

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH: MR. RAY STEELE

CONDUCTED BY: EMILIE HOPPE

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PLACE: HIGH AMANA, IOWA

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Ray Steele was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1893. He moved to Cedar Rapids in 1895 where his father worked for Williamson-Hunting Mill Company. Mr. Steele attended Taylor, Madison, and Washington High School in Cedar Rapids. As a young man, he worked for Western Union and the Gazette. He enlisted in the Air Force in 1917 and served as an airplane mechanic in France during World War I. The Douglas Starch Works explosion occurred on the day he disembarked from France in 1919. His memories include downtown during the early 1900's, the Depression, and the founding of Peoples' Bank.

4. Business and Economy

- Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
- Local Brewing Companies
- 12--Retail Businesses /Department Stores
- Professions
- 18,19,23--Banking and Finance
- 13--Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
- Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
- Farmers Market
- Mills on Cedar River
- 19--Buildings Erected
- Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
- Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)

5. Attitudes/Values

- Children/Discipline
- Sex/Petting
- Charity
- Divorce
- Work
- Working women, Voting Rights for Women
- Patriotism (World War I)

D. Historic Events in and Outside the Community

1. Catastrophic Events

- 25,26--Clifton Hotel Fire (1903)
- 16,17--Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
- 23--Bank Closings (1933)
- 24-25--Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
- 24--Public Library Murder(1921)

2. National Historic Events

- Womens' Suffrage
- 14,15--World War I
- Roaring 20's
- 20--Prohibition
- 18,22-24--Great Depression

Junior League of Cedar Rapids Oral History Project

Interview with Mr. Ray Steele, November 8, 1984

EH: We are at Mr. Steele's home in Amana, High Amana, and today is November 6--election day--1984. We were just talking about when you were born. You were born February 2, 1893. You moved to Cedar Rapids from Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1898. Where did you first live in Cedar Rapids?

Steele: I lived in the 100 block on Eighth Avenue West, right close to the river, between First Street and the river.

EH: What did your dad do?

Steele: Millwork company. They made wood products.

EH: How many brothers and sisters? You had two sisters?

Steele: I had two sisters.

EH: And you had a brother?

Steele: Yes.

EH: How much older than you was Otis?

Steele: He was 10 years older than I.

EH: And your sisters were how old?

Steele: They were between seven and ten years older than I.

EH: So, you are the baby of the family.

Steele: No, I have one sister younger than I.

EH: Oh, I didn't realize that. What was her name?

Steele: Originally her name was your name, Emilie. Then the girls
(his older sisters) named her Kathryn.

EH: I guess I thought your two sisters were both older than you,
but one is older and one is younger. Where did you go to
school--to elementary school?

Steele: The first school I went to was Taylor School.

EH: Where was that located?

Steele: On Sixth Street and Fifth Avenue (West).

EH: Did you walk to school?

Steele: Yes.

EH: That's not too far, is it?

Steele: Now, wait a minute. I didn't go to school until we moved on
Rockford Road. Then I walked to school from where we lived on
Rockford Road.

EH: So, you really only lived a year or two in the first house.

Steele: Just one winter. We moved there in October and we moved away
in April.

EH: You moved to Rockford Road then?

Steele: Yes, one winter was all we put in there.

EH: What was Rockford Road like when you moved there? Were there any houses there?

Steele: Yes. Two brothers built houses, and we lived in one of them. This gentleman died. I don't know when he died, but I think it was about a year before we moved there that he died. My father bought that place then in the spring.

EH: Did the railroad go through?

Steele: There was a railroad that bordered on our place. Our fence was the same as the railroad fence. We were right next to the railroad.

EH: Did Mom stay at home? Did she work?

Steele: No.

EH: Did you have any servants or any help at all?

Steele: No. I was five years old when we first moved to Rockford Road. My younger sister was two years younger than I. She was born in 1895, and I in 1893.

EH: So, your Mom had her hands full. You went to school at Taylor. How many kids were in your class? Do you remember when you first went? Your elementary school classes--were they real big?

Steele: I can't tell you how many were in that class. I would think, just making a guess, there were between 25 and 30, maybe. Between 20 and 30 is closer.

EH: Where did you go to high school?

Steele: I started to high school at Madison School. Only the ninth grade went there then. Cedar Rapids was overcrowded in the schools.

