Mary: Speaking with Esther Cox. The date is May 24th, 1973. Participating in
the recording is Mary Sather. How long ago did you come to New Richmond?

You moved to New Richmond from...

Esther: March of 1934.

Mary: And where...what town did you come from?

Esther: Sheldon, Wisconsin.

Mary: And did you come for a specific...purpose?

Esther: We came to take over the Ford Agency, which we bought from Ernie Bell.

Mary: The agency was already established at that time.

Esther: Yes, uh huh. When we bought it it was inactive and Ford Motor asked us
to take it over.

Mary: Had you had an agency in Sheldon?

Esther: Yes, yes. It was a smaller town—a smaller agency.

Mary: So this was a step ahead? (laughs)

Esther: A step ahead.

Mary: Although reactivating a business was maybe a little tough. How...what
was a good week's work at that time? How many cars would you have hoped to sell
in, say, a week or a month?

Esther: I suppose 10 new cars a month, perhaps was a good month, the first year
we were here. Would have to be. Because there wasn't any business. We had
to...it had been inactive for a number of years so there wasn't...

Mary: Now did you sell just cars or did you sell trucks and everything else?

Esther: Cars and trucks.

Mary: Everything put out by the Ford Motor Company.

Esther: Yes, yes.

Mary: Were there any other cars in town...any other agencies...

Esther: Yes, there was different ones. Chevrolet, Buick, Pontiac was around then...

I suppose so.
Mary: So you were in a competitive business.

Esther: Oh yes. They were all established.

Mary: Now, where did you first start out?

Esther: In what is now Doboy...

Mary: In the Elgin plant.

Esther: Is that Elgin?

Mary: Right near...right across the street from Krueger's? That Building?

Esther: Yes. yes, that had been the Ford garage and...that's where we operated the first...eight years...from that garage.

Mary: You had the tri-county agency plus the mechanic and repair service then.

Esther: Yes. Yes.

Mary: O.K. Now, you were yourself involved in the...

Esther: Yes, the bookkeeper.

Mary: The Bookkeeper, and were right there all the time.

Esther: Yes. Long hours.

Mary: Now—well, that's very interesting. What sort of hours did you have to put in then? Has that changed much?

Esther: Oh, we opened at seven and closed...never earlier than ten.

Mary: All the time?

Esther: Including Sundays.

Mary: Oh, it was open on Sundays.

Esther: That's right.

Mary: For Heaven sakes. I didn't think that happened until...you know, later years, that businesses stayed open on Sundays. Was that true of all the garages at that time?

Esther: I would believe so. I'm not sure, but I would believe so.

Mary: Oh well, that's very interesting. Now...the cars then were considerably different.

Esther: Yes. The Model A, of course, our big seller then.
Mary: The Model A.

Esther: Yes. And we thought it was quite a car then.

Mary: Do you recall approximately how much a Model A sold for at that time? The approximate cost?

Esther: I would say 300 dollars.

Mary: Was that with all the attachments or did you sell extra...extra things too?

Esther: Yes, we always sold extras then, yes. If we could get a stripped model, which was the best seller in Depression years. I don't recall exactly, but I believe it was something like 300 dollars.

Mary: That was a...we'd consider it a good buy now. (laughs) I'm sure it was very difficult for many of the people...

Esther: That's right.

Mary: Did you have a credit plan?

Esther: Yes, Ford Motor had a credit plan. And...there was a credit company.

Mary: Did most of the people manage to make their payments or did you have to take back...?

Esther: Oh...during Depression years many times you had repossessions. Many times it was rather rough...repossession.

Mary: I'm sure. We...were talking about cars the other day and we were saying that the early cars you had to...back up the long hills.

Esther: Yes. Not with the Model A, but the Model T they did.

Mary: The Model A was an improved...

Esther: It was an improved...a great improvement over the Model T. (both laugh)

I often heard local people tell about the years and years they backed up the Stillwater hill.

Mary: There was something about the...

Esther: It was so steep.

