Robert Howe
Narrator

Eleanor Hallin
Interviewer

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EH: ...Ms. Eleanor Hallin. I came to Moorhead quite a few years ago. I was teaching in Dilworth in 1943 and I was living with Eleanor Stoltnow (she's Eleanor Fitzgerald now). We had an apartment together. And we thought she was going to be the new home demonstration agent here in Moorhead. So we thought it'd be nice if I got a summer job, and we could move to Moorhead again and live in another apartment together. I had driven by Fairmont Foods many times from Dilworth into Moorhead. So I thought, well, surely they must need some extra help for the summer. So I go up to see the office manager and he said, "Yes, we can use you for three months this summer."

I was about...it was in July, I believe, and I was about ready to sign a contract, a teaching contract at Chisholm, Minnesota, when Mr. [J.H.] Deems the manager called me in his office and he said, "We would like you to have a permanent position here if you are interested." He said, "I hope you haven't signed a teaching contract." And I said, "I am just about ready to do so." He said, "We are going to do some...we're getting some contracts with the government where we're going to be drying eggs for the...to send overseas to the servicemen. We are going to need about three hundred women to candle and break eggs this summer and from now on. We would like you to stay and do the hiring of these three hundred women and help us in our personnel department." It sounded rather interesting, so I thought, well, perhaps I should try it for a year. It finally...it did become a permanent position. And I was there for many, many years up until the plant closed in 1980.

Ah, at that time we had Jack Shipp as our chief engineer, but about in 1948 here comes Robert Howe. And Robert, you are with me here today. And I would like you to tell us a little bit about your childhood, and about how you came to Fairmont Foods to work.

RH: Okay. Ah, they call me Bob, so I'll say my name is Bob Howe. I was born in Edgeley, North Dakota, and went to school there through my elementary years and also through high school. I was drafted and was in the service for three and a half years, and was stationed in Honolulu and other points in the Pacific. When I returned from the service, they always took you back to where you came from, and that was Edgeley. But it...in the meantime, my folks had moved to Willmar, Minnesota. So I stayed with my Uncle Cliff. He had a hardware store there at Edgeley, so I stayed with him for a few days.

And it so happened that the kids were home for Christmas break. And everybody said, "Well, what are you going to do, Howe?" And I said, "Well, I don't know." "Why don't you go to school?" So...the beginning of January 1946 I went to Fargo and checked in at a hotel. And the next morning I was out at NDAC [North Dakota Agricultural College, which later became North Dakota State University] and took a bunch of tests and things. And finally was admitted into the second quarter on probation because I hadn't gotten my high school diploma when I was going to school in Edgeley. So...everything worked out fine there as far as grades and everything, and I went through school.

And in my junior year…senior year, I believe it was, we went on a field trip and visited several refrigeration and heating plants in the two towns. And the last one we visited that day was Fairmont Creamery as it was called in those days, and we toured the whole plant. And when we finished, we were standing on the southwest corner of the dock. And Jack Shipp, the chief engineer, asked if there were any of us in the group that would like to work for that summer, because they always had to hire people to take vacations and things…and others and…So another fellow by the name Paul Krenelka put up his hand and so did I.

So the day after they let school out that year, I went to work. I guess I was in my junior year. I should correct myself on that. So I worked all that summer until school started in the fall without a day off. So did Paul. Because they needed firemen and operators through the summer. And we learned a lot of things about the dairy business there, and also about the poultry business, because we handled poultry, and we broke eggs, and we learned things about that. So ah...I worked that summer then. And then when school started I worked weekends, and holidays, and everything else that they could find.

And in my senior year then, Mr. Deems, the manager, and Mr. Bosworth, I believe he was the assistant manager, approached me one day and wanted to know if I wanted to stay. Well, I had been interviewing several organizations in the mechanical engineering field and also in the civil engineering field. And I wasn't too happy with any of those jobs, and so I said, "Well, I'll work. And I won't promise that I'll stay. I'll just keep looking for a different job if I want one, and if not, I'll stay." And so they said, "Okay." So I stayed. And ah...I believe it was in March of 1950 that they asked me if I wanted to take a job as plant engineer. Because they were having problems with a fellow down at one of our plants in Nebraska and they wanted to fire him. In fact, they did fire him, and then they didn't have anybody, so they asked me if I wanted to come down there.

So I spent a year and a half in Crete, Nebraska, which was the original processing plant of the organization. And I met a girl [Lois Vergith] there whom I married. And ah...we stayed there, let's see, I think it was another couple of months, when it was decided that Jack Shipp wanted to retire. And he was...he was the chief back here at Moorhead. So they wanted to know if I wanted to go back to Moorhead because there was a job going to be open there. And it looked like they were going to have to close the plant at Crete because the state of Nebraska had passed a Grade A ordinance on milk sold in the city of Lincoln and other communities such that that milk had to be produced in a Grade A plant. Well, they didn't feel that Crete could meet the specifications,

and it probably would have cost way, way too much to rejuvenate the plant. So they said, "You might be looking for another place anyway down the road. So why don't you just talk to Moorhead and see if you want to go back up there?" So I did. And I was there until they closed the plant in September 1980.

