Interviewer: It is Sunday morning July 10, 1994 and we're in Garfield Park in Davenport, Iowa. Mr. Dyer, you say you were born in Des Moines, Iowa.

Mr. Dyer: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And where did you grow up?

Mr. Dyer: I grew up in Davenport, Iowa.

Interviewer: Okay, and, uh, how did you happen to come to Davenport?

Mr. Dyer: Well, I came to Davenport--I came from a broken home. My mother and father divorced. And she got sick and so they took me to foster care home, just briefly. And they took me to court. My father was there. My father had remarried and he had remarried a woman with five children. So I can remember going to court even though I was just a little--.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Mr. Dyer: Well, when I went to the home I was six, so it must have been, I must have been five, five and a half. But I can remember sitting in the jury box, or the witness box, talking to the judge. And I didn't know, everything came so fast. I was in the jury box there, or the witness box one minute and the next think I know they're taking me in the car and out to the Juvenile Home in Des Moines. And I stayed there a couple of days I guess and then we went to the Iowa Soldier's Orphan's Home in Davenport.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. And what year was that?

Mr. Dyer: That was in, uh, '35.

Interviewer: Okay, so you were born in '32.

Mr. Dyer: I was born in '29.

Interviewer: Oh, you were born in '29.

Mr. Dyer: I was born in '29,

Interviewer: Okay, all right. And until what age--how long did you stay at the home?

Mr. Dyer: I stayed 'til I was seventeen, goin' on eighteen. I--uh, I ran away.

Interviewer: You did. Well--

Mr. Dyer: I did. I just ran away. I graduated and ran away.

Interviewer: Well, if you graduated you really didn't run away.

Mr. Dyer: Well, I graduated but, then twenty-one meant twenty-one. You stayed under the state care until you were twenty-one.
Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Mr. Dyer: And uh, the home did everything it could to place you out someplace. But you were under state care.

Interviewer: And uh, the physical circumstances of your life before you went to the home, I mean, --uh, did you have a reasonable home?

Mr. Dyer: No, not really. We were on relief. After they got a divorce we were on relief and living in a one-room apartment. They needed to take me out of there. The environment wasn't all that great with my mother. And she couldn't help it.

Interviewer: Did you have any brothers or sisters who came into the home with you?

Mr. Dyer: No, no. Just me.

Interviewer: So, was it a shock to you?

Mr. Dyer: Well, I think it was rather raw in that when I went to the orphanage--or the juvenile home right off the bat, uh--their isolation was not a whole lot different that a jail cell. You went into a room and the door was closed and the door had a glass window and a screen and you could see out and there was a--oh, much like this backstop (?) is in the window. And then you'd just kind of--of course you're scared and you wonder, "What did I do?" (Laughs)

Interviewer: Yeah. When you got to Annie Wittenmyer it was not like that, was it.

Mr. Dyer: It was not like that. When we got in this car and came to Davenport, we got there in the evening, about supper time. It was dark and they took me immediately to a ward in the hospital, the newer hospital. And there were kids that were in the hospital and they were, there were some in isolation. We were isolated there until we had a physical and those kids that hadn't had there tonsils out, they were next in line to get their tonsils out.

Interviewer: Did they do that right there in the hospital in the home?

Mr. Dyer: Yes, they did those right there in the home.

Interviewer: You don't happen to remember the name of the doctor who did it, do you?

Mr. Dyer: They had two doctors. I think the doctor's name was Dr. Rock.

Interviewer: Oh! Emmett Rock. Of course, I knew him and I knew his son.

Mr. Dyer: Well, it was one of those two.

Interviewer: It was Emmett, 'cause he did--

Mr. Dyer: He was the ENT doctor.

Interviewer: That's interesting.

Mr. Dyer: And I believe the overall family doctor in the later years was, I want to say Dr. Ott. I just don't recall, but I'm sure it was Dr. Ott in the later years. But Dr. Rock was our ENT man. I recall that. I luckily didn't have to go get my tonsils out so I could sit there and laugh at the kids.
Interviewer: So then, after you got through with the hospital.

Mr. Dyer: After you got through with the hospital, then they assigned you to a cottage. And I started in Cottage Two, which was the youngest kids and --.

Interviewer: Yeah, the young--. If I recall this was one 1935?

Mr. Dyer: '35, yeah.

Interviewer: '35, okay. And, you, know, once you got into the routine, what did you think about things like the way they took care of you, the food, the clothing, you know, the discipline?

Mr. Dyer: Well, the discipline. We really didn't have any whole lot of disciplinary problems.

Interviewer: I don't mean problems necessarily, just the way you was managed.

