

Arthur Hamilton Oral Interview
November 9, 1978

Interviewer: The following is an interview with Arthur Hamilton of Thief River Falls, Minnesota, in which he reminisces about his 50 years as a businessman. [silence 00:00:12]

Art, could you tell me your birthdate please?

Arthur Hamilton: Birthdate was August 12th, 1905.

Interviewer: And what nationality are you?

Arthur Hamilton: Irish.

Interviewer: Entirely Irish?

Arthur Hamilton: Yes.

Interviewer: Your folks were-

Arthur Hamilton: Were entirely Irish.

Interviewer: Were you born in Thief River?

Arthur Hamilton: [inaudible 00:00:49]

Interviewer: Were you raised in an Irish home, Irish culture?

Arthur Hamilton: Well, I don't know. It was real good, I would say. I don't know if it was Irish culture, but we were raised on a farm. I don't know if it was Irish.

Interviewer: Did you work hard as a child with your dad?

Arthur Hamilton: Not too hard. I used to like to go work with the... We'd have our horses in town in the winter. After I got to be about 12, 13 [inaudible 00:01:30], and that's about the time I started working here at the school [inaudible 00:01:34] in the spring. It would be about an hour and a half [inaudible 00:01:34], and I could return home to [inaudible 00:01:34] supertime. So that was three bucks, which was an awful lot of money at the time. I guess that was the extent of work at that age in 1916.

Interviewer: What did your father raise, wheat?

Arthur Hamilton: Wheat, yeah. We had a small farm, a quarter section. I don't know at the time. And we raised wheat and barley and [inaudible 00:02:03]. That was just a [inaudible 00:02:03]. It wasn't as big as all farms [inaudible 00:02:03].

Interviewer: Where did you go to school?

Arthur Hamilton: Langdon. I went to high school there. That was the extent of my education.
[inaudible 00:02:30]

Interviewer: What did you do after high school?

Arthur Hamilton: I started selling washing machines. Well, I took odd jobs first, first in a hardware store and was there about two or three years. Then a fellow came along and said you could make as much in a week selling Maytags as you can make in a month in a hardware store. So that sounds interesting to me. So we bought a Ford pickup and started selling washing machines or I started trying to sell washing machines.

I started the first of April, 1928, and I drove up through the country all during the month of April and didn't make a cent. I was wishing I was back in the hardware store at \$75. The very first day of May, I happened to be in the showroom of my boss. He went to the post office to get the mail, and it was the superintendent of the water of the town of Lincoln. His wife came in and said she'd like to talk about a washing machine. So I thought I'd hurry and get her out of the office before the boss come back because he would sell them right there and then. So I made an appointment with her to wash clothes with her water on Monday morning. So then it was just like shooting fish in a barrel. [inaudible 00:04:16] right there. So during that month of May, I sold 12 washers, and I was making \$25 apiece on them [inaudible 00:04:27].

Interviewer: How much did a washer cost back then?

Arthur Hamilton: It was \$150 for the electric and \$175 for the gas. And after about 15 months there... It must've been more than that because I came to see her in 1929, March of 1929, and I was to be a crew manager for the salesmen we had here. So we had five other salesmen besides myself, and I made \$5 apiece off of each one they sold. The first year, we sold [inaudible 00:05:20] a couple, 300 washers all together. But then along comes '29, The Depression, and a couple of fellows dropped off then.

Finally by the end of '29 or the end of '30, I was the only one left, and I couldn't handle it there alone. So that was the time when we bought the little newsstand for \$200. It was oh, we couldn't make a living with that, so another store building has been built. Go over there and started, complete with magazines and newspapers and [inaudible 00:06:00] and drags along and says, "I'm selling the popcorn machine. The theater has [inaudible 00:06:15]. The popcorn machine is \$200." I didn't have the \$200. We dickered back and forth, so he said he could take \$25 down and he'd give me enough supplies of corn and popping oil so I would get \$50 out of that. If I didn't want the machine afterwards, I'd still be \$25 ahead. That was the best investment we ever made because I had this [inaudible 00:06:41] be getting up, we'd have our popcorn machine running. Most of the time, [inaudible 00:06:47] the theater.

