

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELDRED SWINGEN

FOR THE
VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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MADISON, WISCONSIN
AUGUST, 10TH 2004

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KURT PIEHLER: Let me begin ... You've asked that this interview, in a lot of ways be sealed until you've passed away—you've talked with me a little over coffee before we formally began this interview about memory and how you wish to be remembered. How do you wish to be remembered when people read this oral history transcript?

ELDRED SWINGEN: I'd like to be remembered as a good, decent American soldier who loved the United States of America.

PIEHLER: One of the things that brought me to Madison, Wisconsin—besides that I've really very much enjoyed the times that I've been to Madison before—is Edgar Wilson spoke very highly of you and you have a similar feeling towards Edgar Wilson. Could you talk a little bit about Edgar Wilson, and what you'd want him to be remembered for?

SWINGEN: I would like to have him remembered as an American hero, a quiet, unassuming man who had deadly calm efficiency in combat and also in his dealings with his fellow officers and men. He was kindly, he was stalwart, and he was always thoughtful.

PIEHLER: We were talking over coffee about the several generations of your family and can you start with talking about your immigrant ancestors, your grandparents?

SWINGEN: That's correct. I was very close to my maternal grandparents. Having the paternal grandparents passed away either at the time I was a very small baby or in the case of my paternal grandmother, who died back in 1898. My maternal grandparents immigrated from a small village in Norway, north of Oslo, near the Swedish border. And ... at times I wonder if in the course of history, by virtue of a peccadillo or so, that I might be part Swedish. And then I awaken with a sweat ... so I consider myself entirely of Norwegian descent. My grandparents came to this country in 1880 via Liverpool. I have visited the home territory of my maternal grandparents and it's a paradox that they would leave a beautiful country of rushing steams, mountains, and tended forests for the open plains of North Dakota. They came as an aftermath of the Homestead Act of 1862 and homesteaded with the initial records being in the Dakota Territory. Records in Billings, Montana. My mother in fact, was born in the sod shanty which my grandfather had hacked out of the virgin prairie, where she lived until Providence and a few American dollars made it possible for them to live in traditional farmsteads.

PIEHLER: I've read about the sod houses on the Plains, does your mother have recollections of those growing up?

SWINGEN: She never related them to me. It seemed like successful immigrants or their next generation, always wanted to hide from the so-called prosperity that came about after a generation or two in America. I have uh photographs of the sod shanty and the primitive tools and operations. And of course the homestead of 160 acres was expanded substantially by purchase or other acquisition, uh due to the passing or withdrawal of other immigrant Norse.

PIEHLER: You said about your family that it fit the pattern of other immigrants, you've talked about the change in generations, you're being a third generation. Could you recall that?

SWINGEN: I think we followed the same pattern of first generation were farmers, came to get the free land. Second generation, business and shopkeepers. And then me, the third generation, professional education and practice. This seemed to be the pattern and it sorta represents the American way.

PIEHLER: Your parents were married on October 5th, 1910. Do you know how they met?

SWINGEN: I think they may have met at a barn dance. Which was a form of social activity, or it could have been a meeting, a church meeting. Of course everybody was Lutheran, the state church of Norway, and everybody fell in line with that. I was not lead to believe that their lives were completely romantic, though I came along a number of years after their marriage, being born in 1917. So I presume that I was a wanted child.

PIEHLER: What do you remember about your parents? When you think about them, what comes to mind?

SWINGEN: I remember my mother's intense care for me and her regarding me as her treasure, or to use a Norwegian term, a "duckamon," which translated means "doll man." Maybe she wanted daughters but I had to do. My father was a kindly, merchant type with a flair for trading and owning farms and land. I came along at a time when the country was passing from—into a fair level of high prosperity, into the throes of what became, in my eyes, the Great Depression.

PIEHLER: Your mother was born in Cooperstown, North Dakota, and would pass away. Your father though was born in Iowa?

SWINGEN: Lake Mills, Iowa. Yes.

PIEHLER: How did his family, or him rather, come to Copperstown?

SWINGEN: Well he came because of the opportunities to own land and to stay in the retail lumber business. And on borrowed money he had his first lumber yard, I am told when he was twenty-four years old. His dream was that the country would soon become a land of small farms, villages growing into small cities and the like. None of this came to pass.

PIEHLER: What were your earliest memories of your hometown and of growing up?

SWINGEN: Well I remember that it was a product of two railways, the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern, which intersected and ... I was conscious of railway traffic, both the branch line and the main line. I was conscious of what I got to know as the "Silk Trains," at that time from the Orient would come trains of this raw silk which was on its way to Eastern manufacturers. That brought a lot of imagination into the picture. I remember thinking in terms of the village blocks. Just a few houses on each block. As a matter of fact I had a playground that was half a

city block, a big city block— because of course the land was cheap and nobody wanted to have a neighbor who was within shouting distance.

PIEHLER: When you say memories of trains, you have memories of trains going by town and stopping?

SWINGEN: Yes, I remember ... the whistles coming along and the sounds of the steam engines stopping and starting and how the steam engines would start and get some momentum to pull a big load. The hundred car trains were normal, and they would increase my mathematical ability to be able to count the cars when I was permitted to go close enough to the tracks to see them. The railways were exits to other parts of the world.

PIEHLER: How old were you when you took your first train trip?

SWINGEN: Oh I probably was carried in the arms by my mother or father. But my first recollection of train trips is when I had to be helped, by somebody, maybe even a porter, to get up the steps between the passenger cars, which are now in my mind nothing but old relics. I say in jest that they must have been remnants of the Lincoln funeral train ... But the railways were always of interest to me because they were pre-aircraft days. The first airplane I ever saw was something, in my child-like mind, I said it will never work.

PIEHLER: How old were you when you saw that first airplane?

SWINGEN: Probably six or seven that I recollect. And there were all—then came a series of barnstorming pilots that would come by—I was never permitted to take an airplane ride. Likewise I was never permitted to go to the old swimming hole alone, I had to go with practically a bodyguard or someone that could rescue me from the water. As a result I never learned to swim. I was to be bathed by myself or others.

PIEHLER: So it sounds like your parents, particularly your mother, were very concerned about you when you were young.

SWINGEN: Yes. I was—it was typical in the frontier that families would be large, cause in the language of the street, it was always expected to lose a few. And the cemeteries are attest to the fact that many infants passed on before the age of two. So I was protected, guarded, and perhaps even babied because I was one of a kind.

PIEHLER: One of the things you said, your father came to Cooperstown in part because he thought these would grow, this would become a much bigger place.

SWINGEN: Yes. This was a dream, he was optimistic and he was interested in the land, cause what else is there but the land? At an early age I became aware that there was such a thing as the stock market. And obviously history says that it was a high flying time, and uh I thought that maybe we should move from a village to a city. My idea was that Fargo, North Dakota was the ideal. I think my mother agreed with that but my father was insistent that this is the place we are, that will be, this is home and there is no need to envy people in the big cities. When I was about

seven or eight years old and my child-like carping about living in the village, he took me to the First National Bank in Fargo and led me into a back room where mortgaged properties were shown in black. And he pointed out to me with rather strict language that, “See that all these people in the city owe money, they don’t really own their property.” I thought about that and went back home and was more satisfied with the village.

PIEHLER: So your father did not like being in debt.

SWINGEN: No he didn’t and neither do I. That’s why to this day I carry more cash than I need because you get that old insecurity of not being able to pay your bills. Now with the present day money, credit cards, people say I’m a fool to carry this money but I despite the fact that I could be mugged and the story would come out that either I was greedy or that I was insecure.

PIEHLER: When was the first time you went to Fargo? How old were you?

SWINGEN: Oh I must have been in my mother’s or father’s arms or pulled along by their hands. I don’t really know. But I remember a trip there when we would generally stay overnight. Fargo is the headquarters of the lumber system that my father was interested in, and I still have that interest, his interest. And that experienced the ups and downs of credit in a one crop per year country. Fargo represented a town that had streetcars. Streetcars were these kind of mammoth excuses for horses, which I was used to, though my first recollections are of automobiles, generally the touring cars. The foreverness of running boards and ... living in the Depression, which started either 1926 or ’27 up until the start of wars in Europe. So I’m a product of the Depression more than anything else.

PIEHLER: You were very impressed with Fargo at a very early age, because before you were seven you were advocating moving to Fargo. What was so impressive about Fargo that struck you as a young boy?

SWINGEN: Well I was impressed by the fact they had indoor plumbing, they had ...

PIEHLER: You did not have indoor plumbing?

SWINGEN: No, nope. I was a ... product of the chick-sale, which existed frankly until wartime back home ...

PIEHLER: Which is?

SWINGEN: I thought that the “temple” if you call it that—now over the years I’ve accumulated these phrases so I’m kinda in the process of retooling my thinking because I lived comfortably, or lived well, almost to the point that if I had to blow my nose somebody was there to take care of that. It’s funny that I developed any personality at all.

PIEHLER: You were very taken care of?

SWINGEN: I was taken care of. I was almost to the point where they said, “We don’t expect more from you than just keep breathing.”

PIEHLER: You mentioned indoor plumbing really impressed you about Fargo. What else about Fargo was so impressive for a young boy?

SWINGEN: The streetcars.

PIEHLER: The streetcars.

SWINGEN: And the fact they had organized medical care and treatment. I was, of course so well taken care of that every little variation was serious. When I was six years old the local clinic said that I had a kidney problem. So off we go to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. And I went through there and I know my mother cried a lot. In which I know translate into the fact that she was very worried about me. She may have been worried about everything. But got through that and fooled them and today I’m just kind of an overgrown shell but “c’est la vie.”

PIEHLER: Cooperstown and at Hannaford both strike you still as very vibrant, very small but vibrant places.

SWINGEN: Well there are a few people still breathing there.

PIEHLER: One of the things I was struck by was when you said how they laid out the city ...

SWINGEN: Oh the village.

PIEHLER: The village. Now you lived in Cooperstown.

SWINGEN: I lived in Hannaford. I was born in Cooperstown.

PIEHLER: Which is even—Hannaford is even smaller.

SWINGEN: Oh yes. Hannaford is very small, as we say Hannaford was so small that men had to take turns being the village drunks. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: The way you’ve described the city being laid out, it was supposed to become a bigger place.

SWINGEN: I think so because with the intersection of two railways it had the potential to expand and ... I think my father saw even some light to manufacturing ... based upon farm needs. They certainly had enough banking to facilitate that. And that leads to another set of stories of my first encounters with rural economics.

