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**Narrator**

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**KMRS**  
**Interviewer**

**1979**

**Interview done for the Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota KMRS Feature**



*The transcription of this oral history was made possible in part by the people of Minnesota through a grant funded by an appropriation to the Minnesota Historical Society from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund. Any views, findings, opinions, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the State of Minnesota, the Minnesota Historical Society, or the Minnesota Historic Resources Advisory Committee.*

- LT: 00:00 This is *Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota: a Saturday, KMRS News Feature*. Today, we are talking with Chester Johanson from Wheaton. Chester, tell us, first of all, where were you born?
- CJ: 00:13 I was born in Clifton Township, six miles east of Wheaton in 1896.
- LT: 00:19 Your family was one of the first families that settled around here.
- CJ: 00:23 Pioneer homestead—homesteaded there in 1880. That’s five years before railway come to Traverse County and five years before the Town of Wheaton started.
- LT: 00:33 Where did your folks come from?
- CJ: 00:34 They came from Karlstad, Sweden; immigrants in 1879. They had two children with them on a boat.
- LT: 00:41 When they came over here, that first winter was kind of a bad one, wasn’t it?
- CJ: 00:45 Well, when they got out on the homestead in October 1880, they were caught in that famous blizzard that covered three days. Finally, when the blizzard was completed, they had to raise the roof board in order to get out. They had a single homestead shack, and they used twisted hay for fuel.

- LT: 01:06 There weren't too many trees around this area either, at that time, where there?
- CJ: 01:10 No, the old pioneer tell me there wasn't a tree here even around the lake. That's pretty hard to believe, but that was a fact. This was all prairie. It had been burnt off, no doubt, in prairie fires and so forth.
- LT: 01:21 When they came out here they just had to make a claim? They didn't have to buy the land when they first—
- CJ: 01:25 No. They lived there so many years and break so many acres ever year. But it was pretty rough pioneering.
- LT: 01:32 Did you come from a big family, a lot of brothers and sisters?
- CJ: 01:34 There is six brothers and one sister.
- LT: 01:38 Were you one of the youngest then in the family?
- CJ: 01:41 No, my brother, Alvin, was the youngest. He was Senator here for 12 years in this district, but he passed away 15 years ago.
- LT: 01:50 When you were growing up, were there schools around this area? Evidently, when you first got here, there probably weren't any schools.
- CJ: 01:57 Oh, when I was growing up, there was a one-room school that was a mile-and-a-half from the home, and we had to walk in muddy roads or snowy winters. I went there eight years, and that was the end of my schooling in 1910.
- LT: 02:13 Was it a pretty big deal to come into town when you were a youngster? That six miles away, like you're saying, the roads were quite as good, it must have been quite a treat to come into town.
- CJ: 02:23 Quite a treat. Mother would probably get to town once or twice a year, and we kids would never get into town when we were youngsters.
- LT: 02:31 You mentioned that Wheaton was fun. Was that shortly after the railroad got here that the town sprung up?
- CJ: 02:38 As the soon as the railway came through, of course, they started Wheaton. I don't know when it was incorporated,

but they started Wheaton about the same year that the rail of 1885.

- LT: 02:47 Growing up on the farm, I suppose you were busy with a lot of things. Any things that you liked to do or maybe didn't like to do so much?
- CJ: 02:55 I was busy doing farm chores, milking cows, and picking rocks, picking corn, and all kinds of general house—we had 25 head of horses. We had to clean the barn every day and harness them up in the morning, go out in the field and work. There was a lot of work compared to today. Get up 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning, and so forth.
- LT: 03:15 With that many horses, you must have had a pretty good-sized farm then too.
- CJ: 03:18 We had about 500 acres there.
- LT: 03:22 You evidently didn't get too discouraged because you went into farming for yourself as a young man.
- CJ: 03:27 Well, I was only 16 years old, and my father was pretty shrewd. He turned it over to us boys, and so we took over, and I farmed five years. There were those wet years in 1916, we didn't pull out a bite. We didn't harvest a bundle. The spring is something like we're having right now. It's too wet to get out into the field.
- LT: 03:47 Were there any good years when you were farming?
- CJ: 03:50 Well, in 1918 the prices of World War I were good. We had a good crop, so we had made good money but that was the end of my farming.
- LT: 04:00 Well, soon after your farming you came into town and lived there. Tell us about your job?
- CJ: 04:06 I got into town and started working for the farm store in Wheaton, which was a Farmers Cooperative, a mercantile company—my father was one of the founders—and I got on the other side of the counter, selling instead of buying. It worked out better.
- LT: 04:23 Over the years, that store changed. There was a lot of different things that were added. What things were different from the time that you started the store?

