

SAN PIERRE REVITALIZATION PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY

ST: Sarah Tannehill, interviewer

EK: Ed Kesl, interviewee

ST This is Sarah Tannehill, and it's the 27th of July 2006. I'm interviewing Ed Kesl for the San Pierre Revitalization Project. I'm in Bass Lake in the home of Del Paulsen, and we can go ahead and begin now. Can you begin by giving me your full name and the full names of your parents?

EK My name is Edward Robert Kesl, Jr. and my mother's name was Clara; my father's name was Edward, Sr.

ST Okay. And can I ask your age?

EK I'm going to be 70 on Saturday, July 29th 1936 is my birthday.

ST Okay, thank you...and brothers and sisters? And where you fell in that lineup?

EK I was the oldest of four. My sister, Carol was two years younger; and my brother, George was nine years younger; and my sister, Donna was seventeen years younger... so, a pretty good spread.

ST And so there were four of you? Four all together... and where were you born?

EK I was born in Oak Park, Illinois, and we lived in Elmwood Park, Illinois, which is a western suburb, until I was about seven years old. Then we made the big move to San Pierre.

ST Oh, that was a big move.

EK I had a problem with bronchitis when I was a child, and the doctor said we should move to a warmer, drier climate. Now how my father decided San Pierre was a warmer, drier climate, I have no idea! But we moved to San Pierre when I was in second grade; and we lived actually south of the railroad tracks, so at the time we moved there was a small farm – it was like 14 acres; chicken coops and barns and plants and bushes and everything... but we had no electricity! No plumbing! A hand pump in the house, and it was a really... quite a different scenario than Elmwood Park.

ST *I would say... how did you all adjust to that?*

EK I really don't remember [laughter], but I know it was tough going to the outhouse for the first year or two.

ST *Oh yeah. It must have been quite an adjustment for your parents, too.*

EK Right. I don't know how my mother did it, because she was always from the city – Cicero and Chicago. It had to really be tough, I suppose, reading by a kerosene lamp wasn't the easiest thing in the world. No electricity, no washing machine, wood stove in the kitchen... it had to be really tough. Looking back, I really feel sorry for her; it was a tough road.

Well, we got electricity in a year or two because there was a pretty good charge to get the pole over the railroad tracks, 'cause they had to put a high pole over there. So nobody in that area across the tracks – there were, like, three houses – nobody had electricity over there.

ST *Was that the farm that was on 10?*

EK No, this little farm was just south and west of downtown San Pierre, maybe just a half a mile or so... just across the... the New York Central ran east and west; the Monon railroad ran north and south, and we were just south of the New York Central, and it would have been west of 421. So, no electricity... matter of fact, your grandparents lived in our house for about a year.

ST The Beckers. I was thinking that it was a place that they lived – and I probably just had it confused all these years – that was on 10. But that must have been a different house.

EK Right. Ten would have been, maybe, a mile or two farther south... there was a big woods behind us, and it was on the other side of the woods.

ST So you must have been born in a hospital then in Chicago.

EK Right, I was born in Oak Park Hospital.

ST And what was your ethnic background? Were your parents or grandparents immigrants?

EK No, they were both born in Chicago area and of European descent. My mother was Polish and my father was Czechoslovakian.

ST How long were you a resident of San Pierre then?

EK I was a resident from the second grade until I graduated, which was about 16 years, I would say. Then I went to... I volunteered for the Army as soon as I graduated from high school... I had to wait until October, until I could turn 18. And then my buddy and I, Roger Loomis, we both went together, and we went down to Fort Smith, Camp Chaffee, Arkansas.

ST What year would that have been?

EK That was in 1954 – October of '54 when we went into the military.

ST So Korea was going on.

EK Yeah, it was just at the end of the Korean War. We finished our basic training, and then I went into what was called Fire Direction Control – how to control the Howitzers – and I got pneumonia for about a week, and was supposed to go to Korea; and they changed... after I got out of the hospital they changed my orders and sent me to Fairbanks, Alaska – where I spent about 12 months up there.

ST *Wow. How was that?*

EK It was pretty chilly. I got a little card that says I'm a member of the 50 Below Zero Club. It was like 50 degrees below zero for like 30 days. If you didn't wear the right equipment you were...

ST ... *dead meat. Can you talk about any memories you have of growing up in San Pierre – your experiences in town.*

EK Being a small town, there were only three or four real playmates I had. We were all very close. It was Ray Hine, Larry Hine, Bill Hine, Mick Eckert, Don Weninger... if we could get half a dozen guys together to play softball or baseball or something, we were lucky. We spent a lot of time just kind of bumming around. We'd go out to the gravel pits and the Pearson's and go swimming, and we really didn't have a whole lot of supervision, and so I'm surprised we didn't drown! [laughter] We were not expert swimmers! We'd ride out bicycles out there, and my dad would take us fishing quite a bit to the gravel pits around there.

I had a good buddy, Irv Teske – he lived in a trailer. He was a real hunter, fisherman... never worked much in his whole life. He just hunted, fished and trapped. And he took me hunting and fishing and really taught me a lot about the outdoors... a good experience for a couple of summers there.

ST *I don't want to interrupt, but I'm glad you mentioned him, because he was a person who lived very close to my family when my dad built the house east of 421, and Teske was one of our neighbors. And the other kids and I would sometimes go by the trailer and talk to him, and he might have been... he might have just caught some squirrel or something [laughter]. I mean, I can even remember being inside the trailer, and he was frying fish that he had caught...*

EK Yeah, he was a great outdoorsman. We would put the boat into the Kankakee River up by State Road 8, and we'd float all the way down to San Pierre, and we'd put a lot of lines in the Kankakee, and we'd go out and catch minnows, and we'd go 'coon hunting, and

squirrel hunting, and he could really cook it up, too. He was really kind of an expert with the grill.

ST Where was he from?

EK He was from San Pierre. His sister was Mrs. Scammerhorn, and she just died about two years ago. She was like 100... 101. She was the only one of her class at the alumni for... 70 years, maybe? So that was his sister. They lived out southeast of San Pierre. He used to take his wash out there about every two or three weeks, and she would do it for him. He was a sharpshooter. We used to go to trapshoots and stuff like that, and he'd win prizes of all sorts... turkeys and shotguns and... you name it... money!

