



JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH: FRANK ZEMAN

CONDUCTED BY: SANDY MILLER

DATE: MAY 9, 1985

PLACE: CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA

PUBLIC LIBRARY
CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA

10-09

2005.10.88

Frank Zeman was born January 11, 1901 in Franklin County in Iowa. His parents were immigrants from Czechoslovakia, arriving in this country about 1870. Mr. Zeman has lived in the Cedar Rapids area from 1909 to the present. He married his wife, Thelma, in 1930. He began working for the Swift Co. and upon his marriage, owned an independent grocery business for ten years.

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

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- 1--When were you born? Where?
- 2--How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
- 1--What are your parents' names?
 - Where did you go to school?
- 6--Are you married or single?
- 27--Did you raise a family? How big?
- 6--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)
 - 31--Horses and First Automobiles
 - Mud roads and the seedling mile
 - Hunter Airport and the first planes
 - Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)
 - 31--Gas Stations
- 2. Communications
 - Newspapers
 - Radios
 - Advertising
 - Telephones

B. People in the Community

- 1. Amusements/Recreation
 - 29,30--Motion Pictures
 - Cedar Rapids Parks
 - Dances
 - Carnival Week
 - Chautauqua
 - Community Theater
 - Little Gallery
 - Symphony Orchestra
 - Circus
 - Greene's Opera House
 - Amusement Parks (Alamo)
 - Camps
 - Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)
 - 29--Baseball
- 2. Famous Characters
 - Cherry Sisters
 - 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
- Saloons/Taverns
- 2,3--Farm Life

4. Family Life

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

5. Ethnic/Minority Life

- 21,27,30--Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
- Indians
- Segregation of Blacks
- Jobs Available

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community

1. Education--3,4

- 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
 - 4,5--Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.) Swift
 - Local Brewing Companies
 - Retail Businesses /Department Stores
 - Professions
 - Banking and Finance
 - Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
 - 6-19,22-27--Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses) Grocery Business: customers prices/packaging delivery Depression years
 - Farmers Market
 - Mills on Cedar River
 - Buildings Erected
 - Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
 - Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)
 - 20--Fruit Store 24--Wholesale 28--Beverage Vending
 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
 - 32--Prohibition
 - 16,18--Great Depression
 - 3-4--U.S. Army

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The following interview is with Frank Zeman. It's done by Sandy Miller on May 9, 1985 at 631 32nd Street in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

SM: Mr. Zeman, can you tell me where you were born?

Zeman: I was born in Franklin County, Iowa.

SM: When were you born? What's your birthday?

Zeman: January 11, 1901.

SM: So, how old are you now?

Zeman: I am now 84.

SM: What were your parents' names?

Zeman: Parents--Bohsoloff Zeman and Anna.

SM: What kind of nationality is your father's name?

Zeman: That's Bohemie, right from Czechoslovakia.

SM: Was it?

Zeman: Ya. Both of them.

SM: Did they come here from Czechoslovakia?

Zeman: They came right here from Czechoslovakia. They came to Iowa in about 1870, after the Civil War--quite a while after the Civil War.

SM: Were they married when they came over?

Zeman: No. They were married here.

SM: Here?

Zeman: Right. In Franklin County at Ackley--Ackley, Iowa; that's where they were married.

SM: Well, when did you come to the Cedar Rapids area?

Zeman: About 1909.

SM: So, you were about five years old.

Zeman: About eight or nine--something like that. Around eight years old.

SM: For what reason did you come to Cedar Rapids?

Zeman: Oh, my folks thought that being out there in the country, which we were on the farm, and about a couple miles from Geneva, which is a little town. There was no school. The only thing was a country school there to go to. My folks thought that there wasn't much of a chance for young people there. They sold the farm and moved down here, again on a farm south of Cedar Rapids.

SM: How far south?

Zeman: Oh, about probably a couple of miles out of Cedar Rapids. Right.

SM: How long did you live there?

Zeman: I think about seven years. Then my dad traded that for a farm north of Cedar Rapids, about seven miles out on Highway 150. We moved out there and then that's where we stayed until--in fact,

my brother Joe took the farm over after my folks passed away there. He was there, and he still has half of the farm just west of the highway and half that's east of the highway, but the buildings, he's sold that since.

SM: So, how long did you live on that farm?

Zeman: Not too long, because I got off there pretty fast. I didn't like farming.

SM: You didn't?

Zeman: No, I did not like farming. I said, "I will not be a farmer." So, I took off from there, oh, probably when I was, what, seventeen or eighteen, something like that. In fact, I never got through high school. I got through one year of high school and that was it. So, then I took off and, not too long after that, I got tired of tramping around the country and then I joined the Army for a while. I was there for three years in the regular Army. Then I did decide that that was the place--that it was time to go to school.

SM: I see.

