

Joseph P. Farah

Interviewed by: Janet Miller 03/13/1997

Transcribed by: Jennie Hakes

Cassette tape label: **Joseph P. Farah 3-13-97**

Note from Jennie: Unfortunately, the microphone was too far from Joe, and there was a lot of background noise (construction, dog barking, etc.), so it was very difficult to make out Joe and his wife, Florence's, responses.

Side A

Introduction

Janet: This is Janet Miller, a volunteer for the Aitkin County Historical Society, Oral History Committee. The date is March 13, 1997, and I will be interviewing Joseph P. Farah regarding his recollections of McGregor. Good afternoon, Joe!

Joe: Good afternoon.

Janet: I'm happy that you've agreed to spend some time with us and talk to us about McGregor. How long have you lived here? Let's start way back at the beginning.

The family

Joe: We came in 1910, no 1920.

Janet: 1920. And how old were you then?

Joe: I was born in 1912.

Janet: 1912, OK. Where you were born?

Joe: In Duluth.

Janet: OK. And your family moved to McGregor then when you were a small child.

Joe: That's right.

Janet: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Joe: Well, I've got two brothers and one sister.

Janet: OK. And they're all living, aren't they?

Joe: They're all living, no – Roy died in 1996.

Janet: Oh, Roy died. I know that he was living a few years ago, but I hadn't heard that he had passed away. What brought your family to McGregor?

Joe: My dad was (*unintelligible – something by pain?*) and my mother wanted to get out of Duluth. So they changed residence from Duluth to McGregor (*unintelligible*).

Janet: OK. And what...did your mother have some work to do here then? Or how did your family...what did your family live on, or what did your family do?

Joe: When we came here, we bought a hotel, and hotel was our property.

Janet: That would keep her busy.

Joe: That sure would.

Janet: Did you help with her? Did you help her in the hotel?

Joe: Yes, but that many years ago, I was just a young one.

Janet: So did your mother run the hotel for a number of years then?

Joe: It wasn't a number of years, it burned down in 1923.

McGregor businesses

Janet: What kind of businesses were there here in McGregor, when you came. Can you remember?

Joe: Let's see, there was three grocery stores, a hardware store, and a lumberyard.

Janet: Can you remember any of the business people who ran the grocery stores?

Joe: Well, Tiny Cater (?) (*unintelligible*).

Janet: Tiny was here then?

Joe: Oh, no, he was years later.

Janet: Oh, he came later? OK.

Joe: Let's see. There was...

Janet: It's OK. If you don't remember them, you don't remember them.

Joe: I'll remember 'em, maybe later on.

School

Janet: (Laughs) Sure, that's fine. You went to school here in McGregor, then?

Joe: That's right.

Janet: Was the school located where it is now, when you came to McGregor?

Joe: It wasn't really finished. (*unintelligible*) They were still finishing the school, the inside of it.

Janet: Did you attend school over there then?

Joe: Yeah. Went to school there. And years ago, there used was nothing but brush and trees there behind the school, and we used to get behind and smoke cigarettes behind the school.

Janet: Oh! Kids do that today! (Laughs)

Joe: I know! Isn't that right?

Janet: Some things never change. Vern tells me there were big piles of wood back there, too, that was used for fuel.

Joe: Yeah, that's right.

Janet: Did you remember that?

Joe: Oh, yeah. I remember on one Halloween, they took all that lumber, and put it in front of the school. It was kinda foolish.

Janet: Did the students have to move it back?

Joe: No, I guess (*unintelligible*). The janitor.

Janet: So you remember Iver then?

Joe: Oh, sure!

A happy memory

Janet: What's one of the happiest memories you have, thinking back? Or some fun things that you did when you were a kid?

Joe: Oh, yes. The freight train used to come in the switch on the rail. We used to run down and we'd see the train come in, and they'd let us get in and sit with the fireman.

Janet: Really?

Joe: Yeah. Oh, that was a big thing then! While they were sitting at the switch about an hour. That was another thing we did.

Janet: Who were some of the other kids in town that were...

Joe: (*unintelligible*) Woodrow, Vern Dotzler came – what year did he come? I guess 1930s. But (*unintelligible*) kids. (*unintelligible*) Vernon Dotzler came later on. It's kinda hard to – I can't read this...

