

Narrator: Gen John W Vessey, Jr

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.

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Transcribed by: Linda Gerber

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TS: Today is Thursday, 29 March 2012. This is the first interview of our cycle with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. First, on the record, General Vessey, thanks very much for participating for this afternoon.

JV: Thank you.

TS: If you would just begin by telling us when and where you were born.

JV: I was born in Minneapolis at the old Hillcrest Hospital on June 29, 1922. My parents actually lived in Lakeville at that time and shortly thereafter I was in Lakeville.

TS: And your parents – we talked earlier – that’s John W. Vessey, Sr. and Katherine Emily Roche?

JV: Right.

TS: What are your early memories of your parents? What kind of people were they?

JV: Good people. My father was the quieter of the two with a terrific sense of humor and could make a joke out of almost any situation. My mother was a bit more serious but she was always very pleasant.

TS: What was your parents’ background? For example, were they born in Minnesota, both of them?

JV: Both were born in Minnesota. I frankly don’t know exactly where my mother was born. Her parents...her father was a banker in Lakeville and was originally a St. Paul native and her mother came from the Carpenter family. Her father was a dentist in Plainview, Minnesota. I do not know the story of how they met or how in the world they got together. But my grandmother was an organist and a pianist and my grandfather on my mother’s side was a banker in Lakeville.

TS: What was your father’s profession?

JV: He worked for the Minneapolis Northfield and Southern Railroad. He was the station agent in Lakeville at the time that I was born. Came from a farming family out in the Bloomington-Savage area of the Minnesota River Valley.

TS: Did your dad have other jobs other than that or [did] he keep a job for a long time?

JV: That was his main occupation throughout my lifetime. He was a World War I veteran. My recollection of Lakeville is that the World War I veterans were sort of the young Turks in Lakeville and they were the ones pushing for the sewer system, the water system and things like that. But my father came from a farming family and during a number of years growing up in Lakeville we lived in the last house in town and had some farm land out beyond there. The house which my father farmed...*(tails off)*

TS: Do you recall helping with that farming work?

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: Is that something you recall fondly or not so much?

JV: I was the first child but there were six more that followed after me so it was sort of the average size family I would say in those days in town. By the time I was six years old the economy had begun to turn sour so that farming or gardening or whatever it was we did...we fed a couple of hogs and we had chickens, a lot of vegetables to can and so forth. I wouldn't call it fun, but it wasn't something that I disliked. Feeding the hogs is not something that immediately occurs as a childhood dream. *(chuckles)*

TS: Do you recall thinking at all as a young person farming is a career or something I'd like to do as an adult or did you already as a young person find yourself thinking about other possibilities?

JV: I spent many summers on real farms, that is grandfather's farm, on my father's side. Step-grandfather he actually was at the time. Although I enjoyed the life, it was not something I wanted to do for a lifetime work.

TS: You mentioned your dad as a World War I veteran. As you were growing up, how much did your dad talk about being in the service in and around the World War I times?

JV: Very little. He'd tell about seeing Paris and things like that but he was an infantry squad leader in the 42nd Division which was McArthur's division, the Rainbow Division. But he had a lot of World War I buddies that got together regularly to play cards and talk and sometimes one would overhear some of their conversations. But my dad never raised it with me. But he was sort of the veteran's leader in Lakeville. When there was the Memorial Day parade or the Armistice Day parade, my dad seemed to be perennially in charge of the veteran participation. He helped form the VFW post in town and eventually, after he died, they named the American Legion Post after him.

TS: So the idea of the military was at least in the back of your mind as a young person. You knew of this experience of your dad.

JV: Yes. The World War I vets were, as I said, they were the young Turks and they were a powerful group in Lakeville. I became a Boy Scout when I turned twelve years of age and

we always marched proudly behind the vets who were always in their World War I uniforms in the Memorial Day and Armistice Day parades in Lakeville.

TS: What's a favorite memory you have of your mother and your father?

JV: For my father I would say that he treated me almost like a grown up from the time I was about twelve years old on. I had two paper routes growing up in Lakeville and my dad spent a fair amount of time with me trying to impress on me the business lessons of having a paper route and collecting the money and taking care of putting it away securely so that the newspaper itself got their share of the money and I got my share which was...it seemed like a miniscule percentage of what the newspaper got at that time but it was okay. He helped me. The Sunday papers were big. At that age hauling a sack of Sunday papers around on a bicycle was not possible so he helped me construct a miniature automobile using a gasoline washing machine engine and a wagon that we used. Made a machine. It wasn't very successful because it went very slow.

