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The Interviews

Ralph Arnold

Keosauqua, Iowa

Birthday: January 4, 1918

Interview on October 5, 2001, in his home by Heidi Vice

Edith Arnold, his wife, and Mandy Murphy also present

Q. [Heidi Tice] How long have you lived in the Nauvoo area?

A. [Ralph Arnold] I really started going to Nauvoo when she [Edith] was there, but I knew about Nauvoo being there. I just didn't happen to go there. But it used to be a lot of fun to go up over to the wine and cheese festival. Of course, we don't do that much anymore. We went on vacation and people would ask, "Where are you going to go?" And I'd say, "Well, I'm going to start in Nauvoo." And we went to Nauvoo. We went to as much of the wine empire there, I guess that's what you'd call it. We enjoyed it. We've had pretty close connections to settlers and proselytes and missionaries. We don't mind them. We enjoy very much being there for the blacksmith presentation and the statue garden. It's quite a place. But I've never gone back over there to see the big play that they put on.

Q. [Mandy Murphy] You're missing out.

A. I've just never seen them.

Q. [HT] What about living here in this area?

A. She [Edith] was born here. I was born in Kansas. My parents brought me back here, to Van Buren [County]. I escaped the county once and went to Jefferson County and then came back after four years. I've been here since almost 1943.

Q. What was your occupation?

A. I've been a farmer. I worked for the Soil District as Merle [Heidi's grandfather] did when he was here. And recently—I don't know if you would call it an occupation or not—I've written four books.

Q. [MM] Busy guy! [laughs]

Q. [HT] Besides your wife, what attracted you to come back to the area?

A. All of my ancestors—with the exception of my father, mother, and brother—are buried in the same cemetery. We've been here ever since September 5, 1835. My family is here.

Q. With your family being around for so long, did they know any stories about why the Mormons came?

A. They were here when most of the Mormons came through. I'm sure that they knew something about them, but I've never heard them say anything about it. They'd say different things, but I never heard them say ill about the Mormons. I expect it's because they didn't know much about them before they came back to the area.

Q. What is your opinion of the Mormons?

A. Well, I don't know if I should tell you this. You promise not to tell your grandpa? He worked for part of the soil district as the state aid—he was state employed. The two federal employees were a little bit unkind to him. In fact, they were very prejudiced in their views. Their view was that the only religion was theirs. They didn't like Baptists, they didn't like Catholics, they didn't like Mormons, and they showed this. They were kind of mean to Merle. Anyway, when we got ready to have the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the soil company, I was asked to make a slide show with slides of the very first week we started. I had some of the very day we started. I was going through about two thousand slides of all the pictures of your grandfather—standing in a puddle with his pants rolled up and holding a surveying rod. Now, those yahoos could have walked out to that puddle, but they had ordered him out there. And they did all kinds of things to aggravate him. At the time he worked as a soil technician, there wasn't too many people that understood the Mormons or treated them too nicely. But I went up to them and I said, "You have to be decent to Merle. Quit this dumb treatment of him."

Well, the time came when he loaded up his kids in that station wagon, tied that trailer on behind them, and headed off to Provo. He went to school and came out with a Ph.D., as I understand it. I had heard that he worked in the elite of the Department of Agriculture. I knew what he was studying—the utilization of water and the alfalfa plant.

But I never told these people I knew that. I waited until that night at that meeting when we saw those slides of Merle standing in that puddle and people were making fun of him. I said, "Well, you know something folks, he's a scientist with a Ph.D., and he works for the Conservation of the Working Company." Those two guys were surprised because they were still down working for the soil district.

We used to get into it. I'd fight with them about Catholics. Well, they didn't like Catholics, Mormons. Methodists. I didn't care if they didn't like Catholics or any of them! People probably believed I was atheist because of

all of that. Well, don't you tell your granddad about that.

Q. I won't. What have you liked about living in the area?

A. It's just home. It's a nice place to be. Laid back, easy, scenic—everything here. It reeks with history of which I happen to be mightily interested in. It's just a great place to live.

Q. Have there been any events or traditions in the community?

A. The place over the years has had all kinds of events. Of course, the greatest thing has probably been the thirteenth and fourteenth when they have the Sheep Empire Days, but it's over now. There was a parade in Keosauqua and they used to barbecue a whole sheep. But the Sheep Empire Days were going on when your grandpa lived here.