PIEHLER: What memories do you have of Hannaford as a boy? You mentioned the huge playground you had ...

SWINGEN: Yes and uh relatively few friends. Very relatively few playmates. I used to break away from my family to go to these homes in the neighborhood that had multiple children. Like practically the one a year type. I used to revel at that and I used to revel at how they made do. Hand me down clothes. I never had any because there was nobody to get from. So I lived ... as a child I would get new bicycles. Kids would follow me around, just to get a chance to ride the bike. And I could be pretty officious and overbearing at a tender age, which my parents reminded me that, "You have to share something." And then I'd say, "Why? Why share anything?" Which set the pace for a conservative lifestyle.

PIEHLER: You mentioned not learning how to swim, because you were always carefully guarded when you went near the swimming pool.

SWINGEN: Yeah. "Don't go near the water."

PIEHLER: What would you do for fun?

SWINGEN: Well probably introspective, was one word for it. I used to get old ledger books that were unused from my father's office, and I used to have these large books which were just a source of drawing for me. I would doodle, brooding of the hand so to speak, and I could create empires, largely in the lumber business. I would create, I'd pattern them after the business my father was in and do, even at a tender age, elementary accounting. That will lead you in many different directions. Then there was reading and then there was the fact that you learn as an only child to be a lazy child. If you don't have to do anything, what's the point of getting any sweat up? And ... one of the deficiencies of being an only child, course I've often said that if I'd had brothers and sisters I probably would have drowned them in an old gunnysack, which was the way you used to get rid of excess cats. But that's speculation ...

PIEHLER: Did you play any sports growing up?

SWINGEN: Well only the sandlot stuff. And much of the time because I was the only kid that had extra bats, gloves, and baseballs. I had to be. In other words, I was not very competent as a sportsman. Then I never had to try very hard. But because I had the equipment I had to be a part of the team, because without me the game would be nothing.

And of course I played, by the time I got to high school, I would be in baseball. The village was too small to support a football team. I think there were only four other males in my high school graduating class. So it was really a very small organization. And everything was ... sized down.

PIEHLER: When did your family get indoor plumbing?

SWINGEN: About 1940.

PIEHLER: 1940. And what about electricity? Did you have electricity growing up?

SWINGEN: Yes. We had the good electricity and plenty of lighting so that—but coming from immigrant people, the staying up late was a no-no. You went to bed—"early to bed, early to rise" and the old proverbs. So uh ... but I would be lying in bed and I know my parents would say, "Is

there something wrong with this boy?” I could hear them saying that, and my mother of course would rise to my defense and say, “Let him rest.” And even at a tender age, “Is there anything we can do for you this morning?” I must have been an arrogant child ... and it shows ...

PIEHLER: In looking at the current websites, what the two towns say of each other, Cooperstown and Hannaford, there were a lot of ties between the two.

SWINGEN: Oh yes. Yes. Is a matter of fact my father’s family, we had a brother that lived—that I dearly loved, my uncle Thomas, who was a ... basically a plasterer to begin with, and who developed an engineering and a construction firm—he’s long gone. He pre-deceased my father. But we used to get together with them and that was a treat for me. He was like my father’s big, kindly, affable—you see the Norse are really a pretty severe people. Flat faced, unimaginative, laughing considered almost sinful, death and the grave are the realities. Somberness all the way.

PIEHLER: And your father, he wasn’t that sort?

SWINGEN: No. He was a different breed than my mother. My mother was awfully good to me, perhaps very possessive, because she said to me so many times, “You are all I have.” And I said, “Well that can’t be. You’ve got my father, you’ve got all this property, what are you talking about?” You know I’m kinda ad-libbing now. So ...

PIEHLER: So your mother was a somber?

SWINGEN: She was somber. And severe. And I think she was—she must have read Theodore Dreiser, about the *American Tragedy*. Here’s a good kid, she worried about my relationship with young girls in the neighborhood that were not like the youngsters in Hamburg that would give themselves for a free meal. But she thought about those things, I know she did.

PIEHLER: Your father had a retail ...

SWINGEN: Yes. It was a retail ... and this was his lumberyard that he started and it was merged with another Norwegian and Englishman in Cooperstown. And they developed up to twenty-two lumberyards at one time, which were more or less just trading posts right next to a primary elevator on either one of the railway lines. And uh they got at one time into Minnesota, and we still have yards in Minnesota, and into South Dakota, in this twenty-two yard spread.

PIEHLER: So your father’s lumberyards still continue?

SWINGEN: No. My father’s lumberyard is out of the picture and even the yard in Cooperstown, which happens to be a county seat, is out of the picture. We now have two yards in Fargo and in major county seats in North Dakota and in the Red River Valley in Minnesota. Ten yards exist now. I still have my stock ownership in them. Which is the largest number of shares that I have in anything, though I’ve been in the market since World War II, in an individual basis. The lumber business was sort of ... was a dream of my father’s and I thought it was pretty good too. But the eternal credit problems in a one crop country that I referred to, were something that

attacks the patience of a saint and also makes collections impossible practically until the rains came and the crops would come through.

PIEHLER: Well also wheat prices were not very good in the 20's and the 30's.

SWINGEN: No, they were not too good. So it takes a war to make prices. And with the advent of World War II, not only did the lumber business pick up, because there weren't too many farm boys who were drafted. And they used to tidy up the farms because they had to show that there was some use and some need otherwise people would say, "Well we can get along, we get along. We want—we don't need to educate anybody we'll just drive right along these dirt roads and nothing more." And they'd teach them the alphabet, the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, and teach them the multiplication table up to twelve, that's all they needed to know. Instinct will teach them the rest. So I was fortunate and blessed. I had, because of the Depression, good quality teachers, even at the high school level. As a matter of fact, I had access to Shakespeare when people were coming with tattered clothes but were talking Shakespeare. That increased the language facility among other things. And probably more thinking than what's been, what the wheat crop is gonna be.

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PIEHLER: Over lunch your daughter brought up a story that she remembered hearing you tell. You said before we broke for lunch, that a lot of your friends and people you knew that were your age, had really tough lives. Apparently one person you knew, one of your friends died in a snowstorm walking to or from school.

SWINGEN: Yes. There were actually two deaths, two grade-school students, probably fifth, sixth graders. I remember the first time I was a pallbearer for one of them when I was going on eleven. These—There were no school buses and ... this particular case the boy had attempted to walk on the railway right of way, which is obviously tough walking even on good days. But he was able to get through a blinding snowstorm partway when—by just dragging one foot along the iron rail and then recognizing, hopefully the telegraph poles along the way, he would know when to turn off to his own farmstead. Well the snowdrifts got too big and the situation arose when he couldn't simply find his feet and he froze to death, exhausted. And I remember then that my maternal grandfather was still alive and he gave me instructions on what a pallbearer has to do. The balancing of the small, wooden casket was a major engineering operation.

SWINGEN: I got a pretty grim introduction to death, as I don't recall seeing a dead person before. And that stayed with me for years and tying into the War, I was aghast at seeing the truckload of G.I.'s bodies being transported back for burial. My first impression was, "Look at all those boots and where are they going?" And then recognizing and thinking back to the days when I saw the first real dead person as a child. Because I was always spared—the impact of death was always around, because the Norse were always talking about the equivalent of happy hunting grounds or "Valhalla." And then seeing what followed ... But uh this was an incident that I'm not proud of. The second ... frozen death as I call it, I'm not—I don't exactly remember because the first death of this, losing your footing on a railway track and being all alone and exhausted and then freezing to death. I remember of course the farmsteads used to have, in the

winter season, ropes between house and barn because to get to the horses it was important and possibly a few cows huddled in the end of the barn for milk purposes, it was important to get to them. But people would lose their way between house and barn in the fierce storms. Course I think the health of the people in general was much poorer than it is today. And that contributed to the alleged severity of the storms.

PIEHLER: From what I've read, the weather could really be extreme both in the summer and the winter.

SWINGEN: Well the contrast was something that I noticed it, because I never really traveled outside of a narrow band say, to Fargo and then probably on to Minneapolis. And then sometimes in the summer we would get down to the lake region in Minnesota. I never got beyond that narrow belt. So I thought that winter was a long season and that probably the growing season was limited to maybe three months or more. And it is true that ... of course as a child a snowdrift of maybe six or seven feet could seem like a mountain. And I remember seeing pictures of snowdrifts in the village probably up to the second story. I haven't seen anything like that since because Mother Nature, a few of the years after the heavy snows, became one of limited rainfall. Fifteen inches a year. And the stories of the Dust Belt, which were some to the West of us, land that has been in the family for 125 years saw one year that I am told, only one year, was a crop failure. Which is a pretty good betting average for getting grain. Something in the granary.

SWINGEN: The summers were hot and occasionally they would result in hailstorms. Hailstorms were the ultimate summer disaster. My grandparents used to talk about prairie fires. I never saw one, never suffered through one, never took any losses from prairie fires. But the hailstorms, to return to that, were such that were devastating and as far as the farms go, I remember my father saying "Well we'll have to make do for another season under the hail insurance." Everybody insured for even modest amounts, but these were the times of a hundred to two hundred dollars month gross per family was enough. I remember Christmases in depths of the Depression where it was not uncommon for families to have ten-cent Christmas gifts. That would have put them so far below the poverty level by present standards that we'd be worse off than the people in the Sahara. Well they made do and I never knew, I never knew any want myself and I never knew any people that actually starved to death. But I do recall many thin, dirty faces, largely because even soap cost too much. And you couldn't be like the animals and rub yourself in the grass ...

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PIEHLER: Soap that was one of the things you had to buy from the stores.

SWINGEN: Yeah, there were some that attempted to make the soap using a tallow. Never worked.

PIEHLER: Your father had one of the businesses in town, what other businesses were in Hannaford?

