

HARTFORD ORAL HISTORY PROJECT—KEN PARKER
Ken Parker, interviewed by on 1/30/07 by Lissa Mounce
In his office at 160 Gate Street in White River Junction
Transcribed by Laura Power, 1/28/10

LM: Today is January 30, 2007. I'm Lissa Mounce and I am interviewing Mr. Ken Parker in his office on Gate Street in White River Junction.

KP: Welcome Lissa. It's nice to have you here.

LM: I'm so pleased to be doing this.

KP: Well, I'm pleased that I can make a contribution and I hope that the time spent produces some insight and perspective about the town of Hartford but maybe more to the point White River Junction and the village and what has transpired here over the last 60 years as I've seen it change from the time that I was a little kid until here I am about to turn 60 years old. It's been a long time.

LM: Well, now you started off here with your folks who owned a restaurant here downtown?

KP: That's correct. I moved to white river junction with my parents when I was three months old. We came up from Ascutney. My father and mother owned a restaurant in Ascutney right after the war called the Top Hat, which was a very popular night spot. After running that a couple of years, they decided they wanted something a little bit more mundane so they bought the Junction Restaurant from my father's brother. His name was Howard Parker, my dad was Clayton Parker and they moved up here in June of 1947. And stayed in that business until they retired on January 1, 1966.

We lived in a four room apartment upstairs over the restaurant from the time that we moved up here until well, I had actually had gone away to college, I was in my first year of college when they sold the business and moved out and purchased their first home in many, many years.

LM: Where was the restaurant, what was the address?

KP: The restaurant was at 40 South Main Street. And I don't know what today's address is because of the 911 change. It was a restaurant that was located in a building between what used to be the American Legion Hall which is now C&S Pizza and a building that on the other side housed at the time in the early fifties, late forties, early fifties it housed the bowling alley and people who have been around not quite that long may remember Lena's Lunch which was there.

Anyway, the two buildings bracketed the restaurant building and the backyard was initially the coal bins of the railroad yard. Eventually they were taken down and the white river paper company extended its wholesale warehouse past the backyard building. So, the backyard of Main Street was in part my playground from the time I was a little kid until well through my high school years.

LM: Were there many other families living as neighbors?

KP: There were a lot of families that lived generally south of there. When you get above where the restaurant was, it was right in the heart of the business district and there weren't many or any residences to speak of. But as you moved down South Main Street on the west side of the street, as you go down the street that would be the right, there were a number of families that owned single family homes and in some instances their business and their homes were combined in the same building.

Al Izzo, for instance owned Izzo's market. And a couple of buildings down was Babe Falzerano and his Progressive Market. And the Falzerano family as well as the Izzo family lived on the same premises where their businesses were conducted.

LM: Did they have children that you were able to play with?

KP: They had children my age, a couple years older. There was a fairly substantial number of kids in the neighborhood. The Falzeanos, the Bairds and when you got down the street the Regionis. South Main Street was by and large the Italian district in the town of Hartford, one of them, the principle one. Many of the families there were second generation or even first generation immigrants. They tended to work on the railroad. As the generations changed, some of the younger people went to work in some of the other wholesale businesses in town.

The Romanos for instance worked in Twin State Fruit, which was on Railroad Row in a building that was demolished a few years ago. A new structure was built over there. But there were over on Gates Street, there were two families that had three children in each family. They were again close to my age and some of my buddies.

LM: How did you get to school?

KP: Well the school was, my first experience with school was St. Anthony's Convent for kindergarten. And the convent had two kindergarten classrooms, one on each level of the

building. The nuns were the teachers. When I went to public school I started at what's now the White River Elementary School up on the campus with the high school. At the time I started there it was first grade through ninth grade facility. And the high school was where the White River Elementary School is down at the foot of the Route 5 hill, and that was sophomore, junior, and senior high.

Part way through my sophomore year in high school, was it sophomore or junior year, we moved up to the new high school. I graduated from high school in 1965. My class was the first year, the first graduating class to spend a full year there. We moved in the middle of the year and the class before us spent just six months in the facility there and then they were gone. It was quite a transition.

LM: I can imagine. A lot of change socially going on.

KP: There was a lot of change. You asked how we got to school. We got to school in a variety of ways. When we were small kids we rode the bus. And then as we advanced up through the grades they had cut off points that basically said, ok you are too old to ride the bus now, you need to find another way, walk or something. When I went to high school at the foot of the hill in the old high school, I walked, it wasn't that far. Kids would gather, there'd be clusters of kids that were walking from the terraces up behind the village as well as South Main Street. And we'd walk with our buddies to high school.

LM: What would you do after school? You had this bunch of kids going to the same general areas.

KP: Different ages we did different sorts of things. When I was in grade school, we used to play outside and go to each other's houses and play out in the coal sheds and play along the railroad tracks. In the spring time we always looked forward to the weather warming up enough and the snow melting enough that we... so that could go play baseball in the town parking lot which is now behind the legion building. That was a great spot for kids to congregate and play whiffle ball or baseball.

LM: And it was just kids...

KP: Yeah, pick-up games, and the sort of things that kids don't seem to do or be allowed to do today. In the winter time if we could catch a ride, or somehow get to Wilder, we'd go skate at Frost Pond or play pond hockey or busy ourselves with our own activities. During the school

year, there were a variety of things going on, it certainly wasn't the variety of sports that are played now, but we had a variety of sport opportunities, both organized as well as...sometimes the basketball courts would be open and we could go in and play pick-up games and do that sort of thing. There also seemed to be a greater willingness on the part of parents to pool, car pool and pool resources and take kids to ski in the winter and do things of that sort than happens to be the case today.

LM: But both of your parents were working at the restaurant.