Your grandpa made a down payment on some land in Laccy Keosauqua Park that the state sold. The state later felt kind of bad for selling it. So Merle decided to give the land back and the state gave him his down payment back. I'm sorry, but I have been operated on, so I sometimes don't get the words out—trying to say them. I can't form the words. So if I sound a little bit odd . . .

Q. [MM] Oh, you make sense to me!

Q. [HT] What are some of the challenges you've found in living here?

A. I don't know. I suppose life in itself is a challenge, but I don't look at it that way. I shouldn't forget running water and electricity. We didn't have electricity. You can see the lamp is barely used. [He and his wife couldn't get the lamp to turn on before we began the interview] We've got electricity now. See those kerosene lamps? [points at shelf] That's what we used to use.

As World War II ended, there was a great influx of building electric lines. I had seen those in other places, so I wasn't too upset about it. So electricity was one thing I didn't have, or running water.

One great thing is the addition of Lake Sujema—that large lake—that's been a great event.

Q. Lake Sujema—Lucille Gano told me that they chose the name that you wanted for it.

A. Well, I'm not going to tell you what it means.

Q. That's what she said, [laughs]

A. Although I have written a letter. The day I die, she [Edith] is to mail it.

Q. What opportunities have you had to serve in civic organizations?

A. The Developmental Association. I was one of the organizers of the Villages of Van Buren, the RC&D, and Pathfinders of RC&D. I was the vice president of the RC&D, but I guess I wasn't good enough for them to be elected president. If you want to see something, there is a wall of has-beens, [points to living room wall] There are about thirteen or fourteen plaques around here. They have everything.

Q. [MM] Do you want me to read them off to you?

A. You're not going to be able to read all of them. Some of them aren't up there, [laughs]

Q. [MM] Someone appreciates you—you've got a lot of these! Van Buren County Bankers and Conservation Master Award. What is that?

A. That was somebody who did a master job of preserving soil. See, I'm one of the forerunners of No Till. This is the twenty-fifth year of No Till. We don't tear the earth out. It keeps the organic matter in the soil much higher. Ours was almost up to four. One and a half to two is what the average is.

Go ahead and read those plaques off to her. She wants something newsy, but you don't have to have them.

Q. [HT] But this is your history!

Q. [MM] Outstanding Citizenship Award. Another recreation one for service to the community. Why did you get that?

A. Being a stinker, I expect, [laughs]

Q. I didn't know they give awards for these services.

A. Well, they was running out of the barrel—they skimmed the bottom of the barrel, [laughs]

Q. I don't believe it. Van Buren Good Samaritan Center: Volunteer of the Year.

A. That's probably a plaque that I'm prouder of. That's a Mormon-related award.

Q. The Appreciation for your Contribution to the Preservation of the Historical Mormon Trail. What is this [on the plaque], a yoke?

A. Yes. One of your [Heidi's] relatives made that yoke.

Q. [HT] Really?

A. I knew him really well, but now I can't think of his name. Isn't that awful?

Q. Was it Vernon Flake?

A. No, it wasn't Vernon. I may think of it before you leave. Then this one over here [points], that's two years for being Chairman of the Developmental Association. I was the only one who ever served two years as chairman.

Q. [MM] Too much bureaucracy?

A. I don't know. And there's one with the state of Iowa on it—for building a model of Lake Sujema, believe it or not. Those others there on the south wall are for yield of wheat.

Q. The wheat challenge?

A. That great big one on that side was the first one I got. That's from the radio station WMT at Cedar Rapids. The one with the many colors on—I guess they just decided I ought to have an award! They gave it to me, anyway.

Q. They like the way you preserved your soil?

A. I guess so. There are a couple or three more around here somewhere. I don't know. You don't need it; you've got enough, [laughs] That's a wall of has-beens.

Q. [HT] From your knowledge of the history in this area, what groups or individuals stand out in your mind?

A. They all blend together really. I'm interested in all of it, and I've written about all of it. I've written about the Mormons. I've written about the Methodists and the Catholics—everything we ever had around here. I've broken some down on nationalities and where they came from. Some are from the southern states. They came out of the deep South and stayed here. But they never did get around to my wife's ancestry, which is German and Prussian. There's quite a community of those. I just can't find anything much about them. They didn't want anybody to know what they were doing. Ku Klux Klan—do you know much about the Ku Klux Klan?

