

Interview with Dewey Bergquist

Interviewed by Agnes Hornbacher for the

Heritage Education Commission

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Dewey Bergquist - DB

Agnes Hornbacher - AH

AH: This interview is with Dewey Bergquist, 1541 10th Street North, Fargo. Mr. Bergquist has been asked to tell what he remembers and what he has gathered from other sources about the F-M Hotel of Moorhead. This interview is being held at Moorhead State University recording studio on May 15, 1985. The interviewer is Agnes (Mrs. Ted) Hornbacher, 105 3rd Street North, Moorhead, representing the business committee of the Oral History Project of the Heritage Education Committee.

DB: All right, Agnes, thank you. The telephone company this year made a mistake on about four hundred homes in south Fargo, so my address is 1541 South 10th. Four hundred homes were put on the north side of Fargo this year [laughter], so if you're looking up an address in Fargo, check with me first. [Laughter]

Well, now, as she says, these are my recollections of the first three or four years while I was working with KVOX in Moorhead, the radio station. We moved into the F-M Hotel in 1950, the year it was built; and the radio station started in the basement of the Comstock Hotel and from there we moved over to the Anderson-Stadum [spelling] Pontiac building which was about a half block east of the Comstock Hotel. I'm not too sure what year that was, but it started at the Comstock Hotel in 1936. Then we moved to that new building, as I mentioned, and from there to the F-M Hotel in 1950, and that's about the year we went on the air in the F-M Hotel. That was also the year it was in operation, the hotel itself. Since I worked nights and days at the radio station, I had plenty of time to see how the hotel began and subsequently how it flourished for several years, and what made it tick as long as it did tick. And what made it tick was, to use an old phrase, a combination of a good number of things, probably the most important was the manager, Ethan Brown. We all called him "Brownie" and we were all his good friend. He was easy to get along with; he was brusque, he was really tough on employees at times, if I can throw that in there; but he did make the hotel run and it was because of his energy. It was just literally his energy that made the hotel go so well at the beginning, and later another gentleman took over, Lee Bittinger (I don't have the year when he took over), but when Brownie left, Lee Bittinger took over and he was an opposite. He was slow, easy to like, tall, good-looking guy, and he, too, knew how to run a hotel. So, I'm not saying that the hotel failed because of management at all. They were two very good guys.

So that's only part of what made the hotel tick, the management. The rest of it, of course, was the layout of the hotel itself. Before I get to that, I think I'll just give the dates, Agnes. I've looked these up because I couldn't remember them all--the dates that were significant in the life of that hotel, which was actually the hub of the universe, as far as the people in the Fargo-Moorhead area were concerned. It came at a good time and it lasted and lasted for a good 20 years, and failed. The years that I believe are important (however, there may be others) were 1947, 1948, 1950, 1961, 1971, 1972, and 1974, at which time it was taken over by Moorhead Federal. Perhaps I'm not right on the date on that because in 1974 it was taken over by a different group, and I'll get to that.

But let's start with 1947 in Moorhead when the plans to build this hotel were first announced. It was quite an announcement, and it was made by people like R. B. Berglund [spelling] and Martin Johnson and Art Diercks, and M. O. Foss, and several other people involved with it, like Ralph Hollands and John Ingersoll and Bill Kenny [spelling]. They were the original planners, and they are the ones that got the announcement made in 1947 that there would be a big hotel built in the city of Moorhead. And in the next year the construction began; that was in the spring of 1948. It was built by a company called the Standard Construction Company and they were from Minneapolis. That part I remember and the construction company was operated by a fellow by the name of Thor Knutson and his son, Don Knutson. And it first became known as one of the Knutson hotels; I'm not sure if the Knutsons had other hotels, but it was called "one of the Knutson hotels."

