

Interview with Jim Mowrey

December 11, 2014

Conducted at the Kinsley Library, 208 E. 8th St. Kinsley, KS 67547

Interviewer: Joan K. Weaver

Joan: Jim let's start out with when you were born.

Jim: I was born in Roselle, Kansas, March the 6th, 1930.

Joan: Who were your parents?

Jim: Mr. and Mrs. M. M. Mowrey. They were originally from Geneseo and Sterling.

Joan: What was your mother's given name?

Jim: Carrie Belle Temple. My dad was Magnus Melvin Mowrey.

Joan: Magnus, that's a neat name! Had they lived in Kansas all their lives too?

Jim: Yes, they were born and raised in Kansas. Mother was a farm girl and Dad was a city boy. He was born in Gardner and grew up in Sterling and Mom was born in Geneseo, Kansas.

Joan: That was pretty close together. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Jim: I had one sister, and her name was Wanda Jean Mowrey. She died at the age of 25 of cancer.

Joan: Was she older or younger than you?

Jim: Older.

Joan: So only you were left. What brought your parents to Rozel?

Jim: Dad was working for the railroad. He was the agent at Rozel for a while.

Joan: Was this the Santa Fe Railroad?

Jim: Yes.

Joan: So you carried on a tradition that we're going to get to here.

Jim: We were a railroad family. My dad was a railroader, I was a railroader and my father-in-law was a railroader.

Joan: How about your grandfathers?

Jim: No, one was a farmer, the other ran a grain elevator.

Joan: Okay. What do you remember about your childhood? You told me a story a little bit ago about when you were born. Do you want to put that on this?

Jim: I was born about three months before the main street of Rozel burned to the ground. Of course, I was young enough I don't remember it, but my mother told me that her and the high school boys carried all their furniture three blocks north to a vacant lot because our house was right at the end of Main Street. Luckily, the fire didn't get our house. From there, we moved to Ulysses. That was before they got Main Street rebuilt, too.

Joan: Maybe before we go on, did your father tell you any interesting railroad stories that go back to his time period?

Jim: No, other than that he coached me on what to do to get a job. He was... I'd say he was a perfectionist, because to get on the railroad back in them days, you had to almost memorize a 300 page rule book because you had to write it by heart and answer questions. He made me memorize it, and that started it all. It was a good deal because I got a lot of good jobs because I knew what was going on. But as far as his time on the railroad, to him, the railroad was what was happening at the present time. He didn't never go back and expand on his problems or anything with the railroad.

Joan: Okay, then your family, you said, moved to...

Jim: From Rozel, we moved to Ulysses, Kansas, just in time for the Dirty Thirties.

Joan: Okay, that's what we want to talk a little bit about today. What are your memories of the Dust Bowl?

Jim: Well, at Ulysses we weren't really in the Dust Bowl. Dust is when you can see around town and everything. I call it the Dirt Bowl, because we had dust mostly every day. No trees in town, no nothing like that. The grass didn't grow. I went to school wearing a respirator. When it would get so dusty in the school, they'd let school out. Of course, back in them days, there wasn't any such thing as school buses or anything, so there were very few cars and we'd walk home. Me and my sister would walk home from school together. If you don't live through it, it's really hard to describe because when them storms would come up, like I say, we were used to dust because there was dust in the air all the time. Even the smallest breeze would make dust blow. When the big storms would come up, it would kind of roll in like a... I was trying to think the other day how I would describe it. It was kind of like a typhoon or something like that. It would roll in and it would get a little dustier. The wind would come up a little bit and then it would come up really bad and it would get real dark and you couldn't see anything in the house. Our houses were all... the windows were all taped shut. Only one door would open to the outside. Of course, the dust was so thick in the wind that it would cover up the floors. Mom used to...we didn't have vacuums in them days, she had a broom and a scoop shovel. That's what she cleaned her floors with.

What little grass we had was whatever we watered by the well on the property. The grass rake was like an inverted snow shovel. They were in the shape of a 'C' backwards, with little teeth on it. You'd scrape all the dirt off out into the street and the city would blade it off.

Joan: So the grass was growing, but you had to get the dust that had blown on top of it off?

Jim: Correct.

Joan: I'd never heard that story. So you raked the dirt off...

Jim: The rake was like a push snow shovel, you know, only reverse. We pulled it and it had little teeth

on the bottom so it wouldn't tear up the grass. We planted some trees in front of our house at Ulysses. They grew up about seven foot tall, and that was as tall as they'd get, by watering them.

To get back to the big storms, the wind only blew around the edge of it, and then it would get dead calm. That's when you really got the dirt. It was just flakes of dirt falling straight down like snowflakes. It would really stack up, and then as the storm got on by, the wind would pick up again and then eventually it would die out to just dust blowing in the air again.

Joan: So it was sort of like the eye of a hurricane?

Jim: Yes, that is the best way to describe it. That's exactly the way it was. The wind didn't get that strong, a 40 mile an hour wind was normal. That's about all it got, but that 40 mile an hour with that much dirt falling, it would stack up on your car and on the ground out there like snow. It buried fence rows; it buried what few shelter belts were out there. Us kids used to go out after a storm with shovels and we'd make tunnels through them shelter belts. We had some running all over. I don't know, there was fence post on top of fence posts out there because farmers would go out and re-fence the property every so often. We lived right on the west edge of town. At the time, it was the last street in the town of Ulysses. The storms always came from the southwest. We could see them coming long before they got to town. They didn't move very fast, but it was something else. Fortunately, our house had a basement in it. So we eventually shut off the upstairs and lived in the basement because it was clearer down there. Mom would go up during the day and clean the house and come down. But it was different, and eventually she got dust pneumonia, and we had to move. Dad had a chance for a job in Ellinwood, KS, so we moved to Ellinwood from there. Ellinwood was the first snow I ever saw.

Joan: Okay, let's wait before we go to Ellinwood and the first snow. I have a couple questions. You said when you went to school, you had a respirator. What was that?

Jim: Well, you see them on... it was this little white mask over your nose. Eventually they come out with the regular respirators that filtered the...

Joan: Like a gas mask sort of?

Jim: Yes.

Joan: I've heard people say that they put wet cloths over their mouths when they slept. But you were in the basement and didn't need to worry about that?