Q. Yes, I do.

A. We had two active members, one more or less—how'd you know about the Ku Klux Klan?

Q. History. I was born in the South.

A. Where were you born?

Q. Texas.

A. Oh, you know about the Ku Klux Klan. My mother was married on her seventeenth birthday, and my dad took her to Texas because he was a ranch farmer down there. Out there on that lone prairie by herself. You know, I bet I'm not answering your questions at all,

Q. Oh no! You're doing great. I think it's wonderful. Do you know much about the conflict that the Mormons had?

A. There wasn't much conflict with the Mormons in Van Buren County. We didn't have any reason to be mad at them. Took advantage of them, though. The old wages for splitting rails was two dollars and a half per thousand. After

they got here it was ninety cents per thousand. You can't be sure about that stuff down there—no matter what they tell you. It's better to take that as a job on the side.

Do you know about the Missouri-Iowa line? The line is not straight. Sullivan made three lines. And the Missourians then drew one line, and it was straight. And it was exactly half a mile south of the establishment. The Missouri line was straight, and the Sullivan line wasn't exactly straight.

Back in 1836–38, it was pretty well considered a no-man's-land. Joseph Smith sent Mormon people here to explore the area to find land where they could build their Zion. They missed it—they got too far north. They got up to Chequest Creek; there they could get the water power that they would need, which is north of the Missouri line. That's hard to find. You've just got to be in the right place. The main trail was about a mile from here. That wasn't the only way they went, however. There were so many wagons with Mormons.

There's a story that one of Brigham Young's writing desks was sold in Winchester—it's a ghost town over there in the northeast part of the county—to raise funds. They suppose it still exists. But you can't trace that story, although it's told at circumstances once in a while.

Ruth Whittaker has a thing that they use for a washstand, but it may have been part of a writing desk—probably came from the Masonic lodge. But you can't prove it or disprove it. Well, you don't need to know too much about it. One of the drivers that drove on it—drove the old stagecoach—said he wanted to be buried near the trail. But they did better than that and buried him dead center in the road, [laughs]

Q. You were helping with the preservation of the Mormon Trail?

A. Yes. I went to Des Moines—to the Big Trail Association—at the beginning. I walked that trail. I walked clear across this county. Now I can't walk, [chuckles]

Q. Are you familiar with the history of the Icarians?

A. Yes, I know a little bit about them. We had the remnants of the Icarian county, the Thremes. They were descendants of the Icarians. The Icarians' history was brief. They didn't last long. Down in western Iowa. But they were here, and that's all.

Q. You don't think they helped to develop the area?

A. They did nothing here in this county. Most of them went to Nauvoo and then out into—well, the little town doesn't exist anymore. It's a ghost town, Icaria. out in western Iowa. The Icarians came to Nauvoo as the Mormons left. That's not part of what you're interested in. That's all I'll say. [laughs]

Q. Are you familiar with the beginning of the wine industry in Nauvoo?

A. No, I'm not. I don't know anything much about the wine.

Q. You don't know why they came?

A. Well, I suspect it had something to do with their nationality. I don't know if you girls know, but people are attempting to establish a wine region here in this county now. They don't know what they are in for. [laughs]

I had an old uncle that was in World War I. He spent some time in France. He had a vineyard with French wine grapes. Sourest dam things—they aren't even good to eat out of the hand at all. I guess it made good wine; I don't know. He made wine. I never knew him to ever sell any of it, and I never knew him to ever drink more than he could sell. But he would steal one occasionally, [laughs] I think he gave most of it away. So I knew a little bit about making wine. My granddad always made two or three gallons every year out of blackberry.

Q. [MM] Blackberry wine?

A. Blackberry wine. And occasionally he'd branch out and make some others out of dandelion and stuff like that. A little potato. There were thirteen stills in this township during Prohibition.

My grandfather was very proud of his cattle business. And lots of people would be coming through—we had all kinds of people wandering. Well, my grandmother had two hired hands. And she would feed them and any people that came by any time, day or night.