KP: They were. My parents' day typically started at around 4:45 in the morning and the restaurant was opened at 5:30 and their work day usually ended at 6 o'clock at night and this was six days a week. I didn't have a lot of time with my parents to do things so I pretty much became somewhat self sufficient. They were always there, I knew they were around, I got solicited and unsolicited guidance, from them, and I knew that they were caring and attentive and they were there to watch over me. But, I spent a lot of time keeping myself busy, playing by myself upstairs, or meeting with some of my friends and playing ball, doing some of the chores I can't say that I miss in later life. It was a time when people worked pretty hard and there were family times together, but there wasn't a lot of vacation, there wasn't a lot of travel, in part because they just didn't have the time to get away.

LM: What about the Thanksgiving and Christmas time, the traditional gather the entire extended family together, were you able to do that?

KP: We did that. In fact, one of the things that was kind of a ritual, we always gathered Sunday evening for dinner. When I say we, I had a relatively small family. I have an older brother, but he essentially left to go to college and then served in the army. And when he got out of the army he took up residency in Massachusetts. He wasn't around from the time he was 18 years old. He's 14 years older than I am. When he left home I was basically a 4 year old. It was like two separate families. And he didn't come up here to spend holidays. He had a family in Mass and he tended to stay down there and do things. My folks would have my uncle and his wife come and spend Thanksgiving with us on occasion.

LM: Your family was in the restaurant business, you must have had fabulous meals.

KP: Well, the restaurant that my parents operated was a blue collar diner sort of thing. The food by my recollection was very good it was quite basic. There were some things they were well known for and kind of set a standard. My mother had an enormous capacity to make the best

raised donuts in the world. And she made, on a regular basis she would make 60 to 70 dozen donuts a day and they were all hand cut, hand rolled, hand fried. She also made muffins. My dad was basically the guy that did the soups and the sauces and the roasts. They worked the restaurant for just about twenty years together. They worked side by side from the time they married until the time my dad passed away. They'd been married 61 years. With the exception of two years during world war II when they worked in shops. My dad worked in Jones and Lamson, J&L, in Springfield and he had a critical skill that made it necessary for him to stay there and do war time production work rather than go into the armed forces. My mother worked at the Goodyear plant in Windsor. Aside from that period of time, they worked side by side and did virtually everything for 61 years.

They put their skills to good use. A lot of it was skills they learned working on the farm with their parents. Work ethic certainly stemmed from that.

LM: Did you know your grandparents at all?

KP: I did. My mother came to the United States from Coaticook, when she was ten years old. Coaticook, Quebec. Moved to the states, she was one of five children, the next to the oldest, couldn't speak a word of English. Came to Vermont, first to Barre for a short period of time, first to Barre for a short period of time because her dad worked at the granite quarry up there. And then they moved to Amsden which is down near Weathersfield. My mother went to school. The growing family lived there for quite some time. When she was 17, she met my dad and he was a couple or three years older. And they got married when she was 18 and he was 21.

My father was from Springfield. My grandfather ran a small store. He was a meat cutter and he also had a livery stable of horses in Springfield. I never knew my paternal grandmother, she passed away before I was born. But my grandfather remarried and I did know my step grandmother who was the only grandmother I knew on that side of the family.

My mother's parents were, they didn't live in this area, they moved from Amsden and lived predominantly in the Hookset area. That's in New Hampshire. My grandfather ran a chicken farm down there. I have some fond recollections of going down to the chicken farm as a little kid and teaching him to ride on his one one John Deere tractor and pattering around the yard then being chased by chickens. I called him Pep Pere, his name was William Riando (?). My grandmother's name was Eva, she was referred to as Mem Mere. It's interesting how the contrast of two personalities seemed to blend very well. My grandfather I don't think, on my mother's side, I don't think ever said an unkind word, or ever raised his voice once in his life. My

grandmother used to be a banty (?) rooster. She would have cousins lined up in corners of two rooms at the same time facing the corner because she was pretty strict.

LM: Good cop, bad cop.

KP: Yeah, good cop, bad cop. She had a heart of gold but boy, I'll tell you she could make you mind your p's and q's quicker than anybody I've ever seen. And nobody crossed her wires.

LM: And your parents were sort of in between?

KP: They were. My folks were firm with their discipline. My dad more so, my mother was more soft hearted. If I have a gentle side of me it's in large part because of my mother's nature and my grandfather on her side's demeanor. But I do have that Parker edge and I can be pretty prickly without being prompted too much.

LM: Did you get into any kind of trouble as a little kid or as a teenage rebellion kind of period?

KP: I always got in trouble of some form or another. Nothing with the law thankfully. It was kid stuff. I used to get in scraps with the neighbors or arguments down the street and come home with a bloody nose or fat lip. And sometimes come home because I'd been sent home after having given one to somebody. But that just wasn't my nature. I'd do mischievous things but that didn't tend to be hateful mischievous things and every once in a while I'd get caught.

LM: Do you think a lot of that had to do with the community?

KP: I always had a lot of people watching me. When you grow up as a street kid like I did with somebody whose parents ran a restaurant that was right in the heart of town. Everybody knew me and there wasn't too much I could get away without a report getting back and being called on the carpet for it. There were also people in the community who would look after you. There wasn't that concern for your safety. If you walked down the street there was always somebody sticking their head out the window saying hello or where are you going what are you doing. Checking up. Even though it was a business district there was a neighborliness about it that was comforting as I look back on it. It was not the ideal environment because of being right there on the street and all the noise and the cacophony of the bowling alley on one side and the Legion beer hall and dance hall being on the other side. Things of that nature. There were plenty of people to interact with. I think as I look back on my childhood two of the things that served me best as I worked my way through life are one, is the exposure I had to people from all walks of life

from all parts of the country other parts of the world who through their patronage came through my parents' restaurant. That gave me an understanding and appreciation for people of different colors, different beliefs. I was right there in the midst of it all the time. It wasn't like I was separated from the restaurant environment because we ate our meals in the restaurant. I raised hell and made the life of more than one cook miserable because of some of my shenanigans and demands. But it was all part of the fabric I guess of growing up in that time and in that area.