Zeman: So I went to school--I went to school at Ft. Lewis in Washington. I went to school there, was there about a year and then they shipped a bunch of us over to Honolulu. I went to school there--went to the non-commissioned officers' school in Ft. DeRussey for, I think, about a year and a half. That's just about finished my term out and I came back and I said, "Well, wait a minute, Frank, you're not going--this is not going to do you any good. The education

that you got in the Army, what were you doing--you were studying equipment and dismanteling and repairing and everything else in equipment. Then later on you were in the non-commissioned officers' training school for a year and half and what did you do there? It's not going to do you any good." So, then I looked around and I thought--you can't go to college. There's no way you can go to college. You don't have your high school, so I checked at the penmanship school that was here--what was the name of it? So you know the man who wrote the pen...?

SM: Is it still in existence now?

Zeman: Ya.

SM: I think I know what you mean.

Zeman: You know what I mean.

SM: I can't think of the name of it now.

Zeman: A secretarial school they called it, I think. I went there for two years, then I went to work for Swift. That was the only thing lucky, I guess, about that was, I wasn't married because I could go anywhere they sent me, different places, and I traveled for Swift for, I must have traveled for them for about five or six years.

SM: What kind of work did you do for Swift?

Zeman: I was with the branch house account department. I checked these branches and they had 420 of them, so there were plenty of places to check. I'd never stayed too long in any one place. You keep

moving on.

SM: You've done a lot of traveling then.

Zeman: Well, that's what I say and as long as I was single, it was o.k. I think I would have been probably with them until I retired if it hadn't been for one thing--my health started to go bad, working inside, see. Sitting at a desk all day, that'll kill you. I went down from--I always weigh, in fact a lady yesterday asked me, "What do you weigh?" I said, "About 170, 175. I've stayed there all the time." At that time, believe it or not, I dropped down to 130 pounds. I was skin and bones. I could feel myself and I said one day, I was at Billings, Montana, and they were having problems up there. There was man there by the name of Neff there, he was managing that plant. I said to Mr. Neff, I came down in the evening there to do some work there, to check over some things and he said to me, "Frank, we've got to straighten some of these problems out." I said, "You used the wrong adjective. We're. You are because I says, I'm single, and about two weeks from now when that train that whistles by here, that Great Northern train, I'll be riding that thing. I'm going to get out of here."

SM: So, how old were you then?

Zeman: Oh, I must have been about thirty.

SM: So then did you leave in about two weeks?

Zeman: In two weeks, I left the company, not I didn't leave just there. That's where I quit--right there. I told him, "You notify whoever

you want." I said, "Tell the Chicago office that I'm quitting." He said, "You wouldn't do that, would you?" I said, "I wouldn't, I would." (laughter) I said, "You're married. Your job is here but, I says, I'm single and I can get another job all right."

SM: So, did you get another job in that same area?

Zeman: No. I quit and I came back here and that's when I started the grocery business. I met Thelma there in Billings. She was teaching there. We corresponded for a little while and then she came here and we got married.

SM: Oh, I see. So, that must have been about 1930?

Zeman: I think 1930, either '29 or '30. I think it was 1930. Right.

SM: You came back here and you got married here?

Zeman: No, I met her up in Minneapolis and we got married. Just like that.

SM: Just like that! And you stayed together for several years.

Zemna: The grocery business, I think right then, was starting to change. In other words, there was--we had in this town probably about twenty-three or twenty-four or twenty-five small milk routes, people who would run small milk routes. My brother was one of them; George, he ran a Cedar Valley, I think he called it, and I tried to look for the picture to show you the picture of his wagon--milk wagon with the two horses on it. I helped him. Let's see, how old was I? I don't know, but I must have been thirteen,

fourteen, fifteen, somewhere in that category when he had that. I couldn't find the picture. We've got so many pictures that I just gave up. All the milk was delivered straight to the house.

SM: Now, this was in the 1930's?

Zeman: No, this was before.

SM: Before that, o.k.

Zeman: This is bringing it up to the time that I started the grocery business. The bread--there were seventeen little bakeries around town that made--there's one left now, Sycora's. He's the only one left, down on Sixteenth Avenue. But there were, I think, seventeen of those little bakeries and then the big bakeries were just starting to come in fast because the sliced bread was coming in. This was in when we went in. Eggs, we got thirty dozen in a case from Vavra Brothers and all these farmers that bring their eggs in to Vavra Brothers store on Sixteenth Avenue. Then the smaller stores, like myself and different ones, would drive down there and pick up eggs. They didn't charge much. What did they get? Two or three cents a dozen for handling them. They'd handle all the eggs from the farmers. The farmer didn't have to drive around and says, "Frank, do you want some eggs?" "No, I don't want any today. Go to the next store." He'd dump them all off at one place. The ice cream was handled in a--with ice on it.

SM: To keep it cold?

