

Interview with Mr. Robert B. Coy
November 5, 1976
Interviewer: Gayle Goff

Q: Today is Friday, November 5, 1976. I'm doing an interview with Mr. Robert Coy. This is Gayle Goff at the home of Mrs. Patrick McGinnis, in Morris. Mr. Coy, what is your full name?

Robert Bruce Coy.

Q: Ok, when were you born?

March 4, 1894.

Q: What were your parent's names?

Um, Barbara J. Morrison and Robert Bruce Coy.

Q: Where were both of your parents from?

Uhm...well my father was born in Maine, in Eastport, Maine and my mother was born in Wisconsin, but I don't know just where.

Q: What was your father's occupation?

Well, he was a lumberman, in the lumber business all his life. He, eh, ran logs in the woods and he was a skinner...and for the woods, he'd go to a tree and check what was to be cut from that tree and he was a foreman, foreman of the crew...and then he was in the retail lumber business in the, Watertown, S.D. and Forman, N.D., prior to coming to Danvers, where he had bought a lumber yard.

Q: Do you remember right off hand what year he came to Danvers?

To Danvers? 1905. The summer of 1905...in July.

Q: Had he bought the store before he came to Danvers?

No, he bought a lumber yard here and he sold the lumber yard in early November and bought the store.

Q: Was the lumber yard in Danvers, too?

Ya.

Q: What kind of schooling did you have in Danvers?

Public schools, every grade and up until the eighth grade.

Q: And then did you go to high school?

Yes, I went to high school then.

Q: What was Danvers like when you came?...in 1905?

1905, when I moved here? A typical small town; they had three saloons.

Q: Did you have three saloons?

Three of em, ya, and the lumber yard and pool room and three stores, um, hardware stores. Well two of them, one was, one was, partially hardware and had other things, too. But there were three stores.

Q: Do you remember what all three of the stores were besides the hardware store?

What uh...

Q: What they were, what kinds of stores they were?

Well, well they uhm, the store that my father bought was a general, general store. They had purten'near a little of everything in it... clothing and a few yard goods and...

Q: Ok, do you know what year Danvers was founded?

Well, no I don't. But um, I would say someplace in uh, the 1890, 1890...the early 90's.

Q: Uh huh. So Danvers wasn't a very old town...

No, not very.

Q: Did it have a railroad?

Ya, the railroad was put through Watertown or from Benson over Watertown to Huron. And I think that was in '87, put in, as far as some of the old timers said, anyways.

Q: So Danvers had a depot?

Yes, a depot agent and a depot and a section foreman and a crew working for 'em.

Q: Do you know, is the depot in Danvers still open? Did it still have..

No, no the original depot burned and they built another one and when they tore, when they went from carloads to lot shipments, why they tore the depot down and they sold it n' it was moved away, I guess that was the proposition.

Q: When you came to Danvers, were there any homes with running water.. or wouldn't you know?

No, there wasn't any.

Q: So was there one central place where you went to get running water? Just apump....

No, there was no, everybody had their own well and a pump.
(126-5 min.)

Q: Do you have any idea what year probably running water came to

Danvers? Or...

Well some haf their own little electric plants r' had their little gas or a little engine to pump water. I spose 1912, 14, or along in there was about the first.

Q: What about electricity?

Well, we had electricity in 1919, that was the first...first electricity we had.

Q: And was that a company that put..it..in...

No, that was a village got an engine and uh we had from dark until about 11:00 or 12:00 at night and then they would shut it off.

Q: Oh....

They did have a battery but it wasn't...you wouldn't get much light out of it after they didn't run the engine.

Q: What kinds of street lights did Danvers have? A: Gasoline street lamps.

Q: Um huh...what kinds of legal protection did they have? Did they have their own sheriff, or...

Well, they had a marshall but when they had the saloons quite a few drunks around they had to take care of them. That was the biggest problem...there wasn't any really, that was about the only problem we had.

Q: For law...

Ya

Q: Ok, what about a fire department? Did Danvers always have a fire department?

Well, they had an engine but, um, they had to run on power by human, by pump, by hand pump, so it wasn't a, it was pretty hard work, so it wasn't very...couldn't run it very long.

Q: What kinds of transportation did people use in those days?

Well, the horse and buggies, n' in the summertime, in the winter-time they had sleighs.

Q: Were there hitching posts, hitching posts on main street? In Danvers?

Ya

Q: Do you have any idea when those hitching posts disappeared?