Q. [HT] What do you know about the Nauvoo bleu cheese?

A. Oh, Paul and Christine McClintock—they were great friends of ours—we went over to the Grape Festival one time. I bought a pound of bleu cheese, and he said, "Well, I ought to have a pound of bleu cheese." So we started to eat that dam stuff on the road home. We got to the first gas station and he says, "Pull in! I'm thirsty." We drank pop and ate cheese all the way home, [chuckles]

They make the best bleu cheese. Well, I think so. And I love cheese. I've got cheese around here most of the time. I like all kinds of cheese. I even like Limburger. It's not bad after the first bite. You have to get it down—once you get it started, then you're all right.

Q. [MM] But is it good?

A. Yes, it's good! Cats like it better, [laughs]

A [Edith Arnold] Doesn't smell so good.

A. [RA] I had some in the refrigerator for a long time. She [Edith] might have made me throw it away.

Q. [MM] Did it make the refrigerator smell better? Maybe it had been in there for a long time.

A. It doesn't deteriorate; it's already rotten. I haven't eaten any in a long time. I need to get some.

Q. [MM] Where do you get it from?

A. [EA] I don't know where he gets it now.

A. [RA] I don't know where.

I used to teach Methodist Sunday School. Once a year at Christmas time, I'd have a smorgasbord of unusual foods—cheeses, meats, nuts. I'd been around the world and knew all about this stuff. Folks haven't around here. Found out these landlubbers had to eat some fish, [laughs] I like fish and they didn't. And so where I might have gotten that, I might have gotten it in Iowa City or in Des Moines—I don't know where I got it. I'd even buy it locally! Do you know something? It's been twenty years since they sold—

Q. [HT] Cheese?

A. Yes.

Q. Besides Mormons and the Icarians, what churches have been influential?

A. The largest has always been the Methodists. About 154 years ago the Muslims were in town. There was a time when we went through a Catholic-hating period. I always wondered why. I'm sure I used to know about thrashing days—the whole community would get together and thrash. Well, that's full of gossip.

They used to just bash Catholics something terrible. The first thing I knew, my dad would show up and tell the crowd, "You all quiet down." Whenever my father showed up, they'd shut up. That's when I found out my ancestors were Catholics.

Q. [HT & MM] Really! [laughter]

Q. [HT] Even though you weren't in Nauvoo, did you see a change when the Catholics built their convent?

A. No. It didn't bother me a bit. But you have to understand, I have a more liberal view of others' feelings than most people. Better not say most—some. I think it is because everybody's got a right to live.

Q. Did you notice a change when the Mormons came back and started to rebuild Nauvoo?

A. When the Mormons came back, they were pretty well accepted. Everybody figured they had money, and we would get money out of them one way or the other. They were a different type of operators—they were westerners. You always knew a westerner when he farmed—he did it different, [chuckles] Different than what the natives did.

There always have been those that are prejudiced against someone else's religion. And there were some here. But there were also some that tolerated the other religions too. I don't know—about, equal I'd say. They wondered quite a bit at the missionaries. They didn't bother Edith and me. We'd have those boys over—enjoyed having them! We'd sit there and discuss the Bible and a whole lot of things about Heavenly Father and the Book of Moroni.

Q. Mormon.

A. Yes.

Q. Did you notice a difference when Nauvoo started being made into a tourist place? Did more people come through where you lived?

A. No, I don't think I could tell a bunch of difference. The time I was going to see her [Edith] is when they started to come back. They're back now—back with a vengeance. If that's the word to use.

Q. Being this far out, you probably don't go to Nauvoo much.

A. No, we don't. We go by the Mormon temple up in Fairfield once a week.

Q. [MM] There's a temple up in Fairfield?

Q. [HT] It's the church.

A. It's a church. It's just my slang word for it. It's one of the fanciest buildings up there. It's brand new.

Q. Three years old, I think.

A. Something like that.

Q. [MM] Oh. it's one of the pretty church buildings, then.

A. You better believe it is. It seemed to me the Mormons had a little more idea of what the future was holding when they started this church down at the end [of Keosauqua] and closed it. Then they built it up in Fairfield and got all the members in the area together. You can do that now. You've all gotten past moving on over to the West, riding horses and in ox carts. I think it's a pretty good idea. But we go by Fairfield once a week for our drug run. [chuckles]

A. [EA] She probably doesn't know what you're talking about.

Q. [HT] I kind of guessed it. My mom has to take those too. [laughs] Before this interview, did you know about the Brigham Young Academy?

