go home for lunch generally?

Wasta: Yes. There was no lunches served in the schools, of course, then. No, we went home for school. I even went home from school when I was in Washington High, and of course, in Washington High, we were very crowded. We had a very large enrollment for the size of the rooms in the building. So, as a result, we had what they called shifts. And some of them went to school as early as 7 o'clock in the morning. And they were through by noon, and others went to school, at, say, 9 o'clock, and they were there until 3:30. So, it was a case of doubling up.

LMD: So, Cedar Rapids was really a growing community in those days.

Wasta: Yes. Very much. I don't remember how large Cedar Rapids was when we came, and I've never really looked it up, so I can't be sure of it, but I don't think Cedar Rapids was 20,000 when we came.

LMD: That sounds about right.

Wasta: And as recently as 1935, Cedar Rapids was less than half of what it is now.

LMD: Yeah, it was really the '40s and '50s when it made its great growth. What are your memories of extracurricular activities? Did the school provide a lot in the way of sports activities and things of that sort when you were growing up?

Wasta: Well, I'm not sure that the schools provided too much more than the usual sports: basketball, football, track, and so on--but most of us had jobs, and we didn't have too much time for extra things. Later on, the churches started

having basketball programs.

LMD: Did the school have a gymnasium?

Wasta: Washington High had a small gym, but basically they played their competitive games--their real games--they practiced in the small gym, but they played their real games at the "Y" and even at Coe. But, basically, we called the gym at Washington High the "Cracker Box." It had low ceilings, you couldn't arch your shots, and, of course, Washington High had some very outstanding teams. A couple before I came to Washington--Novak was the head coach there--and he coached all sports, but the 1923, '24, and '25 years were their banner years in football and track. Their basketball teams were very good a year or two before that.

LMD: I've heard a lot of people mention those years as being very memorable and that they were very good. What memories do you have--now I'm shifting to about 1919--the Douglas Starch Works explosion?

Wasta: Well, I was downtown when the Douglas Starch Works exploded, and we, of course, could see the smoke and so on.

LMD: Were you delivering papers--or selling papers at that time?

Wasta: I was selling papers at that time. And, I was over there before some of the fire trucks got there. Some of them were there, but, of course, all of them came. And we were on the west side of the Eighth Avenue Bridge, which is right there by the Douglas Starch Work, and, after they got organized, they started moving the crowd back, and fortunately, because there were some subsequent explosions--small ones. It was quite a tragedy. I don't remember the exact time of the explosion, but, if I were to guess, I would say, around 4 o'clock.

LMD: Late in the afternoon.

Wasta: Yeah.

LMD: Did you know any of the people or families who were affected by that explosion?

Wasta: Well, not really. The Douglas's lived at Bruce more, and I had a very good friend who lived across the street from them that knew them, and as a result, I did spend some time over at Douglas's, especially on their tennis court. So, yes I knew them, and I knew of them, but I didn't know them personally.

LMD: Then none of the families in your neighborhood worked at the Starch Works, I presume.

Wasta: No, I think the majority of the families in our neighborhood worked basically at the Rock Island Shops, at Quaker Oats, and National Oats. Those were the surrounding businesses that they worked at.

LMD: Do you know of any changes that took place in Cedar Rapids as a result of that explosion?

Wasta: Well, not really. But, basically, I'm sure the methods of getting rid of dust from milling was changed greatly. There had been other explosions--small ones, at Quaker Oats. One of our neighbors was injured in one of those. But, most of those were confined to an area. But dust explosions were a problem that they had occasionally.

LMD: So that, yeah, you're right, I'm sure they did have to change that. Okay, let's move on a bit to the years that you were a young man and then you married in 1928, so I guess I'm really hitting on the '20s here. How did the prohibition law affect you or your memories of that period. Was it--

in the East you hear about all the speakeasies, etc. Was it a time when a lot of people were breaking the law in Cedar Rapids?

