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JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Mr. Tom Siamis

Kris Larson  
May 7, 1985

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Mr. Siamis was born in Greece in 1908 in a small village to Mr. Mrs. Anthony and Helen Siamis. In 1921 the family emigrated to the United States, first going to Aberdeen, Sounth Dakota, where other members of the family lived. They then came to Cedar Rapids in June, 1924.

In Cedar Rapids, Mr. Siamis was educated at McKinley Junior High School and Washington High. He attended Coe College and the University of Iowa. Initially, Mr. Siamis worked with his father in the restaurant business. In 1947, the family sold the restaurant and Mr. Siamis went into the real estate business, opening his own firm.

In 1980, Mr. Siamis sold his firm, but remains active as a broker for another agency.

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

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- 1-When were you born? Where?
- 1-How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
- 2-What are your parents' names?
- 2,8Where did you go to school?
- 2-Are you married or single?
- Did you raise a family? How big?
- 2-What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

- 1. Transportation
  - Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
  - 3-Trolleys (the Interurban)
  - 3-Horses and First Automobiles
  - Mud roads and the seedling mile
  - 3-Hunter Airport and the first planes
  - Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)
- 2. Communications
  - Newspapers
  - 4-Radios
  - 4-Advertising
  - Telephones

B. People in the Community

- 1. Amusements/Recreation
  - 5-Motion Pictures
  - Cedar Rapids Parks
  - 5-Dances
  - Carnival Week
  - Chautauqua
  - Community Theater
  - Little Gallery
  - Symphony Orchestra
  - 6-Circus
  - Greene's Opera House
  - Amusement Parks (Alamo)
  - Camps
  - Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)
- 2. Famous Characters
  - Cherry Sisters
  - 6-Grant Wood
  - Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
  - Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle

- Life before air conditioning
- Winter Activities
- 6,7 Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
- Clothing
- Toys
- Saloons/Taverns
- Farm Life

4. Family Life

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

5. Ethnic/Minority Life

- 4,8 --Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
- Indians
- 8 --Segregation of Blacks
- Jobs Available

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community

1. Education

- Cedar Rapids Schools
- 8,9 --Coe College
- Mount Mercy College
- Cornell College
- 8,9 U of I

2. Government

- City Services
- Streets/Roads
- Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)

3. Medical

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

- 4. Business and Economy
  - Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
  - Local Brewing Companies
  - Retail Businesses /Department Stores
  - Professions
  - Banking and Finance
  - 4, 10--Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
  - 11--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)
  - 12-14Real Estate
- 5. Attitudes/Values
  - Children/Discipline
  - Sex/Petting
  - Charity
  - Divorce
  - Work
  - Working women, Voting Rights for Women
  - Patriotism (World War I)

D. Historic Events in and Outside the Community

- 1. Catastrophic Events
  - Clifton Hotel Fire (1903)
  - 15--Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
  - Bank Closings (1933)
  - Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
  - Public Library Murder(1921)
- 2. National Historic Events
  - Womens' Suffrage
  - World War I
  - Roaring 20's
  - Prohibition
  - 15-16Great Depression

Junior League of Cedar Rapids Oral History Project

Interview with Mr. Tom Siamis

Conducted by Kris Larson

May 7, 1985

KL: Mr. Siamis, when were you born?

Siamis: I was born May the 8, 1908.

KL: Where was that?

Siamis: In Greece.

KL: When did you come to this country from Greece?

Siamis: In 1921; we landed in the early part of the year, January.

KL: Where did you go to then?

Siamis: Aberdeen, South Dakota.

KL: How long did you live there?

Siamis: We lived there until June of 1924.

KL: Then you moved to Cedar Rapids?

Siamis: To Cedar Rapids, yes.

KL: Why did you decide to move to Cedar Rapids from Aberdeen?

Siamis: Well, our family moved together you know, and my dad had a brother-in-law who was in the restaurant business. He asked him to come over here to start up in the business.

KL: How many people were in your family that came here at that time?

Siamis: There was four children, and our father and mother.

KL: Were you the oldest?

Siamis: Yes, I was.

KL: What were your parents' names?

Siamis: Tony, and my mothers' name Helen.

KL: Any brothers and sisters?

Siamis: My younger brother is Daniel; and George, and Sophie.

KL: Where did you go to school?

Siamis: Of course Nick was born in Aberdeen too.

KL: Is that your brother, too?

Siamis: Younger brother.

