

John Ingersoll
Narrator

Everett Lisi[sp?]
Interviewer

April 18, 1985
Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project
Moorhead State University Recording Studio
Moorhead, Minnesota

EL: This is an interview with John Ingersoll, who was a businessman in Moorhead for many years. And the recording here is being made at the Moorhead State University recording studio, and the interviewer is Everett Lisi, representing the Heritage Education Commission. And it's...the date today is April 18, 1985. John, we'll start this by you giving me your full name.

JWI: My full name is John William Ingersoll.

EL: And your present address?

JWI: It's Abercrombie, North Dakota.

EL: Okay, now...

JWI: No street address.

EL: Okay. [Chuckles] Now give me your address that you had when you lived in Moorhead.

JWI: Well, the last time I lived in Moorhead was in...address was 1026 Seventh Avenue South.

EL: Okay. Now give me your age.

JWI: Seventy-six.

EL: Okay, give me your birthdate then.

JWI: November 6, 1908.

EL: And what is your wife's name?

JWI: Ada L. [Transcriber's note: the "L" is for Lilian.]

EL: And give me her maiden name.

JWI: Holmes.

EL: Ada Holmes.

JWI: Right.

EL: Okay. And where were you born, John?

JWI: I was born here in Moorhead.

EL: What were your parents' names? Now your mother's maiden name...

JWI: My mother's name was Rebecca and my father's name was Kip Arthur.

EL: Okay ah...

JWI: No, Kit Carson, pardon me! Kit Carson Ingersoll. He was named after Kit Carson, the old...the old mountain man.

EL: And ah...what was your mother's maiden name?

JWI: Mother's maiden name was Rebecca Kiefer Ing-...Rebecca Kiefer.

EL: Kiefer. Okay, now just for the record, let's...let's determine how she was related to the other Kiefer's in the city of Moorhead.

JWI: Well, she was the brother of Jacob Kiefer the...[unclear] Senior.

EL: She was a sister of Jacob number two.

JWI: Kiefer's...yeah. No, number one.

EL: Number one Kiefer, Jacob Kiefer.

JWI: Number one Kiefer, right.

EL: Okay, she doesn't...she's a sister then...or she's an aunt then....

JWI: Aunt.

EL: ...of...of Jake number two.

JWI: Right.

EL: Okay. I think we've got that straightened out now. Ah, name your brothers and sisters.

JWI: Well, I had... Wayne Ingersoll, Philip Ingersoll, Ezra Ingersoll, Robert Ingersoll, Theodore Ingersoll, and myself, John Ingersoll. And sisters I had, then there was Ruth Ingersoll, and Grace Ingersoll. It was six boys and was... seven boy and two girls or six boys, two girls.

EL: John, I didn't know your family was that large. [Chuckles]

JWI: [Chuckles] Yes.

EL: Ah, I knew Ted and his... am I correct? Ted was Kit Carson...

JWI: Yes. Ted...

EL: Ted, Theodore Kit Carson Ingersoll, wasn't he, named after his father.

JWI: That's right. He's a... he's my... picture my dad.

EL: Okay. Now here's one that may be difficult for you to answer but can you...? Do you know the nationality of your parents or is it mixed?

JWI: I know my mother, of course, was a full-blooded German. Her... the Kiefer family came to the United States back in the 1800s, about 1848 when they had that big rumble over in Germany. And the Kiefer's were one of the people who like opposed the regime, and so they had to leave. And they settled in Wisconsin first, and then they moved to Osseo, Minnesota. And I think that all of the Kiefer's that I know of were all born in Osseo, Minnesota.

EL: Was Jacob number one then an immigrant or was he the son of an immigrant?

JWI: No, he was... he was a son of the... of the Kiefer's.

EL: Alright.

JWI: As was my mother, I know that, my mother... and he was a son of the Kiefer's.

EL: That's right.

JWI: Yeah.

EL: Now your... and your father?

JWI: My father, all I know of my father is that he was born in Ohio, nothing else.

EL: Okay.

JWI: I didn't know when he was born.

EL: Is that a fact?

JWI: Yeah.

EL: Alright. Then ah...you were born in Moorhead, so we can't say when you came to Moorhead. What...? Hmmm. Ah...tell us about your education, John.