I have six children. The oldest is Allan, and then comes Alice, and then Nancy, and Barbara, and Norman, and Kenneth. They are all in this area yet. Alan is a nurse anesthetist over at St. Luke's. Alice is a housewife in Mapleton [North Dakota]. Her husband's name is Steve Wagner, and he's a janitor at the Mapleton school there. Nancy is a LPN at St. Luke's. Barbara is a x-ray technician at Dakota. Norman is now in St. Peter, Minnesota. Kenneth is going to school in Alexandria, Minnesota, in a tech school. He is a major is interested in avionics, which is electronics of aviation, which is something to do with automatic pilots, and landing, and this and that. Ah...Nancy isn't married, but Barbara is married. She married a...ah, she's married to a fellow by the name of Paul Suppa, who is a graduate of Dakota Business College in Fargo with a...with a...ah...well, he's interested in the computer sciences, but he hasn't found a job yet. Norman isn't married. Kenneth is married, and he married a girl that graduated from Moorhead State University in the school of music, I believe it was, or whatever their arts and sciences courses are called. And ah...Allan has two kids. He married a girl from Moorhead who went to school at Moorhead State University. They have a boy, Michael, and a girl, Carrie Jane. Alice is married and living in Mapleton. Her kids are Randy and Angela. Ah...Nancy is not married, and Norman's not married. Kenneth doesn't have any children yet.

Ah...that brings me to...to the point where Fairmont Foods decided to close their plant here at Moorhead (after having closed several others) because of the change in interest of our stockholders. They decided they wanted to get into something else that made a little money than the dairy business did. And I think they could see the writing on the wall. Because I believe that if we watch the newspapers since then, we find that all kinds of dairy plants are closing up, because they couldn't make it with so many in the business. It got so that the creameries could handle more product, and more customers, and cover more distance. And so therefore the little ones disappeared and the big ones got bigger. So…when they closed they had all those employees to handle. And a couple of fellows came out of our Houston office at that time and interviewed each and every one of us about what we were going to do. And I think that at about that time Cass-Clay [Creamery] became interested in buying the place. And so they offered to hire as many as they could use. And they hired, I think it was around...

EH: Quite a few.

RH: Forty-some.

EH: Must have...at least forty, I'm sure.

RH: Yeah. They hired some of the drivers, they hired some of the production workers, they hired me. And I stayed at the Fairmont plant to help dispose of the equipment, because a lot of it was sold to some of the other dairies in the area, and it was decided to...to auction off what they couldn't sell directly. And so they turned the thing over to the American Heritage Foundation

of...oh, someplace…I believe Cincinnati, Ohio. And so they sent a couple of fellows out here. And they went around and cataloged all the equipment, and made a master list of what it was, and how much money they thought it should bring. And so then they set a date, and they hired an auctioneer, and they auctioned off some of the equipment. And what they didn't sell, then Cass-Clay either moved it, or left it, or whatever disposition they wanted with it. And so I was there to either ship, or demolish, or junk out whatever was left there until they sold the building. And I believe they sold the building to a developer. And I believe maybe you'd like to talk about that.

EH: Yeah, I think we should talk about that maybe a little bit later on, too. You're speaking of Jordahl, now or [unclear] Anderson [Anderson-Jordahl Development Company].

RH: Mmmm-hmmm.

EH: Ah, I was going to say, Bob, when you were talking about coming to Fairmont Foods, and all these dates you...you worked in the summer, and then you went to school. I had the job of trying to find the right date for you to start as far as your *seniority* was concerned, and it was not easy. [Laughs] I remember that. I struggled with that for quite a while.

RH: I think it was June 6, 1948.

EH: That's the...that's the date. And I'm not sure to this day whether that's...

RH: It was the day after that school let out that year.

EH: [Chuckling] Was it...?

RH: Hmmm.

EH: I'm not sure if that's the right date, but I think...

RH: Which, I think, was on a Monday. Or I mean the...

EH: I was one of them that set that date. [Chuckles]

RH: Tuesday.

EH: Now I think I'm going to tell you a little...or we'll talk a little about the Fairmont family or the beginning. The Fairmont family began as a one-building creamery in Fairmont, Nebraska in 1884. And it became the largest creamery operation in the Northwest.

RH: Who started it, Helen?

EH: That I don't know.

RH: Wasn't it Mr. E.F. Howe?

EH: I think that's right.

RH: No relation to me!

EH: No, that's right. He was the first one.

RH: He went out and bought a can of cream.

EH: You're right.

RH: Brought it to his garage and made some butter out of it. And then went out and sold the cream so he could buy some more...or...the butter, so he could go buy some more cream.

EH: I think you are so right.

RH: He and somebody from Beatrice, Nebraska did similar things. See, that's where Beatrice Foods started, in Beatrice, Nebraska.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm. That's what I understand.

RH: Just a few miles from Friend [Nebraska].

EH: And that's where George [unclear – sounds like cal] went, too.

RH: Right.

EH: Remember George worked with us.

RH: Yes.

EH: Besides the Moorhead plant, which was completed in 1924, there were fifteen other facilities in the major cities from coast to coast. Now you have a list of some of those, don't you?

RH: Yeah, I took that down.

EH: Yeah, you said...and do you have it there?

