

**Interview with Daniel L. Preston**

**Interviewed by John Jenkins for the Heritage Education Commission**

**June 4, 1985**

**Daniel Preston - DP**

**John Jenkins - JJ**

**JJ: This is an interview with Daniel L. Preston, an early member of Melvin E. Harrell [phonetic] Post, the American Legion. This interview was made June 4, 1985 by John Jenkins at One Riverside, Moorhead.**

**Dan, when did you first come to Moorhead?**

**DP: In January 1919, after I had been in the Army. And previous to my going to the Army, I had made arrangements with Dr. Frank Weld, to be the Chairman of the Music Department at the Normal School, and then I went into the Army and that arrangement, of course, was canceled out. But shortly after November 11, when we learned that the war was over and that if we could find jobs, we could be mustered out at once; and when I found that out, I wired Dr. Weld to find out if he could use me. Fortunately, he had filled my vacancy with a lady whose husband was in the Army, and when she came to the Armistice, she just quit and left the Normal School a vacancy in music, and so I had a wire from Dr. Weld saying "Report on January 7," and so without trying to adorn myself with civilian clothes, I was here on January 7 and my work began.**

**JJ: When did you go into the service?**

**DP: In May of 1918.**

**JJ: Where had you grown up? Where was your home?**

**DP: I was born and raised in a little town of Bangor in Wisconsin, settled by the Welsh, and there my father had a barbershop and I began my service to the community as a shoe shiner in the barbershop which I kept until I went away to college. Then I went to Lawrence College in 1914 and completed my work in 1918 and at that time I interviewed with Dr. Weld and I had my assignment made, but I had to leave for the Army right away. And so I was in only from May until December when I was mustered out. It's hard for me to keep this chronologically in order, but that was my first commitment to teaching--at the Normal School in January 1919. There were then about two hundred fifty students and very, very few boys. By 1928 enough of the men had come back from the service so that we began inviting them in to sing in the college choir along with the girls.**

**JJ: Your first experience with American Legion, then, must have been in that period when you first came back.**

**DP:** At the time, then, that the local Post was organized, I became a member.

**JJ:** Okay, then you were a charter member of the Post. Do you remember some of the people who were instrumental in bringing together the Post?

**DP:** I recall Les Welter had a lot to do with it and George Comstock.

**JJ:** I believe he was the first Commander, if I recall.

**DP:** And Otto Bystrom.

**JJ:** Otto Bystrom--I remember him.

**DP:** And there were a couple of brothers by the name of Lunn [spelling], and I don't recall their first names.

**JJ:** Where was the Post meeting, or where did they meet in the early years?

**DP:** I just can't recall that now. I think it was at the Comstock Hotel; I'm not sure.

**JJ:** There was a time that I have heard about that they met up above, was it the Harris Brothers Machine Shop or something like that, that they met. At one time, they met there. What activities was the Post involved in in those earlier years?

**DP:** Well, mostly they were concerned with observing the military connection with days like Memorial Day and other national holidays that needed to have some official leaders of a parade or whatever.

**JJ:** You were talking about the parades.

**DP:** And they were always available for the firing squad at funerals. Actually, I never served on any committees, so I am not acquainted with the usual procedures that a committee goes through and the projects that they have in mind. I was part of the membership.

**JJ:** Were there going on through the years, in through the 20s then and into the 30s, did the Legion seem to change any at all? Was there a difference in the...?

**DP:** No, I don't recall any particular change in attitudes at all. After 1941, when we were back in the war again, I was not active. I had a physically bad setup. I had been bitten by a wood tick and it gave me Rocky Mountain fever, so I was, from 1941 to 1948, semicrippled with the result of that fever, which lasted from June until August. It was a very upsetting situation because the fatality rate of Rocky Mountain fever was very high--I don't recall just--but it was in the 90 percent, so we were just hoping from day to day that I would get back on my feet. And one thing I was so shrunken by that fever, having had it all summer, that I dropped my weight from 218 to 147 and the muscles on my back and shoulders and

legs were all so stiff I couldn't dress myself; I had to have help. And so Don Peet, who was a county agent, was very kind and invited me to join with him in raising some onions, so he seeded the onions and the idea was that if I could get on my hands and knees and crawl around in the sunshine and work in the onion field, that I could restore a little flexibility of my muscles. And that's what really happened. We had five acres of onions and my children and I did all the weeding and by fall I had regained my strength and could lift a hundred-pound sack of onions into a wagon without any trouble. Following that experience, I had lost contact with my relationship to the Legion and it never did become alive again.