JWI: Well, I was a...we lived at the 314 Ninth Street North in Moorhead for many years. And I was...my grade school was in the old Lincoln School in Moorhead. And then I...from there we went to the Moorhead High School. And then after high school I went to California for a couple of years. Then I came back and went to Moorhead State College, and graduated from there in 1932.

EL: While you were at Moorhead State University, it was MSTC [Moorhead State Teacher's College] then, I believe.

JWI: Right.

EL: Ah...[Chuckles] You were a...you were active, I think, in student affairs, were you not?

JWI: Yes, I was very active in student affairs and the athletics.

EL: Okay. Ah...elaborate on that student affairs bit a little, will you?

JWI: Well, I was president of the student commission for two years. And I was captain of the football team. We played basketball. I never went out for track because I couldn't run fast enough.

EL: Were you ever involved in the newspaper, college newspaper?

JWI: I was the business manager of the *Praeceptor* [Minnesota State University, Moorhead annual yearbook] and before the...my senior year. And the reason I was the *Praeceptor*...was the business manager, I went to Mitch Murray[sp?], who was the faculty advisor, and the *Praeceptor* had lost money for years. I told the professor that I could dig it out of the hole. And at the end of the year we were out of the hole, they had a couple hundred dollars in the bank. First time it ever happened.

EL: So you knew you were a businessman right off the bat.

JWI: Well, no, I knew that...[chuckles] there was no problem thing.

EL: Alright, now while you were in college, didn't you take a summer off and travel with the hoboes and trains and the..?.

JWI: Oh, no. That was *much* before I went to college.

EL: Okay. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

JWI: I...I did that out...I did that out of the...out of high school...and out of high school. In my sophomore year of high school in 1922, Orry Baldwin[sp?], and Walt Johnson, and John Ingersoll decided to go out and see the Dempsey-Gibbons fight in Shelby, Montana. So we three grabbed a handful of boxcars and we went to Shelby...went *toward* Shelby, Montana...we never got there. When we got to Billings, Montana, we were broke and hungry. So we came back toward Moorhead to get back home, and we stopped in Forsyth, Montana. And they were building a railroad from Forsyth or a little small town called Ria[sp?], just a...post. And they were building a railroad from Ria down to Castle Rock, Montana, to get the coal down there. And we stopped there and worked for the whole summer on the railroad. And ah...we didn't have tractors and big...big scoops at that time. All we had was hmmm...horses was the...like the horses and the...

EL: And their scoops.

JWI: And their scoops, and our wagons, and hauled it, and...and at that time I learned how to even hit a spike with a small...the small...

EL: Head on a hammer.

JWI: Head, that's right.

EL: But it...it's an experience you've never forgotten, isn't it?

JWI: That's right. And every time...and I have been back there several times, back that way, but I've never gone all...I've never been to Castle Rock.

EL: John, ah, for many years you were one of the owners of the Blackhawk. And because the Blackhawk was such a...hmmm...significant establishment in the city of Moorhead, give us some history of it. Starting before you owned it.

JWI: Well, the ah...as I remember it, the Blackhawk was hmmm...at first started by Frank Koepp[sp?]. Now Frank Koepp was an old timer in Moorhead that no one remembers. He used to own the Comstock Billiards in Moorhead. And Frank Koepp and [Julius] J.B. Aske started a bar when after...when Prohibition went out. Back of the American State Bank, where the...the Moorhead Clinic was at one time, Dr. Humphrey's.

EL: Yes.

JWI: And he set his bar back there. And then they enlarged when...then at first, you know, liquor...ah...beer was legal but liquor wasn't. But when the...when the Prohibition Amendment was...was eliminated, then we had hard liquor. And then J.B. Aske and Frank Koepp started the Blackhawk. And ah...then Frank...and then J.B. Aske bought out Frank Koepp and he owned the Blackhawk by himself.

And then when I came back from the Army, I worked at Kiefer Chevrolet Company for a few months, and we starting to Mr. Aske because he wanted to retire. And his sons did not want to go into the liquor business. So my brother Ted had worked for J.B. Aske for many years during the war. And hmmm, so Ted and I talked about it and we eventually were able to raise enough money to make the down payment, and we bought the...we bought the Blackhawk from J.B. Aske.