And the other thing that I learned and it stands by me well. Sometimes it...it's something I can't get past I can't be the hard nose that I might be in some instances especially in the business world. I don't ever remember somebody...we had people coming to the back door of the restaurant on a regular basis, on a daily basis looking for a handout. People who were traveling folk, people who were hobos and itinerates who rode the rails. I don't ever remember a single soul coming to the restaurant and asking for food and not being given a meal by my folks. That was just something they did. Sometimes they would ask that somebody, do something in return for it, it would be a minor task or something. It was kind of my dad's way in particular of saying, you know, we'll help you but you've kind of got to pay a little bit for it. Not monetarily but with some energy expense. I met a lot of interesting characters at the back door.

LM: Tell me about some of them.

KP: One in particular stands out. This guys' image and conversations I've had with him over the years have stuck with me. He was a college educated man. His name was Harrison. Harrison showed up one year and had a couple of books with him and asked if there was anything he could do for a meal. And so my dad said sure and gave him a couple of tasks to do. Usually my folks had something left over from the day's prep that was going to be a left over or something. I think in his own way, I think sometimes my dad would over stock somebody's plate. I think he felt, if you want something to eat I'll give you all you can eat and then some. It might have been a game that he played. Anyway, he piled a plate for Harrison that would have fed three men and Harrison wolfed it down like a ravenous dog. And he said something to my father to the effect of I have some skills that I can help you can do some things with if you have need for my help. So my dad said ok. And at that point in time he and my mother had been purchasing some buildings downtown and converting them into apartment buildings and there was always something being torn out or something that needed to be rehabbed. So he put Harrison to work and Harrison worked for a couple of weeks or so and he worked pretty well. Some time passed and dad was feeding him and he also provided him with a cot and a place to stay. And Harrison disappeared, without warning, he was gone. It was like a wisp in the wind, he was nowhere to be found. So we figured, well, he got fed up with it, he got the itch, and it was time to move on. He would

surface periodically during the course of the summer and he would work a day or a week and then he'd be gone again.

Over the period of a number of years we got to know Harrison pretty well. It was interesting, like the swallows that return to Capistrano, Harrison would return to White River Junction about the same time each spring. You could almost sense, in fact we'd talk about it, you know it's about time for Harrison to show up and knock, knock, knock, on the door, it would be Harrison having spent the winter someplace. If you were around, you could tell that sometime in early October his migratory instincts were going to take him out of the area and off he'd go someplace. One year when he came back, my dad said Harrison where'd you spend the winter. He said, well, he says, you know I found this little town in Pennsylvania where the jailer would give you three hots a day, three hot meals a day, and didn't make you work very hard. And would put me up for the winter. So he said I went down there and that's where I stayed for the winter. Now I don't know what he did, he may have broken a window or something to warrant being put in jail, but that's where he spent the winter and he did that year after year.

Harrison was the brother of a fairly prominent lawyer from what I understand in St. Johnsbury. He was a well read man. He had an interesting perspective on things and people and fascinating stories about his travels. He just obviously was somebody who could not be held accountable or be held in one place. He had a wonder lust that just grabbed him more than anything else.

LM: How different that must have been for you, who grew up here, had every conceivable root connected to White River Junction.

KP: That's been a tough bond to break in some respects. After I graduated from high school, I went away to college and stayed here in Vermont going to school. When I got out of the University of Vermont in 1969, I went to work in the governor's office and worked there for about nine months. And, got fired from my job in the governor's office. At the time, when I was University of Vermont I was involved in student politics. It was during the Vietnam era, and I rose to the position of student association president. In other words, I was the president of the student body, 1968 and 1969. And that was a period of time of substantial unrest on college campuses. In that capacity, I worked diligently with university administrators and with some of the law enforcement people in the community including Senator Leahy who was then Chittenden County State's Attorney and a fellow named Jim Jeffords. We were trying to have on-going open lines of communication that would keep the lid on the campus rather than have it dissolve into the chaos that had occurred at Dartmouth or Harvard when the Students for a Democratic Society, SDS, were turning campuses upside down.

LM: Was there SDS?

KP: There were. There were some people who ascribed to their ideals but it wasn't as dominant or as angry a bunch as there were at some of the other colleges. And I think it was probably in part because of the basis from which a lot of the students at UVM came. There were a lot of Vermonters and their values were different than some of the kids at some of the urban schools. We didn't have the infiltration of non students who were there to stir up the campus like Rudy the Redman (?) bunch of them did at places like Harvard and MIT.

Also, we had an administration that was willing to work with people, give them space, but also make it known that they weren't going to tolerate some of the disruptions that were going on in other places.

LM: Really a maturing process for you.

KP: It was. It was for a number of reasons. First of all, had the constant possibility of going to Vietnam hanging over one's head. A lot of unrest and strife because of the fact that some many people didn't believe in what that war was all about.

But when I got out of UVM, I went to work in Governor Davis' office, [first name] Davis was the governor at that time, to set up a commission on student affairs for the state. I worked with other schools in Vermont to try to do some of the things that we had done at UVM. Worked on developing a grant. As things progressed, the governor was more and more ardent in his support of Richard Nixon and Nixon's escalation of the bombing and the war in general. Finally, some of my friends and counterparts in state government and I decided that we would take part in a demonstration on the state house lawn. And we did. Peter Smith who was at that time the assistant, he was a graduate student from Harvard, he was the assistant to Harvey Scribner the Commissioner of Education. Tom Hayes who was the Lieutenant Governor, a guy by the name of Chuck Butler who had been Governor Davis' campaign manager and also worked in the governor's office, and myself who also worked in the governor's office were the four rogues who participated in the demonstration. The governor couldn't fire Smith because he was under Harvey Scriber's tutelage. Peter became the state senator, Lieutenant Governor and Congressman from Vermont subsequent to that. Couldn't fire Tom Hayes because he was Lieutenant Governor. And, Chuck Butler knew where the skeletons were in the governor's closet, couldn't really fire him, but he had no problem firing me.