TS: But you weren't carrying them yourself.

JV: Right.

TS: As a young person did you like to tinker with machines and tools and build things?

JV: Yes. That was a fun experience building a miniature automobile out of a...(tails off)

TS: And so you enjoyed that. Now in a house with ultimately six siblings, being the oldest, did you feel a sense of responsibility? Did you feel more responsibility was placed on you?

JV: Yes. And I also felt like a target. The next two were girls. I always felt that the next two found a way to...whatever went wrong, my two oldest sisters would find a way to get across to my mother that whatever went wrong, that I did it. (chuckles) But it was okay. It was a fun time.

TS: A good house to grow up in?

JV: Yes.

TS: How about a favorite memory of your mother?

JV: My mother had a bit of a hair trigger. Before long, with a child every eighteen months or so, [she] had her hands full with dirty diapers and washing cloths and feeding the household and so forth. She had a bit of a hair trigger and expected her children to obey promptly and do what she said. But she was pleasant. She'd play jokes on us. ... I remember she bought a rubber wiener. If you incurred mother's wrath you were likely to find the rubber wiener in your lunch sandwich in your lunchbag. (chuckles)

TS: Just letting you know she hadn't forgotten about whatever it was.

JV: Right.

TS: What was the importance of religion or faith in your household growing up?

JV: Every Sunday we marched to Sunday School and to church so it was part of the program and blessedly has remained so ever since.

TS: Were your parents both people of faith as you think back on it?

JV: Yes. My father, again with his sense of humor, would jab both clergymen and the rest of us about the faith. We grew up as Lutherans even though my father had grown up as a Presbyterian and my mother as a Roman Catholic. But when they married, both families apparently were disappointed at the union and somehow the Roman Catholics didn't want the people to end up as Presbyterians and the Presbyterians didn't want their Presbyterians to be Roman Catholic so we attended the Lutheran Church. The Lutheran Church in town had a youth program called the Luther League and Sunday evening, ... we would get up from the Sunday dinner table, always to go to Luther League, and my father would always say, "Who's leading in the league now?" (*chuckles*) That was a line that went on for...(*tails off*)

TS: And therein lies the humor, right, by saying it over and over and over again?

JV: Right. My father, I remember, later on, before we moved to Minneapolis, I had ridden with him to Minneapolis. He was working part time in Minneapolis during the Depression. We came home in a snowstorm. By that time I guess we had a Model A, a new Model A Ford. The fellow in front of us was a Catholic priest who kept getting stuck in the snow. We got out three or four times to shovel snow. My dad used a few four letter expletives as he was shoveling snow a couple of times. The priest who was stuck in the snow had his collar turned backwards and was obviously a clergyman. He asked my father where we lived and he told him Lakeville. He asked if we went to the Lakeville Catholic Church. My dad said, "No." We were Lutherans but we knew Father Hart who was the priest in Lakeville, and my father said he played golf with Father Hart often. So this fellow said, "I'm a priest too." My dad said, "The hell you say." (*chuckles*) Never missed an opportunity to jab.

TS: Your dad had a sense of humor too, didn't he?

JV: He did.

TS: Did you inherit that?

JV: I don't know. (*smiling*)

TS: You think about Lakeville and it being a place where some of these World War I vets really were kind of anxious to change Lakeville, when you think back, and you lived there until 1936 I think you said.

JV: Yes.

TS: When you close your eyes and look at Lakeville when you were growing up as a young person, what did Lakeville look like?

JV: It was so much different from what the village would look like today that it's almost hard to imagine. Down Main Street, which was the old Highway 65, that went from Minneapolis through Orchard Lake and Orchard Gardens, and then past Buck Hill where the ski place is now, and then on past Antlers Park and on into Lakeville itself and then on to Farmington. The main street was lined with hitching rails, because when I was growing up farmers came to town with horse and wagon. In the wintertime in bobsleds. The main street had Engren's Grocery Store, which was the one and only grocery store in Lakeville. Had blacksmith shops at the two ends of Main Street. Gephardt's Furniture Store and Undertaking Parlor, which incidentally was the biggest family in town. The Gephardts had I think thirteen kids. There was a drug store on the other side of the street, the jail and the town hall and a theater. We had a movie theater on Main Street.

