

Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois

Ralph Korte Oral History Interview

Steve Hansen, Interviewer

Korte Construction, Alton, Illinois

October 22, 2018

Editor's Note: This transcript was edited by Ralph Korte and differs from the audio recording.

Ralph Korte gave permission to post the interview on October 22, 2018 (which he noted is his wife Donna Korte's birthday)

Ralph Korte (RK): We were married 62... no, 59 years this year.

Steve Hansen (SH): Wow. Congratulations.

SH: Alright. So this is, today is the 22nd, I'm Steven Hansen. I'm talking with Ralph Korte, we're in Korte Construction offices in Highland, Illinois. I did read that, that was a really good...

RK: Thank you

SH: ...summary of your, of your life on that weblink and, I wonder if we can, uh, I was wondering what, how much of that we can, we can use for, for this

RK: Use any piece of it

SH: Okay

RK: Any piece of it

SH: Okay

RK: If it works

SH: What we're, what we're interested in, Ralph is this is just talking about what your life, you know, we're, um... because we think that, you know, 50 years, 100 years after you and I are long gone, historians and students and scholars will, will go to our website and they'll see all these, these interviews and sources and they'll be able to put together, they'll have a really good window into what life was like in this area at the end of the twentieth century. So, so let's just start out, even though this is redundant

RK: Yeah

SH: ... to some of the stuff you've already done and, and just tell us a little bit about your, your life, you know, when you were born, and you, you grew up on a farm...

RK: Got it

SH: ...so tell us about that.

RK: Okay, I was born in 1934, and I numbered 9 of 14 children, 8 boys and 6 girls from a German Catholic family and back then, the more kids they had, the more kids they had to help milk the cows. I stress the dairy farm. Before I went to school in the mornings, even before I went to first grade, I had to milk my cows. I was milking cows at age 5. We rode to school, it was a Catholic grade school, taught by the Sisters of St. Francis and it was in the town of Pierron, Illinois. Pierron had a population of 500. It's on the county line between Madison and Bond County. The school was in Madison County, but we lived on the farm in Bond County. Our address was Rural Route, Pocahontas, Illinois. Growing up on the farm, we did not have electricity until I was in the second grade, but up until then we had to milk the cows by hand. Shortly after we got electricity we had milking machines. We didn't have indoor plumbing in the house until we finally built a new home there in 1950.

SH: How big, how big was the farm?

RK: The farm was only 120 acres but we milked about 30 cows. So it was a big operation. In addition to the cows, we'd always raise about 200 pigs a year and butchering day was a big deal, we butchered 3 times a year for that large family and probably 4 pigs at a time so 12 pigs but the rest of them were shipped to the stock yards in East St. Louis. We also had about 200 chickens, so we'd collect and gather about a hundred eggs a day and we would sell the excess eggs.

SH: So, so the egg reach was, was that for uh, growing for feed for the, for the dairy?

RK: Feed for the dairy, and then...

SH: That mostly pasture land?

RK: Uh, yeah about 20 acres, about 10 acres of pasture but then the corn would go into silage for the cows in the winter and the hay we'd put up in the barn for the winter so a lot of it was to sustain the food for those 30 cows and 200 pigs and chickens. None of my older brothers and sisters had gone to high school, Pierron School only went to 8th grade. The nearest high school was in Highland, Illinois, which was another eight miles away, it was too far to walk. We would essentially walk to school, we'd ride to school with the milk truck but then we'd walk home the two miles on the roads. Only the youngest two of the 14 children went to high school. There weren't any school busses or truant officers in the earlier years, and we were needed on the farm. Back then, nobody cared if you went to school, hence I have never been a day to high school. I look back at it, and there probably wouldn't be a Korte Construction if I would have gone to high school. Back then, whenever any of the neighbors needed a building, all the neighbors would pitch in and help, and at that time, there was a move afoot in the dairy industry to ship Grade A, Grade A inspected milk. If you shipped Grade A milk you got about five dollars a hundred, if you shipped Grade B milk, you only got about two dollars a hundred. The Grade A milk went into bottled milk, the Grade, B milk went into cheese and products like that. So it behooved you to ship Grade A inspected milk which was controlled by the health department in St. Louis because we were shipping to St. Louis dairies and you had to meet certain specifications. The cows had to be milked on concrete and there had to be a gutter. The gutter had to be so wide and then concrete behind and then one of the big

things was window light. There had to be so many square feet of window light per cow and the reason for that is it was the assumption, and I guess it was proved out, that the sunshine streaming in kills bacteria. They were very cognizant of keeping the bacteria down in the milk. So, it behooved all the farmers to upgrade their farms from milking on dirt to concrete and following these specifications so they would get more for their milk. My dad was handy with a hammer and a saw, and whenever one of the neighbors would be remodeling their barn for this, he would help them out. When I was out of 8th grade, he saw that I was handy with it and he took me along. So, instead of going to high school, when we weren't putting in crops, we were helping the neighbors remodel their barns.

SH: So, so you grew up, and, and, during the, during the depression.

RK: 1934 is when I was born

SH: Okay, so, do you have any memories of the, of the Great Depression? Or . . .

RK: Well, we didn't know... didn't know we were poor because we lived off the farm.

SH: Yeah. And and, your father, was he exempt during the draft during World War II?

RK: Right, no, my dad went in the army in World War I, but he just got in less than six months and the war was over and he got out. No, my dad was born in 1895 so he was about 20 years old in the First World War

SH: Okay, alright. Okay, so, okay, getting the chronology here together.

RK: Sure.

SH: So do you have then any memories of World War II...

RK: Oh, God yes...

SH: ...as a boy?

