Eric Martinson
Narrator

?
Interviewer

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Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project
Minnesota

I: ...of 6:05. Ah...Sixth Street South in Moorhead on November 7, 1985. So, could I have you give us your full name?

EM: Eric Martinson.

I: And what is your age now?

EM: Ah, ninety-seven.

I: Ninety-seven. And where were you born, Eric?

EM: I was born in Moorhead. My home was the...where the Rourke Art Gallery is, on Fourth Street.

I: I see. And your parents lived at that address?

EM: Yes.

I: What was their name?

EM: Well, their...my father's name was Ole, and mother's name was Christine.

I: And what nationality were they?

EM: Norwegian.

I: They were Norwegian. And your parents' place of birth?

EM: Norway.

I: Do you remember the town?

EM: Oh, yes. A small town, Hafslo, which is near Bergen, is where Mother was born. And Father was born at Stordal in Sunnmøre, Norway.

I: Do you remember the year of their migration to America?

EM: Not exactly, but both my mother and father came in about 1870 or 1871, I think.

I: What was your father's occupation?

EM: Here in Moorhead?

I: Yeah. Yes.

EM: He had a grocery store.

I: What was the name of the grocery store?

EM: Well, Ole Martinson, I...I guess was it! [Laughs]

I: And do you know where that was located?

EM: Oh, yes. [Coughs] I think where my father first started, the grocery store was at...I think it's Ralph's Bar on Fourth Street and Main, isn't it, on the northwest corner of the intersection? Be across from that Kirby's [Bar].

I: Oh...yes. Yes, I...

EM: Yeah.

I: I know where that is. Thank you for that. Tell us about your educational background. Did you attend grade schools and high school here?

EM: Well, I graduated from Moorhead High in 1906. And I went to North...(well, they called it the Agriculture) North Dakota Agricultural College, which is now North Dakota State [NDSU]. Then I went there from high school, and I...I missed part of the next two, three years of the...ah, I worked on a surveying crew on...on the Milwaukee Railroad. And so I should have graduated in 1910. But actually, I graduated in 1912 from NDSU in civil engineering.

I: I see. Okay. Now, we'd like to know how you got into the business that you're known so well for, into the oil business. How did...how did this happen?

EM: Well, I...[coughs] I was the county highway engineer for eleven years and...and John Pitsenbarger was...who I knew real well, talked me into going in the gasoline business with him. So we were in the gasoline business for a year and a half, and then we decided to separate. We...we separated good friends. And he went on with the gasoline business, and I went exclusive

motor oils. And...then that would...that would be...we started in 1926, John and I, in the gasoline business.

And then, in 1928 the iceman, Albert Lund[sp?], came to me and...and wanted...wanted me to go into the coal business with him, which I did. And a few years later I bought them out, and I was in the coal business. And well, the coal...sort of started to fade out, and as the coal...then I got into fuel oil. And then finally got to where there was no coal and...and all fuel oil with me. [Chuckles] So then I sold the business in 1968.

I: Okay. Going back now, you started with Mr. Pitsenbarger, and...was that a partnership?

EM: Yeah, just...well, we incorporated, but...

I: You incorporated.

EM: But just a partnership, yeah.

I: Yeah. So it was an incorporation of two people?

EM: That's right.

I: And that corporation lasted for two years?

EM: Just two years. Mmmm-hmmm.

I: And then you just simply divided?

EM: That's right.

I: There was no sell out or anything like that?

EM: No. We just divided.

I: And then you had the motor oils and then took on a coal business?

EM: Coal business.

I: Did you buy a coal business or...?

EM: No, just started a new business.

I: You just started a new business. Okay. Did you...how many employees did you have?

EM: Well, it varied. In the busiest time with the...in the coal, why, I suppose...oh, I probably had seven, eight employees.

I: And could you tell me a little bit about how that business looked on an organizational chart? I'm assuming that you sat behind a desk, and that other people ran wagons or whatever. Could you tell me how...how you ran that business?