KL: Were there any children born here in Cedar Rapids?

Siamis: A younger sister, Francis. She was born in Cedar Rapids.

KL: So then there were six altogether?

Siamis: Yes.

KL: Where did you go to school when you moved here?

Siamis: When we moved to Cedar Rapids, I went to McKinley Junior High.

KL: And then to Washington High School?

Siamis: That's right.

KL: Are you married or single?

Siamis: I am presently married.

KL: What has been your occupation or career during your adult years?

Siamis: I've been selling real estate. I got my real estate license in June of 1948. I was an agent for about four years. After that I had my brokers license and had my own office until about 1980. I closed my office and I am now with the Heritage Realtors, as a an associate.

KL: Do you work full time for them now?

Siamis: Yes, full time.

KL: We'll talk more about that in a little while. Let's start with transportation. When you first moved to Cedar Rapids, and in some

of those early years, what can you remember about the way people traveled around town or went to other towns to visit people. For example railways; what were they like?

Siamis: Locally, they had street cars, you know, trolleys. We had nice train transportation; the Milwaukee, the Northwestern, Rock Island, Illinois Central. Quite a few trains coming here.

KL: Did your family own a car at all?

Siamis: Way in the late years, my dad bought a car without having a license. Of course, those years didn't require a license. He drove in the alley and hit the telephone pole. (Laughter) So, that was the end of that!

KL: What happened to the car?

Siamis: I guess I took care of that. That's when I learned to drive then.

KL: Were there a lot of people who didn't drive very well back then?

Siamis: People were not driving too good then.

KL: How about any airplane travel? Do you remember the first planes that were around?

Siamis: The first plane I took was when I went to Washington, DC, in about 1946 I believe.

KL: Do you remember the Hunter Airport here in Cedar Rapids? What was that like? Where was it located?

Siamis: Hunter Airport was located on J Street and about number 30, now, on the southwest side. Pretty close to where Lincolnway Village is. Right about in that vicinity there.

KL: Did you ever go out there?

Siamis: To just watch the planes, that's about all.

KL: You mentioned before, when we were talking, about a friend of yours

that worked for a radio station. Could you tell us about that?

Siamis: Oh, yes. A little Polish boy, we went to YMCA together, and he was working at the for the station on 2nd Avenue and 14th Street. I think the station was KWCR if I remember correctly.

KL: How about advertising back then? How did people advertise their businesses or things that they were selling?

Siamis: They would advertise through the Cedar Rapids Gazette. I don't remember much about radio advertising in those days. Of course we didn't have no TV until the late few years.

KL: How did you advertise your restaurant, or your uncle's restaurant that you came here to work in?

Siamis: The only ad we put in was probably on special holidays.

KL: Where was the restaurant located?

Siamis: It was located first at Magnus Hotel, and then from there we moved to the Taft Hotel. That's when we had the Taft Grill. It is no longer there now.

KL: What was the name of the restaurant?

Siamis: The Taft Grill.

KL: What did you expect it to be like in Cedar Rapids when you moved here? Did you have any expectations of what you thought it would be like?

Siamis: Well, Cedar Rapids at that time was about 40,000 people. We came from Aberdeen that was about 10,000 you see. Cedar Rapids has improved considerable, very clean city, and we fall in love with it.

KL: Where did you live in Greece? What was the name of the city?

Siamis: That was a little village.

5/5  
Retype

KL: So it was quite a bit larger than where you had grown up?

Siamis: Oh, definitely.

KL: When you were a young person, what can you remember about some of the amusements? Where did you go to see movies and that type of thing?

Siamis: Well, they had theaters, you know.

KL: Any particular theater that you liked to go to?

Siamis: The Iowa Theater.

KL: Why did you like that one?

Siamis: It was a new theater. (Laughter)

KL: How about dances? Were dances popular back then when you were a young man?

Siamis: The only dance I remember is when I was a senior in high school, we were going to have a senior prom. A friend of mine wanted us to go to the dance hall. I said I didn't know how to dance. He said, "Well let's go anyway, we'll have to learn someday." I remember we went to the dance hall above the JR on 2nd Avenue and 5th Street and tried to dance to get on our feet so we could be prepared for the senior prom.

KL: What was the prom like?

Siamis: Just an ordinary dance, you know. Of course, we had the chaperones. The teachers were the chaperones. The boys and girls were chaperoned in those days.

KL: Did the young people dress up like they do now, with the long dresses and suits?