TS: Was Main Street paved, General?

JV: Yes. It was at that time. But it wasn't paved beyond the edge of town. Gravel road.

TS: Did you get into town? I mean you said you had a house on the edge of town.

JV: It was a short walk into town.

TS: But going into town, ... Main Street was the town pretty much, as far as where the shops and things were?

JV: There were at least two side streets. Lakeville had almost five hundred people. We had a creamery in town and a flour mill that stopped working in the '20s sometime. By the time, before I was twelve years old, the flour mill had stopped working and had become just a grain elevator. We had two farm equipment dealers.

TS: Was there a railroad through town?

JV: There were two railroads that went through Lakeville, the Minneapolis Northfield and Southern went north to south and the Milwaukee Road had an east to west line. They crossed in Lakeville. So we had two railroad stations.

TS: Now you lived in a number of houses when you were in Lakeville you said. Was there one that you lived in more, for a longer time, or that you consider your main house as a child?

JV: I think there are two that I remember. I remember living in a third house. When I was first born we lived at Antlers Park, which was a resort out on the edge of Lakeville on Lake Marion and we moved into town to a house that was on the west side of town fairly close to the railroad station. But it soon became inadequate and we moved into a larger house that was on the edge of town where we had the farm land off to the east.

TS: Was that an existing house that your dad and mom bought or was that a house they built themselves?

JV: No. It was an existing house.

TS: Describe that house.

JV: It had what was left of a barn out behind the house and part of that barn was turned into a garage, that my dad used as a garage. Then it had an outdoor toilet. It had a basement with a furnace in it but the heating system was unducted, that is, the furnace was right over a big hot air register and then the upstairs bedrooms had registers in them that would let the heat rise into the bedroom or you could close it off at night. It had I don't remember how many bedrooms, but I think that it had at least three with my parents in the largest one and then at that time my youngest brother was not yet born. My youngest sister wasn't born either at that house. My little brother and I slept in one of the bedrooms and all the girls slept in the other one. Had a porch, which most houses in Minnesota had.

TS: The house that came after this was larger still then?

JV: Yes. The house that came after that was a house in town. My dad became the mayor of Lakeville. I've forgotten what year he became the mayor. But we moved from this house on the edge of town into this considerably larger house to accommodate the remainder of the children. It had a lot more room. The earlier house had an unheated sort of outdoor back entryway that the washtub was in and the washing machine and so forth. I remember that the town house actually had a heated room and it had a ducted furnace in it.

TS: Are either of those houses still standing, General?

JV: No, neither one is still standing. I remember when Lakeville was expanding, I got a call from the mayor of Lakeville and they said they were tearing down the old Vessey house. It was being dismantled and wanted to know if I wanted any part of it.

TS: What did you say to that question?

JV: I said I didn't know what part I'd take, but I was glad to get the information.

TS: So neither one of those houses are there anymore because Lakeville, like you mentioned, has changed almost completely as to be unrecognizable from what you're describing.

JV: Yes.

TS: You also, if you lived there until age fourteen, you went to school in Lakeville for a number of years. How do you remember your school years? Happy times?

JV: Yes. Lakeville School was a two story brick building on the south end of town along the highway. It had the lower grades on the ground floor and the high school, the seventh and eighth grades, on the upper floor. ... A fellow by the name of Mr. Degan was the president or chairman of the school board and we had a room that wasn't much bigger than that living room there [motions to living room in house, approximately 12 feet by 12 feet], it was in the basement and it was called Degan's Gym because Mr. Degan apparently didn't believe much should be spent on physical education. (*chuckles*)

TS: The room that you've described is probably twelve [feet] by twelve [feet] maybe?

JV: Right. We had an outdoor basketball court with one basket and Deagon's Gym on the inside. Those were our athletic facilities. We did have a baseball field that was on the edge of the school ground but it was primarily used for the town ball team. Teachers were...I frankly don't remember the names of any of the teachers. I don't know what that says about me or the teachers.

TS: I wonder. What are your memories of school? More about the people, the friends you made, or the things you did outside of school?

JV: The friends, and the fact that I was ahead of most of the other kids in school. I had a couple of really good friends but my parents had me reading far beyond the school reading before I ever went to school. School seemed very easy for me. Not particularly challenging.

