

William Kenney
Narrator

Agnes Hornbacher
Interviewer

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AH: This interview is with William Kenney, 425 Fifteenth Street South, Moorhead. Mr. Kenney has been asked to tell about the famous steakhouse restaurant, the Silver Moon of Moorhead. This interview is being held at the Moorhead State University recording studio on May 15, 1985. The interviewer is Agnes (Mrs. Ted) Hornbacher, 105 Third Street North, Moorhead, representing the Business Committees of the Oral History Project of the Heritage Education Committee.

Okay, Bill, can you give us a little bit about your personal background?

WH: Well, I was born in Park River, North Dakota on October 31, 1911, which is Halloween Day. I've...hmmm...both my parents are full blooded Irish, so that leaves me the same. Their birthplace was Iowa, and they were farmers in Iowa. And they came up to the Dakotas around the early 1900s and settled in Park River, and Adams, North Dakota, and they farmed there until their retirement.

As far as my education, I went to grade school in Park River, and to high school in Park River. Then I came to Fargo and went to the Interstate Business College and graduated from there. Then I went out West for, oh, about a year, around Fresno, California. Came back to Moorhead and Fargo, and I started in business at Bill's Club in 1938, which was nickel sandwiches and 3.2 beer. And I continued there until 1942, when I was asked to go into the Navy. Then I was in there for forty-two months, and I came back to Moorhead again. And I bought the Silver Moon Café, in which I had invested some money before I went into the service, when I sold Bill's Club. So I had a little bit of money to start at the Silver Moon.

But when I started Bill's Club, I had to borrow eight hundred dollars. And in those days, 1930s, money was a little tough to come by. So the Gluek's Brewing Company borrowed me the eight hundred dollars that I paid for Bill's Club. And I had to...beer at that time was eight dollars a keg. So I paid nine dollars a keg. The dollar went towards the purchase of the eight hundred dollars, but I didn't have to pay any interest. And I was only open...Bill's Club, four Sundays,

and North Dakota...or Fargo, the whole state, had to quit selling beer on Sunday. But Moorhead had beer from twelve noon to midnight. So then that naturally helped the business in Bill's Club.

Then in 1946, I bought the Silver Moon, as I told you. It was a café and a lounge. It had been there for, oh, a number of years before that. A fellow by the name of Amund Thoreson and his wife Agnes ran the café. They ran a *real* nice café, so I had a real good reputation right off the bat to start with.

Then at Bill's Club, I started out with one employee. Then that was in 1938, and in 1974 when I retired, I had gone over to Fargo in 1969 and bought the Gardner Hotel, after there was a fire in the Moon, Silver Moon in Moorhead. And I...when I quit Moorhead, this Gardner Hotel had a hundred and fifty employees. So it was a little different from the start in 1938.

Now in 1942, just before I went into service, my brother and I bought what was called the Tile Tavern. And he ran that until I came back from the service. Then I sold my half interest in it, and that's where I got some of the money also to buy the Silver Moon. The building was at 408 Center Avenue, that was Bill's Club, and it was owned by Katy Kiefer[sp?] (a sister of Jake Kiefer, who had Kiefer Chevrolet) and I paid a hundred dollars a month rent, and it was heated. Then when I went to the Silver Moon, I bought that building from an estate. And I didn't have any money but my sister had some, Mary, so I borrowed it from her, and didn't have pay any interest there either. So if you don't have to pay interest, it really helps a little bit as you're going along.

It was a...was not a family business. I'd...it was a family [business] before I bought it, the Thoreson's, his...both Agnes and Amund both worked in the place. But after I bought it, [my wife] Lil was home taking care of the family, so I just ran the Moon down there. Then in later years, the boys came in with that. Tom came over in Moorhead for a little while, and then Pat and Tom both worked over in Fargo at the Gardner Hotel. Lil had done some bookwork in the...at the Gardner also.

AH: Did...?

WH: The only partnership I had was with Cec, when we were in the Tile Tavern, otherwise it was family-oriented.

AH: Cec is your brother?

WH: Yes.

AH: Mmmm-hmmm.

WH: And then he moved to California after that, and he has passed away now.

AH: Did you ever cater to a particular ethnic group?

WH: No, I really didn't, Agnes. I...just anybody that came in. We had professional people, hardworking people, everything, all the way up and down the line, from all walks of life.

AH: Hmmm, how successful were your special goods or services?