RH: Yeah. They had a plant who...and then these...most of these plants produced milk and ice cream. But the Buffalo plant in New York produced butter. And I am not sure about produce like chicken and things like that. And then they had another plant in Cleveland, Ohio, which was a dairy plant. Columbus, Ohio was a dairy plant. Council Grove [Kansas]was a dairy plant and a cultured food plant where they made cottage cheese. Crete was a dairy plant with cottage cheese. Devils Lake [North Dakota] was a dairy plant, and a poultry plant, and they had farmer's lockers. All over the country…

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: …they set up farmer's lockers because Fairmont Foods and all the other dairies had steam-operated generating plants, and refrigeration plants, and it was about the only place in these towns that had refrigeration services and such that they could offer this. Ah...Grand Island, Nebraska was a dairy plant and a poultry plant. Green Bay, Wisconsin was just a dairy plant. Huron, South Dakota was dairy and poultry. Moorhead was dairy, and poultry, and dried eggs, and dried milk. North Platte, Nebraska was just a dairy. Omaha, Nebraska was a dairy, and an ice cream plant, and poultry plant—they didn't have milk. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I'm not sure of, I think that was just a dairy plant. Rapid City [South Dakota] was just a dairy. Scranton, Pennsylvania was a dairy plant. Sioux City, Iowa was a dairy, and poultry, and...and farmer locker, I imagine.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm. Well anyway, the...

RH: And I think that's the extent of the plants.

EH: So many of the cream checks saved many farmers during the dirty thirties [1930s]. Now the first piece of land [on] which the building was to be erected was in Fargo. Now one of the reasons why they didn't want to stay in Fargo was because for dairy things you do have to have a good water supply, and Fargo didn't have it. So they decided to go to Moorhead. And the excavation was done by horsepower and manpower. The first addition was in 1924, the second one in 1926, and the third one in 1942. The building is fireproof and constructed of brick building, and it was ninety feet by three hundred feet. T.F. Powers Construction did the work. Now you remember...or you...you know which...pretty much which additions were made in 1926 and 1942, proximately, do you, Bob?

RH: Well, the original building is the building that stands there now where this...ah...oh, what do you call that place? Senior citizens...

EH: Yeah, the Fairmont East Retirement Home.

RH: ...retirement home is. Except for the engine room and the boiler room. If you could visualize those two buildings…

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: ...it was...they lied east of what is standing there now.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: Then some...a few years later, they added another little building that they called the feed department where they made chicken feed and calf feed. And that was a building just a...just a small building just north of the southeast corner of the plant. Now that southeast corner was

where they used to bring the horses to town and hitch them at steel posts out there. And ah...Paul Koenig was the one that did that. And ah, the next addition, I believe, was the addition to the main building to the north, facing on the...it'd be the north part of the building that stand there now, two bays north and three stories high, and it was brought east to the corner where it stands there now. And they called that the dairy department.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: Because before that it was strictly a poultry and butter plant. Then…when the war came along, the government was looking for places who would produce dried eggs and dried milk. And so at the expedience of the government, Fairmont Foods entered into a contract with the...

EH: Government, I suppose.

RH: J.F. Powers and the government to erect the drying building, the first story of the poultry house. So what they did was they raised the roof and installed a story underneath for breaking eggs and receiving eggs. Then to the north of that was a great big cooler that extended all the way over to Second Avenue. And that was for storing eggs. Then at the very front of that north part of this cooler, there was a little bit of addition put on there to put a truck or two in it. [Sighs] So they produced dried eggs, and dried milk, and poultry for the servicemen in the country. And I'll bet a hundred bucks that I ate some of those dried eggs when I was out there in the Pacific.

EH: Oh...I...

RH: And I *hated* them.

EH: [Laughs]

RH: *Oh*...

EH: I've heard that.

RH: Well anyway, ah...that building when...then when we say that it was built at the expediency of the government, [it] meant that instead of writing it off in twenty years, they allowed us to write it off in *five*. Because when I used to go through the equipment record, when I'd come to these buildings, here these buildings were all written off already, and they weren't as old as the oldest ones, and so I asked, and that's what the answer was.

EH: Now Moorhead…going back to the beginning again, Moorhead had the advantage of excellent railroad facilities. Here on the banks of the Red River is Fairmont's first plant. Moorhead was selected by the company as a location for a manufacturing plant. J.H. Deems was our first manager, and he started in Omaha in 1909, and he was at...he was at several places. He was at Crete, Nebraska. But in 1923 he was appointed manager of the new plant in Moorhead.

There were some very noted dairy herds, and cows were found on every farm. Poultry and egg production was developing. The source of our cream supply was through cash buying stations. Shipments were received at the plant direct from the producer. There were six traveling superintendents working with the buying stations. Whole milk was received from more than two hundred farmers each morning. This helped supply the forty thousand people in Fargo and Moorhead. At this time, there were eight hundred creameries and about three thousand buying stations. And I think you can maybe tell a...you started telling a little bit about the horses, I think, didn't you? Or maybe that...

RH: Yeah, I spoke of where the horses were...were tied up when they brought them in from the...what they called the Fairmont Farm.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: It was a little place south of Moorhead...I can't think of the people that own it now. And I don't know if there's anything standing there anymore or not. I believe the house still stands.

EH: Mmmm.

RH: It's about the second mile south of...of twenty…[sighs] Twentieth Avenue, I believe, is the section line, over towards the river.

EH: It was a beautiful farm, I understand.

RH: Paul Horn bought it originally.

EH: That's right.

RH: And then he sold it to a heating and plumbing organization in Moorhead. And I…Nord [unclear – sounds like Weegsland] moved out there.

EH: Oh. Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: Well anyway, they had dairy cattle and pigs out there. They milked the cows to produce the milk that they needed to sell to the customers in town. And I read that somewhere in these papers where they produced enough milk from…a hundred and twenty cows was it?

EH: I'm not sure about that one.