TS: Would you call yourself a good student because it was easy, or someone who was easily bored?

JV: I'd say I alternated between those two positions. Skipping school was, during the spring and fall was sort of a joy for me. One of my best friends was a kid named Joe Weichselbaum; his parents owned a small resort on Lake Marion. It was a small summer resort. What they did is, they had a big farmhouse and they took in guests, rented extra bedrooms to guests. They had a beach where they could swim and fish from boats that they'd rent.

TS: Do you recall Lakeville being a summer destination for people from the Twin Cities?

JV: Antlers Park was. There was a big dancehall at Antlers Park and a golf course and some recreational rides and so forth. Lakeville itself wasn't. Lakeville was support for the farming community. Groceries, farm implements, blacksmiths.

TS: Exactly what you described a little bit ago, with a couple of farm implement dealers, a couple of blacksmiths. These kind of things.

JV: Right.

TS: So the kids that you knew growing up, some of their parents did live on farms.

JV: Right. Kids in school. Many of them were children of full time farmers. We had a pool hall in Lakeville too.

TS: Was that for adult and older kids or someplace where a young boy might also wander in?

JV: No. It was forbidden territory for me. *(smiles)*

TS: How come?

JV: It was where idlers went during the daytime.

TS: And so it being forbidden was [from your] mom or dad?

JV: Yes. I don't know which one came up with it, but it was forbidden by both. My father could go in there.

TS: So the pool hall was a place where guys hung out during the day.

JV: Right.

TS: You lived in Lakeville until you were fourteen years old. The Depression was in full swing during the last number of years you lived there. Did you notice men around town, more people around that you didn't know possibly drifting through?

JV: Yes. They were, the term used was "bums," who hitched rides on the railroad. We had two places in town where they camped, one along each of the railroad tracks.

TS: So as a kid you could see these guys out there.

JV: Right.

TS: Was that scary in a way to have these sort of people camping around, or was it just part of the scenery?

JV: I remember my parents forbidding me to go to these campgrounds where these vagrants camped out. Their description of the people was that these were not good people. They were perfectly all right, but they were obviously jobless. But I don't remember

anything other than them going through town and my dad, working for the railroad, like most of the railroad people, did not want them riding the rails.

TS: Of course. Yes. Did your dad talk much about his job with the railroad?

JV: In the summertime or on Saturdays or Sundays or whatever it was when he had to work he'd often take me to the station. It had some side tracks and a small yard there and a side track that went to the creamery. In the station itself it had levers that one used to switch the cars from one track to another.

TS: Manual switches.

JV: Yes. So I was given the opportunity to pull the levers.

TS: Did you like hanging out with your dad and sort of being part of this world of work as a young person?

JV: Yes. My dad wound up doing up a number of things during the Depression. I remember he sold gravestones, and part of the selling of the gravestones was that he would set the gravestones after the engraving on them was finished. He would take me along and have me help him set the gravestones. I don't know that I enjoyed the work, but I enjoyed being with my father while he was doing this.

TS: And being the oldest and the next two were girls, you were the one he was likely to take out. Okay. How many of your siblings are brothers?

JV: Two.

TS: So there are three boys altogether and four girls.

JV: Three boys and four girls. Boy, two girls, boy, two girls, boy.

TS: Now it's 1936 and your family moves to Minneapolis.

JV: Right.

TS: What prompted the move from out in the country, as it were in those days, to the big city?

JV: The railroad was cutting employment during the Depression and as employment was cut the people with seniority would bump somebody out of a job if they had the seniority to get that job and I don't know what else, whether they had to demonstrate capabilities or not, but anyway, my father bumped somebody out of job and he worked as a dispatcher for the railroad.

TS: Which railroad did he work for again?

JV: Minneapolis Northfield and Southern. The nickname was the Dan Patch Railroad, because it was actually started by Mr. Savage, who was the owner of Dan Patch¹.

TS: The horse, yes. How long did your dad end up working for the railroad?

JV: Until he died.

TS: How old was your father when he died?

JV: You asked me earlier when he was born and I got the answer from my sister, and I've forgotten whether it was 1894 or 1896. One of the two. I think it was probably 1894. He died in 1942. So he was forty-eight years old.

TS: Early, mid-forties. What happened to your dad?

JV: He had been wounded during World War I and also had diabetes. I think it was a combination of the two that killed him. He died in the Vets Hospital in Minneapolis.