Wasta: Well, of course, the foreign born people, which there were many of in Cedar Rapids, continued to make for themselves and their own use, beer and wine. I don't believe any of them made whiskey, but I know my dad used to make his own beer. He had probably three or four different kinds of malts. (interruption)

LMD: Okay, your dad actually brewed his own beer then.

Wasta: Oh yes, and lots of the neighbors did. He had several kinds of hops and malts and did a fairly good job of it. I probably drank more beer before I was 15 than I have, by far, since. But we had very small amounts, and a glass of beer would last Dad for a whole meal. I never saw him intoxicated in my life, but I can't say that about some other people. There was intoxication in our neighborhood, especially one family right next door to us. They went so far as to buy "Canned Heat" which was an alcoholic substance made of wood alcohol, and they drained that through a sponge or drain it through a chamois to take out the impurities and then they'd drink it. That was the only family that really was a problem. The father was dead, and there were two boys, and they had quite a time with life. The bottle was too much.

LMD: Too much for them. Were there breweries in Cedar Rapids that were shut down during prohibition?

Wasta: Yes. There was a brewery on the west side, southwest corner of Cedar Lake. See, Cedar Lake, at one time, was quite a pretty spot. It had lots of springs in it.

LMD: Is that what we call "the slough" now?

Wasta: That's what you call "the Slough ". The north end of it, when I was in the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Junior Chamber of Commerce wanted to convert into a park and make a beach there, and it would've been the prettiest beach you could've had in Iowa. But, industry was too entrenched in that area, and we didn't have the means to move them, and as a result, it just never became. That's when the Junior Chamber first built the first pool out at Ellis Park.

LMD: That's a real important topic, and one that I think this would be just as good a time as any to get on to. When did you join the Junior Chamber of Commerce?

Wasta: Well, I belonged to the Senior Chamber of Commerce, because Clark Beems wanted me to, by the time I was 21, and I recall that I joined the Junior Chamber of Commerce about four years later.

LMD: Explain, as we were talking the other day, why the Junior Chamber of Commerce came about.

Wasta: Well, there was a man by the name of Harold Rowe, who was in the Chamber of Commerce that was unhappy with the fact that the Chamber of Commerce was not accomplishing much. Things weren't going too well in Cedar Rapids at that time, and he felt that we needed something to spark it. And there was another fellow by the name of Bob Bickle, who was an insurance man, a good friend of mine. He and Harold were the instigators, along with several other people, in starting the Junior Chamber of Commerce. And the Junior Chamber of Commerce did accomplish its goal. The Senior Chamber of Commerce got active. We were not a Junior Chamber at that time, we were called the Young Men's Bureau of the Chamber of Commerce. And we didn't become a separate unit until about seven, eight, ten, years later.

LMD: Your involvement as...or going out first that you said that you helped to get pools built...how did you get involved in that? Had the Chamber of Commerce done anything of that sort before, or was this a brand new idea?

Wasta: Well, the Junior Chamber of Commerce movement was new in the United States then, and one of the things they wanted to do was be a value to the city. And, we had no swimming pools in Cedar Rapids. My recollection is that Marion had one in Thomas Park where the pool still is, and now is being...

LMD: Re-done. That's right.

Wasta: Well, they're moving it too though, because that was a poor place because it flooded every spring. But, basically Al Kyes, who was president of the Junior Chamber when the drive started to build a pool at Ellis Park, he was the spark plug back of it. He had been the swimmer at the University of Iowa--quite outstanding--and was sold on swimming as a sport. That's how we happened to get into it. It so happens that the pool was completed in 1941, when I was president of the Junior Chamber.

LMD: Now was that Ellis?

Wasta: That was Ellis. That's the only one that I know of that actually, the Chamber of Commerce built--the Junior Chamber. Basically, the others were built by the City of Cedar Rapids and the Recreation Department, of which Nevin Nichols was quite an outstanding leader.

LMD: What else can you share with us about the Junior Chamber. Were there other contributions that they made during that period?