It was started in 1948 by the Standard Construction Company of Minneapolis and in 1950, two years later, it was ready for business; and that's the year KVOX went on the air from the hotel. And I remember down there in the lower lobby where we were stationed in the northern corner of that hotel; they called it the lower lobby because nobody wanted to call it the cellar or the basement. But it was a good location for a radio station, and the two were really compatible--the radio station and the hotel. We got along famously. So it was ready for business, and it was operated by Thor Knutson because there were financial problems right away there in 1950 with this hotel. And so Knutson operated it at first and he ran it for 11 years, at which time the Kahler Corporation took it over; that was in September of 1961. I have these dates from various sources. A scrapbook I've kept is one of the sources and then various publications about the history of the city of Moorhead.

In 1971, Kahler sold the hotel to some Moorhead people, and they were James Durham, Eleanor Hetzler, Hugo Olson, and Norm and Marge Overby; and there were possibly others involved in that, but these are the names that come to me. That was in 1971. So, finally, the hotel was in the hands of some Moorhead people, and in 1972 it went out of business. Why it went out of business is something I don't know. You can probably think of a lot of reasons. The times pretty much covers everything. It wasn't a depression necessarily, but for some reason Moorhead just didn't need a hotel that big, I guess. Otherwise, I don't know why it went out of business.

In 1974, it was taken over by another group, and what they wanted to do was make it into an office building; and they probably had a start on that. They wanted to call it the F-M Center; that way they wouldn't have had to change that beautiful sign at the top. Take the

word "hotel" off and put the word "center" on there instead of hotel, but then they'd still keep that nice, beautiful sign. Well, then, Moorhead Federal took it over--the date I don't know--and they had to reverse the letters on the sign, of course, to make it MF, but the original sign is still there and the original letters, just reversed.

What else have I here? The original planners, I mentioned them, but I might read them again here--R. B. Berglund, who was mayor at that time; Martin Johnson, Moorhead realtor; Art Diercks, president of the Chamber of Commerce and had the printing company in Moorhead; M. O. Foss was a well known designer at that time and here in 1985 he is still a well known designer; and other names keep coming up such as Ralph Hollands, John Ingersoll, and Bill Kenny. The original corporation, then, was Martin Johnson, who was the president, and Al Breitbach was the vice-president, and Art Diercks was the secretary, and A. E. Berglund was the treasurer. And this is what started the hotel; they were the first operators, operating under the guidance of Thor Knutson from the Standard Construction Company. Other than that, that's about all I know about the business end of the hotel. I know it did succeed for quite some time, and it still was a successful office building.

But I mentioned before that it was the hub of the universe, as far as I was concerned particularly because that radio station was right there in the hotel and the hotel attracted a lot of celebrities, and so I got to meet a lot of them just because of that. They would come to town for various shows and they would be staying at the F-M Hotel, most likely, and during their time off they'd meander around, if they were real celebrities, like for example, Charles Laughton. He wasn't too particularly interested in walking around looking at the park or the river or anything because he was too well known and there were a lot of them like that. So they would meander around the hotel and eventually they'd meander their way down toward the lower lobby just to look over the hotel and they'd see this radio station and I'd be there with my thumb and motion them to come on in and we'd talk a little bit; and sure enough, most of them would do that. And I was a disc jockey there at night, every night, unending nights, and so I got to meet a lot of people that way. And Charles Laughton, who invited me to dinner at that time but I couldn't take him up on that request because I had to work. But that was true with just about all of the visitors, but they were all happy to just to come on in and sit down with a disc jockey and talk about things. We did that quite a bit. I didn't mention the name of the hotel--Frederick Martin. It was named after Martin Johnson's son, who wasn't quite a year old at the time the hotel was put into operation and named, and so they named it after Martin Johnson's son, Frederick Martin.

I have a description from a brochure that was published for the hotel as it went into operation, and I'll only read a description of the lobby. It's a short description, but it does give you an idea of what the hotel looked like the day it opened.