EM: Well, I had a girl who took care of the office, and I was in there part of the time. And...

I: Do you remember...? Pardon me. Do you remember her name?

EM: Yes. It...Viola Kvilvang.

I: Excuse me. Go ahead.

EM: [Laughs] And her name was...maiden name was Jhonk. But so [coughs] then we'd get real busy. Like in the coldest part of the winter. And this...well's got to where I had both coal and fuel oil, and so...quite a...well, a good part of the winter, one year anyway, when we were short of help, I drove the oil truck. I never...I never shoveled coal, but...that's a little too heavy for me. [Chuckles] But I drove the oil truck. And then, oh, I was in...

I: This was in 1927? What kind of a truck was *that* in 1927?

EM: Was the what?

I: What kind of an oil truck was that in 1927?

EM: Well, I didn't have oil in 1927.

I: Oh.

EM: That came...oh, probably in the...in the 1930s. Well, and up in the late 1930s.

I: Oh, okay.

EM: Mmmm-hmmm.

I: Well, when you took on the oil and...and coal....

EM: Mmmm-hmmm.

I: Then let's go back and explain your organization and who did what. I interrupted you when you started with Ms. Jhonk.

EM: Mmmm-hmmm.

I: Or...tell me about the rest of the employees.

EM: Well, they...I had...[coughs] one then who worked for me for fifteen years. Ah, he was just an all around handyman. He's a carpenter, he's a mechanic, he's a painter, he could...he could do anything. And he...he worked for me year round then. And then the other fellows were just...just part time. They'd start working when the coal began moving.

I: Okay. Did the coal come in on railroad cars?

EM: Yeah. It...

I: How did you unload those?

EM: Well, to start with, it was...well, partially all done by hand to start with. [Coughs] They had what we called a wheel scoop. They would wheel the coal over a...and with iron plate then, from the boxcar into the coal bins. And then later we got some better equipment, we had conveyors then to...and then we had...we had what you call an undercar, the conveyor that you...they used to get the coal in these hopper cars, and then drop the coal through the...out through a hopper in the bottom, and then the conveyor...a conveyor up into a truck.

I: I see. So you had the handyman who did that part of the time. And when you had six employees, did you have someone who drove and delivered the coal?

EM: Oh, yes.

I: Or did most people come and get their coal?

EM: No, no. No. The...not very many came. These...a farmer would probably haul his own coal. And they got to where they didn't want to haul it either. [Chuckles] So we'd deliver coal in the country, too.

I: And so in the beginning...let's see, the coal business started in 1928?

EM: That's right.

I: Okay.

EM: [Coughs]

I: In 1928, did you use horses, or did you use...? Was there trucks at that time?

EM: No, I'll tell you, we...we didn't have horses. And this...we had...well, we started out with two...two trucks.

I: Model T's?

EM: No, they were Chevys. They were Chevys. And finally got into...well, it got to where I would...oh, I suppose I had...six, seven...I think I had six trucks. Well, and I didn't use them all, all the time, but a couple of spares, you know, that could take the...if we got busy. And then the...

I: So most of the six men that you employed did both unloading, and loading, and so on, and that sort of thing?

EM: That's right. But then we had...we had probably...well, I would say in the wintertime I had one steady man who didn't drive the...a truck. And he unloaded coal, and he would help load the trucks.

I: Do you happen to remember, Mr. Martinson, what the wages were in those days?

EM: Yes. Ah, they were thirty-five cents an hour.

I: And there were no other benefits?

EM: No, no. [Chuckles] No, no.

I: [Chuckles] I don't believe there was Social Security then, am I right?

EM: Ah...yes, well, they...

I: I think Social Security started with Roosevelt's administration.

EM: Yeah.

I: Which began in 1932...?

EM: 1930, or it was...1932, or whatever that was.

I: 1932 or 1933, okay.

EM: [Coughs]

I: Did most people just work forty hours a week?

EM: Well, to start with, we...when I first started in the coal business, we worked from seven 'til six. And then it wasn't long before they cut down, and we'd work eight hours then; from eight to twelve, and then one to five.