Wasta: Oh, yes. They contributed to many things. They had fund-raising events of various kinds. They had Fourth of July celebrations. They had what was

called "Demolition Derbies" and a lot of different things. The Junior Chamber was a very active group. I think, at the height of our membership, we were over 750 members, and it's gone up and down, and of course, now it's a very stable organization and, of course, at that time, it was strictly a men's group, now it's also women. In fact, they're going to have their first woman president this next year.

LMD: Oh really, I didn't know that. I'm going to stop this and turn the tape over. We're almost to the end of this side.

END OF SIDE ONE

LMD: During the twenties and the thirties when you were really involved in getting into the business environment here, what was your perception of the people who actually made important decisions about Cedar Rapids? Was the city government a real power or was it primarily a group of businessmen...?

Wasta: I think we've been most fortunate that we've had a good city government. We've had a clean city government. I don't believe we've ever had any amount of graft. I think most of the people that have been in the city government have been outstanding. We've had one or two unusual people, let us say, but basically, there were enough people on the council when we had an unusual mayor, where the council could pretty well control things. So, I don't think we've ever suffered. Of course, the thing that built this city was the individual businessmen. The Douglas's, the Stewarts, and the Reeds that built the cereal mills, and the people that built the road machinery places-- Howard Hall, Dave Lady, and Ronck, and the others that were in Linkbelt Speeder. They were the ones that really built the city. And, of course, later, a man like Arthur Collins doesn't come along very often. Arthur was

in school--I was in school with him at Washington--just a bit. He was about three years behind me. But he was a real brain and he did a terrific job for the radio. He was able to talk to Admiral Byrd at the South Pole and talk to the Navy at the North Pole at the same time better than they could in Washington or anywhere with their big sets. So they came out here to see what this young fellow had, and that's when he got started.

LMD: Did you know him in later years?

Wasta: Yes. Not real well. His wife's brother, at one time, did artwork for me at Pioneer Litho. So, yes, I knew him and over the years, they've been a good customer of our's.

LMD: Tell me, then, since you mentioned Pioneer Litho...tell me about that business, and you went into business for yourself in 1936, which was kind of an unusual time to get started, I guess, or at least a hard time to get started.

Wasta: Well, it seemed like it, but actually it was a good time to get started because a lot of people felt that things were bad, and if you get enough people thinking things are bad, they don't work. And if you're silly enough to work, you do all right.

LMD: You had lot's of business!

Wasta: Right, and basically although business wasn't real booming at that time, we did all right and made a little money from the first day we started.

LMD: Tell me, how big was the business? How many people did you employ for instance?

Wasta: Well, to start with, it was only one person and myself. I had a secretary and bookkeeper who answered the phone and did the office work and I went out and sold. And that was pretty much the situation for a few years until we got to the point that we could afford to hire someone and take the chance of their making it eventually. We really didn't expand much until after World War II when the people started coming home from the service.

LMD: What sorts of products, services did you offer?

Wasta: Well, our biggest item of sale to start with was printing--lithographing. Printing and lithographing are the same. They're both a process of printing. But, basically, at one time, we had probably 90 percent of all the letterheads that were in Cedar Rapids because we lithographed them. And Metropolitan Supply Company, even after I went in business for myself, did a lot of the lithographing for me because they had, at that time, the only lithograph press in Cedar Rapids. They had had a stone press when I worked for them directly and then later had replaced it with an offset press. And lithographing, of course, has become very popular, and today, the newspapers are done the same way.

LMD: Did you eventually buy your own press?

Wasta: No. We never actually got into the production. No, all we did was sell it.

LMD: Provide the service.

Wasta: I sold for Metropolitan for probably 15 years after I went in business for myself. But I, also, had the privilege of selling for other companies. And several printers around town did work for me. What we tried to do was get people to specialize on certain types of work so that the quality was good,

and also, on certain kinds of work so that the price was right. Anybody that tries to do all kinds of printing has a hard time doing them all good or reasonable.

LMD: There's so much more equipment and expertise.

Wasta: That's right. We represented printing companies in several spots in the state of Iowa and Illinois--Chicago and different places--and we still do that to some extent.

LMD: At one time, did Cedar Rapids have a lot more printing companies than it does now? I talked with one person who remembered the Lawrence Press and a couple of others.

