

JONATHAN BEHLEN ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

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ABSTRACT

Biography

John Behlen was born in 1915 on a family farm in Shible Township, Swift County, Minnesota. He attended high school in Minneapolis from 1927 to 1933. After high school he returned to the family farm and remained there for the rest of his life. As a farmer, he received deferment from military service during World War II. He married his wife in 1942 and remained very active in his church and his community throughout his life.

Summary

In this interview, John Behlen relates his experience with farming approximately 400 acres of land and in raising livestock before, during, and after World War II. He recounts his difficulty finding help on the farm during the war and his feelings of inadequacy about his own contributions to the war effort. John recalls that he did not struggle in wartime like other families and recounts the benefits he received while working on the farm. He also discusses local religious, community, and agricultural life.

Keywords

Pearl Harbor, Appleton, Minnesota, farm, shortages, service, draft, church, rationing, newspaper

INDEX

00:00 – Introduction

01:29 – Reaction to Pearl Harbor and to war in general

04:07 – Memories of a friend and former employee that went into military service

05:40 – Concerns about the war and his farm

07:02 – Being alone during the war

08:10 – Changes due to the war

10:08 – Challenges of finding workers for the farm

11:40 – Feelings of inadequacy for his own wartime contributions

13:03 – Writing letters to people in his township asking if they'd like to go collect money for the war effort

14:43 – How the war changed his township

15:55 – His cousin's death during the war

16:47 – World War II's impact on hired help

18:04 – The impact of wartime shortages on farmers

18:54 – Receiving a permit to buy car

20:58 – Buying gas and tires during the war

21:30 – Feeling that local people didn't struggle due to wartime shortages

21:47 – Being ashamed of the high amount of gas he used as a farmer

24:00 – Feelings about his ability to afford and access a car relative to others at the time

24:59 – The impact of the war on Appleton, Minnesota

25:38 – Recollections of a local man going into service

27:00 – Programs not benefitting those in the service

27:23 – Being tempted to go into the service

28:36 – Not having the opportunity to associate with other kids

29:16 – Thinking he was lucky in some ways to not have a father

30:05 – His cousin's spouse's limited education due to the demands of farm work from a young age

32:15 – Crops and animals on the farm during the war

33:55 – Crop prices

34:50 – How he benefitted from the War Act

38:00 – Working for his uncle; having money in those days

39:11 – Typical day on the farm after the war

39:33 – Feeding his pigs butterfat from skim milk; selling butterfat

40:23 – Community in Appleton during the war

41:12 – Doesn't remember lengthy conversations about the war
41:56 – Not having electricity on the farm until 1941
42:15 – Story about his neighbor who couldn't afford electricity
44:01 – Going to church during the war
45:45 – German services at church
47:07 – Having children
47:28 – Being a "voracious" reader of the paper
48:31 – Concerns about President Roosevelt dying
49:27 – How the end of war impacted him
50:31 – Celebrating the end of the war
51:46 – Not suffering during the war
52:33 – City people suffering from shortages
52:55 – Receiving a draft notice
53:03 – Pleading his case to keep a worker
54:07 – Story of a young man who worked for him on the farm; not having reliable help
56:35 – Reflections on who he would he have been without church; reflections on the role of church
58:04 – Memories of the Walther League
1:00:21 – Being active in the church; having God's blessings

STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: Impact of Wartime Shortages

[18:06 – 19:49]

The thing was that, as a farmer, you were a number one priority. If I had a tire that went bad, I could go to town and I could get the tire—at least to the point that I'd say I don't remember that I had to lay up any machines.

In fact, when the war first started, they had a few automobiles. I was driving a car that had 100,000 miles on it, which doesn't sound so great today, but at that time that was really miles. And I applied to the draft board and I got a permit to buy a car.

TS: And whereas folks in the city may have simply, they wouldn't have gotten the permit?

Probably not.

TS: *You need the permit to go to a car dealer? Otherwise they couldn't sell you a car?*

The local Chevrolet dealer, I knew him. We went to the same church. And he had a kind of homely Chevrolet, two-door it was—.

TS: *[Not] something special, I think.*

Yup. So, I went to him and I says, “Harvey,” I says, “Gosh, I’d like to buy a car, but you know, you get anything different than that?” “I’ll see,” he says. I don’t know what day that was, maybe let’s say it was Saturday. And on Tuesday I got a card in the mail saying, “Your car will be ready Tuesday night.”

