Interviewer: My name is Jim Hale, I am here with Wesley Cooper, to do an oral history. The date is June 23, 1994. This is for the Annie Wittenmyer Home, or as they used to call, the . . .

Mr. Cooper: The Iowa Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home.

Interviewer: The Iowa Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home, right, right. O.K., I’ll fill out some of this information on your background after we’ve had a chance to talk about this a little bit more. They give us all kinds of . . . This is for anything that I might borrow from you, photographs, anything like that.

Mr. Cooper: I see, all right.

Interviewer: We’ll just make a list of them before I go and you’ll know what I have and so will the library. O.K., when were you at the Home? When did you arrive there, can you remember?

Mr. Cooper: I arrived at the Annie Wittenmyer Home in 1938.

Interviewer: 1938, O.K. What were the circumstances of you coming there?

Mr. Cooper: Well, my father died in 1935 and my mother died in 1938, and so . . .

Interviewer: So you were an orphan at that point?

Mr. Cooper: So I was an orphan, there were no relatives that were willing to accept us in the family.

Interviewer: How many youngsters were there?

Mr. Cooper: There were four of us, and my brother next to me, he died within three months. He had contacted tuberculosis from my mother and he died in Pine Knoll(?) Sanitarium. So, there was three of us left. And my aunt in Springfield, Illinois, she adopted my sister, Mary Lou.

Interviewer: Now, is that Mary Rolax now?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, Mary Rolax, yes.

Interviewer: O.K., somebody gave me her name, so I thought I better ask about her.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, that’s her right there. And she adopted her in Springfield, and she was raising her and she caught pneumonia and died . . .

Interviewer: The aunt did?

Mr. Cooper: The aunt did. So Mary had to come to Annie Wittenmyer.

Interviewer: I see, so she joined you there?

Mr. Cooper: Well, yeah, she came there a couple years after I was there.

Interviewer: How old were you when you came to the Home?

Mr. Cooper: I was fourteen.

Interviewer: Fourteen? Oh, fourteen years old. Getting to be a big guy then?
Mr. Cooper: Yeah, yeah, I was the oldest and she was uh . . .

Interviewer: Where had your home been before you went . . .

Mr. Cooper: Davenport, I lived at 415 West 9th Street in Davenport.

Interviewer: In Davenport, before your parents died?

Mr. Cooper: Yes, I was born and raised in Davenport.

Interviewer: O.K. How old are you now by the way?

Mr. Cooper: I'm seventy.

Interviewer: Are you? Boy, you hold it good (laughs).

Mr. Cooper: (Laughs) Yeah.

Interviewer: You got me by a few years (laughs).

Mr. Cooper: (Laughs) Right.

Interviewer: Well, bless your heart. O.K. What was your first impression when you got to the Home?

Mr. Cooper: Well, uh . . .

Interviewer: Do you remember how you felt about it?

Mr. Cooper: Yes. Mrs. Pelligrum (?) was our food counselor that picked me up from Pine Knoll Sanitarium. We had to go there for three months observation after my mother died from tuberculosis.

Interviewer: I see, because of her health?

Mr. Cooper: Because of her health, so when, on the way to the Home, this is what I assert my success to. She told me, she says, "Wes, don't think about going to the Home as a hardship," says, "think about it as just a phase of your life," said, "think what you want to do when your twenty-one years old (that was the legal time you could get out of the Home then) and think what you want to do and make out of your life, and accept this as a stepping stone in order to be a good man."

Interviewer: Isn't that terrific, yeah, that's great. What good philosophy. Now, in those days then, in the mid to late thirties, you could stay in the Home until you were twenty-one. Could you leave at eighteen? Would they allow that?

Mr. Cooper: Yes, you could leave at eighteen if you had a job and were able to take care of yourself. And the Home also provided you with a college education if you wanted to go to college. The state would pay for your education. But as you know, most of us wanted to get out as soon as we could. I went straight, the war started, and so I went straight out of the Home into the Navy, because of the war.