EH: Really! What year was that?

Steele: It was when I went to high school, which was in . . .

EH: You went to high school first just one grade at Madison. There was only one high school there then, and that was Washington.

Steele: That was across the river.

EH: So then you went your sophomore, junior and senior years, you went to Washington. You walked all the way from Rockford Road to Washington High School?

Steele: Yes.

EH: Where was that located?

Steele: It was on the railroad track. Fourth Street was where the railroad tracks still are. It was between Fourth and Fifth Streets.

EH: There by Greene Square?

Steele: By Greene Square, right south on the south side of Greene Square.

EH: Where that veteran's hall is and that parking lot?

Steele: Yes, right there.

EH: What was that like? How many kids were in that school?

Steele: That was the biggest school in Cedar Rapids. There were four grades, from the ninth--if they started high school in the ninth grade, then they graduated in the twelfth grade. It was supposed to be four years, whether it was now or not, I don't know.

EH: Did most kids go all four years?

Steele: Well, I would say so. Yes.

EH: What sorts of subjects did you take? History? Geography?

Steele: Yes, and mathematics of one kind and another. You could take a Latin course or a business course, a commercial course, a book-keeping course.

EH: So, you could either go college prep or vocational?

Steele: You could go as a preparatory school for college, if you took a Latin. If you took the Latin course, that was in preparing for college.

EH: Did you take Latin?

Steele: Yes, I took a Latin course.

EH: Did you like it?

Steele: Oh, it was all right. I was no expert at it. Those who took a bookkeeping course or a commercial course, instead of Latin, they took bookkeeping and the subjects that went with it.

EH: Why do you think the school was so crowded? Was it just because there was one school?

Steele: I would say that that was probably the main reason.

EH: It just grew so fast?

Steele: It was the only high school in Cedar Rapids that I know of at that time.

EH: Do you happen to know when they built the second high school? Was that much later, or was that right around the same time?

Steele: They built Grant School, but that was a vocational school mainly. They took manual training. When I can first remember, they didn't have any manual training in the schools. Then, later they gave you a woodworking course. That's all they taught in those days in manual training was woodworking. When I first went to high school, I didn't take any manual training. I don't believe they taught any manual training in the high school. I believe that was all in the grade schools.

EH: Probably because people who needed to have that didn't go to high school, maybe?

Steele: Well, it wasn't considered in those days as a necessary part of an education. It was a voluntary elective.

EH: What did kids do for fun in high school when you were going to school?

Steele: Well, they didn't have a playground as such. All the grade schools had playgrounds. Practically all the time they put in at school was on their school work.

EH: You didn't have sports, or anything like that?

Steele: I can't remember, except for a small elective, we'll call it, like baseball. I don't remember any tennis that was played. They played baseball on the playgrounds for the younger kids. They didn't have any of that for the older kids who went on to high school.

EH: There were no organized sports?

Steele: No. They did take part in some athletics in high school, but not to the extent that they did later on.

EH: Did kids date a lot in high school? I mean like we have now?

Steele: Some, but not to any great extent, I would say.

EH: Did you have a dress code? Did you have like a uniform that you had to wear?

Steele: No. Not that I recall.

EH: What was the first job that you had?

Steele: The first job that I can remember having in Cedar Rapids was when I carried messages for Western Union Telegraph Company.

EH: On your bike, or did you walk?

Steele: I rode a bicycle.

EH: How old were you?

Steele: I'd say 15 or 16 years old.

EH: Did you do it like after school or week-ends?

Steele: Yes, I remember working Saturdays.

EH: Where was the telegraph office?

Steele: It was on Third Street across from where. . . At that time I can remember when I worked for Western Union, right around 1910, it was on Third Street, right where Armstrong's is now.

EH: Was it a little place?

Steele: Just about average-size office.

EH: How much did you get paid? Did you get paid by message?

Steele: I don't really remember now.

EH: Well, I can't remember how much I got paid for my first job either. Was there a lot of telegraph business?

Steele: Well, they telephoned. If a message came in for some business concern, which probably most of them were, they telephoned it to the one that received the message.

EH: You delivered to places where they didn't have a phone?

Steele: Yes. Sometimes, if they wanted a copy of the message, they sent it out with a messenger. They typewrote it and sent it out.