ST [laughter] He lived by his wits... and skill!

EK He did! He used to have me throw little bottles up in the air, and he'd pick 'em off with his .22. But then he got older, and he started to lose his sight.

ST Well he must have been quite a bit older than you.

EK Oh yeah. He was like in his 40s... probably close to 45, or something like that.

ST Yeah. Because my memory of him was as a much older man... I was just a child. But if you were a teenager...

EK No, I was probably 10, 12 years old. I was pretty young.

ST So he really was older; it isn't just that I was a kid.

EK No, he was like a father figure, actually. I think my father was a little jealous of him, 'cause he was always taking me out hunting and my dad had to go to work, you know.

ST He was one of those guys who worked!

EK Right.

ST Well, thank you for sharing that about him. And what did your parents do for a living? What did your dad do?

EK My father – when we lived in Chicago – worked downtown in a rubber stamp company. He was a rubber stamp maker. He had a pretty good job. When we moved to San Pierre he tried several things, like he worked at the nursery south of San Pierre. Then he worked at the railroad – the New York Central. And he ended up finally... he even tried working for a farmer in La Crosse for about a year. That's when we moved to La Crosse, and your grandparents moved into our house. Then he finally ended up at Allis-Chalmers in La Porte. He was a machinist there, and he worked there for about 23 years before he retired at... 62, I believe. And my mother worked at the Little Company of Mary Hospital in the kitchen for several years. It wasn't too far... she could actually walk right across the highway. She didn't drive, so if my dad wasn't home she had not much choice.

ST Yeah, I guess a number of women didn't drive... of that era... of that age.

EK That's right. There really weren't too many that drove that I can recall.

ST I don't think my grandmothers, either of them, drove.

EK No.

ST And what sort of work have you done in your life?

EK The reason I volunteered for the Army was to get the GI Bill, 'cause I couldn't afford to go to college on my own. So I got out of the service in August of '56, and my sister Carol and I both went to IU at the same time. She had just graduated. So I bought a car, a '54 Ford, and we went down to IU, and I graduated in 1960 with a B.S. degree in marketing. And then I went up to Chicago and started interviewing, 'cause there really weren't many opportunities around San Pierre.

So I got a job with the insurance company – Amica, A-M-I-C-A, Mutual Insurance Company. They were right downtown in Chicago, and I was an adjuster, handling automobile claims and property, homeowner claims, stuff like that. Then I worked my

way up to supervisory position, and eventually became the claims manager. We moved out to Oak Brook, then we moved out to Lisle. I had gotten married in 1961, and we were living in South Holland, Illinois. So the drive to work kept getting longer and longer. So I worked for Amica for 35 years – same company – which is kind of unusual these days.

So then I retired in 1995, and in the meantime I had refereed... I was always involved in sports in San Pierre. I played basketball, and softball, and track, and I was refereeing in basketball for about 33 years. And I umpired baseball and softball... kind of a hobby – kept me busy.

ST And so your involvement in athletics seems like it's been really a good thing for your health. I mean some people that I know who've been involved in sports all their lives have some problems now... with joints and things.

EK No, I've been pretty lucky. I haven't had any serious injuries... I stay pretty active with walking and biking, and stuff like that.

ST And I heard you play golf?

EK I play golf, and we do a lot of... Bass Lake here, we do a lot of boating and sailing, and... I haven't done any waterskiing this year, but I plan to try it on Saturday, so I can say I skied at 70!

I met my wife... my friend, Jim Zelinka, he had about a 14-foot boat, so we came out to Bass Lake, and we were riding around in his boat, and we didn't have a... you had to have a ski watch in the boat. So we saw these two girls in a canoe, and we asked them if they wanted to go for a ride, and they said, "Oh, sure!" So we went skiing, and then we asked the girls out that night, and I eventually ended up marrying this one girl. Her family owned this cottage at Bass Lake, which we still have.

ST Can we say this girl's name?

EK Her name is Mary Lou, and her maiden name was Zriny – Z-R-I-N-Y. And she has two brothers and they live in Chicago.

ST So that's where her family is from?

EK Right, her family is from Chicago, and her grandparents and everybody came out here on the weekends. And then we had two children; Christine, who lives in Miami, and Charles – we call him Chuck – he lives in New York City.

ST And what does he do there?

EK He runs a computer department for the New School in downtown Manhattan. He wanted to be into the movie making business. He got a master's in broadcast journalism, and this school where he runs the computer department is quite a school for actors, video, movie makers and stuff, so I think he's still involved.

ST He found his niche.

EK Right. And Christine got a master's at Illinois in Industrial and Labor Relations, and she's in human resources. Her last position now, she's the vice president for DHL Express down in Fort Lauderdale.

ST So if I were to ask you about your time in San Pierre, what did you most like about it?

*EK I most liked the small size of the high school, because everybody got a chance to participate. I'm only like 5' 6", so I had to try twice as hard as all of these big guys that are 6', playing basketball, particularly. So I was very fortunate. We had a very good coach, George Miller, and he really gave me every opportunity. And I tried my best, and by senior year I was captain of the basketball team, and we had a good record. We won the Kankakee Valley Tournament. My sister was a cheerleader, so we had it all covered!
[laughter]*

ST [laughter] That's great! The skill and the support, all right there in one family.

EK Right! And other than the sports and the high school, everybody was so friendly; everybody got along real well. I seemed to know everybody because I had a paper route

for awhile, and I would go to all four corners of the city on my bike, you know, trying to get these papers delivered every afternoon. The South Bend Tribune, and, I think the Chicago Daily News. And there was plenty of opportunities for people to work, if you wanted to. I weeded peppermint for Frank Cervenka for awhile. Worked for Henry Becker at his gas station. Worked for Pearson, he had the Standard station at the south end of town. Used to have free shows there on Saturday night. I used to go collect all the money from the businesses to pay for the free show.

ST Where were the free shows?

EK The free show was at the softball field there. They put the screen up against the backstop, and everybody just drove in and had like a drive-in movie every Saturday night.

ST What years was that going on?

EK I would say it had to be right in the early '50s... maybe 1950, somewhere around there.

ST And did it go on for a long time?