Jim: Well, no, we had covers over our beds, a sheet over a built up frame like a bug screen. It completely enclosed the bed.

Joan: Like a canopy bed.

Jim: Yes. But we slept in a mask during the worst storms. Day in and day out, you'd have to. It was just dust in the air like we have around here, or like when you're driving down the highway and the farmer is plowing a field and the wind is blowing and the dust blows across the highway. It was that way, every day, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. We were used to that, that's basically what gave my mother dust pneumonia. It was constantly breathing that air.

Joan: What were the symptoms of dust pneumonia?

Jim: Just like flu when you first got it, and then it would turn into pneumonia. But it was caused by dust.

Joan: By flu, you mean coughing?

Jim: Coughing and you couldn't breathe. High temperature and your lungs were full of dirt.

Joan: And the treatment was just to get away from it?

Jim: Yes. They could treat you, but then when you went back and got in it again, you got it quicker. She finally couldn't get over it, so we had to move.

Joan: Now, did these dust storms... maybe you don't know this, but your dad was working the railroad. Did the dust storms affect the trains?

Jim: Oh yes, the big storms, everything stopped out there. But the rest of the time, they were all steam engines at that time and everything. They didn't have no problems, but they all had to wear a dust mask too.

Joan: Did they have to go out and uncover tracks?

Jim: Yes. The section crews had to, and then that reminds me, all the steam engines had what people now days call a "snow plow" on the front of the cow-catcher out there. They would plow dirt as they went along. Trains back in those days pretty well kept the dirt off of the rails, not like nowadays where the trains are only once in a while. There were a lot of them back then, of course, they weren't that big of engines. They couldn't pull that much, also when you had a lot of cars, it took two or three trains to pull the number of cars, you know. But Dad and I used to go down to the depot and we'd try to write on the desk, but we had to first brush the dirt off and off the paper to write on it. But it was a way of life.

Joan: How did it affect your life, as a child, other than getting to miss school?

Jim: Well, it didn't seem to bother me. I grew up in it. I don't remember even having a sick day. But they were pretty strict on wearing masks and everything. The worst part of it was, if you had to go to the bathroom at night in a dust storm. We had a cable that ran from the house to the outhouse; you didn't dare let go of that or you'd get lost. It literally got so black and so dark that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

Joan: It is hard for me to imagine that.

Jim: That's what I say, it is hard to explain because if you don't live through it, I don't know just how you'd explain it. That's why I was trying to think, how would I explain these big storms. Well maybe that would be the best way to explain it.

Joan: Were you ever scared?

Jim: No, not that I remember. I know my mother used to get scared. We had one storm come in, and the grandstand where they raced horses out there at Ulysses at that time was a quarter of a mile behind our house. I didn't know Mom could yell so loud, but we were having a church party out there and one of the storm tellers seen one coming. She stood at the fence at the back of our house and yelled at me

and my sister. And we heard her! We run that quarter of a mile to the house and just got in the basement when it hit. So Mom was... I didn't know she could scream that loud!

Joan: Well, that was sort of a close call. Do you remember any other close calls that your family had? When you were out in the car...

Jim: No, back then we didn't really travel in a car very much. Dad would take it to work and then come home. That was the biggest trip other than the trips like Christmas to Grandma and Grandpa's out at Geneseo. Other than coming to Kinsley again when the highway was down 8th Street and going on. But other than any close calls, we were just used to them.

Joan: Because your whole early childhood was dust storms. You didn't know anything else.

Jim: Yes, the first thing I remember was a so-called dust storm and going to school in them. It was just a way of life. I know the winters back during that time weren't like the winters we know now. It got cold, and it would freeze water, but that's about as cold as it would get. We never had any snow, and what few rains we had, if we got them nowadays, people would think they were not rain but mud balls. They would fall and get that dust out, and when it hit you it was just a mud splash. I guess you'd have to say that's as close to the old frontier days as I ever lived in. But I didn't see snow until I got to Ellinwood.

Joan: How old were you when you got to Ellinwood?

Jim: Oh, I was in the second... the third grade (*corrected, actually in the 4th grade*).

Joan: Now, did Ellinwood have any effects from the Dust Bowl?

Jim: No. Actually, I hate to say this because there'll be people who'll argue with me. Dodge City didn't know what the Dust Bowl was. They had dust, but it was just dust in the air, not like we had out there at Ulysses. I mean, it come off of the front part of the Rocky Mountains, that wind somehow, and both KU and K State claimed it was on account of the way the farmers farmed out there. But they didn't farm any different than anybody else. It was just dry, period. You could go out and scoop dirt with your hands; no shovel was needed to dig a hole, if you wanted to. But I know when we eventually moved to Dodge, people would talk about the terrible Dust Bowl days and we'd just kind of laugh at them and listen to their stories. We'd dig out pictures and show them what one really looked like.

Joan: I think they had a few, but they maybe weren't so continuous as yours...

Jim: No, they didn't have anything close to it. I mean, they had dust storms, actually dust, but not dirt storms. We had pure dirt where the land just rose up and flopped over. There was dirt, but that's my theory. There's probably scientists that can tell me different, but I lived through it, I know what it was like.

Joan: Now, when you moved to Ellinwood, did your mother recover?

Jim: Yes. She lived to be 92 years old. But we had no humidity out there, there was actually no humidity all that time. When we got to Ellinwood, there was humidity and cool breezes. The temperature out there in the Dust Bowl days hardly varied more than 10 degrees. Like I say, once in a while in the winter time, it would get cold enough to freeze ice; but it wouldn't last. Of course, the ice

was dirty. It was brown ice. But Ellinwood was the first place I seen snow, and I went nuts because I thought it was dirt. I can remember that. I ran out and jumped on it and went up to my knees in snow. I couldn't figure out why it was wet and what was going on. Mom had to tell me because she was from east of there.

Joan: You were talking about the snow in Ellinwood. What else do you remember about your youth then?