So that went along real good, and it was the time a lady came by at the beginning of the school year, wanted to know if anybody had a typewriter for sale. [inaudible

00:06:52] I said, "Just a minute, be right back." [inaudible 00:07:14] Remington, sold it to her for \$25, and the owner never did get paid for it.

But after that, I went to Minneapolis and I went to the bigger typewriter people like L.C. Smith, [inaudible 00:07:29] and Remington. I didn't have any money, so I wanted the same machines to be. They wouldn't listen to me. In fact, they wouldn't even listen to me if I had the money because they all had representatives in the territory. So I went to the Woodstock Company. That was the typewriter made in Woodstock, Illinois. I talked to that fellow [inaudible 00:08:05]. I guess I asked him for two typewriters. At the time, I said, "I'll either pay you for them in two weeks or bring them back." I sold those two and then I got five, and I [inaudible 00:08:09]. And that's the way I got started in that business.

Then as we started going fairly well with the typewriters, I thought we should add adding machines. So I went down and talked to [inaudible 00:08:31] consigning some [RCL 00:08:32] adding machines to [inaudible 00:08:35]. And we started with secondhand cash registers and did quite well with that. So in the meantime, we had to hire a mechanic to take care of the service, and the typewriter company would send their chief [inaudible 00:09:05]. Getting ahead of my story there. I hired a typewriter mechanic. He worked for the Woodstock Company. So he took care of our typewriters and the service, and after a while the adding machines.

Some months later, we sent a man out to teach him something about the fundamentals of taking care of adding machines and things that possibly would go wrong [inaudible 00:09:41] the cash registers. And so as a result, he became an all-around mechanic, which you couldn't find anywhere else in the cities or specialized in one particular machine.

So along comes the war in '42, and we couldn't get any new machines of any kind. So the young lad that had the other side of the building, he had a little confectionary in there. So he sold me that, which I used for my [inaudible 00:10:22] in case the machine business would fall apart. Well, all he had in there was a Coke cooler and a jukebox, and I didn't want that to [inaudible 00:10:44] 12 hours a day. So we changed that room over into a restaurant which was called The Fountain, and there's still a restaurant called The Fountain in town.

Both Gunther and I worked our tails off from early in the morning till late at night. And one evening one of the other guys in town that was selling clothing came in. We were open in those days from 7:00 in the morning till 12:00 at night, and the stores in town were open on Saturday nights until 10:00 I guess. But this particular fellow came in in October, and I said, "How's your business?" He said, "It just took in \$1000 today." We were struggling our tail off to get \$100. So there was a fellow that went to the Navy, had been in the clothing business. His room was vacant, had been for about six months or more.

So immediately I went over to see his mother and see if I could rent the room. Well, she said she had another person that wanted it too: Stern & Field. They were this small chain of about eight, 10 stores. And he would see her maybe in the

afternoon, I'd see her in the evening. We were seeing which one could get to her. The only reason I got to her is because he wanted to pay \$150 a month's rent with the room heated, and she wanted \$175 a month including the fixtures. He didn't want the fixtures because he had fixtures of his own in his other stores, and I didn't have any fixtures. So I said, "I'll gladly pay you the \$175 a month." So that's how I got into the clothing business, and that was the best move I ever made.

Interviewer: What year was that that he got into-

Arthur Hamilton: 1944.

Interviewer: '44, and you've been in it every since. Can you remember World War I as a child at all?

Arthur Hamilton: Yes, yeah. [inaudible 00:13:05] about 14.

Interviewer: You were still in Langdon then, right?

Arthur Hamilton: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was it like around Langdon during the war? I know a lot of people go.

Arthur Hamilton: Yeah, there was two of my brothers that were [inaudible 00:13:19] many, many brothers at first. In fact, they used to run a train-up from... They had a small company there in Langdon for the summer, and they ran train-ups and ran parks to move the company on down into [inaudible 00:13:39]. But it was just a very quiet and peaceful town, I would say. Other than that, I don't [inaudible 00:13:51].

