

TOM ARMITAGE, RETIRING DIRECTOR, CEDAR RAPIDS PUBLIC LIBRARY

Q: Tell me what your growing-up years were like...where you were born and the town you grew up in and I thought you might have something (inaudible) library stuff.

I do in a way. I was born in Torrington, Wyoming, and my mother was a teacher and my father was in real estate, and when I was just about three my father died, and this kind of threw everything into a tizzy, of course, I being too young to really realize what was going on. My mother went back to school to get a certificate so she actually could teach in something other than a country school. So I was about three years old and we moved close to her parents, which was in South Dakota, and she went to the University of South Dakota at Vermillion. We lived in a trailer there, and it was a pretty rough life because it was right after the war. I can remember it was so cold in the trailer I used to go to bed with my snowsuit on.

Q: Is this a joke?

No. The water would freeze inside the trailer. My mom was real concerned about keeping the heating on because there were several trailer fires. This is kind of right after the war. And then I ended up breaking my arm, so I went to live with my grandparents.

Q: Back in Wyoming?

No, in South Dakota.

Q: Oh, that's where they were.

They were in South Dakota. So we then after she graduated went out to California, and I spent most of my growing-up years in California.

Q: What area was it?

Around the LA area. I went to three different schools in first grade and two or three schools in second grade, so I didn't get off to really a very good start because it was rather confusing, but we did settle. She bought a house, and it was pretty stable until I got out of high school. One of the things that I can remember especially about libraries was that I used to go into the public library in our community and they had a publication there called Hobbies magazine, and I was very interested in...I've always been kind of a collector of things even from when I was very young...and I always used to look at the Hobbies magazine and I'd jot down some of the names and things in there and I would write people and I started collecting autographs and stamps and so on. But I used to go in there all the time just to look at the most current issue and the back issues. And when I went to school, one of my friends was interested in science fiction and he encouraged me to start reading Robert Heinlein's (sp.) books. It was quite interesting because I read

everything I could get my hands on. I don't really remember any of the titles. If I thought a little bit about it I probably could remember a few of them.

Q: Is one of them Stranger in a Strange Land?

No. These all had to do with space exploration, and we started keeping lists of the books that we'd read, and somewhere around a hundred, when I finished going through Robert Heinlein (?) and then a few of the other science fiction writers, for some reason I stopped and I don't exactly know why. But I did stop and I really didn't read very much after that. It's almost like I was driven to read everything I could on the subject, but they were books that were written for people my age, which would have been about eight or nine years old, and I didn't really have much contact with public libraries after that.

Q: When you were going on to high school then in California, were you thinking of possible jobs and careers? What were your thoughts about that when you were a young man?

Well, this is the part of the interview when you probably don't want to hear what the answer is, but I'll give it to you anyway. When I was in high school I never set foot in a library. I was a very poor student. I had a lot of trouble with that whole thing so I consequently didn't use libraries and never thought of possibly working in a library. It was the farthest thing from my mind, and it just wasn't my interest area. So I don't think I ever went in a library when I was in high school.

Q: Did you have thoughts about what kind of work you might do? Were you thinking about going to college then?

No...yeah, I had a lot of pressure on me to go to college.

Q: From your mom.

From my mother and her brothers and their...you know, I really quite honestly wasn't ready to go and I just had trouble getting through high school and I was lucky to make it. So there were a lot of subtle pressures. The whole family is full of professionals—doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs—and I was the oldest grandchild and it was pretty much expected that I was going to go to college and follow in a very traditional path, and I tried but I just couldn't quite do it.

Q: Focus.