I remember being called into the Governor's office. And, the Governor said, you know Ken, we have a problem here. We have a problem we need to resolve. He said, you know, you participated in something yesterday in a way that means that one of us has got to leave. And he said, you know I was elected by the people of the state of Vermont to do a job for a couple of years and I haven't finished that job yet, and I owe it to the people to stay. You serve at my pleasure, and I think probably that you're going to have to leave. Of course, I knew the hand writing was on the wall anyway. So we had a discussion about things, and it was a congenial one, paternalistically congenial. And I was invited to hand in my keys and everything and I did. And then in the final moments of the conversation, the Governor looked at me and said, I have a feeling that I've not seen the last of you young man. I said, well, I don't think you have. With that, we good naturedly parted and I came back to White River and started to look around for a job.

I was 21 at the time, and started to look around for a job. Bill Miller and his general manager Tony Michael were people that I knew pretty well and they knew of an opening working for General Motors. I interviewed for the job and was hired working in this territory for General Motors. Basically established myself back here in the community.

LM: Were you living with your parents?

KP: By then, my parents had sold the restaurant and purchased a home on the Woodstock Road. I went back and lived with them. In the fall of 1971, it was the fall of 1971, I decided to run for the legislature. I ran in a district that was predominantly Hartland but included portions of White River and Quechee. The district was dissolved in 1976. The 75 fall election was a, there was some gerrymandering that went on. I was, my district was then split so that Hartland had essentially its own representative and the portion of Hartford that I had represented was added in to most of the rest of the town of Hartford and it would have pitted me against two incumbents in that district, a Selectman Joe Reed, and Stewart Rouse.

But getting back to what I was saying. I ran for the House, and had the good fortune to have a group of people in Hartland band together and say we're going to get you elected. Although I went door to door, knocking on doors throughout the community, running as a democrat in a district that had never elected a democrat to anything. Running against a fellow who was fifty years older than I was at the time, who was a pillar in the community, a deacon in the church, had the strong support of a very strong Republican Town Committee. When the votes were cast, I beat him by 13 votes. I know full well the value of every person's vote. Because that 13 votes means that if seven people had changed their minds, I would never had been elected.

And when I was elected, I became the youngest person at that time to have ever been elected to the Vermont legislature. I went and served that first term and sponsored some legislation which I felt very passionately about at the time and as luck would have it, it was legislation that was enacted pretty much intact. Governor Davis signed the legislation into law. The legislation I speak of was the age of majority legislation. Vermont was the first state in the nation to reduce the age of majority or adulthood from 21 to 18 across the board for everything. Some states had done it for voting, some states had done it for drinking. But the approach that we took and it was accepted by the legislature was, essentially was that if you're old enough to drink you're old enough to vote, then you should be able to...if you're old enough to serve in the military you ought to be able to vote, you ought to be able to drink, you ought to be able to sign contracts, you ought to be able to get married, and you also ought to have the responsibilities that come with being an adult. And, that legislation was enacted. Some other states followed suit after that.

The next election cycle in the fall of 74, actually the fall of 73, I ran unopposed from Hartland, same district, and there were I think 10 people who were elected who were younger than I was, included the present Governor, Jim Douglas, he was one of the young turks.

Governor Salmon became the Governor after Governor Davis and he used to refer to me as the dean of the kids.

I had some other legislative success when I was there, but I served four years in the house and largely became frustrated with the process and some of the aspects of being a legislator that really weren't too pretty. There were things I thought in my own mind philosophically that the state ought to deal with and for petty political reasons, partisan reasons in many cases, sensible legislation got stuck in somebody's pocket and never got enacted. I think probably one of the telling moments was the outcome of a bill I had sponsored to require wearing hunter safety orange while deer hunting. It passed the House, it passed a couple readings, and it was up for final vote in the Senate, and right at the end of the session somebody put it in their pocket and it never got enacted into law. And it was that close. And my sponsorship of the legislation was due to the fact that a member of my wife's family was shot and killed in a hunting accident. It's one of those things that just made sense. It still makes sense today, for people's safety. It's still not done.

I ran for the Senate in the fall of 75. I ran on a county-wide basis again as a democrat. And at that time only one democrat had ever been elected to the State Senate and that was in the Johnson landslide in 1964. I lost by I think it was around 500 votes. You ran for one of three seats. I finished fourth by 5, 6 hundred votes, somewhere thereabouts. I was beaten by Herb

Ogden who was the sage of Hartland. He used to run a grist mill and cider mill down there. He had some friends. He was an eccentric. I took heart in the fact that I ran a strong campaign and it wasn't long after that, I think it was the year around that Edgar May got elected to the Senate. I think Peter Welch sometime shortly after that, too. I opened the door. I guess in my political experience, I opened the door in a number of ways at different times.

I never enjoyed the, perhaps the fruits of some of that effort directly, but I can step back and look at it. As an example, when I was a student association president at UVM, I ran for a seat on the Board of Trustees. In effect it was the first time that a student had run for a seat on the Board to represent the student's interests. There were only three avenues that could be followed to access getting on a Board. One was as an alum which obviously I didn't qualify for. The other one was as an appointed trustee. The third was through the legislative selection process. A third of the Trustees at UVM are elected from the Legislature. Typically they had been legislators who had been selected. I ran for a seat as a Legislative Trustee as an individual not as a member of the legislature. This was before I was in the Legislature. Tom Sayman (?) happened to be my major nominator. I didn't win, I think the vote was seven or eight votes short on the first round. And then obviously after the first round people started going their own way, they held the support for me for that vote. The following year, the university opened it up, the process, and now there's two student representatives that serve on the Board.