RH: And then the cream was separated...there was excess milk, of course. So that ah…that some of the cream went to direct shippers, but some of it...or to butter, but some of it went to ice cream, because about that time they started making ice cream.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: Well anyway, the byproducts of making butter and having a dairy plant are always buttermilk, of course. For sour cream butter their buttermilk isn't usually human...ah, good enough for human consumption, so they used that for hog feed. And they'd haul that out to this farm and feed it to the hogs. And ah, he…Paul Koenig managed this farm, as I understand, or *worked* there, because he always brought the horses to town. Now he'd drive a team or two on the wagon with several horses behind it. He'd bring them in there and hitch them to these hitching posts.

And then these drivers would come to work. And they'd take their team and take it around to the north side of the plant where they'd load the wagon up with the products that they had to sell. And if it was in the summertime, it was of course, you know, insulated container packed in ice, because they were glass bottles then. Then in the wintertime, they had to have *heat* in these wagons, and so they used charcoal burners. And then somewhere along the way they developed an alcohol burner that didn't give off any fumes. But in either case, no matter what kind of fuel they used, you had to watch out for carbon monoxide and you had to have air. And if you had it too tight, why, you got…the carbon dioxide would asphyxiate you. So they had that problem. And then some of them even used fuel oil, and then they'd get an odor in the butter, and oh, all kinds of problems they had then.

EH: Well, at this time then we started motorizing, I think, about that time. And we had four combination wholesale and retail routes. Later, there were nine retail routes and four wholesale routes. Our salesmen were well informed so they could talk intelligently about Fairmont's selected and pasteurized milk and cream, as well as better butter, better cheese, milk, poultry, ice cream. Our ice cream was put up in bulk in factory-filled packages. Ice cream department was the first in this territory to introduce extensive and varied forms of unique creations in ice cream. One of the things that they were telling me today, ah, they were having a shower for one of the women in Moorhead, and she was working for the northern…for the Burlington Northern. She was going to married. And so they had Fairmont Foods make ice cream out of engines. So they…well, they looked like engines, I should say, they weren't made out engines, but...

RH: I heard of that.

EH: And they were just beautiful. They said they were brown and...and very popular. And they also made...[Coughs] Excuse me. They also made decorations and ice cream symbols, like for the Kiwanis or the Rotary. And another thing, they...oh, somebody was telling me they had a birthday cake made for an older lady, and it was all made out of ice cream, and it was just beautiful. I remember some of those things, and that surely did help the people, the women especially in the town. Whenever they wanted to entertain, they could always call on the ice cream department, and they brought forth some pretty nice merchandise. And Ezra Jones was ice cream foreman at that time, and did a beautiful job, I think.

RH: You know who the ice cream maker was?

EH: Who was that?

RH: Hugh Newby[sp?].

EH: That's right, Newby.

RH: He came from Crete, Nebraska.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: When I went down there, I ran into his dad! And I said, "Hugh, what are you doing down here?" He says, "I'm not Hugh," he says, "That's my son."

EH: [Chuckles]

RH: They looked like *twins*.

EH: Really!

RH: Yes.

EH: Oh, I remember Newby so well.

RH: Yeah.

EH: And that was Mr. Kimmel[sp?], too, in the butter.

RH: Yeah. Say, is he still alive?

EH: No. No.

RH: Oh.

EH: And now, Mr. Deems was our manager for thirty years. And he was a wonderful man. You worked for Mr. Deems, didn't you now? Did you now?

RH: Yes I did. A very short time.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: But…for a while.

EH: And he was followed by Paul Dew. Now Paul Dew wasn't there too long.

RH: No, he came from Cleveland, Nebraska…ah, Cleveland, Ohio.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: And ah...oh, I'm not sure just what's all behind it, but he came in there just as a temporary manager until they could find one who wanted to keep the job. And he was supposed to reduce the expenses.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: And so he was swinging the axe, and firing a few people that they didn't need and stuff. So I think he was there...In fact, he's the one that called me from Crete to see if I wanted to come back.

EH: Oh, he was. Hmmm.

RH: Because one of his jobs was...he told each department head that they had to take care of their own purchasing, receiving, and cost control. And Jack Shipp didn't want to have nothing to do with that.

EH: Oh...no. [Chuckles]

RH: So they wanted to know who they would recommend that would take his place to do that. If he wanted to stay, they would keep him because of his license, but he would, ah...not get the same recognition as the rest. So he suggested that maybe they'd call me and see if I wanted to come back up there. Well, I was kind of glad, cause...that was an *old,* old plant down there at Crete and…and ready to fall apart, you know.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: So...

EH: From what I remember...

RH: So I was glad to come to Moorhead then.

EH: Mr. Dew was very...he was very active in extracurricular activities, and he wanted all of his people to do the same thing. And I remember I was chairman of the Republican Party, the lady chairman of the Republican Party. And he told me that the day after...we had an election. And he said, "If the Republicans win, you may take the next day off," I remember he said. [Chuckles] But I didn't. I was pretty busy, so I didn't take it.

RH: They won, I see, ah, is that what you...?

EH: Yes, they did win.

RH: Oh, okay.

EH: Now he was followed by Mr. [[J.D.] Heckart. Mr. Heckart came in January of 1953, I have, and I believe that's right. And he was with us until 1976 when he retired. He was a fine man, too. He came from Green Bay, Wisconsin didn't he?