WH: Well, it was just...it was mostly a good service. We had some great employees. Some of them were with me from the time I started until Social Security made them quit, or they quit because of Social Security.

AH: Mmmm-hmmm.

WH: And it was service and the good food. The...I had some good chefs, only two, and then Pat, our youngest son took over when our...ah, when the last chef was killed in an automobile accident. And then when we sold out, he went to school to become a lawyer.

AH: I remember those good meals.

WH: You do? Thank you, Agnes. [Chuckles]

AH: Hmmm...how were your goods retailed?

WH: Well, it was just...we had everything practically served there. We'd done very few catering. Like if you wanted, you could call up and say, "I want steaks," or something, and we had containers to...and take them out. But most of them were just served in the Silver Moon itself, properly.

AH: I see. Ah, what methods of payment did you use?

WH: Most of it was cash. We did have credit. We didn't bother with credit cards until we went over to Fargo in the hotel business. All you had to do was sign the slip and put your name on it, and as far in that time there was...as far as loss to revenue, it was almost nil. Everybody paid their bills.

AH: How did the prices of your products relate to people's incomes?

WH: Well, we just tried to make it so that we could make a fair margin on it, so that we could eat regular, and that's what it really turned out to be.

AH: Mmmm-hmmm. How did you...what method did you use to calculate inventory needs?

WH: Well, we took inventory once a month, both on the liquor and the food. And...there were certain times of the year we would buy large quantities of shellfish, shrimp, mostly. And then we would buy choice tenderloin from Hormel. And we would use...freeze them over at Union Storage in Fargo. And then they would...that's when they'd be on grass, so then we wouldn't...or on grains, so you wouldn't have to buy the meat when it was on grass-fed.

AH: Mmmm-hmmm. Hmmm...what were the primary goods and services you provided?
[Shuffling paper sounds] I guess you covered some of that.

WH: Well, it...it was just mostly just steaks, and seafood, and beverages.

AH: Who were your suppliers?

WH: Well, most of them were local. Like we had well, Gamble-Robinson at that time. There was...Dan Luther had a place, that was when we first started. Ah, Nash Finch, and then of course all your...your liquor distributors. We had a different supplier when we were in Moorhead. For the liquor, we had to buy out of Minneapolis and St. Paul, a Minneapolis...or a Minnesota-based, you know. But when we got to North Dakota, we had to buy out of North Dakota places, distributorships.

AH: What do you remember about salesmen?

WH: Tell you what, I never really got...had a...a poor salesman call on me. None of this high-pressured stuff. If they had a good deal, they'd tell you about it, and I...there wasn't a one in all the time in either places that I had any qualms about.

AH: How did you receive your supplies?

WH: Well, most of them, like in Fargo-Moorhead here, they were just delivered by truck.

AH: Truck. Mmmm-hmmm.

WH: Yeah. But then there was rail, then we used to get things shipped in by rail.

AH: Mmmm-hmmm. Hmmm...have suppliers changed over...how have suppliers changed over the years?

WH: Oh, I tell you, when we first started, it was a lot smaller. In fact, usually the boss called on you and sold the stuff. Then later on, then when they got larger, then they had salesmen call on...and like Mel Sullivan when he first started, he used to call on me. Then he...he had salesmen that...that called after that.

AH: Who made the management decisions in your business?

WH: I'll have to say most of it was by Bill. [Laughs]

AH: [Laughs] How...what was the most difficult part of managing a business? Day-to-day operations, or...what?

WH: No, I think possibly of all of them was the help situation. The finances we were strictly on a cash...if you came in and bought merchandise, you paid for it, so then when I had to order something, I had the cash to buy merchandise to replenish it.

AH: You mentioned, hmmm, the employees you had. You started out with one and ended up with a hundred and fifty.

WH: That's right.

AH: How were they hired?

WH: I hired...when I first started, and in the Moon operation, I hired all of them. When we went to Fargo and bought the Gardner Hotel in 1969, then the head of the hotel, the manager of the hotel part, he hired all the hotel part, including the maids. And then in the bar part of it, Tom done that, and Pat took care of the kitchen help, and then I just kind of oversee'd the whole group.

AH: Okay. Ah, what benefits...hmmm, were...were there union members?