Mr. Dyer: I never felt pushed or enclosed or--gee, we were fed good, we had our own bed, we had a movie once a week. You know you're talking to a guy who, before he got to the orphanage, maybe only had a meal once every three days, so all of a sudden we've got an abundance of food, we've got clean bedding, we've got clean clothes and kids to play with. You know I never had no brothers and sisters. I think I must have been born to live in an institution. I fell right into it. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Well, that's very interesting. Uh, you know, uh, I've interviewed some other people and I've been told that there are some former Annie Wittenmyer residents who don't want it to be known that they were in an orphan home. Can you understand that?

Mr. Dyer: (Sighs) Not really, unless they were really sensitive. Probably the thing that--when I started going to highschool--see, we went to ninth grade there. Then we went downtown to Davenport High Schoo, Central. It's Central now, then it was the only one. I think probably if there was anything that I kind of resented, until kids there got to know me, I was wearing--we had one pair of shoes, one pair of pants, one shirt, you know, so they maybe claimed we all looked alike. (Laughs) So this kid Charlie didn't know I had a clean shirt on, 'cause it looked just like the one the day before or my dress pants weren't--

Interviewer: Yeah, like little Orphan Annie. (Laughs)

Mr. Dyer: Right. Course we didn't have ragged jeans in those days and tww-shirts to fall back on. So if anything I was self-conscious of, was that. Unless they'd been exposed to a whole lot of that, I see no reason why they would not want it to be known that they were, let it be known that they were in the institution, in the ISOH. Overall I think we had it great there. I think we had a lot more in there than a lot of kids on the street that had good parents.

Interviewer: Well now, did you--did you finish highschool? You finished highschool, okay. And so then, you just left.

Mr. Dyer: I just left. Yeah, I just left.

Interviewer: Well, what did you do after that?

Mr. Dyer: When I left I went to Des Moines and I got a job. I got a job--I was staying at the YMCA for a couple nights and I'd been in correspondence with my cousin. So she said, "Don't tell my mother, but why don't you come out and stay with us?" So I did and I continued working.
Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Mr. Dyer: And then one day I got a phone call from a lady that was on the Board of Control at that time. I think her name was Rosenbloom--Rosenbloom, I think. She said, "Donald, I know you've run away from the Orphan's Home. I want you to go down and get the bus tomorrow morning and go back to Davenport--ISOH." And I said, "Well, you know, I've inquired about joining the Army today"--which was a flat out lie. (Laughs) And she says, "Fine, you go down ahead and go down in the morning and take your examination. If you pass it, we'll let you go." So, regardless of whether I wanted to join the service or not, the next day I was down at the courthouse.

Interviewer: Oh, you did, you followed through, huh? Okay.

Mr. Dyer: I did. I followed through and went down.

Interviewer: You just couldn't let yourself be---

Mr. Dyer: No, I couldn't. I didn't really want to go. I had a taste of this outside life now, you know, I could---

Interviewer: So then you went into the army--let's see, what year was that?

Mr. Dyer: I went in in March 13, 1947.

Interviewer: '47, okay. And how long were you in the army?

Mr. Dyer: Four years. I got out in November, '51.

Interviewer: Go to Korea?

Mr. Dyer: No, I got out just before Korea. Just before Korea.

Interviewer: Oh, that's right. That's right.

Mr. Dyer: Matter of fact, I came home and I had to reregister for the draft. Although I thought, "My gosh, I just gave them four years and now I have to go back."

Interviewer: So then where did you wind up? Doing what?

Mr. Dyer: When I came out of the service I wound up--kind of made a reconciliation with my father. In all the years I was in the home he--uh--never came to see me. He--uh--never wrote. And though I didn't dislike him, I really had no feelings for him one way or the other. I stayed with them for awhile and then I went to work in Des Moines. And then I moved to Davenport and I wanted to go to school. So I went to Davenport, right here at Mercy Hospital. And the nuns got me in touch with the Lexing (?) Brothers Hospital in Chicago.

Interviewer: Oh!

Mr. Dyer: And then I went to school in Chicago to be a--well, at that time they only had one school in the country and that was the Lexing (?) Brothers Hospital had a School of Nursing.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Mr. Dyer: So I went there and I went there for two years and became an OR technician.
Interviewer: Oh, that's what you were, huh? Are you still working?

Mr. Dyer: No, I'm retired. I retired from that.

Interviewer: Yeah, you're retired now. That's interesting. Did you do mostly general or did you get into any specialty work.

Mr. Dyer: No, most of the hospitals that I worked at, it was before big-time heart surgery, just kind of a general surgery.

Interviewer: That's an interesting career, really. That's good. During the years that you were in the home, uh--what was the worst thing that ever happened. Not necessarily to you, but that you knew about?

Mr. Dyer: The worst thing?

Interviewer: The worst thing.

Mr. Dyer: Probably the--there wasn't any real big disaster. Uh, I hear things now that I never knew happened then. But I think probably the thing that affected me the most, that really affected me--I went into the one and only bathroom in the cottage and sat down and cried and I'm really not sure why it affected me so much, was when President Roosevelt died. That probably was the thing that was the most outstanding thing that I can remember and it really affected me.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Yeah, yeah.