EK It went on for a couple of summers, as I recall, collecting the money. Then they built the bowling alley out south, between San Pierre and Medaryville, and that was a big boost for the people, to bowl, and it was a good moneymaker... I used to set pins over there, and at that time we could make \$13-14 a night – which was big money! It was a good place for kids to hang out. They have a restaurant and pool tables and things like that. It's a shame that it folded, I understand.

ST Yeah. It seems like it's been closed down for a long time now.

EK I think so.

ST So as far as changes in the town, in the course of your life – not just when you lived here – but I know that you are one of the people that comes back for alumni regularly?

EK Right. I try to come back every year, but now we've moved to Florida, and they have it in the middle of April every year. It's kind of hard to get back now. I hate to come here that early, 'cause it's kind of cold. But I've been coming, other than that, for the last 10, 12, 15 years. And the Alumni Association has really done a good job. They've got that scholarship fund for the high school students of Railroad Township, and it's been really a good thing. I think it's stirred a lot of interest for the young people to maybe do a little better in their studies and get a scholarship.

ST *And so, coming back as you have pretty regularly, can you talk about the changes you've seen in the town?*

EK Yes. Slowly, over the course of the years, it's gone pretty much downhill. When they closed the high school, I think that was a big development that really changed the whole town. The whole town seemed to revolve around the high school, with the activities, the basketball teams, and the PTA, and everything was there for the kids, and everybody seemed to be involved! And once they consolidated with North Judson, you just took away from the town. There really wasn't much to do there.

And then the stores... I mean there always were taverns... and there's still, I think, two taverns there. But the Dolezal's store was the big one, and it had the general merchandise, the groceries, and the butcher shop; and once Duane Dolezal passed away, I don't know, it just eventually closed. But you can't even buy a quart of milk there now – it's just practically dead. We went there with Bev a couple weeks ago, and I was shocked at the old bank building, which was right on the corner – beautiful brick building was completely destroyed inside. I mean, there'd been a meth lab or something. Ceiling coming down... just garbage all over. And it was a beautiful building at one time!

And the rest... the gas stations are all shut down and overgrown, and nobody has really taken care... they built a tennis court there and even it is dilapidated. I don't think you could play on it! It's weeds all over... the only part that looks decent is the softball field, and where they tore down the old schoolhouse there's a nice picnic area there.

ST *It would be nice if the old schoolhouse was still there, though, wouldn't it?*

EK Yeah. And the one year I was president of the association of alumni, we built that plaque out there commemorating the high school, and it was a nice gesture. We kind of copied it after one I saw at Wheatfield, and we got some contributors to pitch in, and... it was a nice little symbol... at least there's something there to mark the old school.

But it's a shame, the house I lived in even burned down, and now there's a big trailer back there. But the town is just... apparently it doesn't have anybody to take charge. No leadership there to try to develop a business or some kind of industry, or something to... the only thing really left is what used to be the Little Company of Mary... nursing home now. I think it's Holy Cross or something, but that's about all that's left... post office! And library.

ST *Which we didn't have when I was growing up.*

EK No, we didn't either. Well the churches are still there going pretty well... that's probably the only source of entertainment people have around there – going to the churches.

ST *Yeah, they've kind of become the social focus for people.*

EK Right, that's where we had that little meeting that Bev went to; and it looks like they have a quilting club there, and most of the activities are out of the church.

ST *Speaking of churches, did your family have a religious affiliation?*

EK Yes, we went to the Catholic Church. I was in the choir for about a week; Mrs. Sharritt threw me out, she said, "You can't sing a note." [laughter] I said, I could lip it, right? So I was an altar boy for a while. There used to be some sisters that had a house across the other side of the tracks, and I used to go over there. They used to teach me the Latin prayers... I think it was Ray Hine and I... we used to go over there, and they'd try to teach us. We picked up on it pretty good, I guess, but we used to go through that. I know my brother, George, he was more involved with the priest. He was an altar boy for quite a few years. I was for only maybe one or two.

ST Speaking of those Sisters – because I’ve mentioned that little convent to other people, and nobody seems to remember that house, so you’re touching on some points here that... you may be the only person who remembers, besides me. Because I remember going to that house once for... I don’t know, maybe some kind of training for my first communion or something... but I was trying to remember the name of the order that they were. Do you remember? Was it Our Lady of Victory?

EK I have no idea. I remember Mrs. Sharritt. The Sharritts lived right on the corner, and then the convent was there, and then Wolskis lived right next to it, Gana...

ST Yeah. So it was in between Wolski’s and Sharritt’s.

EK Then across from Sharritt’s, on the other side of that road, there used to be a grocery store, but I can’t remember the name of it.

ST Wasn’t that Mussel’s?

EK That could be. Mussel’s.

ST I think that is what Del has told me.

EK I was wracking my brain trying to remember... ‘cause I know it was run by a couple of older immigrants, like, a few items in there... a general store; that was there for quite a while.

ST I don’t actually remember it being open when I was a child, but... at least not as a grocery store. It almost seemed like it was a place where they auctioned things...

EK Oh, that’s right, it was like used furniture...

ST But I don’t know that it was Mussel’s anymore then.

EK No, no, I remember the guy... I can picture him, but I can’t remember his name.

ST So, you've kind of talked about how you feel about the changes you've seen in San Pierre, and I don't know if – since you left when you were a teenager – if you think of yourself as having a role in the community, but certainly as an athlete, you were the young man...

EK Right, I never really had a role as an adult. My parents lived there until probably mid or late '60s, then they moved to Walkerton. But my mom and dad were never really involved in politics or in the community. My father liked to drink a lot, and he spent a lot of time at Artimo's tavern and Cramer's tavern; he used to play a lot of pinochle and stuff like that, but that was about the only activity he was involved in. And my mother played cards once in a while and some things like that. But there really wasn't a whole lot of activity for a lot of people other than church or taverns and school. And taverns weren't the best influence [laughter], 'cause I think Cramer... the first tavern was run by Bill Danford, and then I think Frank Diehle took over, and then Eric Cramer took over. Eric Cramer was pretty active in San Pierre – he was the trustee, and he built the new gym – or he had it built. I saw him not too long ago in California. He's south of Los Angeles.