EH: Did you ever know what kind of messages you were delivering? I mean, you just knew you had to go to so-and-so's office.

Steele: Whatever the address was. Sometimes, if you take a message out,

then you'd wait for an answer. The party that received the message wrote an answer, and you took it back to the telegraph office. The telegraph operator sent that message on the wire.

EH: Is there any message that you particularly remember?

Steele: Occasionally you took a death message to the party that received the telegram. I suppose because of the unpleasantness, the shock, that he didn't want to shock the recipient too severely.

EH: Did you belong to any clubs as a boy? Were there any clubs like Boy Scouts or 4-H?

Steele: I had nothing to do with 4-H. That was more agriculture than it was for town boys. Later on, I worked for the Gazette.

EH: What did you do for them?

Steele: I collected money for want ads.

EH: How old were you when you did that?

Steele: That was in 1915, '14 and '15, so I was 22.

EH: What was that like, working for the Gazette? Where was their office at that time.

Steele: Right on the river bank on First Avenue and First Street, at the end of the First Avenue bridge. Now it's on Fifth Street and Third Avenue.

EH: Who was your boss?

Steele: The advertising manager was named Young, a great big, heavy-set guy. A big, fat fellow! He was advertising manager, so I worked under him.

EH: How many other guys did you work with?

Steele: I was the only one who collected for want ads. I rode a motorbike.

EH: How much did they charge for a want ad in those days?

Steele: I think they charged 15 cents a line. They charged so much a word.

EH: Did you like that job?

Steele: Yes. I liked it all right.

EH: Was it hard to get the money from the people sometimes?

Steele: No. No. They telephoned the ad in, and then, after the ad was run, they sent a collector out to collect for it.

EH: Did you go to college?

Steele: I went to Ames for one year. The one reason I quit, I took mechanical engineering at Ames--this man who was honor man in the class ahead of me couldn't get a job. So he went to work for the college. I got to thinking about it, by George, if I'm going to college for a job, and the honor man in the class ahead of me couldn't get a job, what am I doing here. He taught mathematics in the Engineering School; so I quit. Well, I wasn't too sorry afterwards that I quit, but that was the main reason that I quit.

EH: Why do you think he couldn't get a job?

Steele: It was a mechanical engineering course. Mechanical engineers were a dime a dozen. There were more engineering graduates than there were jobs. That was one of the main reasons that I quit.

EH: And then you came back to Cedar Rapids?

Steele: Yes.

EH: What was your brother Otis doing?

Steele: He went to Chicago when he was young, and he worked for a heavy hardware concern in Chicago. Then, there was a lead pencil company that made Dixon lead pencils. This was a mechanical pencil. This company, an old company established in 1827, it was a graphite concern. They had graphite mines, and graphite is one of the principle ingredients in the lead pencil. It's a mixture of clay and graphite. That so-called lead--there's no lead in a lead pencil. They advertised for a couple of city salesmen in Chicago. Otis applied for one of those salesmen's jobs and he got it. He started to work for them in 1904. He worked for them until 1942, when he retired.

EH: Did he come to Cedar Rapids as part of his district?

Steele: He didn't get home for six months. He'd be on the road for about six months.

EH: All over Illinois and Iowa?

Steele: He traveled all over the middle west. He traveled Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Nebraska.

EH: On the railroad?

Steele: Yes. He made a whole flock of states, all those states in the middle west, and he sold lead pencils. He used to call on the school teachers. He'd get an order for lead pencils from the school teachers--an art class or something like that. He'd turn the order over to the jobber, like Morris Sanford Company here in Cedar Rapids.

EH: That was a jobber?

Steele: That's what they call a jobber, yes. That's what he did. He did that for all those years, from 1904 'til 1942.

EH: You mentioned Sanford's. I remember Sanford's as books, paints, and business supplies. Is that what it always was?

Steele: They called it a stationery store. They sold office supplies and all kinds of office supplies, like pencils, papers, erasers.

EH: Was that a pretty big concern in the 1900's?

Steele: For that kind of a concern, yes, it was.

EH: What would you say was the fastest growing or the most profitable of the downtown merchants in the early 1900's?

Steele: Take Armstrong Clothing Company; that was one of the businesses that I remember as one of the original businesses in Cedar Rapids. That was a clothing store, and they had hardware stores, and, of course, lots of grocery stores--not big ones like they have now.