I couldn't focus. I actually barely made it through high school, quite honestly. There were like 315 people in my graduating class and I was somewhere around 304, and I didn't even really know the people that were below me academically because I don't think I'd ever seen them. I don't know where they were, and I didn't go to school very much, quite

honestly, and when I was a senior I had a lot of trouble getting there. Anyway, they did let me graduate, which I can't believe they did but they did, and I went to a junior college. I majored in electronics. I was interested in electronics because of several reasons. I had a friend who was doing that, also, and I thought it might lead to a job potentially in one of the aircraft companies around the LA area, like Boeing, and this big employer. I took a lot of drafting and so on so I was kind of really off in a direction that was far, far away from where I actually ended up. So anyway, I never did really complete two years' worth of college. I went in the service because there was also a lot of pressure at that point in time because of Vietnam. I received my physical notice and I was scheduled to go take my physical and I knew I was going to get drafted, and somebody told me that there was a reserve unit that had opened up, and it wasn't an hour and I was over at the reserve unit putting in an application. I was accepted and I joined the navy and so it was a communications unit. The interesting thing about it was I had to have this clearance and it wasn't just a regular old clearance. It took a year to do, because of the nature of the work. The security clearance was called a Top Secret Crypto clearance. So anyway, I continued to work after I was out of high school and was in college, and I finally didn't have the pressure of the draft anymore so I quit college and I worked in a machine shop. I did a lot of work with automobile mechanics rebuilding engines and all types of things, mainly Volkswagens and Porsches. So anyway, when it came time to go, I went to boot camp and did all the normal things but I found out that I actually was going to go to a message center and work in a message center, and some of the traffic that I would be seeing was very, very sensitive. I wasn't really aware of what the scope of it really all was but there were messages going directly to the president from the Vietnam commanders and so on, and it was very exciting. I thought about the possibility of staying not with the military but as a civilian employee, because I really liked the work, but I decided not to. I decided to go back to school when I got out, and I thought, you know, I was really such a miserable failure in high school and my first attempt at college, I'm going to see if I can't really do this.

Q: Had it been six years then in the naval reserve? Was it a six-year commitment?

Yeah, it's a six-year commitment.

Q: So it was six years altogether that you were...

Well, yeah, and actually when I got out I had two years left on my commitment so I was supposed to attend reserve meetings, and I had trouble doing that. This is where I got involved in buying and selling antiques, at this point in time, and it was basically because I didn't have any money and it was my first attempt to...I was married with no children. I started going to a Sunday flea market and buying things and attempting to resell them, and this was in 1968.

(Recorder was shut off at this point and then turned on again.)

Q: Tell me how you got interested in antiques. Was it just because you were driving around and seeing sales?

No. I've had an interest for a long time. It came from my mother. She collected antiques when she was a girl.

Q: So the antiques were kind of an extension of the Hobbies things, the collecting?

Yeah. Right. The way I really learned what to do was I bought...are you recording this?

Q: Yeah. I bought a Worman's (he spelled it) price guide. What I essentially did was I memorized the book and then I went around and I tried to find examples of all the things that were listed in there so I could really see what they looked like, so I did a lot of preparation I guess because I needed to know what the price structure was and I needed to know what the actual object really looked like. So that's basically how I started. I spent a lot of time doing that, but in addition to that I'd taken a job with the telephone company, so I worked for General Telephone Company in California. I was a member of the CWA labor union, and I just really didn't like my job. The reason I didn't like it was that I was expected to work when there was no work. I had one of those jobs that was a full-time job and they expected you to be busy the whole time, but there was about two hours' worth of real work and I just couldn't stomach the possibility of being in a career that was going to be that way. So that's one of the reasons why I quit my job and I went back to school. I went back to a community college. I took a wide variety of classes and I decided that I was going to try to make the school thing work because I wasn't really sure whether I didn't have the ability to do it or whether I was just slackin' off. I didn't really know, but it was one of those questions that was always nagging me. Well, I ended up on the honor roll and I figured out that I really was pretty good at school. So I started taking everything and I had enough hours to get a two-year degree and it was in history, so I just sucked up the social sciences like crazy. I took everything...all the anthropology courses, all the archaeology courses, I went on digs...I went crazy. It was great. I was finding out all kinds of things that I never knew before. So when it came time for me to make a decision on where I was going to continue my education, I decided that I was going to try the Midwest. A couple of my friends that I used to sell things to in Santa Barbara, and this is where this all occurred, had moved to Oklahoma, and they had started antique shops back there. So I figured...well, you know, maybe I ought to try going back there. So really I bought and sold my way through college. It was real interesting because I used to go to sales all the time and buy stuff, and then on the weekends I'd go down and sell it, and that's what paid basically my rent and my food and everything while I was going to school, in addition to the G.I. Bill. I had a child by then and I was married, so it was kind of what I called my Midwest tour.