Your first impression of the fine interior design and coloring of the new hotel is experienced as you enter the beautiful lobby. Walls, check-in, and baggage desk, and four columns are paneled in flat-cut natural walnut. The vestibule is barn red, as

is the ceiling over the passage to the elevators. The floor is gray asphalt tile. The furniture is simple and modern. Soft cocoa brown predominates, and the rich wool fabric upholstery is shot with gold thread. Small side chairs in natural saddle leather. Cove lighting and spotlights provide the illumination.

That was the description of the lobby, and each of the hotel rooms were equally fitted out. They weren't all that same color scheme; there were various color schemes, as I recall, throughout the hotel.

There was a big splash made when Newsweek Magazine published a story about the F-M Hotel once. I don't know how it got into Newsweek, but I have an idea that Ethan Brown was the instigator of it. He probably knew somebody at Newsweek and got them to come up here to the F-M Hotel to look it over. The reason for the article was that Brownie was an inventor, and he couldn't figure out a place in front of the hotel to put a Christmas tree. He wanted to put it out on the sidewalk, and I recall walking around with him and a group of other people wondering where the heck to put that Christmas tree. Finally, he got a contractor in and they went up to the seventh floor and they took out one of the big glass windows, and they found a large Christmas tree and they built a framework and a support for it and there it was, sticking out over Center Avenue, way up on the seventh floor of the hotel where everybody could see it. And Newsweek Magazine wound up their little article about the hotel by saying that if Brownie couldn't find a place for that Christmas tree, he would have cut a whole in the top of the Tree Top Room and stuck it up through the roof. That was the gist of the article by Newsweek. That was their reason for publishing it, but it was also a good description of the hotel and made Brownie pretty proud because he framed that picture and that article and had it as a centerpiece in the lobby for several years.

I mentioned why the hotel succeeded and this is another reason, besides management. It succeeded because it had a little corner for everybody. The Barn Coffee Shop, there was the Skol Room, the Tree Top Room, the Top of the Mart, and in later years, they had the Depot Club there. The Barn Coffee Shop was a genuine gathering place, and if I can use a tired old phrase, it was in the true sense of the word, a gathering place. I think, if you sat there for a week, you'd have seen everybody in the world you knew because everybody came in there. The Barn Coffee Shop is the place where a sandwich originated, called Sandwich Elaine. Elaine was one of the waitresses at first; later she became a manager there of the coffee shop, and they named that sandwich after her, Sandwich Elaine; maybe you've heard of it, maybe not. But if you haven't, it was a good sandwich. I had many of them myself. And then the Skol Room--there was another case of very nice decorations; everything was posh, plush. It had a nice hotel bar in it and it was another great gathering place. Big-time entertainment would show up every once in awhile. I recall one in particular--Fats Pichon [spelling]--he was a jazz pianist from New Orleans, and we hit it off nicely and I had him on air with me many times. And he would also play the piano at the Top of the Mart and in the Tree Top Room as well. The Skol Room had a noon meal, which was awfully hard to beat for the price. They'd haul out all this great food from the kitchen and put it on this long table, and the chef would stand there with his hat and his butcher knives and he would start slicing meat and he made some fantastic sandwiches. It was quite

a spot. The Tree Top Room, up there on the seventh floor, faced west, north, and south. You could overlook both towns from there, and it was a popular gathering place, too, because they had such a nifty bar up there and they had a lot of tables for people to sit. They would serve food, and the Tree Top Room also had entertainment nightly. It was a place for some festive dining, formal dining even, and kind of a quiet time up there. I don't recall any real loud music up there in the Tree Top Room. It was good taste all the way through. The Depot Club was formed later after KVOX moved south of town and left that part of the hotel vacant for awhile. The Depot Club was a private club and people would buy a membership to this Depot Club and then they could bring their friends into a private club. I never did join the Depot Club; however, I was invited as a guest in there many times. For some reason, I just didn't have any fun in there. I don't know why. Maybe it was a little too formal, but the meaning of the word "club" was to be informal actually, but it just didn't seem to loosen up for some reason. But the rest of the hotel was just like a home to me for about four or five years, and I knew every nook and cranny of it because we had that whole hotel wired so we could stick a microphone into any wall and go on the air from anyplace in the hotel that we wanted to. That's the way it was designed when we put it together so we would have access to microphones in any room we wanted to broadcast from and I think we eventually have broadcast from every room in the place [laughter] because there was always something going on at the F-M Hotel. There were conventions, meetings, celebrity occasions, and just get-togethers, and anything you can think of happened there. I haven't mentioned the Top of the Mart yet. The Top of the Mart was an acre of fancy dress balls; I mean, you saw a lot of tuxedos there in the Top of the Mart, and a lot of formal dresses. Military balls would be held up there. They were very exciting events and very formal, and it was the spot to do that sort of thing because the management of the hotel had a knack of really making them feel at home. For instance, if the military were coming up for a military ball, it would be decorated in military accoutrements and they all felt quite at home. Or if it was an American Legion convention or any other convention you could name, they were really made to feel welcome; they all waited until they could get back for the next meeting they would have there.