Janet: That's OK. You don't...it's all right. What was school like?

Joe: School. It was a...going back to school...school was nice.

Janet: Do you remember any of the teachers?

Joe: No, I don't think I do. (*dog starts barking*)

Janet: When I was working on the All School Reunion, I found that Myron and Ed and Allen knew a great many of their teachers. They said that because they had no children, they were friends with the teachers. It didn't create problems like it would with...
(*Someone puts the barking dog out of the room*)

Joe and George's restaurant

Well, when did you first get into business yourself in McGregor?

Joe: Let's see, that was...

Joe's wife (?): You said you went to St. Paul and worked, and then you come back and you and George went into business.

Joe: (*unintelligible*) I left here after I graduated.

Florence: He went to Duluth and graduated.

Janet: Oh.

Joe: Yeah, I went two years in Duluth, a Catholic school there. And then from there I went to St. Paul to work. And I got a job at the packing house (?). Back then they - it was about 1930 - couldn't find any jobs.

Janet: Um hm.

Joe: You took...

Janet: 1930?

Joe: 1930. Wasn't it 1930 I graduated?

Janet: How long did you work in St. Paul then?

Joe: Well, it was about two years. And then the...George was in Texas, and came to St. Paul, so we both...so I quit working there, and came to McGregor and we started a business together.

Janet: And what was that business?

Joe: Well, the restaurant business.

Janet: Who did the cooking?

Joe: George, most of the time. Oh we had a time, because there was several years a team.

Janet: Ok.

Joe: He was very good.

Janet: And the restaurant was located about where the street is now?

Joe: Right where the street is.

Janet: Between the post office and the hardware store. Ok.

Joe: Yeah, it was quite a deal for the *(unintelligible)*

Janet: Were there other...did you have really authentic Chinese food there?

Joe: Oh, yes. Chow meins were always *(unintelligible)*

Janet: Were there other restaurants in McGregor at that time?

Joe: Oh, yeah, there was...

Construction worker: Excuse me, there's gonna be a big crash here in a moment. I thought I'd warn you.

Janet: Were there other restaurants in McGregor? *(Big crash)* There was the crash!
(Laughs)

Joe: I was trying to think of the...Peterson's across the street.

Florence: That was the deluxe buffet.

Janet: Ok.

Joe: *(unintelligible. Pounding in the background is covering up the conversation.)*

Janet: Who ran the Jutne (?) Shop?

Joe: Fella by the name of (*unintelligible*)

Janet: And after that it was Nellie Burnside.

Joe: It was Nellie Burnside, yes. I'm still trying to think of his name... (dog is barking again)

Janet: Well, when did you and Florence get married?

Joe: 1930, was it? 1932. No, 1942!! (Laughs)

Janet: 1942. (Laughs) Ok.

Joe: She was going there... (Laughs)

Marriage and building a house

Janet: (Laughs) Ok, so you've lived in this house all of your married life, then.

Joe: That's right.

Janet: Ok. And when did you say you built this house?

Joe: 1938.

Janet: 1938.

Joe: Yeah.

Janet: Did you actually do some of the work yourself, or you hired a contractor, or...?

Joe: Yeah, I laid out the plan. I got some (*unintelligible*) from Vernon Miller.

Janet: Um hm. – George

Joe: Yeah – it was George Miller. (*unintelligible*) Frank Krueger (?) was the one that built it.

Janet: Well, getting married and building a house were pretty important decisions that you made.

Joe: In those days, you know, everybody had a cow.

Janet: Did you have a cow?

Joe: We had two cows.

Janet: When you lived here?

Joe: When we lived here..?

Florence: Not here.

Joe: Not this house, but in a barn right about (*unintelligible*) one fellow had some cows, two calves, two lambs, two pigs. And (*unintelligible*) there's no street through there.

Florence: No homes.

Joe: There ain't no homes, no that's right. There's no homes here. Yeah, that was quite a thing.

More about McGregor businesses

Janet: Where was the hotel located that your mother ran?

Joe: The hotel was located right on the corner of the *(unintelligible)* Bill's (?) Hardware.

Janet: Ok. On the south side or the north side?

Joe: Well, it was on Main Street on the *(unintelligible)* street corner.