EL: Okay. Now the Blackhawk got involved in the urban renewal downtown. *How* did that affect you and your business?

JWI: Well...it didn't affect our business hardly at all.

EL: But you had to move.

JWI: We had to move. And I...decided I wanted to move, and I...I wanted to go back into business. But one day I was home and my wife said, "[unclear], you're sixty-five years old. You'd better quit." And I made up my mind.

EL: That's when you retired.

JWI: That's right.

EL: Okay, now you touched on something that we have neglected to bring up here. Ah, you said when you came home from the service...Tell me when you went in the service, what branch you were in, and how long you were in, and where you were stationed.

JWI: I was drafted into the service in 1942, June of 1942. And ah...a little story behind that. My wife was pregnant, so I went down to the office and...ah, we lived in Fargo at the time. I went down to the office and asked them if I could get a deferment for a few months until my wife's...until the baby was born. And the fellow in charge said, "Why, I'm sure we can take care of that." He said, "I'll take care of it myself." So he took the...the folder he had, and put it down in the drawer down below. Well, a few weeks later I got a notice of report. So I immediately went down and said, "What's going on here?" And they said...well, I told them what happened. "Well, we're just gonna find out." And the...he was no longer there. And they hunted and hunted and they could not find my folder. And so I said, "Well, might just as well go out then. I quit my job, and they set a farewell party for me, so I'm going to go to the Army anyhow."

So the day I was to go to the Army they called up and said, "Mr. Ingersoll, we found your folder. It was right down [where] you told it was, down in the bottom drawer of his desk." And ah...but

by that time I'd quit my job, so ah...I went to the Army. Yeah, went to Fort Snelling. And at Fort Snelling they said, "Has anybody had any National Guard experience?" Of course, I'd been eight years at...seven years of National Guard in Moorhead under [Alex] "Sliv" Nemzek. And hmmm...they said, "Has anybody had any of that...know how to handle a rifle?" And I raised my hand. They said, "Come on." So I...and...and with the National Guard we...we threw our guns up, ding, ding , ding, the right shoulder arms. Well, in the new...then the new...order of things, you didn't throw your rifle, you...you...you went hand to hand, you didn't throw it. And so I started throwing a rifle around, they said, "No, that's not the way to do it." And then they showed me how to...how to do the right shoulder arms, and I stayed in Fort Snelling for three months. And ah...in order to have a job of this kind they had to make me a corporal because I had to have some authority. So I was a corporal, about two weeks after I got in the Army I was a corporal instead of a buck...instead of a buck private.

So one day we saw in the...and we saw on the bulletin board that all commanding officers are directed to accept any application that any soldier makes to...for officer training. So I immediately went in and made an application for officer training. And he had to give it to me because they already said so. So I was down in Fort Benning, Georgia in September of the same year. And in December I came out as a second lieutenant, one of these ninth day wonders. And after that there was no...no problem, anybody who wanted to could get ahead in the Army.

So hmmm...I was...yeah, I was ah...in...and I was drafted in June of 1942. In September I was...no, by July 1st, I guess, I must have been a corporal. And by September I was in the officer training camp, in December I was a second lieutenant, and from there on you're out of your...promotions came automatically. Every six months you got a promotion. So in June of next year I was a first lieutenant, in December of the next year I was a captain, and then of course that's as far as you went. And when you were discharged you were discharged as a major. So my discharge...

EL: You were discharged from the Army as a major.

JWI: As a major, that's right.

EL: Where did you...? Well, were you stationed primarily in the United States then?

JWI: Yes, I never was overseas.

EL: Okay.

JWI: At Fort Benning and hmmm...and ah...what's that camp in Texas? Camp Hood?

EL: Oh, Fort Hood. Yeah. I'm familiar with Fort Hood.

JWI: Camp Hood. Yeah. And ah...Fort McClellan.

EL: Now, hmmm, you have several children of your own. Give us the names of your...your children.

JWI: The oldest one is John Wallace, and my second son is Wayne Pierce, my youngest son is Bruce Robert.

EL: The three boys.

JWI: Three boys.

EL: Now Wayne, of course, is a former mayor of Moorhead.

JWI: Right.

EL: And he's also a teacher in the Moorhead school system. What does Bruce do today?