ST Orange County?

EK Yeah. His son Dick is really a big time operator. He owns multimillion-dollar buildings and clinics, and... he's a real hustler, I guess... Somebody made it big time! [laughter] But all the alumni that come back to these are basically from out of town. It's surprising, because a lot of the local people don't even show up. I mean, people come from all over the United States. Doris Bolduc comes from Texas every year. She comes with her sister, Joyce, from Cincinnati. And the whole Hine family, most of them always show up. There's Bill, and Larry, and Ray. It's always surprised me, like Kenny Cervenka – he's lived in North Judson since he graduated from high school – and the first time he ever came was at our 50th high school reunion, which was 2004. And it was tough. Guys like Jerry Danford, he's never come. Don Weninger, he lives in Michigan City, he's never come back. It surprised me that the people that live the closest don't come – and they *do* have good food! [laughter]

ST [laughter] And it's not that far!

EK No! I mean gee whiz, for ten bucks, or \$7.50, whatever they charge for dinner, you can't go wrong, and you do get to see all your old buddies at least once every few years... nice to see that they're still around.

ST So do you maintain contact with your high school friends from San Pierre?

EK Yeah, one of my buddies, Bill Hurt, he lived with Ralph Cummings when he went to high school, he was from Chicago. But he only spent, I think, three years with us in high school, but he'll come every year if I come, or... he lives in Orland Park in Illinois, and we just came out and we played golf a couple weeks ago at Chesapeake Run over here. Joe Soplanda, I see him quite a bit. I used to see Roger Loomis, although he passed away several years ago. Doris comes every year. Donna Richardson Rinehart – she's been coming the last few years. But a couple of the girls, Sue Schwandt, she lives in La Porte, she's never come. Patty Bullard, she comes once in a while, but she hasn't come for several years.

ST And where does she live?

EK She lives in... matter of fact, I just saw her mother when I went with Bev, Her mother was at the Lutheran church, Vera Bullard. She's gotta be 90 years old. But Patty lives, she said, on Route 10 somewhere near San Pierre. Ed Schultz lives on the farm, and he came to our 50th – he's not in good health, I guess. Don Luedtke, he's got the farm out by English Lake, and he's been coming the last several years. So I do get to see 'em at these alumni banquets... it's good to get in touch once a year, at least.

ST But you also have the ability to contact them outside of the alumni activity.

EK Right. I have phone numbers, emails, things like that.

ST I just want to pause for a moment and ask you if there's anything in what we've talked about so far that you haven't been able to really go into, or if you think I've missed something important to you?

EK The one question about the person who had the greatest impact upon me... I think would have to be my coach, George Miller. He was our class sponsor, we had 14 in our class, and he was still young. He was only, maybe, 24 or 23 years old, so he kinda fit in. And being our class sponsor, he was involved in all our activities – which, we did a lot of things together: picking corn and we had a smelt fry, we went to Chesterton and caught all these smelt and cooked ‘em up.

So we did a lot of activities, and then we had a great class trip to New York City and Washington, D.C. and Niagara Falls, and all the money we made over the four years we put towards this trip, and it pretty much paid for everything. But he taught us a lot. He was a good disciplinarian... and I think he had the most impact of anybody around on me. He’s still... he lives in Bass Lake, not too far from here. I got to see him; he came to our 50th class reunion and gave a few words and I think he donated to the scholarship fund.

ST *That’s awesome!*

EK Yeah, he’s a good guy. I see him once in awhile – not often enough. But he ended up... I think he was principle at Culver. Eventually went to Wheatfield, then to Culver. Then he told me he worked at the casino for a while after he retired, like a pit boss or something like that.

ST *This sounds like somebody I should try to interview down the road.*

EK Yeah, he lives right around on the road going to Toto Rd.

ST *I don’t know if Bev knows about him. She might not, if he doesn’t come to alumni regularly.*

EK No, he just came when we invited him to the 40th and the 50th – I think he was at both of those... as far as I know he’s still in fairly good health.

ST *And he might have some very interesting perspectives as someone who was there as a teacher and coach... and young, at the time.*

EK He had some problems with Ralph Richardson, who used to be the coach... you know, he was trying to tell him what to do, and I think he finally had to throw him out of the gym, and say, "I'm in charge!"

ST *Anything else?*

EK About the Depression, actually my father had a pretty good job at the time, so we didn't have any problems with that.

ST *That must have set you apart... some.*

EK Well, I wasn't even born, but my father had a pretty good job in Chicago, so he was able to buy a house and things like that.

ST *Just curiosity, and I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but how would you describe the role of women in the community as you were growing up?*

EK Yeah, I was thinking about that. Other than the women teachers, there weren't too many women that played a role in the community. Most of them were pretty much housewives, mothers, homemakers... like you said, *didn't drive* – so they were kind of dependent on their spouses to really get around.

ST *So pretty family focused.*

EK Right, it wasn't like nowadays, when both people work. It was pretty much... 'course it was tough being a homemaker then; they didn't have all of these modern conveniences, either.

ST *They probably didn't even have some of the modern conveniences that were available then!*

EK That's right!

ST *I guess you said you feel the most damaging development has been the school leaving.*

EK Right, it seemed like after the high school closed, other businesses started to shut down. Like there used to be three or four gas stations, and a couple restaurants, and a couple taverns, and a couple grocery stores, and... really, they all just disappeared since the high school's gone, and there really hasn't been any development. I mean, there are several new homes, I understand, west/southwest of town. I was talking to Beverly Alexander Jones the other day, and she said they are building some new homes – a small subdivision.

But they don't have any sewers, or they don't have city water, the town's not incorporated, there's no mayor, no leaders, no police protection. It's just kind of a place to kind of retire... and *die!* [laughter] No golf course. There's not much goin' on there, really. I can see where people have no real incentive to move there. If you have a family, you know... they even closed the grade school, which was open until a couple years ago.

ST *Well I guess it's now a kindergarten?*

EK Something like that. I mean, it's a beautiful building; it's got a big gym in there, and it's got a lot of room, and I don't think it's getting much use these days.