Q: And—

There's something else I forgot to tell you that may be interesting or it may not be, to what you're trying to do here. When I was about eight years old my mother bought me a set of World Book Encyclopedias, and I don't know why but it just interested me so much. So I started making up excuses not to go to school so I could go through the World Book. I started with A and I went all the way through and it took me about four or five days. Anyway, every time I found something that I thought was interesting I'd stop and read it, but I went page by page all the way through it, and I was claiming that I had this illness and it was basically so I could stay home and look at the World Book Encyclopedia. After I had gone through there completely, I may have used it a few times but I was kind of done with it. I don't know if it was a good investment for my mother or not, but anyway I think that plus my early experience in a friendly place, like a library with Hobbies magazine and the staff that was there, plus the ability to take a lot of classes in a wide variety of subjects, really led me to be a real generalist as far as my education goes. When I got out of college...most people need like 135 units or 130...I had 240 or 50 units.

Q: This is bachelor's degree?

This is bachelor's degree. This is before I even thought about getting a master's degree.

Q: And this was the University of...Oklahoma?

No. Actually it was the University of Kansas at Pittsburg.

Q: The University of Kansas...that's right.

And that's where I got my BA. I was going to teach. I wanted to be a history teacher. I really love history and I took all of the education courses, all of the psychology courses, and everything to set me up. I got to the point where my next step was to take student teaching, and I choked. I said I don't want to do this.

Q: Did you ever try it?

No. I'm being honest about it. The only reason I thought being a teacher would be cool was I'd have the summers off and I'd get to go antiquing. So my wife said why don't you take a class in library science? Just try it, because I was down to the last semester and I wasn't sure what I was going to do afterwards, because I had pretty much decided I wasn't going to teach. So I said okay. So I signed up for a class and it was a cataloging class, and I got into the class the first day and the teacher said how many people are thinking of being librarians and going on and getting a master's degree in library science? So I looked around and there were a few people that put up their hands, and he said if you're thinking about doing that at all one of the things that you really need to do is to get a job in a library. So right after class I went down to the library director.

Q: Public library?

No, the college library director and I said I just signed up for a library science class and I'm thinking of becoming a librarian. The teacher, whose name was Rene Jordan, suggested that we get a job in a library and I need a job, and he said okay, you're hired. When do you want to start? And I said right now. So I got a job in the college library, and pretty soon I was opening the library and then they were giving me the key. Anyway I really got off on the library atmosphere, the idea of helping people, the idea of using the knowledge that I'd accumulated taking a wide variety of classes, and just my interest in stuff kind of propelled me on and I went to get a master's degree. And once again I was a little bit off track. The reason I was going to get a master's degree in library science was because I wanted to be a rare book room curator. I wanted to get into rare books. A guy that I knew, from going to auctions actually, was the rare book curator at the university library, and he managed several special collections. It was a pretty interesting area because Eugene Debbs, an early socialist, used to live right around in the area. They published a series of books for the common man called The Little Blue Books, and one of the special collections at the library was called the Haldeman Julius Collection of these Little Blue Books on a wide variety of topics. There were probably a thousand of them. But anyway, I thought it would be really cool to manage a special collection. So I got to the University of Missouri and the reason why I went there was there was a guy that was a professor there and he was a very well respected, famous rare books professor. And I figured if I'm going to study under somebody, he sounds like the guy that I'd want to take the classes from. My first week there I decided that boy, this guy's a crab. What a grump! But that's where I discovered public libraries. And public libraries...I really had a couple of mentors at school that showed me what a thrill it was and what a diverse work situation that you have, and is really the work at a public library.

Q: Was this in Columbia?

This was in Columbia.

Q: Were you working at the university library?

No. This was in Kansas where I was working, and actually I was still buying and selling. I did not work when I went through school.

Q: Started at Missouri.