EH: Little ones?

Steele: Small ones, yes. They sold all kinds of food products like they do now. Groceries on shelves.

EH: When you were working for the Gazette, where did you eat lunch? Did you eat lunch at home? Was there like a cafe downtown?

Steele: There were places to eat downtown. If I remember right, I went home.

EH: There were places where you could go to get a sandwich, a bowl of soup?

Steele: Yes.

EH: Did you go out to eat much, like we do now?

Steele: Not too much. As I said, I ate at home.

EH: If you wanted to go out with a friend and go out for dinner somewhere, where did you go?

Steele: I can remember Bishop's had a cafeteria years ago.

EH: Like in the '20's? Or 1910?

Steele: Oh, yes, before that. They used to have what they called dairy lunches, similar to a cafeteria. They had a lunch counter, and you went in. They served regular meals. You ordered whatever the meals were. The kids going to school carried their lunch. That was before the days of the hot lunch program.

EH: Did you walk to work from Rockford Road when you worked for the

Gazette down by the river?

Steele: I rode a motorbike when I was collecting, and I rode my motorbike home. When I finished eating, I went out on my regular job, collecting want ads.

EH: You went to World War I?

Steele: Yes.

EH: You were a soldier?

Steele: Yes.

EH: What did you do?

Steele: I enlisted in what they called the Air Force. Then it was part of the Signal Corps. I was in the Air Force when there wasn't any Air Force.

EH: You were a mechanic?

Steele: Yes.

EH: Where did you serve?

Steele: I enlisted down in Florida. I was on the road for Moline Plow Company and traveled out of Atlanta, Georgia. That was where their southern branch was. I was down in Florida when I enlisted.

EH: So, you only worked for the Gazette for a couple of years, and then you worked for the Moline Plow Company.

Steele: Then I went to work for Moline Plow. The war started in Europe in 1914. The United States got into it in '17, and I enlisted in '17.

EH: What did your folks say when you told them that you had enlisted?

Steele: They thought it was all right. I wanted to get into some branch of the service where I could pick my branch. I was a mechanic, so I enlisted in the air service. I worked on airplanes over in France after I got there. It was March before I got there. I enlisted in December, and it was March already when I landed in France.

EH: Do you happen to know--in Cedar Rapids were people really gung-ho for America getting into the war? How did people generally feel about World War !?

Steele: They felt a good deal like they do now. Some of them weren't too crazy about us getting into the war. They thought it wasn't our war. You might say we were forced into it. They sunk our ships and, I guess, they didn't take us very seriously. We didn't have much to fight with. There were no preparations made for the war. We didn't have anything to fight with, you might say. It took time to build up a fighting force. I enlisted December 1917 and it was March of 1918 before I got to France. Then the war ended in November of 1918. I was discharged in the spring of 1919.

EH: Did you have any friends when you were over in France who were from Cedar Rapids?

Steele: There was a fellow in our company I never knew before. I got to

France and he was from my hometown, and still I didn't know him. As I said before, I wanted to pick my branch of the service and that was one of the big reasons that I enlisted, so I could choose where I went. In that respect, I was fortunate. It turned out to be where I wanted to go.

EH: When you came back, was it hard to find a job?

Steele: No, not especially so.

EH: What did you do?

Steele: I could have gone back to work for the plow company, but I didn't want to go on the road down south again. I didn't go back to work for the plow company. Another fellow and I started fixing up automobiles.

EH: Did a lot of people have automobiles in Cedar Rapids, or did that take a long time to catch on?

Steele: There were a lot of cars. The war ended in 1918. I worked on cars quite a bit.

EH: I've been reading some things about Cedar Rapids. Did you ever hear anything about the Douglas Starch Works explosion?

Steele: Yes. I remember when it happened. It happened late one afternoon.

END OF SIDE ONE - BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

EH: Do you remember the explosion? Were you home?

Steele: No. That happened the day we landed coming back from France.

EH: So, you weren't in town?

