

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with  
Father Donald Peters

Conducted by Barbara McCuskey  
May 22, 1985  
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Transcribed by Sue Daugherty

Father Donald Peters was born April 6, 1903 in Monona, Iowa. In this interview, we learn a few things about his growing-up years (his father put up and repaired windmills and pumps). We learn about his duties as a priest and the activities that took place at St. Patrick's Church and School during the 1930's.

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Date: May 22, 1985  
Place: 510 A Avenue NW Cedar Rapids IA

BMc: This is Barbara McCuskey. I am working on an Oral History tape for the Junior League Oral History project, interviewing Father Donald Peters on May 22, 1985 at his home at 510 A Avenue NW here in Cedar Rapids.

SIDE ONE - TAPE ONE

Father Peters, when were you born?

Peters: I was born April 6, 1903.

BMc: 1903. And where were you born?

Peters: On a farm near Monona, Iowa. That's in northeast Iowa, in Clayton county.

BMc: Were you oldest child or middle child or . . .?

Peters: I was second oldest child.

BMc: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Peters: I had three brothers and two sisters.

BMc: And was the older one a boy or a girl?

Peters: Boy.

BMc: Tell me a little bit about the farm that your mother and father farmed.

Peters: Well, we didn't live on it long enough. I don't remember a thing about it because my father put up windmills and fixed windmills and pumps. We moved a great deal. We were living in Monona

probably five houses. Then we lived in another place in the country near town once.

BMc: Did he farm in addition to . . .?

Peters: No. Well, that is, I suppose he did when I was born, but I don't know. But I know the one that I know about we lived near Monona on a 40 acre place and he fixed windmills and pumps. We only had a few cattle.

BMc: Do you remember how he came to be a windmill fixer? How did he come to have a job like that? Was he mechanical?

Peters: Well, yes, very mechanical. I think at one time he worked in a hardware store and then came out from that.

BMc: But he didn't work for a company for instance. He did free lancing.

Peters: He was free lancing.

BMc: If we could go back to a time before you were born, what do you remember about things your parents told you about why they came to Iowa. Were they born in Iowa or did they come from someplace else?

Peters: They were born in Iowa.

BMc: Right around the Monona area?

Peters: My mother was born in a territory right near there, probably about four miles from where I was born. It's known as Ion. My dad was born about six miles from there. I can't tell you the name of the valley he was born in.

BMc: They would have been born ~~like in~~ the seventies or eighties, around in there maybe?

<sup>e</sup>Peters: I imagine.

BMc: That's interesting. It's always curious to know why people come



to a certain spot in Iowa because it was pretty desolate in 1903 and even more so when they were newborn.

Were there any special family stories that you remember about their life on the farm or stuff before you were born that they used to talk about?

Peters: I don't know but I know my mother. . . there was a little store down in Ion and I know my mother clerked in that.

BMc: Do you remember her clerking in the store?

Peters: No.

BMc: That would be before you were born.

How did your father get from job to job?

Peters: With horse and buggy. Then in later years with a car.

BMc: Do you remember the horse and buggy? Was that in your memory?

Peters: Yes. I remember the horse and buggy.

BMc: Did you have any special jobs about taking care of the horse?

Peters: That's one of the great recreations we had was horseback riding, and walking down through the woods, always near a creek. A creek is (laughter). . .

BMc: You had to get to water. (Laughter)

Peters: . . . is always very attractive. Apart from that I don't remember any.

BMc: What other kinds of family chores did you have around the place when you were a boy? Do you remember what responsibilities you had?

Peters: I know I had to take care of the barn for the three or four cows and milk them. We didn't have any refrigeration. We'd either put the milk in a pail down in a well or you put in down in the house basement.

BMc: Then you covered the pail and sunk it into the water in the well?

Peters: Near the water.

BMc: What other chores did you have when you were. . .?

Peters: Well, I used to help my father hay and the requirements that he made of you on the farm.

BMc: Early hours?

Peters: Another thing would be. . . I'd say we were about two miles from town and ~~was~~ walking to school and back. (Laughter)

BMc: Let's talk a little bit about school. What kind of school did you start at?

Peters: Well, I started at the sister's school, St. Patrick's parish in Monona. I went there for nine years, then I went three years in the public school.

BMc: Why did you change?

Peters: That's all the farther the parochial school went.

BMc: I see. What difference did you notice when the changeover came? What was the difference between the sister's school and the public school when you changed? Do you remember?

Peters: Well, I wouldn't notice any difference, they were both very good.

BMc: And the name of the school was the Sister's School.

Peters: St. Patrick's school.

BMc: What order of nuns was that?

Peters: The Presentation Sisters from Dubuque.

BMc: Tell me a little bit about that early school. How big were your classes?

Peters: I wouldn't know exactly, but I'd say maybe 12 or 15, something like that.

BMc: Did you stay with your own age group or were there grades mixed in together?

Peters: As any school goes you stay with your age group.

BMc: And what kinds of things did you study?

Peters: Reading, writing, and arithmetic then.

BMc: Did you like school?

Peters: Very much, very much. (Laughter) Very much.

BMc: Tell me a little bit about Monona. What size town was Monona about the time you were in high school.

Peters: I'd say it was. . . we always figured it was a little less than a thousand. The railroads went through there. I know we lived near a railroad. There's a hill from Marquette up to Monona, and they'd have to have two engines on the train to pull it up the hill. They'd make a great noise. We lived about a half a block from the track and you'd get so you never even heard them.

BMc: Just a part of life.

Peters: That's right.

BMc: I know that you went on to Loras and I want to talk about that, a little bit, too. Before we get out of your early life, I wanted to ask you maybe about what you remember about World War I. Now I know you were just a young boy. . .

Peters: I just remember the celebration when it was over.

BMc: Armistice Day.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: What do you remember about that?

Peters: They had quite a celebration. I remember they had it in the livery barn. The great jubilation that it was over. I remember

one of our fine boys was killed. His name was Leslie and he was killed. That made quite an impression, he got killed during the war.