Siamis: Yes, they did.

KL: Did they have the dancing at the school?

Siamis: Not much dancing at the school.

KL: Was the prom at the school?

Siamis: I don't remember that.

KL: Were there any circuses that came to town that you can remember?

Siamis: The first circus that came to town was up there where Link Belt Speeder is now on 6th Street SW. That was the circus grounds.

KL: What were they like then? Were they similar to what they are like today?

Siamis: Just similar to today; elephants, monkeys, wheels, and all that stuff.

KL: You mentioned that you remembered a little bit about Grant Wood. What can you tell me about him?

Siamis: Grant Wood was an art teacher at McKinley Junior High. That's the only thing I remember. I wasn't much of an art student, but I did remember that he was one of the teachers there.

KL: Let's just talk a little about the life style of people back then. How did you celebrate your holidays, and which holidays did Greek people celebrate?

Siamis: Of course Easter. That's our Greek Easter; big celebration. And Christmas, of course.

KL: How is the Greek Easter different from anybody else's Easter? Is there any special celebration that you do or customs that you have?

Siamis: We have night services. We have Holy week the entire week, every night we have services. Then Easter is midnight services, and after that usually families go home and have their snacks or lamb. That's our main dish, spring lamb, and Easter eggs.

As far as other celebrations, we don't celebrate birthdays, but we do have what we call "name day".

KL: What is your name day?

Siamis: My name day is on Easter Sunday. My dad's name was Tony, which is celebrated the 17th day of January; St. Anthony's Day. It's a Saint, see.

KL: So no matter what your name is there is a distinct holiday?

Siamis: Yes, that's right.

KL: How about Christmas? Any special celebrations for Christmas?

Siamis: No, not any more. Other than church services.

KL: Were there any different social events that your church had back in those days on Sundays? I know you mentioned that they have a big festival now that started in 1942, but is there anything before that, bazaars or anything?

Siamis: Of course our church is a small congregation and needs financing. The only way to raise the money is by having an annual festival, which we are having every year. That helps.

KL: What do they do at your annual festival? How do you conduct that?

Siamis: We have dinners, dancing, Greek pastries, Greek sweets; people buy it you know.

KL: Is it just for one day?

Siamis: Usually two days. We have live music, orchestra. They play Greek music or American so people can dance Greek or they can dance to American music. Square-dance to it if they want.

KL: Were there a lot of other people who came from other countries here in Cedar Rapids at the time that your family came here? People from Germany maybe, or Czechoslovakia. Did you remember

meeting a lot of immigrants?

Siamis: When we came to Cedar Rapids, of course Cedar Rapids was known for a Bohemian town. That's on the west side. I remember when I was selling real estate, I went out to visit the Bohemians about listing. I had a difficult time understanding them and them understanding me, unless you know the language. I had to get another fellow who knew Bohemian so we could communicate with them.

KL: So a lot of the people who came here did not speak English?

Siamis: That's correct.

KL: Was it hard to find a job for people from other countries, or anybody for that matter back in those days? Were jobs plentiful?

Siamis: I think they were plentiful.

KL: What were some of the different kinds of jobs that people had that you knew?

Siamis: Our Greeks, the only thing they know is restaurant and shoeshine. Some of the old Greeks first came, and they were working over at the packing house or Pennick and Ford.

KL: Were there a lot of Greek people here then, or just a few?

Siamis: There were quite a few. More than there were in Aberdeen, South Dakota.

KL: Why did you go there?

Siamis: That's where my uncle had a restaurant over there.

KL: You had another uncle here in Cedar Rapids who had one?

Siamis: This was my mother's side.

KL: You also mentioned that you'd gone to college two years at Coe and two years at the University of Iowa. Did you go to Coe first?

Siamis: Yes, I went to Coe.

KL: What did you study then?

Siamis: I took liberal arts courses. Straight liberal arts, that's all.

KL: What was college like in those days? Do you have any particular memories of your college days or events?

Siamis: Only thing I know is I had to study hard and had to work because there was no scholarship fund given to me. I had to work for my meals. I had to work in the summer time to have enough money to register for the following year.

KL: Did you work in the restaurant?

Siamis: Yes, I did. I worked over at the restaurant both here and at the University of Iowa in Iowa City.

KL: Did you commute then and live at home while you went to the University of Iowa?

Siamis: No, I stayed.

KL: Any particular events about college football games or dances, fraternities or anything that you were involved in?