Interviewer: What was it like around this area during the '20s with the bootlegging and the speakeasies and things like that?

Arthur Hamilton: Well, I don't remember any bootlegging being done at Langdon, but when we came over here, there were speakeasies and [inaudible 00:15:02] supposed to get their moonshine. I don't know where it was, but in those days, I didn't drink so I didn't have too much problem with it. I took my first drink when I was 24 years old, and that was the biggest [inaudible 00:15:03] Standard Oil Station. And that was [inaudible 00:15:03] experience. So speakeasy [inaudible 00:15:03]. As I say, I didn't have anything in common with them, so I didn't [inaudible 00:15:03].

Interviewer: What was it like being a businessman during the '30s, during The Depression in Thief River Falls?

Arthur Hamilton: Well, in the '30s, it was a really rough time. [inaudible 00:15:08] we'd never have made it if we just didn't... You couldn't make enough to get very far. These typewriters that we sold and the other machines that we sold, it was expensive [inaudible 00:15:08]. So we didn't do too bad. However, I sold it to my mechanic, the business [inaudible 00:15:08]. I sold it to my mechanic for \$10,500, and I had six trucks. He was the only one who wanted the trucks, so I said [inaudible 00:16:05]

tobacco trucks [inaudible 00:16:09].

Interviewer: You had that big a fleet of trucks during The Depression?

Arthur Hamilton: Which was a mistake because I didn't have that much inventory when I needed something compared to [inaudible 00:16:23] decent equipment in his truck. So I expanded too fast, and that's another reason I didn't do too well. [inaudible 00:16:35] So the guy I sold it to, I said, "Whatever you do, stick down to one or two trucks." And he didn't do that. And he being the mechanic, we used to figure taking in \$300 a month, that was good. And after he took it over, he took it to \$2300 the first couple months because new machinery [inaudible 00:17:03]. So he made a barrel of money. In fact, he's a millionaire now [inaudible 00:17:05] stocks and [inaudible 00:17:10]. Obviously I kind of got off the track.

But we were there this fall out visiting his sister and her daughter. So [inaudible 00:17:22] her daughter. He went there eight years ago and bought a house for \$58,000 completely furnished. And he said now he just turned down \$200,000 for the house, so he has done real well. I don't know that I've had him as a mechanic at the time because I never would've gotten along because as I say, he eventually learned how to take care of three types of machinery: the adding machines, cash registers and typewriters. That's of course probably-

Interviewer: What year did you say that you got into the clothing business?

Arthur Hamilton: 1944.

Interviewer: '44. Now was it hard to get clothing and things during the war? Were you rationed?

Arthur Hamilton: Yeah, it was hard to get things, and it was a blessing that it was hard to get them because I perhaps wouldn't have survived in that either if there hadn't been any merchandise, but you could only get so much. These salesmen would load you up. I remember one instance, the guy sold me 50 dozen athletic shoes. Well, the common thing to do was to get some [inaudible 00:18:56]. So I said, "Well now how many dozen when I get the briefs?" "Oh, I don't have any briefs," he says. So I learned a lesson from that guy, and then I was talking about some other shirts. Well, all he had were Salem. He had Marlboro shirts, but the only shirts he would sell me would be wool shirts because he made a lot more money on it.

Well, there was a customer of his in the salesroom at the time who felt sorry for me, the merchant Marshall. He said, "I've got some shirts that are not new but they're still in packages. Some are a little shop worn. I can let you have seven, eight dozen of those if you want them." He said, "If you can't sell them, I'll take them back." [inaudible 00:19:49] So those went out like hotcakes. And overalls, for instance, they'd kiss you if you'd had overalls for \$2. Now they're \$20, \$25. So it was a blessing that there was a shortage because you could sell it, and consumers needed to get it.

I remember once Duluth picked up 45 wool jackets, and at that time, I had hired a

good clothing man from [inaudible 00:20:23]. And he saw those 45 jackets come in, and he says, "Well, we might sell them under these conditions, but normally you'd have enough for four years." And he was right. So as far as merchandise, it was a blessing in disguise for me. Most everybody [inaudible 00:20:51] careful buyers, lower over buying [inaudible 00:20:57]. Everything was good.