BMc: Those boys would have been just a little bit older than you, wouldn't they? Because you would have been about fifteen in 19. . .

Peters: Oh, yes. That's right.

BMc: Do you remember people talking about the war when it was going on? Or anybody's feelings about it?

Peters: Well, being that age, and being in school, you didn't pay much attention.

BMc: Tell me about the celebration that they had on Armistice Day. Was there a band?

Peters: No. Just having a good time. (Laughter)

BMc: (Laughter) I know that you went to Loras College after you finished high school. What made you choose Loras, that's in Dubuque. That's L-O-R-A-S.

Peters: Yes, Loras. I think at that time, it was known as Columbia. I don't know, it was just rated a good college and I went there. I suppose, maybe, the sisters being from Dubuque, too, would influence you. Yes. And then I had kind of an idea to be a priest, and that's the place to start.

BMc: When did you first think that you might want to be a priest?

Peters: I think probably all my childhood. We had a sister there that told us to pray to Almighty God that you carry out your vocation. I know I said three "Hail Marys" every day in honor of the Immaculate Purity, the Mother of God, that I would. I suppose maybe that was an influence. And then after I became a priest, and even to this

day, I say three "Hail Marys" with the same intention to thank God that I became a priest.

BMc: Was there a priest perhaps in your parish when you were growing up that was an influence in your life?

Peters: Well, naturally, the pastor, just the pastor.

BMc: Tell me a little bit more about your mom and dad, what kind of people they were.

Peters: Oh, they were lovely people. That would probably give the example to lead a good life. I know my mother would go to mass often during the week. And my father, of course was too busy working but they would give a very good example.

BMc: How did they feel about it when you told them that you wanted to be a priest?

Peters: They were very pleased. And I know, going through the country, afterwards, we'd always, riding, we'd say the Rosary. When we'd get through, then my mother would go right into the litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary by heart. I don't see how she could do that, but she did. (Laughter)

BMc: That's wonderful. What about your friends? What did your friends say. What was the feeling of the time about . . . not only as a vocation, but as a life's commitment?

Peters: Oh, they were very pleased. Very pleased.

BMc: Let's talk about life at Loras. About what classes were like there and things like that.

Peters: Well, it was very straight. You couldn't go downtown. Only on Saturday afternoon right after dinner until, I'd say 5:00. Then you'd have to come back at five and they'd have chapel. When

you'd go into the chapel, you reported in. Otherwise, we had a great community life there playing, and we never missed not going downtown.

BMc: What about the academic part of it? It's always had a reputation of being a good and sort of a difficult school.

Peters: Very good. Very good.

BMc: You were sort of a boy from a rural area. What was the impact of college on you? What did you think about this--the academics of it. Were you prepared? Did your high school prepare you for this?

Peters: Yes. I loved mathematics, that's what I majored in was mathematics. For instance, calculus, college algebra and all that. I really majored in mathematics and also in philosophy.

BMc: At the time that you started at Loras, did you know that you know that you wanted to go ahead and go to seminary?

Peters: Yes, oh yes.

BMc: So did you have a different course of studies than students who were not going on to seminary?

Peters: Well, I suppose you'd go into philosophy and . . .

BMc: What kinds of courses did they offer to help you to deal with the human contact that you'd be having? You know, there's so much psychology in the work that you do and there's so much counseling, as you say philosophy. Do you remember what specific courses and things that you had to prepare you for that aspect?

Peters: Well, you see, we had a course in religion and scripture and philosophy and that would.

BMc: What happened after you left Loras? When you graduated from Loras? You graduated from Loras in 1921 maybe?

Peters: I graduated from Loras in 1926.

BMc: 1926, right.

Peters: Immediately the next year, I went to St. Paul Seminary. St. Paul.

BMc: St. Paul, Minnesota.

Peters: Minnesota, yes. I was there for four years. After 1930 was ordained.

BMc: And you were ordained in St. Paul?

Peters: In Dubuque. By Archbishop Beckman.

BMc: Tell me about that moment. Was that a scary moment? Or was that a wonderful moment?

Peters: It was wonderful. We'd make a retreat out at the Trappist monastery the preceding week. Then some priests would come in in cars and brought us in to the cathedral at Dubuque for the ordination. I remember my parents was there, and at that time, there were no paved roads and it happened to be a rainy day so ordinarily they'd come down through Guttenberg, but we had to go back on what then was called a paved road, gravel road. We had to go back through Manchester, Strawberry Point and Elkader.

BMc: And your parents came?

Peters: Parents came. And I'm sure brothers and sisters. We had an old Model T to take us. (Laughter)

BMc: Your dad's first car was a Model T? (Laughter)

Peters: Yes. That's all about there was then. (Laughter)

BMc: Of course, he could probably fix them himself.

Peters: Some. Some.

BMc: After you were ordained, what happened then?

Peters: After we were ordained, my cousin also was ordained with us, we



were classmates all the way through grade school and college and seminary and we had our first mass shortly after we were ordained and I was assigned to the Cathedral in Dubuque and after being there about two months, I was assigned out here to St. Patrick's on October 1930.

BMc: That must have been a very nice assignment, to come here to Cedar Rapids.

Peters: Oh, very good.

BMc: What did you think about that?

Peters: Pleased. Pleased. Beautiful parish.

BMc: What were your duties when you first came?

Peters: Well, like all priests. We only had two of us, the Pastor, Father Lenihan, and myself. We'd each have a mass every day. I'd say a mass at the sister's convent, and he'd say mass in the church. The sisters at that time lived in two houses right here where the new convent is, for their sleeping quarters and residence. Then in the little corner house was their dining room.

BMc: And these would be the sisters who were teaching at the school?

Peters: Yes.

BMc: What other duties did you have within the parish? Do you recall?

Peters: Administering the sacraments, baptism, and as I say, mass, the Holy Eucharist, and at that time the Pastor took a great many of the marriages. But we had quite a few marriages and sometime I might have to take a marriage. Then go out and visit the sick or if someone was dying they'd call you and you'd have to go.