Siamis: I didn't have the time to go to entertainment. My idea was to study and work, so I didn't have time for entertainment.

KL: I asked you a little bit about anything you remembered about hospitals or that type of thing and you mentioned selling papers. Could you tell us a little about that?

Siamis: Yes. I was selling papers, also here and Aberdeen. I remember correctly, I hate to go to the hospital to sell papers. I didn't like it because there was a strong odor from ether in the hospital. I was glad to go over there in a hurry and get rid of my papers and get back.

KL: Why don't we talk about the business. You said you had your own Greek restaurant, is that right?

Siamis: My dad did.

KL: You worked with him?

Siamis: Yes, I did.

KL: That's the same restaurant you mentioned before?

Siamis: That's correct.

KL: Who did you employ at your restaurant? What kinds of people; were they mostly men or women? What were the different jobs you had in your restaurant?

Siamis: We had, for the waitresses, women. There is no waiters then. Of course we had a man cook, and also had a woman cook, too, both. Then the dishwashers.

KL: Did you have part-time employees, or were they mostly full-time employees?

Siamis: No, there was no part-time employees those days. It was all full-time.

KL: Did people leave tips like they do now?

Siamis: Very little.

KL: So, mostly what they earned was just their wages?

Siamis: Yes, and the wages were very low then. So were the meals low.

KL: What were some of the things you served in your restaurant?

Siamis: All types of beef stew, spareribs, hash, and all that stuff.

KL: Were they mostly Greek foods?

Siamis: American food.

KL: Did you serve any Greek foods?

Siamis: No, not much Greek food.

Siamis: We were paying waitresses \$7 a week, seven days a week. Cooks were \$20, and the chef was getting \$25 or \$30. The meals were 25 cents a meal. Pancakes and coffee, 10 cents. Ham sandwiches and egg sandwiches, 5 cents.

KL: Did you have a pretty good business then? Were there a lot of regular customers who came?

Siamis: We had quite a few regular people come in, yes.

KL: How long did that restaurant exist, and when did it close?

Siamis: We sold it in '47'. Late '47' the English people come in and bought it. They kept it for a while, then when I got in the real estate business I noticed they had it for sale. I listed it for them, and I have sold it two or three times since then.

KL: What were some of the businesses downtown that no longer exist?

Siamis: Yes, Synicate's Clothing Store is no longer in operation. O'Mara's Clothing Store, Newmans' Department Store, and prior to Newmans' was Denecke's.

KL: That was a department store, too?

Siamis: Yes, it was.

KL: How about old grocery stores, can you remember any?

Siamis: Fifth Avenue Market, Dysters Brother's Meat Market. Buhler's Meat Market.

KL: How about ice houses?

Siamis: Hubbard Ice, Hutchinsons Ice Cream, Ross' Ice Cream.

KL: Any dry goods stores that you can remember?

Siamis: Kresges, Woolworth's, of course.

KL: Let's talk about the real estate business. Who did you work for when you first started in the business?

Siamis: In 1948 when I got my license, I started with the Charles Siegrfried at the Guaranty Bank Building. He was the president of the Cedar Rapids Board of Realtors. He also was the VA appraiser. I stayed with him a couple of years, then I went to the west side and Brad Deshong, formerly from Peoples Bank, bought the business from Oscar Lanquist. A friend of mine, Ralph Clymer asked me to come there and work with him. So I worked with Deshong a couple of years, maybe two or three, and then I opened my own brokerage office.

KL: Where was your office?

Siamis: I started at the west end of the 3rd Avenue bridge. When the highway came in and acquired the property, I had to move. I moved to the Guaranty Bank Building until 1980. I closed my office and joined Heritage Real Estate.

KL: Why did you decide to get into the real estate business? Any special reason?

Siamis: I was kind of interested in apartments and houses.

KL: What were people interested in when they were looking for a house back when you first started versus what they're interested in now? Has there been a big change in that?

Siamis: Oh, yes! Terrific! In those days the houses weren't too plentiful. When people want to buy a house, they said please, please call me when you get a house. We just get on the phone and tell them we have a house, the price, and this and that. People didn't have too much choice.

KL: Was there much building going on, of houses?

Siamis: Not then. That's when they started building later on. That's

when the demand calls for, and they started building a lot of houses. I remember when Skogman came in from Omaha, he started up the division open up there on Franklin Avenue, by the tracks.

KL: There were Skogman homes over there?