**JJ:** I'd like to go back to the time when you came out of college and went into the service and, obviously, toward the tail end of the war. But I'd like to go back to that particular period and get your recall of what you did in the relatively brief period that you were in the service.

**DP:** Well, I was being trained with the rest of the battalion for service in French balloons as teletype operators--operations balloons, they were, and the Germans had devastated the balloon reserves for the French, that is, their personnel, so they were training American men for service in those balloons because of personnel reasons.

**JJ:** Where were you training?

**DP:** At the University of Wisconsin. About halfway through that, influenza became such a problem that they transferred me and two other men into the hospital as orderlies, and that's where I was at the end of the war. And we had, on the average, of 500 cases of double pneumonia to deal with, so there were many deaths. Every night we carried out a few bodies, and that was my war experience. I saw lots of anguish and death, but not in combat. I didn't get overseas.

**JJ:** And that was right at the University or somewhere near in Madison?

**DP:** Actually, any movement of the battalion or something like Saturday morning inspections were held in the athletic field at the University. Otherwise, our classes met in the science building.

**JJ:** Where were you when the Armistice was signed?

**DP:** I was in Madison then.

**JJ:** Do you remember it?

**DP:** Oh, yes, I do. We had parades all over the place, all night long. It was quite a celebration, and I remember my wife telling about the celebration back in my little hometown. We had one child then who was just an infant, and she said all the ladies in town who had babies put them in their buggies and led the parade down that little street.

**JJ:** And then after the Armistice, your battalion was broken up.

**DP:** I never saw any of the men after that. I never knew where they were. We had been marched down to the train three different nights and then brought back again. The morning after the third trip to the train when I was transferred to the hospital as an orderly, and then when I went back for my gear for the next morning, the battalion had pulled out that night. I think maybe there was another reason for my transfer to the hospital and that was they didn't want to send a married man with a child overseas, so they had need for orderlies and they took two others of them with the same problem.

**JJ:** Then, when you came to Moorhead, then you came right from Madison?

**DP:** No, I came home for Christmas in Bangor, where my parents lived, and then in January, immediately following, I came out here. My wife waited at the home of my parents until spring. But I remember when I got off that NP train that morning and could see no hills, I wrote my wife and said, "If I can ever stand this place until spring, I'll be lucky," because back there were had nothing but hills. It was 16 miles back from the Mississippi River, and you know what high bluffs there are along the Mississippi River. Well, that extended back into the state maybe 16 miles or more before it began to level out and then not too far from that was the place where the Ice Age never affected it at all. All the erosion there around Camp Douglas was wind; there were no lakes that I ever remember of. There were just big pillars of rock that had been blown away, or the wind reduced their size and you could see layer upon layer of what had been deposited by water in the centuries past.

**JJ:** Yes, that is a glacial free area, down near Winona and that area of Minnesota also.

I suspect that in those years, Moorhead Normal was pretty much out in the flat country also.

**DP:** Oh, yes, it butted on a farm. Comstock and Wheeler Halls were right next to farmland.

**JJ:** And that continued for quite awhile, actually until after into the late 1940s until they began to change that.

**DP:** It remained that way for a long time and before the campus began to spread out.

**JJ:** Where did you first live when you came in January?

**DP:** I lived in a small house just a half a block west of the old high school building on Eighth Street; and previous to that when I was here alone before my wife came, I lived in an upstairs apartment right next to the Congregational Church in a building which has long since been removed. When Dr. Weld came up to see where I was living, he said, "Now, we can't have you living in a place like this," and so he found another place for me and I've forgotten now where that was; I don't remember.