Zeman: To keep it cold--ice and salt. The one we had was drilled out the side to run the water off after it got so much ice melted

The water would get in there. It would run off. We drilled a hole through the side of the building. (laughter)

SM: The thing that you used for refrigeration, what's that, inside?

Zeman: It was inside the store and the water would run off. O.K., but the only ice cream that you could buy that I knew of anywhere in our area after it got cold, after about the first of October, was at Ted's Drug Store on Sixteenth Avenue. He handled ice cream all winter long, but no one else did. We didn't. Vavra Brothers didn't. Louie Blaha didn't and none of the stores around would handle ice cream very good because there was very little sold. Ted did. The drug store did, because he had a soda fountain and he had to have it for making sodas and different things, you know. If you wanted ice cream, a quart or a pint, you drove over there and got it. You didn't have any in the store. Those are the things. The meat came in mostly, you'd cut it up in chunks. In other words, a quarter of a beef or so many loins or so many hams and you'd try to cut it up yourself because today I noticed it all comes in cut up. In that time, we had to cut it up ourselves.

SM: Where did you get that meat? Did you get it from a central place?

Zeman: Wilson and Company. Wilson and Company called and they did deliver about twice a week. They'd deliver to the stores. They delivered to all the stores and restaurants and things like that.

SM: Now, about how many grocery stores were there in town when you first started?

Zeman: I think the Triangle was one group, and they were just a bunch of loosely connected independents. There must have been about 15 of those...the Palumbos' and I don't know all the different ones that belonged--the Krejci's and the Palumbos'--mostly Bohemie people. They had the Triangle stores. There were, let's see, Four Leaf Clover stores and different ones. Some of them were just independent and didn't belong to anyone.

SM: Like you?

Zeman: Right. Then, on the east side of the river on First Street, there were the wholesale houses--the grocer wholesale houses. Now, they didn't sell anything except by the--tomatoes, peas and corn were all sold by the case. Largomarcino handled fruit and vegetables and the same thing. I noticed today bananas are all sold in crates and cut off the stems. They sold none except hanging on the bunches. People hung them in the window. Go over and cut off what they wanted.

SM; Did they weigh them?

Zeman: Weighed them, right. For some unknown reason, you had those people who were down on Third Street East, there were several Italians who handled fruit, mostly fruit and vegetables there, and they sold theirs by the dozen. I suppose they weighed them first and knew what they were. John Bloze was regular wholesales. Jack Spratt had another wholesale house. Nash Finch had another one. There were probably--and Witwer was big at that time. Weaver Witwer, he was coming in fast. The different ones more or less

stated their own category. Now, the potatoes were sold by the hundred-pound bag. We bagged them ourselves and we'd put so many in either 10 pounds for so much or a peck was so much. Some of them sold them by the peck, some by the 10 pounds. Sugar the same thing.

SM: Now, what kind of containers did you put like sugar in?

Zeman: In bags.

SM: Cloth bags?

Zeman: No. Brown paper bags. We'd mark on the side there with a black pencil. We'd mark what was in there--10 pounds for so much. I noticed not too long ago, I can't remember who it was, but someone was in John Palumbo's store and they were remodeling it and they found one of those sale bills that the smaller stores put out on week-end and it had in there: 6 pounds of rice for 25¢, 3 pounds of hamburger for 25¢, pork chops, 17¢. Just some of the things I remember right off hand. This had been in there for, since, John has been gone a long time. In other words, these were some of the things that were, what might I say, showed how the different prices because they showed that here to me not too many years ago, probably ten years ago. Then you couldn't think about... The nuts, walnuts and different mixed ones that were in hundred-pound bags. Rice was in bags. Prunes were 25 pounds in a box...boxed in 25 pounds. Figs were the same thing. Most of that stuff, though, people didn't want that much, so what did you do in other words to save a lot of time. Whenever you had time, you'd take these and bag it up in 2-pound or 1-pound, 2-pound, so much and write

it on there and then you had it. The same thing on oranges. Oranges were in a crate. Candies were in a paper carton. Most of them sold them in paper cartons. You couldn't sell those in a small store. Anything that you sold around the neighborhood, you had to settle on less than a case.

SM: In the summertime, did most of the fruits and vegetables come from this area or were they all transported in?

Zeman: Let's see. We never had any of the store--we sold some that was local. Now, oranges naturally came from Florida and California. Bananas came from Central America. People like Largomarcino handled those. Grapefruit, the same thing when in season. Grapes, when in season and cherries, when in season. If they weren't in season, you didn't handle them because there was no way you could buy them. There was nowhere that you could buy them.

SM: Did most of those things come in by train?

Zeman: Yes, by refrigerated cars. I don't know if you ever saw one of those refrigerated cars. On each end, they had an ice bunker on there and they loaded it with the--probably, oh, probably a half a ton of--at one end. One of those two bunkers and a half a ton of ice in the other. In fact, everything, when I was with Swift, everything we shipped was like that--refrigerated cars. You just can't believe it, but in Chicago on the south end of Chicago, there were Swift, Armour, Cudahy, Morrell and, I think, Wilson. Five big packers there and practically all the live meat came in there--pork and beef and everything. From there, it was shipped in these refrigerated cars and don't ask me why. I don't know.