Jim: In Ellinwood? Well, it was a change, but I had a ball there. We had a flood there after we moved there. I hadn't ever seen anything like that! The closest river out of Ulysses was the Cimarron River, about 10 or 15 miles south. It was all sand and only had water run when it rained up on the mountains. We had a flood, and our house was built up off the ground about four feet. It got high enough that I could use the front porch as a boat dock. I got one of Mom's wash tubs and floated it out there and jumped in and floated around all day. I got a third degree burn and had to go to the hospital for three weeks. It was things like that that I hadn't saw and I couldn't understand them, you know. Mom had to explain to me. Being in the third grade, I knew everything but I didn't know nothing. I remember rains. I couldn't get enough rains. I was out in the rain day and night; Mom would get up at night and I wouldn't be in bed. It would be raining, and she'd go out and I'd be playing in the rain because you didn't have to wear a mask and it was cool. But it was just the opposite to what I grew up in. It is hard to describe that feeling. I can remember, but to put it in words is a little tough. People just don't understand that never had to go through it. To make it clear enough for them to understand... I hope I never see it again, I'll tell you that.

Joan: Well, we just got past December 7 here. Do you remember Pearl Harbor?

Jim: Yes. Most of it, I remember from listening to the radio and hearing people talk about it. I was old enough then that I absorbed what was going on. Then, of course, the movie houses had news reels, and I always went to the movies on the weekends. Of course, a movie only costs a dime back then. We'd see it all in there. Yes, I remember it. Basically, I would say that it was just another adventure to me. I wasn't old enough to really... Looking back, I didn't really understand the significance of it.

Joan: I guess I should have asked back before that question, because the Dust Bowl was the Depression, but your father always had a job.

Jim: Yes.

Joan: So you think your family didn't feel the Depression as much? Or how did the Depression affect you?

Jim: Yes, well, we didn't have no money to spend or anything. His wages just went for basics, you know, food... That's why we didn't drive any place, but then he still managed to take us on a vacation in the later part when the storms started tapering off. We visited other places. I got... there was kind of a park out in eastern Colorado just west of Ulysses about 40 miles that they called "Two Buttes". There were two little humps of ground there. It was nice, then we went out next to them there was a petrified forest. We went to that.

Joan: Now, you went in a car. You didn't use the train... Didn't your family have some free train passes or something?

Jim: Right. We could go anyplace on the train, and when we moved, we moved by train. We'd spot a box car and we'd load our furniture. Then they would take the box car to the town we'd moved to. Yes, we rode trains all our lives. In fact, when me and my wife got married, that's the way we ran. Why buy gas or wear out a car? We'd just go down and get on a train, show our pass and go.

Joan: Okay, well, back to the other. So World War II probably, you said, was sort of an adventure. It didn't affect you much either. You didn't have relatives that served? Your father would have been too old...

Jim: Oh yes, of course my father-in-law, he... my relatives were all older and they... I don't remember any of them that was actually in the service. I know me and my sister used to at night, before we'd go to bed, we'd listen to the war news on the radio. About the only way I was involved in it was the town or wherever we was living, they'd have air raid drills. You'd have to turn out all the lights and go to the basement or someplace until the "All Clear" sounded. That's the most I had...

Joan: So how long were you in Ellinwood?

Jim: Well, from the third grade to... We moved to Great Bend when I was in the seventh grade. We lived there a year. Nothing exceptional happened there. I went to the seventh grade and then we moved to Dodge City. Dad got a promotion and we moved to Dodge.

Joan: What was his job in Dodge?

Jim: He was the chief dispatcher.

Joan: What does that entail?

Jim: It entailed making sure no trains ran into each other.

Joan: Was he there at the Santa Fe Depot in Dodge?

Jim: Yes. It was all in the east end of it. The dispatcher dispatched the trains and the railroad back then operated on what they called "Train Orders". Each train had a set of orders that would tell them when they were going to meet a train and whether to take the siding or stay on the main line, and stuff like that. That was his responsibility, to see that the dispatchers done right. He was in charge of all the dispatchers.

Joan: Now, was there somebody over him?

Jim: Yes, two people: the Train Master and the Superintendent. He was the third in line. And then I graduated from high school there at Dodge. I'd been working for a railroad on third shift, from midnight to eight in the morning. I'd get off at the roundhouse there in Dodge City.

Joan: This was before you graduated or right after?

Jim: Before. My junior and senior year in high school I went to work at the round house in Dodge. We serviced steam engines.

Joan: So what were your hours there?

Jim: Midnight to eight in the morning.

Joan: And then you went to school?

Jim: Yes. I'd get out of school, do my homework, sleep till about 11 p.m., and then go to work.

Joan: You didn't get much sleep!

Jim: No, but I didn't seem to miss it. I could sleep; when I shut my eyes I was asleep and didn't wake up until the alarm went off.

Joan: So you were working in the round house repairing? Like a mechanic?

Jim: Repairing and... well, my job at the roundhouse was I was a Hostler Helper. That was what they called us because you helped the engineer. You wasn't a fireman or an engineer; you was a helper.

Joan: So what were your duties?

Jim: Well, when they come into the yard, I'd go out to the end of the house track and run the engine down to the ash pit, kill the fire, and...

Joan: How did you kill the fire?

Jim: You'd shut everything off.

Joan: Shut the oxygen off to it?

Jim: Yes. Then you'd dump the ashes in the ash pit.

Joan: Did they go down like to a trap door of the train?

Jim: Yes, under the engine, under the firebox, the engine would open up and dump the ashes. Then before the boiler cooled down, you could still run the engine without a fire for a while. Then I'd run it up on a turn table, then get off and turn it to the stall track it was supposed to go in and run it in the roundhouse for the mechanics to go over it and get it ready to back out. Then I'd go out and pick up another engine and start all over.

Joan: How often were engines treated this way?

Jim: Every time one came. Back in them days, those steam engines, their maximum travel time without service was about 200 miles. That's why there was a division point about every 200 miles. Kinsley was originally designated to be the division point, but the city fathers wouldn't let it happen because they didn't want the railroad trash in town. So Dodge City grew up as a division point, and Newton, Kansas, and ...

Joan: So the main servicing, you had to get rid of the ashes so you could start over. What else had to be done every 200 miles?

Jim: When the mechanics got done with their inspection and their greasing of all the bearings and all

that stuff and got everything working, you had to go get it out of the house, take it out to the coal chute and fill it full of coal.

Joan: And that coal came down from the top, right?

Jim: Right. Then you'd go to the water tower and fill it full of water and fill the injectors. My job was to fill the injectors on a steam engine... and then park it in line to go out whenever it was due to go out so it could be first out on the leads.

Joan: So what was the turnaround time? About...