LM: That's a fairly common occurrence in most universities.

KP: It is. But again it was groundbreaking.

End of Tape 1.

Ken Parker, interviewed by on 2/6/07 by Lissa Mounce
In his office at 160 Gate Street in White River Junction
Transcribed by Laura Power, 1/29/10

LM: Let's talk about White River Junction.

KP: Welcome back. Let's. Recollections of 60 years in the downtown area.

LM: It's so unusual that someone has lived their entire life in a section of America.

KP: I keep thinking that too as I get a little older. My span of time here in downtown is...my time here in the downtown area spans from my days as a three month old infant to a 60 year old adult. Grown-up. Some people say that they are suffering from old age or they're getting older. I'm not getting older I'm experiencing advancing youth. I still remember vividly a lot of the things I did as a kid in the downtown area growing up. And I've spent my adult life here professionally as well. My office location on Gates street used to belong to...well, originally it was built by a fellow who was a physician. Had a family practice and he built the building so I'm told to house both his medical practice and also to take care of his family housing needs. The garage or barn that is out back used to be a horse stable, as were many of the old barns or garages in the Gates Street and Fairview Terrace area. One can still see out behind a lot of the larger homes what were old carriage houses and horse barns.

LM: So when would this have been built, in the 20's?

KP: I think this was built in the late 1800's.

LM: Oh really, I noticed some of the light fixtures are those two button types.

KP: There are a few of those around. Some of them are also the kind that you turn and they click. Fortunately, I don't have any of those in the house, I've done the place over. The old barn out back still has the original interior, you can see where the hay was stored, and the grain was stored, and the horses dug into the wooden floors, and it's fascinating. Fascinating history of how people got around in this community back at the turn of the 19th, 20th century.

LM: Well, the trains came in before that of course.

KP: When I was a child, the trains were pretty active here in town. When we first came to town there something in the magnitude of 50 plus trains going in and out of White River Junction a day. I have vague recollections of some of that period in the late 40's when I was just a young child. In

the early 50's when steam trains were still coming into the community and they were being replaced by diesel locomotives. Trains were very integral part of the life of anybody who was in the downtown area because they often were...trains were being made up of cars and the two switching yards were a constant source of great noise and thunder and that seemed to be chaos but anybody who lived in the downtown area or close proximity was hammered constantly by the noise of movement of trains and that sort of... the railroad itself.

LM: Were there also passenger trains?

KP: Oh yes. There were a lot of passenger trains. The line from Montreal to Boston went through here. Or two lines actually. One that came diagonally across Vermont from St Albans through Essex Junction and Montpelier which is essentially the same route that the Amtrak train follows today. And then the other line was the one that came down the Connecticut River and passed through White River Junction.

LM: And both were both passenger and freight?

KP: There were passenger and freight trains coming in both directions to the best of my memory.

LM: What was your first train ride, was it from here?

KP: You know, one of the first train rides that I can remember was when I was a little kid...of course, my parents owning a restaurant in town that catered to the local working community, we had a lot of railroad personnel who ate and drank in the restaurant. And I can remember...and they had a variety of types of jobs some of them were section crew members where they went out and repaired the rails or rebuilt the roads or did that sort of thing. Others were conductors or flag men or engineers on the trains and some worked in that capacity for long distance travel and others worked just in the local yards driving the switchers and things of that sort. One of the first remembrances I have of a train ride was riding in the lap of a fellow who had been a long time friend of my family's who was an engineer, he ran the switcher in the yard, and I can remember riding in the switcher around the hub down by the depot. I must have been maybe three or four at the time. That was a thrill.

LM: Oh, yeah!

KP: Of course it didn't go very far or very fast.

LM: To a young child, the huge engine and the noises...

KP: That's very true. And I do remember a couple of other train rides, but I didn't ride the train much. If we went someplace we usually went by automobile.

When I was in my first year of college I took a train ride from North Field Vermont to New London Connecticut. I was a student at Norwich University for a short while, played in the band and we had a football game at the Coast Guard Academy in New London and the whole cadet contingent went through White River on the train and in fact stopped in White River for a brief period of time, then continued down to the Coast Guard Academy for a weekend football game, and that was an interesting trip to say the least.

By then, train travel had really diminished. It was a time when the Interstates were starting to open up and trains...the late 50's started to see the demise of a lot of travel by rail. I can remember a great deal of concern in the community about the reduction in rail activity and the loss of jobs being experienced by people who had worked for the railroad because of the railroad falling by the wayside.

LM: This was such a pivotal area of train system, a huge variety...

KP: Well, just as it is today a crossroads for transportation back in the 30's, 40's, 50's it was a crossroad of transportation for the rail industry. That brought a lot of people to the area. At the time when we came to White River and when I was a small kid, a lot of people rode the rails to come to Dartmouth or to come to things in the area and White River Junction was one of the chief economic cells in the Upper Valley. White River Junction, downtown Lebanon, and to a degree, Hanover as well. Often times the trains would be carrying students or students families to Hanover for weekends, and Dartmouth was at that time an all male school and commonly on key weekends, there would be a flood of females coming to Dartmouth for the weekend. Whether it was Winter Carnival, or Green Key, or a football weekend, homecoming or something.

A lot of Dartmouth students when they wanted to venture out of Hanover would come to White River. Some to come to some of the night clubs that were in town. Teddy's Grill, the 494 Steakhouse. My parents had a fair amount of student traffic through their restaurant, and that was interesting to a young guy.

LM: For sure.