Steele: I wasn't in Cedar Rapids. The next day after that happened, one of the boys in our outfit came to me and said, "Say, you're from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, aren't you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Did you ever hear of Douglas and Company?" I said, "Yes, it's a starch manufacturer." He said that they had a bad explosion in that plant. He didn't know much about it, but my Dad was on the road then. He traveled for Dubuque Millwork, and they furnished the millwork for buildings. He was on the road for them, and he told me that when that explosion occurred, it broke so much plate glass in Cedar Rapids. They think it was the air from the inside that pushed this glass out--blew this glass outward. When this explosion occurred, it created a vacuum outside and dropped the air pressure outside. The air pressure on the inside blew this glass out. My dad said that there were certain thicknesses of plate glass that you couldn't buy any west of Chicago. There was such a demand for glass because of this explosion. It took so much of this certain size of glass that they just cleaned out these sources of supply that there were in Chicago. Dad used to tell that there were certain thicknesses of this glass that you couldn't buy west of Chicago. It just cleaned them out!

EH: Did you know anybody who was involved with that accident?

Steele: No. My Dad wasn't. There's a grave--I don't know how many men are buried in that place up in Linwood Cemetery. That was a combined grave of these unidentified men that were killed in that explosion. When that blew up, it killed these men, and they

couldn't tell who they were after that. There's a grave there up on top of the hill in Linwood Cemetery, a multiple grave, where those men are buried. There's a monument to those men who were killed in that explosion. The Douglas family came from Michigan. They built that starch works, and it's still in operation.

EH: Would you say that that's the biggest tragedy that happened in Cedar Rapids, or can you think of some other tragedy?

Steele: I can't think of any big tragedy. I would think probably it is. When I think back now and try to think of a bigger one, I don't think of it.

EH: When did you become involved with the People's Bank? Was that in the '30's?

Steele: The People's Bank was founded and established in 1900. My dad had an interest in a planing mill, they called it, in Terre Haute, Indiana. Terre Haute was hit very hard by the panic of 1893. That's the year that I was born. It was a depression, that's what it was. In the '30's, they had one in this country. It was countrywide, and they called it the Depression. They called them "panics" in those early days. Indiana was hit very hard with that depression of 1893. There was almost no work to be had. Jobs were just awful scarce. Building tradesmen, carpenters, and tradesmen couldn't find anything to do. My dad said there was a well-to-do family in Terre Haute, Indiana, that decided to build an opera house that year, in 1893. They advertised or let

it be known that they were going to build this opera house in Terre Haute. My dad said that contractors came from all over Indiana to bid on that building, that opera house. The competition was so keen. Everybody wanted that job. So they bid it real low to get the job. In bidding low, they paid the lowest wage they could so they could hold the price down. He said that carpenters worked for 10 cents an hour with their tools. If a man didn't put in a terrific day's work, they let him go and hired somebody else. There were all kinds of fellows standing around wanting a job. That was one of the big reasons that we came to Cedar Rapids. My dad put an ad in the American Lumberman that was a trade journal for contractors. He put in a job wanted, position wanted, as a mill superintendent--planing mill superintendent. Williamson-Hunting Company in Cedar Rapids answered that ad, and that's how we happened to move to Cedar Rapids. We came here in 1898. My dad applied for that job at Williamson Hunting Planing Mill, and he got it. We moved on Eighth Avenue. The next spring we moved out on Rockford Road. People's Bank was started here, and my dad opened an account in that bank.

EH: Where was their first office?

Steele: It was on the alley in the 100 block, the first block west of the river. It's right across the street from the river now at the end of the Third Avenue bridge. Then, it was down a half a block to the alley. That's where the bank opened was in that building. It's on their lot now, but then that's where it started.

EH: Do you remember when they built the new bank or the bank that
was ^{Louis} Lewis Sullivan?

Steele: Yes, I can remember when they built it.

EH: Did you ever meet ^{Louis} Lewis Sullivan? Did you ever see him? He came
to Cedar Rapids. He was the architect for that bank.

Steele: I don't know.

EH: What was Prohibition like in Cedar Rapids?

Steele: That when they closed the regular saloons. It wasn't legal to
sell liquor.

EH: Did people get it anyway?

Steele: Oh, yes.

EH: Where did they get it?

Steele: Well, they called them "bootleggers." They made this home brew,
and some people made liquor. It was really the same thing as
home brew.

EH: Was it hard to get?

Steele: No, it wasn't real hard to get, but you had to get it on the sly.
It was illegal to sell. Personally, I never cared much for
liquor. I just didn't like the taste of it.