TS: *You hadn't seen it yet.*

I just knew it was gonna have four wheels. Then I went in there—oh my God, how can I be so lucky? Here he has a green Chevrolet, torpedo-shaped—I don’t know, they always had a special name. But I couldn’t have prayed for anything nicer, especially since I was dating my future wife. *[laughter]*

Story 2: Gasoline and the War

[21:47 – 23:43]

I did something for which I was ashamed for a long time. There were some people who were claiming that they were not getting what they needed in the way of gasoline. So, they had a mass meeting down here in Appleton. They had all the dealers there and so forth. And the farmers were supposed to come in there and complain.

So, I went in, and just my presence was enough—I don’t remember if I had too much to say. These guys got plenty to say. But somebody got up and said, “Have any of you been refused?” *[shakes head and pauses]*

TS: *[affirms aloud] They shook their heads no.*

The only problem was we didn’t realize how much we were burning in many cases. So, they’d ask for twenty-five gallons a month or something. And they didn’t realize they needed more than that. And it all got straightened out so easily. It didn’t need to be any casting reflections on people’s ability or anything like that. That was the only thing, but those things got resolved so easy.

And I applied to the local ration board, which met in Benson, and they published the name in the paper of who got permits for more gasoline, who got permits for this thing, and, most importantly, who got a new car.

TS: *And your name was in there. You got a car. Now, were other people envious or a bit suspicious that you had got a new car?*

No one ever said anything to me face-to-face. I was—and I say this with realizing that it sounds like I’m bragging; I’m not bragging—I was one of the bigger operators. I was also active in town board. I was also active in my church.

Story 3: Working on the Farm Instead of Going to School [30:00 – 31:57]

So many times, I saw farmers, they wouldn’t move out of any direction from what their dad was doing. And their dad was doing the best that they knew how—but they didn’t know any better.

I had a cousin—well, he was married to my cousin. His name was John Arndt [*phonetic*]. I did custom work for him. I liked John. Why do you like one person more than another? I liked John. And we got him on the town board for a while, but he only stayed one term, then he resigned. He says, “John, I can’t even sign my name.”

And when I was doing combining for him, he started talking and he goes, “You know John, I’ve felt so dumb all my life, ‘cause I was the oldest. My dad was farming; he needed help.” So, in the fall, school would start, but John wouldn’t go. His name was John also, John Arndt. “So then, about December, the farm work was done. And I’d go to school, and the other kids are down the road a long ways. The same thing would happen in the spring. I’d have to help dad until the crop was planted. Well, school would close about June 1, and we had almost all the work done by that time.”

And I wonder if he ever opened his heart. I liked John. He was a simple person, but honest. And he was talking to me man-to-man.

Story 4: Electricity on the Farm [41:56 – 43:48]

We didn’t get electricity until 19—well, just before the war, 1941. And so those of us who had signed up and were on the schedule, we got the electricity. But I had a friend who lived over here, and he signed up. But his neighbors didn’t sign up, so he couldn’t get it. Because it had to run, the lines had to follow, and they couldn’t afford—they had a limitation of something: you had to build so many feet or parts of a mile to justify you getting electricity.

Now, my farm was here. My uncle’s farm is over here back in the field a-ways. They’re very close. The main feedline is here. Now, for us both to get electricity—especially he was too far, and he had to agree to a hire minimum. I just *shake*, you know—I think the minimum was four and a half [miles]. But remember, this is 1941.

Well, they came to me and said, “Would you be willing to sign a hire minimum? If you and Chris Wilkins [*phonetic*] would both sign a hire minimum, we can afford to put this in.” “Sure, of course we’d do that, no doubt about it at all.” The secret of it is when they turn the current on, neither one of us got by less than the minimum. Even if the minimum hadn’t been changed, we qualified, ‘cause both of us were—.

TS: *You were using enough.*

Yeah.

TS: *So, the hire minimum—H-I-R-E for the tape—you had to almost promise to use a certain amount per month to make it worthwhile.*

Right, you paid for so much whether you got it or not. And another guy over here, a friend of mine, he was about two miles from this main line. He couldn’t [get electricity] unless he paid for the two miles.

Story 5: Unreliable Help on the Farm [54:50 – 25:59]

One night, this young fella came in to Barbara’s bedroom and called her by name. And he had gone off the road and hit an approach and just, you know—so he was bleeding. He had a nice older car and he had a girlfriend, but stayed out too late nights. And he messed himself up.

Another fella who had kind of a bad reputation—too much drinking, you know. And one morning—I would try to get him up to help with the chores, but he wouldn’t come. So, I would just do the chores, and then I’d go. And this particular morning, I’d gone on the field or something, and he sat at the end of the walkway with his head in his hand. And my wife laughed about it. Later on, she went out there and she said, “Aren’t you well today?” Well, of course, he had too much to drink. [*laughs*]