Why would you, in Cedar Rapids, you load cars with live stock here and ship it into Chicago and let them butcher it and then haul the meat back here.

SM: That's true.

Zeman: So, it wasn't until after, I don't know, after trucks, I think when trucks came in, because right when I worked for Swift, there were changing then. We still had a horse here and delivered from B Avenue, delivered around, all around close in the loop district with a horse and a red wagon. Believe it or not.

SM: Delivered to stores?

Zeman: Deliver to stores. What went out of town went--with this horse and wagon went just before the train left. It expressed it out to these small towns and they'd wait for it and get it.

SM: Earlier I asked about how many stores were in Cedar Rapids. I don't think we ever got down to a number.

Zeman: Number? I'd say in round figures, would I say--I would say a couple hundred stores.

SM: Oh, really. That many.

Zeman: I'd say that, yah.

SM: Where was your store located?

Zeman: On N Street SW.

SM: About how close by were other stores to you?

Zeman: There was another store around the corner in one, two, three blocks to the south. Then there was another store three blocks north. Then there was Palumbo's was about four blocks east. Oh, I'd say, at least 200 stores.

SM: A lot.

Zeman: Yes. There were a lot of stores. Blaha, who closed up about-- he was the last one left here. He was on Fifteenth Avenue and Sixth Street and Fifteenth Avenue there. He ran a store, believe it or not, up until about four years ago. He passed away finally and his wife closed the place up.

SM: Did you live right next to your store?

Zeman: Right. Merkle and there was a raft of--practically everything was small stores. The first time I ever saw a supermarket was about 1936. My wife's sister lived in Boise, Idaho, and we stopped in there. We went up to see her folks in Spokane and coming back we stoppped at Boise, Idaho, and John, my wife's brother said, "We've got to run out and get some groceries." He passed one store and passed another one. I said, "Where are you going?" He said, "Oh, I going out to the big store. Did you ever see a big store?" I said, "Never did." I walked into that thing and I couldn't believe it. This was just a medium-sized super market. I'd say a medium size. When I looked at that row of fruits out there and they had a bakery in the back--all the rolls out there. I just couldn't believe it. I just sort of shook my head. I never saw a deal like that. That's the first

super market I ever saw.

SM: Now, who did you buy your grocery store from when you started?

Zeman: From Mike Aossey. And believe it or not, Mike was having problems with his wife and they were back and forth jawing. One day he called his brother--I knew his brother--he called his brother and said, "Would that young fellow, that works, so-and-so Zeman, would he be interested in this store down here. So he called me and I said, "Yah, I might." I said, "I just might take that on." So, I did.

SM: That was shortly after you moved here?

Zeman: Yes. Right. I kind of revamped. It needed painting and it needed this and that. One day, one of the fellows came there and he says, he was an attorney, he said, "Look, Mr. Mentzer owns this building." I said, "I know it. That's who we pay rent to." He said, "Well, he'd like to sell these buildings as--14 houses and this store and 14 houses, spread out here. A lot of them are vacant and he wants to sell them. Would you be interested in buying this?" I said, "I might." I said, "I'll get my down payment on it and we agreed on the price." Believe it or not, (laughter) I probably paid him today about what that ground is worth.

SM: Do you remember what you paid him for the store?

Zeman: I can't even remember what I did, but it seems to me it was \$1,400 or something like that for that wooden store building. It's a frame building on the corner, but even then, the ground

there is worth something. You're right.

SM: So, was it one big, open room inside?

Zeman: Yes. Just one big room. Right.

SM: Did you have storage rooms, separate storage rooms?

Zeman: It had a basement.

SM: You mentioned that you had to package things individually and you had to cut meat. Did you have any employees to help you or did you do all the work?

Zeman: No. Just did it myself. Well, my brother came in. John came in and helped me once in awhile. If I'd run into some extra work, I'd always call on him. My wife helped. We got married and she helped. She'd come down there and help. There were times in the store when you're not busy and there are times that-- I noticed even the super markets here, they'll have, well in fact one of my nieces works for Me Too, and they'll have times when they're real busy and there are times when they're slack. I worked a lot of times on the election board over here and we have exactly the same thing over there. You have, in the morning everybody stands up there at seven o'clock. They want to hurry up and get in.

SM: So, you had to check people out, too? You had to figure up their bills?

Zeman: Right. People want to get in right now and then the afternoon you're sitting there and you're wondering if anybody is going to

come in from one o'clock until four. Then at four o'clock, they start coming in pretty fast again. At the store, I think it's the same thing because my niece said we have to work according to the way that people come in. They'd need about so many checkers at a certain time, and then in the afternoon, you don't need any checkers until about four o'clock. She says, from then until about six o'clock or six-thirty, you need a lot of checkers.