KP: Strange people from out of the area.

LM: Exactly, bringing all sorts of different accents and styles. So this was a very vibrant community.

KP: It was. In fact, I can vaguely remember seeing and experiencing it, but I also have listened to my parents talk many times in the past about the level of activity and things going on in the middle of the night. It was often said that White River was as busy during the middle of the night as it was during the middle of the day.

LM: Not just train activity.

KP: Not just train activity. But shopping, and people coming into the community working and changing shifts. And we had a fairly...we had a number of employers in the downtown area or the periphery that had some tie-in to transportation or people traveling. At one point in time the bakery, Tip Top Bakery, operating on North Main Street employed quite a number of people. Between that group and the people that worked at Twin State Fruit and Cross Abbott Company which was a wholesale grocery distribution firm. There was a sizable number of people that worked in the downtown area that came in and out of the community. And also when they weren't working they came here to shop. There were some stores in the downtown area that were the source to go to for clothing and home supplies and things of that sort. JJ Newberry's and Ben Franklin.

LM: I was going to ask you about chains.

KP: JJ Newberry had a presence in the downtown area for quite some time.

LM: Where were they located?

KP: Mostly in the Briggs-Gates building. They occupied one floor for quite some time and then opened up the second floor up where the Opera House is. That was part of the Newberry's complex.

The old Opera House was closed for many years. In fact, I can remember their being some vestiges of the old time Opera House there when I went up with some people that I knew who were members of the Rod and Gun Club. They used to use the Opera House in the winter time to practice their archery skills. It was kind of an interesting transition from being an old turn of the

century opera house to being an archery gallery to being now the home of flourishing, great small professional theater. So it kind of came full circle from where it was.

There were other stores. Woolworth was in the downtown area as was the Ben Franklin Store.

LM: Ben Franklin, is that like a Woolworth?

KP: It's quite similar. It was in what was most recently the space occupied by Aubuchon Hardware Store. It's on South Main Street.

There was another store that was pretty popular. In fact, it was one of my favorites because it was close by and it was where I would buy jeans and occasionally get a new jacket and that was the Surprize Department Store—Kolodny's Surprize Department Store.

LM: Kolodny's Surprize Department Store. And did the owners live here?

KP: Oh Yes. That business was owned by a woman by the name of Rose Briskie. She was a fire ball. She was a short woman who ran the business with a tight fist. Her daughter Sylvia still lives in town. Sylvia was also one of the workers in the store. They were a couple of doors up from my folks' place, and they had all kinds of things—shirts and shoes and dresses for the women and kids clothing. It was a typical old village department store that offered something for basically anybody that needed clothing.

LM: What about toy stores or beauty shops or the sort of extraneous stuff?

KP: I never had much to do with beauty shops. There were a couple in town that I remember. I don't remember much about them to be honest. Toy stores—well Newberry's had a toy department, that was always a favorite spot for kids to go. They sold toys. They also had a pet department. There weren't many other toy stores as such that I remember in town. Newberry's kind of held a fascination for that sort of thing. There were some others in the area, but that wasn't one of the things that I recall about the downtown.

LM: So it really was a major shopping center.

KP: Absolutely. I can remember a lot of people would come into town on Friday nights to do shopping and that was very important ritual for many of the families in the area. People would come in from areas like Quechee or Hartland and drive into town and a lot of times they'd have

dinner and go shopping and maybe go to the movie. It was kind of a break for them from their normal routine.

LM: Where was the movie theater?

KP: Oh, the Lyric Theater. Fond recollections of the Lyric Theater. It was on North Main Street. It was next to what I think was originally the Masonic Building but was eventually an office supply, Graydon Freeman was the name of the company. It was right on the corner of Currier Street and North Main Street. And next to it where what is now a nondescript, ugly office building. The office building is between the former Gates Library and the building housed Graydon Freeman. The structure that was there was the Lyric Theater. Every kid of my age always hankered to go to the theater there, because they ran all kinds of movies. Cowboy movies, and war movies, and horror shows, all that stuff that kids in the 50's thought was absolutely great.

LM: They had matinees that you could attend too?

KP: They had matinees. They had a great popcorn machine. I can still smell the popcorn popping up in the back. It was operated by a fellow by the name of John Gallagher and he had a suave old timer Pete Donohue I guess his name was who seemed to have always been in his 70s from the time I was a kid until he passed away. He was the ticket taker and there was a balcony. As a young kid I used to go. I went to the movies frequently. In fact I can remember when the movies were 15 or 20 cents.

LM: It was in walking distance.

KP: It was a great theater.

LM: It wasn't a big one though.

KP: It was pretty good size. I don't know how many people it sat, but of course my recollection of it was that it was huge when I was a kid. It might not be so big today. But it's certainly much bigger than the local theaters that we see around the Upper Valley now. But it had the slanting floor and the seats that would fold down and kind of slide back and the projection room was up in the middle in the back. Some of the older kids used to go up and neck in the balcony, of course I never went there.

LM: You just threw popcorn.

KP: Right. It also had a stage but I don't remember more than a couple of instances where there was actually something that was done on stage. A group of local business men bought the theater and tore it down and built the office building that is there today.

LM: When did that happen about, in the 60's?

KP: Maybe the mid to late 60's, somewhere thereabouts. I always thought it was a tragic loss of a great building because it was pretty stylish and had an interesting lobby, art deco to the highest degree. Probably built in I would say the 20s or early 30s. I don't know much about the history of it.

LM: That must have been something.

KP: It was. I remember it vividly, I spent a lot of time there.

LM: Where would you go after that?

KP: There were a couple of malt shops I guess as we used to refer to them. There was one right across the street, what was called Larry's Dairy Bar. It was owned by a fellow named Larry Falzarano. Had a great couple of pinball machines. If you were able to do it at the right time, you could put your wallet under the two legs of the pinball machine so you kind of level the playing field and you get an extended period of play out of a nickel or a dime or whatever you put in there.

