



2007 Sesquicentennial Oral Interview

Carroll Gerstenberger

CH: What do remember about your grandfather who lived in Hesper?

CG: He was a real Quaker man. Was to ask him to sign a contract. All they wanted you to do was shake hands. Give them the word and shake hands. They would be insulted if you asked them to sign a contract. They believed in the word.

CH: What did they farm out there?

CG: Just general farming. My uncle, my granddad's only son, he was dairying out there. He had a large family and so they had to change houses.

CH: Moved to parents' house

CG: So my granddad moved into a real little house out there where Eula Uller[?] lives now, a local Eudora girl.

CH: Where did your parents live in this area? When they first got married?

CG: My grandparent's dad built them a new home for them where I lived, across from the Church of Christ where we just moved out of. Eva Belle and I lived there ourselves 60 years.

CH: That was your parents' house.

CG: That was my parents' house. They moved in as newlyweds when the house was new.

CH: Who did they buy the farm land from?

CG: John Vogel. That 98 acres there where the house is my granddad just gave it to them under the circumstances that they had to pay my grandmother money so much every month for every year for rental. And if she passed away, then his sister had to get so much money. Really, he paid way more for it that way because they all lived to be old people than they would if they bought it outright. But they got it bought. Most of the farm was bought back about in 1916 or 1917, and he put it on wheat and it was down



in the little Wakkie bottom and he had it all cut and shocked and it all flooded. Water got all over it. A complete loss. He bought that farm in 1916 or 1917. He must have bought it in '16 because he had it in 1917 in wheat crop when it flooded out. . He never got that place paid for until 1944. So, he paid all that length of time. I happened to throw his papers away about 15 or 20 years ago out of the attic. I noticed on his mortgage payments he paid as low as 50 cents sometimes on the principal but he always paid the interest. Sometimes he had a real good year and paid five dollars.

CH: Your dad farmed but did he do other jobs to make money?

CG: Oh, yes. He had a college education. He was the only one of his large family that got to go to college. He had to work his way through Friends University. He actually revived a football team at Friends University, and he started the first basketball team at Friends University. I will tell you something else about that basketball. Out here at the Hesper Academy, he and five other boys, local farm boys had a basketball team, no coach, just a basketball goal was outside. Cinders, you know; it was muddy. No coach to teach them rules; they just had a book. They learned to play basketball on their own. But they won every team they ever played. Never was defeated in the whole life of the school.

CH: Did he graduate from Hesper Academy or the high school here?

CG: No, he graduated from the Hesper Academy and then he went to Friends University. I was thinking that one time I had the idea that he went to the high school in the old grade school building sometime. I don't know what year the Hesper Academy quit.

CH: I thought I read Charles Gerstenberger graduated in 1908 from the high school, but, you're right, the Hesper Academy started losing money around that time and a lot of people left.

CG: In 1921, they built the high school.

CH: Did he ever talk about what Hesper Academy was like as a school?

CG: I know they talked about having those, they used to have those societies that started with a "L," was it Lucerne ?or some kind of literary society?. An educational society. I don't know the correct word. I know it started with an "L."

CH: Lyceum.

CG: Something like that. I couldn't tell you for sure what that word was. I remember him talking about it. Our young people have things to go to, groups, that's what they're--

CH: So he graduates from there and goes to college and then he is living on the farm and he does odd jobs? Did he ever drag the roads sometimes?

CG: No, no, no. His brother done that. Homer Gerstenberger done that. He had the home place. Homer lived at the home place. His brother, Walter, lived out here at Keystone, what they call Stinky Corner sometimes. Dad, by having a college education,

the local people around □ wasn't many older people who had a college education in those days they wanted him to run for the Legislature. So, they went and got up money and they paid for the filing fee and got him to run for Legislature And he spent four terms in Legislature

CH: How old was he when he did that? 20s? 30s?