SM: How did you check people out? Today, they use cash registers. What did you use?

Zeman: Cash register and you punched, pulled the lever down and it would make a tape. You could make a tape on the side.

SM: Now, today people have to pay right on the spot. Did you keep a tab?

Zeman: Yeh. I had for some of them a charge by the week and some by the two weeks and some would pay part of it and some would pay more of it. You have all kinds of problems.

SM: And you had to keep track of all that?

Zeman: Right. That's right. Yeh.

SM: Did you ever have a time when somebody couldn't pay, like in the Depression?

Zeman: Oh, yeh. That was horrible. It was because you had those people you knew they couldn't pay. You knew that they were honest. What could you do? The only thing you could do then was just use your best judgment and do the best you could.

SM: It must have been real hard.

Zeman: Yeh, right. I think that's really what brought the super-markets in was because the supermarket did not have any charge at all. It seems to me the first one that came in was on Third Avenue West--A & P store came in there. It was either cash on the barrel head or you didn't get the groceries.

SM: You never went to that system?

Zeman: No. No. None of the small stores did because they were all their neighbors. It was mostly your neighbors who traded there. There was nobody gonna--unless it was some relative or somebody who would stop by there who lived on the other side of town. Noone else was going to come in and trade at your store because they drove by maybe a dozen little stores while they were doing that.

SM: So did you ever lose money?

Zeman: Oh, yeh. You're right. Yeh, you did but you couldn't do anything about it. What were you going to sue anybody for or anything like that. No. It was, like you say, a problem but everybody had it. Another thing, don't forget--you probably don't remember but there were people lined up. Every morning there were maybe three to six hundred people waiting in front of Wilson & Company to see if they were doing any hiring. Maybe they would hire two or three people or something like that, or maybe a dozen. Somebody heard that they were going to hire there and they were all lined up there. Like I told my boy when he got through at Iowa City, I said to

him, he said, "Dad, I got a chance to go to work for so and so and so and so and so and so." I said, "Well, you and I do not know whether there's another Depression coming up or not." So I said, "What you want to do is take a look at what happened in the last one." I said, "Quaker Oats ran steady." I said, "Penick & Ford ran steady. Wilson & Company, they were the food people who ran steady." I said, "Ordinary person could always reach in his pocket and find a nickel or dime for a candy bar or something of that nature that's made out of corn, but they could not dig up and find the money to buy a new car or a new refrigerator or a new this or a new that, so they would repair the old one." I don't know, it was a (I can't think what I'm going to say). Anyhow, these people--oh, yeh, what I was going to say--I said to him, "Remember that, these other people at cyclical. John Deere is cyclical. The different ones, I said, Link Belt Speeder, different ones are cyclical." I said, "If you want a job like that, fine." But I said, "Get with somebody like that." So he went with the National Starch and Chemical outfit in Indianapolis and he's with them today. He likes it and he thinks he made a good... because there are people in Iowa City that are gonna be there now again. As these people graduate, they're going to be interviewing them and he had a half a dozen different places to go--a chance to go. I told him, "Remember one thing, I went through one Depression. I know what it is." I said, "If you're working for National Starch and Chemical--I asked him here a while back, how are you fellows weathering this." He said, "Listen, Dad, we can't keep up. We can't keep up. We just built on another

chunk on the other side of the railroad track, another department there. He says, "We're going to put on a--many more people, I don't know, to grind starch and corn. He said, "Every time you put a stamp on an envelope, you've used some of our glue."

SM: What were your hours during the day? What time did you open in the morning?

Zeman: That's another--oh, they were horrible!

SM: Would you say it was hard work?

Zeman: Yes, it was. That's the world's hardest work. Thelma was talking about that the other day. She said, "You remember when Ma Checks and some of their friends were having a little party at their house and along about midnight they decided to get some oysters and have an oyster stew. (laughter)

SM: Did they call you up?

Zeman: Yes. They called me up about eleven o'clock at night and said, "Frank, you know, I did favors for you and we got a little group down here and he says, we'd like to have a quart of oysters." He says--they were in season then, see, and so, "We would like to have a quart of oysters. Could you open up and get them for me?" Well, what are you going to do?

SM: On a typical day, what time did you open in the morning and close at night?

Zeman: Probably about, I'd say, from seven to eight at night--seven in the morning 'til eight at night. Some people had different hours.

Scarolo, who ran the store, the fruit store, on the corner of Twelfth Avenue and Third Street Southeast, he had a big, leather chair there and I don't think he had a key to the place. These people would stop in the morning--people going to work about six o'clock in the morning, would stop to get their tobacco and cigarettes and chewing tobacco and smoking tobacco and mostly tobacco. One morning they couldn't wake him up. He was asleep there. They shook him and he was fast asleep. The old gent passed away. Kids would come down and relieve him, you know, and then he'd take off.