RH: Yes, he did. He was sales manager at Green Bay. And he hadn't been there too long, but [sighs] they knew he was a good man.

EH: He was...

RH: Now he started out working for Fairmont Foods in...in that steel plant in Ohio where he was from.

EH: Hmmm...I can't remember the town that he was from. I saw it a year ago, too.

RH: Yeah...but I can't think of the name of that...

EH: Youngstown!

RH: Youngstown.

EH: So he came from...

RH: And he hired out in this ice cream store where they sold ice cream, and novelties, and soda fountain stuff, everything up front, see. But in the back is where they brought the eggs, and chickens, and the stuff. And he had to weigh chickens, and weigh the eggs, and pay the...or make out slips so that they could go get their pay for the produce they brought in. And then he took care of the front also, see. Well, somebody came along, and I can't remember if it was Maury Archer?

EH: Very...it was Archer.

RH: And...wanted to know if he'd be interested in working in the plant. And I guess the plant must have been in ah...Cleveland or Columbus, I don't know for sure.

EH: I'm not sure about that.

RH: And that's where he started. Oh, he always likes to talk about that...ah...or did.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: And if you'd asked Mrs. Heckart, hmmm, she'd say, "Yeah, that's...that was him alright."

EH: He met Mrs. Heckart in Youngstown, Ohio. She was a nurse. And I think there was somebody (was it Archer?) who was in the hospital and...and...

RH: Yeah, she was taking care of Maury Archer.

EH: Yes.

RH: He must have been the division manager of the southeast division then or...

EH: I think he was.

RH: Oh. Okay.

EH: And he thought they would make such a *fine* couple, and I guess that's what happened.

RH: Well, I guess they did!

EH: Now he was followed by Larry Groves. Now Larry Groves was our sales manager in our Minneapolis plant and came down here.

RH: Right. That's right.

EH: And he stayed from 1976 until 1980 when the plant was closed. He is now in Sioux Falls, I believe, in the dairy business, isn't he?

RH: He's back in the dairy business down at Sioux Falls.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: And I can't think of the name of that dairy, but it's...you can see it from the interstate when you drive by.

EH: Yeah, I know that he was interested in going...

RH: There's one that's closed down there. Terrace Park is closed, but this one is still going.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm. Until its purchase in 1980, Fairmont Foods was a pioneer and leader in the community and a very definite uplifting force in the local economy. I should quote what Mr. Deems said. Mr. Deems, the first manager. "Confidence in the future development of the country prompted the building a Moorhead plant at its present site. The building's strong presence in the corner of Eighth Street and First Avenue North will continue to be a reminder of that family philosophy that was Fairmont Creamery."

[Pauses] [Shuffling paper sounds]

Do you have anything more you want to add before we start talking about what we had...later on? Or do you...do you want...anything more you want to talk about before we get down to where we...? We're about ready to...

RH: Where...where are we at in this thing here?

EH: Well, I might mention…before we go on any further, I should say that we had a lot of visitors that came through the plant. One of my tasks was to take people through the plant. We took many homemaker groups through so they could see the operation. We took Campfire Girls and also a lot of schoolchildren. [Clears throat] Ah, we did this up until, oh, I would say about the last five or six years, and then we decided it was a little bit too risky to take some of these people through, there were so many machines and so many stairs to climb. So we really quit taking...making tours through the plant. But we did enjoy taking the women through, and they were so grateful for what they could see. And they all could see how clean everything was and they realized the necessity of safe milk supply with pasteurization of milk products.

We also had quite a few part time employees. A lot of the employees (that was in the beginning) were part time when they were doing a lot of poultry picking. And they were...some of them worked just during the holiday season, like Thanksgiving, and New Year's and so forth. The women would pluck the feathers off the turkeys, chicken, geese, and ducks and so forth. Birds hung on conveyor chains and then killed by shock, then run through hot water. Feathers were collected for down and put through dryer. You remember some of that, don't you, Robert? Where they...

RH: Well...the process of...of killing the chicken was that they had a knife that they would insert into the jugular vein right below the bill. And as soon as he got that into the vein, he would press this trigger, and that would produce about...ah...forty or fifty volts, I believe it was, and that would make the bird relax and the blood would drain better. That was the purpose of that shock.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: And they had this copper sheet there. It was about as big as one of these panels here that you see here. Ah...about four feet wide and six feet high, and it had to be kept clean. And while the men held a turkey with one hand (or the chicken) he had the knife with the cord hanging down it from a transformer that was on the wall there. And he'd insert that into the neck, the jugular vein of the bird, and then push the bird against the copper plate to complete the circuit. And sometimes, ah, something would happen, and then he'd either touch it with his elbow or something and *he'd* get the jolt instead!

EH: Ah.

RH: And I remember the inspectors come in there and then they *really* rapped us for that.

EH: I remember another thing, too. We had...they used to have coffee breaks, of course, down there, the girls who were picking chickens and so forth. And many times if somebody had a birthday, they would bring a birthday cake. And I remember one day I was down there and they said, "Why don't you come and have birthday cake with us?" So I had birthday cake and coffee.

And some of the women were not very nice looking. They had pretty much blood on them from the turkeys and so forth.

RH: Yeah...

EH: But that didn't bother too much. We all enjoyed the birthday cake anyway. Most of those people were paid by piece at that time and they punched time clocks. Sometimes they worked a half a day and sometimes they worked ten hours.

RH: The reason why they had to punch the clock was to prove that they were on duty in case they got hurt, see.