Jim: 24 hours. The only engines that come in and went right back out were the through trains. If they was having a problem on the engine, they'd shunt it off the train, bring it down to the roundhouse and we'd fix it and they'd take it back out. Then they'd go on.

Joan: So if you were starting a trip back east, you might change engines?

Jim: Oh yes, they could change engines at every division point, actually.

Joan: I'd never realized that, I just assumed you got an engine and you went all the way to California!

Jim: A lot of them did because the engines on the through trains were big engines. They held a lot of coal, and they held a lot of water. They could go farther than your average little train that run between local towns. But then, they got rid of the coal-fired engines and went to the oil-fired engines, and then they could go even farther. It is amazing. I went through all that; in fact, when I came to Kinsley after working at the roundhouse, we were still running oil-fired steam engines then. The house track across in front of the depot, if they had an engine that was giving them trouble, they'd always cut it off and park it in front of the depot. While I was working, I'd go out and maintain it.

Joan: So you were doing this while you were a junior and senior in high school. Then you graduated. Then what did you start?

Jim: Well, I remember vividly, because I was working to save up money to go to Cal Tech in California. The airlines were just coming into business, and I wanted to get into the basics on that. My father, the year I graduated, the summer after I graduated, he told me... I remember him saying, "Son. The railroad has a good retirement and before you go to California why don't you try and find a job on the Santa Fe and see if you like it?"

I thought, "Well, that's logical. Rather than transfer from one area of the United States to another, I could stay at home." So, I told him, "Okay."

He said, "If you don't like it, then your tuition is already paid, and you can go the next semester or so." So I got on. It was kind of a neat job.

Joan: Now, you were saying, before we started the tape, what the procedure was to get hired on the railroad. Memorizing that book, and...

Jim: Yes. I think I got a rule book. You wouldn't believe it. They called it a "Rule Book". But I called it, "The Fire You By". Because if you violated any of them rules, you got demerits, and after you got 100 demerits in your lifetime, you were automatically fired. But it was rules that you had to operate by on the railroad.

Joan: So it is what you went and did then to try to get a job? You had to learn that book? But you didn't need to know that while you were working as a junior and a senior, while you were in high school?

Jim: Yes, but not at the roundhouse, no. It was just a job. They hired people just off the street. Well, you had to qualify for the job, but you just had to show them that you could do it to qualify. But to get the job I had, you had to take a six months apprenticeship first. During that apprenticeship, you had to learn to telegraph, you had to learn the rules, and then when the agent you were working for at the time said you were ready to qualify, they'd take you to the division office and give you a test to see if you really knew it. If you didn't really know it, you didn't get the job. But as it turned out, my dad made me memorize that book. I used to be able to quote the page and the rule number and everything in the book. Of course, Dad was also a rule examiner, so that was his pet peeve if somebody didn't know the rules. It worked out, but anyway, it come time... the railroad operates on seniority. The more years you get in it, the safer your job is. I worked that summer, and I decided that I wouldn't go to Cal Tech. It was a pretty nice job and the hardest thing I had to do working in the office was to keep the potbellied stove lit during the wintertime. I learned how to bank a fire and all that stuff.

Joan: What were you doing in the office?

Jim: Well, I was learning to be an agent.

Joan: An agent is the one that sells...

Jim: No. He runs the railroad in each town. He is the boss of the railroad in each town.

Joan: But he is under the dispatch.

Jim: Yes. He is the fourth man down from the top. I don't know where to go from there because I just started working. I cancelled and got half of my money back from Cal Tech, and I stayed on the railroad. I started going with this gal from Dodge.

Joan: How did you meet her?

Jim: Well, she was three years younger than me in school and when I met her, I was a pick-up.

Joan: Oh, you were the pick-up?

Jim: Yes. I had gone to the movie on my day off and the movie let out about 11:30 at night. And her boyfriend, the kid I ran around with, was going with her. They drove by while I was walking home; it was about a mile and a half walk home. They hollered and asked if I wanted a ride. Sure I wanted a ride rather than walk a mile and a half! I got in the car and the first thing they asked was, "You got any money?" Well, they knew I did because I was working. They were low on gas, so I went and bought them a dollar's worth of gas. Gas was 19 cents a gallon at that time, and we rode around all night. That's when I met her. Of course, I seen her in-between times when we was together. Then one day, I don't know what the conversation was, but he was talking about her and somehow it came up, and I told him, "I'll bet you a case of beer that I can take her away from you." He said, "I'll bet you you can't!" And I said, "Okay." All through my life, I've always said that was the only bet I should have lost. But I won that bet.

Joan: And her name was Beryl. And you got married in 1949.

Jim: Yes.

Joan: And were you an agent at that time?

Jim: I was still working for them when we moved here. Well yes, when we married, I was on work they called the "extra board" at that time. When we got married, I was in different towns relieving agents for vacation.

Joan: It was called "extra board"?

Jim: "Extra board". It was when you'd go around relieving other people in different towns. So yes, we got married on a Sunday.

Joan: Where did you get married?

Jim: The Kinsley courthouse.

Joan: On a Sunday?

Jim: Yes. I had to go to work that night, so I took her to my mother and dad's house, and I went to work and I didn't see her until Thursday. That's when my day off was.

Joan: Not much of a honeymoon!

Jim: No. We took our honeymoon probably a couple years after we got married. That was my first vacation. Because when you first start the railroad, you don't get vacations. You have to earn them. Eventually, I got two months' vacation a year before I retired, but no, then we moved here to Kinsley.

Joan: So you were assigned to Kinsley at that time?

Jim: No, I was still with on the extra board, but Kinsley was kind of the central place when we moved here. I was still relieving agents when I got my job at Kinsley. Then I was here permanently.

Joan: What were you hired here as?

Jim: Operator. Train order operator. But I eventually got up to agent and raised my three kids here. We just came to Kinsley to see where we wanted to go, because like I say, the railroad operated on seniority. When a vacancy came up, the guy with oldest seniority that bid on the job got it. So we thought, "Well, we like Kinsley. So we'll just stay in Kinsley until we find out where we want to go." And I'm still here.

Joan: You never left?

Jim: I'm still looking.

Joan: Is that unusual? Your dad moved quite a bit...