EH: Your friends, did they ever go to speakeasies and such? Where
were they located?

Steele: One fellow would get liquor from somebody. He would ask somebody, and they would tell him where he could get it. He'd get it, and then he'd probably tell somebody else who asked him where they could get a glass of beer or something. This man would tell them where they could get it.

EH: Were there know places?

Steele: Yes, there were. They just sold it on the sly, they didn't make it generally known that you could get it there. One would tell another, and they'd go there.

EH: Did you know of any places?

Steele: Not off hand that I can think of. I knew several that sold it. There was a fellow who lived out on Rockford Road--a fellow by the name of Spina, a Czech (a Bohemian). They knew among themselves. One would tell another who had liquor for sale or where you could get it. That's the way they would get it.

EH: You married in what year was it?

Steele: 1939.

EH: Right before World War II? She moved with you to Cedar Rapids?

Steele: Yes, in December '39.

EH: What did your friends think. . .you were marrying a Colony girl, a girl from Amana?

Steele: Of course, anybody who knew her didn't think anything about it.

EH: In 1939, what did you do for a living?

Steele: I ran a shop, an automobile shop, before that. I did mechanical work on automobiles and trucks, tractors. Most of my work was with the farmers south and west of Cedar Rapids.

EH: Did they bring their tractors and things to you?

Steele: Yes.

EH: Do you remember '19, the Crash? Do you remember what that was like? The Depression, the beginning of the Depression?

Steele: Yes, I can remember that very well in the '30's. I was running an automobile shop. I heated my shop with wood. I had a wood stove in the shop. We used to burn railroad ties. The section men on the railroad would unload those ties on the edge of our lot which was right along the railroad tracks. I used to cut those ties, and it was difficult to get someone to saw those ties because they had a lot of abrasive, or grit they called it-- sand and little fine rocks that were imbedded in the cracks. They were awful hard on the saw. If you hit one of those little rocks, it would dull your saw. I used to saw our own ties for the shop. A lot of fellows wouldn't touch a railroad tie with a saw because it would dull the saw. I would saw what I needed to heat the shop in the winter. They used to come there to get me to saw these ties and other wood, too. A lot of people went out to cut wood for their winter fuel. In the fall, I used to saw

these various kinds of wood ties, mostly. If I would be sawing ties or wood, I couldn't be working on cars or trucks or anything. I just closed up the shop and sawed wood for a few weeks. It got so that in the fall that I would get so much wood to saw ahead I couldn't work on the cars and trucks. During the Depression, there was so much wood being used that I just sawed wood for several weeks.

EH: Sold it to people?

Steele: I didn't sell it. They hired me to saw it up.

EH: People couldn't afford to burn coal or oil?

Steele: They got the wood so much cheaper. They'd go out and cut down these trees or make a deal with a farmer and cut these trees down. They'd get me to work it up.

EH: I knew there were a lot of people out of work in Cedar Rapids. What did people do when they didn't have a job and they didn't have any money? Were there places where they could go for help?

Steele: Yes. They went out and did this work on the wood. They'd cut up the wood so they could handle it and burn it. I had so much wood to work up that I just closed up the shop and didn't work on cars and do mechanical work. In the spring, they wouldn't need the heat any more, so I went back to working on cars. I used to saw wood from September until probably May.

EH: A lot of banks closed up during that time.

Steele: Oh, yes, they sure did--a lot of banks in Cedar Rapids. Cedar Rapids had seven banks, I believe, and I think the People's and the Merchants were the only ones that were left.

EH: How did people feel? Was there just a general feeling of-- obviously people would be upset. They would lose all their money.

Steele: Well, a lot of people did, by George! A bank failed with good, big deposits, then whoever had money in the bank lost it.

EH: That didn't happen to your dad?

Steele: We happened to be fortunate to do business with the People's Bank. It was sound. It didn't close up, so we didn't lose heavily like some of those people did.

EH: Do you recall a lot of businesses that went under in the Depression in Cedar Rapids? Are there any that you remember right off the top of your head?

Steele Well. . .

EH: Is there any other memory of the great Depression that you have that comes to mind when you think of the Depression in Cedar Rapids? People standing in line? I have a list of some events here in Cedar Rapids and I'm just going to read them to you to see if you remember or if you have any memories of them at all. Some of them you may not because of one thing or another. Public Library murder in 1921. There was evidently a murder in the Public Library in Cedar Rapids. Do you recall anything like that?