Yeah. So anyway, I really found public libraries, and I was so excited because they were such an interesting, interesting institution. Anybody could come in and ask anything. They weren't college students and they weren't the audience...I mean it was like anybody can come in. Anyway, I just fell in love with the whole concept and decided that I'm going to be a public librarian. So when I graduated I took my first job as a reference

librarian in Ottumwa. After I took the job, which actually the annual salary was \$8,000 a year...

Q: And what year was it?

This was 1975. Anyway, I received a call from the Cedar Rapids library, because I had put in an application there to become a reference librarian and they also had an open position, and they were paying \$9,200. So I thought I know I've already accepted this other job but it wouldn't hurt me just to interview, and if I get it I might just take that one.

Q: Hold on one second. Was it just the advertisements of positions that brought you to Iowa?

Yes.

Q: Did you know anything about Iowa before that?

I didn't even know where Iowa was.

Q: You were in Missouri.

I know, but I mean I was...

Q: You were looking kind of all around the Midwest at the time?

Yeah. What really did it was that the director had sent a job opening up to be put on the bulletin board and there was a notice down there that he would actually come to the school and be interviewing.

Q: The Ottumwa director?

Yeah. So I thought okay...let's do that. So he interviewed two or three people and I got the job, or he offered me the job. But I hadn't started. I graduated actually in December of '74 and once again the money was not flowing and I didn't have really very much so I had to get a job or it was the gas station—one or the other. I was three weeks away from that was it, because that's about all the money I had. And this is kind of embarrassing and I laugh about it now but when I first started my job in Ottumwa, the first week I had to borrow \$20 from the director so I could eat. Do you know how embarrassing it is to go start a job and go in and have to ask the person who hired you if he could loan you \$20 so you could eat? But that's how poor I was at that point. It was in the middle of winter and I just didn't have any money.

Q: Now go back to the idea that the public library in Cedar Rapids also had a position.

Yeah. They had a position also that was a reference librarian and I applied and I got a call and it was from Thelma Grover. I didn't know then...and she said they wanted to interview me so I said okay. So we set up a time and I got up real early in the morning and I drove up to Cedar Rapids, and I got there...I don't know if you want to hear all this.

Q: Yeah.

I got there at the time that I was supposed to be there and it was at 9:00 or 9:30 or whatever it was. Anyway, she said well, we're not ready yet. I said what? She said we're just not quite ready yet and could you come back? I thought okay. So I was supposed to come back in an hour or an hour and a half or something like that and I decided I'd better go check on my car. I was parked about three blocks away from the library and I got there and I thought maybe I can find a place I can move my car closer to the library. So I got in there and my battery was dead. This was actually right before...what I didn't tell you was on the way up here I was coming up old Highway 218 and the sun was just starting to come up because I had to start real early to get up here. And up in the distance I could see a tractor-trailer pulling a big house trailer and somehow the load and the trailer got disconnected and the tractor-trailer that was pulling this big trailer went past me and here comes the trailer headed right down the road for me. The hitch had gone into the asphalt and sparks were flying everywhere and I jammed on my brakes and I thought the thing was going to run over me, and I basically stopped a foot or two short of being run over by this house trailer, those double-wide deals—they were towing one. So that didn't start the day off very well. So when I got up there as I said I went to check my car and my battery was dead, and I thought oh crap, now what am I going to do? A couple of doors down there was a mechanic there and I asked him if he could charge up my battery or something because it was down. I told him I was here applying for a job and so on and my battery was dead. He said don't worry about it. You go to your interview or whatever you have to do and when you come back your car's going to be just fine. So I thought well there's a nice guy. I left the car there because it was two doors down from the shop and I guess they had to push it up to put the charger on it. So I get back to the library and they take me on a tour of the library and it was the old library. It was the one where the Friends of the Library had their books stored upstairs and it was like going up and down these little passages and it was like a maze and like a gigantic, disorganized mess. That was my first impression of the library. Downstairs where the public services were, things were pretty well organized. I didn't detect too much chaos, but behind the scenes it just looked like—unbelievable. Thelma said we want you to meet the director so I thought okay. I remember Tom Carney (Kearney?) came out. It was about 11:30 and he was on his way to Rotary, and this was on a Monday, and he had on a camel, long kind of trench coat and it was probably in December, and he asked me a few questions and left. I went down and I knew I wasn't going to get the job. I can't remember who the person was that was interviewing me, but I could just tell by her body language that I wasn't going to get it. The day ended and I went back to get my car, and the mechanic or the owner of the shop said I got your car all fixed and I asked him what I owed him and he said you don't owe me anything, and I thought God, what a nice community. Here I blow into town and