EH: Well...

RH: They didn't get *paid* by the clock, but they got paid by...yeah. That was...

EH: Yeah, I suppose...

RH: That was just to prove they were there.

EH: Now when we...ah...I should say a few more things. We had a few slogans that we went by. One was, "Let your cows and Fairmont's checks pay all your bills." Another one was, "Let Fairmont's better butter, butter your bread."

RH: [Chuckles]

EH: Then we also had a bell that says, "Ring for Fairmont." You...do you have one? You have one of those, don't you Bob? Or don't you? I know they have it at Fairmont East, several of them. They were bells and they rang and they said, "Ring for Fairmont."

RH: Yeah. I don't remember that.

EH: And the farmers got quite a few of those.

RH: Oh.

EH: Then the other day I saw a paperweight. It was a cute paperweight. It has "Fairmont Creamery Company" on it. And it represented a thirty pound can of frozen eggs.

RH: Oh, yeah. I've seen that.

EH: That's...that's a *nice* little item, too.

RH: Yeah. Yeah. We sold frozen yolks and frozen whole eggs to the baking industry for making cakes.

EH: Yes, I understand that.

RH: Yeah.

EH: Now Fairmont Creamery was first...it was called Fairmont Creamery to begin with, and then was it in 1947 they changed it to Fairmont Foods? I believe it was 1947.

RH: That's right. That was after they acquired some plants that ah...produced more than just dairy products, so they thought they'd better change the name.

EH: And there were a lot of frozen foods at that time, too.

RH: Yeah.

EH: There were frozen vegetables and so forth. Ah, when we closed there were about a hundred and eighty people there. And there were quite a few...that includes our demonstrators, which we had in stores. And we had sub-branches, they were at Sisseton, and Aberdeen, Detroit Lakes, Valley City, Devils Lake, Minot, and they also had demonstrators there. Ah, we had a...we had two unions, the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] and the AF of L [American Federation of Labor], the AF of L were for the drivers, the CIO was for the factory people downstairs. Ah, we had...didn't have too much trouble with the union, although we did have to follow the union contracts very much and sometimes they were a little hard to understand. I remember Heckart and I used to go through those quite often, and they were a little difficult, but we managed. Ah, we were really like one happy family. Everybody was interested in everybody else. It was a lovely place to work. We had parties every so often. We had one when we had the Army "E"...or the Navy "E" Award. Now Bob, you'd better tell us about the Navy "E" award.

RH: The Navy "E" Award. There's a picture in the *Fargo Forum* here. And...and ah, somebody...

[Sounds of paper rustling]

I think it was this gal from the...ah...Clay County Historical Society thought I ought to put that Army-Navy "E" Award flag up. And so I did and everybody noticed. Well, Chet Gebhardt from the *Fargo Forum* noticed it. So he'd come over and interview with me. That flag—I think I still have that someplace—was awarded to plants who did an excellent job in producing for the war effort. And it was done for Moorhead here because of their production of eggs, and poultry, and...and dried milk for the services. And they had a great big party. And I don't remember what day that was. I wasn't around, of course. But ah, they said they had a great big party because of that award. It was called an award's dinner, and they...they gave out awards to the drivers who had never had an accident, or hadn't had an accident in so much time…or something like that, you know. But I can't remember on what day that was.

EH: That was...we had it at the Elks. You weren't there, hmmm?

RH: No, I...I wasn't...

EH: We had...

RH: I wasn't around then. I was...

EH: It was a big dinner...for everybody.

RH: I was still going to school, I guess.

EH: I thought...Well, maybe you were, but...and anyway, they...And afterwards there was a big dance, so everybody seemed to enjoy it. We did have quite a few parties for our people and they enjoyed that.

RH: They had twenty-two—it says here—milk wagons driven…or pulled by horses. For seven years they had that.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm. Well, that's interesting. Ah, the plant was closed in October of...September, I guess. I worked until October of 1980.

RH: Yeah.

EH: And at that time, before...right before we closed...or I guess it was the day that everybody in the downstairs plant quit working, we had a gathering at the American Legion. Do you remember that?

RH: Right.

EH: And there was a big closing party. People came...

RH: And it wasn't...oh, it might have been that day. But anyway, ah...several of the wives of the men who instigated the idea wrote letters to all the former employees and brought every...almost everybody back for this party and...and of course there was a few that were a little bit mad about the thing and kind of raised hob with the party, but ninety-five percent of us were alright.

EH: It was fine. Ah, there were people there from Minneapolis and all of our sub-branches. And I don't know if there was any...But anyway, it was...it was a great evening, and there was lots of hugging going on. Everybody was so happy to see everybody.

RH: Yeah, there was that.

EH: Then you might tell a little bit, Bob, now about the Fairmont East. You were there. Tell us a little bit about...hmmm...some of the things about Fairmont East. The building, it was...Jordahl and Anderson were the...they were the ones...

RH: The developers.

EH: ...that developed it. Ah, and you should also tell about the...the stuff that's left there as a reminder...

RH: Well, wait...first of all, let's tell them about the whistle.

EH: Oh, fine. We shouldn't miss that.