SWINGEN: Well we had basically a mercantile store, we had a cobbler shop, shoemaker, we had believe it or not a furniture store. The lumberyard would sell everything from coal, ranging from anthracite, hard coal, to lignite. Right next to peat practically and would sell paint and they would sell building materials of all kinds, cement. And the lumberyard, generally would take on farm clothing, denim clothes, never shoes but all the other things. Work shirts of all sizes fit everybody, everybody looked like a wind-blown rag-a-muffin but you could still work in them. Winter coats were sheepskins; generally hand-me-downs because they seemed to never wear out. Other businesses of course would be banks. We had the makings of three banks. The First National, of course which my dad was on the Board of Directors, And another state bank and another kind of miscellaneous check cashing thing which was passed off as a bank. All of them failed. The era of wildcat banking was the start of the economic Depression and the first time I saw disorder in our little village was when irate farmers would come in with their buggies, line them up, protest against the residency of the federal bank examiner of the First National Bank. The only time that my father left town, under threat of being served by the Federal authorities and because of the double indemnity which was proper, at least they had that in the wildcat banking day when you could start a bank with just ten thousand dollars. Imagine that just ten thousand dollars!

PIEHLER: Even in that era that wasn't a lot of money to start a bank.

SWINGEN: No! But the days when you could get twelve plus manpower for a dollar a day so the decimal point just flutters and flaps. But I remember the disorder, which was peacefully resolved and uh I remember the sequence of that when my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, was incredibly thrifty and she even sold milk when they moved into town and she had amassed about, close to three thousand dollars—which was a tidy sum. In other words you talk in terms of single dollars rather than hundreds or thousands. And the bank failed, nobody wanted the assets of the bank and in those days the bidding was out early for try to recoup something. Well I think my father got more than two hundred thousand dollars in so-called assets for this three thousand dollars. I think he did it to try to show that he was willing to give something back and he had to say that he got this money borrowed within the family. Now my maternal grandmother thought so much of her son-in-law, my father, that ... “Henry we'll do whatever we can. God bless ya.” And she was quite dear to him naturally 'cause he had lost his own mother when he was a teenager. So I would go with my father in an old rattletrap car and he would try to salvage something out of the three thousand dollars. Well the most significant time was when he went to this farm and ... put a note on it for two thousand dollars, a tidy sum, and the farmer said, “I have nothing, I have two cans full of cream on the porch. You can have one of them.” My father was moved and he tore up the note, in my presence. Of course to tear up an asset was a cardinal sin. We were taught to be thrifty and while I didn't have a great knowledge of money I knew that you treasured every dime, every dime. And I thought that was showmanship, though I didn't know what showmanship was. I saw that and the pieces fluttered to the ground and the man cried, then he sobbed and I'm still touched by that.

PIEHLER: What year was this? Was this before 1929?

SWINGEN: Oh yes this was before '29. This was probably in '27 because things moved quickly, there was not much else to do except complain and try to get some paperwork done.

And there wasn't—the service from the Federal people was fairly rapid and— 'cause of the examiners and the banking officials, they just wanted to get the hell out of there. There is no question about that, to use plain, blunt crude language.

SWIGEN: So we owned—then there was a butcher shop in town that, a meat shop. And uh my Dad picked that up and he also picked up a filling station, there were several in town. And then mortgages on dozens of farms. Well my father didn't push anybody and he got a little money to start with but he held his ground and he was regarded as a good man who treated people decently. When the windy years- the tornado years of '35, '34, '35, '36 came around—made a small fortune out of—well for instance we had in the county, I guess we had three hundred carpenters working in the yards. And we had lumber coming in by the trainload, which I mean twenty cars or more. So it'd be part jammed on all the trackage that we had and he got his own prices on everything. So the return—it's the old classic, "it's a ill wind that blows nobody good." Well at about that time I was ready to enter the University and normally I'd been getting nickels, dimes and quarters and maybe a dollar as a gift and I had amassed this fourteen hundred and ten dollars, which is in the back of my mind, so the worm turned. We then moved from barter economy to "Oh we got some money." And then it kept going and there was a little droppage here and there and still costs of living were remarkably low and my parents were not demanding of anything and were still thinking grateful for food and decent clothing. And with a small family and with grandparents contributing there was a chance to put together some money. My father went into, started getting into railway bonds, another facet of railroading. Didn't turn out well at all. So he said then that, "Stay with the land, it's the only thing that comes," or "Stay with the lumber business, people gotta have a roof." And I went along with that so my undergraduate years were pretty darn good, to the point where a poor country boy even had a set of tails. And his freshman year! I was forbidden to have a car so I used money to get— most of the boys in my fraternity had cars, rattletraps, so poor that they were asked to park the cars on the other side of town practically. So for two dollars a week I could have a chauffer. Gas was fifteen cents a gallon. And if I would be nice to the fella—supposing I wanted to go on a date, I'd have a chauffer. Then if I were so inclined I'd ask the chauffer, say "Pull up. Pull up, leave us now." Ideal situation for an imaginative youngster but in living on peanuts practically, course everyone was living on peanuts, we were just a collection of elephants living on peanuts. And so it went. Now I'm getting afield ... I'm talking too much ...

PIEHLER: No, no no.

SWINGEN: I'm talking ruinously of your time.

PIEHLER: One thing you mentioned that I want to bring up was what you mentioned at lunch, I think someone from your hometown now reading this interview, particularly someone very young, would be stunned that you took trains then. You were describing how you would often go into Cooperstown from Hannaford.

SWINGEN: Yep. Hannaford was—had the market really for work clothing. My mother in an attempt to keep herself, my father and me in decent clothing and all that sort of thing, would want to take the train to market, twelve miles away. We'd hop aboard the train, probably before noon and would go there and maybe have a light meal up in Cooperstown and then come back.

My mother never learned how to drive a car, she never had to. And she took advantage of that. She was great with horses but she—cars were something else. She was typically a farm girl and had to develop her own set of street smarts, her farm street smarts. We'd have enough time to shop and then come back. And in time so that dinner could be made for my father. He'd say, "Well how's your day?" "Well we had a train ride." And there were a number of other things, there was a meeting place and then of course being that my uncle Tom lived in Cooperstown had a chance to see him occasionally while there, but my mother was interested in shopping and doing a little bargaining and seeing what other people were doing. The isolation of the female in the rural area, even from the days of the first settlement to now, is something else. Of course now you flip on the T.V. and you can find out what Oprah is doing and so you know. The isolation is gone but the personal contact is still missing.

PIEHLER: Did you have a radio?

SWINGEN: Yes. We had always radios. We had the squeaky-squawky type and we had people come around and repair and fix it, adjust it. My father had no mechanical ability whatsoever and he made the most of it. He said, "I can't do this" and immediately three people would jump to his assistance and do everything from minor surgery to mechanical wizardry. They would help. Sometimes it pays to not be ... to be helpless. That's what the welfare state is built on. The helplessness of many. I think that's that.

PIEHLER: Cooperstown also had the movie theatre?

SWINGEN: Yes.

PIEHLER: Do you remember the first movies you went to?

SWINGEN: No. The first movie that I have really much feeling about, except for silent ones of the Tom Mix order, which were run in Hannaford, even uh—my father permitted a big screen against one of the sheds in the lumberyard. We had four or five sheds, and that served as a backdrop and people would gather. And you'd see some of the silent movies. But the first movie that I have really a remember of I saw in 19 ...23, when Lew Ayres as a youth then, starred in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, an anti-war film. Course the Germans were beaten and the Norwegian would say, "So what?" They thought that the biggest actor in the movie was a big lumbering fellow, I think he was called "Cajun" or something like that, and he was kind of a clown, kinda of a white Stepin Fetchit. And they said, "That's normal. So if you lose you lose." It was not—most people would say then "That's not anti-war, it's just the fact that when you're in battle you've got to put up with these things. The Germans were beaten what do you expect to see em in spiked helmets? No you expect to see them as beaten." They were so normal that I thought—I felt sorry for the soldiers, though there was enough humor and there were some moments when you felt somebody's got too much control over somebody and that with a child-like expression of well, "Why do we have to have orders? Why do people have to give orders?" Not recognizing that you've gotta have orders—you've got no Army. Which was another primitive thought that upset with that.

PIEHLER: One politician you mentioned in your writing was Senator Nye, who is from Copperstown.

SWINGEN: Senator Nye, yes he ran ... he was the editor and publisher in the chief bottle-washer of the Griggs County Courier, which was the county newspaper. I was a lino-typist and bottle washer and gopher at the Hannaford Enterprise, a weekly paper. So was the Griggs County Courier, but that was a big paper. Well Nye became a U.S. Senator from Cooperstown and he was famous largely for investigation of the munitions industry. Which was a cushy job. He'd be investigating in Florida in the winter and California in the summer. They were Republicans of course. Like my father was a Republican for the reason that immigrants followed, they followed probably an anti-Catholic tradition. Though my father would say to me, "We've got nobody but Scandinavians on the farms, wouldn't it be nice Mother, if we had a few German families?" Then she would repeat, "But Henry, after the second season they'd want to buy the farm." So that went on. But the Senator ... I never really knew the Senator but he ran the course, the politics in the state, were pretty much Republican. But then under the Republican banner there would be people running in the Non-partisan League, which by Wisconsin standards was the Progressive party, or part of the left. I supported, in college, and that takes me back into 1935, when I supported William Langer, who was a ... ran under a Republican ticket and became Governor and the Non-partisan League supported state ownership of Milan Elevator, insurance and banking.

SWINGEN: And things were so desperate in the 30's, early 30's, and starting back in the late 20's, that the legislature even passed this moratorium on debt. Which of course is about as unconstitutional as you can get. And people were ... foreclosures were there everywhere, money was scarce, bartered. If a farmer would say to his wife, "I'm gonna take the ole shotgun and go down and patrol the fence lines. Got too many varmints down there." The farmhouse wife would say "No," because her first thought was that he'd go down there and blow his brains out and we don't want that to happen. And to see old men or young men, young-old men with tears in their eyes, and my father's office was a pretty sad thing. Then you saw the worm turn in the 30's, particularly after these providential winds that came through. When if you could put up every other building in the county, farm, city, what have you, in the jag trade, doubling your money on each sale, 'cause you had to do that initially 'cause you had to carry people for nine months anyway. Made all the difference in the world. And then the entrance into the war. People saying well we're kinda getting on our feet now what's gonna happen next. People had no concept of any wrongs in Germany, as a matter of fact if you tell the average Norwegian that maybe there are some abuses taking place in Norway they'd say "Impossible! The Germans are a steady people. Every dealing we've had is fair. They're hard bargainers but they're fair. They would not permit—and then too, whether they're Catholic or Protestants they gotta—they're code is better than ours!" So they would ... isolationists. I belonged in school to an organization called "The Yanks are Not Coming," that was before anything happened.

PIEHLER: This was in the 1930's, before America First existed.

