

POWERS, G.W. INTERVIEW  
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WORLD WAR II: THE HOME FRONT SERIES

BIOGRAPHY --

Mr. G.W. Powers, born in Chokio, Minnesota in 1911, established the Power's Produce Company in 1938 and operated it throughout World War II and into the late 1950's. Mr. Powers provides a vivid and detailed account of the establishment and operation of this business, which is a war-boom business in that it could not have been established had it not been for the economic conditions caused by the U.S.'s entry into World War II.

COUNTER #

ABSTRACT

Tape One.

020 Interview Begins.

020-075 Personal Information: place and date of birth, ethnicity, father's occupation, size of family, level of education, wife's maiden name.

080-089 Background Information on Power's Produce Company.

09-095 First year of operation: 1938

104-140 Capital Powers had to start business with.

142-151 Banking practices in the late 1930's Powers thinks very few local bankers saw approach of war and thus were hesitant of loan money to potential war-boom enterprises.

152-196 Powers's survey of area poultry production potential (background work to the establishment of his company); describes farm conditions of late thirties.

209-302 Experience in a German/Russian town in North Dakota that was a key to convincing him that he should get into the food processing business.

303-450 Was at that time a field manager for Cutty Packing Company; job provided him with the experience needed to set up and run his own company; he developed ideas for improving business.

541-486 Establishment of lines of credit needed for set up of the business; got credit by convincing bankers that U.S. was going to war and that this company would be needed to feed the Army; had no collateral borrowed only on the value of the merchandise he purchased and the speed of the turnover of his product.

487-502 Emphasizing importance of having close contacts with the farmers who supplied his company; contrasts his contacts with those of land'o Lakes local creamery contacts.

- 503-525           Quality of produce brought into the plant rose quickly when the government increased the prices they paid; new credit and education programs for farmers also boosted the quality of the produce.
- 530-546           Labor shortage encountered by company during the war; employed elderly (up to 70 years old) and teenagers; community facilities (restaurants and boarding houses) expanded to meet the needs of the growing number of people working at the plant; employed about 80% women, most of the men were people who couldn't serve in the military; had to train all workers.
- 546-               TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE ENDS
- 003-               TAPE ONE SIDE TWO BEGINS.
- 009-077           At first their lowest wage for women was 25¢ an hour with a raise to 35¢ when the women were more experienced; men at this time were paid 35¢ and 45¢ an hour; these were the standard packers' wage rates; aircraft manufacturers paid higher wages and drew labor away from the company (the government had frozen packer wages at the previously mentioned levels); hire "George S. May people from Chicago" (paid 15\$ an hour) to set up an incentive wage program that would legally break government wage freeze; wages then rose to a top of \$1.25 an hour; employed an average of 100 people during the war, but the number fluctuated according to the army contracts the company was filling.
- 078-087           The plant processed eggs, chickens and turkeys.
- 088-126           Describes the method of training workers; got trained workers from other packing plants.
- 127-136           Drew labor from as far away as Benson, Minnesota.
- 140-235           Used local banks for some credit and borrowed from some local wealthy individuals; there were times when he had \$500,000 in loans; borrowed heavily from Chicago bank.
- 247-274           "Loose" money (i.e. credit available without collateral) came just as we entered the war and by the time of the Truman administration the loose money had stopped.
- 285-318           At time of entry of Truman administration Powers' company was buying produce from as far away as Freeman, South Dakota; began having the produce packed at sites with wheat and then shipped directly to the buyer; became a produce "broker"; got produce from smaller farmers in the wheat area too, but most of the produce came from the large farming operations scattered throughout Minnesota and North and South Dakota.
- 319-397           Helped large farming operations get started; worked with the South Dakota State University at Brookings in educating farmers in new methods of raising the produce.
- 398-404           Used automated equipment in plant in Wheaton.

- 406-535 After V.E. day Powers went to east coast to see new, huge egg and chicken processing plants; this trip convinced him that he should get out of the poultry and egg business because he couldn't compete with new plants; stopped expanding company after trip to east coast; closed Wheaton plant in 1958, just after the plant had unionized.
- 536-546 Sold "part loads" to other packers prior to his getting army contracts.
- 003 TAPE TWO SIDE ONE BEGINS
- 041-062 Quartermaster's corps got contracts with suppliers like Powers's Produce through Chicago brokers.
- 063-103 Army was slow to pay its bills, but as long as a company was contractin with the army it could get credit; most of Powers's contract during the war were with the army; there were times when Powers sold 35 cars of eggs a week to the army; several times when Powers couldn't get all the produce he needed, so he bought products from his competitors to fill the contracts.
- 120-135 Had very close relationship with his competitors: mutual agreements not to cut prices, etc
- 136-195 Quartermaster Corps preferred to deal with small, independent packers instead of the large corporate ones (because of the superior quality of the produce of the small independants).
- 197-260 Company had no problem with rationing; Quartermaster corps saw that the company got anything it needed; contracts with the army were the key to getting anything they wanted.
- 261-265 Company had good egg inspectors; company trained them and then the U.S.D.A. certified them.
- 278-368 Thinks that the small size of the management in the Powers company allowed him to get closer to his competitors and to his government contacts; had army and U.S.D.A. people out to his summer home to entertain them; army sent out an investigative team to check for collusion between the company and the army inspectors, but they didn't find evidence of any collusion.
- 369-393 First Army food inspectors weren't qualified (21 day workers), but army soon got better inspectors.
- 394-412 Much of the prosperity of the Powers company stayed in the Wheaton area; when the plant closed in 1958, town was very concerned about the loss of the business.
- 503-519 Many mobilization programs within the plant; also, army took all healthy makes out of the plant; participating in mobilization programs was a prerequisite to government contracts.
- 520-119 Powers's prominent place in the community's economy forced him to join Wheaton Commercial Club in spite of his lack of time to work with the club; similar situation with community hospital board and board of county commissioners.

- 545 Tape TWO SIDE ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ ONE ENDS.
- 004 TAPE TWO SIDE TWO BEGINS.
- 121-135 Didn't serve on any war mobilization boards because of lack of spare time.
- 138-141 Quartermaster corps notified local rationing board and the board authorized the supplies for the plant.
- 142-175 Describes lifestyle during the war: "we lived a 100% life for the army."; extremely long hours; "It was a young man's game."
- 176-200 Describes the three factors that went into the success of his business: hunger for success, innovative ideas, and the proper environment (i.e. business opportunities).
- 201-242 Gives opinion on future of U.S. and Soviet Union.
- 245-270 Thinks that the quality of leadership in U.S. businesses today is much better than the quality of government leadership.
- 289-315 Emphasizes ability of an individual in Pre-war II U.S. to see coming of war and make preparations and raise a successful business.
- 323-335 Tells of plan to set up carp processing plant in the area (after the war); never carried it out.
- 349-380 Emphasizes the fortunate timing ~~xxx~~ of the growth of the company's war ~~economy~~ economy was necessary for its success.
- 390-480 Talks about rural life before WWII.
- 485-490 There were a lot of other companies that experienced a war-boom similar to that experienced by Powers Produce Company.
- 545 INTERVIEW ENDS.