TS: So you were overseas when that happened.

JV: I was overseas. I was on a boat on my way to North Africa [in 1942] when my father died.

TS: What happened to your dad over in France? Did he ever say?

JV: He was wounded by shrapnel. I've forgotten...he used to show us the scar once in a while if we'd beg him to. He always, he shot himself with insulin for his diabetes. He'd fill that syringe with alcohol to clean it out and he'd always squirt it at one of us.

TS: So you remember. Moving to Minneapolis: What kind of an adjustment was that for you moving from a small town to a much different environment?

JV: It was hard for me at first. I didn't like the idea of moving to Minneapolis. Kids in Lakeville always talked disparagingly about the kids in Minneapolis. I don't know why because we didn't know any of them. (*chuckles*) Obviously had a little straw in my ears when I came to Minneapolis. I remember one of my first assignments in English class was to stand up and give a talk on explaining how to do something. I had chosen explaining how to find the North Star, which I knew very well having been a Boy Scout. I still was a Boy Scout at the time. But I remember being a smart aleck kid and standing up in front of the class and saying to the teacher, "I know how to do this but I don't think these city kids would understand if I told them," and getting a failing grade.

¹ Dan Patch: harness race horse, b. 1896, d. 1916; Dan Patch Avenue on the Minnesota State Fairgrounds is named for the horse.

TS: One liners were not what she was looking for apparently. Now where did you live in Minneapolis? Do you remember the address or the streets?

JV: I do. 3202 Wenonah Place; it was a three block long street between 51st Street and 52nd Street and between 34th Avenue South and 31st Avenue South.

TS: And what kind of a neighborhood was that as you perceived that as a child?

JV: It was a solid middle class neighborhood, by and large people of Scandinavian extraction. We had Nelsons and Andersons and Olsons and Petersons. But we also had some Anglo Saxons around. The Hathaways lived on one side of us and the Caldwells lived across the street.

TS: Was this a new house your parents built or was this an existing house?

JV: An existing place that they rented.

TS: When you stand out front and look at the house, what does it look like?

JV: It was a stucco house, two story stucco house with a basement, a large sun porch curiously on the north side of the house. Now it was a sun porch because it was windows all the way around. It was called a sun porch. But it didn't get any sun. Had a couple of big boxelder shade trees in the yard and an oak tree in the backyard. Garden space for a vegetable garden. All the houses along Wenonah Place are based on the west end of Wenonah Place and had a fairly steep bank from the sidewalk going up to the grade that the house was sitting on. Had a front porch. Front screen porch. I think there were three bedrooms plus the "sun porch." The three boys slept in the sun porch which was unheated except that we had a small thin steel stove. My father made a vent out one of the windows with a stack and we burned principally rolled up newspaper in it.

TS: You slept there year round though?

JV: Yes. In the winter it was colder than all get out. Even though we had storm windows on, the frost on the inside window ... there was always a good coating of ice on the inside window.

TS: I would think so. Having you describe you slept there, it took me a second to think about all year round.

JV: Yes.

TS: So you drew the short straw on bedrooms it sounds like.

JV: (*chuckles*) The hard part was putting up the storm windows. It had four windows about the size of this window here [motions to window in room, approximately 1.5 feet wide by 4 feet tall]. Four of them together across the north side of the house. It had a one piece

storm window that covered all four windows. The windows were adjacent to each other. So the sash for the storm window was all around the four windows.

TS: Pretty big.

JV: So it was a big item pushing that storm window. I remember that being one of my duties is putting that storm window up there with my two younger brothers on the inside. It had hooks to fasten it on the inside and I pushed it up.

TS: You went to Roosevelt High School?

JV: I did.

TS: Describe your high school days? Good times?

JV: Yes. It was a good time. It was a great school. I went to Nokomis Junior High School for the ninth grade. Then by the time I got to high school I was interested in school and it was clear that even though, as I said earlier, I was ahead of most of the kids in Lakeville up through the seventh grade, but by the time I got to the ninth grade in Minneapolis I wasn't ahead anymore.

TS: So you noticed the difference.

JV: Right. Right. The competition was a lot keener and there were some real students going to school who had much more interest in academics than I had. Clearly I needed to work a lot harder than I had been working. And the same, by the time I got to Roosevelt High School, I was challenged by the school and it was a great school in those days. I remember the faculty fondly.