SWINGEN: America First, The Yanks are Not Coming, Communist inspired perhaps. Didn't know what a Communist was—Except maybe the guy that lives in a commune. That's about as

far as it would go. Naive! Though, now I'm running afield here, I'm running amok almost. I didn't tell you about my editorializing in the Village Gazette. My column.

PIEHLER: When did you start the column?

SWINGEN: When I was in high school. Now I'm going back and forth here. And uh I had—I worked as kind of a handyman and I got to learn to run the linotype. Which was an old type of machine—remember having to wait in a cool office, no money for fuel, to wait to get the lead to melt so it could make the slugs and then making every mistake in the book and finally learning how to get a few slugs out. The editor and owner, was the brother-in-law of the initial operator-owner, who was very kind to me. Who gave me books and who gave me a set of old National Geographic magazines, starting in 1923. The old books that were written now, as I look at some of the titles, written by great authors. Great works, of course the color—some of them really weren't in much color, but then they got into some kind of color. The early ones, black and white of course. Mostly about China and the Hindu culture, something I could really care less about but I recognized that the writing was ... well my column...

SWINGEN: I had two adversaries. The railways were charging us too much for hauling wheat. And then, a possible story I'd heard about abuses in Germany. Of course the Russian deprivations, Communism, that was a given, nobody was interested, that was all bad per se. But then the German and the rumblings of war. Why would this Austrian, Hitler, make noises like he was making? And then occasionally getting a look at the New York Times. I think the editor got second-hand copies from somebody in Fargo and I would read what I could read. That somebody's excited. And then my boss, the editor, he would say, "That's probably the Jewish press." The first idea of Jewish—was there any such thing as a Jewish press? I'd heard about the farm block but I didn't know anything about—which Hitler made a mountain of, the Jewish press block, whatever you call it. And I had to write about something, but mostly about the railroads.

SWINGEN: And in a child-like fashion, it would go out, and my editor was a very liberal person and also an atheist. And of course I was raised with a belief that God's law is primary. The statutory law that we make up is just filler. And I really learned that, as I say now, the Ten Commandments are about as good as we're gonna get, at least on the domestic side of things. And ... so my mind is not completely logical, I wobble around—but I did get some responses out of the railway people out of Minneapolis and St. Paul, which were really the terminals of the Northern Pacific and Great Northern. Among my souvenirs I have—railroading has made an impression on me. My grandfather, my maternal grandfather had picked up buffalo bones, which were sent to the Eastern market for some darn reason and he had also supplied the team of horses with a scoop shovel for the building of the railways, one of the railways. He got a personal letter from James J. Hill, the initial empire builder. And I thought that was big stuff, it was like getting a postcard from God. But we had our heroes and that was a part of the act there. Beyond that I didn't know what I wanted to do, sometimes I think that I might have made a fairly decent, but penniless, rural small town newspaperman. And sometimes I think that the fabric of our whole society may depend on such people. Not the Bill Gates or the Presidents of people or anything like that. Somebody holds us together, maybe next to God, which we can't really examine, are these educators and newspaper groups.

PIEHLER: Well what's so striking to me about these small towns is now there's so much information so easily available because of the internet. But for you—what newspapers would people would read? What else would they read?

SWINGEN: No. We would get the local paper of course, the Griggs County Sentinel Courier .

PIEHLER: And that was a daily?

SWINGEN: That was a weekly.

PIEHLER: That was a weekly too?

SWINGEN: That was a weekly too. Then we'd get the Fargo Forum, which was a daily paper, daily and Sunday. Then occasionally we'd get the St. Paul paper or the Minneapolis Tribune. In later years we'd get the daily Minneapolis paper, we'd get it about a day late but it had more of the worldly news. We never got anything like the Chicago Tribune or the New York Times or the Washington Post. We never got anything like that.

PIEHLER: What about the Wall Street Journals?

SWINGEN: No. Never got that. Though I've been taking that regularly now myself for forty years. And I've kept track daily of our stock holdings for the last twenty-eight years.

PIEHLER: You mentioned ...

SWINGEN: When I leave you I'm gonna look up and see what happened yesterday. I'm gonna itemize the sixty-five stocks plus the mutual funds we hold.

PIEHLER: You mentioned getting these National Geographic, what other magazines did you read?

SWINGEN: Well we got the Literary Digest. As a matter of fact I used to sell the Literary Digest going place to place until finally people said "We can't afford to spend the fifteen cents or whatever it was, on this." And only people that owed my father money would buy it from me. (Laughter). So... but—and I gained a few things from that, but there were no—I tried to later on I had some contact with the Esquire magazine, which was supposed to be a pretty racy thing. I submitted when I was in a college, sort of as a joke, an article on pin hanging. Which I recognize now as just an attempt to identify low-class, low-price prostitution. 'Cause I had found a girl, through the connections in the fraternity, who lived in the University of Montana, who had twenty-three fraternity pins at one time. Of course now I characterize that as badges for one night stands. But I thought it was humorous. And also the fact that I was very loathe to give anybody my fraternity pin, 'cause I really sought no favors, wouldn't know what to do with the favor if it ever was thrown at me. So the only girl that got my fraternity pin was my wife. As I say, my present wife. And she was kinda amazed that I would have it. And I said, "Well, hell it's possible

to buy any number of fraternity pins there.” She’s got all my other keys from Phi Eta Sigma to Beta Gamma Sigma, and a few other little things that accrued to me for no good reason.

PIEHLER: You mentioned your grandparents were Lutherans from the old country. You were a member of what Lutheran church in?

SWINGEN: Well they were members of the Union Church, which is a rural church and my grandfather had deeded a part of the family farm there to them so they could build shelter for horses for winter services. And now that’s been gone for many, many years but the initial abstracts show that. My parents were members of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in Hannaford. They were members since they were married though their marriage took place on the old family farm, back in 1910. And there were no church service then. Why, I don’t know. Virginia and I were married in a Lutheran Church, Beth-Al or Bethel. If I want to pretend I’m Jewish I say Beth-Al, at the synagogue. But we have a—were not, were kinda basement Lutherans which means we go occasionally and we still reserve the right to be critical of the pastors. As I may have mentioned, one of the first things a rural Lutheran boy or girl learns is how to bait the pastor. You do that by getting to the Bible, you learn a verse—it may be in Ecclesiastes. Well historically the Lutheran ministers have not been terribly educated, well educated, and probably are deficient in medieval history or even Bible history. And the idea was to catch a minister where he didn’t know what verse it was. Expecting him, the poor devil, to have at his command, be able to preach a sermon on each verse of the Bible, impossible. But this was done—I never could bring myself to that because I recognized how little I knew and—but I learned from a legal standpoint that if you could start a verse from the Bible, depending on the jury that you’d picked, you had a leg up. And that was important. Actually the Norwegian Lutheran Church, was a rather tiresome process for me. I used to go and having to listen to some of the sermons, especially if they were in Norwegian, I’d have to count the number of e’s in the Psalm or the o’s and so forth, I had to put my mind to something ‘cause I was getting nothing out of the message.

PIEHLER: I know there’s a sect of Lutherans in Norway that have no liturgy as part of their service. Was yours a liturgical Lutheran Church?

SWINGEN: It was very, it was quite severe, almost to the point where we thought that the display of any ... even furniture was contrary.

PIEHLER: So you didn’t have a liturgy, it was just the sermon?

SWINGEN: Yes there was a liturgy and maybe that’s what held us together. My father now, came from Iowa where he was a member of the Missouri Synod where they very severe. They didn’t even believe in the Boy Scouts. My father had an uncle who was a Lutheran minister, probably unlearned, probably no more than a high school education, even at that, but inspired somehow and my father was an ardent member of the Masonic lodge. I never joined. Now Willie would say, “What’s the matter with you? Why haven’t you joined? You’ve gotta be a Mason or you’re nothing.” And of course I’d read as a child the morals and dogmas of the Masonic Lodge, a book that was supposed to be off-limits to me, but I read it and I found that it was pretty good, decent type of thing, where you’re building in stone, whereas as a Lutheran you’re probably building in flax straw. But I get tied up with myself here so ... your question?

PIEHLER: How big was the congregation?

SWINGEN: Probably a one hundred and fifty people, of which probably on any Sunday, depending on how bad the times were, probably no more than forty percent would attend. There was only one service.

PIEHLER: And often it was in Norwegian.

SWINGEN: Yes, really every other time in Norwegian. Of course when it was in Norwegian most of the young would stay away. They can't understand him, what's he saying? I remember early times when my father would take a seat on one side of the aisle and my mother would take seat in the other. Just like the family is split. I'd sit one Sunday with my father and one Sunday with my mother and this would be kinda of a ridiculous thing but sometimes it was because my mother didn't want to sit with somebody that had probably not bathed for three months and my father said, "I don't give a damn, I'll ..." They were treasurers of the church. My father was the treasurer. And my mother was the bookkeeper. And so she would keep immaculate records, good families now that had raised sons and are doing incredibly well, giving 10 cents a week to the church. I remember my father sending me over to the parson, or the pastor, at the parsonage, which was right across the street from us, and giving him a handful of coins. He was ashamed to go over there himself. I've seen him dig into his own pocket for money to give money to the pastor to live on. I remember as a small child I never quite understood until recently and when I became matured and a man of the world, that my parents would talk at night when I would go to bed. Through the air vent, I would listen in, maybe there was something to be learned. My mother would say, "The minister's wife is having another child." My father would sound off, saying "My God woman, we can't afford it!" (Laughter) And then my father would say to my mother, "My God, can't he ever use to learn ... ever learn to use little raincoats." The raincoats were another term for the condom of course. And my mother said, "Shh the boy may hear this and we'll have a lot of explaining to do."

PIEHLER: That was a term your mother would use, "little raincoats?"

SWINGEN: No my father would use ...

PIEHLER: Your father would use that term?

SWINGEN: And that was a very delicate term and sometimes I think that, I don't know.

PIEHLER: You didn't know what it meant?

SWINGEN: I didn't know what it meant. I know that they felt that the congregation couldn't afford another child, that they had to pay the fee, and the records would show that. Well now last week I arranged to give five thousand dollars to the cemetery association of each of my parents and my grandparents, and I'm doing that out of memory to them and because I'm using their money ...

-----END TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

PIEHLER: This continues the interview with Eldred Swingen on August 10th, 2004 in the Madison Club, in Madison Wisconsin, with Kurt Piehler. And you were saying, just as the tape was cutting off, you talked about a recent contribution to the two cemetery associations.