RH: See, we had a steam engine that pulled a generator. And at one time the plant was almost self-sufficient as far as power was concerned. They could produce the steam they needed. They pulled this generator to make the lights that they needed. And the receiving pumps for the milk and the cream was steam driven reciprocating pumps. And the hot water circulating pump was that way. The feed water pump was steam-driven. So that the only electricity they had...that they needed was one great big motor for the four churns that was in the one churn room, and another one for some other churns that hadn't been taken out by the time I came along. And they had what they called an overhead drive where they had belts that ran from each churn up this overhead shaft and pulleys. And when you wanted to start a churn you just took a stick and moved it to the left or to the right to push the belt on the one from the neutral pulley to the one that went forward, or to the other side if you wanted the churn to go backwards. And ah...so they made their own lights.

And they also had electric motors to crush the coal, cause they bought coal from Baukol Noonan mines in ah...up on the Great Northern line up towards Minot there someplace on the way to Minot. On the...what we called the Surrey Cutoff when the Great Northern was running here. And so they had the coal crusher was driven by electricity. They had the lift for elevating the coal up to the augers. And there...another motor was there to convey the coal from the lift to the bins. And then the boiler had a steam-driven exhaust fan, a steam-driven grate drive...ah, what do they call it? Ah...travelling grates, and a stoker. And they had steam driven pumps in the engine room.

And the only other electricity...electrical need then was lights. But the only thing was, you couldn't keep that generator or engine running at a constant speed, which was supposed to be seventy-two rpm's, and that was belted up in such a manner that that produced sixty cycle in current. And so some times of the day the clocks would be fast, and that other times the clocks would be slow, and the lights would...would blink, and sometimes it'd be bright, and then if it got too bright they'd burn 'em all out. Their…speed regulation wasn't working right. And they...it finally wore out entirely and we quit using it. Well anyway, we also had a whistle. And they blew that whistle at seven a.m., right?

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: And noon, and one o'clock, and six o'clock. And I can remember, boy, we had to be right down there to the boiler room. Either the fireman or the engine operator, one of those two had to

blow those whistles...that whistle at those times. Because everybody set their clocks by that whistle.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: Some people didn't even own an alarm clock because they woke up by the whistle. And ah...the only other whistle in town at that time was the Fargo Foundry, but you couldn't hear that one all over, and it didn't...I don't believe it blew at seven o'clock. I think it blew at eight o'clock. Well then sometime along the way, somebody said that they don't blow whistles anymore. That's old fashioned. So they told us to quit blowing the whistle. *And the phones rang day after day*. That poor switchboard was answering questions. "*Why* aren't you blowing the whistle anymore?" "Well, the manager decided wasn't going to blow it anymore." "Well then I'm going have to buy an alarm clock!" they'd say. So I guess that's what they did.

And I used to catch it when I'd be going down the street. "Bob, how come you don't blow that whistle anymore?" And I finally said, "Well, it's *wore out*, that's one of the reasons."

EH: [Chuckles]

RH: It was getting wore out. It was supposed to have a shriller tune than it had. It kept getting more bass all the time because it was cutting a groove in the...in the reed. [Chuckles] Well, then...ah, when Civil Defense came along, they wanted to put these sirens up in the two towns, and it was going to take too long to get them or something. So they asked me if I would blow the whistle on the first Wednesday of the month to alert the drill if there was one and also to call the all clear. And so that's the only time we used the whistle after that until they closed the place. Well now the whistle stands down at Rollag [Minnesota] at the west...western steam threshers reunion place, on a steam engine that was donated by Pabst Blue Ribbon from Milwaukee, and then they...they blow it down there.

EH: And you were the one that showed them how to do it.

RH: I had to show them how to blow it. They didn't know how to...they didn't know how to start out at a low tone and then bring it up to a high tone and then sort of taper it off, you know.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: They'd just pull the rope, and blow, and then let go of it with a jerk, you know, and it would just...you know, didn't sound right. If you talk to any railroad engineer, *they* know how to blow a whistle, you know. And if you… And most of your old men that run steam engines for threshing rigs, *they* knew how to blow a whistle, cause they had...That whistle meant a *lot*, you know, in the country. That...that if you were out of water, you blew the whistle, and that meant the man that was supposed to haul water is supposed to get there pronto or they're going to have a loose tube in that boiler!

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: And if somebody got hurt it meant that somebody should come and get the person and take them away. And oh, they...and would...they blew the whistle when to start, when to quit, for emergencies, and...I don't know what else.

EH: Well, speaking of whistles...

RH: And...and there is a code.

EH: That's right.

RH: There was a code.

EH: When I taught in Dilworth we would go to circle after school and the women would say, "Well now I..." There would be a train coming and there'd be a special kind of whistle. And this lady would say, "That's my husband's whistle. I have to go home and make some dinner now because he's coming to town." She always knew who was...by the sound of the whistle, the way he blew it. And that was who it was.

RH: And when they...when they built this plant, I understand that they had artesian water, right?

EH: Right.

RH: Well then later, of course, as people used these artesian wells, the level would go down. And so they had to put motors on these wells. And so we even drove that motor with our own generator. And so we didn't need to depend on the city at all hardly. We had our own garbage dump one time. And I don't know what this...if there was ever anything done with sewage disposal then or not. But I know the City of Moorhead had a unique system in that the...the storm sewer and the sanitary sewer were in the same manholes. It's just that when it rained real hard, it would rise up in the manhole high enough to overflow into the river.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: Well, there was times when the wrong sewage got to the river. And of course that brought about the switch in the separation of the storm and sanitary sewers. And this is in a lot of towns. Then...the original well is still there, and there's a pump on it, and the building that's there now uses this water as ah, air conditioning, as a coolant in their air conditioning systems in the building. They just pump the water out of that well and they dump it into another one that's over there. It's oh, ah, I forget what they call that. But you have to get a permit from the State of Minnesota to pump water out of one then dump it in another one.