Janet: And then you... Now, when you said you and George started the restaurant, was there a restaurant there before, or did you actually build that building?

Joe: No, we built the building.

Janet: You built the building.

Joe: Yeah.

Janet: So you started from scratch.

Joe: That's right.

Janet: Ok. How long did you run the restaurant?

Joe: Well, let's see. When did I go?

Florence: Well, we locked it up when he went into the service, and he went into the service in '43..

Joe: It was '42.

Florence: So they locked it up. *(more pounding in the background, so it is hard to make out the conversation here)*...until the war was over.

Joe: George... *(unintelligible)* ...'45?

Florence: Yeah.

Janet: Ok. Now I've heard talk about an ice cream shop, Flo.

Florence: Yeah, that's Lucille and I ran, when Joe was in the service.

Joe: *(unintelligible)*

Florence: Yeah. And then that's where the drugstore used to be. That place that had the drugstore. And so then, we let them *(unintelligible)* wherever, when the war started. And so then Lucille and I ran this ice cream shop while Joe was gone. *(unintelligible)*

Janet: How long did you operate the ice cream shop?

Florence: Let's see.

Joe: *(unintelligible)*

Janet: Ok, so you were discharged and came home after the war ended.

Joe: Yeah.

Janet: Then back to the restaurant?

Joe: Yeah, *(unintelligible)*

Janet: Then you ran the restaurant until it was sold? Is that correct?

Florence: Yeah, George Sears bought it. (*Barking dog again*)

Janet: George Sears bought the restaurant? Ok, and then it moved out, and then what did you, Joe? The restaurant was gone.

Joe: Well, I had a little hardware store.

Janet: Yeah, a little hardware store.

Florence: The biggest little hardware store in Minnesota! It was little!

Janet: Uh huh. What year would that have been? Around...

Florence: It must have been '43, '45?

Janet: You were in the hardware business for a longer time than you were in the restaurant business.

Joe: Oh, yes!

Janet: Can you remember some other businesses in McGregor after you came back from the war then? You mentioned Tiny Cater (?) earlier. Do you know about when Tiny came to town.

Joe: I sold the (*unintelligible*) to him.

Janet: Oh, you did?

Joe: He owned two or three places, a couple of places on Main Street. There was a little hardware store right next to Tiny's place.

Florence: A hardware store?

Joe: It was a hardware store before Tiny got it (*unintelligible*)... next to it.

Janet: Did your family operate the hardware store, or was it rented to someone else?

Joe: What was that?

Janet: When...the hardware store when it burned down.

Joe: Well, no, we leased the building.

Janet: Ok, so that wasn't your hardware store, you owned the building. Ok. And then you owned the building that Tiny Cater had a grocery store in.

Joe: That's right.

Janet: Ok. But you don't remember when Tiny came to town, how long ago?

Joe: I don't remember. We were here, but I don't remember what the (*unintelligible*) Tiny came in.

Janet: I remember Tiny, too. He was a big man!

Florence: Yes!

Joe: Yeah. He'd sit on an apple box... (*unintelligible*)

Florence: Yeah, I would guess. When he came.

Janet: How about the theatre? Do you remember when the theatre was built?

Joe: I remember it being built. But I don't remember what year it was.

Janet: Do you remember what was located on the site where the theatre is now, previously?

Joe: There used to be a restaurant across the street there. There was a...

Florence: *(unintelligible)*

Joe: You leave it and I'll think about it...

Janet: Ok. How about Holt's Garage? There used to be a service station...

Joe: That was in the corner of property there. That was *(unintelligible)* filling station. Yeah, he was a... *(unintelligible)*

Janet: Do you remember about when he came to town, or was he here when he came?

Joe: No, he came after... *(unintelligible)*

Florence: No, I remember he was there in '38 and '39.

Joe: Yes.

Janet: And I've also heard about Skennel's (?) had a grocery store.

Joe: Yes, Skennel's had one on the corner, that's right. And...

Florence: How about that church...*(unintelligible)*

Joe: Yeah, there was a church on *(unintelligible)*... across the street from Zimmerman's.

Janet: Ok. What kind of a business did Merle Zimmerman have? *(sounds of construction in the background again making it hard to hear)*

Joe: He had a grocery store.