Jim: Yes. That is really unusual, but of course I didn't stay here all of my career. I lived here all my career. After cars and roads got improved and popular, why I was here about 13 years and then I went to Spearville for 13 years. I was the agent there. I came back to Kinsley and then I went to Dodge. I started my railroad career in Dodge City and I ended it in Dodge City. I ended it when the BN and the Santa Fe merged.

Joan: So you worked for the Santa Fe all the time?

Jim: Yes, just the Santa Fe. This was a busy town when I was working there. We had a train through town on average, one an hour. On a day when they were running on time, I've got records at home that show a train through town every 20 minutes on my shift alone. Kinsley was a 24 hour station.

Joan: At this time, was there a round house? I know there had been a roundhouse.

Jim: No, that was all gone at that time. When I first came here, it was gone. The roundhouse, but the coal chute was still there the ice plant was still there and the pit for the turntable was still down there where it had been. But it went out about the same time the Aunt Nancy (*Anthony and Northern Railroad*) disappeared, just before the war. But Aunt Nancy, I remember coming over with Dad looking the yards over because he was responsible for them before they took over, where they sat things out. I used to travel with him, even after I started working for the railroad. When we got a day off, we'd spend it on the railroad because we'd go someplace we hadn't... didn't know how it was laid out, just to see how it was laid out. But Kinsley was probably the most important station on this division. We had a 27 lever interlocking system here, where the operators had to be qualified to operate here. It was a pretty permanent job once you got it, because we threw all the switches and the signals for the trains that went through here. Two districts wound up here; the fifth district went through Great Bend and second district through St. John. The second district was really the main line because it was the shortest trip to California, to come on the second district. It was not a high speed railroad through Great Bend, what they call now days a "branch railroad". But back in them days it was a pretty good railroad.

When you have to funnel 24 trains in 24 hours in and out of Kinsley, you kind of have to know what you're doing because you're responsible. You're throwing switches for them and keeping them safe so they don't run together and all that. It was a pretty important station. Like I say, you had to be qualified to do it, and that's what kept me here so long. Otherwise, if I'd just been out at a little local station, I might have hunted a job before I retired.

Joan: Okay, then you were an agent. Then did you move up from there?

Jim: No, this was as high as I got because I refused a promotion. Because with most promotions, you was never home. I didn't want to lose my home life. Me and my wife got along so good, that I just didn't want to go off and leave here. I refused three promotions. I could have made a lot more money, but I was making enough and I had a home life and loved my wife. I didn't want to go off and leave her. Of course, now, if I'd a took the job, I'd had a bigger pension. But I don't need it and I don't feel like I made a mistake. I not only had chances at a better job on the railroad, I had a chance to go to work for AT&T. I had a chance to go to work for Standard Oil in Argentina; they paid big money and furnished a home. They had a pretty good deal. They would have took the whole family. Down there, they had a compound where they had the schools and everything. They'd a paid me a hundred dollars a month to live on and the rest of the money went to a bank in California until I came back to the states. But it was kind of like the service, you had to sign up for a three year hitch.

Joan: And you didn't feel like doing that?

Jim: We talked about it, and then it was at a time when on the radio they kept talking about uprisings down there. It was kind of a time of unrest down in Argentina, and I told my wife, "No, we ain't going. I'm satisfied where I'm at. I don't want to put the kids through that." Then AT&T, I went to electronics school in Louisville, Kentucky. I took a leave of absence from the railroad. I graduated out of there and took an exam for NASA. They called me and wanted me to go to Florida when they were building Cape Canaveral. I didn't want to move there, neither. So I turned that down. Then AT&T had a big office over here at Dodge and then their manager came over and wanted me to go there and be a manager at Kansas City. I went down there and they wanted to hire me. It started out paying a little less than what was making on the railroad, but at the end of the first year, it would have been more. But I had to go to New York to school for a year. I didn't want to do that so I just came back to Kansas. I mean, it wasn't a chance I could have made big money. I made big money as far as that goes, more than the average store man on Main Street.

Joan: It was a good reliable job.

Jim: Yes, and that was another thing I didn't want to do. I didn't want to lose my seniority, because when all this was taking place, I was about in the middle of the seniority roster, so I had a lot of places I could go if I wanted to go. I had a little job protection. It all worked out for the best. When they... I wasn't too thrilled that Santa Fe was merging with the B & N. I would have stayed with them, except they called me and said, well, they was giving a buy out if I was wanting an early out. I said, "Well, what are you giving?" They said, "Well, you're two and a half years from old enough to retire. We'll just give you two and a half year's pay." I said, "Where's the money?" The guy laughed and said, "You just made me \$20 bucks!" And I said, "How did I do that?" And he said, "Well, I made a bet, \$20 that you'd take the money instead of working." And I said, "You're right! So send me half of that, too!"

Joan: So what year did you retire?

Jim: '92, after 41 years.

Joan: Forty-one years! I'm going to go back... we've done a lot of interviews, and several of them with Hispanics about what was euphemistically called the "Santa Fe Hilton". That was where the crews lived, the Hispanic crews. Do you have any memories of those in Dodge or here?

Jim: Well, the one here was out on the Y.

Joan: Was it still here when you...

Jim: It was still here. It wasn't being used when I came, but it was still here. Dodge City, when I was working there, there was a whole community of Hispanics. They was just behind the round house at Dodge. Of course, also at that time, Offerle and Satanta and places like that had an agent's house too. The Santa Fe furnished them with a house.

Joan: But didn't live in the agent's house here, did you? You had your own home.

Jim: Yes, we had our own home. There wasn't an agent's house here then; they'd kind of got rid of that before I got enough seniority to... But when I was out at Montezuma, I did live in the agent's house out there. It was a nice six room house.

Joan: Were the crews that worked mainly Hispanics in this area? Were they mixed?

Jim: Well, it worked this way. The extra gang that traveled around and did specific work, the Santa Fe hired the Navajo Tribe. They were all Navajos. But they lived in what's called bunk cars. They were brought in on a train and parked on siding, and they lived in a bunk car. The Navajo gang had a chief, and he was the only one that could speak English. So the foreman of that gang, which was a white guy, would tell the chief and the chief would tell the men. That chief was like a dictator. Them guys didn't dare not do or say anything. Then the local maintenance guys were basically Hispanics, the sections crews and stuff like that. A lot of them couldn't speak English, but most of them could. But I was around them enough that I could understand it. I never could speak it, but I could understand enough to know what they was talking about. And then, it matriculated in to... why there were some white guys that got on a section and as the other deals faded away... we had some good section crews. I mean, them guys would always help you if you needed help. And the Navajo Indians were good guys. The ones that could understand a little English, of course they weren't allowed to run around town. They had to stay in the bunk cars. Some of them that knew a little English, when I was here, would come down to the depot and I'd talk to them. If I needed help on something, they'd help me do it.