Mary: And there was no pressure...no pump on the fuel tank or something...and it worked by gravity, I guess.
Mary: The Model A was an enclosed car wasn't it?
Esther: Yes.
Mary: And the Model T's were open.
Esther: They were open, with side curtains.
Mary: So you didn't get quite so dirty in the Model A. (laughs)
Esther: No, not quite so dirty...At the time we thought they were great.
Mary: Now, they had a self-starter on these too, didn't they?
Esther: Yes.
Mary: Was it the Model T that had to be cranked?
Esther: The Model T had to be cranked.
Mary: And someone was telling me there were many broken arms.
Esther: I believe so...yes.
Mary: Because they would backfire and...
Esther: Some of them would start hard and there were times that...one thing I never did was crank one!
Mary: Oh, didn't you?
Esther: No. (both laugh)
Mary: You sat in the car and waited, huh?
Esther: That's right.
Mary: O.K. We were talking...just a couple of minutes ago you mentioned the Depression a couple of times. 1934 would have been right in the middle of it.
Esther: Yes, it was.
Mary: Can you tell me a little bit about your recollections of the Depression years? The...prices were very very low...
Esther: Oh...money was very hard to get.
Mary: Can you remember the...comparable price on a dozen eggs or something like that?
Esther: On a what?
Mary: On a dozen eggs? Of course you probably didn't buy eggs from the stores then, did you?
Esther: We usually bought them from farmers and like that. I don't recall the price of it, however I recall the price of meat which was...perhaps...twenty cents a pound for what we pay a dollar-and-a-half for now. But it seemed as hard to...harder to buy it then than in later years.

Mary: Do you remember what the...

Esther: I can remember all of us going out to Opal's which all the old-timers would remember, getting...eating spot near Rivers Edge, and getting a beautiful, beautiful steak for 60 cents...huge.

Mary: That was the whole meal.

Esther: That was the entire meal, 60 cents.

Mary: And everything with it.

Esther: Everything with it—salad, french fries, coffee, all for 60 cents.

Mary: Not bad. (laughs) Do you recall what you would have paid in salary for one of your mechanics per month at that time? Could you figure...I could remember but I'm just trying to figure out...a comparable wage...what would have been a monthly wage...

Esther: I really can't recall...

Mary: You think it's hard to recall that.

Esther: Yes, it is...I haven't even looked at the books for so many years.

Mary: ...What sort of living conditions would you have run into during the Depression years? Were there many people...?

Esther: Rents were very low, as well as everything else. We paid like 25 dollars a month rent for a four-bedroom home.

Mary: The whole house.

Esther: The whole house. The entire house for 25 dollars a month, so things were comparable...that was cheap.

Mary: Yes, you bet. Do you recall that there were many people out of work in New Richmond?

Esther: Very many. Yes, very many. It was easy to get help.
Mary: How did they handle the situation to take care of these people who didn't have any work?

Esther: Well, it was of course much harder to get Relief in those years than it is now. It was quite difficult. There always were some who did get it...but there was much red tape to get it and there was unemployment also, but that was only a percent of what they were earning so it was pretty hard for a whole family to live on unemployment in those days too.

Mary: Do you recall the banks closing? That must have happened when you were in Sheldon.

Esther: Oh yes, yes. Yes, I well remember the banks closing.

Mary: Was that...?

Esther: And that created quite a difficulty for everyone. It was quite some time before you realized...anything from your money. Tightened up for quite a while and that made all business poor.

Mary: That must have been quite a shock to everybody. Did you kind of wake up one morning and the banks were closed?

Esther: That's right, that's right. We had no warning.

Mary: No warning.

Esther: That I recall. No, we didn't.

Mary: Did you have a radio at that time?

Esther: Yes, we did. But as I recall we didn't get too good of reception and perhaps only a few stations. We didn't get range we have now.

Mary: Was the programming on 24 hours a day like it is now, or did they just run certain hours?

Esther: Just certain hours. I don't think we had any after perhaps...eleven or possibly midnight, until morning.

Mary: Uh huh. You were talking about it was easy to get help.

Esther: Yes.

Mary: Did you have household help as long as you were working?
Esther: Yes, I did. Yes, I did. And that was...that wasn't hard to get either.

Mary: Was this help that moved in or did they used to come in?

Esther: Both ways I had it. I had some that came every day and I had some that lived with us.

Mary: Can you recall how much you had to pay to get...(laughs)...These numbers...

these numbers are very difficult, aren't they?

Esther: No, I don't. Not at all. After all the years, I just forget.

Mary: That's right. Was it usual for women to be working full-time then.

Esther: No, no, it wasn't. There were very few women who were working full-time then. There were many women that perhaps helped out a few hours a day, but there were very few that worked a full day.

Mary: You said that were on...that women that were on salaries during that time...had to quit if they got married.

Esther: That's right. There were very few married women that kept their jobs after they were...Most of them quit and stayed home.

Mary: Was that just...was that a law or was it just a sort of...a standard policy?

Esther: It wasn't a law but it was a policy, I think, and a few stayed on but not many—just a very very few women that worked full-time.

Mary: What have you noticed since you've lived in New Richmond, a lot of changes are gradual, but what have you particularly noticed over the years?