RK: I remember the day it started, we had no electricity at that time, no radio because no electricity, but our cousin had just stopped by that Sunday morning about noon, he had just dropped by, he had a car and he had a radio in his car. And I can remember standing outside his car and hearing the broadcast about Pearl Harbor. We got electricity about a year later, in 1942.

SH: So did your, did your parents take a newspaper? Did you follow...

RK: Oh, yes.

SH: ...the progress of the war?

RK: Yes we did have a Post-Dispatch that came to us daily via rural route delivery but I followed it and of course what I remember the most about it is the cereal boxes that we would buy. Cereal had pictures of airplanes on them that you could cut out and build your own cardboard plane model of the B-17 and the

B-24 and the P-38, oh I followed that with a great interest.

SH: Yeah.

RK: I was in first grade when the war broke out.

SH: Yeah, so you were...

RK: And I remembered a lot. We would collect scrap iron from all the ditches in the old days. Out on the farm, if there was a washout, you'd throw the junk into those ditches to stop erosion. Now, we gleaned all of that steel out of all those ditches and brought it in, into the school and there, put it on a big heap and some truck would come get it.

SH: Wow.

RK: Scrap iron.

SH: Do you remember, uh, any rationing during the war?

RK: We were virtually exempt from that because we were on the farm. Gas was never rationed because of farming, it was an important thing.

SH: Right.

RK: ... and so we needed gas for the tractors and they didn't pay attention. Course we never did uh, cut you know, vacations or nothing and the only place we'd go is from our farm to the church. The little town of Pierron had a grain elevator so we took our grain only two and a half miles to the grain elevator where it went out by trains. No, we never felt the rationing because we virtually raised all our own food.

SH: And, and did your, you say your folks took a newspapers so they had daily newspaper, did they take any other magazines or anything?

RK: Oh, Yeah. *Prairie Farmer* and *Farm Journal*, those were staples and they came once a month. And I voraciously read them, I was a voracious reader, and joked about it but, I was the highest in my grade 8 out of 8 years in grade school, but there were only 8 students in my grade.

SH: [laughter]

RK: I never had any problem, then again, went on to say that I took a GED test...

SH: Yes.

RK: We can get into that later.

SH: Yeah. Alright so, so you remember pretty vividly then, the war years and uh, and

RK: Absolutely

SH: ...and the aftermath and...

RK: Yes.

SH: ...and that.

RK: Everything about it.

SH: Did you...

RK: ...My older brother Vince, he was about ten years older than myself and he got deferred because Dad needed him on the farm, but then I do remember right at the tail end of the war he did get examined in Chicago. You have to take a train to Chicago for the draft, he was married at the time. About the time that happened he either didn't pass the exam or the war was over, but he did not serve. The birth order, there was Vince and then there were four girls in between before they had another one and those boys, then my older brothers, they were eligible for Korea. The next oldest brothers.

SH: Yeah.

RK: So they missed, but I remembered just like it was yesterday when it was victory and the bomb was dropped and it was a big celebration day.

SH: Did you, did you go to like, into town or anything...

RK: No, no.

SH: ... like that? Just celebration on the farm and...

RK: Yeah. Yeah...

SH: How, how did you celebrate?

RK: Well...

SH: And by then did you have radio?

RK: Yes, but there was no television yet.

SH: Right.

RK: No, but I recall everybody was happy. Everybody.

SH: That the war was finally over.

RK: Yes.

SH: Yeah. Did it seem, did it seem, can you remember, did it seem like all along that we were gonna win if we just take time or, was there any doubt...

RK: I was in 6th grade, but I remember distinctly going to the Pierron School and the VE day, Victory in Europe, happened, and that was 1945. I still remember the Priest came into the school, it was about 10 a.m. and he came in to each classroom and said, "Take the day off". When the big war finally got over, school wasn't in session.

SH: Wow.

RK: I remember distinctly, I should have walked home like my sisters did, but my cousin, who lived in town said, "Why don't you stick around, let's go fishing." So we went fishing in a creek because, I wasn't supposed to be home anyhow. I caught heck for not coming home to work! [laughter] But I was only 10 years old, we got the rest of the day off.

SH: Tell me about the school. It was uh, it was a parish school...

RK: Yes.

SH: And, how big?

RK: ...it was taught by the Sisters of St. Francis, there were only four rooms, two grades per nun. There were four teaching nuns plus one nun was the cook, so we had five nuns.

SH: And two grades per room...

RK: Two grades per room.

SH: ... in four rooms. So it went all the way up to 8th grade.

RK: Yes.

SH: And was there a kindergarten or start in first?

RK: No, no kindergarten. Started with grade school.

SH: Okay, and was it, uh, do you remember, was it strict?

RK: Oh yes, I had very good teachers and... there was no nonsense about it. And discipline, too.

SH: Okay, you said, you said that uh, your, your, all the neighbors would get together to...

RK: Build buildings, yes.

RK: If I would have gone to high school, I wouldn't have had that opportunity, and who knows what I would have become. I look back at it, and I've never been sorry a day that I didn't go to high school. Now that I look back at it, if I wouldn't have gone in the military, I wouldn't have gotten a GED and then been eligible on the Korean GI Bill and getting a degree at night school at SIUE on the GI Bill.

SH: And... you had, did you, you had a natural talent for... for building and constructing?

RK: Yes, I loved to build things.

SH: You could, you could puzzle through the, how to put things...

RK: Yes. I just loved it.

SH: You just loved it.

RK: I just had a knack for it and looking back at all my friends that went to high school, I just couldn't see how I would have sat still. Maybe I would have been a great chemist or some darn thing but, it just fit me.

SH: And did you think that you would be, you would leave the farm and that that would be your livelihood?