Janet: Oh, a grocery?

Joe: Yeah. *(unintelligible)*

Janet: Ok, you mentioned your brothers and your sister and you've lived in this home since 1938. Where did your brother, George, live?

Joe: George? His first home was...let's see.

Florence: *(unintelligible)*

Joe: Yeah, that's right. He... *(unintelligible)*

Janet: Ok. And then later on, he moved to the house across from the school?

Joe: That's right. He bought that building...*(unintelligible)*

Janet: And then your sister, Seal *(I spelled this the way it sounded, but I bet it's the wrong spelling)* has remained in McGregor, and...

Joe: Yeah, she used to live with us (?).

Janet: Um hm. And she's still in McGregor.

Joe: That's right.

Joe and Florence's immediate family

Janet: Ok. Let's talk a little bit about your immediate family. You have a wife of 1942, so that's going on – what – 55 years?

Joe: That's right.

Florence: (Laughs)

Janet: Ok. (Laughs) And how many children do you have, George? Er, Joe?!

Joe: Joe! (Laughs)

Janet: I'm getting confused!

Joe: That's right. We had three. Two boys and a girl.

Janet: Ok.

Joe: Right?

Florence: Well, I'm not gonna answer that, if he don't know...! (Laughs) (*unintelligible*)

Janet: Ok. How many grandchildren is that? One, two, three, four...

Joe: We have twelve.

Florence: We have twelve.

Janet: ...five... Twelve grandchildren. (*She must have been counting from a photograph*)

Florence: Those are just the ones that have graduated from high school, or college, or whatever.

Janet: Do you know how many girls and how many boys?

Florence: Three boys...

Janet: Three boys. Well, looking at the picture, it looks like the girls outnumber the boys.

Florence: Yeah.

Janet: But they're beautiful, beautiful children, aren't they?

Joe: Oh, they're all very nice. Nice grandchildren. We're real happy.

Janet: Now the boys both live here in McGregor, and where does Carol live?

Joe: She's in Hermantown.

Janet: Hermantown. So you get to see your family, then.

Joe: Oh, sure!

More businesses, looking at old photos

Janet: That's great. Have you collected pictures of McGregor from way back when?

Joe: (*unintelligible*)

Janet: I have one that I want you to take a look at, and see if you can give me some information.

Joe: *(unintelligible)*

Janet: I think that this is Gonnell's (?) grocery store. So that you kind of get an idea of the perspective. I'm wondering what this building was...

Joe: That's the...

Janet: ...it looks like it might have been a hotel.

Joe: That's the old school house.

Janet: This is the old school house?

Joe: Yeah.

Janet: Ok. Looks like a church, and old church that I understand had been moved. It used to be over across the...

Joe: That's the Methodist Church.

Janet: Yeah, and then it was moved over...would this have been what is now the VFW building? It used to be a two-story building, and it looks like...

Joe: *(unintelligible)*

Janet: And I don't know how old that picture is. Now I don't know how many years ago it is, but it's... do you know about when that building was cut down?

Joe: *(unintelligible)* Let's see.

Florence: It must have been about '35? *(unintelligible)* I know that.

Janet: Another picture that I have is from the school dedication, and I would like to get that one blown up so that maybe some of those people could be identified. Because, you know, this is something that's over 70 years ago.

Florence: Real old.

Janet: And it's a pretty clear picture.

Florence: Um hm.

Janet: But it's small. So I'd let to get it enlarged, and then maybe...

Joe: That's in the gym.

Janet: Yes, that's in the gym of the new...er, no, the new school in 1922, when it was dedicated. I got these pictures from Norman Schultz. He said his father...

Joe: He was a *(unintelligible)*, Schultz.

Janet: Yes. And his father was a photographer as a hobby, and he developed pictures himself and he had a dark room. And so Norman had these old pictures and he gave them to me.

Florence: Well, that was pretty nice.

Janet: So.

Joe: I'd get it blown it up and get it framed.

Janet: Yeah.

Joe: That's pretty nice.

Janet: It'd be kind of fun to see if we could figure out who those people are.

Florence: ...get it enlarged.

Joe: I couldn't see that.

Janet: Yeah, it's hard to see, because they're... it's clear, but they're small.