BMc: How big was the parish at that time?

Peters: Well, that would be hard to say, it was a big parish. I wouldn't just want to say. It was a big parish.

BMc: In terms of square miles, do you think? I mean, how far did you have to travel when you were visiting?

Peters: There was two parishes on the west side. St. Patrick's and St. Ludmila's. We have to take all this side of the river and St. Ludmila's would take kind of the south west side.

BMc: Now, see, I don't know how the churches are all connected and how they're all set up. What connections do you have with the other churches here in town? Are they administrative connections? Within the dioces?

Peters: Each one takes care of their own church, their own people.

BMc: Tell me what your impressions were of Cedar Rapids when you came.

Peters: Oh, I loved it. Cedar Rapids is a great place.

BMc: Well, you came at kind of a tough time, in 1930, after the Crash.

Peters: It came right after that, the Depression. Very good. They were very good to us; we could walk right into the shows and walk out at night. And go right up to baseball games. We'd have our instructions at night and then we'd probably get out to the ball park at 9 o'clock, see the last few innings. Walk right in and walk out. It was wonderful.

BMc: Because of your connection with the Church, that's wonderful. What was the downtown like then. You were close enough here to be able to walk down.

Peters: Yes, we'd walk down for the mail from the Post Office. Everything centered in downtown, then.

BMc: And it was quite a hub for the whole area, I know.

Peters: Oh, my, yes.

BMc: Tell me about going to the ball games, you said you were going to the ball park. What ball games, for the high schools, for instance?

Peters: No, for the town team.

BMc: Which was what?

Peters: (Laughter) Young lady . . .

BMc: (Laughter) See, I didn't even know they had a town team then. And they used to play a team from Dubuque or . . . Where did they play?

Peters: Yes. Well, maybe that happened . . . maybe I'm talking about around 1960.

BMc: Well, that could be. Did they play out at Kingston?

Peters: Yes.

BMc: Wonderful. That's great.

You told me that at the time that you came that Father Lenihan and you were the only two priests.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: That would be L-E-N-I-H-A-N.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: Was he an older man?

Peters: Yes.

BMc: What kind of a man was he?

Peters: He was a lovely man, very kind. I don't think he ever said one unkind word to me.

BMc: That's wonderful.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: That's an awful lot of work for only two priests.

Peters: Yes, but we did it.

BMc: And the days were long.

And did you live here at this house?

Peters: No, right over at the residence. See, Father Lenihan built that new house in 1924. Nice house, stone house right next to the church.

BMc: Yes, it's beautiful.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: You told me that you used to make visits to the school rooms of the church. I would like to talk about the school a little bit, too, because I think that that's very interesting. On what occasions did you visit the school rooms?

Peters: Whenever we'd find time, we'd go over and take part in their studying the catechism, the religion classes. Then you'd also go over to give out the reports. Monthly reports. It was very good.

BMc: St. Patrick's always had a very good reputation as being a good school here in town. How did you find the children when you first came? What was your impression of the children when you first came?

Peters: They were very good. Very reverential. I remember we bought a popcorn machine from one of the theatres downtown. Near the stairwell, we put in a stand there, and we'd buy candy by three and a half thousand bars at a time. Some ladies would donate their time, and we'd have that as a confectionery stand. The profit we made, we'd buy washing machines and refrigerators and lawnmowers and things. It was very good. The children were very good.

BMc: So it s been a real active school, too. Active in the community.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: How are the kids different in this school than when you were in school in Monona? Did you notice any differences in the way they acted, or their expectations. . .?

Peters: (Laughter) They were all about the same.

BMc: (Laughter) I know, people always ask that question. Kids are pretty much the same here, too. (Laughter)

Peters: (Laughter) All the same.

BMc: That's right.

The school was built in 1929, you've told me that. So, it was brand new. . .

Peters: Yes.

BMc: . . .when you came.

Peters: First year it was used, it was opened. I came here and it had only been used about two months.

BMc: Describe the school a little bit for people who haven't been around it that much.

Peters: It's three stories. It's built in the form of a "U". In the middle of the "U" is the gymnasium, which is used as an auditorium, too. The gymnasium had a wonderful stage on it and beautiful balconies on each side. What I notice mostly here--going to other schools in other towns--the dressing rooms here, for the girls and for the boys, are so ample. We went to places where you could hardly get in, clothes wet. But here, they were large and good showers and very good. Then , for plays and recitals, they use the gymnasium floor for seating capacity with the balconies. I would

imagine that gym would hold eight or nine hundred people, or maybe more. It was very good.

BMc: That was quite a luxury in that time, to have that gymnasium that large.

Peters: Oh, yes, beautiful. And the balcony's so good.

BMc: Do you remember what kinds of extra-curricular activities they had at the school when you first came? There was basketball games.

Peters: Basketball games. And later on, baseball was put in. That would be about all.

BMc: Were there glee clubs? Choruses? Things like that?

Peters: Oh, yes. The children would sing for masses at church, too, you know. See, we had, I'd say, 14 sisters. Twelve would teach, one for each grade, then there was a music sister. One of the sisters did the housework and the cooking. The music sister would have children that would be taking lessons. They'd have to pay for those lessons, too.

BMc: For piano lessons and violin and things like that.

Peters: Yes. Then they would put on their recital.

BMc: What were the grades of the school? Was it first through . . .

Peters: Yes. First through twelfth.

BMc: Through twelfth. How long did that . . .because I know it's not high school now . . .How long did that continue until they stopped?

Peters: Well, it was going when I left here in 1960.

BMc: But it was still a high school in 1960.

Peters: I think, don't quite remember, but I think then at the beginning, we put in the kindergarten, too.

BMc: When you first came, and the Depression was really rolling in the

thirties, what kinds of difficulties did you see among the people in your parish? What financial difficulties did they have, or whatever, due to the Depression? What change do you know that it brought into their life? What were their lives like, do you think?