RK: No, I expected, and it was planned out for me that I was going to take over the farm, by my dad wasn't ready for me to take over, due to the new Social Security inclusion for farmers. My oldest brother, he already had his own farm, and now, the Korean War came along and my brother George, he enlisted in the Air Force in 1950 and it appeared that he was going to stay in, and my brother Ray, who was four years older than George was drafted and was in the combat engineers and sent to Korea about 1952. After Ray was in Korea about four months, we didn't hear from him for over 30 days, and finally we wrote to our congressman Mel Price, somehow, they got through to him, and we found out he was now in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, in a mental hospital. He had a nervous breakdown in Korea, they flew him to Japan and from there he ended up in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, in a mental hospital, taking electric shock treatments.

SH: Ooh

RK: My dad and my sister and a friend of Ray's drove there and visited him at Valley Forge. My sister said Ray just looked like a zombie.

SH: Yeah

RK: After about four or five months of electric shock treatments, they shipped him to Jefferson Barracks hospital, and I remember visiting him on Sundays. He was there about six months and finally my Dad said, "He's not getting any better, I want to get him home." And Dad had to sign a paper that he was responsible, and I still remember, I think I might have been there, I was 16 or 17, and the doctor there told my Dad, "You'll be sorry, you'll bring him back." Dad said, "I'll take my chances." Ray was never the same, but he never went back and later on then I hired him as a truck driver servicing the Korte Company. A long story short, I was now the next oldest boy and Dad just assumed that I would take over the farm. Before I left for the Army, in the spring of '54, I designed and built a milking parlor and open housing and all that, took about six months, so it'd be ready when I got home. Once completed, I said okay "I'm ready to go, get it over with". The draft was still there, so I volunteered for the draft, I went into the Army, October 28th, 1954, when I was about to turn 20. Looking back, it was fortuitous because the Korean War ended in July of 1953 and they cut off the GI Bill at the end of 1954, and just because I went in, I had just made the Korean GI Bill which meant they owed me a college education.

SH: And where'd you do your training?

RK: Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, right outside of Fort Smith is where my eight weeks of basic training was. I got slated to go into the artillery and Camp Chaffee has a lot of mountains and it was a good place to shoot the 105 howitzers. They could throw a shell about six to eight miles. Then I had two weeks off in between, then went back to Camp Chaffee for another eight weeks of artillery training. Then about half of us went to Europe, and I was sent to Korea. I was shipped over to Korea, flew from Fort Smith to Seattle, Washington, but the interesting thing about that was that it was a charter, United States overseas airplane. It was chartered for us, and I guess they can hold about sixty. . It was the first time I was ever in an airplane, but we could not make it to Seattle, Washington, without refueling. We had to stop at Grand Island, Nebraska to refuel and then on to Seattle. I spent three days in Fort Lewis in Washington, processing to go overseas, and I then I was loaded on a ship, the USS General Mann, Port Seattle, and it took two weeks, to get to Korea. We did stop at Yokohama, Japan to pick up other supplies and another three days. I was on the ship about 17 days to get to Korea.

SH: Well you must have been good at mathematics if you were able, if you were in the, the artillery to be...

RK: Oh yes.

SH: So that, that played well then with, with your...

SH: ...construction and design...

RK: Yeah, and life on the farm, it was an education. I was a voracious reader all the time.

SH: You, your bio, biography says that when you were in the Army then is when you decided to get your GED diploma.

RK: Yes

SH: Now, excuse me, where were, in Korea were you stationed...

RK: I spent the whole time (one year and four months) right at the DMZ near Panmunjom where the truce talk was held, and that building still stands today.

SH: ... around different places?

RK: Yes, let me get back to that GED. I had my orders that I knew I was going to Korea, and half of us went to Europe and half went to Korea. It was just where they needed us, and now, it was ten days before we would have transportation to get out. It was too far to go home (it was an eight to ten hour drive from Camp Chaffee Arkansas., I recall it was a rainy Saturday and I used to hang around the library, we had quite a few libraries on the post but there was one nearby, so I was sitting in the library that Saturday morning, and I saw on the bulletin board "take a GED test." And I was inquisitive. I thought it had something to do with high school, so I went to the desk and they said well we're giving the fives. Five different subjects here in the conference room this week and it'll be one class a night, 90 minutes for the

subject areas, and you can sign up for it. They said fill out this application. Well I went to my desk to fill it out. First question was, "How many years have you been to high school?" This was for drop outs. So, I go back up to the desk, said "I've never been a day to high school." They said, "Oh, we have a different program for you." You can take the refresher course. One night a week for eight weeks study up all those subjects, those five subjects. I said I don't have time for that, I said I'm shipping out in ten days. I said "what would happen if I took the test and I flunked?" They said "nothing." When you get your next duty station you can take the refresher course." They were very cavalier about it. I said well I'll take the test and I filled out a form. So that was on a Saturday; Monday night they were having standardized tests, probably still going on, it was 90 minutes, timed and supervised, and it was multiple choice, five different subjects, and I didn't think they were particularly hard but I didn't know how I did. I finished on a Friday and three days later I got the results, I had 86.5 percentile. I joke about, "so much for public school K-12". A good private eight grades, life on the farm, and being an avid reader helped me pass the tests. So, now I had that piece of paper with those five grades, stuck in my billfold that said I was certified smart!