SWINGEN: Yes. I'm doing that and I recognize that we've got to help the churches along. Now I'm making it to the cemeteries association because in my time the churches in Hannaford, Union, Ijord, Wallum and a few others had the same pastor 'cause they were relatively few people and the church superstructure didn't call for, you've got to be doing something every day. Now it's difficult— now they're different organizations, they belong to different ones. The rural cemetery where my maternal grandparents are buried, my paternal grandparents are buried at the cemetery at Lake Mills, Iowa where I visited and where there is more care given than in the rural cemetery in North Dakota. Well in any event they're trying to get a pastor of this church out in rural North Dakota and they're having a hard time. They're now having to go to the days when women pastors were thought of as being nothing more than ornaments, if they were pastors at all. Like one fellow said, "Having a woman pastor is like seeing a dog walk on his front legs, impossible though it can be done!" Very type of garish humor.

SWINGEN: I guess there is a certain thing about soil that is sacred to family members, especially those that have practically lived and died on it and I can see people of any, of all faiths, all nations, feeling the same way. How one treats what is due the dead or what respect should be, or how you generate that respect, is something else. And I suppose it comes down to if you're a gambler you can't be other than a believer because if I gamble eighty, ninety, a hundred lousy years on the planet against eternity. And I'm pretty sure—when I was a child I thought the world would end when I died. That isn't gonna be so. Now I think that eternity is beyond our imagination though I still fret and stew about Judgment Day. If you're a believer you've got to believe that you'll be held accountable or it's a great big fantasy to be accounted for, to account for your deficiencies. Maybe it's an element of discipline. But I've got to believe what I believe and that is generally the creed laid down for me as a child. It's the best that I can hope for. So forgive me for my lapsing into these sidelines but that's the way I am.

PIEHLER: Were you confirmed in the Lutheran Church?

SWINGEN: Yes. Confirmed. I remember practicing for the Confirmation so I wouldn't stutter too much over some of the responses required, although I think a lot of it gets down to simply a yay or a nay. So ...

PIEHLER: You mentioned very briefly about school and how small the town was, did you have kindergarten?

SWINGEN: No there wasn't any such thing as a kindergarten.

PIEHLER: So you started first grade?

SWINGEN: First grade. Well that was soon enough for most everyone. I started at the usual time and went through grade school, which went up through the eighth grade and then I went right into the high school which was across the hallway in this two-story building that we lived in. Then they did build a supplementary school for the grades one through four. And those are the days I remember, mostly because I learned—the biggest thing was handling the multiplication table. And being able to do it at the blackboard. And listening to the titters of the crowd if you didn't finally master nine times seven. Which is a stick-up point for me, sixty-three didn't seem to match with anything. I prided myself on my studies of history. One item that I remember I failed in was when St Augustine was settled—1565. I couldn't come up with the right answer. And I remember that to this day. So whenever I think about Alzheimer's is setting in, I say well, "Think about St. Augustine." Now St. Augustine is as far from a Lutheran parish as the law allows. But nevertheless that's a sticking point. So I fumble around that way.

PIEHLER: Are there any teachers you remember that stick out in memory?

SWINGEN: Yeah, I remember my first teacher, Mrs. Krog. Fell in love with her. Very matronly, kindly person who would clean off my face if I would get pushed down on the school ground. There were bullies. And they were, they came as a result, I think, of economics. Some were denied much comfort, probably very bad conditions at home. And they would take it out on the kids that came to school in clean clothes. I would have my scraps and sometimes I think of war as the start of scraps because when I think of wars starting over unidentified things like somebody steals some countries pig and you've got a forty years war or whatever it is. I think that we have these scrapes, or scraps, scrap being a short term. Starting all these things that happen and ... I better wait for the next question.

PIEHLER: How big was your school? I think you said in your high school graduating class there was four?

SWINGEN: I think there were about twelve in the high school graduating class and I think I was the only one that went directly onto college. And I was sorta proud of the high school class, or my teachers, who were able to spend a large amount of time, especially one teacher who was basically, ugly looking woman who was a real god send to me as far as the classics because where in the world in the sod shanty country area would you get Shakespeare and Francis Bacon tied in one blanket? And while I didn't understand much at least I had familiarity with some of the language and the fact the people in the wide world were speaking other than guttural Norwegian. I thought that it was great that she stood out and made me think. There were other younger teachers in their early twenties, when I was quite impressed by them. And I remember one girl who was rather buxom, we used to have a trick whereby we'd ask her to bend over to look at our papers while the others boys would stand farther back and ...she was well developed.

PIEHLER: Did you have any male teachers in your school?

SWINGEN: Yes, we had teachers in math and we had some in courses like geography. And I think they were quite good. We had of course biology teachers, male biology teachers, that were more interested in developing sports arena than anything else, 'cause they had to double as

athletic coaches. Some of them were quite good, others were just saying, “God we have to put our time in this small town? Well, it’s out of Purgatory.” They women teachers were the best, the most thoughtful and understanding and probably the most culturally enlightened and made us do some work. And just like the nuns are to the Catholics, I think the Catholic Church is missing a lot by not having any faithful nuns doing the work for them, or work in the educational system.

PIEHLER: You mentioned there were twelve in your graduating class. How often would people drop out of school to work on the farm or just to find other work?

SWINGEN: Well most of all of it was based on the crop farming and so that school would generally start after Labor Day, which meant pretty good because normally in a short growing season. You had to be sure that the grain was in and another thing of course, grain farming didn’t always demand that you had to be there when the frost came in. As a matter of fact flax for instance, you could cultivate or cut that after the snow had fallen. It’s like being protected by these little nature intended balls that I – I’ve seen threshing machines operating, flax before combining, when the snow was flying. But to get to the questions, yes, there was time off and I remember some of the excuses some of the farm kids would give, that whenever there was a slaughtering process or whenever they were trying to can chickens, might be out for a couple of days. Or if there were some other danger or disaster—normally school went on always, even with deaths in the families. School would go on for that child and he’d be there, even though he had tears in his eyes, he would be there.

SWINGEN: And but in a one crop country, the fall harvesting season was really the only time. Then there were times of course, in the worst of winter, but ... school would be operating at just a few kids from town would be in school and the farm kids would stay home because they wouldn’t want to get the horses out or bring them in to town. The sleighs were kind of a valuable part of the Christmas season because of course you could run the sleigh over any ground or field or whatnot, you could take shortcuts—when the sleigh season came in. But it was quite a job because some of the kids had to come through five miles of half roads and half whatever. I’m glad I lived in a town where I could walk to school, and even in the blizzards I could identify where I lived. And then too of course I was watched over like a wayward pilgrim. ‘Nough said.

PIEHLER: Was the state highway paved?

SWINGEN: No it was not paved. Now it has been paved. And even the place by one of the farms is paved blacktop type of thing. But so the money roads were something. I remember wrecking a brand new car while taking workers out to one of the farms. And my father saying “Are you hurt?” “No.” “Well alright then we’ll have punishment.” And then my mother said, “Well poor boy.” Then my father said the equivalent of baloney or “Yeah let’s have this out.” And then I was grounded for some time. I don’t think I had a driver’s license or any such thing.

PIEHLER: Well I read that North Dakota didn’t get driver’s licenses until the late 1930’s even.

SWINGEN: Well I don’t know what the facts really are but I know that ... I know that I was driving when I was eleven years old, not having any wit or wisdom but simply trying to follow. Of course sometimes it was a miracle that the cars would start, which was a salvation for many

situations. 'Cause the old classic situation of a boy asked his father for the car tonight. And he says yes, with the proviso, "Yes, if it runs." And sometimes it wouldn't run, so it'd be a case of unrequited love because the damn machine wouldn't go.

PIEHLER: How many of the farmers, and you even said your mother never really drove but was more comfortable with a horse.

SWINGEN: Oh yeah.

PIEHLER: What was the proportion of horse versus car and truck growing up?

SWINGEN: Well early on with the surge of prosperity before the start of the Depression, every family most had a car of some kind. Some of them were pretty good but most farms had probably the equivalent of a Buick. Then of course with the Depression coming in, cars would go down to Fords or Chevrolets or even the mixture of cars that are now long forgotten like some of the General Motors or other cars like the Nash or the Overland and—but I still remember farmers coming to town with buggies and my father and mother in their courtship was a buggy affair. And then thank God, as we'd say, "The horse had more sense than he did." And of course the buggy was ideal for those farmers that would come to town and have a drinking bout of the home brew. There were no taverns or such because the piety, the Lutheran and Presbyterian piety said no saloons. But there were places where you could get home brew. And a farmer if he could get aboard the buggy, the horse was smart enough to take him out of town, even if it'd be miles away. And the story of farm boys was that, "Dad came home, he wasn't in good shape but the horse surely was." (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Your hometown ... in the Great Depression, did it have any relief projects? Were there any WPA [Works Progress Administration] or PWA [Public Works Administration]?

SWINGEN: No there were none. I remember in the Depression when my mother would take me on a sled, a pretty good size sled, she was able to pull. And there were a number of hams, hams, not big ones, 'cause they were piled all around me and I was just kinda like a small pig surrounded by these hams. And we'd go from place to place, sometimes on the opposite end of town. There had to be some discretion, because you had to do it sorta like "I was just dropping by and I thought you'd like to have this," and not referring to well "I know you're hungry, here's something." That's a killer that would bring nothing but tears and discouragement and in cases where I remember a person closing a door, not wanting to accept that which they obviously needed. And ... this kind of thing and there was no—the churches didn't even 'cause they figured they couldn't do anything more than that which you could do yourself for people. My mother used to give clothes, 'cause the saddest thing in the world is a girl in tatters. A lovely child, a girl, in tatters. Boys can stand in rags, but girls can't. And my mother would do her best to give clothes ... and I remember her even giving tennis rackets she bought to some of the girls. And my father would say, "What are you doing that for? There's no place to play, they haven't even got a net." But sometimes just the illusion of having something was good. And then too of course winter clothing was something else. It's terrible to be tattered in a hot summer but its worse to be tattered in a freezing winter, which is maybe so simple that it isn't even worth talking about. But winter clothing was at a premium and mittens, a person that has frozen hands is probably useless

to do anything where manual labor and dexterity means something. So she would make mittens, knit mittens, buy mittens and then to surprising men who would go without work gloves. Now you see everybody ... If a person is using even a feather duster they've got to have gloves. Now there were the hands were such that like in shaking hands with an alligator. They were so rough. I remember rough hands, even on women. I remember kindly ladies patting my face as a boy, felt like I was rubbing against a barbed wire fence. Well that's putting it a little extra, but that's ok.