I: Did most of the men bring their own lunch? Or where did they eat lunch?

EM: Well, they...well, I suppose they...they went home, they...most of them. Or if they didn't have a home, they ate at a restaurant.

I: Alright. So, that's the coal. Now oil, were you speaking of lubricating oil or were you speaking of heating oil?

EM: [Coughs] Ah, heating oil. No, I...I got out of that lubricating oil business shortly after we started with the coal.

I: When did the heating oil business start?

EM: Well, of course, they...[Coughs] They were heating with it, homes and other buildings with oil, I suppose...oh...well, I suppose when I...when I started in the coal business. But then the...it...fuel oil gradually came into common use, you know.

I: So how did you start that business? Did you buy someone out?

EM: No, I just bought a truck, and a couple of storage tanks, and that was it.

I: Did you have storage tanks installed underground or over ground?

EM: No. They were all above ground.

I: Was that an expensive investment to start the oil business?

EM: Well, it just led from one thing to another. Not...not too much. I never bought a new oil truck. I would buy...buy a used one.

I: And was the fuel oil loaded on these trucks from overhead, or were there pumps?

EM: Well, ah, to start with I had one overhead tank then. But otherwise, we'd do it...

I: Gravity? Gravity-filled?

EM: Gravity, yeah. But that was just...just 'til...for a short time. Then we got these upright tanks and had a pump, motor-driven pump.

I: Ran by electricity?

EM: So we'd just loaded the trucks with this pump, you see.

I: Then when they delivered the oil to the homes, did they have a long hose from the truck?

EM: Well, yes. But to start with, ah, I'd just unload it from the truck then to the filler pipe at the residence, and that was by gravity.

I: I see.

EM: But then it wasn't long before we got a pump on the truck then.

I: Alright. So this was a business that you started by yourself, the coal and oil business, which happened in about 1928. And gradually you went into the oil business more. And as the demand for fuel oil and coal changed, ah, you just went with the times, hmmm?

EM: That's right.

I: Was there any other...members of your business...did anyone buy in with you, or were there partners, or did you do it yourself?

EM: No, I...I bought the iceman out when he first started, but then otherwise it...it was just my own business.

I: So you had ice also?

EM: No.

I: Oh. Okay. [Pauses]

[Recording interruption?]

I: Okay, Mr. Martinson, hmmm, I think I neglected to ask you where your business was located. It must have been located along the railroad tracks. Can you spot that for us?

EM: Well, our office to begin with was in a part of an old depot building on the corner of Ninth Street and Center Avenue, where the Holiday Service Station is now. And I bought that old building and the land that it stood on. And then I just destroyed the old...tore the old building down, and then built the filling station there for Mobil Oil, that I leased to Mobil Oil. And then I built a small building, kind of back next to the railroad tracks on Ninth Street, that I had for the office for the fuel business.

I: Okay. The buildings that you built, did you build them yourself together with this handyman that you talked about? Or did you have contractors?

EM: No, we had...it was all on contract.

I: Do you remember who the contractors were?

EM: Well, that was Kwame[sp?]. Bert Kwame[sp?]. Bert and Dick Kwame[sp?].

I: Would you mind telling us what you think was the value of your total investment for that operation in those days?

EM: Well, it wasn't very much. [Chuckles] Ah...far as the coal business went, I...of course, I had a minority interest with the iceman. And I suppose together we probably had five thousand dollars tied up.

I: Alright, now you received coal and oil from...Well, from whom did you get your oil and coal?

EM: Well, the coal...there were, at that time, I suppose at the peak of our...part at that time in the coal business, I suppose we had six...six dealers in Moorhead, coal dealers. Now that included lumberyards, and grain people, and things like that. And so we had...well...then of course we bought from several coal companies, the...then the coal...practically all the coal came from Duluth or Superior. And they had...I think there were probably sixteen dock companies, that you'd call them, and then lignite, of course, we bought that from [unclear] in North Dakota.