SH: [laughter]

RK: I really didn't know I'd do anything with it, and again you never know. I tell my kids and grandkids, that you're a product of who you associate with. You hang around with bright, successful people, and some of it will rub off on you. The first day after I got settled in, I was sent up north with the infantry to monitor for communications up to the forward observer post back to the guns, and I'd be on the switchboard radio around the clock, we were six hours on and 12 off. 24/7. So I had a lot of time when I wasn't sleeping, I sought out the library. The library was a tent about four times as big as this room, and the only ones that hung around the library were college graduates and me. And there I got to know people. One of the guys and I stayed in touch, he's dead now, but he was a graduate lawyer, having graduated from Loyola University in Chicago, and while he was going to law school he was exempt from the draft. Well as soon as he graduated they nabbed him. So most of us were about twenty years old and he was 25, but he was older and wiser, he had the system figured out. They had a regimental newspaper that came out once a week and the guy had been running it went home, so my lawyer friend masqueraded that he was good at it, he told them that he was a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* so he had that job. He found out that he could get paid as a college professor teaching Business Law 101, he knew he could teach but he needed six soldiers to be in the class or he wouldn't get paid extra for it. He had five guys lined up, but needed a sixth. By this time I'd known him for three or four weeks, he knew my story, he knew I had that piece of paper said I was certified smart. He said "Ralph, why don't you sit in on this". He too didn't think I could cut it but as long as he had a student. Well, I could keep up with those guys. It was just common sense. Offer, consideration, acceptance. I was able to keep up, After Business Law 101, I went on to Business Law 102. So, we were taking that and the other five guys that I was going to class with said "Man Ralph, you gotta go to college when you get out, this stuff's so easy for you". I said, I don't have to go to college, I'm going to be a farmer. I said, besides, I can't get into college, I've never been a day in high school. Fast forward, and then that story told about the five dollars. The day I left for the Army my Dad gave me five dollars. If I was going on a date on a Saturday night, I'd get \$2. Going away for the Army, that morning, dad took me to Greenville to catch the Vandalia bus which would go to downtown St. Louis that stopped at Greenville. That's where the draft department was and they picked up at Greenville and there were eight boys that morning leaving from Bond County and we went to the induction center which is still there at 12th and Spruce, the federal building in St. Louis. We spent one night there, and after you pass your exams the next morning you went to Camp Chaffee, Arkansas. In the

Army they tell you when you get there what to do with your pay, they highly recommended you sign a class Q allotment and send 50 bucks a month to your wife or to your mom and dad. Well I wasn't married then, with a family of 14 I figured I'd send it home to mom and dad. The family was only making \$85, so I sent 50 bucks a month home. I'd never see it again. The other option was a program called Soldiers Deposits that they'd exact the pay as much as you want and they'd pay you 4 percent, so I took a chance with that and when I got out of the Army and I had, uh, 1,300 bucks I think. So, when I got home I had 1,300 bucks. I was discharged on August 14th, 1956, and hitchhiked home from Chicago. When I got home, I said "Dad I'm ready take over the farm". He said well there's been a change in plans. While I was gone, the government changed the law on social security for farmers in 1955. They saw the injustice that the only way you could be on social security was if you were on the payroll of something. Farmers were self-employed, they had no payroll, so now they changed the law that self-employed people, particularly farmers, could average the last four years of how much income tax they had paid and take that amount. That average of those four years and pay in that lump sum and then when they reach age 65 they can start collecting social security, even though they weren't on the payroll. Dad was 62 but he had to keep farming for three more years to get on the government dole. He said "you can work for me as a hired hand, I'll pay you". I got home and wasn't particularly enthused about that but, neighbors heard I was home and, they wanted me to build buildings for them. So I went out and start building buildings for the farmers. One farmer, that I had worked with, who was ten years older, said "you know Ralph I sometimes wish I'd gone into construction instead of farming. He said "you could find plenty of work around the neighborhood, Ralph, building buildings, long as you work hard and don't charge too much". But that stuck with me and after knocking around for a while, I started my construction business, thinking I'd do it for a couple years. I talked my cousin into joining me, we started working for \$2.50 an hour. Work kept coming our way, and after about a year I thought, I could make it in this business. I gave up on the idea of farming and since my four younger brothers didn't care to take over the farm either, they all came to work for me and Dad sold the farm to the neighbor. In the meantime, I was eligible for the Korean GI Bill and my only motive was to get even with Uncle Sam.

SH: [laughter] How do you mean get even?

RK: Well, I gave two years at 30 cents an hour.

SH: [laughter]

RK: I felt the government owed me, and SIUE was just opening. I was able to get in to night classes that we held at the Rock Junior High in East St. Louis, on the strength of my grades. I can give you just a little sidebar to that about the complication of it. I went down there about 1959.

SH: 1959, I was 11 years old.

RK: Okay. 1959 they were operating Rock Junior High at East St. Louis. The stipulation of the GI Bill was that you had to start your program within three years of your discharge. If you weren't enrolled in an educational program within that three years you were shut out. It was the summer quarter, I had to be in school before August 15th. So, I went to Rock Junior High to get in. Register in June, for the summer quarter. The guy there he said, the test scores are good, but we can't accept hand carried grades. It's SIUE's policy that it has to be an official document.

SH: [laughter]

RK: The headquarters that were administering the program, I think it was the University of Wisconsin at Madison. There weren't any fax machines or emails back then, and classes were starting in three days. So, he called down to the Veteran Affairs office which was only two blocks away in East St. Louis and he was told to send me down here. I went to see that guy, and he called back to the school to say these test scores are the 86.5 percentile. But SIUE said they couldn't accept my hand carried grades. I had the same piece of paper I had in Korea. This guy, I'd love to find him again, he hangs up the phone from SIUE and he says I've gotten thrown out of more colleges than you'll get in to.