TS: Do you have a teacher that you remember, someone who made an impact on you?

JV: Mary L. Edwards. Mary L. Edwards was the upper mathematics teacher, and she looked like someone out of the Victorian Era. She had a wig and she wasn't particularly careful about putting it on. It looked like she just sort of...when she was leaving the house slipped it on because some days she'd have an inch of forehead and other days she'd have four or five inches of forehead, and she wore long dresses and high button shoes but she was a terrific mathematics teacher. I never realized how good she was because I didn't get particularly good grades from her, but years later after the war when I was trying to catch up and get an undergraduate college degree I was taking some engineering math courses. I had gotten a wonderful grade, the best grade of the class. I then realized that it wasn't because I was a mathematical genius; it was because I had gotten a firm grounding from Mary L. Edwards that had lasted me through the years. But I'd say the faculty was all around good.

TS: Did you make significant friendships at Roosevelt High School, people that also made an impact on you?

JV: I met my wife to be there and friends that have remained friends since then. Many of them are now gone, but there are still a couple alive that we continue to communicate with.

TS: So what I'm hearing is a positive experience with good faculty. There were lessons as well as life lessons there.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you work as well as go to school?

JV: I did. Work was hard to come by then for teenagers during the Depression. My early ways of making money were lawn work in the summertime. In the wintertime everyone that I knew had a coal fire furnace. Disposing of the ashes in Minneapolis was a problem. There were dumps where you could dump the ashes. The going rate for ashes on Wenonah Place was ten cents a tub, and that was a washtub.

TS: Wow! That's a lot of ashes.

JV: Saturday one would get a pull wagon or in the wintertime a sled and pull ashes to the dump and collect ten cents a tub. So you could make a dollar maybe on a Saturday. Then in the summertime working at the truck garden farms, mostly out the north side of Minneapolis. Take the streetcar out to the end of the line and stand there and wait for a farmer to come by with a truck and take you out to top onions or hoe the garden or whatever. And again, you could make about a buck on a Saturday.

TS: In those days a dollar was obviously more than today.

JV: Yes. Then later on I worked the night crew, the night heater crew, for the railroad for a pretty good wage. It was 21.5 cents per hour was the wage.

TS: That's good money then.

JV: Yes. You worked by the hour. Sometimes it was four hours, sometimes six hours, sometimes two hours which, if you worked two hours your streetcar fare was 7.5 cents each way so you worked an hour and you got six cents worth of profit. You net six cents for your [trouble].

TS: The streetcar system was still working. What do you recall about the streetcar system in Minneapolis?

JV: It was superb in those days. You could go all the way from Stillwater to Lake Minnetonka on the streetcar, and the streetcar company actually had boats on Lake Minnetonka to take you around. For those of us who were kids in those days it was the primary way of getting around. My senior year in high school another friend and I got a car that was a junker actually. It had a cracked block. But we put enough water to run it for

ten or fifteen miles from where you needed to put in more. It was a 1926 Chevrolet. We kept a saucepan on a hook underneath the hood and we'd go around behind the filling stations and dip drain oil out of their drain oil tanks to use as motor oil in our car.

TS: Necessity is the mother of invention?

JV: Right. (*chuckles*) Go to the dump and look for tires that might be suitable enough to take along.

TS: Less bald than the ones that were on there?

JV: Right.

TS: Let me conclude for today by just asking you about – as you're growing, you're a teenager, fourteen when you moved to Minneapolis and high school – what would you identify as a lesson that you may have learned in high school or working these jobs that served you well perhaps in later life?

JV: I think that work could be enjoyable. We haven't talked about it yet, but I was a Boy Scout all that time and we had a wonderful Scout troop, some great leaders. I think the lessons I learned in the Boy Scout troop were probably some of those that I carried later on through life. I learned a lot.

TS: Let's talk about Boy Scouts, because you're right. You were a Boy Scout for a number of years. What attracted you first to scouting?

JV: The other kids and the chance to do some outdoor things that I might not have otherwise have gotten an opportunity to do. The Scout troop was sponsored by the church we attended in Minneapolis. In Lakeville it was the VFW post that sponsored the Scout troop, but in Minneapolis it was Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church. Sponsored old Troop 21 in Minneapolis and had great leaders. They had a wonderful Scoutmaster, a great troop committee that was interested in the kids, some great leadership, demonstrations. My impression was that the leaders truly believed in the Scout program. They believed that Scout law made better kids. They stressed it to us. Even while we were having fun. A Scout is trustworthy. A Scout's honor is to be trusted; if he should lie or cheat he would be directed to hand over his Scout badge. It was a lesson.