Wasta: No. Considering the size of the town, they probably had more for the size of the town. No. But I think today they have as many printing firms as they've ever had. But they're different ones--some companies like Lawrence Press, which was the largest, is out of business. And others are specializing, such as Stamats, in certain things. The real outstanding printers are specializing. And, of course, this quick print--which is offset--that's changed things a lot.

LMD: ...Has really changed...changed the whole business. Okay, I'd like to shift a bit and ask you about some of your memories of how transportation has changed in Cedar Rapids. I'm sure when you came here originally, it was very different--even than when--the period when you married and started a family.

Wasta: Well basically, when I started out traveling for Metropolitan in 1926, there were practically no paved roads in Iowa. And during the time that I traveled--'25 and '27--I probably traveled on more detours than main roads because they were building the cement roads in Iowa. The thing, of course, that was the

means of transportation then, was railroads. And, of course, Cedar Rapids had many railroads. I don't know how many they had, but it was around six that came in and out of Cedar Rapids. And you could go almost any place. Then we also had the Interurban from here to Iowa City, and another Interurban line from here to Waterloo and Cedar Falls. So, the rail service, whether it was railroads or interurban, was the main means of transportation. And, of course, in the city, streetcars were the means of transportation.

LMD: So there were streetcars that went downtown and around town...

Wasta: Right, and up to Marion.

LMD: ...And the interurbans went between the...

Wasta: Towns, yeah.

LMD: You said you went on a lot of detours. Why didn't you use the railroads rather than...

Wasta: Well, you couldn't make enough calls. I only had one call to make in a town when I traveled for the Metropolitan School Supply Company because the school system was one call and as a result, I could make five calls a day possibly by car, but with a railroad, sometimes you couldn't make two.

LMD: What kind of car did you have in those days?

Wasta: Well, I tried to buy the highest wheel car that I could. I had a Ford, which had quite high clearance off the ground, but the best car I had was a Dodge, because it had more clearance than the Ford had.

LMD: To get over the ruts.

I could go that far--or to Davenport--I could go that far on paving and I'd have less mileage, and, of course, at that time also, by the second year that I was out traveling, they had built some roads between here and Clinton that was paved.

LMD: I'm sure you remember the seedling mile then that was...

Wasta: Yes, that was between Cedar Rapids and Mount Vernon if I remember right. And then I think there was also a seedling mile in eastern Iowa between Clinton and the DeWitt area.

LMD: How were those roads financed? Did the state pay for them? Or was it cities or do you remember?

Wasta: I think they were state paid for. Yes, I think so. Of course, in those days, we had no gas tax that I can recall.

LMD: So it had to have been--come out of property tax or some other form of income tax.

Wasta: I think it was state tax. Yeah, state tax.

LMD: Were there adequate service stations, gas stations for you along the way or did you carry some with you?

Wasta: No, there were adequate stations. You just watched it. And you wouldn't go anywhere without having close to a full tank to start out with, and each evening you'd check your gas and if you were anywhere near low, you'd fill up. No, I don't remember any real problem with lack of gasoline stations. They came just as fast as the automobile.

LMD: Right. What are your memories of Hunter Airport?

Wasta: Oh, Hunter Airport, of course, was quite a thing in its day, because it was the only airport we had here. The larger airport, or the first one that brought regular airport service was at Iowa City. But Hunter Airport was an outstanding place, and especially during the war years. They were doing training down there for pilots and so on. The barnstorming, or the local ride planes used to come into Hunter and we used to fly out of there. I can remember a Ford tri-motor came in there years ago that I took one of my first flights on.

LMD: So, was it a paved strip or was it just a level area that they came in on?

Wasta: I think it was paved, but I don't think the original was cement. I think it was asphalt. You see, there was quite a controversy in Iowa whether paving was the way to go--cement paving--or whether asphalt paving. In fact, there was also another group that didn't want either one; they wanted gravel. They thought gravel was the best. So, the thing evolved and paving finally became the only way to go because of the frost damage. You can use asphalt in the South without pavement under it, but you can't up here.

