

Issaquah History Museums 2007.12.1
Oral History Interview with Lee Hepler
April 24, 1979

Narrator: Lee Hepler
Date: April 24, 1979
Interviewed By: Terri Kenyon

Side A [Accession # 2007.12.1]

LEE HELPLER: ... speaking to a skinny girl. I love you, you are so good! I am self-conscious about having myself recorded. But I want to tell you all about Issaquah.

TERRI KENYON. [Laughing] OK, this is Terri Kenyon. It's the 24th of April [1979] and I'm talking with Lee Hepler.

How about – I know you ran the Ford agency. Can you tell me about that?

LH: Well, when I come back out of World War I, which was only a few – because of my age, I only had a short time in which to serve – I had a chum who worked for the Ford Motor Company, and he was chief clerk, and that's bookkeeping.¹

So you could get an agency out here in Issaquah from ... I can't give you his name right now ...

TK: That's OK.

LH: ... who already had the agency, but wanted to get out of it and get down in California with the oil discoveries down there. So, we come out and took a look at the country. And he wanted me to go in with him, so finally got enough money together to take it on.

So, it included Hobart, North Bend, Snoqualmie, and on around Lake Sammamish and over into Redmond, up on the upper land now, which is Pine Lake, Beaver Lake.

I don't like to publicize or have on the tape how I happened to be alone.

¹ Leon Earl Case was an accountant for the Ford Company in 1917; by 1920, he and Lee Hepler were operating Case & Hepler in Issaquah. By 1930, Hepler ran the business and Case had moved his family to Seattle, where he worked for a confectionary.

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TK: Do you want me to stop the tape?

LH: Oh ... no, not necessarily, but I can give a general way for you.

TK: OK.

LH: Uhh ... I guess I forget the date that I took over, but we were financed by a bank over in West Seattle that I knew the owner, and was someone that I had most of the financial responsibility with that. I worked in the shop with the mechanics and we made Carl Cedarholm, who was the father of our now-fireman by the name Cedarholm, the owner as someone that I had most of the financial responsibility with that.

And I designed, for the City of Issaquah, a fire truck that would be able to go into places that were hard to get out and so on, and that carried a little water or tanks of water and so on, and ran with hoses, and it was all automatic so that power came off of what they called the power train or the ... oh ... transmission line.

I really don't know much about how to talk about the business now. It's been a long, long time. On my 60th birthday, I sold out to what was known as the Foothills Motors.

TK: Yeah.

LH: And that is located now at Hilltop, over near Bellevue. Do you know where that is? OK. And they've had three different people running it. The first one was a Ford Motor Company man himself, and he took it over from me. And then, he sold out to a man and his wife. And this man run it for several years and finally died, and his wife tried it. And frankly, I don't know who the owner is now.

TK: OK.

LH: It seems there have been changes in the automobile business from the time we took over, which was in the Model T days.

TK: What was that like? I mean, how has it changed?

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LH: Well, you know what an automatic transmission is now?

TK: I know what one is.

LH: Do you know that it's run by bands, and then from the band to the drive direct. Do you understand that?

TK: Yeah.

LH: OK. Well, a Model T had three pedals instead of gear shifts out here [inaudible]. And we pushed down on our foot and that closed the band on the drum, which then made some gears work inside, which reduced it, increased the power to the rear wheels, see. And then after we'd started it, we'd [inaudible] our foot off of that pedal, and then it was driven directly from the motor to the rear end, see, according to what you call [inaudible]. Now, if you wanted to put it into reverse and back up, you had to put the push pedal in neutral that was halfway between, and then press on the center pedal, and that backed you up. So you were in a neutral position here, but reversed going backwards.

TK: Yeah.

LH: And then on the far side of that was the brake. It's the same now. So that was three bands that were on the drums that rotated what we called the planetary system. In other words, taken somewhat from the Earth's movement around the sun and what have you.

And then, we finally – Henry Ford, the owner and the inventor of all of this, died about the time when they come out with a Model A, they called it. And Model A was a gearshift transmission ...

TK: Standard.

LH: ... which was a gearshift instead of planetary. And that went on for several years. There was a few later Model Ts. And the one thing that you probably won't think was possible, to see today's price of automobiles, and I sold many Model Ts for \$365.

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TK: I wish that's what it cost. [laughter]

LH: So that's how Ford finally got his big deal, by telling the public that he would give them back, uh, I forget now, whether it was \$300 or so if you sold so many cars. And he [inaudible] that number and he reversed to the people the part that they had overpaid [inaudible].

Then, of course, when it come to the Model A, times were all a-changing, too. We had a ... transmission deal, what I already told you. And from there, it became more practical than the Model T. So many people couldn't [chuckles] adjust their feet to these pedals, and do things that they would like to do. However, it was the start of entire automobile business.

There was a company that built [inaudible] cars. And they built a business in Detroit that still says on it [inaudible]. It belongs to the General Motor Company now.