WH: No. I didn't have any union at that time. In fact, there weren't too many unions in the café and the liquor industry, as far as the service was concerned. The truck drivers usually were, but that was just starting of it. So the unions weren't...we didn't have unions at that...they...they were here, but they weren't in that type of business.

AH: Ah, what benefits did you...did your employees have?

WH: Well, right...that was just when hospitalization was just starting to come in. And the employees had to pay one dollar a month if they were single. And the...the place paid the balance, which was only, I think...and I'm guessing at it...I'd say four or five dollars a month. If they were married, I think they had to pay two dollars a month. And then after they were there so long, and if they made a certain amount of money, then they were put on a pension plan.

AH: Mmmm. Hmmm, did you...? You owned your buildings. And can you describe it?

WH: Oh, like in...in Moorhead, the...we put a new front on there a couple of times. The inside we remodeled, I don't know, I thought we were remodeling most of the time we were in business. But the...the front we put on a nice brick or stone (kasota stone) front on the Silver Moon in Moorhead, and had that until we burnt out.

AH: Hmmm...well, you didn't have anything to do about the banks or the bankers, ah, ever, evidently. Or did you?

WH: Of the...oh, yes, I...I don't think...yeah, the only thing I did, I borrowed some money once to buy some land out around Casselton, which I still have.

AH: And then you were...you were paying interest?

WH: Yeah, that's the only time that I had to pay interest on it. [Chuckles]

AH: How did the overhead expenses change during the years? Did they impact your success?

WH: Oh, I tell you what, when we first started...[Sneezes] Excuse me. I think we were paying like...ah...the minimum wage at that time was twenty-five cents, I think, and that was at Bill's Club. And they worked an eight-hour shift, they got a half hour off for lunch, but then they had to make up that other half hour for lunch or supper, whatever the case they took off. Then when we left, I think the minimum was around, oh, in the neighborhood of three dollars an hour for the employees, the minimum.

AH: And then, of course, they got their tips.

WH: Yes. And that was just about the time they started having to declare tips. And then they would just bring it in and tell us the amount, they didn't bring the money in. They just told us the amount, put it on a little sheet of paper, and we had to keep track and give it to the bookkeepers.

AH: Hmm...ah, time...how about the time spent in business management?

WH: Well, I tell you, the...[Chuckles]

AH: [Chuckles]

WH: The family thought I spent all the time in there. But I really...I enjoyed every minute I was down there. I spent a lot of time, but I enjoyed it. I liked to meet the people.

AH: Did you ever hold a job outside of your business?

WH: No, I really can't say that I did. [Chuckles]

AH: Who handled the account books?

WH: Well, when we first started, I did, and then we had an outside bookkeeper all the time. And then when we went to Fargo, we had the cashiers and everything that took care of each of their own departments.

AH: And how were the bills collected?

WH: Most of it was cash. I would say ninety percent of all the business we'd done was cash. And then the rest was credit, but as I said, we used...just...sign your name is all we used in those days. We didn't go for the credit cards too much.

AH: What about government involvement like sales tax, Social Security, and income tax?

WH: Oh, they...we had all those things that they...we had to take care of, or the bookkeeper had to take care of them for us.

AH: You said you had an independent accountant as last...?

WH: Yes. Mmmm-hmmm. Like [unclear – sounds like Eid Hemeke] took care of all this stuff for us.

AH: Okay.

WH: When we first started, we had Northern...oh, Fred Krueger[sp?]. Was that...? Well, he was the head of it. He left, so...so he left the Internal Revenue and started his own accounting firm. Then when he passed away, one of his partners bought it, and then they sold to [unclear – sounds like Eid Hemeke], so I went right with the same auditor all the way through, just changed names.

AH: Hmmm, what unique features did your...your place have?

WH: Oh, I don't think there was anything special outside of that we served real good food and it was consistent. Well, and the help.

AH: Hmmm...what about pest control? [Chuckles]

WH: Oh, I tell you. When I first went in, I had a fellow by the...an organization by the name of [unclear – sounds like Leisting and Redding]. And their headquarters was in Grand Forks. And if you ever saw anything, even as much as a fly, you could pick up the telephone and call them collect in Grand Forks, and they were there right...they were the best outfit I ever had.

AH: Well, that's good.

WH: Absolutely great.

AH: Hmmm...customer relations. How were you...? Ah, who were your customers?

WH: Well, they were all walks of life, as I said, but they were people that...I didn't go...I didn't really do much advertising. It was mostly word-of-mouth that...that got the business; that brought the people into the Silver Moon.