Some of the other celebrities that I can recall, as a disc jockey, and just a few of them that would come rambling in. Perhaps you remember Jerry Murad and his famous Harmonicats. He had some show in Fargo and he had to be in Fargo for a week and they stayed, all of them, at the F-M Hotel. So we got quite well acquainted. And there was Jack Benny. Jack Benny didn't stay at the F-M Hotel; he stayed over at the Gardner, but he would come to the F-M Hotel for the banquet. As soon as anybody found out that he was in town, they would, of course, get him over to the F-M Hotel for a banquet. And there was--maybe you remember Yogi Yorgeson [spelling]--he was kind of a Scandinavian ballad singer/comic and he would come in and sit down and disc jockey with me every once in awhile. Yogi was in the music business for 10-12 years, but he passed away and the world lost a lot of laughs when they lost him. Some of the entertainment they brought in at the F-M Hotel in the beginning years--there's hardly words to describe some of them, such as a magician I recall. His name was El Don. His real name was Eldon, but he called himself El Don, the Magician. He was a comic and he was a magician; he would go to tables. People wouldn't suspect him of being anything but just another guest at a party, and suddenly they would find themselves completely dumfounded by some little card trick he had with

him or something like that. But he kept the entertainment going and you never knew from one table to--you could always tell where he was by the laughter because he was so good at it--one of the greatest magicians I have ever met, and I doubt if there will ever be another one like him. I talked about Fats Pichon; he was another one of the entertainers I remember. But I shouldn't just pick on these few because there were so many that stayed there at the hotel. It was a gathering place, and it was really, again let me say, the hub of the universe.

Why it failed? I don't know. I really don't, but it seems to me when I look at it now that it's kind of a monument to failed human aspirations. From what it was originally intended to be and what it really was originally and from what it is now, an office building, it's just a shame that it didn't keep up that great spirit that it brought to the city of Moorhead. It brought spirit that kept the Greater Moorhead Days with a headquarters. Everything hinged around that hotel. The whole community seemed to circle that hotel. Greater Moorhead Days you probably recall yourself was quite an event. It went on for many years in the Moorhead area. What stopped that I don't know either. Maybe it was because the F-M Hotel was going downhill. It's hard to say. And I shouldn't speculate maybe. But the Greater Moorhead Days should be resurrected, they should get somebody back again like, I don't know if they have a job like Bob Siegel did when he was here, if they have a position like, but if they don't, they should create one and get somebody back like Bob Siegel and get him into the Greater Moorhead Days again and get that thing going the way we did it when the hotel was first started. I'm sure it could succeed again. I don't recall ever seeing a community with so much good natured get-together spirit as Greater Moorhead Days generated and probably because the F-M Hotel was such a great place to have as a gathering place.

That's about all I have to say about my memories of the F-M Hotel. I'm sure if I sat around and thought a little bit about it I could think of some other things--some incidents--but I think basically what I recall. I was there about five years with KVOX before I saw that great big television tower across the river and decided to move.

AH: Thank you, Dewey, for participating in this oral history program.

[End of Interview]