Siamis: Yes, Skogman homes started up there.

KL: How are people different today, with the selection vast.

Siamis: Right now the younger generation wants houses with the built-ins, rec-room, and in those days they didn't ask for rec-room or built-ins, or anything like that. They wanted two or three bedrooms, and if it had a garage, all right, if it didn't, it doesn't matter. Now they want a fireplace and they want everything.

KL: Were people more concerned about how well a house was constructed back then than they are now? Has there been any difference, like the type of woodwork, in what was important back then?

Siamis: Yes, it was. Some people said they didn't like painted woodwork, others wanted hardwood floors, (now they don't put a hardwood floor, they just put plywood floors and the carpet all over it) built-in ranges, disposals, and dishwashers. In those days they didn't have those things, they just didn't require it.

KL: What type of house do you think people are most interested in now? What type do you sell the most?

Siamis: I noticed the last few years, they vary. It started with the bungalows, and then the ranch, split foyer; constant change all the time.

KL: What's real popular right now, would you say?

Siamis: Right now the ranch type home is real popular.

KL: How has financing changed for houses over the years?

Siamis: Back when I started real estate, the VA loans were 4 percent interest, and 5 percent conventional. There was no problem, if a fellow had a credit rating and a good job, he could get a loan. The interest rates now are much higher, and now they have the various types of financing. There's no long term loan much now, as there was in those days.

KL: How long were loans usually for back then, 30 years?

Siamis: In those days 30 or 40 years.

KL: What are they now?

Siamis: They got what they call an arm. Three years and renew, convention you know. Start with interest up or down, or whatever the case.

KL: What are some of the things you think have made the city of Cedar Rapids grow over the years? You said it was about 40,000 when you moved here?

Siamis: 40,000 when I moved in, and now it's about 120,000. The industries.

KL: Any particular industries or factories you feel have been major contributors?

Siamis: Yes, Collins Radio, Rockwell, brought a number of people. The Square D, FMC, the Goss Company, and of course we do have a good school system. Cedar Rapids was known to be a clean, powerful city. That's what they called it in those days. Those are important factors to make the city grow.

KL: Were there any buildings that were erected that come to mind, during the time since you moved here until the present time, that you were interested in?

Siamis: I remember at that time they were building the Iowa Theater Building. I remember when they were building the Roosevelt Hotel, and the Paramount Theater. Those were new buildings.

KL: Those were all built after you moved here?

Siamis: Yes, right after we moved in. Of course, the last few years which you remember, the hospitals, both Mercy and St. Lukes, expanded tremendously.

KL: Were they both here when you first moved here?

Siamis: Yes,

KL: But they have been added on to quite a bit?

Siamis: Oh, yes. Coe College is expanding terrific. When I appeared, they had just two buildings, the main building and Hall. Now they got Stewart memorial, they got all other buildings.

KL: When you were going to Coe, where did you live?

Siamis: At home.

KL: What street was that?

Siamis: Right here on 3rd Avenue.

KL: So you could just walk over there?

What do you remember about bank closings? Did it effect your family at all?

Siamis: We didn't have too much finances in those days, but I do remember very distinctly when the banks were closed. As a youngster I had a school fund at the American Bank. I was disappointed, see the bank closed and I thought I lost my money. It was only a few dollars, but actually then . . . (Laughter)

KL: Did any family or friends lose their businesses or everything they had?

Siamis: I remember the depression times. My uncle was telling us about a lot of people commit suicide because they lost everything they had.

KL: Were there people that you knew who did that or anyone in particular?

Siamis: I don't remember any of my acquaintances committing suicide. I know during depression times when we were in the business, it wouldn't even pay our rent. We were behind two or three months. And the utilities sometimes were behind, but they didn't come in and close it. The utility companies understand the situation, the landlord knew we were having a hard time making the payments. So we ask for a reduction of the rent, and he did.

KL: Were most landlords that willing to do that for people, or did you have a particularly understanding one?

Siamis: I remember that when I got in the real estate business, they were telling me that Perpetual had so many houses repossessed, people lost them, that they tried to rent it. They couldn't sell it, so they rent it. They would even tell them, if you can pay the interest we'll let you go along on that.

KL: So they didn't really want them back?

Siamis: No, that's right.

KL: That about ends what I wanted to ask you, Mr. Siamis. We want to thank you very much for taking the time to answer the questions today.

Siamis: And I'll thank you for coming in!