Peters: Well, they'd have to skimp. I think there was some government relief, too, and they'd take advantage of that. But I don't remember Cedar Rapids being too hard-hit.

BMc: Did you notice any more stress on families and things because of bad economic times? There's a lot of talk about that now--times are bad, there's a lot of family stress. Did you . . .?

Peters: There didn't seem to be. They seemed to be more able to suffer and endure. They probably didn't have too many luxuries then, you know. It didn't seem to cause any trouble.

BMc: So it wasn't that much, maybe, of an impact.

Peters: No.

BMc: Was there a lot of unemployment, did you notice, in the parish?

Peters: There didn't seem to be. You see, Quaker Oats and the others seemed to be going pretty good.

BMc: I know that the church has always taken care of its parishioners that do fall on hard times. Were there any special funds or anything to help people if they had a brief tough time of it, to help them? Was there something that the church did in that way during that time?

Peters: I don't believe so. I think they do now, but I don't think we did then.

BMc: Of course, times are different now. People expect a lot more outside help now than they did then. I've heard that from other



folks, too.

What about for the church. Do you remember? What impact did the Depression have on the church in terms of . . .

Peters: Well, of course, naturally they couldn't support it like they did when the times were good. But we got along. We got along.

BMc: What size was the school in 1920, when you came? You said that it went all the way to twelfth grade, so how many students would that have been?

Peters: Well, I would say it was pretty near to capacity. In the grades, it was built for 400 grade school students and 150 high school. I think it was almost to capacity.

BMc: Do you happen to remember what the tuition was?

Peters: I don't think there was any.

BMc: Really?

Peters: (Laughter) I don't think there was any.

BMc: No kidding.

Peters: If there was, it was very small.

BMc: Very slight. What about uniforms. Did the children wear uniforms?

Peters: Yes. The girls wore uniforms. When there would be processions, parades downtown, they always made such a big impression. And they'd come away with prizes. The uniform attracts attention.

BMc: Did you ever have trouble with kids with the dress code? Who wouldn't . . . who would balk at it . . .

Peters: Well, if they did, that would be the sisters (laughter) the sisters who would take care of that. They took care of that.

BMc: A church this size is very important to the community. I'd like to talk a little bit about the exchange between the church and the

community and the impact each had on the other. What do you think--during the years you were at St. Pat's--what do you think was the greatest impact that the church had on the community?

Peters: Well, I would think making good, law-abiding citizens. See, they taught them the commandments and anyone who keeps the commandments is law-abiding. Should I mention the commandments, or would that be necessary?

BMc: Sure. Absolutely.

Peters: Well, you see, they taught them the first one, not to have strange gods before them. The second one, not to take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. The third, keep holy the Sabbath day. The fourth, honor your father and mother. Fifth, do not kill. Sixth, do not commit adultery. Seventh, do not steal. Eighth, do not bear false witness against your neighbor. Ninth, do not covet your neighbor's wife. Tenth, do not covet your neighbor's goods. So they were taught the Law, to obey God's law, and the civil law. And the laws at the school.

BMc: Then you would be able to watch a lot of your students grow up and become citizens, good citizens here in town.

Peters: Yes. And I can remember, we always used to think that Quaker Oats and the telephone company was a great place to work. And I know the telephone company . . . they used to say that they could always tell the St. Pat's students because when they were waiting for the interview, when they'd come in, they'd always stand up in reverence. Isn't that funny something like that would appeal to them?

BMc: That is interesting. And there is something to be said for teaching a child that kind of responsibility in that kind of thing.

Peters: Opening the doors when an elderly person comes.

BMc: That's right.

In what other way do you think the school was a help to the city?

Peters: The Depression was on in the early thirties. The education of five hundred or more students would be a considerable saving to the taxpayers. That would be one way.

BMc: That's right. That's right, because otherwise the students would have to have been absorbed. . .

Peters: . . .by the system, see.

BMc: At that time, in the thirties, was there any exchange between the public schools and the private schools? Did they do any teacher exchanging or programs . . .

Peters: No. There was nothing like that then.

BMc: Because I know that's happening more and more now. What's your opinion of that?

Peters: Well, it's good. And I noticed where I came from, Burlington, the public school system provided the bus transportation. Oh, that was a big item. Because I know when I went there, we had to have two buses and pay two men. That was a big output. Later, the school system took that over. The public school did that for parochial schools.

BMc: So you think that whenever that can happen, that it benefits everybody?

Peters: Oh, my, yes. Yes.

BMc: Let's talk a little bit about entertainment in school. We touched on extra-curricular activities and things before. But what other kinds of things were there for the students at that time?

Peters: There would be always the yearly senior play. That was a great honor to have a part in the leading roles.

BMc: Were they musicals? Or was it a straight play?

Peters: Mostly just straight play.

BMc: Did they do famous plays or plays that were appropriate to . . .

Peters: Yes. Very good as high schoolers do. Very good. Then, of course, there would be the music recitals. And parents were always proud to have their children taking part in them.

BMc: Did the students play individually or did they have orchestra?

Peters: Both. Both ways. Yes.

Then, we had a fun night every Friday night. That didn't go on only for nine months, that went for twelve months of the year. That was very popular. Even now, when I meet men and women who refer to when they used to attend the fun night.

BMc: What was it like? What did they do?

Peters: Well, we had an orchestra, usually Herbie Westrom's orchestra. I meet Herbie around town occasionally. He'd play, I imagine he had about seven in the band. They'd play. What they'd get for doing that, it wouldn't even probably pay one man half now. We only charged ten cents for the dance. It was very good.

BMc: Did you have it over at the gymnasium?

Peters: The gymnasium.

BMc: Did people have to take their shoes off to dance on the gymnasium floor?

Peters: No. That was a little problem with the basketball then. But see the basketball season probably only went three or four months. We had problems.

BMc: Wax that (Laughter)

Peters: (Laughter) We had problems.

BMc: And so they would have a band, and the kids would dance. Popular music?