Joan: That is interesting! I'd never realized that there were Indians on the section crews.

Jim: They were extra gangs. Just gangs like rail men. That movie you got, I remember them laying that quarter mile of steel. That's all Navajo Indians.

Joan: You recently watched that, can you explain to me what... or should we watch it and maybe explain what is happening?

Jim: Well, basically, yes I can explain it. Basically, it starts out where they are unloading a quarter mile steel.

Joan: This is a track that is a quarter mile long?

Jim: Yes, a section of track. The average section of track back in them days was 33 feet.

Joan: And we're talking 19...

Jim: Now we're talking a quarter of a mile.

Joan: What year are we talking when you say that?

Jim: 1960.

Joan: And now they've got this quarter mile... that's a long piece of...

Jim: It's a long piece of steel. The men in charge of preparing the track, after they lay a quarter mile of steel along the side of the short pieces, then as I remember the film shows... Well, it's been so many years ago...

Joan: We can stop this and watch it for a second if you want.

Jim: Well, I could probably answer your questions better and tell you what each machine is doing...

(Began watching and narrating movie)

Okay, that is them unloading a quarter mile of steel, pulling it off the flat cars. They've got a quarter of a mile of flat cars there. Each car is carrying a certain... they set a pedestal on there that swivels so they can go around curves. That's a picture of the train with the steel on it. That's how long the sections are. This is called a "Burro Crane". It's the one that can pick up the steel and travel on a track. They lay that new rail alongside the track you see there, and they use that Burro Crane to position it and pick it up and put it on after they get the old rail out. They have taken the dolly off the track that they used to pull that rail off the flat cars with. That's the section crew coming home from a day's work. That was their motor cars back in them days. Now this is where we're actually laying and getting ready to lay. That's the bull crane swinging the rail over next to the rail that's it's going to replace. You wouldn't think of steel as bending like that, but he just drives down a track that's in place and flips it over and takes out by the old turntable and comes around the curve on the... you see it looks like a piece of pretzel of steel. That's a 135 pound rail, which was the biggest rail made at the time. I don't know if they make any bigger or not.

Here, they're pulling the spikes off half of the track. They lay one rail at a time. They are pulling the spikes and the anchors that anchor the rail to the tie. That's the anchor puller there.

Joan: So they're taking out the old track. Yes.

There's the old track, they're pulling a section of it off. Then they clean the ballast off between the ties, because in places they had to put new ties in. Here, they're using what is called an "adze." I don't know how to spell that, but it goes along after the ties are in and cuts a groove for the tie plate. This is where they're putting asphalt on the ties there because they shaved them off. There they're lining up the tie plates so they're all in a line on the end of the ties to get ready to accept a quarter of a mile of steel. Then they dragged the line of steel down to the end of the last piece they laid for a joint. Of course, that's a track saw; it takes about 30 minutes to cut through the end of that 135 pound rail. It cuts it so it's completely square. Now here, we've got the track laid and they're going along and putting in the spikes. Then there are spike drivers. They're not the old hammers you used to see the guys use, these are hydraulic spike drivers.

These are rail clamps, they are like open "C" clamps, and they go down beside the ties and clamp around the rail. Those cars there are the bunk cars for the Indians.

Joan: And these are Navajo Indians?

Jim: Yes, these are Navajo Indians.

Joan: Are we looking at Navajo Indians now?

Jim: Yes. These are Navajo. Every once in a while the spikers would miss a place, and a guy'd walk along and put a spike down and they'd have to hand-drive them in. This is getting up close to the end of the job. There is one of the power switches that was on our interlock. You'd throw it by hand. That's the end of the job. That was the first train on after they finished the job.

Joan: What kind of a train is that?

Jim: It's a freight train, and it come through Great Bend and Larned. This other track was the one from St. John.

Joan: Okay, and where they were laying it was right here in town.

Jim: Yes, right through town.

Joan: Those are neat pictures.

Jim: Yes. There was a... the reason it come about with quarter mile steel is the railroads all over the country were trying to eliminate so many broken rails. Seriously, some pieces had a joint every thirty-three feet and were more subject to breakage than the quarter of a mile. So, from Kinsley to Dodge was the highest speed in the United States. It was 120 mile railroad for passenger trains. They decided they would test it at Kinsley to see how it stood up to the weather. Steel expands and retracts considerably in the weather. On a hot summer day, it will expand and on a cold winter day it will retract. The theory was that the quarter of a mile wouldn't expand and retract near as much because there was more steel to get cold or hot. So they decided they would bring that in and they had just built that new railroad bridge. They ran over that and into town as a test strip to see how it held up. We got an "S" curve through the town that puts a lot of pressure on the rails when a train goes through. That's why they put it in and it worked out great. We didn't have any more sun kinks. When that thirty-three feet of railway kinked on a hot day because it expanded out and pushed on the next set of rails and the next set until somewhere the pressure would get too much and it would kink. We'd have to change the rail, or if we didn't catch it, we'd have a derailment, you know.

But anyway, it worked out and now it is all quarter of a mile steel to Dodge and all over. In fact, there's an empty rail train sitting on the siding out here in Kinsley right now, while they put some quarter-mile steel someplace. They stored the cars here; they're empty. So there's a steel gang someplace around here. That was the whole purpose for it, and that plus the fact that when the ice house burned down, there was still thirty-three foot rail down there. It was such a hot fire that it turned them rails into pretzels. They got red-hot. They got rid of the ice-plant then, and then this balled up. You know, it was an afterthought that run through there. But it worked out great. Yes, you can still have broken rails with quarter-mile steel, and you can still have sun-kinks, but they're not as severe. You can go out when the tracks are like that and you can cut the bent piece out and put in a short piece of track. There is places where they've had to do that. But all in all, quarter-mile steel is the only way to go. It stays put and it doesn't expand and retract as much as the short pieces. You'd think it would more, because of the amount of steel in it, but it seems to dissipate the heat and absorb the cold better.