ST *Our agenda with this project is not to move towards incorporation, because the community does not want that, but I'm just curious to know, is that something you would be in favor of if you were a member of the community, or do you feel it's not important?*

EK Well, I think you need something like a town board, or somebody to kind of pull things together. I know they're against the sewers, also, because that's another expense. I mean, since we got sewers at Bass Lake, I mean, sure, we have to pay \$60 a month or something, but the prices of property have quadrupled, and every piece of property is being developed. Where it was lowlands, wetlands, they couldn't build. Now they can build with the sewers, 'cause it used to be the septic systems, and you had nothing to work with.

So I think the sewers and city water... and if they could get somebody to build some small type of industry... I don't know, I guess Hamlet just got a \$500,000 award to revitalize. But they've got a company coming in there that's going to employ like 300 people – Sysco Systems, or something like that.

ST *Cisco is coming to Hamlet?*

EK I think so. Somebody said it's going to be a big terminal. But that's something that San Pierre needs – something to bring people in there. Because they don't have a lake! Even the gravel pits are pretty well shot, you know. There's just the Kankakee River that maybe could be something of a resort area. They tried to develop English Lake several years ago. They called it Lomax Station, and they had a restaurant there, and they had some buildings that were, like, old buildings from the Burris' Camp, and they tried for five or six years, but that didn't work either. It didn't develop.

But they need at least a little grocery store in San Pierre, so you can buy some bread and milk once in a while. But that's not the answer. They need some kind of industry, I think, to develop. Because people still have to... I mean, even Wanatah, which is closer to Gary and the industrial... that hasn't really developed much, either. I think everybody... most of the people in San Pierre that lived in within Railroad Township worked in La Porte or Gary or... you know, quite a distance to drive. And nowadays, with the price of gas, I don't know how far people are going to be driving. To drive to Gary every day to the steel mills could cost you a small fortune.

ST *Oh, yeah, it's hard to justify how much the transport would cost. So, I think we've addressed some of these questions... You talked about George Miller being your biggest influence. How would you say his influence stayed with you, or did it impact you in some way, in terms of, like, forming your character, or your outlook, or perspective on things?*

EK Well, he definitely helped develop our characters with... he was a good discipline... I remember one time – we used to play our basketball games at La Crosse, and we would meet at the schoolhouse, and we'd all ride in two cars, and the team would go to La Crosse. Well, one time, for some reason – I don't know why – some of us got a little antsy, and we drove to La Crosse on our own, and he was waiting, and waiting, and when

we got to La Crosse, he was really upset. And we were playing Tefft, and he did not let any of us start that were starters on the team that left early and went to La Crosse. In fact, the only one that played that was a starter on the team was Don Weninger – he had waited for him. [TURN TAPE OVER]

So we're sitting up in the stands, we played the sophomore game, the JV game first. Then we were getting ready to go down for the varsity game, and he said, "Nope, none of you guys are starting tonight." So that was his discipline for us, and it ended up Tefft ended up beating us, naturally, with no starters out there. So the next time we played Tefft, at Tefft, we were really out to get some revenge! And I think we scored 115 points or something, and they scored about 22 or something, so we made amends. Tefft's gym was even smaller than San Pierre's old gym. We had three walls and bleachers in San Pierre, and that was one thing that really helped the sports program was when they built that new gym, because, I mean, shooting in a small gym and then going into this great big gym was like being in another world. It was really tough to gauge your shots.

But George, he was always very helpful in guiding you. And Ralph Richardson was a big help. He tried to get me a scholarship, and I took some tests, and I did get a scholarship to Ball State, but I decided to go into the military first. 'Cause I knew the GI Bill was probably going to run out at the end of that year, so I had to get in quick. So I was able to get my \$110 a month while I took four years of college.

ST It must have been significant back then.

EK It was very significant, because your credit hours are only like \$9.00 an hour or something like that; so it wasn't really expensive to go to college. But any questions, he was always willing to give us answers. He lived in Knox, basically, and he used drive to San Pierre every day.

ST Are you talking about Ralph now?

EK No, I'm talking about George Miller. He lived with his mother in Knox, and I mean, he was like a second parent. He would drive all the basketball players and the farm kids

home after the games... I think he even had to pick some of them up, you know, if they didn't have a ride. So he was really very helpful.

ST *And did he have a family at that time?*

EK No, he was single, and lived with his mother right there in Knox. I think he eventually married; I don't think he ever had any children. I think his wife passed away several years ago. I don't know if he lives by himself now or not, but he was a guiding factor, and I had decided that there was no way I could really make a living in San Pierre – I really had to get out, probably [laughter] the sooner the better. So I had it pretty well planned out.

The summer after we graduated, I worked on the New York Central Railroad as a laborer, and the guy gave me one of these great big spike pullers that weighed more than I did, I swear. And I says, *no way I'm going to end up here, working on the railroad. I've gotta go to college. I've gotta get an education.* And then after my freshman year of college, I worked at Allis-Chalmers one summer, and that also provided me with more incentive to continue college.

ST *Yeah! [laughter] All of your work experiences were leading you toward college!*

EK Right. So I did spend a couple summers at San Pierre when I was working. And then, after my sophomore year, my buddy said, "Why don't you come with me and work at Yellowstone Park – you're 21," 'cause I'd been in the military, so he said, "You could be a bus driver." So I applied for a job at Yellowstone, and I went out there and worked for two summers driving a tourist bus. We'd pick up people at the train station, and they had trains... more coming in there... take 'em around to Old Faithful, and to the lake, and give 'em a little spiel about the park, and... that was a much better job. That was fun.

ST *Now when you worked at Allis-Chalmers, was it when your father was there?*

EK Yup. He was there. I just worked then one summer, and they had me Brillo-pad sandpapering off rusty panels so they could paint 'em, and then they gave me a job as a sandblaster – they put you in a space suit and give you the sandblaster... sandblasting

tanks! So I said, I don't know how my dad stood it for 23 years, you know, it's just a routine, every day the same thing, over and over and over.

ST Now did he and your mother encourage your higher education?