Well, they gradually disappeared. We had em' in front of a, front of a store and then, when the first batch had to be replaced...we thought they'd be better off across the street because of the fly problem...but that didn't, it helped a little, but not much. And then of course when the cars come, they gradually disappeared.

Q: Do you remember who had the first cars in Danvers?

Yes, Mathiason, the feed-mill man and the flour dealer, had the first car. And the banker had one the next spring.

Q: How were most of the homes heated in Danvers?

Well, with wood...coal stoves at that time.

Q: Has there ever been a hospital in Danvers?

No, there hasn't.

Q: Ok, has there always been only one bank?

Well, there were...this bank was started in 1902 and then in 1916 another fellow came along and they organized another bank. They called it the Farmers State Bank and that was closed a couple of years later. So theres always been one, but never been any more than one bank.

Q: What sorts of businesses were in Danvers...say when you came?

Well, they had the three stores, one handling the hardware with their other merchandise, and then the livery barn and three saloons and of course the creamery was running...so that about all.

Q: Do you have any idea how many people lived just in the town area?

Well, about 200, there never was anymore than that, I guess.

Q: Did most of those people work for farmers, or...

There were some that worked for farmers but there were others that had jobs in town or a, or....(long silence)

Q: Maybe worked for people in town, more or less?

Ya.

Q: Ok...do you know the sorts of things that prople did for recreation? Were there alot of parties?

Ya, that was the main recreation in those days, was card parties.

Q: What kinds of cards were usually played, do you remember?

Whist, mostly.

Q: Did the parties start in the early evening?

Ya, about 8:00 until midnight.

Q: Were there any sports that were really popular in the area?

Well, in their own families had, would have a ball team...of sorts every year...

Q: Let's see...Danvers had a really big fire one year. Do you remember what year that was?

1931.

Q: How did that fire get started?

Well, it started in the pool room about 10:00 or 11:00 at night.

Q: Did it do alot of damage to the businesses and buildings in town?

Well, it burned about five buildings.

Q: It burned a hotel and a restaurant and the meat market?

Ya, and a jardeare store and a restaurant and the pool room.

Q: Were there any other fires that had done any damage before that?

No, only a house fire, but that got put out before it got a good start.

Q: Did a grain elevetor get burned prior to that too?

Ya, a grain elevator was burned in 1926.

Q: Was it very full when it was burned?

Well, I don't know how much grain was in it but there was quite a bit I guess.

Q: Over the years were there any tornadoes or wind storms in Danvers that did any damage?

Yes, we had a storm in, I think it was in 1928, that was very severe and that blew the roof off of the town hall and that had to be replaced. It did quite a little damage.

Q: When did you start in the business?

Well, in June 1st, 1912.

Q: Right after you graduated from high school, then?

That's right.

Q: Did you have any problems getting started? Did you need any finances, or was the store in good shape?

No, we had a guardian, that took care of the place until my older brother was of age. He was of age in 13, he was 21, in 1913. So we had been going as a store, as Coy Brothers for three years then.

Q: So there were three Coy brothers that managed the store?

Right.

Q: Do you remember how much stock on dollars you would have carried in say 1920?

1920?....Oh I suppose it would run around \$8,000, at that time.

Q: What hours was the store open?

In 1920? Well, that was about the time that we had thought we were gonna close one or two nights a week at 6:00, but it was kind of hard to convince the people that we could do that.

Q: Mostly then, people would come knocking on the store whenever they needed something?

Ya, whenever they want, ya...ya they'd come upstairs and get us out. I have sold merchandise for every hour thats 24! (laugh)

Q: So you lived above the store?

Ya

Q: Most of the years did you live above the store, or...

Well, we lived above the store til uh, 1931, I think it was. (367-15 min.)

Q: All those years you stayed in the same building?

Ya

Q: And was the building a wood building?

That's right.

Q: How was it heated?

Well it was heated by stoves in the earlier days and then we put a furnace in.

Q: Were there any problems during the Depression that stand out in your mind? Was it harder to get certain things, or did you loose alot of money?

No, there was plenty of merchandise but was to get the money to pay for it, that was the problem.

Q: Do you think that you lost any more money during these years than you would have any other years?

Oh, I don't think so. In proportion, I think that we were probably put...some had some, owed our debts but they eventually were paid.

Q: Did most of the people who bought things on credit pay you then, and when they could?

Yes they did.

Q: Did you think that Swift County fared any better than any other of the counties? Did it seem a little less hard hit than some counties?

Well, I don't know, everybody had their problems, I guess, so I don't think there was much difference.