LMD: So that's probably why the seedling mile had such an effect, because it showed how it held up. Okay, I know we're running short on time, but I wanted to shift to just one last area...We had talked about the Depression in terms of your own business and but I wanted to ask you some more about that...

Wasta: Well, the Depression basically was like a lot of things. If you had a job, the Depression wasn't bad. But there were a lot of people out of work. I was fortunate, I had a job all during the Depression, and although my salary was cut by one-third when I worked at Metropolitan Supply Company, the two-thirds that I had left would still buy the groceries for the family, and wasn't any real problem.

LMD: Was your family affected by the bank holiday--the bank closings in 1933?

Wasta: Yes and no. I happened to have started an account at the Merchant's National Bank. My father made me go down and start one when I was about eight years old. And, the Merchant's Bank was only closed as long as the government ordered them to be closed and then it opened up and it was perfectly all right. Other people who had their account in other banks in town were affected very badly. I know a friend of mine who was an employee of one of the banks that no longer exists, and he not only lost what he had in the bank, but he was assessed an equal amount that he had to pay. In other words, if you had \$10,000 worth of stock in a bank that failed, you were assessed \$10,000.

LMD: Because you were part owner, you had to pay off the...

Wasta: And you not only lost the \$10,000 you had in, but if you owned property or anything, you had to pay another ten. So it was quite a time at that time.

LMD: How many banks....I don't know if you have that vivid of a memory, but how many banks closed that didn't open up again?

Wasta: Oh, probably a half a dozen. The one that I'm referring to was Cornbelt Savings. That closed.

LMD: Another was a Kenwood Bank that closed.

Wasta: There was a Kenwood Bank, there was a...

LMD: Did the Cedar Rapids National Bank...?

Wasta: Well, the Cedar Rapids National also closed. Let's see, there was another one. What we call the white building, or the white bank, where Moramerica

is. That bank also closed. And. later on, Dinwitty's bank--I can't remember the name of that--that was on the corner of Third Avenue and Third Street, that closed.

LMD: So there were a number of people that were very seriously affected.

Wasta: Oh yes. Some of the others like the United States Bank, they were able to open up again. But there were a number of them that lost heavily.

LMD: Do you have memories of how people...how charity worked in those days? Certainly there was no government unemployment or welfare system as it is in place now. Do you have memories of local charity efforts?

Wasta: Well, the real early charity in Cedar Rapids that I remember was neighbor helping neighbor. In other words, if someone died, we'll say, and that person was the one that had the job and helped the family, the neighbors usually were always around and did some things. They, of course, couldn't replace the person that was the bread winner but they certainly helped. And, of course, the Salvation Army was available part of that time, and way back, there was the Sunshine Mission. That was the place where different things were exchanged. They used to take in furniture and supply it to people that had to have it as a result of a fire or something. Everybody was poor. I shouldn't say everybody was poor, but by comparison, everybody was poor. There were not the number of well-to-do people then that there are now. I don't know what the percentage was then, but the percentage now of well-to-do people would be much greater. Welfare has done a lot for a lot of people, but it's also done a lot to a lot of people. To be on your own and accomplish things is to me a joy. And it was to all of our neighbors. They didn't have anything, but what they had, they earned.

LMD: That's right. It was a very personal kind of giving in those days wasn't it?

Wasta: Right. ...and the churches helped. I know that we had a little church near us called Daniels Park Presbyterian Church. If somebody had some difficulty, the church would help out.

LMD: Were you a member of St. Paul's in those days?

Wasta: I joined St. Pauls--oh, I don't know exactly when, let's see, I'm 79--and I joined when I was about 12 or 13.

LMD: So, I would imagine that they were involved in some charity, of course, too, because of the size of that church.

Wasta: Oh, yes. But I don't recall that because I wasn't in that end of it. I was in the athletic part of it. That's where some of the athletic program came from.

LMD: That's right. They had a gymnasium in that place...

Wasta: They had a gymnasium and they had baseball teams, they had volleyball teams...