Joan: And Kinsley was the first area they tried that? They hadn't tried it back east or anywhere else?

Jim: Well, they could have on other railroads, but not on the Santa Fe.

Joan: We do have the extremes in weather!

Jim: Yes, and I think they tried it on the UP out through the mountain passes about the same time that the Santa Fe tried.

Joan: By UP you're talking...

Jim: Union Pacific. I think all the railroads were experimenting at the same time. But for Santa Fe, Kinsley was the experimental point. They used that stretch for five or ten years before they ever went on and never had a bit of problem with it.

Joan: Well, on this film, you also had another...you want to talk about the train wreck and how that happened?

Jim: Well, the train wreck in 1960 was caused by a broken rail. We had a local freight train parked on the siding and of course the west yard tracks were full. We had a gang in there that was a bridge and building gang that was checking all the bridges. They were parked on two tracks on the west yard. One track was full of commercial box cars and we had a Red Ball Freight coming out of the west, so we parked the local freight that would switch in at every little town on a siding. The Red Ball Freight was going to pass them here and get out of the road. About 300 feet short of the old viaduct, the rail broke and tilted the train into the other train and cars started piling up.

Joan: So the train that moving was thrown into the train on the siding. And by the "old viaduct", you mean by the overpass there?

Jim: Yes, the old one. If it had been 300 feet farther east, it would have torn that out too, because there is a heck of a kinetic energy whenever something tries to stop that weighs 100 tons. True, the train was only going 30 miles an hour, but they had cars spread out and the extra gang cars were over on two tracks away. It was kind of funny afterwards, but it would scare you at first. It turned the foreman's bunk car over just as he was getting out bed. He said that was a hell of an alarm clock! But he didn't get anything hurt; he got a bruise or two, but that was all.

Joan: So what cause the broken track?

Jim: It is hard to say. It was July, I would say a sun-kink got too big and popped. Or it could have been... I don't remember exactly what... it could have been at a rail-joint too, because that's just little pieces slapped on there and bolted on between the ends to hold them in line.

Joan: So nobody was blamed?

Jim: No. There was no blame for it, it was just one of the things that happened.

Joan: What time of day did it happen?

Jim: It happened about 6:30 in the morning because the foreman was just getting up to go to work when it threw him out of bed. But the only track we had through Kinsley then, which the two trains didn't damage, was the old stock track. They had a crew come in with steam derricks and of those two derricks, one was out of Dodge and one was out of Newton. They had to first come and re-rail those bunk cars and get them out of the road so we could get into the stock track.

Joan: And by "re-rail", you mean set them upright and get them back on the track?

Jim: Pick them up and set them back up on the rail.

Joan: So they were still functioning, they were just tipped over.

Jim: Yes. So then we had the stock track, and that passenger train goes by, and ... that was probably the slowest that they'd ever run. It was about three mile an hour, because that stock track was only 90 pound rail, and it was used to running on a minimum of 110 pound rail. That was the slowest that they'd ever run through Kinsley, but them people got quite a sight, because we was right in the middle of a train wreck. At that time, we were hiring a company out of Scott City, Kansas, that specialized in train wrecks. Other than the equipment picking them cars up and everything, other than the two steam derricks that showed on the film, it was out of Scott City, owned by that company. They were good.

Joan: It looked like it got cleaned up pretty fast.

Jim: Yes. It took about four days, I think. The last thing that happened, they was welding a piece on one car they were going to pull on a track and they set the wheat in it on fire. So the fire department got a chance to make a fire run and come put the fire out. In the last of the film, that's the first train through there after they cleaned up. It was the old mail train, number seven. It was all mail headed for the west coast. It generally went through here at about 60 mile an hour, and it was only running about 20. But it is just things that happened that could have been a lot worse if it had been 300 feet east.

Joan: Or if it had been a passenger train, El Capitan, going 60 miles an hour.

Jim: Yes, or anything. In fact, later on, I'd say about five years later, we did derail the Chief over at Offerle right in front of the depot. Thank goodness, the cars.... They really didn't tip over none. But we had a lot of injured people.

Joan: What caused that one?

Jim: Broken rail.

Joan: Was this fairly common in your career?

Jim: Well, not really. Of course there was all kinds of things. But that was probably the most common one. Once in a while you have brake rigging breaking and falling under the wheels and kicking it off the tracks. Most of the really big wrecks were caused by a broken rail. Of course, we had one guy that rode the track every day inspecting track. But eyeballing it don't stop all... the break ain't seeable. The steel can be broke on the inside and look good on the outside. Then the pressure of the trains, they put tremendous pressure on that rail. It's amazing that there wasn't more of that. I expect, the way they run trains now, without anybody on the rear end and all that stuff. I'm amazed that they don't have trains strung all over the countryside all over the country because of the money-hungry people that don't want to pay somebody to do a job.

All I'm talking, maybe this ought to be off the record... But I want to mention something about this new gymnasium. I'm a little upset about it and a little worried about it. I never talk to nobody, but I often laid at home thinking about it. When I came to Kinsley, there were two Santa Fe water towers there, and there's a big well underneath that. I keep thinking that I don't know what kind of well it was. Was it a drilled well or a dug well? I think about that.

Joan: You don't think the engineers looked into that?

Jim: I'm curious if they did run a geological survey before they ever put it on there. If they didn't, there may be a cavern under there. Them two water towers, when they sold them and we tore them down, they went to a little town up north for their city water and were put back together. I don't know how many thousands of gallons they held, but when I first came here we had two water spouts beside the track and we could water two engines at the same time and in five minutes put over 10,000 gallons of water in them. There was a well house in between them. As near as I can remember, the west side of that round building is over the top of that well. And then you see on T.V., these pictures in California where people's driveways cave in.

Joan: Sinkholes.

Jim: All I can think about is that building sitting there on the outside of an “S” curve with a train derailling there and the minimum weight of any of them cars that go by there is 100 ton at 35 mile an hour. You got a ball game in there and it’s full of people. Them cars would go right through that building. You couldn’t build it strong enough to stop them. The kinetic energy is too much.

Joan: No, you can’t.

Jim: Then add to that, if we get a wet season and that cavern where the water towers was, if they didn’t do something about that, fill it in or something, if it caved in, there goes the west side of the building. Same scenario, people in there. I hope I’m not alive if it ever happens.