EH: That's the same air conditioning we had, was it not?

RH: No, no, no, no.

EH: What was changed?

RH: We used...we used ammonia.

EH: Oh. Oh, okay.

RH: Yeah. Yep. And ah...ah...there's an old ammonia compressor that sits on the grounds there that was about four feet from the corner of my office that was one of the electric machines that they bought, in 1946, that was the first electric machine that Fairmont Foods bought. Otherwise everything was driven by steam. And it was used...we had to have low temp refrigeration for the freezers to make ice cream. And so it was bought and brought in there to harden out the ice cream. It was a long time getting that machine because it was hard to get equipment after the war.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: See, in 1946, it was still only one year after the war. And it was...it was still hard to get stuff.

EH: Yes, I'm sure of that.

RH: Well, that still stands there. That's just a memento there at the...of the...

EH: And that's...is that...? Then that you've also got that brick one where it says Fairmont East.

RH: Well, they erected that, but that's made from some of the brick that they salvaged from the building. Because see, the...the brick that was in that building, you couldn't duplicate them. It was a special brick that ah, the architect...do you know who the architects were? Kirk Associates.

EH: Mmmm, yeah, I guess I...

RH: From Fargo.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm. I've heard that, too, and I think...

RH: And J.F. Powers had the blueprints. But there was a rule in the trade in those days that they only kept them for twenty years and then they threw them away.

EH: Now...

RH: And I've only...I've got a few of the prints.

EH: Ah, the...the new setup they have now, Fairmont East, some of that was...was removed. Some of the building was removed, was it not, for...?

RH: Yeah, the ah...the garage, and the poultry house, and the old milk cooler, and what we called the buttermilk department.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: All that's left of that is the floor and the south wall. The engine room is gone and the boiler room's gone. There's grass growing there where that engine room and boiler room was. That floor that you see there where the buttermilk department was is the original floor.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: Underneath there's...there's just space underneath there. Yeah. I was down in the basement one day and I could walk back there.

EH: Really.

RH: But there's *nothing* down there. Just...just empty. And that basement is so full of pipes and stuff, because they had to run all their conduits externally as risers for each tier of rooms, you know.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm.

RH: What is there, sixty-nine rooms in that building?

EH: I'm not sure now how many there are.

RH: Something like that.

EH: Ah, we had a little reunion. I think that was last year, 1984 now, in April.

RH: Right.

EH: Where we asked every...all Fairmont ex-emp...Faimont employees to come back. There were, oh, much over a hundred that came and that was most interesting, too. I was at the reception desk. It was quite interesting to see these people when they walked in, the expression on their face.

RH: Yeah.

EH: The place was so nice and clean and well kept. And it just...

RH: And you couldn't smell the dairy anymore.

EH: No. And...and you would never recognize that it was the same place.

RH: Yeah. Yeah.

EH: And I must say, too, before we close, I must say that we did have hospitalization insurance there at Fairmont Foods. We had pensions set up, so that these people will now receive pension at the time...they may work somewhere else, but at the age of fifty-five they may draw some pension for...from Fairmont Foods. Hmmm...

RH: Well, the pension...

EH: They do have to work ten years, or should have...Well, they needed to work ten years before...

RH: That was a union pension for the...

EH: Well, there was both.

RH: ...for the hourly and paid employees from one time to another up...what year was it when they started that?

EH: Oh, I can't remember that, but...

RH: About 1948 or so.

EH: Something like that, I think.

RH: Yeah.

EH: And then of course the office people and all the others were under Fairmont pension. So and that...it's...it's a pretty good deal for all of them. It's not...they're not forgotten even though the place is closed. Do you have anything more you'd like to say, Bob, before we close?

[Paper rustling noises]

RH: Oh...I was trying to find this thing that I had on...they had a surprise party on the first anniversary of the building of the plant. And the plant was built in...in ah...

EH: 1924.

RH: 1924, I had the date here.

EH: March, I think it was completed in March and then...

RH: May...May 17th.

EH: Oh yeah, that's right.

RH: Another three days and that plant would...that building there would be sixty-one years old. But anyway, they...they had this party and they invited Mr. Deems and…everybody. They had him...they...they catered in this thing, and they'd...they had little anecdotes to say about each person. And one of the things that they had to say, whenever they would see Jack Shipp—and I remember this—he always had a smear on his face from where he'd either wiped a fly off his face or something from his dirty hands from working with the coal or the...the steam engine. And there would always be a smear on his face, either one side or the other. And they'd say, "Jack, *when are you going to wash your face*?"

EH: [Chuckles]

RH: And that was one of the things they said. And I can't find that story, but there was a *whole* four or five pages about that party.

EH: Mmmm-hmmm. I wonder if I don't have that at home? I think I do.

RH: I hope you do.

EH: I think I do.

RH: Because I had it yesterday.

EH: Yes, I have it at home, I think.

RH: Okay.

EH: But anyway, it was a wonderful place to work. And I think we both enjoyed our time there.

RH: We sure did.

EH: And it's so much fun to see everybody. Now when we see them they're all so happy to see everybody else. So we're just like one happy family. And thank you so much, Bob, you did a fine job, I think.

RH: Okay. Thank you.

[End of interview]

Transcription by Marilyn Olson-Treml
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