LMD: They were very youth oriented.

Wasta: Yes. There was a church league in Cedar Rapids that a lot of the churches belonged to--both in basketball and baseball.

LMD: I'm sure they filled a real need in the community at that time.

Wasta: Oh, yes. They did a lot of things then that the YMCA is doing now, and that the city of Cedar Rapids is doing through their playgrounds. Those things have all evolved.

LMD: But somebody had to start them. Are there any areas, Mr. Wasta, that I have missed that you particularly wanted to comment on? I know that we haven't touched on everything, but that's never possible. I just want to give you an opportunity to make any comments on...

Wasta: Well, my dad liked the theater and I can remember going to the Majestic with him. Mother didn't particularly care for it.

LMD: That was vaudeville days.

Wasta: That was vaudeville days. And so, I went to many things with him. I remember hearing John Phillips Sousa when he was here. You asked the other day about the Cherry Sisters; yes, we've seen them, but they were a...oh, I don't know what to call them--you might almost call them a monstrosity.

LMD: And they were objects of ridicule weren't they?

Wasta: Right. And that wasn't too much fun very often. But the old Majestic was a good vaudeville house, and Greene's Opera House--I went there with my dad, yes. Because Dad liked to go--he had gone to the opera house in Vienna, and he liked that sort of thing and Mother, her health wasn't good, so I ended up going with him.

LMD: So you were his companion.

Wasta: Yes.

LMD: Were there particular performances at the Greene's that really stood out in your mind?

Wasta: I can't remember them. If I had a...material that showed what they were, I could remember the ones we went to.

LMD: The one that I've heard people speak of is the performance of Ben Hur--
Apparently made a great impression on some...

Wasta: Yes. I saw Ben Hur with Dad and I can't remember how long ago that was, and
I don't remember how it was done because I was quite small then. But, yes,
I saw that. And there were others--oh, what was the negro show?

LMD: Minstrel shows?

Wasta: No...Yes, we saw minstrel shows, but the main thing I was thinking about was...
I remember seeing Uncle Tom's Cabin. And, of course, to me, the Negro problem
was never a question. To me, it was a question of what people were. We had
Negroes selling papers when I was a kid. We didn't have many, but if they
were nice guys we liked them, if they weren't nice guys, we didn't like them.

LMD: The ethic was just what your character was...

Wasta: Right. That's the point. And this was true with almost everybody. I
mentioned at the start of the session here that we didn't particularly have
trouble with the Irish or the Scotch or the Jews...

LMD: Or the Czechs or the other...

Wasta: No. We had no problem with them because they were people and those things
seemed to build up later.

LMD: I think that's a true midwestern characteristic, too. Much more than in the
East or the South. One last question...this is a tough one. How does Cedar
Rapids compare to you today as a community to the community you grew up in.
And I'm thinking primarily in terms of--what do you think has changed for the
better or even for the worst in the community?

Wasta: Well, I think Cedar Rapids has changed for the better. I think its a better community than it used to be. There's more entertainment here--you don't have to go away for good entertainment. We, of course, have some things that I don't particularly care for but other people do. I think Cedar Rapids is a good town. It has its problems and it will have its problems as long as we have our agricultural problems in Iowa. That's the biggest problem we have and how that's going to be solved I don't know. But I do think that Cedar Rapids is as good a city in the state of Iowa as there is. I've always been very happy here and I've always felt that there's lots of opportunity for businesses here. Every once in awhile somebody starts a new business and does very well. But we have to keep our work ethic. We can't expect the government to do for us. You've got to do for yourself because the government is nothing more than the people, and you're just taking out of one pocket and putting in the other. And how far can you go with that? There's an end to it.

LMD: Obviously we're getting close to the end.

Wasta: Absolutely. And I'm very sold on the work ethic of Cedar Rapids as a whole.

LMD: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Wasta. I really appreciate the time you've given us.

Wasta: Well, I hope I've done a little good here.

LMD: Oh, I think you've done a great deal of good.

END OF SIDE TWO/END OF INTERVIEW