SM: So, did he have mostly all fruits and vegetables?

Zeman: Practically all fruits, vegetables, and little stuff like tobacco and different things of that kind, but very little on the grocery line, that is, in canned goods or anything like that, or anything that he'd have to bag up, like sugar or rice or navy beans. He didn't want anything. There was too much work to that. All he liked was the fruit.

SM: What kind of canned goods did you have in those times?

Zeman: More or less, believe it or not, just like we have today.

SM: Vegetables, too? Vegetables were canned?

Zeman: Vegetables, corn and peas and tomatoes and different things. Sauerkraut and everything.

SM: What brands were they?

Zeman: More or less the brands that you have today--DelMonte. The

only difference is that DelMonte had competition. They had Jack Spratt and they had Western and they had John Blaha's, the 4-B brand and the different brands that were more or less local. Along with them, you handled a little DelMonte and Green Giant and there was, who else? There were several of them that were like that were regular brands that were sold all over the United States, all over the country. The local, in other words, like Vinton, they used to have a canning plant. They've closed down. We used to have one here that was on Twelfth Avenue. It's closed down. They haven't used that for years. So, in other words, the brands that were at that time, I don't think you find any today at all.

SM: You talked about some Italians having some stores.

Zeman: Right.

SM: And Czech people having some stores. Were there any other ethnic groups or nationalities...?

Zeman: There really weren't. They were big. In the fruit stores, the Italians were and in the grocery store, the Bohemians, I think, were. I can't think of anybody else that was in that type of-- we had other people here. We had no Chinese, had no Japanese or anything like that. The Greeks, I think, ran the Butterfly Cafe. Believe it or not, when I was a kid I used to go in there and get stuff in there. I'd get ice cream cones and different things. You know where that is, right there on Third Avenue. Two Greeks ran that. They made their own candy. They did their own ice

cream. They did different things themselves, mostly themselves.

SM: Did you watch prices of foods of other stores? Did you have to compete at all or did people in the neighborhood stay pretty...?

Zeman: Stayed pretty well, you're right. By the time--you know, the thing that I can't understand now is, we don't have a store-- a grocery store downtown.

SM: No, we don't, do we? No.

Zeman: No. We don't have a grocery store downtown. At that time, there were about, I think, three or four grocery stores along on First Street. There were--right by Paramount Theatre was another grocery. People's Grocery Store had one there. Dusters--Charlie Duster, Charlie and Leo Duster had a store on Third Avenue. There must have been concentrated down in the loop there maybe, what would I say, would I say a dozen stores? They were scattered around that loop.

SM: I never thought about that.

Zeman: But, there's nothing down there now. Of course, Hutchinson Ice Cream, at that time, was a big seller here and then Borden's bought it. The Borden name here was a little division of Borden's and pretty soon Borden's got bigger and Hutchinson's got smaller and smaller and smaller. Pretty soon Hutchinson's got down here and Borden's got along here. That's the way those brands went.

SM: Did you do any advertising?

Zeman: Generally, just the slips that were like this for the week-ends.

SM: The flyers?

Zeman: Flyers.

SM: How did you distribute them?

Zeman: Kids. Kids would go over there and say, "You want to take this block? You want to take those blocks over there?" Generally, it was kids who lived there, you know what I mean. You'd give them a few dimes and they'd put the bills around to every house. If somebody didn't get one, it didn't make any difference because they'd come into the store and pick one up anyhow.

SM: That way you'd let people know what specials, maybe, you had?

Zeman: Right!

SM: What you had a lot of?

Zeman: Right!

SM: You said that you had your grocery store for about ten years.
Is that right?

Zeman: Right.

SM: What kind of changes did you see happening? After being in the business for ten years, were there fewer stores?

Zeman: Fewer stores because you could see people going out. As soon as they could get a job, they'd get out of the stores. The hours were terrible. When you stop to think, six days a week. You had those hours for six days, maybe what, fourteen or

sixteen hours a day. Then, they expected you to--Sunday morning to open up for maybe a couple of hours and Sunday evening. So, by the time you figured those hours, it was terrible. The people, as soon as they could get a job, they grabbed the job and they just closed shop and got out of the grocery business. So, you'd see those stores, like was over on C Street. The first thing I noticed, he was closed. Frank's store, there on J, he was closed. Somebody else went in there. Pochobradsky, he closed his up. His wife used to run that. He'd go out and work in the cement work and as soon as cement got to moving a little bit, why his wife just closed the doors. She says, "Closed."

SM: Were some of those stores joining larger corporations?