Steele: No, I don't think so.

EH: The Lyman Stark Building.

Steele: I can remember that the building collapsed as they were building it. I was down on Fourth Avenue and Third Street. I think the forms collapsed that supported the upper stories. I guess the concrete was heavier than they figured. The frame members broke and let that down.

EH: There's a story that Howard R. Greene, the engineer, was walking by that building one morning and was looking at it as they were building and he said, "That building will not stand." He mentioned it to a friend of his, and that afternoon he walked to the boarding house where he was living. He went in to the door, and a little bit later the landlady knocked on his door, real upset, and said, "Mr. Greene, Mr. Greene, the Lyman Stark Building just collapsed." That afternoon the thing collapsed.

Steele: I remember Mr. Greene. I knew who he was. He was a well-known engineer. I remember that building collapse. It was written up in some of the architectural journals over the country.

EH: Clifton Hotel fire in 1903. What was that about?

Steele: I remember that. That was over on First Avenue and the railroad tracks. I believe they built a new hotel, and they called it the Allison, I believe.

EH: In that era, 1903, was a volunteer fire department or was there a regular fire department?

Steele: Cedar Rapids had a regular fire department.

EH: With horses and pumps? Horse-drawn pumps in 1903? What kind of equipment did they have? Do you remember?

Steele: I think they had just the regular city water pressure. They had a City Water Works that pumped this water. I think they used river water at that time. Later, Cedar Rapids drilled wells. They have well water now even. At that time, I believe they filtered the water, cleaned it and filtered, and used the regular river water.

EH: Did they ever figure out what started that Clifton Hotel fire?

Steele: No, not that I know of. I remember it real well. It seems to me there was a life or two lost in that.

EH: I'm trying to think if there is anything else that we should cover. Can you think of anything else in your lifetime. . . a big event in Cedar Rapids? What do you think was the biggest improvement in Cedar Rapids in the early 1900's. say 1910, 1920? Paving of the roads or the trolley system?

Steele: Well, of course, they had the streetcar system that was in use for a good many years. I can't remember horse-drawn streetcars. Ever since I can remember, they were electric. The streetcars were operated with electricity.

EH: How much did it cost to ride on the streetcar?

Steele: It used to cost a nickel.

EH: Did you always put in a nickel, or could you buy a card and they would punch it, like for a whole month or something?

Steele: When I can first remember, they had a motorman and a conductor on the streetcar. The motorman had the controls up in the front end of the car. They turned a lever to turn on the current. They called him a motorman. The conductor wore a belt with a little change holder. He collected the money and gave or made change for the passenger that paid his fare. If he got a dollar bill or larger change, he collected what the fare was and made change.

EH: How far did that trolley go out to Cedar Rapids? Did it go out to 189th Street from the river? Where did it start?

Steele: It seems to me they went across the river. They used to go across the river on First Avenue. They went as far as Tenth Street West and turned up Tenth Street. They went to Fillmore School. That was on C Avenue, I believe. They started at First Avenue, A, B, C, etc. They used to go as far as the old carnival grounds.

EH: The old carnival grounds? What was that?

Steele: Every fall, they had a Cedar Rapids carnival. It was in October, and there was usually a good stretch of weather there. Very often they had good weather during the Cedar Rapids carnival. It usually lasted a week, as I remember. Otis used to say that they advertised that carnival way out in western Iowa and the Dakotas. The great Cedar Rapids carnival!

EH: That was a big deal?

Steele: Yes, and they had similar to what a carnival is of later years.

They had sideshows. There was a midway and they had merry-go-rounds and amusements of one kind and another.

EH: Ferris wheels?

Steele: Yes.

EH: Roller coaster?

Steele: I don't remember a roller coaster.

EH: They had those games, like those games of chance?

Steele: Yes. There were sideshows of one kind and another.

EH: Popcorn and taffy pulls? Lemonade?

Steele: Yes. It was well advertised.

EH: Who ran that?

Steele: I don't know. Some company, I guess.

EH: It wasn't like a fundraiser for the community? It was a private deal?

Steele: They advertised it pretty extensively.

EH: Where were the carnival grounds?