PIEHLER: You came from a Republican family. What did you and your parents think of Franklin Roosevelt.

SWINGEN: My mother thought—my father came home and said, “Mother, I’ve done something today. I voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt.”

PIEHLER: This was in 1932.

SWINGEN: 193 ...32. 1932. That's when he first came in, he came to office in '33. And she was aghast and I think she really didn't want to talk to him for several days. But he said, “Woman, we've got our backs against the wall. We owe five years of back taxes. The only reason we have our property is that nobody wants it. We have our backs to the wall.” And he'd say, “If it weren't for your mother,” his mother-in-law, “we'd be in very tough shape.” The lumberyards were at a standstill. The sales were nothing. People were working in the lumberyard for a dollar and a half a day. Full days. Of course there was nothing to do but straighten piles that didn't need straightening. It was kinda like a privatized WPA. It was ... so bad. But then again of course, my father got over this. My mother never did get over FDR. She said, “He is changing things too much. The Lord intended us to have some periods of deprivation. This is a test.” And I didn't know what to think. I thought Republicans were generally dull people. But maybe we needed dull people because just like we expected that out of our ministers or priests, that was it. My father, when I went away to school I made friends with this Bill Langer, who was a Republican, a Nonpartisan Leaguer under the Republican banner. Just like a Southern Democrat. They're all now basically Republicans. They're the only part of the Republican party that is still alive in this country. In a few other areas. The rest of it are have-not areas that are largely Democratic. Only three percent of people in the land are very rich. Only three percent are very poor. Basically dirt poor. We're arguing about the effects of these six percent of the population. Ninety four percent of us are up for grabs, we'll go any which way. It's too bad because we supposed to be an educated, thinking people. God knows what we really are. I am a Republican because I think we have a responsibility to do that which we can to take our lumps. I think I got too much back from my own government. But it's the old story, if it's there you're a damned fool if you don't take advantage of it. And maybe that's what's wrong with the tax code. But I'm getting so far afield now that I'm talking in another way. Forgive me ...

PIEHLER: Well, William Langer and the Nonpartisan League, from what I've read in the non-partisan league, one description was very colorful. Langer would lose the governorship at one point over a federal conviction that would eventually be overturned. He would come back to office, while as a Republican state still in 1930's it was a Republican state as you had mentioned earlier, really to state bank, still exists, kept a grain elevator for years after.

SWINGEN: Yeah, they've got that going up there and they've got a state insurance program exists in some form. So I supported really a Socialist program but I didn't know a Socialist from a Sioux Indian, I was just naive and following along. I knew that people were hurting but I wasn't personally hurting. And I—early on I could spend my time doodling over, here I am an only son, an only grandchild and all these people are working hard, they're working for me. I regarded my ancestors as just kinda my faithful flock and the arrogance that's built into that, then you start in with imagination so I'm grateful on one hand and arrogant as all get out on the other. And that arrogance stays with you and God I hope that God grades on a curve on Judgment Day.

PIEHLER: One of the things you wrote to Willie [Edgar C. Wilson] once, you were sending a memoir of another friend of yours, a former governor I think of Idaho, Bill ... I'm forgetting his name ...

SWINGEN: Willie was the Idaho feller.

PIEHLER: Okay, Willie was sending it to you.

SWINGEN: Yeah.

PIEHLER: But you had replied to him and you talked about Langer, sort of a run-in you had, using the state seal in college.

SWINGEN: Yes, I did that. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Well could you explain how you've ...

SWINGEN: Well I'll tell you what, I was a—one of my fraternity brothers worked for a printing company and they had copies of the state seal available to them for business purposes. And I was down late night one night visiting my friend at his work, it was after school work and I said, "God this would look nice on my stationary." I was running a campaign then for Bill Langer, which was a no-no. My father then had come around to saying that, "it's alright to vote Roosevelt, in the depths of it we've got to do something, but then after we've got to come to our senses and you can't have a man like Langer who's under indictment and is probably a crook." To use the politest term. So in my office today I have a picture of Langer hanging with a letter, which he writes to congratulate me, that letter was written forty-five years ago and he says, "I appreciate your father's differences with me." My father said "Don't ever bring that guy to this town to have him speak!" I used to campaign with him. And I got a kick out of that. Any boy who is 18 or 19 campaigning with a Governor, that is big stuff, particularly back in the late '30's. Nobody really gave a damn on what you were saying or thinking ... But I liked him. I thought he was a great fellow. He, by contrast, had become Attorney General of the State of North Dakota before he could vote. An outrageous situation. Of course now you can vote before—just after you leave your mother's teat.

PIEHLER: Well I mean he was really—how young he was when he was Attorney General?

SWINGEN: Yeah and the first thing he did was he sued all the railways and that fell in line with me because I thought at that time that the railway corporation was a symptom of the worst part of capitalism. Because I remember being as a boy, aboard a train, where I was sounding off as I was apt to do, and my mother would say “Hush! There’s a superintendent of the railway division here.” Now I would say, “Well throw the bum off the train and start complaining about the service!” Then of course I was taught to be quiet because he was a symbol of authority. He had the equivalent authority of a sheriff or a marshal. So for this Governor to sue as Attorney General then ... all the railways; the Great Northern, the Northern Pacific, the Sioux Line, and I guess those were the three big ones, was quite—he outdid Elliot Spitzer, who has now taken on everybody including his mother-in-law. I’m running—I’m adlibbing a little bit here. Forgive me for that.

PIEHLER: Well one of the things that in some ways Langer represented was a real antipathy toward the railroads, through Eastern—eastern was defined as also St. Paul. It wasn’t just New York. It was also St. Paul.

SWINGEN: Anything east of the Red River to the north, which actually flows north, which was another geographical aberration, that was eastern capitalist interests and uh it was a symptom of rural poverty. And then to the North Dakota, the land of the fighting Sioux, except when they were so drunk they couldn’t pull the bowstring.

PIEHLER: You also mentioned campaigning with Langer as a young man.

SWINGEN: I thought that was great.

PIEHLER: .Where would you travel to?

SWINGEN: We’d travel through largely northern and central Dakota, where there were a number of teachers colleges, or normal schools as they were called, and I would go there. Of course most of those people then were not pro-Langer so I had a hostile audience. I remember speaking to a group of Russian farmers in the north, or the southwestern part of the state, up near Mott, and not being able to communicate at all. I would have done better if I had just stood there and picked my nose. But nevertheless I got a kick out of it. I learned some things from him. Number one, he said, “You’ve got to learn to keep your body in shape.” And he always wanted me to go out to one of the farms and work on the farm.

PIEHLER: Really? To get in shape?

SWINGEN: To get in shape. And he also said, “Learn how to eat and drink if you’re with a public.” He said that the most significant thing a politician learns is bladder control. He said, “If you ever got to pee in a public gathering, you’re not in shape to be rational.” Of course I’ve learned through this, otherwise people say, “You’re lips are turning blue, you must have to pee.” Well. And then too, politeness. A politician must always be polite, even though you’re castigated, spat upon, thrown or hit by eggs or what not. You present a priceless image. You don’t come back fighting mad because then you’re done. But what you say in the column can be anything you want, cause you’re immunized then. At least they can’t throw anything at you. But

it's funny how he never did really talk about the common good. He just talked about being friendly people, or being with friendly people. And having people like you. The price that a politician pays for trying to present the friendly image. And issues come and go. Don't get tangled up in issues too much.

PIEHLER: That's what he'd say to you?

SWINGEN: Yea.

PIEHLER: He was very much a professional politician?

SWINGEN: Oh he was a great politician.

PIEHLER: This was in a sense how he made a living and he gave you in many ways very practical advice if you were to become a politician. Had you thought of ...

SWINGEN: No, I didn't think of it because I didn't want to risk exposure. I am, by all ... the thing I worry most about is Judgment Day and then being a loser. So in the process I've become a conservator. Which means I'm not really, I'm not an aggressive capitalist. So I think that capitalism is what we all are—if the jungle was still out there then we're gonna be kept in it.

PIEHLER: I'm curious about being in politics, you know being with the governor and campaigning in the '30's and policies—there was radio but there was no television, and these were more isolated ...

SWIGNERN: These were isolated though I did have about five occasions—No I'll say four, four occasions when I wrote out a television ... no more than five minutes. Of course because I'm generally long-winded and slow talking, slow on the development of ideas. In five minutes I wouldn't say very much but maybe that's what politics is all about. Saying everything but saying nothing. And I would go on the station in Grand Forks, paid for, I'd go up there and I really at the time there was nothing canned 'cause they didn't have that kind of thing going then, I had to be there and blast into this drafty little room they put me in and speak my piece. Of course I had no audience and I had only hand signals saying, "You're done buster," and then I quit. And I never paid for it, never did anything. Don't know who paid for it. As a matter of fact, sometimes I said, because nobody even responded to it, maybe it was just; maybe I was just talking to myself. I don't know. I think that I did get some acknowledgment, because some of the more pious and proper people would say, "What the hell are you doing that for? You're supporting someone that is under indictment, what are you gonna go into, criminal law?" Or the equivalent.

PIEHLER: What year were you sure you would be going to college or were you always sure?

SWINGEN: It was a given.

PIEHLER: It was given. Even when you very young.

SWINGEN: Even very young, yes. Even—no matter what. In the wave of prosperity there was a—it was just a given. My father had attended a short time, or a year, a little college in Iowa, Cornell, Mt. Vernon. My mother had attended just a smattering of time at Valley City at a normal school down there. Of course the days when women weren't supposed to be educated, they could spell their own name and maybe draft a sentence or two on a birthday card that was the limit of their academic need. And she did that, she did develop a, she went to a one room schoolhouse near where the family farm was. She rode horseback to school. She did carry a rifle, one time when there were a few, when she was a kind of target for those intent upon assault and the like. But other than that she was opposed to firearms in general. Partly because she didn't want me to be careless.