Zeman: Right. Right. They'd go to work for some of the bigger stores. The same thing with the wholesale houses. The wholesale houses, I think, the first one closed down. There was Iowa Food. They closed down. Little by little, it affected them the same way, the same way that it did everybody else. In other words--and then the plants that were--the war came on and the plants such as Speeder started to pick up. I walked into Speeder one day and instead of being probably three hundred people working in there, there were seven people working in there. I couldn't believe it. Of course, as soon as anybody heard that there were jobs open, why you know, they headed that way. And then, of course, some--Colonial came in about that time with a bakery.

SM: About what time was it? About what year is this?

Zeman: This is along toward about the time the war--about the forties,

They started coming in. Who else came in? Oh, Collins built a plant out here. As soon as they started to build for the war machine, right away there was work out there and people heard about that. They just flocked out there. You couldn't blame them for that.

SM: What made you decide to quit?

Zeman: Oh, I could see the same thing. I could see that it was just coming on. I says, "The grocery business is going to be bad."

END OF SIDE ONE - BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

Zeman: I could see the handwriting on the wall.

SM: So, some of the smaller stores had already gone out of business before you did?

Zeman: Right.

SM: Did that make your business pick up at all?

Zeman: No. No, because they were generally all over there or over in a distance. It was the same thing as these little bakeries. Instead of being--I think there were seventeen of those little bakeries and when one would close up, people would go over, stray over to the other one, but not very much because they were more or less located about so far from each other. They depended on the neighborhood. They didn't depend on somebody coming over. Another thing, don't forget, the automobile was making a change, also at that time. My dad, I think in--oh, I forgot what year it was, about 1935, he was back up there at Franklin County where I was born and where most of us kids

were born up there. He said--my Dad came back and he said, "You know, Frank,--Ackley was a German town, and you could go to the bank there and it said 'This is a German establishment.'" on there. The creamery was the same thing and the elevator was the same thing. Ackley was quite a--he said, "Did that place up there for the next hundred years will still be all German." But, it wasn't. It wasn't. All at once, the automobile came in and there was something that he wasn't looking for. The automobile came in and they just mixed these people. Where we lived was about north and east of us was all a French settlement around Dumont and in there. That was solid French. You could walk into a store or restaurant or grocery store or anywhere and those people were talking French. North of us was Irish. You could understand them more, but the Germans in Ackley and Iowa Falls and Parkersberg and Grundy Center were all solid German in there. You'd better know how to talk German or you could (laughter).... He said, "For a hundred and fifty years, that's going to be all solid German, but it wasn't." The automobile came in and really mixed those people up. The German boys married the Irish girls and the French boys were marrying the...(laughter), but those elderly people, including my folks, and including even today some of the ethnic group here, they want their children to marry in their ethnic group.

SM: How old were you when you...did you sell your grocery business to somebody else?

Zeman: Yes. I sold it to some people from Dubuque, but they didn't stay very long. The man's wife got sick and they sold it to

somebody else--different ones, from one to the other. Finally, I sold the building to Ollie Allick and he came in there and he stayed in there. He was one of those ethnic group from the Syrian group. He was one of the younger Syrians. There were a few. There were not very many. There were probably, I would say, a half a dozen of those and they did pretty good. They'd all concentrate their buying and they'd say, "We're going to buy so many bags of this or so many crates of this. You're going to buy all of it." The wholesale house couldn't do much of anything except bill it to that man and then they'd deliver it around.

SM: To the other Syrians?

Zeman: Right. Like I say, there were about a half a dozen of those Syrians. Well, the Italians were pretty good on holding together, also.

SM: Did you work with any other grocery stores in that way when you had your grocery store?

Zeman: No, very little. Vavras and a few of them, maybe certain ones who handled certain things, like Vavras. They handled the eggs. If you went down there, you got eggs from them. Another thing was like the rolls and donuts and different things. You generally went down and got them from one of those small bakeries.

SM: So, how old were you when you sold your business?

Zeman: I'd say probably 40, 42, something like that.

SM: Did you have a family at that time? Did you have children?

Zeman: Yes.

SM: How many?

Zeman: Three.

SM: What did you do after you sold the grocery store?

Zeman: Oh, went to work for Charlie Duster for a while. He was on Third Avenue then. He and his brother quit and went into politics. Leo did. So, I went to work with Charlie and I worked for him for what--oh, I don't know, a year or so. Then I went to work for Ralph's. He had a cookie route and he wanted me to take it over. That thing covered Cedar Rapids and for

I don't know if you ever heard of them. They're like you need a biscuit people, you know, a national biscuit company, but they're smaller and they had this territory. So, I went with him for a while and stayed on the road, but I didn't particularly like that. You ran into a lot of problems, whether the weather was good or bad. Those people expected you certain days. This is the day you're supposed to come and be there. So, I went with him for a while and then a fellow by the name of came through here and he sat down and he said to me, "Frank, why don't you take on some of these drink machines." He says, "They're the coming thing." So, I said, "Well, I might." So, I did. I went in with him. He helped me put them in. We went and put drink machines with a cup.