I think that when I was in high school I was on the stage crew, which in Roosevelt was considered sort of an unglamorous job to have. People vying to work on the stage crew. But it was hard work. You were building scenery for the plays and shuffling it while the plays were taking place. You didn't get to take any of the bows that the kids that were in the cast of the plays got to take. But there was a lot of satisfaction. And again back to the faculty at the school, they made you think you were important doing that sort of work. As I say, I think the joy of building teams to accomplish things came home as a great lesson.

TS: That is part of Scouting. You're right.

JV: Yes. Of Scouting and stage crew. It was a real learning time in my life I'd say.

TS: How long did you stay in Scouts? In high school sometimes we drift away.

JV: I was a registered Scout or Scouter from 1934 I guess, when I became twelve years old, until 1979.

TS: Okay. So you had a relationship or connection to Scouting.

JV: Yes. The relationship was obviously loose during the military service because during World War II, [although] everyone who went into the military service stayed a member of Troop 21. You got your registration card through the mail. Then after the war I was a Scoutmaster. Soon after the war I was an assistant Scoutmaster at Fort Sill and then the Scoutmaster left and I became the Scoutmaster there. Then later on Avis was involved in Girl Scouts much of the time, Brownies or Girl Scouts.

I remember the first time we were in Washington I was working hard at the Pentagon. I didn't know my job very well and I worked hard to try and make sure that I did what was right by the United States Army and the job I had been assigned, but I was also scrambling to try and finish a baccalaureate degree so I was going to school at night and so on and so forth. I remember that our oldest son was in the Scout troop and it was having some troubles and Avis was going to the parents' meeting on a night that I was going to class at the Pentagon. I came home and asked her about the meeting and she said, "Well, they have a new Scoutmaster." I said, "Who is that?" She said, "It's you." (*chuckles*)

TS: Should have gone to that meeting, General.

JV: That was my second run as a Scoutmaster.

TS: Did you like being a Scoutmaster and working with young people?

JV: Yes. It was extra work, but it was clearly something good to do for the community and it was good for me to do it.

TS: So you were in Scouts the whole time in high school. What rank did you attain in the Scouts?

JV: Life Scout. I never made Eagle. It was my fault. During those years I blamed it on the examiner for merit badges. Nature Study merit badge, about outdoor life or wildlife: there was one examiner that had this, and he was known to be particularly tough for this merit badge and you really had to do your work. And I must say looking back on it years later, I realize that I never did put in the effort that I should have to pass. I always held a grudge against the examiner when I should have held a grudge against myself for failing to do the required work.

TS: That was one of the required merit badges.

JV: Yes. It was a required merit badge.

TS: So you finished as a Life Scout. Still nothing to sneeze at.

JV: I had plenty of merit badges for Eagle but I just... *(tails off)*

TS: There were some that were required. That's right.

JV: Yes.

TS: Anything else you want to add before we stop for today, particularly about growing up in Lakeville or your experiences as a young person up to and including high school?

JV: We could add a lot I guess. I think recognizing the leadership of Troop 21 for example; a fellow named "Dad" Towle was the Scoutmaster. He was a repairman for the telephone company, that was his full time job. But I'd say his full time job was being a Scoutmaster. He only worked for the telephone company to make sure his family was fed.

TS: He took to this job then very much.

JV: Yes. We had a troop committee and I continue to look back at those people and admire the work they did. Emil Johnson who was the father of two boys that became friends of mine, and their daughter was a friend of Avis's. They were both art majors in college and went through high school and college together. Her husband, Howard Olson, was one of the Scouts. He died a couple years ago, but Avis and Betty Olson still get together.

TS: That's sixty-plus years later, so that's a meaningful relationship. Clearly made an impact on you the way you're talking about it.

JV: It did indeed.

TS: You can just feel this as a positive energy in your voice when you talk about it. You're right. We could add other things. And one of the positive things is if and as things come to your mind when we're looking at a transcript, that's a place we could add those things and make sure that we cover everything you want to include. So for today, I'll turn off the recording device.

END OF INTERVIEW