try to apply for a job and I have car trouble and the guy charges my battery and fixes it up and doesn't charge me anything—nothing. And that always stuck with me all these years about that act of kindness that somebody showed somebody from out of town that had come to town to find a job. So I had a very good impression of what Cedar Rapids was like because I thought boy, if the whole town's like this, this is a great place to live. I essentially went back and started my job in Ottumwa and about a year...am I telling you more than you want to know?

Q: No.

Okay. Did you have another question?

Q: You're doing fine. I was going to say—

I can just kind of tell you up to the point where I took the job in Cedar Rapids. That's where I'll stop. Then you can ask me some questions. After a year I became the assistant director in Ottumwa and I knew right away that I didn't want to stay there. In fact I had said that before my daughter got into first grade I was getting another job and getting out of there. It was a very chaotic situation and I won't go into any details but man, I had to get out of there, so I started applying for jobs. What I really liked to do was be a reference librarian. I like the interaction with the people and I just love to talk to people about things. I like to get them things. I like to see how happy they are when we're able to get something for them. So the public service thing...I just really got off on providing services and that's all I ever wanted to be was a reference librarian. I started applying for jobs and I just couldn't get one.

Q: You were already an assistant director then?

Well, yeah, and I just wanted to be a reference librarian. So I started applying for director jobs because I got the feeling that that's what the expectation was. Some people just stay as a reference librarian and that's all they ever do, but unfortunately, and this kind of shows something not so good about the profession, is that when you're a man the expectation is that you're going to be moving up and you're not going to be moving laterally, and to take another reference librarian's job would be a lateral move. So I applied for a director's job down at Burlington and I applied for one up in Fort Dodge. I went over to interview for the Burlington job and that was a real interesting situation. They had people on the library board that hadn't been to a meeting in years because they were bedridden. They had a young attorney or a real estate guy who was trying to get the situation in hand. They needed to hire somebody who was going to move this thing along. So I interviewed in both places and Burlington called me up and said we want to hire you. We want to offer you the job. I said okay, I'll tell you what: give me one day and I'll call you back and tell you yes or no. So then I called Fort Dodge back and said I've just gotten a job offer from Burlington. Are you interested? Because if you're not I'm going to go to Burlington. He said we've had a number of things come up and we

just haven't paid enough attention. Could you come up here one more time? And I said sure. I'll be up there tomorrow. I drove up there and the board interviewed me again and they offered me the job. So I went from not being able to get reference librarian jobs to two director jobs, so I took the one in Fort Dodge. I thought that I probably could do better there because there were so many problems in Burlington with the building and with the structure, so I just took the (Fort Dodge) job. I was the director there for just about nine years and made a lot of changes and did a lot of different things, but it was really time for me to move on and to go somewhere else. So I started looking for a job. There were a lot of other reasons but I won't tell you right now why.

Q: But Fort Dodge was a community of about how big? I can't quite remember.

At the time I was there it was 32,000. Most of the medium-sized communities were bouncing around that size—Mason City, Fort Dodge—and Burlington was close to 30,000. In the last probably 10 or 15 years I think Fort Dodge may be down to about 25,000 now. There's been a real loss in population by some of the medium-sized cities.

Q: But you were pretty much looking in Iowa. Just tell me...did you like Iowa as a state?

Loved it. I like Iowa. When I was looking for jobs to go beyond Fort Dodge, I did apply for a couple of out-of-state jobs and I just missed really getting interviewed, but they were a little bigger than probably what I could handle, so when the job for assistant director came up I knew I might have a chance at that because moving as a director to an assistant director in a larger situation might be a little more of a logical move than from director in a small situation to a director in a large situation. So I think that's why I was having trouble. Usually when I get to the interview stage, I get the job. I can sell myself in an interview process and I've never had a problem doing that, so that was never the problem. They were looking on paper and my paper may not have measured up to somebody else's experience on paper. But if I can get into an interview I'm a killer.