SM: Were those the first ones in Cedar Rapids, then?

Zeman: Yes. In other words, the insurance company does not permit a

theater or these public places to use glass bottles in there. I don't know if you know that or not. They're not permitted to use glass bottles in there on account of their insurance, and especially in theaters. They had none. They had only the girls who would sell drinks with paper cups over the counter, so the machines was a little gold mine for them. All they'd do was leave it sit there and it'd use a little bit of electricity and outside of that, it was all they had in it. I'd come around and service the thing. They had a telephone there if anything did go wrong, why they'd call. We put those in and we put them in Fruehauf's plant and I don't know, maybe a half dozen or so. Then, I ran those for--I must have run for what, maybe fifteen years. Something like that.

SM: Did you retire then after that?

Zeman: Yes.

SM: In the thirties, what did you do for entertainment in Cedar Rapids?

Zeman: It wasn't much of a problem because there were one, two, three-- there was the Strand Theater. This was just on the south end. This is not uptown in the loop. In the loop, there was a whole raft of theaters, but this was on the south end, down in that Bohemie town end. The Ideal, the Praha, the Strand, and I can't even remember the one on Sixteenth Avenue West. There were one, two, three. There were four theaters down in that end of town and there must have been about six or seven up in the loop. Of course, there was baseball and there was different for recreation.

SM: Did the theaters have motion pictures?

Zeman: Yes. Motion pictures and the original ones, you know, they were not the colored for a long time. They were black and white and it was printed on the bottom. There was no sound to them either. On the bottom was printed whatever they were saying. They were, like I say, black and white.

SM: Did you ever go out to eat in restaurants?

Zeman: Not too many.

SM: Were there very many restaurants?

Zeman: Very few, but there were around town--I think there must have been maybe a half a dozen in the loop. I'll tell you what there were. Joe and Cliff's had two places. They had nickel hamburgers. The long bun that's in a wienie, what did they call it?

SM: Hot dog?

Zeman: Yeh. There were hot dogs and there were--they had a certain name for them, but there were about a half a dozen of those. Believe it or not, those were run by Greeks. I believe every one was run by Greeks. Of course, practically all of those were just walk-in and grab it and run. The what-you-call-it was out there, also. The bus depot had one. That was just a lunch counter. I don't think there were very many restaurants over town.

SM: Somebody mentioned Bishop's. Do you remember Bishop's?

Zeman: Bishop's. Yeh, right. Oh yeh, right in the same place and around the corner was--who was around the corner in Witwer's

building? And, of course, you know later on when they tore that down and built, he went into the old post office building that's over where they are now. You know, the old post office there on Third Street and diagonal from Merchants National?

SM: Right. Third Street and Second Avenue.

Zeman: Right. He put up an eating place there and that again was more or less a grab-it-and-run. There were no tables there. It was just a long counter there. If you wanted to eat there, you'd stand behind somebody that's about through and grab his chair when he gets-- (laughter).

SM: Did you have a car?

Zeman: Yeh, an old one.

SM: When did you get your first car? Was it after you were married?

Zeman: No. I'll tell you, the first car I ever got, I think, was in-- I was somewhere. I can't even tell you where I was working. The manager there says to me, "Frank, you could use a car, couldn't you?" I said, "Yeh. I could use a car. I don't know what I would do with it, but I could use one." He said, "We got a car here we want to sell. We just traded in and the fellow wants--doesn't want to give us much of anything for it. If you want it for--I think it was a Model T and I think he said \$125. That's all he wants to give us for it and we think it's worth more than that." I wrote him out a check for \$125 and never did even get a title to the thing. This is all you need. I said, "I'll sign this and I'll think about that."

SM: Did it run good? Did it have many problems?

Zeman: Yeh. Oh, it was a company car. He knew what the car was. He says, "That car's good, Frank. Well, you'd be stupid for not buying that even if you sell it afterwards." And afterwards, I was back here in Cedar Rapids and I think I sold it to my brother, George.

SM: Were there many gas stations around Cedar Rapids?

Zeman: Yeh and I was just looking at that the other day--a fellow pumping, a fellow 82 years old and he's pumping for one of those stations that had the glass on top. He's still using it down in Texas. You're right. The stations started coming in fast. Right after the war, people they started to build cars and people started needing gas. There was one on every corner.

SM: Do you remember anything about Prohibition?

Zeman: The only thing I remember was that they had a saloon not too far from where our grocery was--where the grocery store was when I was a kid and where my folks traded. We walked over there, my cousin and myself walked over there to see if it was actually closed and it said--somebody wrote on there, "The Desert of Sahara." "Closed, The Desert of Sahara." That's about all I remember about those saloons.

SM: Well, thank you. You've given us a lot of information today.

Zeman: Well, you just scratch out what you don't...(laughter)

SM: You did a good job. Thank you.