Joan: It is awfully close to the tracks.

Jim: Right. These little accidents happen, and it’s going to get damaged. It’s the outside of an “S” curve and centrifugal force is going to send the cars that way. Why they didn’t put it over there where the old hotel was, and just make a parking lot there, I don’t understand.

Joan: They wanted to connect it to the school.

Jim: They could have still connected it. I know towns that’s got school buildings across from each other and four lane highways run through the middle of them. They got upstairs walkways. I’ve been afraid to talk to Jay, because I don’t think Jay would know anything about it. Hopefully, they did. But I don’t think many people realize them two big tanks were there.

Joan: Not in this day and age. We may have some pictures that show it, but I’m not sure.

Jim: I know that when I first came here, my job was to make sure... part of it was to go down there and make sure the tanks were full because you never knew when an engine was going to need water.

Joan: We had one, because you know that one building down there was a little gas station. We’re not sure the gas tanks were ever taken out!

Jim: Yes, they were, I seen them do it.

Joan: Well, that’s good.

Jim: There was a gas station when I came here too.

Joan: Did they take them out recently, or did they take them out when they closed the station?

Jim: Well, it was quite a while ago. The state come out with a law that you couldn’t leave gas tanks. They took them out at the same time they took the old Independence Station tanks out.

Joan: That’s good to know, because we had worried about that. I’m trying to think, do you have any other railroad stories you want to get on the tape? Or anything else from your life that you want to get on the tape?

Jim: I think you probably know more about me now than my wife did. No, I can’t think of anything.

Joan: I'm just curious, and a good way to end it is, railroads declined. They weren't being used, and now they seem to be coming back. What do you see for the future of railroads?

Jim: The reason they declined was that a lot of their revenue came from the U.S. Post Office. All our passenger trains had mail cars on them, and you could mail a letter to the next town and it would be there in 15 minutes, you know. That plus the airlines... the government started subsidizing the airlines and building their airports for them and everything. They wasn't doing nothing for the railroads. Then we lost passenger service. In fact, there at the last, we had quite a bit of passenger traffic but when you stop and think that one of them passenger cars is like a mobile motel. They even had diners and beds and everything in them. The postal department was actually making up the difference between the fares that people paid to ride it and the cost employing those people. I guess you'd say that modernization got to the railroads. On the bad side, was we resisted change. We'd owned transportation for so many years, they just said, "Oh, nobody can take it away from us." Well, then you got UPS and everybody else got their airline service, and it changed. I mean, so-called modernization. It is not really modernization, because if we still had passenger trains, we could move more people and more freight in less time across the United States than they can with the airlines. I don't care how big a airplanes they got, if we get a 20 car passenger train, there isn't an airplane that can haul that many people, plus their belongings and everything else. We're the only country in the world that don't depend on rail service for mass transit. But our forefathers didn't see that and our new fathers ain't got brains enough to see it. It's just...

Joan: Well, a few years back, when gas got so expensive, people were thinking about starting the rails up again, even for personal transportation, but for freight for sure.

Jim: But, one thing leads to another, and people are in a hurry, and an airplane can get them there faster, but not safer, than the railroad. Of course, Japan beat that. They got 200 and some mile an hour trains. They can go clear across Japan in the time it takes us to drive from here to Dodge. But the railroads... of course they couldn't foresee spending that money to build... they had little idea of what was going on. There's talk of people losing money on their stocks. But it amazing to me that they have deteriorated so far, really.

Joan: The thing that is sort of amazing is that a lot of the land that the railroads owned, they no longer own anymore. If they wanted to go back...

Jim: They still own the right-of-way. That part that they haven't give away or sold.

Joan: That's what I mean. A lot of them, they turned into bicycle trails and that sort of thing.

Jim: My house is built on railroad land, but of course you know that big well at Greensburg was built by Santa Fe.

Joan: That big hand-dug one? Because they were trying to get water for the train?

Jim: No, when the government gave grants for land for the railroad to come out here, they wanted to expand west. They had the Rock Island and the Santa Fe vying for that ground. So the government told them (and this is in the history of the area at the Big Well) "Okay, the first railroad to Greensburg gets the land." So that's why the old Rock Island main line and the Santa Fe main line is parallel all the way to Abbeville before the Santa Fe bends off. The Santa Fe went there and dug that well to furnish water for the crews coming out there. They were so sure they was going to be there first. They got beat by

one day. So they had to bend off there at Abbeville and come this way. This was a longer route, but the reason they were trying for it, is that's the shortest route between Chicago and Los Angeles, down through Greensburg and Liberal and that way. The reason we go up north to La Junta... It is amazing, a lot of that stuff I looked up.

I didn't realize until I was down there and reading the history of Greensburg years ago. I would have never guessed that Santa Fe dug that. But according to their records, they did. I'd like to see the railroads come back. I really would. I think it would help the country and I know it would help each individual because it wouldn't cost an arm and a leg to go to Chicago on a passenger train.

When they took them off in the late '60's, at the time, it was \$32 to go one way. You can't even get a boarding pass on an airline for that.

Joan: I'm not sure anymore. You can still get on at Dodge and go to Chicago. I don't know what it costs.

Jim: It's not near what it costs to fly there. It's more than that. Yes, Dodge City Amtrak still... but that train don't belong to any railroad. That belongs to the U.S. Government. But the railroad that it runs over has to sign up to get the service. The government pays lease for going over the railroad tracks. For that railroad to get the money, they have to agree to maintain the track. See, when they first took over, it was kind of funny to me. Amtrak took over and they kept the names, "Chief" and "Super Chief" and "El Cap..." They wouldn't wash the engines or clean the outside of the trains, and finally the Santa Fe took the names away from them. Galesburg and Albuquerque, they were wash outs. They were built right on the main line. As a train come to town, they went through them wash outs. As soon as Amtrak took over, they shut them down and took them out. It cost too much money. But then the Fed went on vacation and had a false alarm and took two helicopters with him, besides all the servicemen. But them washouts cost too much money? Come on.

Joan: Are there any other stories you'd like to add to this tape? Have I worn you out?

Jim: I'll think of one when I get home. But I'm always open to questions. You can always call me and ask.

Joan: All right. I appreciate your spending the time.