Esther: I've always enjoyed living in New Richmond. I thought New Richmond was very kind to us. Very lovely people...and I've always called it home.

Mary: You...you have noticed that there has been some growth.

Esther: Oh, very much so, yes. Therefore, as it grew...and would bring other people in...it expanded in many ways, as far as social functions and everything else. It wasn't...there wasn't as many cliques as there used to be, so to speak. I...thoroughly enjoyed living here. Well...way back before my time there were primarily two nationalities...or three nationalities here.

Mary: And that was...
Esther: That was the Irish and the Norwegian and the Swede and they were...there was always a little...a little feud going on—more or less—especially with the younger youngsters in school, like that. But as years went on and more people moved in, that kind of...

Mary: It sort of faded away.

Esther: Faded away.

Mary: But yeah, when you first came, these three nationalities pretty much kept distinctly to themselves? Fairly much so?

Esther: Fairly much so. However, they were all very kind to us and we didn't... didn't exactly belong to any of them.

Mary: But it...took awhile for everybody to get integrated.

Esther: That's right, that's right.

Mary: Now, when your boys were growing up in New Richmond...did...there weren't quite as many things for the kids to do. There wasn't a swimming pool...

Esther: They swam in the Widespread.

Mary: Right up in the Widespread.

Esther: Right up in the Widespread. (both laugh)

Mary: Did they have the swimming beach organized then? Did they have the ropes and things?...or did your kids just go right up and...

Esther: No, uh uh. When we originally came there was nothing. Along in the summer, later summer, then it was always a difficult time because of what they used to call "Dog Days" and the green on the river and you had to insist that they not go swimming for a certain length of time, which was hard on youngsters, because they loved it.

Mary: The Widespread has been turning green for many years.

Esther: Oh, yes. Nothing like it is now. But it would get green and just wasn't safe for swimming.

Mary: So what did the kids do during...?

Esther: Oh, they skated. They'd take their brooms and their shovels and go up and clean off a place to skate.
Mary: They skated up at the Widespread too.

Esther: Oh yes. They went swimming. They played ball as they do now. I'm sure there wasn't anywhere near the recreation that's offered now but it seemed to me they kept busy.

Mary: These were all unorganized things.

Esther: Only unorganized, that's right.

Mary: Just went out and...

Esther: Just went out and...

Mary: A group of...

Esther: A group of their friends and...I think...I think they were perhaps as happy as youngsters are now—maybe more so, than they are with the organized.

Mary: I'm inclined to agree with you. (laughs) Now one thing we do have to finish up...was...we mentioned that where your business first was...when did you...

what year then did you move out of that building? When...

Esther: You mean...

Mary: When you started out you were in the building across from Krusger's.

Esther: Yes. We moved out of there in '40...in '41 and then we were building and we moved into that in '42.

Mary: The building in the...in the...

Esther: Well, we moved out in '42 and we moved up there in '42 is what we did.

Mary: You...you built the building behind Standard Oil.

Esther: Standard Oil, uh huh.

Mary: And that...is that still referred to as the M & L? Building?

Esther: It's our building but it's referred to as M & L.

Mary: Oh, uh huh.

Esther: But it was our building. We built it and...leased it to M & L. Have for years and years and years.

Mary: Oh, I see. I didn't even realize that was a Cox building.
Esther: ...had to do that...was too small. But in wartime you just couldn't get materials.

Mary: So you put up what you could.

Esther: Uh huh. And we got by in it but it was much much too small and we knew we had to do something different so...

Mary: And then you put up the present building.

Esther: We moved in there in '49.

Mary: In 1949.

Esther: We built that in '48.

Mary: What is the address on that...that's South Knowles, almost down past Somerset Road—it's right at Somerset Road and South Knowles isn't it?

Esther: No...Somerset...on the corner...

Mary: Oh, so...well, I think that to locate it for our purposes it's one building beyond the JayCee Hall.

Esther: 430.

Mary: 430 South Knowles.

Esther: Uh huh, yes.

Mary: When you mentioned that it was tough to get materials during the...World War II, that sort of reminds me of another subject. You people all went through difficult times in the Depression and then you had World War II.

Esther: That's right...World War II.

Mary: And what do you recall about World War II? I vaguely remember rationing.

Esther: Uh huh—that was rough. We had rationing and of course we were short of help. Wade had been with us ever since we came to New Richmond and...was always your right-hand man, just always such a wonderful person, and he went to war.

Mary: This was Wade Johnson.

Esther: Johnson, uh huh.

Mary: He's back working...took him back...
Esther: Came back from war, came back to work for us and is still with us. You can imagine—he's 40 years if he'd worked for us outside of the wartime, you know.