TK: How did Issaquah react to a dealership coming in that was going to sell cars? It just seems to me like maybe they wouldn't, maybe the town wouldn't really want cars, so many cars.

LH: You mean you'd like to know how cars were purchased from Ford?

TK: Well, in Issaquah, how did, yeah, how were they purchased, and did people react well to having cars running around?

LH: I don't quite understand you.

TK: OK, how did ... [chuckles] ...

LH: Go ahead.

TK: I suppose I'm trying to say was business good, was it lucrative to sell cars in Issaquah?

LH: You want to know how the cars were distributed to dealers, right?

TK: Yeah.

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LH: Well, they were distributed to dealers on a cash basis. At one time, we paid for them before they were ever built, and they were shipped to what was Ford, let's see ... Lake Union ... Fairmont ... Fairview? Fairview. That now, I think, is full of [paint?], if I'm not mistaken. Then they built a building way down on First Avenue South, and that building was used for the cars coming in by, oh, they come in by boxcar from the East where they were manufactured, of course, from Detroit. And then they were – they had a distributing company that they contracted out to deliver these cars to the door of the dealer. Now, this was later on, with the Model T – er, Model A, I should say.

Now, I'll get back to the Model T for just a moment, and that is that we used to have to buy chassis from the Ford Motor Company, and those were delivered down in Seattle. And you wanted to buy that to have a cab and a body put on, which has to be made by hand.

And one of them was sold here in Issaquah to a party that run a chicken ranch up here and delivered eggs in Seattle. I had the pleasure of selling that. And those people are all gone now, except ... well, I'll stand by that one. I'm quite sure that ... it would be of no value now.

But anyway, the only way that you could get it out here was to set on the gas tank, which was up in the front just over where the front seat would be. Understand?

TK: Yeah.

LH: So it rained and rained [chuckles] and we had some of those experiences. Well, I think that's enough for that.

TK: What about your mayorship?

LH: My what?

TK: When you were a mayor?

LH: Oh, when I was a mayor?

TK: What was that like?

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LH: Well, it was quite an experience to have experienced it. I think every citizen should try at some time to be on the council or a mayor. It just so happened I was mayor when we had sidewalks made of wood, and no grade on the street. So part of the time, we were finding people were complaining, and some suits were talked about but never happened. And it was at this particular time women were wearing spike-heeled shoes, and when they'd be walking on this, the cracks were big enough to allow the heel to go through. So that became quite a problem.

So, the thing is, that in looking at the town, the Council and myself felt that this area, to the east, was the ideal place to ask the people to put in concrete sidewalks. And I hired a [inaudible] from Seattle, which I'd known for many years. He drew the plans for the city, and I'm sure that they – people had preserved the records from the old City Hall.

Do you know where the old City Hall was? Do you remember?

TK: No.

LH: Oh, you're too young for that. You know where the people now have sort of a ... oh, what do I want to say? ... You know where the old City Hall was, over on Andrews Street down by the railroad tracks?

TK: Yeah, I think so.

LH: It's now ... what do I want to say? ... It's ... the old relics anyway ...

TK: The Historical Society?

LH: No, there's a dump train that packed coal out along the dump and there's some old books there and so on. Well, it's about the second house east of the railroad track on Andrews Street, and the south side.

TK: OK.

LH: And so that was the City Hall until this City Hall was built in the early days. And it was built by the Council at the time, I was still a councilman and not the mayor. My only problem as mayor was the sidewalks.

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And then, there was a Mrs.[Stella May] Alexander who lived in town. She lived on the corner of ... maybe I should tell you first that this used to be the main highway, which is now east ... [pause] ...

TK: Well, anyway, this Mrs. Andrews?

LH: I'm trying to think of what the name of this street is [chuckles] and I should know.

TK: That's all right.

LH: OK, it's Sunset Highway, and the original highway from Renton to North Bend, this street. Now, of course, it's moved over to [I]-90 and farther north.

TK: Uh-huh.

LH: She lived down ... Mrs. Alexander lived two blocks over from the school now. What is that? Second Avenue?

TK: Yes.

LH: Second Avenue and [inaudible] would be, because everything south of Sunset here is named after pioneers. The other side of Sunset Avenue is named after trees, so there's Alder and so on, on the north side.

TK: Uh-huh.

LH: One of the things that they don't seem to have, and the City doesn't seem to understand, on the map, when you've filled in all these streets and leveled them off and poured the concrete, that they was one foot left between the inside of the sidewalk and the property line that was left there for meters to be put in. If you go up and down the street, you'll still find meters out in the driveways and sloping off the sides and those kinds of things.

Mr. [Laurence J.] Harris was the one who run a coal mine over here between here and Coalfield, and it was done during his administration that they built a City Hall, which has now been added on to several different times. It's still on Sunset Way in front of the library and the post office [inaudible].