SH: [laughter]

RK: He called Belleville Junior College, now it's called Southwestern Illinois College, but at the time it was Belleville Junior College. It was on West Main in Belleville. He called them up, he said would you accept a young man with GED test scores? He read them, they said we sure would. He said what do you have available that is freshman level? It was rhetoric 101 and classes start Thursday (2 days from then) at 6:30. He said he'll be there. The SIUE gentlemen told me to go there and that would start my eligibility for the GI Bill, then we'll get you transferred.

SH: [laughter]

RK: So that's how and why, if it wouldn't have been for that guy letting me in, I would not have been able to start night classes. Sitting there at night, making passing grades, I had it figured out that I was making about \$2.45 an hour. Working on the jobs I was only making 2.50, and in Korea I was making 30 cents an hour. My only motive, my biggest motive, they owed me.

SH: [laughter]

RK: I got hooked on taking classes. All they offered at SIUE was business. If they would have had engineering, I would have taken that. In retrospect, the business was what I needed. I knew how to build buildings, but now management would be learned. They just kept hammering it in, planning, organizing, directing, controlling, and directing, delegating. And after about three years studying at night, all the sudden it occurred to me, regardless of how hard I'd work, as one man, a carpenter, in eight hours you could still only produce eight hours' worth of work. But now if I hired eight carpenters, and supervised them, I could leverage my time. Those principles driven into me, expanded my thinking.

SH: So, up until then, '59, you were just operating as an individual on an hourly basis.

RK: Yes. I'd talked my cousin into joining me, we bought a used pickup truck, a 1946 International for \$100.00, and a brand-new heavy duty Black and Decker saw for \$79.00. I still thought I'd finally go back to farming after Dad retired, but work kept coming our way. And I decided I could make it. My cousin, who's four years older than me, decided to go back to farming after three years working together. I bought him out. I remember sitting at his kitchen table, he and his wife had an upstairs apartment. It was a Sunday morning and I bought him out. We added all the tools we had, and it amounted to \$1600.00. I wrote him a check for \$800.00. Now that company's doing \$300 million worth of volume a year. Only in America could this have happened.

SH: Yeah. That's right. That's right. Now, uh, at one, at what point did you then turn, make it into a company instead of just being a, an individual... selling your labor?

RK: Within a year I was pressured into joining a union, and I finally gave up and joined the carpenters' union and they offered me a deal less than a year after I'd started, and we went from \$2.50 an hour to \$3.65 and that was in 1959 before I got married. In 1962 my cousin went back to farming and I was the sole Owner, and during this timeline he said hey Ralph you're raking in the bucks. I wouldn't have had the confidence if I hadn't gone to night school and learned the business and financial side of construction. It gave me the inner confidence and I started meshing with architects and business people in Highland. The confidence that was engendered by my night school that I understood what business is about and of course then I started investing and stuff and later brought the *Wall Street Journal* into Highland. The story of how that came about is all in the company history book. It was 1966 when I played a major role in bringing the *Wall Street Journal* business to Highland. I was only 32 years old, but I had a lot of confidence.

SH: Ralph, were there, were there different, as you built the company into uh, into this success that it is, were there any particular key moments or key contracts that, that seemed to be...

RK: Well the *Wall Street Journal* I did in 1966. I knew that was going to be a reality. I bought the 40 acres of land right across the street and I got an option on that and then when that happened, I bought that and that brought the Binkley Company, and that brought at least ten more businesses to town. The key thing, then, I knew I needed to hire a second-in-command, you know, talk about leveraging your time, so I graduated from SIUE in 1968, fifty years ago. I'd been looking for someone, and here a young man came into my office, I had been working out of my house, and now I was working in an office in downtown Highland. I had built an office building down there, so I moved my office in the basement. This young man was a local boy and he had graduated from U of I, you've probably heard of him, he lives in Edwardsville now. Vernon Eardley. He was a single ticket winner of the Illinois lottery in 1994 and won \$41 million.

SH: Only, only in the...

RK: At the time, he was living as a newlywed, living in an apartment I'd built in Highland. He was working for the state of Illinois, he's ten years younger than me. They were building Interstate 70 through here at that time and he was a project engineer on the ten-mile section going from Highland to Greenville. He had a civil engineering degree out of the University of Illinois. He came in to my office sometime in 1966 to want his \$50.00 deposit back, and he told me he was going back to the U of I to get a master's degree. I gave him his \$50.00 deposit and I didn't know that I'd ever see him again. In June of 1969, he stopped in at my office, there in downtown Highland, and said he's going to be graduating August 15 with a master's degree in construction management from the University of Illinois and he said "I've been watching your company the last three or four years, it looks like you're going places. Have you ever thought of hiring a second-in-command?" I said sure. That's what I'd been thinking about in night school, I needed to hire good people and delegate. And we talked for 15 minutes and he said what would you be willing to pay? My brother Larry Korte, my carpenter foreman was really my second in command and his salary with benefits fully burdened was \$7.00 per hour. I told Vern I would offer \$14,000.00 per year. He replied that he would think it over and get back to me. He called me about two weeks later and made an

appointment with me for the following Saturday. At that meeting he said would accept my offer of \$14,000 per year with a bonus plan for the three key employees Ralph Korte, Larry Korte and Vern Eardley. The plan he suggested was very simple and straightforward. We would take the annual true and accurate net profit of the Company and pay out 20% of the profit to the three key employees based on the following percentages. Ralph Korte -12 percent, Larry Korte - 6 Percent, Vern Eardley- 6 percent. Total 24 percent of net profit annually. We shook hands on it, and he came to work August 15, 1969. We have never had a written employment contract. The Company is still using that same formula of 24% of net profit but now there are more employees that share salary bonus pool. There is no doubt in my mind that Korte Construction would not be where it is today but for me hiring Vern Eardley. I would not have had the courage and foresight to hire him if not for my degree in Business from SIUE. I graduated in June of 1968 after 8 years of night school two nights a week. I hired Vern one year later.