Steele: They were north of Fillmore School, about F Avenue. Fillmore School was on C Avenue.

EH: On which side of the river?

Steele: Well, it was on the west side and they had a race track there-- horse track.

EH: Was that where people went in the evening for entertainment?

Steele: Yes. It was an evening--an afternoon and evening show that they had this so-called carnival.

EH: So the trolley took you out to the carnival then?

Steele: Yes, it went out.

EH: And then the horse racing, did that go on all summer?

Steele: No.

EH: That was just during carnival week?

Steele: Mostly, yes.

EH: Hunter Airport?

Steele: The Hunter Airport was down south of Cedar Rapids, between Cedar Rapids and Iowa City.

EH: On Highway 218?

Steele: Highway 218, yes.

EH: When do you think the first plane landed in Cedar Rapids? Not an exact date--in the '20's, 1910, 1920? Do you remember it? Was it something that you read about in the paper?

Steele: I don't remember what year that was.

EH: That Hunter Airport--was it a commercial airport?

Steele: It was, yes. Dan Hunter, I don't know if he was a war aviator or what (I believe he was).

EH: He got it going after World War I, did he?

Steele: I believe so.

EH: What kinds of things did he do--like crop dusting?

Steele: No, I don't think he did it especially. He used to take up passengers and provide a plane and fly people. He would take somebody in a plane to another city if they wanted to go.

EH: Did Otis ever do that? He did a lot of traveling.

Steele: He didn't do much flying.

EH: Mostly by train?

Steele: Yes.

EH: Well, this is plenty long enough. Thank you very much.

Steele: You're very welcome.

EH: I enjoyed it. You say you used to go to Greene's Opera House quite often. What kinds of things did you see there?

TAPE BEGINS AGAIN

Steele: They called that a legitimate theatre. There used to be traveling shows that used to come to Greene's Opera House and they

would put on usually just one performance. Then they'd move on to another city.

EH: What kinds of things did you see?

Steele: Those that came to Greene's Opera House, those were plays.

EH: Shakespeare?

Steele: Well, yes. They were traveling plays. They would travel from one city to another.

EH: Where was Greene's Opera House?

Steele: It was on Second Street East. Do you know where the Roosevelt Hotel is? Well, it was across from where the Roosevelt Hotel is.

EH: Where the Brenton Bank is?

Steele: Yes, I believe so.

EH: That's west of the Roosevelt.

Steele: Yes.

EH: Right on First Avenue there.

Steele: Yes, but Greene's Opera House fronted on Second Street.

EH: Was that fancy inside, like the Paramount was?

Steele: Yes, quite a bit.

END OF SIDE II

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

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- 1--When were you born? Where?
- 1,19--How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
 - What are your parents' names?
- 2-4,10--Where did you go to school?
 - 21--Are you married or single?
- 21,22--Did you raise a family? How big?
 - What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

- 1. Transportation
 - 11--Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
 - 26,27--Trolleys (the Interurban)
 - 16--Horses and First Automobiles
 - Mud roads and the seedling mile
 - 29--Hunter Airport and the first planes
 - Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)
- 2. Communications
 - 9--Newspapers
 - Radios
 - Advertising
 - 8--Telephones
 - 7-8--Telegraph

B. People in the Community

- 1. Amusements/Recreation
 - Motion Pictures
 - Cedar Rapids Parks
 - Dances
 - 27-29--Carnival Week
 - Chautauqua
 - Community Theater
 - Little Gallery
 - Symphony Orchestra
 - Circus
 - 30-31--Greene's Opera House
 - Amusement Parks (Alamo)
 - Camps
 - Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)
- 2. Famous Characters
 - Cherry Sisters
 - Grant Wood
 - Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
 - Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle
 - Life before air conditioning
 - Winter Activities
 - Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
 - Clothing
 - Toys
 - 20--Saloons/Taverns
 - Farm Life
4. Family Life
 - Household Help
 - Women's Roles
 - 6-7--Childrens' Activities/Behavior
 - Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)
5. Ethnic/Minority Life
 - Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
 - Indians
 - Segregation of Blacks
 - Jobs Available
- C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community
 1. Education-- 3-6,10
 - Cedar Rapids Schools
 - Coe College
 - Mount Mercy College
 - Cornell College
 2. Government
 - 25--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