Q: Uh, do you think that dairy farmers did any better than grain farmers?

Yes I do. I think they did.

Q: Did they seem to have more....

Well, they got their money every, every week, or two or three times a week, in fact, they always had their money, when they had a can of cream....they got paid for it.

Q: Let's see, you bought cream for awhile then, at the store?

That's right.

Q: That was because the other creamery had closed down?

Ya.....uh....it had to be.

Q: Did you have any problems with refrigeration for the store? Did you need it very much in your earlier days?

Well, we didn't need so much refrigeration in those days, no. There wasn't....we had a meat market and they sold the fresh meat so we didn't have to worry about that.

Q: When you started buying cream from farmers, did you resell it to your customers or did you sell it to another...

No, we sold it. We shipped it to the creameries who ever we bought it for...we just shipped it out everyday by express.

Q: Would that have been by the truck or the train?

By the rail, by rail.

Q: Do you know where the cream, did it usually go quite far away, or...

Well, we bought cream for...we had it shipped to Minneapolis and we shipped to Paynesville, to Benson and different places.

Q: Was it very expensive to ship by rail?

No, you could ship...I don't remember just ...I know you could ship a can of cream to Danvers- to Paynesville, for about 35¢ and then get the, the empties would come back for nothing.

Q: Hmm. You probably shipped everyday to somewhere...

Everyday, ya.

Q: Did you have any problems with rationing during WW2? Did that work pretty smoothly or....

Well ya, it did. There was less problem I think than there were with WW1. They had the coupons. If they had a coupon, they got the merchandise...if they didn't, why they didn't get it.

Q: Was there any problem with the flour situation...in WW1? Did the people resent getting the substitutes they got?

Well, some of them...well everybody complained about it, but some of them could use them better than other.

Q: Do you remember what some of those substitutes were?

Well, they were rye and barley and rice...I guess were the main substitutes.

Q: Do you think there were any...any real major problems between the smalltown business people and say the big city business people, even in Benson and Morris, or Appleton? Did you feel that those people, you know, used an unfair advantage over you?

Well, I don't know if they did...There wasn't so much traveling in the, before the automobile became popular and they didn't go..they'd have to go on the train, if they wanted to go any place, or...

Q: Do it wasn't really that hard to compete with the big towns, because people...

No, no it wasn't.

Q: Has there been very much crime in Danvers throughout the years?

No. We had an outlaw that broke into the bank. He'd been out in the country and uh, he broke into the bank and got a dynamite or uh blew the safe...and I don't know how much he got...he got seven or eight hundred dollars, I guess. It was in 1907 that that was, but that's the only time that uh biggest deal was, and then of course the bank was robbed in daylight...I didn't just remember just what year it was it was along in the 50's I guess....

Q: Did they catch the people who robbed it that time?

Ya, well the first time?

Q: The second time.

Second time, ya...they did time.

Q: Was there ever any break in of your store done?

Well, we had it broken in about two or three times up until the last summer...a year ago, it was broken in a couple of times. You know, kids, I guess, wanted...wanted something to eat or something....to get some

money....I don't know what they wanted...but they didn't get so very much.

Q: When was the first time that it was broken in? Quite a few years ago then?

Ya it was. I think the first time it was in about 1923. We had a dance in Danvers, that there was a gang from Montevideo came up there and they broke into that...at that time.

Q: Did you lose very much or did those people...

Well, there wasn't much they took...nylons, which were just coming in and they were popular then and they took what we had of those and I don't remember just what all, but they didn't get very much any way.

Q: Do you have any reasons why you think Danvers has stayed a small town through the years?

Well, there wasn't very much, there wasn't any employment for people like all these towns. They had no..no industry to entice the people to stay.

Q: What do you think some of the advantages were to living in a small town? For you?

Well, I don't know. (long silence) There wasn't any advantage, but I don't think there was any disadvantage....

Q: It seemed as good a place as any....
Ya.

Q: When did you quit, uh, managing the store?

Well, in 19....the end of 1969.

Q: And who took it over then?

My nephew.

Q: And does he still....

Ya, he's still running it.

Q: And is his name Jerry?

Ya.

Q: What happened to your two other brothers that were partners with you, in managing the store?

Well, uh, my older brother, he was blind, died in 1960, and the other, my younger brother is in a, EauClair, Wisconsin, with his son...living now.

Q: Did he retire then?

Ya.

Q: Oh. Ok....Alright. Thank you very much for your thoughts.

Um Hm.

(555-25 min.)