Joe: Yeah, McGregor's an old town. A nice town.

Janet: Yes.

Joe: Always said you could run a (*unintelligible* – *street, or stake?*) through the heart of McGregor and still see its (*unintelligible*). (Laughs)

Janet: (Laughs) It's nice to go and visit, but it's nice to come back to McGregor.

Joe: We always liked McGregor. Well, it's been my home. (*unintelligible*) I've lived most of my life in McGregor.

Janet: Um hm.

Joe: So. (*unintelligible*) There was nothing but a (*unintelligible*)...there were no sidewalks.

Janet: Uh huh.

Joe: And (*unintelligible*) get that scoop and (*unintelligible*) the sidewalk.

Janet: Well, good for him.

Florence: That's was during WPA (*note: a government program that put people to work during the Great Depression*).

Joe: I wouldn't say he did it all, but...

Janet: He worked for it. He got it...

Joe: Yeah, (*unintelligible*).

Janet: Now you mentioned George. When did he start the shoe store?

Joe: He (*unintelligible*) the restaurant, and he partitioned off a small part of it, I don't know, about how many? - 6 feet – and he put a shoe store in there. So I ran the restaurant and he ran the shoe store.

Janet: Ok.

Joe: That's quite a few years ago.

Janet: And then when you sold the restaurant, then he got his own buildings...

Joe: Well, he... yeah. That was the building across the street there. (*unintelligible*)

Janet: General Minnesota Utilities?

Joe: That's right.

Janet: I understand it was the bank building way back when.

Joe: Yeah, it was the bank building. Mr. Ryder opened that.

Janet: Ok.

Joe: And we used to...

Florence: And the bank was there, when George lived there?

Joe: *(unintelligible)*

Janet: There's still a vault in there, I understand. Any other things on your sheet there that you made note of that we should talk about?

Joe: *(unintelligible)*

Janet: How many years ago did your mother pass away, do you remember, Joe?

Joe: She passed away in 1932.

Janet: Ok. Did she help out in the restaurant, too, after...

Joe: Yeah. She used to make pies.

Janet: Oh, she did?

Joe: That was kind of a big thing, too, making pies. She never *(unintelligible)*...She'd just make the pies and bring 'em over.

Janet: Um hm.

Joe: *(unintelligible)*

Janet: What was your favorite pie?

Joe: My favorite?

Janet: Um hm.

Joe: I don't know *(unintelligible)*. All of 'em.

Janet: You liked all of them. Ok. Well, I want to thank you for spending this time with us, and thinking back...

Joe: I don't know that I've been any help...

Janet: Oh, yes, you have been. You mention those cows and sheep and all the animals that you had. Did you have a barn here, then?

Joe: Yeah, the barn stood right about in here. And in between here we had a garden. There was no street there, either.

Janet: Did you also build the house next door?

Joe: Yes.

Janet: It's so similar to this one, I've often wondered.

Joe: *(unintelligible)*

Florence: ..the drugstore.

Janet: Ok. And added on to it. Who lived in that house before Jerry Munson did?

Joe: A teacher lived there.

Janet: Oh... So did your family own it and rent it then?

Joe: Oh, yeah. (*unintelligible*)

Janet: OK.

Joe: And farther up the street, (*unintelligible*)...and put a street through there.
(*unintelligible*)

Janet: So when you say your family owned the land, did you own the land... you mentioned the VFW... so was that?

Joe: Yeah, it was all in one unit.

Janet: Ok.

Florence: Where the post office is, and the...we sold the post office to them for a buck, and sold the (*unintelligible*) for a buck. We really got rich on it!

Joe: Everybody thinks so! (Laughs) At least we did (*unintelligible*) good for the town. I thought it was good for the town.

Janet: Was the Catholic Church here when you came to McGregor?

Joe: Yeah.

Janet: Ok. I'm always asking questions, trying to figure out when things happened. The hospital that burned. Was... do you remember when that burned?

Joe: I don't remember the year, but I remember it burning down.

Janet: And where was it located?

Joe: Right out where the Catholic Church is now.

Janet: Ok. Do you remember how old you were when it burned, about?

Joe: (*unintelligible*)

Janet: Ok.

(end of Side A)