A. Yes. I've read numerous books. I didn't ever accomplish genuine speed-reading, but blame near it.

Q. So you know about Brigham Young University in Utah. Did you know when the university established the program in Nauvoo?

A. No.

Q. What do you think is in the future of Nauvoo and the area around it?

A. It's going to get bigger and bigger.

Q. Is that what you want to see happen?

A. Well, sure. I don't see anything wrong with it doing that. Now being a Methodist, I ought to object terrible! But I won't. Because there isn't any sense in that foolishness.

Q. Are there any stories you know?

A. Oh, I could tell you a little bit. I want to tell you there used to be a little old ghost town—you came through it. You cross the Des Moines River and enter Pittsburgh. There used to be a distillery just after you come off of that bridge, just off to the left, as you come this way. As you head back to Nauvoo, it'll be on the right. They made a whole bunch of whiskey and sold it—ten cents a gallon, or something like that. It wasn't very much money. Anyway, the distillers got a bunch of young men to take a wagonload [of liquor] [to] of all places Salt Lake. Now you don't take liquor to Salt Lake. You doirt do that! Mormons don't drink anything stronger than rainwater, [laughs] Sorry, girls.

Q. [HT & MM] No. it's true.

A. Why they took it out there I don't know. But at that time, of course, it was a medicine. And so, they did sell a little. But while they were there, somebody said there was a mining town down in Arizona or the state below and [suggested], "Why don't you take it down there?" The liquor sellers found out that the Mormon women all had a flock of chickens and a lot of eggs. So they bought those eggs off of those Mormon women. They got salt, because you can get salt for nothing over there. They got a wagonload of salt. They put the eggs—which they get three cents a dozen for—in the salt to preserve them. They took the whiskey and went down to Arizona. They sold all the whiskey and all the eggs to the miners down there at a dollar a dozen and the whiskey at a dollar a gallon.

Q. [MM] A dollar a dozen?

A. They didn't have eggs down there, so they were buying eggs to eat!

Q. [MM] That's expensive!

A. That was back 125 years ago.

Q. [MM] I don't know if I would pay a dollar a dozen today.

A. Well, they're one of the cheapest things to eat—about forty cents a pound now. We just had a couple of eggs for dinner. So I always thought it was crazy that these guys would send a wagonload of whiskey to Salt Lake City. I think they were pretty dumb, [laughs]

Q. [MM] They made a lot of money, though.

A. But they made a pack of money! You better believe they did, because they bought those eggs for three cents a dozen and sold them for a dollar.

Q. [HT] Do you know any other stories like that?

A. They always said—this is a myth, I think. It's something that may have been somebody's idea. You know there's a burial ground just about a mile west of here. They also say that that's where they were supposed to have buried Browning rifles and ammunitions. They said that Brigham Young had found out that the Mormons were in trouble. So he's supposed to have sent Browning back to Nauvoo. Some people think Browning took the guns and buried them in the ground there. But I don't know. I know that there have been several people with metal detectors. Now whether they ever found them, I don't know, because people keep that to themselves. But now there was trouble in Van Buren County a couple of times. Things that have happened. There was a scene in Mount Sterling that was over a fat hog and a woman. You'll find that trouble usually has a woman involved, [laughs] Well, I don't know what happened.

The Mormons were always the last to get to the weigh stations because they were bringing livestock with them. The other immigrants would be there bedding down their horses and cattle.

I think that that's all. You can read about the Mormons. They've got a whole bunch of stuff in books.

Lynn and Wanitta Barritt

Niota, Illinois

Lynn's Birthday: April 13, 1918

Wanitta's Birthday: October 25, 1913

Interview on November 20, 2001, in their home by Jedediah Briggs

Jeff Johnson also present

Q. [Jedediah Briggs] Wanitta. were you born here?

A. [Wanitta Barritt] Yes, but not in this house. I was born in this area. I was bom and raised west of this house—that's torn down now.