(Laughter)

I can do it. So the job came up in Cedar Rapids and I sent in an application and it was for the assistant director's job.

Q: And this was 1986?

This was...yes. It was at the end of '85, and I started...I think it was in February of '86. I think that's correct.

Q: So it had been some time since your first visit with the car trouble.

Yes, it had been some time.

Q: And then how did Cedar Rapids strike you when you came, first about the community and then about the library, in that year?

I had always heard such good things about Cedar Rapids. Not really living that close and not being in Iowa, and not really knowing...one of the things that I noticed was the national attention that Cedar Rapids gets on a lot of the different fronts—politics, safety of a place to live—there were a lot of different things that made me realize that Cedar Rapids has a national reputation and did at that time. They may check in to see what Chicago's doing, and they may find out how things are in LA, but to get the real finger on the pulse they didn't call Rochester, Minnesota, or Topeka, Kansas, or Sioux City, but they called Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and I don't know why that was but it seemed like Cedar Rapids was very highly thought of in the country as giving a pretty good indication of how things were economically, politically and (inaudible), so it got a lot of national attention. When I was living in Ottumwa (inaudible) in Iowa, and when I was living in Fort Dodge watching the national news I saw Cedar Rapids' name quite a bit and it always impressed me, and that was over the ten-year span of time between Ottumwa and when I left Fort Dodge. It didn't happen overnight. So I knew the community was probably a pretty good stable community. I've always worked in libraries where there've been problems, and I won't go into any of that but part of what I always thought was my ability was to take a library that had problems and turn it around: Ottumwa, Fort Dodge, and I was getting myself into another one in Cedar Rapids.

(Recorder was shut off at this point and then turned on again.)

Q: Why don't you tell me about some of the challenges that you knew you were going to face without going into details that you don't want to deal with?

You mean here?

Q: Yeah, in Cedar Rapids, at the library.

I saw a very poor public service attitude. I saw a library that had a lot of resources that I didn't believe was using its resources very effectively. I saw an administration that was in trouble that I thought needed some direction. I thought that I could probably provide all of that, and that's one of the reasons why...

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Q: You knew you had a challenge coming here?

Oh, yeah. I checked it out ahead of time. It's not that I went into this blindly. I knew exactly what I was getting myself into. I had developed friendships with a couple of people that worked at the Cedar Rapids Library. One of them was Roy Knage (sp.).

Q: How do you spell his last name...K-n-o-e?

No. It's K-n-e-g...I don't know, something like that.

Q: Okay.

But Roy and I had been acquaintances for some time and when I was offered the job I called Roy up—he had gone on to Ames as the assistant director—and interviewed him about the job, too, to find out what I was really getting into. So I tried to do my homework as much as I could and I really felt I knew pretty much what I was letting myself in for. But I came in as the assistant director. I worked for Tom Carney, who had been the director for 16 or 17 years before I had gotten here. So he left a year after I came and through the advertising and selection interview process they offered me the job. So I was Tom Carney's replacement.

Q: In your job as assistant director had you gotten to know the board at the time? Did you go to the board meetings and were you kind of involved and learned the structure and learned the process?

Yeah, pretty much. It was real interesting and pretty obvious. They needed somebody basically to set the tone and somebody to do the planning, and they needed to move the institution ahead, and I perceived that when I was selected as director it was my job. I've had a tendency quite honestly in other places that I've worked, and I've realized this and it can be a good thing and sometimes it's a bad thing, but sometimes I take over so completely that part of the problem is that the board is following me. I had this problem in Fort Dodge. It is a problem but to explain it any other way it wasn't that I was trying to cut the board out of its role or decision making or whatever, but I always realized that in either situation whether it was any of the rest of the situations I was in that my job was to run the library. Their job was to create policy and to approve that, and a lot of times I can be a little stifling by taking over fairly completely. If the communication isn't real good I think board members can feel adrift. I don't like to run something where I have to run to the board all the time. I'm used to taking care of things myself and telling people later. I try to temper that somewhat through communication, but it becomes difficult because I essentially saw the board once a month, twelve times a year, and I'm there every day. So my job is to run the library and not bring a lot of niggling little things to the board, but only those things that had policy ramifications. It's just one of those things I know about myself, that I sometimes take over too completely.