- CJ: 04:32 When the store started, we ran it in that big building across the street. It had a 75-foot front, and it was two-stories. There was a lot of space upstairs that we rented it out for office space. Finally, one morning, the landlord came in and he said, "I've sold the building. You'll have to move." So we had to build our 50-foot store across the street.
- 04:52 In 1941, we added on 30 feet, so there was an 80-foot front there where we conducted our retail business. We sold hardware, ready-to-wear, groceries—in fact, everything—machinery, threshing machines, and carloads of bail and twine, and carloads of washers, and carload of stoves, and so forth. Quite a job.
- LT: 05:12 When you first started out, tell us about some of the prices that come to mind, maybe in the early teens or the twenties, some of the different—
- CJ: 05:20 In 1920, I think we sold a pair of overalls, bib overalls for 98 cents. Then the war came along and it shot them way up, of course. A sack of sugar was \$40 and the overall probably \$4.
- LT: 05:36 You later on, became general manager overall. You mentioned so many different departments. What was your specialty?
- CJ: 05:44 In 1920, of course, it deflated the war prices and the farmer's store lost all of its cash-flow, so we were in bad shape. I started picking up the common stocks from these fellows that had it, and then added it on to the store and improved it, and made a retail operation. In 1948, we did over \$500,000 worth of business, and had about 25 employees. We were in plumbing and heating, and all of those things.
- LT: 06:14 Tell us, in hardware tools, over the years that changed from when you got into business. Today, you think about just something as simple as a saw. How did that change over the years you were in business?
- CJ: 06:28 In 1920, when I started, there wasn't anything automatic. We had a bucksaw to saw wood. I think we sold them for 98 cents. Of course, all the handsaws and coal chisels, it was all hand-work. Drills, bits and grazers all had to be operated by hand.

- LT: 06:48 Tell me about the equipment too Minnesota made. What was the name of the company that you sold for?
- CJ: 06:53 We also had a lathing machine that was assembled at the Minnesota State Prison by prisoners. The Minnesota binder and mower, buckers, and hay rakes, and hay loaders and binders. Binders were the big things we sold. We had to go out and service them and also we saw carloads of twine at that time. Everything was tied into a bundle.
- LT: 07:16 What was twine a bundle about in some of those earlier years?
- CJ: 07:20 Yeah, I don't remember what we were selling twine for per pound, at that time. But there were a five-pound ball and they come in 50-pound sacks.
- LT: 07:31 That came from the prison too, didn't it, the twine?
- CJ: 07:33 Yeah, the twine was spun at the Minnesota State Prison until lately now, I think it's gone out of that business. There isn't much use for twine anymore anyway. They don't even tie up the hay. They roll it into a big ball.
- LT: 07:48 A lot of things have changed over the years. Land prices around this area too. You mentioned an example of the great inflation prices that the land has experienced.
- CJ: 08:02 Yeah, I bought land years ago for \$15 an acre. Now, it's selling for over—they tell me the other day that an acre sold for \$1,300. That's quite a change.
- LT: 08:13 Interest rates too have changed considerably—the interest rates.
- CJ: 08:17 Oh, yeah, the interest rates. Of course, in those days a farmer could get a 20-year real estate loan for 3 percent. Now, it's, I suppose, probably 10 percent and a 10-year lease maybe, and no acceleration clauses in the old loan either.
- LT: 08:33 You were mentioning some of the things that your business sold, things like washing machines. When they came out, some of the early models, were they going like hot cakes; pretty popular?
- CJ: 08:44 When the gasoline-driven washing machine came out, of course, it was our job to go out and demonstrate them and

do the washing and try to sell them. There were a lot of customers we has to give three-four demonstration to before we sold them a machine. But it was interesting.

- LT: 0:900 You became an expert at washing clothes too?
- CJ: 09:03 We introduced the Maytag line and that got to be quite a washing machine company.
- LT: 09:09 In your company, when somebody wanted something it was your job to go out and not only sell it but deliver it and set up too?
- CJ: 09:15 Oh, yeah. Back in those days, of course, we had to buy them. We had to set up all our binders and all the machines they had to be set up right on the job. Then you'd delivered it out there, and if they had any problems they would call us. If a binder wouldn't tie, we'd have to go out there and see what's the fault.
- LT: 09:33 You sound like you had some very interesting experiences in your job and, of course, it sounds like your job was something new every day.
- CJ: 09:41 Yeah, it was a different job every day. You didn't know what's going to happen when you went to work in the morning. We used to open up our store in those days at 7:00 and we'd have to work every evening until 11:00, back in the horse and buggy days—muddy roads and so forth.
- LT: 09:56 Since you retired—that was in, what, the early sixties, I believe, Chester?
- CJ: 10:01 I retired when I became 65 years old in 1962, and I've been retired since—although I've been looking after my affairs and so forth.
- LT: 10:12 One of the things that you've been very active with is the Wheaton senior citizens and I think you were one of the people that was right there when they wanted to get a center.
- CJ: 10:22 Yeah, I helped to organize and finance the Wheaton Senior Citizen Center incorporated, and now they are doing a good job. They are serving something like 75 hot meals to these old people. They get them out of the house, they get to stay

there in the afternoon and play cards and get acquainted. They are really enjoying their retirement.

- LT: 10:44 So even though you are retired that doesn't mean you are not busy, right?
- CJ: 10:48 That's right. I'm still up and active and getting around.
- LT: 10:51 That's good. Chester, we always end the interview and we ask—you cheated a little bit when you told us what year you were born—but tell us how old you are.
- CJ: 10:59 I am 83 years old now. I was born 1896, make me 83 years of age.
- LT: 11:06 All right. We've been talking with Chester Johanson of Wheaton, on *Reminiscing in West Central Minnesota: a Saturday KMRS News Feature*