And well, we just had to continue to increase our stock, and in 1949, our lease went up. So we bought a lot across the street and built a building on it [inaudible 00:21:19]. That was 1949, Labor Day. So we had our own building now, and I'm about ready to retire. We've had oh, in 1950, people wanting to buy it. Some were teachers, some were this, that and the other thing. But I think the teachers could make a lot more in teaching than you can in the clothing business.

Interviewer: Was there a lot of merchants in Thief River during The Depression that just had to quit, they couldn't make it? Same way during the war years?

Arthur Hamilton: I don't remember that there were people that had to quit. Their wants weren't very great, so they didn't require too much, and most times it was a family-owned store. So they could adjust their overhead to their income. I don't recall of any businesses going out in Thief River or towns near. I don't think we made very much money, but we were able to [inaudible 00:22:47].

Interviewer: How did the farmers have it in the area around that time?

Arthur Hamilton: Yeah, they had it rough, I suppose, but they were still farming mostly with horses. So I don't suppose they had it any worse than the rest of us. We learned to get along with what we had and [inaudible 00:23:10] most everybody has a car, and these were 10% down and took us 48 months to pay for it. So it was worn out by the time we got to pay for it. In those days, they didn't buy it, I don't think, unless they could [inaudible 00:23:24].

Interviewer: Times change, huh?

Arthur Hamilton: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you vote for Franklin Roosevelt?

Arthur Hamilton: Yes. I was real pleased with him [inaudible 00:23:58]. We were in Fargo at the time down there [inaudible 00:24:06] auditor was down there that done our work. We happened to be in his office at the time that it come over the radio that Franklin died. Of course, it was real sad because he really brought us out of The Depression. He said we had nothing to fear but fear itself, and the nice thing about that was in those days, the papers and the radio stations were patriotic enough to go along with them. And everybody got behind the wheel and pushed. Today there's no patriotism that I can see. The day after our president outlined a program for us to [inaudible 00:24:58] cut back and so forth, next morning, The Tribune, the headline was they were sure it wouldn't work. They hadn't even tried it. So that's the thing that's difficult for me for the people that are trying today to get support and

patriotism to at least [inaudible 00:25:17].

Interviewer: Are you saying this wouldn't happen back in the '30s, that Roosevelt [crosstalk 00:25:23]-

Arthur Hamilton: No, because we were right down in a depression, and we had no way to go but up. So we all better get busy on it and give him the support, and that makes a lot of difference.

Interviewer: Were you a member of NRA when it came out?

Arthur Hamilton: NRA, that was the-

Interviewer: National Recovery with the blue eagle.

Arthur Hamilton: Yeah, yeah. Compulsory, was it not?

Interviewer: I don't know for sure. It was later declared unconstitutional.

Arthur Hamilton: I guess so. Yeah, I believe [inaudible 00:25:58].

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you remember where you were when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor?

Arthur Hamilton: Yeah, I was popping popcorn in front of the newsstand on Sunday afternoon. We were all shook up about it at first. That's where I was [inaudible 00:26:08]. What year was that?

Interviewer: '41.

Arthur Hamilton: '41, yeah. '42 we moved over to the other place. We were there two years, and then in '44 we went to the [inaudible 00:26:44], decided-

Interviewer: What years for you have been the best in the clothing business?

Arthur Hamilton: They've all been good. I've enjoyed it more than any other business I've ever been in. The nice thing about the clothing business over any other retail business, the customer has two strikes on him when he comes through the door because as a rule, they come in to ask for something whereas in specialty selling like office machines or the type, you have to create a desire for it, then find out if he has the money to pay for it. It's a lot tougher, so I've thought this has been a holiday for me these 30 years in the clothing business. [inaudible 00:27:22] to treat the customer right and do business and get my honest value of course and give the customer an honest value, which is part of treating them right. So I've enjoyed every minute of it. I've never had any [inaudible 00:27:45]. The only reason [inaudible 00:27:45] just buying with other extra help that we had later in the years.

Interviewer: Well, thanks a lot.

Arthur Hamilton: Yeah.