Peters: Oh, yes. The jitterbug. The jitterbug. Yes. Very good. Of course, there would be no danger to the building because the gymnasium was all on the ground floor. And that synchronized beat, you know, it wouldn't do any harm to the building.

BMc: It raised the roof, though, I bet. (Laughter)  
Did anybody ever object to you having dances in the school like that?

Peters: No. No.

BMc: Because sometimes people don't like modern music.

Peters: We'd have parishioners that would work with it. I know particularly of a couple men kind of policed it. And others took part in the refreshments and were very good.

BMc: What were the hours? Did it go until ten? or eleven? or midnight?

Peters: I couldn't say exactly. I don't know whether it was eight to ten, or eight to eleven. I don't remember.

BMc: Everybody probably had to be in by then.

Peters: I can't figure keeping them out til twelve. I don't know. Maybe it only went to ten.

BMc: You know, there's a lot of talk now and concern about drinking in schools. Was this ever a problem that you would see?

Peters: Never. Never.

BMc: What do you think the difference is? If you had to make a theory

on what you think the difference is and how there was not any drinking problem during the thirties and then there seems to be enough now. Is it a difference in the children or in the atmosphere around them or availability?

Peters: I think maybe it's the times and some of the children are able to make money. Maybe to be in the flow they think they have to do it. (Laughter) There was no money made by the ones in my day. (Laughter) Imagine 10 cents a day. . . a night. . . not a dance, a whole night!

BMc: In addition to fun night, what kinds of things were there for the students? We talked about basketball.

Peters: There were basketball games. Later on, baseball.

BMc: Who was in your league in basketball? Who did they play against?

Peters: We played against teams at Waterloo, Iowa City, Marshalltown, Dubuque. At that time, you had no bus to take them. We had a couple good parishioners that would give us the car and we would go.

BMc: They would lend you the car, not drive themselves?

Peters: No they would drive it themselves. I know one particular man, he does my income tax now, he did it for years. Very good. Then we'd get home and at that time, the priests were saying mass the next day, he couldn't take anything after 12, couldn't break my fast. A little difficult, but we lived through it.

BMc: Used to go in all kinds of weather?

Peters: That was one thing about it, you were scheduled, you would go in all kinds of weather. I remember once coming back from Waterloo, it was icy and I remember something happened on number 30 and I

remember I got out of my car to help and you couldn't stand up unless you'd hang onto the car. But we were never in any hurry, we took our time.

BMc: That's a frightful responsibility with having the children.

Peters: And of course, the traffic then wasn't as heavy as now.

BMc: But the roads weren't as good, either.

Peters: No. They were probably gravel, but ice, you know, would fill up that gravel.

BMc: Driving to Marshalltown, that's a long haul.

Peters: Well, I don't think we made that long many times. But we'd play St. Mary's and St. Patrick's at Iowa City. St. Mary's and Sacred Heart at Waterloo. Then Columbia Academy at Dubuque.

BMc: And those would all be schools that were of a similar size.

Peters: Yes. Yes, that's right.

BMc: Were there any parochial schools that were bigger around, like, well, Regis wasn't in existence, was it?

Peters: No. No.

BMc: What about Wahlert?

Peters: That wasn't in existence then. No. No.

BMc: So generally you were dealing with. . .most of the schools were--

Peters: . . .about the same size as ours.

BMc: . . .were really much smaller.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: I see.

Peters: Of course, you'd have the cheerleaders and they'd get there. That was quite an honor to be a cheerleader.

BMc: What was the team called? Were they the Tigers, or what? Do you remember?



Peters: Ours was called the Shamrocks.

BMc: Great!

Peters: Shamrocks. (Laughter)

BMc: (Laughter) Great! I love it, it's perfect.

What about baseball? You said that came a little bit later.

Peters: Yes. Well, I didn't have much to do with that. I might have had one year but I think we played up here, I think there was a field on this side of the Roosevelt where we played the baseball.

BMc: What about the extra-curricular activities for girls?

Peters: Well, they'd have basketball, I think, but they didn't compete. I don't remember them competing.

BMc: So they would have had a girls' recreational association or something like that?

Peters: Or something like this, yes.

BMc: What about changes in the school now. As opposed to then. I know that now, in 1985, it only goes to sixth? Seventh? Eighth?

Peters: Over here it goes to eighth.

BMc: Eighth grade.

Peters: Inclusive.

BMc: And is there kindergarten?

Peters: I think they're starting it next year. Or, they might have had it, too, this year.

BMc: Well, there's a lot of pressure on parochial schools right now, because there is. . . well we were talking earlier about how the students that would come out would have a certain standard, and things are a little more free-wheeling in the public schools, so that's a big change.

END SIDE ONE - TAPE ONE

BMc: Father Peters, we were talking about some changes and things that have happened in schools and you told me that maybe the greatest help today is that there is such a difference in communication and travel than there was then. What do you mean by that? How has that changed thing for the school?

Peters: The children didn't have the advantage of getting information over radio or television or other communication then. I think it helps in their education. There wasn't such a thing then.

BMc: Kids know so much more about the world in general now.

Peters: That's right. That's right.

BMc: You know, when you decided to become a priest, you knew what a priest's life would be like, but now that you're (laughter) at the other end of it, did your expectations match up with your hopes when you were a young man? Is it a life like you hoped it would be?

Peters: Very much so. Very happy. Very contented.

BMc: And the duties were as you knew that they would be?

Peters: Oh, yes. Very good.

BMc: Let's talk a little bit about the times in the thirties. We had a Democratic President who really changed life for everybody, talking about Franklin Roosevelt. What kinds of things do you remember about elections during those times--election of 1932 and 1936? Do you remember anything specifically? Was there anything, were there rallies here in town? Do you remember the talk that people had about changes that Roosevelt might be bringing about?

Peters: Well, I suppose it would be just the same then as it is now. But

politics (laughter) we weren't too much interested in. We had other problems.