SH: Interesting. Interesting. Well, it's, it's good decision making.

RK: You can say I'm an unabashed supporter for SIUE and higher education. No doubt about it, I would have a made it without it, but I wouldn't be doing \$200 to \$300 million a year, or had built in 42 of the 50 states.

SH: What were some of the, of the, big contracts that your company did?

RK: The most recent large job I visited last year. Donna and I went on a river cruise from Portland, Oregon up the Snake River and right there, we had just built a 800,000 square foot mail distribution center for the United States Postal Service. We have built these all over the country. This was the biggest; just under one hundred million dollars. It was a two-year project, and while we were there it was just finishing up, and my wife and I toured it.

SH: Wow

SH: All over. You said uh, 42 out of the 50 states

RK: 42 so far, and Puerto Rico. We did a reserve training center in Puerto Rico about ten years ago. And we have built on many military bases in Hawaii and two military bases in Alaska.

SH: Now you, you, you've stayed here your, your whole life and you've seen huge changes in, in our area, and uh, heavy industry and steel and refineries and along the river, and then the collapse of a lot of those industries.

RK: Yes

SH: ...um, so, talk to me about, about some of the changes you've seen and what strikes you as being really, um, significant, and dramatic.

RK: Well, in our town, the first commercial building I did was Jakel Manufacturing and they have since sold out and they're no longer here, and the buildings that I built have been taken over by the school, for the administration of the school. Other local businesses that I built were Artex's Printing. They printed table clothes and other linens for the restaurant industry. Well the industry and the airlines quit buying

linen and that too is out of business. So, we've had three factories in Highland just disappear. Course I brought B-Line and now Eaton Industries here, Basler Electric's still doing well. Alton Box which I also built still has a division here, but its ownership has changed, and they hire sixty people where they used to hire 200, so a change in technology results in less manpower needed. I have an office in St. Louis and we're based out of there. We have four offices, St. Louis MO, Highland IL, Norman OK, and Las Vegas NV. Other areas that have changed over the years for example are Edwardsville. It has been booming as far as warehouses and I've built five warehouses there and Korte is building a 20-million-dollar addition on to the Hershey's warehouse of one million one square feet that I built fifteen years ago. The Unilever building was also built by Korte and several other warehouses for Lanter in that same area. Good or bad, Amazon, that distribution model is wreaking havoc on the retail industry.

SH: Mmhm

RK: Another example in Edwardsville; I built the National Food Store which became Schnucks. Now Schnucks bought the Shop n' Save that went out of business. So they currently have two Schnucks stores right across the street from each other. I'm cautiously optimistic, I think, things are going good, I mean, the construction industry is the busiest I've seen it in ten years.

SH: That's interesting

RK: Now the construction industry can't find people to work.

SH: Talk to me about, uh, your involvement in community affairs, uh, you, I know that, that, uh, Gary Niebur, Mayor Niebur, and, and others who'd come and and talk to you and consult with you about different ideas to, uh, grow downtown Edwardsville or expand, uh...

RK: Yes. Mark Twain Bank at that time had merged and they approached me and my partner Gary Balke. They said we'd like a new bank, they'd bought the bank in Edwardsville, and they said we'd like a bigger bank, a new image and that's what started that downtown renovation. The first one was 1989 and then two or three years later was Mark Twain Two, which is leased out for law offices. We bid on the court house there and it was ironic, but they had ten alternatives and we were low bidder on the base bid, then they had extra money, and they started adding in the alternatives. They stopped at the sixth one, and if they would have gone to all nine, Korte would have been low. Oh well.

SH: Didn't you, didn't you build the high school in Edwardsville?

RK: Yes, I did, I forgot about that, Korte had to take over the contract.

SH: Yes, that that that project collapsed, and you had to take it over, I remember that.

RK: I still remember when the head of the school board (an attorney) called me up. He said Ralph would you come over and visit with them. I told my wife that I was going, and she said, why would you? The over-budget school project was in the paper for six months and she said why would you want to get involved in that? I said, "Well if the neighbor's house is on fire, you'd want to go help, I want to go see if I can help. And I remember, I can't even remember who that superintendent was, but not the next day he had his attorney there and he said what would you do? And I said well let me work up something, I

thought I was being interviewed against somebody else. He said no, you don't understand, we want you to do it. We're not talking to anybody else. Well, we did it.

SH: Was that Hightower?

RK: No, it was before Ed Hightower.

SH: Before Hightower.

RK: The superintendent at the beginning of the project was Robert Stuart but the guy that ran the show was a chairman of the board and the school lawyer.

RK: We took over the Edwardsville High School project in 1995 and finished in 1997.

SH: What, what are some of the projects that you're most proud of?

RK: Here in Highland, no doubt about it, the *Wall Street Journal* because here was a national company, it was just plain luck. I told that story didn't I, of how they happened to come here?

SH: Tell it. Tell us.