**JJ:** Your work in those years--you had the music.

**DP:** There was one other teacher there by the name of Bullard; she came from Casselton. There was just Miss Bullard and myself. I had to work with children in the first grade, teach them about music, teach them how to sing and how to read and I had a girls' choir in the college. I taught sight singing and ear training to all students. It was required of boys and girls. At that time I still carried with me a kind of resistance to anyone who was a sergeant, and so when I met all of those students for the first sing-a-long between chapel and the sing-a-long, there were two girls knitting mittens, sitting in the front row and I told them, "The war's over, girls, so why don't you put your mittens away and sing." Well, they did, but the next day they got their mittens again and were knitting again. So I said, "Well, if you don't want to sing, why don't you take your mittens and go over to President Weld's office and knit; that's a good place." They left; I don't know where they went. But I went over to talk with the President about what kind of discipline I should employ, and he said, "If they're there, make them sing or tell them to get out." And that's what we did. But I recall, though, between the singing period and the chapel, which was always begun by reading of scripture and a hymn, the girls would play that piano in the interim between the singing period and the chapel, but I didn't know who got those girls to play. I had nothing to do with it. Well, the next fall, there were no girls to play the piano and President Weld called me in and said, "Why aren't there girls playing the piano?" Well, I said to him, "Was that my responsibility?" "Well, it's music, isn't it?" He said, "It is your responsibility." I said, "If you think I'm going to hang around the girls' dormitory to find out who plays the piano, you're mistaken." I slammed the door and went out, and in a half hour he came over to tell me to forget about picking the girls for music. He said, "We'll get the Dean of Women to do it." So he was that kind of a fellow. He was right down to earth and I think very, very honest with his teachers. If he gave them a job to do, he connected with them and worked with them, but he also had an understanding of any change in structure of the program, so that he was aware then that he had never told me that it was a special assignment of someone to select those girls to make the interim music.

**JJ:** What was it like in Moorhead in those years? What activities were going on?

**DP:** The streets were not paved. The milkman got stuck in front of our house on Tenth Street in the mud, and I don't know about the town. All I know is that in the residence district there were no paved streets. I lived on Tenth Street; I think it's the Lutheran students' building. I lived right next to that building, and there my family grew up. I had five children: Jane was the oldest, Bill the youngest. And that's where we lived until Bill was through the grade school. All of our children went to the campus elementary school.

**JJ:** And it was also a high school.

**DP:** And a high school. Except Bill didn't go to high school there. He went to Moorhead High School and played football and stuff like that. But Jim and Molly both graduated from Moorhead State with their major in music. Jim first began teaching in Audubon after he got out of three years in the Army overseas in the Mediterranean area; he was office help, not in a combat unit. And Molly finished her four years in music, but she never taught. She married Clair Flood, who was one of Slim [Sliv?] Nemzek's soldiers, so she never did get to teach, but traveled around the country and wrote her husband wherever

he was stationed--Hawaii, Japan, Vienna, Ft. Bliss in El Paso. And then when they got out they lived at Cape Canaveral [spelling] until they moved back to Hawaii. They are now living there in a town just next to Honolulu--Waianae.

**JJ:** Are there other particular memories you have, in particular, in the period of the '20s, in Moorhead and in connection with the Legion or with other activities in the community?

**DP:** I don't recall that there was any great activity in the community during those years. It was not until the bank holiday in 1929 that a big change came over the attitude of our society because no one had any funds to deal with. On a Friday I received my check and put it in the bank, and on Monday I had no money at all. And everybody else was in the same predicament and it seemed to me that working together as a group became easier for people. In the Anthean [phonetic] Chorus, which had 125 men in it, we never had absenteeism. They were there. It wasn't until prosperity returned again that another war developed and they had some problems all over again.

**JJ:** I'd like you to recall, if you could, some of the early people that came back out of the service during those early years, some of them that came back to the Normal, I'm sure.

**DP:** The first men to come back were Bill Kern, John and Dewey Gates, and Paul Bergquist, Terry Sharpe; that's all I can recall. There were about twelve that came back along that time and Nemzek was a football coach. Maybe it wasn't there yet, but they had such few men for the team that Archer and I of the faculty put on football suits and went out to play on the second team, so that they would have enough for two teams. And I remember how tickled these college boys were to dump Archer and me over on our heads in the contact.

**JJ:** And most of those fellows that came back, then, from the service, also went to Normal?

**DP:** I'm not sure. No, I don't think so. They didn't return until after the 4-year course started. I don't remember enough men in the Normal School to have had an athletic team at all of any kind.

**JJ:** And that started in 1926, I think, wasn't it?

**DP:** I think it became a university earlier than that, in about 1923. It's about that time.

**JJ:** Okay, well, that's good.

[End of Interview]