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Well, Mrs. Alexander was a wild, wild woman, and she became mayor. She left ... well, the man who used to run the streets, Charlie McQuade, hit him over the head with a chair, and destroyed minutes of former meetings and so on. She was known as publicity all over the United States. That's one of the names that Issaquah got as far back as New York. [chuckles]

And she moved to Renton later on. The fact of the matter was she sued everybody that was in the City Government, including myself, at that time for \$10,000. And we had to all go to court over that, and that was when she found out that she was wrong instead of us.

TK: Why did she sue?

LH: Oh ... she didn't get along very well [chuckles] with her people, like the councilmen and her people that worked for her, like this Charlie McQuade that I talked about. Oh, just anything but being a businessperson.

She moved to Renton and ran a rooming house there. And she tried for the Legislature from Renton, but failed after all the publicity that continued to follow her around.

OK, I think I've reminisced on that.

TK: OK. What years were you mayor?

LH: Huh?

TK: What years were you in office?

LH: 1919 ... oh, let me see, what year was I in? No, I was in office during the Depression of 1929 and 1930 and [19]31. At that particular time, people just couldn't get a job. Things were really bad. So, some of the people around the town didn't have anything to eat or otherwise.

The City didn't have too much money, but we started in and we built a large reservoir up at the end of the street, which took water off the creeks and the springs that run out of Lake Tradition, and you know more about that.

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TK: Yeah.

LH: We're back in your class now.

TK: I'm up there a lot.

LH: So, we needed the cooperation of the man that owned the theater at this time. We talked about it would cost people so much money and the ... what do you call it? ... anyway, good money [inaudible], see. And then they had to bring some kind of either canned good or vegetable or potatoes or what have you and stack them up at the front end of the same theater that they are now trying to open up again.

So then they moved the foodstuff over to the basement of City Hall. And my wife at that time would go down there at a certain time in the middle of the afternoon, and the wives of these men that we had digging this big reservoir up there would get just a small amount of money, and the wives could come to the City Hall and get as much food as needed for the family, depending on how many was in it. So that's how we got through 1930 and [19]31 along in there.

TK: How about Prohibition? How did that fit Issaquah?

LH: Prohibition? Well, you want to know where the stills were put, huh?

TK: That would be nice! [laughter]

LH: Is that what you want?

TK: I'd like to know about Prohibition, how it affected Issaquah.

LH: Well, you see where this Seventh-Day Adventist Church is now? And the next house to it?

TK: Yeah.

LH: And then across the alley, and then the next house up? Well, that was a millionaire bootlegger.

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TK: [Laughing]

LH: And I had a niece that came out from the East, and she got the biggest kick out of watching [Sheriff Matt] Starwich and his deputy trying to chase this fellow down, see. And they finally got him over here, which is now ... oh, it was where the County had its shops, which is now a residency.

And the still was actually up on 15 Creek, and 15 Creek was really loaded with all kinds of briars and everything. It's pretty hard, unless you know how to get up there. Well, there was a fellow who ... relatives, I'd better not say. I'd better be careful.

TK: [Laughing]

LH: But I will. There was ... where we have a junkyard up on the Hobart Road?

TK: Yes.

LH: The man that run that – and I'm not going to tell you his name –

TK: OK.

LH: His uncle used to furnish sugar by the ton for these fellows. Some of them are still around here, and the rest of them are scattered around Maple Valley but [End of Side A]

Side B [Accession # 2007.12.1]

Starwich had a deputy that used to come out and collect hush money from all the places that served liquor or where they could buy liquor from. But this man I speak of – and again, I don't think you want to advertise this – lived as a bachelor, and he had lots of good money. And the Seventh-Day Adventists bought this property from [inaudible]. He was probably the best bootlegger there was around town.

Across the street from my garage, there was the Andy Wold building, and they also had a feed store there. And he used to stand on the corner of Sunset Way and Front Street, and somebody would come up to him and want to buy a pint or a quart or whatever, and he'd collect the money. And then,

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he'd tell them where it was at but he wouldn't go and get it. But he had money.

Then he finally – they picked him up real often. He was taken to Seattle and booked in King County and back out here on the next stage. He always managed to get his ... oh, get some money for bail money and never go back. So that's the way the bootlegging deal was done. Most of them – oh, we had another man up on Vaughan's Hill, which is out on the right-hand side going to Fall City ...

TK: Yeah, that's where I live.

LH: ... by the over road. Well, he used to make pretty good stuff. And then we had a man who was on the road between Renton and ... let me see ... between Renton ... between Fall City and on down north. And he was called the Frenchman. He had the reputation of having the finest liquor there was in the country. He served all the professors that needed liquor at the University of Washington. And sold it by the gallon or by the keg.

TK: *Goodness!*

LH: And he was a real good ... he really [knew] how to make it. He gave it up, of course. He had to because of Prohibition.

I think that's enough about Prohibition.

TK: OK. Well, that's just [laughing] about all I needed. [The remainder of Side B is blank]

END