JWI: Bruce is the manager of the VFW club in Grafton, North Dakota.

EL: And John?

JWI: Not the VFW, the American Legion Club.

EL: The American Legion Club.

JWI: And John is a teacher of German in Grand Rapids, Minnesota.

EL: Oh, good. Now John, hmmm...I have a question that you may not want to ah...elaborate on, but I happen to know from my position that you involved yourself on several occasions with the political structure in Moorhead. That is, you couldn't be a member of an elected body because in those days it was considered to be a conflict of interest. However, you served a short time on the Moorhead Planning Commission with Sliv Nemzek and Bill Smaby and somebody else.

JWI: Yeah.

EL: Now I know that you were involved in a lot of the campaigns. Can you tell me anything about some of those campaigns?

JWI: Well, Everett, I don't think I was involved in any of the campaigns particularly. The ah...only campaigns I was involved in was...was...

EL: How about Dr. Bottolfson's campaign? [Transcriber's note: Bottolf Bottolfson campaigned for mayor of Moorhead and won the election in 1961, and served the term 1962-64.]

JWI: Oh yes, I was involved in Dr. Bottolfson's campaign, because that was the time we had that big rabble about a...a sewage lagoon.

EL: So tell us about it.

JWI: And ah...that was really too bad because I don't think that the...who was running against Dr. Bottolfson?

EL: It was Schulte.

JWI: Schulte, yeah. But I think that Schulte never made a statement about it then. That's what...that's what bothered me, because we did not want a...the majority of people did not want a lagoon. And ah...Schulte never said a word, but Dr. Bottolfson came out that he was strictly opposed to a lagoon, and that's why I supported him, and I think that the majority of people certainly supported him and voted for him. And then Doc asked me to serve as kind of a...a listening post for what people were thinking in my area. And I did, and he appointed...that's then when he set myself and was there [unclear] people were going to be appointed to give him advice and what the people were thinking. And then they had this big rumble that the...between the...the renewal board. Who was head of the urban renewal board about that time? The first man.

EL: Well...hmmm...Roberts.

JWI: Roberts, yeah. Roberts and Nick Mathees had got in an argument. But it had nothing to do with the urban renewal; I think it was just a personal matter. And ah...Nick had come out and seen Doc a couple of times about certain things that I forget about. But Doc was a...he was beyond the stage of where...he wouldn't do very much. He [unclear]...he never went to the City Hall...City Hall that I know except to sign the checks. And the city went along anyhow.

EL: He was a very interesting person.

JWI: Yes.

EL: Now did you get involved in...? You don't...You won't admit to getting involved in any other campaigns.

JWI: Well, we...

EL: Okay, let's put it another way, John. Hmmm, I'm thinking today there is a certain amount of apathy amongst the businessman structure in Moorhead as far as local politics are concerned. When you were a businessman in Moorhead there was a lot more interest in politics. You had people that were on the council, on boards, that were businessmen in town. Isn't that true?

JWI: Oh, yes. The only thing I found, Everett, was when I was in...I was on boards, it required a quite certain...ah...not controversial...hmmm...committees as long as I had the Blackhawk Café. Remember, we'd sold the café and kept the liquor store, brother Ted and I. And it seems to me that as soon as I sold that café, or we sold that café and went into the liquor business, then I

was...an outsider. That was the history of the liquor business in Minnesota. If you were in the liquor business...If you were in the liquor business in Minnesota, at least back then, you were really a second class citizen.

EL: John, just as a little interesting note here, hmmm, when the FM [Frederick Martin] Hotel was built in Moorhead back in the late 1940s they didn't have a liquor license for that hotel.

JWI: No.

EL: Now you explain to us how they got their liquor license.

[Transcriber's note: During that time, Moorhead was legally allowed ten total liquor licenses, and they were all assigned to other existing functioning businesses at the time. So to achieve the FM Hotel's desire to get one would necessitate another business surrendering their license first.]

JWI: Well, the ah...there was all kinds of pressure put on liquor dealers to...to want the liquor dealers to give up their liquor license and give it to the FM Hotel. And so Bill Kenney at this...