LM: I can tell that you spent some time there perfecting the thickness of the wallet.

KP: I was pretty good with the flippers. There was also another small space that was in the Stedmen's (?) block, the one that burned I think two years ago, and it was Norm's.

LM: This wasn't where the infamous strip joint was?

KP: No, this, that was the Stedmen's block. But that was on the corner. When I was a little kid that was Teddy's Bar and Grill. And Teddy Terrio ran it. When we first came to town, I don't think we'd been in town a year when the hotel that was there burned. There was a hotel on the corner and that burned.

LM: That's not a very big area.

KP: It wasn't a very big hotel either. I don't remember the structure myself, but I do remember people talking, I have heard people talking about the hotel that burned. Eventually a night club was...a restaurant was built in there. There were some store fronts that over the years have had a variety of occupants ranging from the Employment Security Office to Norm's little, Norm's Dairy Bar.

And that was another place that kids went after the movies or would go to after some of the sock hops or dances at the old high school at the foot of the hill.

You know there were several restaurants in the downtown area. What a transition. It went from several to practically now none except for Como Va, which is a nice, pricey restaurant. When I was a kid, let's see, it was the Mayfair, Mayflower, Polka Dot, the Junction, which was my folks place. There was the lunch counter or dinner counter or whatever at the railroad depot. There was the Marconi Club, which sometimes served meals. The Marconi club was kind of...

LM: The Italian American Club?

KP: Well, yeah, the Italian American Club, the Marconi Club. It was kind of one to the hot spots for the evening crowd. Let's see, Dicks Dinner, which was a small old fashioned kind of domed curved roof building which was on North Main Street right across from Tip Top Bakery. And I think that's pretty much it.

LM: What about the Coolidge Hotel?

KP: Oh yes, I'm sorry, I forgot that. The Coolidge had a dining room and had a lounge or watering hole.

LM: That's 8.

KP: And they were all busy, they were all busy. I can't remember the names of the people who ran them but the Mayflower and the Mayfair were both operated by some families of Greek descent. They immigrated to the country and they ran those. Some old timers, a guy named Walt Stetson, used to own the Polka Dot and then he sold it to the Stedman's family.

LM: Were kids welcome at most of these places?

KP: Oh yeah. Not at the Marconi Club because that was...I guess maybe 15 or 20 years prior to my...when I knew about it, it would probably be referred to as a speakeasy. I think its reputation may have followed somewhat along the lines of what people would think of as a speakeasy. I've heard a lot of stories and some of them recount some pretty freewheeling times there.

LM: Did you have any Mafioso? Or any rumors?

KP: Well, it's always suspected, but you don't know if it was a bias or some ethnic bigotry that accused somebody of it or if it fact it was...although the stories of there having been bootleggers and rum runners if you will. Well hey listen it was on the route in and out of Canada, it was on the train route, it was on the route of the highways that bypassed. I think they were just a little bit more respectful or a little bit less troublesome than some of the modern day drug runners.

LM: They probably had their audience and they knew where they were.

KP: Yes. The American Legion Hall was a pretty popular place.

LM: Now that's that one that you're talking about must have been replaced.

KP: The one I'm speaking of was next to the Surprize Department Store, actually it was between the Surprize Department Store and the Junction Restaurant, which was my parents' building. The Legion was in the building that's now C&S Pizza. And the main bar was on the ground floor so that when people walked in they walked right in to this dimly lit bar. And upstairs on the second floor was the dance hall.

LM: It must have been noisy for you.

KP: It was very noisy. My bedroom window was across the alley, which was probably a little more than the width of a car lane. Of course in the early 50s through mid 50s a lot of service men were returning from World War II or the period after World War II rebuilding and then the Korean War. And a lot of the servicemen who returned when they went back to work they worked in some of the shops around and they worked on construction jobs. And there was sometimes a rather rough crowd around.

The Legion Hall had Saturday night dances and Saturday night fights in the alley. And it was a pretty noisy environment. If you add to that the train yard out in back where they were making up

or busting up trains throughout the course of the night. And then on the other side of our building the bowling alley and all the windows open in every building.

LM: No air conditioning, of course.

KP: No air conditioning. It was pretty tempestuous, sometimes sultry environment.

Talk about interesting characters in town. One of the more interesting was a fellow by the name of Lange, who owned a store, Lange's hardware store, where the present day American Legion is. He had a store that had I think everything that every farmer could need. He was blind. He'd been blinded by being hit in the head by a baseball when he was a young man. He was a pitcher. The story has it that he was destined to be a major league pitcher until he got hit. And I don't know how he started it but he was quite a crusty sort that owned this old fashioned hardware store and didn't matter what you needed, he could find it. And when people paid for it he had a capacity to discern the difference between a five dollar bill, a ten dollar bill, and a one dollar bill and couldn't see. To this day I don't know how he did it. He didn't miss many steps. He was kind of a cranky sort. But he had a real unique business there in a building that was probably one of the major eyesores of the downtown area. It had been built maybe 75 or 100 years prior and never had a coat of paint.

LM: Was there a community rising up?

KP: There was a tolerance. No, there was a tolerance. Because of him, because of his situation. But also because a lot of the people that lived on the farms out around, that was the place that they went to buy horseshoes or chains or nails or a variety of things they might need on the farm. He was part of the color of the community.

Then there were some other people that I remember. Some tradesmen that loved the bottle. They were predictable in the sense that you might find them in one state of intoxication or another between painting jobs. They added a little bit of color and humor to the downtown scene as well.

LM: The other week you mentioned a hobo who, Harrison, was a frequent visitor. He was more stable sounding.