CG: Older than that. Before that he was a field man starting a bank in Lawrence. Farmer Union Bank. He went around and called on lot of farmers around Douglas County to try to get them to put up money to build a bank. They finally got a Farmer Union Bank started up in Lawrence. It's over there by that bank in Lawrence. What is the name of that bank in Lawrence, Eva Belle? Across from where the livery stable used to be? Anyway, they got the bank started, and he naturally was the head of it. They invested their money in a big bank in Kansas City and they went broke in Kansas City, that's when all these banks went broke. So, they had to close their bank. He worked as the receiver. He had to stay on the job a couple of years, finally to close out the details. But what I admire my father about, back in 1944 after the War, he told me that he was happy. He finally got all the people the farmers who invested in his bank, they got all their principal back. He worked all them years without any wages whatsoever. From '29 to '44, taking care of business, get their money bank. They didn't get interest on their money. But they got all their original money back. And, then he got started being in the federal ? in the Depression years, when the farmers were losing so much land and then Congress passed the special law if they could get so many creditors to deduct so much money, discount their debt so much, so they could get it down to what the appraised value of the money, they could borrow money and go ahead and keep their farms and pay it out in time.

CH: When he was in the Legislature do you remember other people from Eudora who were ever in the Legislature?

CG: Not from Eudora. Lawrence. I know Edwin Abels, he had the paper, you know. The Douglas County Republican, I think they called it at that time. He ran against Dad one year. I know Dad beat him a couple of years, running against the paper and he was just a farm boy. One year Dad wasn't interested in running at all, they didn't pay nothing. The representatives made \$5 a day. I'd go in and worked as a page boy and I'd make \$3 a day. That didn't make sense. My father, he walked 17 blocks just to try to get cheaper rent out away from the Capitol, so he could get cheaper rent and he lived on grapefruit trying to get by because he was hard up. He was still trying to pay for this farm. It wasn't paid for yet.

CH: What are some of your earliest childhood memories of living in Eudora?

CG: I lived right down there in Eudora, down there right by the old milk plant. By that real nice house that's down there, the old Lawson house. Who lived there last? Kazmaiers? That real nice home, that house sold for \$2,000 when I was in the service. If I had known that, I'd have bought it. I remember the same time the Rothbergers had a brand new 1940 Chevrolet pick-up. He was trying to get \$500 out of. Finally, Don Westheffer [?] bought it. That was cheap, you know. Back to my father, as I got in the alignment business myself later on and met all these farmers in this county, I had more

than one farmer tell me, if it wasn't for my father that they'd have lost their farm. So, I got a lot of business.

CH: When you lived down there, did you go downtown?

CG: Oh, when I lived there. I was going to Eudora grade school then and that's when I went to the Legislature. That's when Dad was in the Legislature. Mary Miller was my teacher. She's a wonderful gal who lived there with Harold Daugherty. She told me that she thought that by me missing that time in school, my experience in the Legislature was worth more to me than missing grade school.

CH: What did the grade school look like inside?

CG: Just a plain Jane with an old wood floor that they oiled to keep the dust down. You couldn't drop anything on the floor or it would be oily.

CH: Do you remember the busy day downtown was and the first stores down there?

CG: I remember before the streets were paved and waterworks all put in. That's all done. Sure, I remember lots. The first store was Pilla's. My folks had a big round oak table and chairs that underneath it said "Charles Pilla store." We inherited that from my folks and we finally destroyed it. I don't know why we did but we did. For the oak wood, I guess.

CH: What was it like when people started coming in to work at the Sunflower Ammunition Plant?

CG: Really, I was in the service at that time.

CH: When you came back what was it like? Did the town seem like it changed?

CG: Oh, yes. First time I came to town, there's a lady named Helen Miner. They had, you know, Miners welding shop there. The doctors' office was right across the street in Louise Lotz building at that time. My mother was the receptionist in the doctor's office. I was going down to see my mother. I didn't get to my mother, and here come Helen running out and said, "You must be Carol Gerstenberger." I never see the woman before. I didn't know who she was. She threw her arms around me. She hugged me.

CH: So, then when did you move over to the house that you recently moved out of?

CG: I went to aviation school to take an engine course in aircraft that is why I got in aircraft so young, early in the stage of the war. As soon as I got out of that, why I went out there to help Dad. That's right. Then, I imagine I was in town about three months before I moved out to the farm and took over. We farmed together a little bit then he got Parkinson's. He passed away at 67. He died real young in life. He got Parkinson's so he wasn't able to do anything after, I'd way, 60 to 62 to help me.