Q: How did you go about setting goals and then getting them accomplished? I was thinking about your learning previously and then learning on the job about the management skills that you developed and planning and fiscal entrepreneurship and things like that.

Well, I'm good with money. I love money. One of my big thrills is making money and I know how to make a penny scream. But you know, besides fiscal management that was one of my big thrills in working in libraries, was to try and actually make money in a non-profit institution and to try and grow the revenue side, when you were never encouraged to do that by any city manager or any mayor or anything else, because if you made any more revenues they wanted them. The trick really was to make enough money that you could really control so that they wouldn't really have control over it and you could move your operation really along, because they weren't going to give you the money. They just don't. Libraries are in that situation. If we were a pothole we'd be in good shape, but we're not. So while most library directors were trying to short the expenditure side in the budget, I was working on the revenue side. A lot of people that I knew and other library directors were padding their budgets. They were saying that essentially...they weren't giving the really true costs on the expenditure side. And what I decided to do was to do the exact opposite of what everybody else was doing. I was going to be completely honest on the expenditure side and I was going to be less than candid on the revenue side, because that's where the money was. It wasn't on the expenditure side. In other words you can't develop a budget that requires the City Council to give you \$50,000 more because you're not going to be able to operate. You're telling them that your costs are a lot higher. I told them exactly what my costs were and they give us small increases. Where we really made progress was by being less than candid about how much revenue we were really taking in, because they would never know that until the end of the year.

Q: How did that relate to your accomplishing your goals for the library then?

Money basically is required to move things along. It's required to buy things, pieces of equipment, to hire people, anything. We never really asked the City for anything except once and they said no, so it convinced me that that was really going to be the answer. I asked them early in my tenure to replace ten of our dumb terminals. Remember when we had dumb terminals?

Q: Umhmm.

It was about \$7,000 or \$8,000 to do that. And when I got the budget back after we had asked them for money—and this was the capital replacement budget, not a capital improvements budget, and we'd asked them for money to do this—they said yes. And when I really got to looking at the budget what they had done is they had deducted the money required to do this out of our book budget and they had just transferred it over into the equipment budget, and I thought you dirty birds. Here we're just asking you for a measly ten grand and you're taking it out of our book budget to give it to us. In other words the answer is no, so I thought fine. One of the things we did early was we made a deal with the City and there isn't anybody around right now that remembers what this deal really is except me. I went over to the City with the finance committee, Bernie Renstrom, me, and I can't remember who the other person was.

Q: The president?

It could have been the president. It could have been Jim Lampe (Lamb?), and we said we know you're not going to give us any more money. We know you just aren't, so what we want is the ability to raise our own revenues and not be required to spend them out at the end of the year and the ability to carry, and we aren't going to ask you for any more money. At the meeting was Hal Schaeffer, Tom Aller, and Bob McMahon.

Q: This was the team.

This was fact (?). This was their financial group. They thought about it for a minute and they said that sounds good to us, so we had a deal that wasn't written down or anything else. We were not going to ask them for any money and they would not hold our feet to the fire on our revenues, so then we really started in.

Q: Is that what got you the ability to bring technology to the library?

Yeah, we had to pay for it all, but the technology was really already there. The problem was maintaining it and getting enough money to upgrade it and replace it and replace the computer equipment and so on. That was our real problem.

Q: But just to remember, when you came to the library was it a computerized library?

Yes. They had purchased the system and it had been installed partially in the old library. When they moved to the new library the card catalog was gone so they had the DRA system.

Q: The DRA system.

Right. But when I first came...the interesting thing about it was we could not get DRA to give us the upgrades for the updates, and the reason that we couldn't is because the library had dug in its heels and told them that they weren't going to pay them. I had lawyers from the Foundation who were representing the Foundation that built the building and paid for all of the stuff...

Q: The Library Foundation?