EK Oh, yeah, definitely! Definitely. My father... if he'd have stayed... I've often wondered... he was pretty high up in this company when he left Chicago. It was Meyer & Wenthe Rubber Stamp Makers, right downtown. My uncle owned a jewelry business down at State and Wabash. Used to sell class rings and trophies, and he'd never been on a farm in his life, my Uncle Bob, he sold his jewelry business and bought a ranch in Oregon. And one summer, he invited me out there. I spent three months when I was about 11 or 12 years old. I spent one summer in Oregon on a ranch. That was fun. He gave me a horse and a saddle, and they had roundups... it was really quite an experience.

ST That really must have been amazing, and just your surroundings in a place like that.

EK Yeah, the big hayfields, and back then, they had big draft horses that bucked the hay, and stacked it up on the haystacks. But he had a rough time, 'cause when he got out there, the other ranchers didn't want to give him any water for his irrigation system. So he built his own lake, built his own reservoir... and this guy'd never been on a farm [laughter] and I don't know how he did it. And he wanted me to stay out there, and he didn't have any children... and his wife really wanted me to stay. And I probably should have – I could have owned that ranch! [laughter] But I was kind of... I wanted to get back to San Pierre! I was gonna make the 8th grade basketball team!

ST [laughter] Your star was ascending in San Pierre at that point.

EK Right. [laughter] Instead of being a big time rancher, I was a little time basketball player. But it was fun, and it was quite an experience.

ST Any other notes that you've made that you... would like to talk about.

EK Yeah, I worked on the farm for the Paulsen's a couple of years, that's why I'm pretty familiar with Del here. There was, like, three brothers who worked together, and they all

farmed together, and I pitched in and did odd jobs like working on the hay baler, but Harry – Heinie Paulsen pretty much hired me to work with them on the hay baler, but these three farmers, they worked together, and every day at lunchtime they would have a big spread of mashed potatoes and chicken and roast beef... I must have gained 20 pounds that summer, I swear!

ST [laughter] Yeah, the eating was always good at the Paulsen's!

EK Right! And that's one thing... there used to be a lot of small farms around San Pierre back when I first got there. Maybe everybody had 20, 30, 40 acres, and there were houses scattered all over, so there were a lot more children around, a lot more kids. So as the farms got larger, the houses got torn down, the people left and went to the city, and that was another factor that really kind of acted toward the demise of the status of San Pierre. It just never grew, it got smaller and smaller and smaller.

ST Yeah, It seems like fewer and fewer resources.

EK Right. Well your grandmother taught at English Lake in a one-room schoolhouse – she taught all eight grades out there. So we used to pick up a few students from English Lake every year. Don Luedtke, I remember he went to English Lake or to the Lutheran School in North Judson, I'm not sure. Yeah, we picked up a few students that way.

ST Do you happen to know how Luedtke is spelled, just for the transcription?

EK I think it's L-U-E-D-T-K-E, I believe. Don, I haven't talked to him in quite a while. He never got married, but he's pretty involved in the church, I know. He used to run some world tours for the church group, and he went all over the world with the church groups. I'm not sure where it is, but he's been really a hard worker dairy farmer. And he must have got kicked by a few cows, because he's got some bad legs now. He's having a hard time walking, and he's got a cane, and arthritis has set in, I believe.

ST And he's living where?

EK He lives out on the farm near English Lake – just a little bit south of English Lake, on that main road. [laughter]

ST *The main road. [laughter]*

EK The main road – the blacktop. Ed Schultz, he's a farmer, and I guess he's in pretty sad shape, too. I really should go visit all of these guys one of these days.

ST *You know where they are.*

EK Yeah, I know where they are... I'm gonna do that, too. I know Doris Bolduc sent me an e-mail and said she'd contacted Ed Schultz, and said he wasn't able to get around too well. So I should drive out there and check him out.

ST *Can you think of any other men – since you're the first man we thought of to interview – are there any other men that you think would be, other than maybe George Miller...*

EK Well, I think Don Luedtke would be an interesting one. Probably even Joe Soplanda, he lives in Wanatah. Of course you're interviewing Jeanette, so she can take care of the Hine family – she'll fill you in on that.

ST *[laughter] Well, you know, actually, I think it's really good to talk to individuals, rather than having somebody cover their whole family, because everybody had a different experience. And everybody remembers different things. For you the most important person was George Miller. For somebody else in the community it might be someone else entirely, and one thing that is really important to us in doing these interviews is that there are people whose names are included in this who might not otherwise be remembered... necessarily. But they're remembered here because somebody that we're talking to was impacted by them, somehow. And I think that's kind of one of the gifts of oral history is getting the impression of an individual person about their experience.*

EK Right. Some of these people... well, you obviously can't interview them, because they're dead. Ralph Hanke and Adeline Hanke, they were always involved with the sports, and always came to every game.

ST And that's H-A-N-D-T-K-E, right?

EK I think it's just H-A-N-K-E. I mean there were several people... and Francis Dolezal was always involved. He used to come and umpire softball games, and if you ever needed anything at the store, he was always very helpful. Yeah, the old Dolezals General Store, I mean, I remember that... they still had to pick the cans off the shelves! You know, they were all stacked up, there was no self-service.

ST You're talking about the old store, which is the one I have the fondest memories of, because we lived – when I was really tiny – just in the next block, but on the same street. And I can remember walking down there by myself – I must have been three or four years old – to get something for my mom, and Francis was always there. And I have a very dim memory of going upstairs. And weren't there like farming supplies and, I don't know, machinery or something?

EK Yeah, they had... it was a big storage area upstairs there. One time I think I found a pair of shoes up there. Worst pair of shoes I've ever had in my life [laughter]; I don't think they fit right, either. But I needed a pair of shoes.

ST And there they were. [laughter]

EK Edna Batzka, she worked in that store for many years.

ST Did she? At the old store?

EK The old store. Of course, Otto Dolezal, he was kind of the leader of the whole town with the bank and store. He was the big operator in San Pierre for a long time.

ST Uncle Butts, we called him... in the family.

EK And Russell Weninger, the butcher. He was really a nice, friendly guy. And Tom Daly, he was a very pleasant man, and he used to always come and watch the baseball games. And his daughters still live there, Mary and Peggy.

ST I saw them last summer, and will be interviewing them, too. They have a lot of history, pictures of the bank in its good days... its fine days.