SWINGEN: I had an incident worth mentioning. When I was in the high school, I went out hunting with ... a friend and my father came out of his office in the side room and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm out hunting with my friend." And he said, "With what kind of a weapon?" So I handed him the weapon, and this rifle discharged right in the casing. That was the highpoint. I was limited to a slingshot after that time. And I remember my parents talking, so I could overhear them, out of my earshot so to speak, saying, "Mother, that kid of ours isn't too bright. He nearly killed me today." Then my mother jumped in. I was catered to yet I was not regarded as Nobel Prize quality. So I survived.

PIEHLER: Let me just ...

-----END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE-----

PIEHLER: Why the University of North Dakota, did you have any other options?

SWINGEN: Yes I had a scholarship to a religious school, uh Concordia College, at Morehead, Minnesota. And then I had a scholarship to Jamestown College which is another church school and beyond that my folks didn't want me to go too far away. That was the primary reason and I knew I wanted to go somewhere and yet I was insecure but I said I thought I could hold my own. I recognized that children from the Fargo Valley cities, Grand Forks, even some of the religious schools where the training had been quite intense, were pretty well. I, though I did alright in school and uh but—you see as an only child I spent my time by myself. Except when I would get away and go over to a multi child family. You know, as I said before, the one a year family type. Where they were struggling like mad. So ... as you were saying?

PIEHLER: You mentioned earlier, you joined a fraternity, when did you join the fraternity and what fraternity was it?

SWINGEN: I joined the Sigma Chi fraternity. Actually I was rushed so to speak by the SAE's, Sigma Alpha Epsilon—as a matter of fact I practically made a commitment to them. Then I had to get out of that 'cause I wanted to join the Sigma Chi fraternity, which was more of my liking and some of my best friends were there. Particularly one fellow who was the best man at our wedding, a fellow who died at the age forty-five and here and now I'm eighty-seven and he's been gone these years. I sometimes wondered if I'd combined with him, who was—he was a star

athlete, a wonderful fellow, almost like Willie in his attitude towards life; modest and strong. And ... he and I had kept that organization going. I was the Consul of the Fraternity during both my senior, my junior and senior years. Largely because better qualified men were knocked out by intra-fraternity politics. So sometimes the guy who becomes President isn't necessarily the best of his party. But he is sometimes elected because others will eliminate themselves.

PIEHLER: How dominant were the fraternities and sororities on your campus on North Dakota?

SWINGEN: Quite dominant. At the time I started school, professional people would send their children into the fraternities, those that had higher aspects, higher expectations. Though at the time some of my best friends lived in Camp Depression, which was a series of boxcars converted into housing. Now that's practically like being an intellectual hobo as far as housing goes. And all that went with it they didn't have enough money to do anything. And the rag-tag clothing and all the everything else. But some of them turned out pretty well. It just shows that maybe like a poor writer living in the garret sometimes will turn out a gem. But we lived pretty well because of the ill winds I referred to—I even had a set of tails, as a freshman, in a poor dirt college. And we had the entertainment down at the lakes, Minnesota lakes. We had quite a lively entertainment. I didn't live at the fraternity house because I didn't like to be too close. I had to have my own space, my own time to do things. And I lived in one of the administrators offices, which was just a block away from the fraternity house. I had to have that much space between me and the brothers. Brotherhood has its limitations. Togetherness sometimes bothers me. Of course I was used to having it my own way, alone. Part of this you'll have to edit out because it's irrelevant and the judge would say, "Please confine your answers to the questions."

PIEHLER: You mentioned being very politically active in Governor Langer's campaign, were you active at all involved in student politics?

SWINGEN: No. I didn't feel there's any purpose in that. And I knew that I was not going to practice in that area and I had a smattering that I would probably even leave North Dakota because I thought, unwisely to my discredit, that it was too darn provincial.

PIEHLER: I remember you said earlier you thought your hometown was very provincial and wanted to move to Fargo.

SWINGEN: Then everything I got into seemed to be too provincial. Which means that either I don't understand things or I've become—my horizon changes. I don't know.

PIEHLER: It's a basic question I should have asked earlier, how did you get so involved with Governor Langer because your father was opposed to this.

SWINGEN: I'd like to see ND #1, the big gold Cadillac, parked in front of the fraternity house. It was an ego thing for me. And then too, when I put this symbol of the state on my stationary and I was the—and the President of the University said, "This is enough for expulsion!" Course they needed money so desperately I think that even if the Devil had been enrolled they would have said ... they'd say "Stay, because we need your money." The Governor went with me to the President and said, "John" putting his arm—he had this press the flesh thing down perfectly. He

said, “John, you got a good boy here. He’s gonna go places, he’s gonna do things. We like him, I want him on my team. He’s had this little problem with you here and I’ve looked at it but I’ve been so busy with the appropriations problem that I haven’t really had a chance to examine fully ... (Laughter). Now for the good of the order, for the good of the school and for the good of the legislative intent, I think you better probably keep him on the roll here.” And the President not knowing what to do, being faced with appropriations and everything else (Laughter) I stayed. But my father when he learned of it he said, “My God son what’s the matter with you? We have tried to teach you to do the right thing.” I said “Well Dad, you didn’t teach me about how to handle the good things, you taught me to try to stand up for some things” and uh but he said to me, “Do you understand what the Holy Grail is?” And I didn’t know what the Holy Grail was and whether it was an animal, mineral or vegetable. Even at college level. The Holy Grail was too mystic for me. Well I kinda got over that with my Dad. But he was for discipline and he said, “You’re a damn fool.” But I said, “Well I kinda like Bill Langer” and he said, “Well that’s your privilege and I’m not gonna interfere with your own judgments” but he said, “You’ve got to pick the people a little better than you’ve been pickin ‘em.”

PIEHLER: I’m curious. So you and him, when you visited the fraternity house the first time?

SWINGEN: Yes. And I was introduced to him and I kinda liked the way he was doing things. He represented a liveliness and I thought that he had the makings of a doer. Anybody who could graduate from Columbia Law School before twenty-one had to be pretty good stuff. And as history would have it, my graduating from school didn’t occur until I was twenty-nine years old. Of course the War intervened. He was a prodigy and the rest of us were dullards. I liked that and I liked his style. Norwegians are so different in my mind because I had so few to compare them with, that they became not models that I necessarily wanted to follow—now that’s heresy of course, to talk that way. But I assume that you’re interested in my real feeling rather than some artificially manufactured stuff.

PIEHLER: Now ... we want the real uh ...

SWINGEN: Well, which will make me eligible for some asylum somewhere.

PIEHLER: When did you even know you wanted to become a lawyer?

SWINGEN: Never came upon me.

PIEHLER: Not in college ...

SWINGEN: Not even in college. I thought that maybe if it could occur I could be a perennial student. Which still may be a good idea. Therefore instead of having people going out and making their mark somewhere, maybe the ultimate is just a constant studying process. Which should be—because the world is so great, so fantastic, so many things. To be a young man now and be faced with the massive learning that you have to participate in, overwhelming. Sometimes I think that the days of the one-room schoolhouse, reading, writing and arithmetic maybe what is. Then the soul of ours, which comes in, which is all which we really have to worry about anyway. Unless you’re so depraved that you’ve got to have these, satisfy these habits. The soul—and I

don't know how much you need for the soul. The most interesting people I know are among the least educated. The grandmothers that I know, remarkable people. Maybe wisdom comes in little capsules where maybe a few words says it all instead of a library or an encyclopedia of whereases. Which is a cop-out because I'm not much on this refinement thing, of taking a subject and then refining it to death until you finally get down to a question of, "We don't know if this is true or not." So I talk in riddles, forgive me.

PIEHLER: In college what was your favorite subject and what professors stick out in your mind?

SWINGEN: History. All the way through history professors. From English history, which is the background supposedly for the law, where you would get the background of the English kings and then the big, the Magna Carta, the key points in English history. European history, before World War II, when we talked about the colonial aspects of the great powers. Then American history. The professors were the key. They were the men that permitted me to talk out. English classes, other classes were just kind of a mumbling exercise. But history was a confrontation with the heroes of our time, the mistakes of our time and those people that kinda put it all together. So it was my first—all the other things were rosy interviews (Laughs) with the future. History was the only reality I had. History was the thing that kind of caused me to think with certainty about dates. How do you get a perspective of history unless you tie in the wars, the great discoveries—you don't need to know what was discovered or how it works but when did it occur? Where you are in this time frame ... that was a big thing to me.

SWINGEN: So these people, one of them encouraged me to go on to Law School, for what reason I don't know. He was a Czech by birth, had some basis in European history. And ... I remember him affectionately. The English history professor was a more staid, studious type. Probably wanted to get back into the Ivy League. Sure is a funny thing, during the Depression or tough years, every single college professor I had as an undergraduate was a PhD. Now these poor devils go to the Big Ten schools. I had a better education even in poverty times because of the quality of these professors. And I never stopped to thank many of them. That's my—and I never corresponded with more than one or two. But of course in the stream of things you don't get a chance to really hold onto someone unless they're gonna be a part of your life. One of the things I hold onto is this Willie, I'm fascinated with him yet everyday or anything like that. And as a matter of fact, sometimes I say, Willie your letters are too damn much like a telegraph. Let's get with it. And then sometimes I tear those letters up because why should I insult my best friend? But then what are good friends for except sounding boards? And he has brought me into this thing about history again. And I'm fascinated with it. Politics without history is nothing. Organization or defense is nothing without history.

PIEHLER: You had ROTC?

SWINGEN: Yes.

PIEHLER: You were in it for the two years everybody ...

SWIGNERN: Two years. A kind of a nothingness. Learned to march with your left foot first. Never went to summer camps.

PIEHLER: You didn't join ...

SWIGNERN: Didn't intend to join it, didn't want anything. Too isolationist. And also didn't want people telling me when to march, when to step off. I had that—part of that was due to my own fatigue, my own laziness, my own lack of guts. Which sometimes you get to learn about when you're just damn old that's all.

PIEHLER: You mentioned earlier you wrote this column for this high school newspaper, not high school, the local ...

SWINGEN: The local paper.

PIEHLER: The local paper .

SWINGEN: All the Norwegians who ignored it or would have a chance to look at it.

PIEHLER: And you were interested in what was going on in Europe and you were concerned about Germany. But then you said that when you got to college you weren't even involved in the Yanks Aren't Coming?