BMc: Yes. (Laughter) What do you think was the biggest problem that the Church had during that time? You know, like, as the thirties were moving on, what would be some of the problems that the Church was facing?

Peters: I wouldn't know of any.

BMc: Stands pretty strong, doesn't it?

Peters: Yes.

BMc: Let's talk about Pearl Harbor. There's a change. What do you remember about Pearl Harbor?

Peters: Well, I remember it happened and I remember that one of the priests of our Dioces was chaplain of that boat and he went down.

BMc: Oh, really? The Arizona?

Peters: Yes. I don't remember whether his name was Father Smith or what.

BMc: So that was really a very immediate thing, then.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: Was it a surprise?

Peters: Yes.

BMc: Because I don't have that viewpoint coming after the fact. I don't have that viewpoint on the surprise of it.

Peters: Yes

BMc: What changes were there for you in church and with the school, once a state of war was in effect? You had to think about your young men that were graduating.

Peters: That's right. They would be looking forward to some of them going, you know, and enlisting. I didn't notice any changes.

BMc: You were talking about what the sisters' life was like. Could we talk a little bit about that, about what their lives were like when you first came here?

Peters: Yes. Well, they were dressed in their uniform.

BMc: Which is much different than it is today.

Peters: Yes. Yes. And they would march over to church in twos. There was one Superior. You would always know them, they were dressed that way. They were very good.

BMc: They commanded a lot of respect around town?

Peters: Yes.

BMc: Did they have a salary?

Peters: Yes. But very meager. I couldn't tell you now what it was, but very meager.

BMc: Were most of them from around here? Or were they from . . .

Peters: Oh, well, see, those mostly those that joined the Sisters of Charity went to Clark College. They were from all over, Chicago and other places.

BMc: Did you help any of your students on into the priesthood or on to become nuns? Did you have many students that went on with the vocation?

Peters: Oh, yes, we had quite a few.

BMc: That must be a difficult thing to counsel, I would think. What would you do if a child, say, in fourth grade, or so, would come to you and say, "Father, I think I'd like to become a priest." Does a four-year-old know his mind, or how do you deal with that?

Peters: You probably would tell him to keep praying and it will come out

all right. And then, of course, if anyone thought they had to be true to this, send them to Loras College or a Catholic college, where they would be. . .

BMc: . . .given the opportunity.

Peters: We had quite a few right from here.

BMc: Well, that must be a good feeling for you, because then that indicates not only the caliber of student but also that you yourself had enough of an impact on them that they would want to do that.

Peters: Yes. Of course, you always like that.

BMc: Did you have administrative duties in the church at all? Buying coal, buying food, making sure? Who took care of that kind of thing?

Peters: The priest did it. At that time, I remember, when I came here, they had two great, big boilers that heated both the church and the rectory and the school. That was lump coal, the janitor would have to be there continually as soon as it burnt down to put it in. Then the stoker came, and . . .

BMc: The stoker is something that was automatic.

Peters: Automatic. You could fill it up once and then probably you wouldn't have to fill the bin up maybe for about seven or so hours. One thing about lump coal and stoker coal, you would have to open the front and clean the flues, which is a very dirty job. Well, but it was very good that you didn't have to be there all the time. Then, gradually--that didn't occur in my time--but gas came and all you had to do was turn on a switch. But I can remember, during the war, the coal got very scarce. I know, we had

two carloads and we stored it right on the school ground. We had a person that lived on the outskirts of Cedar Rapids, he had a tractor with a scoop on it. We got him to come and scoop and fill the bin. I remember that was the best coal you could buy, Dawson Daylight and I remember it was five dollars.

BMc: Dawson Daylight was the name of the company that sold it?

Peters: No. The coal. I suppose the company. . . But I think it was either \$5.15 or \$5.25 a ton. That was considered quite a price, but it would be nothing compared with it now. (Laughter)

BMc: That's right. That's right (Laughter)

Did the students eat lunch at school?

Peters: Yes. But in my time, we never had a school lunch. I think it came in later.

BMc: So they used to go home.

Peters: They would bring their school lunch. They'd eat in the school. That's why the candy bars and the popcorn. (Laughter)

BMc: That's right. (Laughter) Wonderful.

What other kind of administrative duties would there have been-- because this is a big school, and a big undertaking.

Peters: Well, paying the sisters' salaries, and then of course, with basketball, we had a lay person who coached basketball and we had to pay his salary.

BMc: Was there a booster organization? A parents' support organization that used to help you raise funds? Do you remember?

Peters: I really believe we had what is called an Alumni Association. They would help.

BMc: So you would find that a lot of the students would stay here in

the Cedar Rapids area and go on to be helpful in the Alumni Association.

Peters: That's right. But the people were very good in supporting their church. We didn't seem to have any financial difficulties, even in the Depression.

BMc: Of course, you go with what you get. (Laughter)

Peters: But just think, in that Depression, or right before it, Father Lenihan built that school for \$185,000. Well, you could easily pay that for a residence now.

BMc: That's right.

Peters: Oh, my, the plumbing and electricity and the floors that are in that school.

BMc: That's right. You couldn't build it for that anymore, even come close.

Peters: And then of course, you would have to be on the watch. I think I'd walk through that school every night and see all the windows were closed and all the doors were closed and lights were out. It's a responsibility.

BMc: That's right, it's a big responsibility.

It was a big responsibility to the students and the people in your parish, too. Could you talk about that a little bit, about how you have dealt with that responsibility over the years, of providing guidance for that many people--for so many years? On what ways is it difficult and in what ways is it rewarding?

Peters: You see, Mass would be on Sunday. At the Holy Mass, you would have the sermon. And then, if there might be some difficulties, they would call up and talk to you and it would be confidential.