KP: He didn't have the lust for the liquor that some had. That didn't seem to be one of his vices. There were a number of interesting people in the downtown area that really kind of kept the community on its toes.

In fact, a couple of interesting people on the other side of the law were some of the local police officers who worked the beat in Hartford so to speak. The jail used to be just up the street from where I grew up and it was downstairs under what used to be the Interstate Trust Company and the First National Bank of White River Junction. There was an entrance on the side, on the South Main Street side where you went down some steps that were kind of out in the sidewalk. There was a railing and you went down the steps into the police station. The cells were down there.

LM: Boy, I guess that would put the fear of god into kids.

KP: It did. But I knew the police officers pretty well, and it was in my play territory so I'd pop in when I felt like it sometimes just to see what was going on.

LM: How big of a force was it?

KP: Oh maybe four or five officers.

LM: They had to deal with the whole community.

KP: Yeah. It was a different time then. Some of these people that I remember as officers were hard-nosed rough and tumble sorts that they didn't have to play by the same rules that people play by today. There were a couple that had a reputation of not being somebody that you want to mess with because they were tough critters, tough characters.

Connie Johnson was the chief most of the time when I was growing up. At least, he's the one I remember most vividly. He had a fellow, a tall lanky fellow by the name of Chick Kudavosh (sp?), who generally worked nights. Chick was very capable of taking care of himself and loading the cruiser up with anybody who didn't want to go. I think he welded a night stick very effectively.

LM: Were the jail cells pretty much full on Saturday nights?

KP: Well I wasn't out wondering around Saturday nights. They were generally holding cells. If somebody really was a problem they took them either to Woodstock, to the jail in Woodstock, county jail, or down to Windsor to the state prison. My recollection of the jail in White River was that it was basically a holding place.

LM: Sober them up and quiet them down.

KP: Yes. Fonzo Guarino who was eventually the chief here in the late 60s and 70s, he was the one of the beat cops who walked the beat in town. Any kid my age remembers Fonzo because of his long black double breasted coat with the buttons. He used to stand on the corner by the corner of Currier and North Main Street directing traffic and greeting the kids and asking what you've been up to and have you been behaving yourself. He seemed to have an enormous capacity to check up on us young folks and keep us in line. Good natured. But walked in, very watchful. He was somebody who most of us respected highly and appreciated but also didn't want to get too cozy with. I've known Fonzo all my life.

LM: But it doesn't sound like there was any rampant crime down here.

KP: There was the usual debauchery and disturbances that people might engage in to let off some steam. I don't recall there being a lot of crime, certainly not as we know it today, in the downtown area.

LM: And the economy was pretty strong.

KP: Well it was until the mid 50s and then the downtown area really started to suffer because of the railroad cutbacks. There was a period I would guesstimate it was maybe five or six years between the wasting away of the railroad and the beginning of the construction and then ultimately the benefits or effects of the interstate highway system. When the interstate highway system was planned and proposed it seemed to breathe a fresh breath of possibility and hope into the community, the collective community.

LM: All the veterans had nothing to do.

KP: Well, it provided employment opportunities but it also gave the community some hope that by virtue of being where Hartford was positioned and the fact that it was going to, the two highways were going to bring people into the community breathed some new life into the economic climate here.

Hartford went through some fits and starts about what to do with itself in the future. We had an urban renewal plan that got shot down because there were a number of people in the community kind of banded together didn't want to see any kind of zoning, the old Yankee don't tell me what to do with my property.

LM: Cranky Yankee.

KP: Yeah, cranky yankee is perhaps an apt description of it. There were factions of the community that were kind of pitted against one another because of their competing interests.

LM: Was this the first time you'd experienced sort of that factional rivalry?

KP: It was probably the first time I became aware of it. I was a young teenager at the time. It was the late 50s early 60s. It was the first time I became somewhat aware of local politics and what was happening and the fact that there were people who didn't agree with each other on some political plane.

LM: As a child people always seem to agree with whatever you hear. But as a teenager, teenaged rebellion, sort of a period and then you have urban disaster happen to this city.

KP: Well, we had in a sense an urban disaster here. That occurred again with the reduction in the railroad activity. There was considerable concern, my folks were concerned as were others who that I knew in the business community who were concerned about what was going to happen. And then that concern also surfaced again after the interstate system was built and Vermont passed the sales tax. The implementation of the sales tax in Vermont and the fact that none existed in New Hampshire created a great deal of concern for the retail business community on the Vermont side of the border.

LM: When was that?

KP: 1968, I think, 68 or 69 somewhere thereabouts. Dean Davis was the governor at the time. He proposed it and the legislature enacted it, and basically turned its back on some of the critical border communities, where they were the economic life blood of the Vermont side of the border. Brattleboro. Probably White River Junction suffered more than any community along the border. The business community, the business group in this community really took a hard hit because they lost some of their competitive edge, but they also had a built in cost differential that drove people across the river.

LM: What steps did they try to take politically or business wise? What was the sort of spirit?

KP: I think there was somewhat dispirited outlook. My recollection it was a fairly rancorous time for a lot of the political people participating in politics. If you went to Montpelier and you served in

a community from the border side of Vermont and you voted for the sales tax, it was akin to committing political suicide. Even though Vermont perhaps needed the revenues and was trying to distribute the tax burden somewhat equally around the state, it really cut the throats of a lot of the business community in the upper valley area.

LM: So it really was a time of national political [something].

KP: It was. Real change in political thinking and participation and the 60s were tumultuous in many respects and not all because of the war, the Vietnam War, but I think there was just a different ethic that was starting to come into the political arena, different needs that the states had. Vermont was beginning to see the influx of people from outside that didn't have the same kind of heritage or background or ethic or sense of community and it started to change the complexion of the state.

LM: How did you see that here in White River Junction? I'm going to switch this because I don't want to miss this.

End of tape 2.