I: Do you remember the names of the suppliers, the name of the companies?

EM: Oh, yes. There was...there was a Northwestern Fuel and a...and Inland Coal and Dock Company and [Unclear] Fuel Company. [Unclear] Company. We bought...we bought from...from all of them. [Chuckles] [Coughs]

I: Were there salesmen that called on you to tell you about the product?

EM: Well, they would...I'd see quite a lot of these representatives' different coal companies, ah, in their headquarters in Fargo, or that if they didn't live here, they'd probably be in Fargo-Moorhead over the weekend. And they would...well, there were several of them that would...would call like Monday or Tuesday of every week.

I: Was that a competitive business?

EM: Oh, very competitive.

I: So how did you determine where you should buy your coal then?

EM: Well, [coughs] in the first place, we'd have to consider the brand of the coal, and there's the salability of it, you might say. And then the...the...well, it's kind of a personal matter, too. And these...these salesmen, they weren't...they weren't high pressure as a rule. They just depended on the good relationship with the customer.

I: Did you consider most of them competent and honest and so on?

EM: Oh, yes. They were usually quite honest. Those that weren't...[chuckles] why, we didn't...didn't do much business with, so...

I: Now Eric, in furnishing fuel oil and coal to your customers, did they pay cash? Or how did you handle the financial arrangements with your customers?

EM: Well, most of the sales were credit sales, and some were cash. And then we...we were quite liberal with extending credit to people that we figured were responsible. And we weathered the tough years in the early 1930s, and so it wasn't too bad.

I: In the beginning, there was no interest added if you didn't pay after thirty days was there?

EM: No. No interest, no.

I: Did you ever do that? Did you add interest at the last...?

EM: No, never did.

I: Okay. Hmmm. I was going to go into the matter of...you said your building was located at the corner of Seventh Street and Main.

EM: At...ah...no, it was Center Avenue and Ninth Street.

I: Center Avenue and Ninth Street. Ah, do you still have any connection with that property?

EM: I...I own the land.

I: And ah...what building is located there at the present time?

EM: Well, that's a Holiday Station Stores.

I: And you still own the land, and you lease that land to the Holiday.

EM: Holiday, that's right.

I: Right. If you were going to do it all over again, would you do it about the same, or would you make any changes?

EM: Well, I think in the tough years, and during the...that'd be during the Second War, ah...I've...I felt at that time that I should have gotten out of the coal business, because there was a lot of *grief* with it. You couldn't get help, and it was hard to get coal and all, and...and we...our margin of profit was regulated by the government. And really, for a couple years you didn't make a living. But...survived one way or another.

I: You mentioned to me before our interview that the price of coal might have been in... let's see, what range was that? What do you consider to be the lowest price that you sold coal for and the highest price that you sold it for?

EM: Well, I think lignite coal was the...that was the lowest price, and that was about five dollars a ton. And the good eastern coal, as we called it, came from Kentucky or West Virginia, that'd probably sell at about twelve dollars a ton.

I: And this would have been in the early 1930s, 1930s.

EM: That's right. Mmmm-hmmm.

I: And when you...when you retired from your business...and what year did you retire?

EM: I retired in 1968.

I: What was the value of coal then, or price of coal?

EM: Well, there was not very much coal sold. [Chuckles]

I: Oh, yeah. That's right.

EM: You see, ah, fuel oil had taken over. But I suppose...I suppose the best coal was probably around thirty dollars a ton.

I: Okay. Tell me about fuel oil and the same range and what happened.

EM: Well, the...well, the fuel oil, I think...that what we called number two oil, I think about the lowest price was around fifteen cents a gallon. Now it's up around a dollar, of course. [Coughs]

I: Well, it's been a real fine experience for me to interview you, Eric Martinson. And I wonder if there is anything you would like to add...that...by way of thoughts that came to your mind from questions I did not [ask]?

EM: Well, I...I don't think of anything right at the moment, but...

I: Alright. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]

Transcription by Marilyn Olson-Treml
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