Of course, the priest would have quite a bit of experience. He would try to give good experience. Then, of course, people who are interested in coming into the church, we'd give them instructions. I remember we'd take them individually or at least two to three together, but mostly individually and that way you got to know them personally. If you'd take a big class, well, they won't speak up as freely as individually. I remember it'd go for about three months once a week. Maybe you would take two or three appointments a night, that's why when the appointments got over, you'd skip out to the ball park. You would give them instructions, and you would always tell them, "Don't come into the faith, unless you see it, don't come in to please the one that's instructing you or the one that's having you come. Come in if you see it and if you don't . . ." That's why converts were always good members of the Church. Because they had a free choice.

BMc: Father Peters, you told me once that you had a specific question you always used to ask people about when they decided about their husband or their wife. What was that?

Peters: Well, I'd ask them, "Where did you meet each other?" And I'd say that eight out of ten would say at Danceland at the dance.

BMc: And what was Danceland?

Peters: It was a dance hall, as I remember, down in the Loop there someplace like near Five Seasons.

BMc: And did they have live music?

Peters: Oh, yes, oh my, yes. I think that later on, then, they moved out in a building between pretty close to Marion. Out where that

shopping center is now.

BMc: Like the Armar Ballroom. Right.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: What about dancing . . . was it a big, auditorium-type building?

Peters: Oh, my yes, a big building.

BMc: Who put the dances on? Do you know? Was it a private business?  
Do you know?

Peters: I imagine it was a private business.

BMc: Was it an appropriate place to go to?

Peters: I think it was, I can't even say I was ever there.

BMc: But it must have been popular.

Peters: I think it was. I think it was.

BMc: And this would have been during the thirties.

Peters: Yes. Early thirties.

BMc: What about other amusement-type park places around town. I have  
a note here about the Alamo, for instance. That was an old  
dance theatre. But that may have been gone before you came to  
Cedar Rapids. Does that ring a bell?

Peters: What is the Alamo?

BMc: The Alamo. Well, I don't know, but I think it was a big old  
dance theatre.

Peters: Probably.

BMc: But I think it was gone before you came.

Peters: Probably. Yes.

BMc: Were there any other recreation parks that you remember that the  
kids used to go to, or amusement parks around here? What about  
up at Ellis Park and along the river, did kids used to go up there?

Peters: Well, I suppose they would go up there with their families.

BMc: What did you used to do on your days off? It doesn't sound like you had much time off.

Peters: No. A doctor told me, he says, "You go home as often as you can." So I'd go home every two weeks. Yes. And I'd have to go up through Manchester, Strawberry Point and Elkader and that was probably the only recreation I got.

BMc: So you kept in close contact with your parents, then?

Peters: Yes. Yes. Pleased, too, because they're gone now.

BMc: I know you have to do that while you can.

What about some of the famous characters around town. Did you have any contact with Grant Wood or any contact with him?

Peters: No. I wouldn't have time. No.

BMc: Let's talk about something everybody likes to talk about and that's life before air conditioning. What was life like?  
(Laughter)

Peters: Well, you never noticed it. So much so, I don't go for air conditioning even now. We got our air conditioner in the basement and never bring it out. Kind of used to putting up with the heat.

BMc: What did you do on a hot summer night when you couldn't sleep?

Peters: Just wait awhile and later on go to sleep. I remember I had a doctor say, "Never sleep with a window open, because later in the morning, you'll be dead asleep and the breeze will come in and you'll catch cold." So I endure the heat at night and I have no trouble. Relaxed.

BMc: What was holiday time like with the church and with school?

Christmas time. What can you tell me about those holidays?

Peters: Well, of course, that would be a very busy time for the priests.

BMc: You bet.

Peters: That's when the masses. . . a very busy time. That was one of our busiest times. (Laughter)

BMc: What kind of special celebrations did you have right around Christmas time? Were there school plays and school pageants?

Peters: Well, they would have Christmas programs, you know.

BMc: And what would they be like?

Peters: Well, like any programs, Christmas carols, Santa Claus appearing. . .

BMc: Would the kids have Christmas trees in the classrooms?

Peters: Oh, I'm sure they did. I'm sure they did.

BMc: That's something I missed, we couldn't do that when I was in school. (Laughter) Couldn't have them.

Peters: (Laughter) Danger of fire.

BMc: Well, yes. Did the children used to exchange presents and things? Give Christmas presents to the sisters and to you?

Peters: I'm sure they did. Yes.

I know it probably. . .there's no use of me speaking of Worthington, is there? That's where I was after I left here.

BMc: No, that would have been after 1960, right? See that's a little out of our time frame.

Peters: We better not get into that. (Laughter)

BMc: What about Easter time. What kinds of celebrations did you have around Easter time within the Church?

Peters: I don't think it would be as elaborate as Christmas. There would be celebrations, and for the priests a busy time.

BMc: Absolutely. That's right.

You say you used to visit the sick, you used to go to the hospitals, or at home.

Peters: Both. Both.

BMc: So you usually would go to Mercy Hospital, probably?

Peters: Well, both.

BMc: Hospitals have really changed a lot. What kind of changes did you see?

Peters: Well, I notice, you know, going through the hospital, at every nurse's section there may be three or four nurses. Now you go through and there's probably close to 20. Well, I suppose it's all the records they have to keep for everybody. There weren't very many nurses in those first days.

BMc: And it was such hard work.

I know one thing that you have always had a lot to do with is baptisms of the babies.

Peters: Oh, my yes.

BMc: Were most of the babies born at the hospital when you came or were some of them still being born at home?

Peters: Well, I'd say here in Cedar Rapids, mostly in the hospitals.

BMc: Were you born in a hospital, or were you born at home?

Peters: Born in the home.

BMc: That's a big difference.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: When you first came, were people having their children baptized right away?

Peters: Yes. That's something I have noticed. Probably not here, but in

some places, they were born the same day and baptized in the same day. And have to be brought to the church. I admire them. But people would try to get them baptized as soon as they can. The danger if something should happen to them. Yes.

BMc: That's an awfully happy duty, baptizing little babies. That's a wonderful thing. (Laughter)

Peters: They're so cute.

BMc: I know it.

Since you did a lot of visiting in the hospitals and things, what other kinds of changes have you noticed in health care, relationships with the patients and the doctors, relationships with the patients and the priests, changes in lengths of hospital stays?