[Transcriber's note: Bill Kenney was Cecil Kenney's brother and partner (for a while at least) owning the Tile Tavern in Moorhead and that's likely why the narrator continues to refer to Cecil as Bill several times in the conversation.]

EL: Cecil Kenney?

JWI: Yes, Cecil Kenney agreed to let the F.M. Hotel have his liquor license for a certain...for a fixed sum, I think it was fifty thousand, forty thousand dollars. And of course [unclear] you know, that your...Bill can't sell a license. That you can't sell your liquor license; you sell your business, not your license. The license belongs to the city. And ah...then Frederick Martin Hotel refused to pay that kind of money for a liquor license to buy Bill Kenney out. And ah...

EL: It was Cecil Kenney, wasn't it?

JWI: Cecil, yeah, I want to say Bill.

EL: That's okay.

JWI: But Cecil, yeah.

EL: I just want to correct that.

JWI: Yeah. It was Cecil Kenney, and so...they wouldn't...so a suggestion was made that other liquor dealers in Moorhead, in order to keep things smooth, buy this liquor...buy this Bill's place of business...I mean Kenney...Cecil's place of business. So and then the FM Hotel could have the license. Well, there were ten liquor dealers in Moorhead, including Cecil, so the other nine were

asked to contribute...I think it was what, five thousand dollars apiece to buy Bill Kenney...to buy Cecil Kenney out, and then give the license to the FM Hotel.

Well, we ah...this...the council would not make up its mind. They refused to make up their mind that they would...that they wouldn't just take it away from them. And some...and the very last day, it was on the very last thing the council was going to have, it was unknown what they were going to do. So and eight of us got together and we agreed to this proposition so there would be no rumble about it.

But the...that night—no one know this—but that night before the council meeting I got a telephone call from Ralph Townsend who was on the council. He said, “John, stay away from that meeting.” He said, “[unclear] their license.” And I just couldn't believe that that would happen at this very late date. So I went to the meeting and we agreed to purchase Bill's...I mean Cecil's license, and so that the FM Hotel could have one. And that's what happened. But [unclear] and really got...and he would not go along. They stayed out of it. But the rest of us went in and...

EL: And they got by with that.

JWI: They got *by* with that.

EL: Well, you know, that's a...that's a bit of history that a lot of people don't know about in town here. Ah...and now, of course, the FM Hotel is closed, so it was...it only lasted for about thirty-five years. Ah, John, while you were in business there, you were also a large promoter of Moorhead State University. Weren't you chairman of several fund drives and that sort of thing?

JWI: No. No, they approached me to be a chairman of the fund drive, but at that time I was in the liquor business and I...Oh, it's ah...I think it was President Dille. They came over to see me and asked me to be...they asked me to be the head of a certain drive. And I told them that, “Gentlemen, you're just talking to the wrong man because I'm in the liquor business. And see, you don't want the liquor business to be tied into anything that's having the state college.”

EL: How about the athletic department?

JWI: Oh, not necessarily, no.

EL: You weren't involved in any...?

JWI: No.

EL: ...in any promotions there either?

JWI: No, no. No promotions or like that of any kind.

EL: Oh, I thought you were.

JWI: No, never was.

EL: Alright. Hmmm. Now would like to have...make some comments on what you feel that you may have done that made Moorhead a better place to live? That's a tough one.

JWI: Oh...[Sighs]

EL: But...but ah...it's one...one of the questions we all ask.

JWI: That takes a little thought. And I haven't got time for that. [Chuckles]

EL: Oh...[Pauses] Well, hmmm, you, hmmm...you were always active in...in...in what was going on even if it was in the behind the scenes. And I think you had a moral standard that you tried to always hold, or hold up. You were active in your church.

JWI: Oh, yes. I was senior warden for many years.

EL: In the...in Episcopal church.

JWI: The Episcopal, right. And ah...well, I'll tell you, Everett, that's pretty hard [unclear] answer it. And [unclear] I've been gone for fifteen years now and...

EL: Yes, I understand.

JWI: And I can...I can forget the...

EL: Well, if you...

JWI: But now...

EL: If you don't want to comment on that portion of it, John, I think we've reached the end of the interview, and we'll just close it off here.

JWI: Okay, very fine. Thank you, Everett, very much.

[End of interview]

Transcription by Marilyn Olson-Trembl
April 2016