Right. Who were pretty much saying we're not going to pay them because they haven't given us what they said they would, and there was really a law suit that was just in the making. There wasn't any going back where you could say okay, let's get rid of this computer system and let's get another computer system. This was not a possibility financially. We had a very bad relationship with DRA, so I knew that we had to get this straightened out. So I called up Mellinger (?) who was the owner of DRA and I asked

him to figure out what we owed him, because my intent was to settle the original contract. He flew up here, we had a meeting, and I got the Foundation to pay off the rest of what they owed to our computer vendor. Then we received the updates and then we were really in a position to work with this computer vendor. Before we were stymied. We were pointing fingers, the lawyers were involved and they weren't going to pay, and it was...

Q: So this was one of the problems you had to solve.

Yeah.

Q: We don't have too much more time, Tom, but tell me a little more about some of the memorable problems and solutions that you can think of, other than this technology issue in the eighties.

The thing I always think of when I think of the library, too, is how we really needed to try and make the library system here in Cedar Rapids as modern and as progressive as possible. The moving of the branches and the formation of the metro network really were things that I believe may have been a little too ahead of the time we were actually in. The City and the County can't get together to cooperate now. It's just very difficult for them, but it did take the libraries to show them that cooperation and saving taxpayers' dollars and being able to combine things can work. The libraries did it years before the City and the County will ever do it. I think that when we start talking about accomplishments that's probably one of my big accomplishments was really to move the library system more towards cooperation and more towards working together and the sharing of resources and the building up of revenue streams, and that's what all of this had to do with. After all, why should three communities that are connected to each other all have to buy a computer system? Anyway, taking a look from the 20,000 foot level is something that I think we did to try and make sure that we had all of the service outlets for library services in the right locations in the community so that everyone would not have to travel too far to receive services, setting up the delivery system and just a lot of different things. I'm very proud of that. In Des Moines they're still fighting. They were not able to get beyond that ownership thing and they're still battling over control, and it isn't an issue of control. It's an issue of cooperation. Anyway, I'm proud of that, that I was able to do that here.

Q: If you think about what's coming ahead, tell me just a little bit about your decision to retire after about 18 years and the point of your departure and what you hope for the library, and what you think is coming next in your life.

What I'm hoping for the library basically is that it will continue to evolve, that it will continue with the help of the trustees and the staff to...I think there may be a misunderstanding about this whole thing when you really talk about it, because we're talking about me but what we're really talking about here is a group effort. I did not do

this alone. This was a combined effort of talent. It wasn't just me. I was the orchestra leader but there are a lot of people in the band that played an awful lot of big roles in this whole thing. I think they need to be given a lot of credit for what's really happened here, because one person can't do this. It takes a group of people and a management team and the staff, who cooperated and who wore name tags and who took all the public relations training and who worked to better themselves. It turned out to be just a wonderful thing. We've got a great, great staff here, just some people that are absolute geniuses at working with people, and that's what it really takes. It's the one-on-one contact, so it isn't just me. We can interview me all we want to but quite honestly it was a real group effort, and I'm only one person and I happen to not be there but you've got the rest of the team in place. You just need another orchestra leader and that's what you're going to end up doing, and hopefully that's going to work out. And I think it will.

Q: Thank you. Do you want to add one more note about what you're going to be doing now in your retirement?

Well, in my retirement, yeah. I don't know. I guess I'm going into—I'm in business is what it all boils down to, and I'm buying and selling antiques. I still love to make a buck and I love the fact that there's a lot of knowledge that's really needed here. I'm just going to have a lot of fun.

Q: Are you going to use the library?

Yes, I am. Actually I already miss it. I've been tempted to go down to the library because there's a couple of things I really need to research and look up, but I'm a little apprehensive about going back in right now.

Q: You'll give it a rest for a bit?

I'll give it a rest for a little bit, but can I do without it? No. I have a pretty extensive collection of books at home for what I need, but I just can't replace the library in my life. So I'm going to be using it. I don't know. It'll be interesting.

Q: Well, thank you very much for all your insights, and I know the library people will be glad to see you every time you go there.

I think I talk too much.

(end of interview and end of tape)