EK Clyde Kingman, he was quite a town leader, too, for many years. But he died at a fairly young age of a heart attack, I believe. 'Cause he ran the insurance agency, and he ran the little grocery store – gave Dolezal a little competition for a while. And the barber, John Baker, he was in that barbershop right below where Hines used to live. Yeah, they lived upstairs there, next to the tavern and gas station, next to Artimo's. And he had the shoe shop in the back, shoe repairs and barber shop – fifty cents for a haircut! [chuckle] And you got your money's worth, 'cause he took a lot off! [laughter] He would trim you right down to the wire.

ST [laughter] He must have been fast!

EK Yeah, zip-zip-zip; it was like being in the Army.

ST Were there any other teachers that you remember?

EK I remember Grace Jones – English teacher. She was part of the history of San Pierre. Seemed like she taught there forever, and she used to... I don't know why, but kids liked to pick on her and do tricks and stuff, you know, put a thumbtack on her seat, and little things that aggravate her.

ST She was a high school teacher.

EK She was a high school English teacher. And Paul Glazebrook, he was a retired scientist, pretty much, but he taught algebra, mathematics, the sciences... he always had some kind of a machine throwing sparks or something in his room. If you were in there to learn algebra, he'd teach you something else. He never taught what you were there for! [laughter]

ST Was that something that pleased the students?

EK Oh yeah, they enjoyed it, because nobody liked algebra. So he was very interesting, having been in the science world for a long time.

ST *And I'm sorry, what did you say he'd done in the science world?*

EK I think he worked for some... probably some drug company or something like that. He worked in the city. I'm not sure.

ST *It seems like the Glazebrooks were in the area for a long time, if it 's the same Glazebrook family, because I just happened to look on the Internet... and this came up, that's archived material from 1868: Indiana Archives History – Businesses, and there are several Glazebrooks... or several businesses that were owned by Glazebrooks. It's amazing to see all those businesses!*

EK Yeah, I think he retired, maybe, out near Tefft somewhere and then picked up this teaching job. So his family probably was from the area; I think that's probably why he came back to the area. And I know he had one really bad eye – I think he always had a colored glass in the one [lens of the] spectacles. He must have had a problem with the one eye. But he was really an interesting teacher. We had a lot of teachers there for a long time, like Dora Batzka and Herretta Sharritt, and when I came there, I think it was Doris Brown that was the first and second grade teacher. She married somebody out near North Judson on 10, and then I think Janice Richardson took over in first and second grade. And we had a teacher named Don Marshall, he taught the agricultural subjects, but he stood at the window looking out, more than anything. [laughter]

“What are we doin' today?”

“Why don't you go out and check some ground.”

“Should we take your pick up truck?”

“Oh, sure, take my pick up... go build a hog house or something.” [laughter]

ST *[laughter] So, you were well prepared for college!*

EK Right. I really learned a lot there.

ST *How was your college experience? You were at IU, you said.*

EK I was at IU. It was quite a change coming from a small high school to a big – 10,000 at that time, but still a huge college. I kind of fit in. Of course, I'd been in the service, so I wasn't like a rookie right out of high school. I had a roommate, he was a sophomore, so he knew a lot of the ropes. He was from New Jersey.

I think it helped my sister when I went along with her, because she was kind of a rookie out of high school. So she seemed to fit in... you know, if you get in a clique... We lived in an area called Tree Center, which was almost like a bunch of army barracks, and they had east side and west side, so you had even competition in the dorm. You had 50, 60 guys on each side, and then we all went to a central dining hall. And the girls lived in separate dorms, and so we all would meet at the dining room, and at the rec room if you want to meet somebody.

But it was quite an experience, and you get to pick up a lot of stuff. If you knew a lot of the stuff ahead of time, how to brown-nose these teachers and stuff, you'd do a lot better, I think. It's a lot of politics involved, too. I ended up playing on the soccer team at IU, and... I had a problem with statistics.

I had some English teacher, I think he was from Oxford or somewhere, but he was really tough, and I had to pass this course. And of course he was interested in soccer, being British, so I said, "I'm on the soccer team... I don't have a lot of time." So he finally gave me a D at least! [laughter] It was a course where they gave you a question with about eight parts! If you miss one part of it, the whole thing was wrong. They scored it from zero to 96 – that's a big curve! [laughter] But then you meet a lot of young teachers, too. I was in a couple of classes where my sister had the same teacher, and I think... I know she could have got and A on this English composition, but I think he didn't want to give her an A and give me a B, so he gave us both a B. I said, "Don't feel sorry for me; give me what I deserve – or better."

ST *[TAKES PHOTOS] I'm just wondering if you have any photographs from your time in San Pierre that you feel might be relevant if we put a book together to include in that.*

EK I've got a lot of pictures of me. [laughter]

*ST Do you? Well, that would be great! Love to have some pictures of you. [taking photos]
Are they of you playing sports?*

*EK Oh yeah. I've got some basketball pictures, graduation pictures... stuff like that.
Different things.*

ST Prom?

*EK Yeah, I think I could dig a couple of those up somewhere. I had to hide those. My wife
didn't... her mother made her throw out all her pictures of all her old boyfriends and
stuff. [And she said] you've gotta throw all those old pictures out, and so [I thought] well,
I'll just hide 'em. [laughter]*

ST And where did you say your wife was from?

EK She's from Chicago, on the South Side, Roseland area.

ST Okay, now could you look my way? Oh, that's a good one! I'll let you stop here.

EK I thought you'd bring your mother along. [PERSONAL CONVERSATION]

*ST Is there anything else you'd like to say... that you'd like to be on the record? Even if you
have some advice for the young people, you know...*

*EK Well, the advice for the young people is to get that scholarship working for you, and keep
up the grades. And if I was a young person, I think getting in the education field these
days is a good field. When I was thinking about going in to teaching and coaching – and
that was really my incentive – but the pay was so low you really couldn't make a decent
living at that time. It was tough. Now, I know, when my kids went to high school, those
teachers are making 50, 60, 70 thousand dollars a year, and the more education you get,
the more salary you get in the education field. You have to get at least a college education
these days, or get into a trade – a good trade, like an electrician or something like that.*

ST Are there any community colleges in this area – any junior colleges... like two-year?

EK Not to my knowledge, I know there's Purdue and Indiana have extensions, but they're quite a ways. I think one is up north of Westville, and one in Gary. The closest one here is probably St. Joseph College in Rensselaer.