Peters: Oh, my, you don't stay at all! (Laughter)

BMc: You can't afford to! (Laughter)

Peters: No. No. Yes, they used to stay, you know. I noticed on the case of babies, it used to be 11 days the mother stayed in bed. I remember that the cost for 11 days was \$35.

BMc: Oh, my word.

Peters: That would be a little less than \$3 a day. They found out, I think, during the World War, that they were short of hospital beds, and the soldiers that got out early did better than those confined to bed. That's the reason I heard they stopped the staying that long.

BMc: Well, sure, those poor women could probably barely walk after they had been in bed for 11 days. They would be so weak.

Peters; Sure. But the mothers get right up practically. (Laughter)

BMc: That's great. Do you visit now at any of the nursing homes?

Peters: Yes, I visit the hospital. I take communions out, and hear confessions of some of the people.

BMc: Was that a duty that you had when you were a young man, also?

Peters: Oh, my, yes. That was a duty. Now I just do it kind of just to help them out.

BMc: What about the differences in care for the elderly between now and when you first started?

Peters: Well, I don't think people lived as long then as now. Now, they have these home for the aged which they very seldom had then. I remember a couple started up here on the west side, they were just residents. Maybe a wife that had been a nurse. She had her family raised, and she'd bring in elderly people. I think that's how they started. So now they have these large old folks homes.

BMc: Did you find that there were more people living in the same house with their children, for instance, when they were elderly then?

Peters: Yes.

BMc: So you used to visit the elderly in their homes.

Peters: Yes.

BMc: What's your opinion on that change?

Peters: Well, I think it was kind of nice when they could stay at home. But with the prices of things, sometimes both has to work, and they couldn't couldn't accommodate the elderly people.

BMc: It's a difficult question. It really is.

Peters: It's nice where they can, though, because we're all going to be old sometime and it's nice to be good to your ones to whom you owe so much, the older ones.

BMc: That's right.

What about some of the . . . you would have seen, too, some of the childhood diseases that used to race through the schools, whooping cough and measles and some of those kinds of things. Do you remember anything about any of those, any specifically severe epidemics or bad runs of that when it was. . .

Peters: Well, they'd get started in various schools. Of course, then they got to the inoculations, and it stopped. But I remember you'd just be in fear and trembling it wouldn't get started.

BMc: Did you quarantine? Did they have quarantines in the houses?

Peters: Yes. Oh, my, yes.

BMc: Did you have a nurse at the school?

Peters: I don't think so. No.

BMc: What kinds of things did you have? Was there ever any small pox for you or was diptheria, whooping cough, scarlet fever?

Peters: Yes, but I think some of the parents would have them inoculated, you know, then you wouldn't have such a fear.

BMc: I know, it's a scary thing. We don't realize how lucky we are.

Peters: Oh, yes.

BMc: When you think about that. To have that fright for our children.

Peters: Isn't it funny that hardly any of those diseases gets a going now, do they?

BMc: I know it, that's right. I've even heard now that they're introducing a chicken pox vaccine. So even that will go away.

Well, I think we're almost to the end of our tape, here. I really have enjoyed interviewing you. This has been so good.

It's so nice to have a viewpoint from St. Pat's, from the school



and from the school and the church, because it had such an impact. Is there anything else we need to . . .

Peters: Not a thing.

BMc: Father Peters, you were associated with the church here and the school for thirty years. What do you think during that time was really the most important thing about your life here at the church at St. Pat's and with the school with the community?

Peters: Well, I think the work of the church and the school of carrying on the Lord's work, the salvation of souls and making good citizens of the community. I think that would be the best.

BMc: Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate the time.

Peters: (Laughter) I appreciate it.

BMc: This is the end of tape number one: Interview with Father Donald Peterson.

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

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- 1--When were you born? Where?
- How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
- What are your parents' names?
- Where did you go to school?
- Are you married or single?
- Did you raise a family? How big?
- 6,9,10-11,25 30,31,35,37 --What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community 1-2,28

1. Transportation

- 5--Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
- Trolleys (the Interurban)
- 3--Horses and First Automobiles
- 9,22,23--Mud roads and the seedling mile
- Hunter Airport and the first planes
- Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications

- Newspapers
- Radios
- Advertising
- Telephones

B. People in the Community

1. Amusements/Recreation 20,22-24

- Motion Pictures
- Cedar Rapids Parks
- 31-32--Dances
- Carnival Week
- Chautauqua
- Community Theater
- Little Gallery
- Symphony Orchestra
- Circus
- Greene's Opera House
- 11-12 --Amusement Parks (11am?)
- Camps
- Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

2. Famous Characters

- Cherry Sisters
- Grant Wood
- Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
- Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle
  - 33--Life before air conditioning
  - 28--Winter Activities
    - Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
    - Clothing
    - Toys
    - Saloons/Taverns
  - 3-4--Farm Life
4. Family Life
  - Household Help
  - Women's Roles
  - 3-4,13,14--Childrens' Activities/Behavior
    - Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)
  - 37--Elderly
5. Ethnic/Minority Life
  - Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
  - Indians
  - Segregation of Blacks
  - Jobs Available
- C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community -11
  1. Education 4-5,8,15,18,24
    - 14,17--Cedar Rapids Schools (St.Patrick's)
      - Coe College
      - Mount Mercy College
      - Cornell College
    - 6,7 --Loras College in Dubuque 9--StPaul Seminary
  2. Government
    - City Services
    - Streets/Roads
    - Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)
  3. Medical
    - 35,36--Hospitals
      - Patient-Doctor Relationship
      - Broken Bones
    - 38--Polio, TB, Debilitating Diseases
      - House Calls
    - 35--Home Delivery of Babies

4. Business and Economy

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

5. Attitudes/Values 16-17,18,21,24-25

- 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
- 5-6 --World War I
- Roaring 20's
- Prohibition

11,16-17,19--Great Depression

26,29,30--WWII