RK: [coughing] Well, I had bought this piece of land just because the Chamber of Commerce were talking about how we would bring industry in and I was the young kid on the Chamber of Commerce and I thought well where would they put this? No place around. I saw this piece of land out there where the *Wall Street Journal* is, it was platted in lots. And for one hundred years. The owner was Suppiger and I found out she was living in Collinsville. I called her up, and said would you like to sell, sure, I've been trying to sell, I said well I'll give you \$250 a lot, I figured it out, it was probably about 600 an acre, which is what farmland was going for about then. So she said fine, I bought it from her and I had been sitting on it for about two years, and the city manager knew I had it, when two officers from the *Wall Street Journal*, stopped at the City Manager's office in August of 1966, and they said they were with the National Printing Company and they were looking for a site. The City manager knew I had that, he called me up, I arranged to meet with them the next morning. I was building a shopping center right downtown here at the time. I met them and they explained to me they were with the National Printing Company, that's all they told me, and I was riding in their car and, National Printing that could be copy books, it could be magazines, I couldn't think anything of it, they seemed very professional. We looked at that piece of land, and it was in corn, and they drove around and said well they didn't need a fancy building, just a concrete block building. I had a couple of them going on in town, so I showed them. They asked how long would it take to build a 20,000 square foot building. I said about two months. How much would it cost? I said oh about ten thousand. And as we drove around, these guys said, "Well how much would you want for a 30-day option?" I said well, 30 days that's not very long, make it \$20.00. Sounds fine. So, I thought, these guys are pretty serious, we stopped and got a fish sandwich at a local restaurant here and these guys said we had a deal. And I thought I should have something signed, so I said do you want to stop by my lawyer and draw up an option? The guy driving the car said well I have a lawyer. He said do you have a typewriter? I was operating out of my house. I said, Yes, I have a typewriter. So we drove out to my house, and it was a very hot that day. Donna sat them down at the dining room table and Donna brought the typewriter out of my office. Along with carbon paper and he sat there and typed. It said for

one dollars and good and valuable consideration we option this here and it had to meet some bounds and description, etc. etc. etc. And then, he said I'm going to make this with him personally, and you. Then George Flynn signed it, I signed it, he reached into his billfold, he gave me a \$20 bill. It was a Friday about 1:30 and they were in a hurry, they had a flight to catch out of Lambert. He said, I better give you my home phone number in case you need to get a hold of me. He wrote on there Pennington, New Jersey and his home phone, so I knew that he was golden. They left my house and that evening I'd finished eating dinner and I was back in my office and I was looking at that piece of paper and I was mystified. These guys really seemed very astute and professional, so, curiosity got the best of me. I called him. Person to person. Remember person to person calls?

SH: Yes, I do. I do.

RK: I knew he wasn't at home, he was in the air. I called and his teenage daughter answered. I asked personally for Mr. George Flynn, she said well he's not here. And then the operator kept the line open and I said is this the Mr. Flynn who is associated with the Weyerhaeuser Lumber Company? I just picked a big corporate name and a name I knew because I was buying laminated beams from them. She said "no, he's not with the Weyerhaeuser Lumber Company, and I said well what company is he with? She said well he's with the *Wall Street Journal*. I said thank you operator, I got the wrong number. They weren't gone from my house three hours...

SH: [laughter]

RK: Those guys, as they explained to me, that they were with a national printing company, and that they had sent a team out here, they wanted to be less than 30 minutes driving time of the downtown St. Louis Post Office. That was their criteria. And they had had a team of underlings go from St. Louis west, a month ago, and those guys struck out. The two guys that came to Highland were high up in the food chain, and these guys, as they told me had started going up Route 3 and got up as far as Alton, and as they approached Route 3 in Alton, the first six buildings they saw was the United Steel Workers office, the United Paper Workers headquarters, the United Glass Workers, and they said this is too union-oriented a town, so they found their way to Edwardsville, and they spent all the next day in Edwardsville, and all of the land that was available was owned by Albert Cassens. And they told me Mr. Cassens has an overinflated idea on what his land was worth. Then, George Flynn, who grew up on the Wabash River down here, a little town, had gone to U of I and he said I have a cousin that teaches school in a little town called Highland, Illinois, Francis Ragsdale, and she speaks so glowingly about the little town of Highland around there. So they looked on their map, they were in Edwardsville, and they see it's not far, so they came over and saw the City Manager at 4 pm that day, and it's because of that lady that the *Wall Street Journal* came to Highland.

SH: [laughter] That's interesting. That is fascinating and, and it is interesting that that they uh, fate turns on little things sometimes, doesn't it? Wow.

RK: So then, within 30 days they closed on the property.

SH: Did they call, did they call you?

RK: Yes, there was an article in the *Wall Street Journal* that they were going to be building a printing

plant in Highland, Illinois, and the *Wall Street Journal*, you know here in Highland you didn't get it until noon, but in Chicago it was eight o'clock in the morning, and there's a little paragraph, they're building it in Highland, Illinois, and one of my business colleagues, his friend from Chicago called to congratulate him for that and, he said how in the hell, he didn't know anything about it. Once I had that option from the *Wall Street Journal*, I then approached the farmer that owned the land next to them, when I was pretty certain that we were going to do it. I got an option for the 40 acres next door and I couldn't cover it, so I went to my banker and said I'd like to get a loan on that if this goes through and he says these are \$600 an acre! And I said well I've got an option I think they're going to go through with it with a company that's paying fifteen hundred! He said, "Oh, I'll cover you". Once the story came out in the *Wall Street Journal* that they were building a printing plant in Highland, I had an excuse to call them. I called Mr. Flynn and he said Yeah Ralph, but I'd appreciate it if you'd keep it in confidence, because we've got a lot of international union things we want to solve before they read about it in the paper. Then he said, could you recommend an architect and, I said yes, here's one, they took my architect and they didn't even ask about putting it out for bids. It was a given, they trust me. When I called him then, I called that home phone number, he wife said he's in New York, here's his phone number in New York. That number was for Dow Jones and Company, and then I said Mr. Flynn, they put me right through to him, he said we need to hurry, we only have 30 days, because their option was for 30 days. And this wasn't at the end of 30 days, this was a week into it and he said we have to hurry, because it was laid out in streets, sewers, and alleys and I had to get all of that vacated. It was almost too good to be true but it was just plain falling out of bed dumb luck.