AH: Hmmm...do you remember special or unusual customers?

WH: Oh, if I started naming them, it'd take too long, Agnes.

AH: [Chuckles]

WH: Every one of them was special!

AH: Hmm. Well, that's nice. Ah, and you had no problems with your bills. And special friends?

WH: Oh, yeah. We...we made a lot of real, real good friends over the years while we were in Moorhead.

AH: And professional friends?

WH: Yes. I was on the...the Chamber of Commerce Board, I was the Bank Drafts Director of the First National Bank, I was President of the Moorhead Country Club. Ad I belonged to the clubs, in fact, I was a charter member of the clubs, the Lion's Club. But, the trouble is, they met at noon, and I was only...I was there for about a year, and then I decided I'd better step out of it, just take a demit, because I should be at my place of business at noon when the customers were there. That's why...and I...like I was asked to join other clubs, but I didn't feel that I wanted to join any as long as the Lion's had asked me first.

AH: Ah, did your business serve as a gathering or meeting place?

WH: Oh, yeah. We used to have...like the Moorhead Athletic Club, they were there for years. And then the Thank God It's Friday Club, they were there.

AH: [Chuckles]

WH: And then of course the Moorhead...the Shanley Athletic Club. Ah...I could go on and list a whole group of them.

AH: Hmm, how...how about your competitors? Who were your competitors at that time?

WH: At that time it was really the...the Rex Café, which was run by Kenny Seaburg, who was real good competition. The Blackhawk Café, which was run by the Ingersoll brothers. And the FM Hotel, Tree Top.

AH: Hmm, were they...? Because they...were the competitors similar or different?

WH: Oh, they were all in the similar...now the FM was more of a...a leisure dining. The Moon was more, let's get in and eat and get out in a hurry, we're going to go someplace. The Rex was similar to the Moon. The Blackhawk was similar, but they'd done more of a day business, and they didn't cater as much to the night business as the Moon and the Rex.

AH: What other businesses were in your locality?

WH: Oh, we had [unclear – sounds like Horbick] Electric across the street from us. We had [unclear] acrossed over in the kitty corner from it. Ah, when we were in Bill's Club in 408 Center Avenue, where the FM is now, there used to be a little taxi stand there. Hmm, Grosz

Studio used to be across the street. Moorhead Theater was two doors down. C,I, Evenson, the grocery was on the corner. Ah, [unclear] was up on...four buildings away from us. So we were really in the center of the hub of business.

AH: Hmmm, you...and you mentioned some of it, your civic services. You...I think you've already mentioned them.

WH: Mmmm-hmmm.

AH: Hmmm...[clears throat] [shuffles papers] Ah...the Great Depression and World War II had dramatic effects on business. Did they...? Well, you were gone during the World War.

WH: Yeah. I was...yeah. I had to sell out in May...ah, April of 1942. And I went in the Service in May of 1942 and I was...went through boot camp down at Great Lakes, and then they sent me out to San Diego. They put me in the hospital corps. And I was around San Diego, and then finally wound up in the Pacific aboard an aircraft carrier, a small aircraft carrier. Kaiser coffins, they called them.

AH: Hmmm. Hmmm, what made long-term...this long-term business successful?

WH: Oh, I think it was just service and the good food.

AH: Mmmm-hmmm. And the ability to adapt to changing times?

WH: Oh yeah, we were fortunate enough we were able to adapt to it, that...

AH: Okay. Hmmm...how did...how did you feel about running a business in Moorhead?

WH: Well, I tell you, I loved every minute of it. When I went downtown, I just...went to work, that was great as far as I was concerned.

AH: Did being a business person meet your financial and personal needs?

WH: Oh, I think pretty much. We ate regular, so I guess that...it must have done that.

AH: How did your family feel about the business?

WH: Oh, they thought it was fine. The only thing, they thought I should be home more. We bought a home in 1941 and then we lived in it until...Lil and I, and the boys, and Beth, until 1950. Then we built a home in 1950, and we're still living in the home in Moorhead.

AH: Hmmm...what would you change if you could relive those years?

WH: I don't think a thing. I was happy all the way through. [Chuckles]

AH: I think you're just a happy guy!

WH: Yeah.

AH: Thank you for taking part in this oral history.

WH: Well, thank you, Agnes.

[End of interview]