ST That's a two-year, or that's a four-year?

EK No, that's a four-year. David Chesak, who went to San Pierre, is a professor at St. Joseph College. He might shed some light. He comes to almost every alumni banquet – he's a very good participant.

ST How do you spell that? C-H-E-S-A-K? And he's a teacher at St. Joseph?

EK Right. [MORE PHOTOGRAPHS] Yeah, as a child I probably did think about spending my whole life in San Pierre, because I had a lot of action there, I mean with the outdoor activities, and hunting and fishing and all that stuff – as long as somebody else is paying the bills! [laughter] I mean, I started out making 50 cents an hour weeding peppermint. That was big time money, that was like 20 dollars a week! You can make some big time. And picking pickles was a big... we used to have a pickle factory in San Pierre, too, that's right. Yeah, that was just across the railroad tracks on 421 there. That was a job, picking pickles, oh boy.

ST I'll bet. That was a job that would make you want to go to college, too, I think.

EK Yeah. I planted a pickle patch one year, and our soil was kind of sandy; it needed a lot of water. I remember I bought like 300 feet of hose from Dolezal's store. But the electric bill went up so much, my dad said, "You can't be watering those pickles all day long." So I don't think I made any money off of that.

ST Well, we can wrap this up if you feel complete. When you were reading the questions, were there any things that you thought should have been asked – that you would have liked to talk about?

EK No, I think it pretty well covered it. I thought one thing was, *what did people do for vacations in San Pierre?* My dad used to probably take us to Wisconsin, we had some relatives up by Green Bay. We used to go fishing up there, but we could fish in San Pierre, as far as that goes. And we'd go to the baseball games, you know, the White Sox, and there used to be Riverview Park in Chicago, which was a good amusement park. So basically, you had to go at least to Chicago to get any major activity.

ST *Did anybody go to southern Indiana for vacations – to Brown County? Or did people start doing that later on?*

EK I think it was pretty much later on. When I was at IU, Brown County was just starting to get a little active or popular. They had that big Monroe Reservoir. But Brown County got popular... French Lick. Maybe once in a while people would go to French Lick. Actually, most of the people in San Pierre, as I recall, other than going up to Richardson's cabin, up in Minnesota. Ralph Richardson had a fishing camp up in Orr, Minnesota. I knew all about it, 'cause I went with his daughter in my senior year of high school, so I used to write her a letter to Orr, Minnesota once in a while. Donna – she was a cheerleader, too, with my sister. So we had that covered.

I go fishing up in Canada quite a bit; we drive through Orr, but nobody ever wants to stop, and I want to stop and check out that camp he has. I know Bill Hine goes up there, I think, every year. And Jack Richardson was a big part of it, but he died of a heart attack at his daughter's wedding reception... in Valparaiso they were getting married. And Bill Hine told me he had just given his daughter a toast or something, and *bam!* He hit the floor, DOA. That was a shocker. And, I think there was Danny Richardson, he died, too. Jack's dead. Donna's still alive; I think she's retired. I don't where she is now. She used to live in Wheaton, Illinois. She taught at Knox for a couple of years. She might be one to interview, too, although... one thing about older people is they remember everything that happened 50 years ago!

ST *That's the beauty of it! [laughter]*

EK Can't remember what happened yesterday! [laughter]

ST *That is the beauty of it – this is where we really shine!*

EK Right. My two uncles actually built a house next to us. They were from Cicero. They were two bachelors.

ST *And what were their names?*

EK Len Gresko and Jack. They were both single. They were from Cicero; they took care of their parents until they died, and then they built the house right next to us in San Pierre. I think Rosco Cummings built the house; he was a contractor – Ralph Cummings father. So they lived there until they passed on.

ST *I don't remember them at all. It's funny, the people that I do remember... but because my dad had the service station, I would go there sometimes when I wasn't in school, and just hang out with him inside the service station, and the whole town would filter by!*

EK Yeah, I can still remember he still had that pump, where you had to pump that handle up for five gallons! That was an old, old pump... 21 cents a gallon. And you'd pump that thing up 'til five gallons, and you'd put it in the guy's car. But finally they got regular pumps. But they had ice cream in there... oh, man! Ten cents for one dip, 15 for two. That was good. Pump gas, then go in and dip ice cream! That was real healthy! [laughter] Check the oil.

ST *Right, it was full service. Your windshield.*

EK Full service. Check the tires, whatever. Pinball machine in there, too, as I recall.

ST *Oh, maybe over in the corner near the garage?*

EK I thought it was in the other corner, but I'm not sure, but I remember there was a pinball machine for a while.

ST *And a great candy counter.*

EK Candy counter, yeah. Babe Ruth, all those good candies. And then there was another restaurant – was it called Riccardo’s? That was right across from the gas station, just to the south there... just past Zimmerman’s Garage. Guy had a house there, and then he opened a little restaurant.

ST *Charlie? Charlie Riccardo? I dimly remember that.*

EK I don’t think it lasted very long.

ST *Probably not, because I don’t think it was there when I was small.*

EK No. The only place you could get decent food was at Gargione’s Restaurant. And the Gargione family were there for many, many years. Francis Dolezal married one of the Gargione girls, I recall. And my sister, Donna was a good friend with one of their daughters – I forget her name.

ST *Alberta?*

EK Alberta! Yeah. I don’t know if she’s still getting in touch. Actually my sister’s coming... she lives in San Diego now. She was single until she was 50 years old, and this guy she used to work with... she lived in Los Angeles... contacted her and said his wife had passed on, and he wanted to know if she was married yet. And she said no, and he said, “Would you like to go out?” So they started dating, and within six months, at age 50, she got married in San Diego. She’s actually coming visiting this weekend. Actually, they’re having a birthday party Saturday in Valparaiso – that’s where Carol lives now. Her daughter lives there. Actually, my brother, George, and I were born on the same day, only nine years apart. So that was a shocker.

[TAPE ENDS WITH SEVERAL MINUTES OF PERSONAL CONVERSATION, NOT RELEVANT TO INTERVIEW, AND THANKS TO MR. KESL FOR BEING THE FIRST PARTICIPANT IN THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.]