SH: [laughter]

RK: And if Albert Cassens would have had a Ralph Korte in Edwardsville that building would have been in Edwardsville.

SH: Well, it's not all damn luck I mean...

RK: [laughter]

SH: ... there's, there's a lot of uh, uh personal relationship and skill involved in there that that made that.

RK: But again that was 1966, I was in my sixth year of college and again my business degree just built on my confidence.

SH: Yeah. You've been a great friend of the, of the university over the, over the years and, and you really helped it grow. Um, and, and I just want, want you to know how much we all really appreciate that and...

RK: Now, what was it, how long, what time did you arrive there?

SH: Uh, I arrived in in '84, and...

RK: Where did you come from?

SH: Uh, well I grew up in Kankakee, got my PhD from University of Illinois in Chicago, and worked at the Newberry Library in Chicago then, we went down and were at Georgia Southern University before

coming up here, in '84.

RK: And what were your duties here? How did you become the interim chancellor at that time?

SH: [laughter] Dumb luck. [laughter] Uh, I was, well let's see, I worked my way up to being graduate dean and associate provost for research and, I did that for about 12 years, I, I dis, I left that in 2012 and wanted to return to the faculty to teach, 'cause I love history

SH: ...and um, so I taught for a year and a half, that was how I was going to end my career then and, and then I retired in 2014. In 2015, Chancellor Furst-Bowe asked me if I would be interim dean of arts and sciences and I took over, I came back and did that for about nine months and in the meantime she then left, and Randy Dunn asked me to be interim chancellor then and uh, for, for the year, and I decided, yes, I would take that opportunity [laughter]

RK: How long were you interim chancellor? Just...

SH: J-just a year, and I, I toyed with the idea of, of going for the job, permanently, but I knew the university needed somebody that was going to give them five to seven years, it was a real commitment and, you know, I was, I was uh, 68 years old... and I, and I didn't want, I just...I just didn't think I had the energy 'cause it takes an awful lot of energy at that, to be the chancellor, but you've worked with some great chancellors, David Werner

RK: Oh, yes

SH: ... and Vaughn Vandegrift...

RK: Yes Earl.Lazerson

SH: ... Earl Lazerson. Yeah.

RK: Earl and I built the soccer stadium out there, and I still remember Earl, well, shouldn't record, but I guess you can wipe this out but, Earl, we were doing a fundraiser to raise money for the soccer stadium, and I gave a talk. We were in the ballroom, and as a rah rah rah I tried to elicit support. After my speech was over, as I walked down the stairs, Earl said, Ralph if I was ever in the battle, I'd want to be in the foxhole with you.

SH: [laughter]

RK: [laughter] And it was unusual coming from him because I don't think he had any military experience, by every indication, and I was just coming off the stage. Earl was a leader.

SH: Yes. Yes.

SH: ... and you did the leadership council with Earl, didn't you?

RK: Yes

SH: You were help...

RK: Yes

SH: ...one of the founding...

RK: Yes. I was...

SH: ...uh, forces in the leadership council

RK: ...There wouldn't be a leadership council if not for Earl Lazerson, Carl Mathias, and myself. Earl was a driver. It came about due a meeting with St. Louis Chamber of Commerce, at a groundbreaking ceremony, I believe it was Jim O'Flynn, that said to Carl Mathias and I at the groundbreaking of Precoat Metals in Granite City. Jim Flynn said "you know that RCJ in St. Louis would give fifty thousand dollars to start something in Illinois. A leadership council. I said the only way it would work would be in disparate communities of Alton to Belleville and Collinsville, and asked where would we headquarter? I said the only place that is neutral ground that everybody on the east side might embrace is if it was anchored at SIUE, and that was before SIUE had even annexed into the city of Edwardsville. I said I think everybody would look at that as neutral grounds. And then Carl and I went to Earl Lazerson and told him of the idea, and he says, well let me think about it. Because Earl didn't jump into stuff, and it was maybe 30 to 60 days, he called a meeting and collectively said who should be there, the first executive director was headquartered there and the office was there and Illinois Power paid the staff.

SH: Was the first...

RK: ...think of the young guy...

SH: ...that, that first executive director.

RK: ...He was assistant, but then after about a year then we hired someone. and that third floor, that was Mary Kane.

SH: Mary Kane.

RK: Yes

SH: Yeah. Well the, the leadership council has done a lot for the area that...

RK: Absolutely

SH: ...they um, um...

RK: Wouldn't be there.

SH: ...the levees and, Scott Air Force Base...

RK: ...wouldn't be there...

SH: ...list goes on

RK: ...if I would not have been at that dedication of Precoat metals the Leadership Council and some of the future progress in the area would not have happened. Carl Mathias was head of Illinois Power in this region. But it's been a fun ride.

SH: Yeah

RK: But, hey, I want to thank you, still remember having breakfast with you there in Edwardsville...

SH: [laughter]

RK: ...and you said would you move half a million of that and I said well, if you get the blessing from the business school because I don't wanna be an Indian giver, and the dean was leaving...

SH: Yeah

RK: ...he says heck I don't care, my heart was more with construction so it...

SH: So have you been, did you go to the dedication of the addition?

RK: Oh, yes

SH: Yeah. That's great.

RK: It's a great building.

SH: Yeah, it's nice, isn't it? Yeah. Yeah. You all, you got us started by letting us move that five hundred thousand dollars.

RK: [laughter] Yeah. [laughter]

SH: You've done a lot.

RK: Yep

SH: Well, I thank you Ralph...