Mr. Dyer: And I don't cry very easily. And why I cried over Roosevelt, I'm not sure.

Interviewer: Did--I mean were there a lot of other kids that were affected by that?

Mr. Dyer: I never admitted to them that I was and I never inquired about anybody else.

Interviewer: Well, in this country a lot of people cried because Roosevelt died. He brought us through a lot of things. On the other hand--I had a history teacher in college, after the war, who, when we got to that place in American history, he was going on and on and suddenly closed his book and he looked around at the class and he said, he said, "I don't know what some of you are going to think about this but," he said, "I'm glad that man died." There was a chorus of hisses and boos from the class and that was it. There were a lot of people who didn't like him, but most people believed and still believe that he was a great man.

Mr. Dyer: Well, you know, I was old enough to know that, uh, you listen to the radio--that was all we had in those days--I can recall listening to the radio, the news where Hitler was starting his march across Poland and so forth. To me Roosevelt was kind of a saviour. I didn't have a Bible on him or anything but he was--I think a lot of people pinned their hopes on Roosevelt.

Interviewer: I think you're right.

Mr. Dyer: And I was old enough that Hitler scared me at that age.

Interviewer: I think you had more sense than most people. (Laughs)

Mr. Dyer: Well, you know, that's probably true and this is kind of off the wall, but I think that kids from the orphanage--when I went into the service and I looked around and seen kids my age,
wasn't sure what kind of homes these kids had, what kind of schooling they had. I was much
more adult than a lot of the kids that were around me. What they thought was foolish--what they
thought I thought was foolish, silly and--I was more sober I guess.

Interviewer: On the positive side, what was the absolute best thing that ever happened?

Mr. Dyer: Absolute best thing.

Interviewer: As far as you're concerned. Something that really made you feel good.

Mr. Dyer: Something that--you know, there were certainly highs there for a kid. Uh, it didn;'t take
that much to feel good. There just weren't that many negatives that I can come up with a
positive for feeling good.

Interviewer: That's reasonable--that's reasonable. Did you make any lasting friends?

Mr. Dyer: Oh yeah, I had a lot of friends up there. A lot of friends up there--they're family to me.

Interviewer: Speaking of family, how many children do you have?

Mr. Dyer: I don't have any children. No, I didn't get married until I was forty--forty-two.

Interviewer: Well, okay. Is there anmething else that you can think of? You know, I've been
through the business about the food and the school and all that stuff and everybody I talk to
seems to say the same things about it, so unless there is something outstanding or different you
want to say--.

Mr. Dyer: No, we had our Fourths of Julys and we had our Christmases and they were all big
occasions to us kids. I just can't think of any one thing.

Interviewer: What did you think about the Home closing.

Mr. Dyer: It was kind of sad in a way. I didn't live in Davenport very long after I got out of there.
I'd come through and I'd go down 29th there and I'd see the kids on the playground. And the
kids seemed to get fewer and fewer kids there, smaller and smaller kids there, younger and
younger kids there. And I felt kind of sad because I thought, "They're not going to be able to keep
this place open or they're not going to keep it for that number of kids." On the other side, why,
the fewer orphans there are, the better it is for everybody, I suppose. But the playground just
used to teem with kids. We had hardball diamonds, softball diamonds, the terraces were full on
the Fourth of July. People would come from all over town and park on 29th and Eastern to watch
our fireworks.

Interviewer: Sure.

Mr. Dyer: The forty and eight used to come to the fireworks every year. That was a big occasion
for us kids. And the annual ride on the boat, the old--I can't remember now what--the JS
riverboat and the old Capitol--those were all, we had so much.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Dyer: Even at Christmastime, we had so much. People were given our names. They gave
gifts kind of anonymously. And I recall--I don't think they were supposed to, but I got a present
one time and it dawned on me that this lady--the present came from Ft. Dodge, Iowa. Now there
was no way I'd know anybody in Ft. Dodge, Iowa. They were given anonymously and I think
probably that slip—that name in the package got through accidentally. No, I think they were supposed to stay anonymous, but someone slipped up and forgot. No, I had more presents than a lot of kids did. And, surprisingly enough, there was no thievery in the Home. We didn't have individual lockers, we had a big living room, sitting room. This was my pile and I never had to worry about some kid going over and taking something out of my pile. And we all trusted each other. I think that's one of the reasons we're so close, you know.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Dyer: You never had to worry about that stuff.

Interviewer: Gee whiz. (Laughs)

Mr. Dyer: No, I'd never hide the fact that I was in the orphan home. It's mine and I'd hate to see them do anything to it. I hope they don't do anything to it. They've worked on the girl's side now that it's not recognizable hardly anymore.

Interviewer: Well, your guess is as good as mine as far as what they might do with that property, what's left of it anyway. Well, I think we've covered pretty much. That's about enough.

Mr. Dyer: Okay.