SWINGEN: Well just to ... symbolically. Didn't do anything about it because I still felt that it was none of our business. And of course we had no, nothing inflammatory, like the Holocaust, which even the natives didn't know anything about. And I remember the native Germans marching through the concentration camps or what passed for it, now there were many camps—sometimes single farmers, single German farmers would have the making of a concentration camp themselves. They would feed these slaves, they would get more liberties than in a barbed wire fence, but they were slaves and the threat was always there. You either work hard here or you go into the camp.

PIEHLER: So even when you weren't writing about it, you fit the isolationist mood?

SWINGEN: Yes. 'Cause again I didn't want to, I didn't really want to go to war because the nearest I got to any confrontations was trying to play Cowboy and Indian. Now maybe what that's what wars are like really in the ultimate, grown men playing Cowboy and Indian. I don't know.

PIEHLER: Were there any interventionist groups on campus when you were in North Dakota?

SWINGEN: No. No. Because there'd be no need for them. Why intervene in something that nobody thinks about it or does anything about or cares about.

PIEHLER: So the student body mimicked the ...

SWINGEN: The student body would mimic the whole ... the whole area, “What do you got against the ... the Kaiser wasn’t so bad? What’s wrong? Why get excited?” But there was a threat that maybe the rumblings were there. And then too, you’d occasionally get the stories from some poor World War I veteran who is coughing himself to death because he was gassed, that would be trotted out as the horrors of war. Then too, like I said, even the Lou Ayers film, supposedly anti-war, didn’t cut any ice. And the protesting was merely anti-government anyway. The Germans, the Scandinavians, said, “The government is always right, don’t challenge the government. They’re doing the right thing. Be grateful, you’ve got a government.” And now the refinement is, the name of the game is to pick everything apart. Sometimes for right but we’re overdoing it. I want to see more discipline. I want to see the Constitution remain as is. I reserve the right to be old-fashioned.

PIEHLER: You would go to Harvard Law School after graduating. You mentioned earlier that you hadn’t really traveled—growing up it was North Dakota, Minnesota, and how far south?

SWINGEN: Well I had seen really nothing more. I hadn’t, I’d gone to the World’s Fair in New York City and also the big fair in Chicago.

PIEHLER: So you went to that, the Chicago one in the early ‘30’s?

SWINGEN: ’33.

PIEHLER: And then ’39.

SWINGEN: ’39 in New York. And that was about the limit of it all. We were strictly provincial. And stemming from the fact that I was scheduled to go to Norway with my maternal grandparents, had they survived, just to see the old Fatherland, so to speak.

PIEHLER: When was that trip supposed to take place?

SWINGEN: In ’39.

PIEHLER: ’39.

SWINGEN: But you see the war intervened and by ’39 only my maternal grandmother survived. She died in 1940. So that was all over. The family returned to the sacred sod—that was something that never took place. Of course my maternal grandfather said that I should have dropped out of college at the second year, that’s all I needed. And that travel was just a luxury. You could buy another farm for the cost of another trip to Europe. And the lives were dull but ... they were grateful to be American citizens because in Europe the law primogeniture would have prevented them from having anything. They would’ve lived as a second class relative within their own family. Which doesn’t—that doesn’t appeal to me but again, I don’t have that problem.

PIEHLER: I’m struck by this trip that your grandparents were going to take, they had never been back to ...

SWINGEN: No. For the simple reason that they were grateful for what they did have and I don't think they realized exactly what they did have. There comes a time when the biggest surprise to people is what they find in their safety deposit box. "Oh yeah I remember that... we must've had that for years." Something that is worthwhile or a deed, or nowadays stocks, bonds or whatever. Maybe stocks that haven't been converted over to a modern, contemporary corporation. Alright.

PIEHLER: I'm struck by your grandparents wanting to go back to Norway and then the war intervening. Because one of the things I was thinking about a few weeks ago was how, for a certain—until recently when immigrants left their home country and if they didn't go back, if they were unhappy but they stayed. They often never went back to visit because it was so hard, it was so costly and the distances were so great. And now often immigrants can go back with air travel. Even if they stay here. But for your parents, your grandparents, this ... they had really cut their ties.

SWINGEN: Yes. And that was something. Which shows either more character or lack of sensitivity, I don't know which. I'm sure that ... I come from basically poor people, maybe poor people that might have been a little lucky, but the idea of being poor was always predominant. Maybe poor was a sign to the next generation to be thrifty. "We're poor we can't afford it." My father would say, "Can't afford it." I knew he could afford it.

PIEHLER: So you felt growing up, even though you were well taken care of, there was still a notion that the wolf is always at the door.

SWINGEN: That's right. And there was always somebody who was a disaster or a failure, or a financial bankrupt, to distinguish that from morally bankrupt that was pointed to. Heroes were never pointed to as successful. The people at stake, at issue, were always failures. So that put a negative on it.

PIEHLER: You mentioned going to Chicago when you were still quite young. What do you remember about the Chicago World's Fair and did your parents also go?

SWINGEN: I went with my father. My mother went with a group of ladies. So we'd have equalized opportunity within the family. My father took me to my first big major league baseball team. He was a baseball fan. Saw the White Sox play down at Kaminsky Park, and I said, "Kaminsky, that's not Norwegian." No, of course not. And I remember some of the scientific things, and I remember I was starting to first become aware of girls.

PIEHLER: It was at that World's Fair.

SWINGEN: At the World's Fair. And of course there was Sally Rand, my father would not take me to that. The fan dance was simply a depravity exercise.

PIEHLER: But you were very curious of this ...

SWINGEN: I was curious, I was curious of that. And I never had any sisters to look at or peek at so everything was quite—I was sheltered to the point of where I wondered about myself,

which was normal. So ... my father was good and generous to me and I enjoyed it and he seemed to enjoy it and he spent time with me on the technical exhibits and there were many then which are routine today. I think I saw my first elementary television thing, I said, "My god, that's new ain't it?"

PIEHLER: I'm curious about the World's Fair 'cause I've heard a lot of people, particularly in the Northeast, talk about the World's Fair, and even in the Southeast who went to the World's Fair of 1939.

SWINGEN: Then I was older and I ... was in school and then of course the war was on in Europe and I was headed east to Cambridge, knew I was going there for at least a season, and then I became aware of the New York Times. Then I knew that the publications, the big city press, was upon us, the real big city press, the world press.

PIEHLER: Why Harvard? How did that come about?

SWINGEN: Only because it was recommended to me by my History professor.

PIEHLER: From the English professor?

SWINGEN: No, the Czech. His name is Felix Vonderzdech and he was a Czechoslovakian or as we would say sometimes, Bohemian, or quasi-German. And he thought that was a good school and people said, "Yes, if you can get in there, fine." Well they were anxious for students too. I met a number of big people. I met Joe Kennedy Jr. and was entertained by him at his quarters. Of course he lived well and he even had his brother Jack, who became President, in—Jack used to be sent out for cigarettes. Now Jack was about six months older than I was, of course Joe was much older and he for some reason—of course the rich or the powerful could go to school anytime they want. The rest of us fall in line with traditional age groups or we don't go. I met people superficially like Nicholas Biddle, insufferable. The antithesis of a friendly Catholic, Provincial timber boy. Joe should've been President.

PIEHLER: Well everything I've read he was destined to be.

SWINGEN: Yeah. And I asked Jack when he was up here campaigning years ago if that were really true and he said, "Yes. I'm a second choice."

PIEHLER: Of the family ...

SWINGEN: Yep. And Jack of course had health problems, even then. I think he showed Addison's disease even as a college boy. But he was bright enough, careful enough and these pictures of Jack in a wheel-chair—straight-back chair are not a fabrication, they are for real. Joe had the ear of FDR. FDR didn't particularly like Joe Kennedy Sr. for the same reason that an aristocrat doesn't care for a noisy Irishman. Or an English aristocrat, which FDR was. And I think Joe used us to say, basically, "Is your region going to fight?" And I would have to say, you know, "We've got nothing against the Germans."

Of course Pearl Harbor changed all that. We could hate the Red Devil, or the Yellow Devil, with immunity. We couldn't hate the German who was just like us because he was us. And that still holds true today. It's just like Saddam getting rid of the bad apples. Sometimes you've got to take down a country to get rid of a bad apple. And the Germans were so well-disciplined they didn't know what to do. The Fatherland meant something and I can understand that. And I'm running adrift here and yet war and society are so inter-changed, or a part of one another, you can't help yourself.

PIEHLER: You know, I'm curious about your relationship—Joe Kennedy Jr. Did you meet the father, the ambassador?

SWIGNERN: No. We would ... I suspect I was just to use a technical term, a geographical anomaly. Now refine that if you please or think about that, but I was merely a provincial specimen. Like really who cared about North Dakota but maybe from the Middle West—there was a time when FDR didn't know what the temperament of the country was, so Pearl Harbor was a godsend to him. Especially when Germany declared war on the U.S. two days after Pearl Harbor. Otherwise I don't know whether we would've declared war or whether there'd been anything. But when FDR came and said, "We ... a state of war exists between us and the state of Japan," big thing—he didn't come out and say that war declared between us and Germany. Of course because the Germans permitted him to say nothing because they already declared war because they had to. Or at least they couldn't revoke it. But then politics and war, sometimes I think that your center should have a third—but that would get too involved then. Center for the Study of War, Politics and Society. Maybe politics creeps in there anyway.

PIEHLER: I'm curious about going from North Dakota, which is so isolationist, to Cambridge, which was much more divided, particularly Harvard. I mean there were communists at Harvard, there were real peace—not just isolationists, but a real peace movement.

SWINGEN: Well ... it was there and I remember a law professor telling us that we were a bunch of cowards, we should all resign from Harvard, drop out and join the Canadian Air Force. It's the only thing a decent, red-blooded North American can do. "The Canadians are like your brothers, they're like you, they are your brothers, you've got relatives in Canada." As I did.

PIEHLER: And this was a Harvard Law professor?

SWINGEN: Yes.

PIEHLER: This was before Pearl Harbor.?

SWINGEN: Before Pearl Harbor. "Join the Canadian Air Force." And of course I don't know the background of the professor because he wasn't—he was strictly, it was an argumentative position to be in, 'cause the student body would be divided. Of course even then people thought of war as dressing up in uniforms and the chances of being killed are one in a hundred. They wanted a parade ground war. But it all blends together.

Now I'm afraid I'm gonna have to go because we've got this lease arrangement down there at the cottage and I want to get my wife and daughter ... though they'll hold the line. Now ...

PIEHLER: I have a late ... We don't need to put this on tape ...

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