CH: When did you get involved with the school board?

CG: I couldn't tell you exactly.

CH: Were you in your 20s? 30s?

CG: I would say 30s. I'd say I was 31, Eva Belle. I was 31? Wasn't I? Probably.

CH: What sort of business did you all usually handle on the school board?

CG: Just routine business. Hiring teachers and stuff like that.

CH: How often did you usually meet?

CG: Oh, at least once a week. See, they operated schools cheaply then. Our superintendent of schools, he had no secretary whatsoever. He'd be up there at 11 o'clock at night, with lights on, doing all the bookwork. All the people around were saying, "Oh, he's juggling the books." They didn't realize how much money he was saving the district. He was kind of a hard kind of guy, a wonderful man if you ever got to know him. A real honest man. Sincere man. He was an ex-Army officer.

CH: What was his name?

CG: Dean Kerr, Kerr last name. I don't know his first name. It might have been David? He had boys named Dean. "D.E." was his initials. I remember that. I didn't call him by his first name. Homer Broers happened to be on the school board with me, too.

CH: Were there other organizations that you've been involved with?

CG: Oh, Farm Bureau all my life. They treated me wonderful when I was in the Army cause I had a car trouble in the hail storm. Then I came home and my grandmother Votaw passed way. I was coming home on emergency furlough to her funeral and did have my wife and oldest child with us at that time so when we came through Waco, Texas, in the wee hours of the morning way before daylight, way out in the country, probably 70 miles out of Waco, there was a top light up hanging above, and I never expect to see anything in the country. And a Model T Ford was going right across and I hit him in the back wheel. I broke both his wooden wheels. He felt sorry for me being I was in uniform and going home to my grandmothers' funeral. I told him I'd like to settle up for the damage right now. I had a little cash. He said, "I believe I know where I can get a set of wheel for \$20." So, with a \$20 bill I settled up with that deal.

CH: Where you live you are close to the Jewish Cemetery.

CG: Yes.

CH: That is close to your land. How has that been over the years? Did you donate land for that?

CG: No. That was already there before we bought the place. But it was nothing. When I got back there, when Dad took over there, it was just a jungle. Just grown up brush. The fence around was no good. The mail carrier, Allen Cochrain, he used to horses to carry mail when the road were bad, he used to keep his horses over there. That's all it was. Two acres. I made a deal with the Jewish committee, they wanted to straighten it up,

do something about it. I told them I would clean it up for them if they let me farm the ground that they didn't need for free. Legally, you should give them a \$1 a year. They never did ask for it. That went on until about 10 years ago. We got it all cleaned up and done to grass. Got the hay and grass off it. Didn't have to pay them nothing for that. Now, they fenced it all over separately. They spent a lot of money out there. They come into a lot of money somehow.

CH: So, through the time you have lived in this Eudora area, what is one of the biggest changes you've seen in this area?

CG: The first big change was Sunflower. The people moved in from Arkansas. So many, many come. They come from a lot of other places. I'd say the biggest percent came from Arkansas. Every house around, I know we had people from Missouri that lived in our house, we rented out rooms. They would go out eat some other place. We had several people stay in our house. They just lived in any kind of shack just to get a place to live. Outside of that, that plant out there coming in, naturally, this big stuff, this building site that went on here in the last, I'd say, 10 years here in Eudora. All this development here. I can't believe it.

CH: Since this is Eudora's birthday year, if you had a wish you could grant for Eudora, what is something you would wish for Eudora for its birthday party?

CG: Oh, if they could get good people interested to run on city council. It could be improved.

CH: Any other wishes?

CG: No, I guess not.

CH: How about the nursing home?

CG: Oh, yeah. It's up for sale now. I sure hate to see that. The stockholders and board, they are going to try their best to get some big outfit that has a lot of money to take over and operate as we have been. That is what our wish is.

CH: That's good. Thank you very much. This concludes our interview. This is for the Eudora sesquicentennial oral history project.

CG: You are welcome.