Mary: Uh huh.

Esther: But it was very hard to get good help in wartime. It was hard to get cars and you know, for a while they didn't make cars.

Mary: The car business was maybe not the business to be in during the war years.

Esther: Oh, it was tough because you couldn't get any new cars, you know. They were allotted—you had a few and that was it. And of course, used cars sold for a premium which...you were out of used cars in a short time—you couldn't get 'em. And they were rationing new cars so...

Mary: Did they ration tires and gas?

Esther: And cars too.

Mary: And gas.

Esther: Oh, gas. We don't mention that! (both laugh)

Mary: We're back to it again.

Esther: Oh, it's a terrible thing.

Dad, so generous...if he knew you well and you came in and said "Gee, I just don't have any ticket left and I have to go all the way to Amery—and could I get by with two gallons of gas?" "Yeah, yeah." Do you know that the day they called it off we didn't have enough tickets in our place to buy 100 gallons of gas? We would have just had to close if it had lasted any longer. And you see gradually—everybody comes. And somebody comes and wants 20 gallons and only have tickets enough for 10 or 12, and he never could say no, so we were short and short and short and short and...three days before it was called off I said "Well, I don't know what you're going to do for the next load of gas, you just don't have any tickets." "I don't either, but I guess it's easier to close the station than to say no." So that's what probably we would have done.

Mary: You were saved by the bell.
Esther: Yes. You can imagine on top of all your other work, had to hang on to those silly old tickets and not only collect your credit card and take your money and give your slip and all that crap, you still had to hang onto those tickets and make sure you got 'em.

Mary: You had to turn in your tickets, so they would give you...

Esther: Yes, we had to turn them in before the oil man would give you any gas.

Mary: ...give you any gas. Food was rationed too, wasn't it? Certain things.

Meat...

Esther: Oh, sure. Coffee...sugar...

Mary: Meat. Butter?

Esther: Butter. Oh, just everything. I was exceptionally fortunate. My sister, by the way is coming today, lived with me. Her husband was in service...and she was a nurse and she had a little boy...baby...and she came and lived with me about three months. In the meantime, both my parents were still living. They were both sick and they came to live with me. When you have that big a household you get by much easier on rationing than with just two or three people.

Mary: Oh, for Heaven sakes.

Esther: You know, like for instance, you bake a cake—well, you bake a cake if there's two people, but if there's a fifth or a sixth you'd still bake a cake too. And then—everything goes farther when there's a larger family. That's my redeeming feature in wartime when I had this houseful.

Mary: Each person was allotted so many papers or coupons...

Esther: Each person, uh huh, yes. You got tokens and all these tokens—when you bought you had to turn in your tickets, you know, for meat, or for sugar, oh everything...Must be all.

Mary: Now...clothing was not rationed as I recall, but you just simply couldn't get certain things...

Esther: No, you couldn't get certain things. But no, it wasn't rationed.
Mary: I remember...silk stockings and nylons...

Esther: Oh...

Mary: It was impossible.

Esther: Yes, it was hard. I learned one lesson then that I never forgot. (coughs)
I hope that isn't on.

Mary: Yes, it's on.

Esther's story was real interesting and we didn't really have to turn off the machine at all. Now, tell me what you were just saying about charge accounts.

Esther: Well, I learned then that it was wise to have a charge account and...

hosiery was rationed and stores couldn't get it. They saved it for their charge customers. If you didn't have a charge account they wouldn't sell it to you. So therefore I opened several charge accounts.

Mary: Opened 'em all over, huh?

Esther: Opened them all over. (both laugh)

Mary: I'll have to remember to tell that to my husband.

Esther: It is comical, you know, to...is it off?

Mary: No, it's still on and we are still talking. ...Another thing I remember were the...you couldn't get rubber boots or overshoes.

Esther: No, that was hard too. Very hard.

Mary: Just certain things on hand...Well, those were tough times and...

Esther: They were happy times. I guess everybody was sort of in the same...

predicament and so everybody got along.

Mary: When everybody is in something together it's easier.

Esther: It's easier, much easier.

Mary: Then you're not the odd man out.

Esther: And sometimes I think it was good for young people.

Mary: The...the tough times.

Esther: To be...I don't think they remember it. I don't think youngsters like
mine really know what it was all about and yet I believe they remember a certain amount of it, which is—which is good.

Mary: It was maybe a little easier to raise children then than it is now.

Esther: Maybe. It wouldn't surprise me.

Mary: Well, this has been a very pleasant visit Esther, and thank you very much.