Interviewer: What year was that?
Mr. Cooper: In ‘42. I went straight into the Navy and left the Home, I graduated . . .

Interviewer: You beat me by four years there too (laughs).

Mr. Cooper: (Laughs) Yeah, so the Home, lots of children looked at it as a bad token in their life and a bad experience, but I looked at it as an educational experience and it give me a foundation in life. It was there if you wanted to accept it. If you didn't want to accept it, they didn't force it on you. If you were unruly and couldn't be reprimanded, they sent you to Eldora, otherwise you stayed there and went by the rules.

Interviewer: And where was Eldora?

Mr. Cooper: Eldora was a boys’ reformatory in Eldora, Iowa. And if you were a behavior problem and you couldn’t cope, well, you were sent there. You were given counseling, and several times, and if they see it didn't work, then they sent you there, to Eldora.

Interviewer: Were you any more likely to be sent to Eldora from the Home, then you would be if you were out on the street?

Mr. Cooper: No, it was, you had more of a chance at the Home because they counselled you and talked to you, and you had very good supervision. So you were more subject to go if you weren’t in the Home. Yeah, but the Home was the last, you know, you got lots of chances at the Home. Where in regular life, if you stole something, then boom, you were going to Eldora, you know.

Interviewer: (Laughs)

Mr. Cooper: (Laughs) They didn't fool around with you in those days. But at the Home they really counselled you and they tried . . . Well, we all had to work, we worked before school and after school.

Interviewer: How many hours did you spend in school at age 14?

Mr. Cooper: At age 14, we went to school at 9 o’clock and we got out about 2:30.

Interviewer: Sort of a half day kind of thing?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, it was a little over a half day.

Interviewer: And then what?

Mr. Cooper: Then we would work. Everyone had a job.

Interviewer: What was your assignment?

Mr. Cooper: Well the first job, your jobs were considered, were based on your behavior basis and your trust, and your initiative. And my first job was at the dairy barn, and that was where you'd start at the bottom, you'd go out there in the morning, early, and they milked the cows and you cleaned up behind, cleaned the crap up behind the cows.

Interviewer: (Laughs) That's really starting at the bottom isn't it?

Mr. Cooper: (Laughs) Yeah, starting at the bottom. The next job I got, well I was the janitor at the school, I'd sweep up the school rooms after school. And then, as I got old enough, I got a
driver's license, and I was a football player then, and had good behavior, well I serviced the cars and worked in the garage. And, the third job I had, when I was storekeeper, we had a storeroom where all our food supplies came in.

Interviewer: Now, how old were you by the time you had that job?

Mr. Cooper: Oh, when I was storekeeper I was, uh, sixteen. And I had to deliver food to the kitchen and to the bakery every day. They had a requisition. The baker had so many cases . . .

Interviewer: So, when you say storekeeper, it doesn't mean you were a clerk, that means you were in charge of the stores that they had . . .

Mr. Cooper: The warehouse, the warehouse, yeah, the storeroom they called it. And I would have to deliver the meat and the canned goods, the flour, hundred pound bags to the kitchen, you know.

Interviewer: Well, you look like you could handle hundred pound bags all right.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, I could then, yeah. And then one job I had, I used to haul the milk in from the dairy. We had a truck you know and . . .

Interviewer: Now this is a pretty good-sized farm, wasn't it?

Mr. Cooper: Oh, yes. Yeah, we butchered the steer and hogs and everything. It was a large farm. And we milked thirty-six cows every day. So, we had our own good milk

Interviewer: A good-sized herd there too.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah.

Interviewer: Uh, let's go back to the beginning for a minute. Now, when you arrived there, you were assigned to uh, one of the . . .

Mr. Cooper: Cottages. Where you were assigned according to your age. And I was assigned to cottage ten. That's where the fourteen year olds were.

Interviewer: Uh, huh, all the boys were in even numbered cottages if I recall.

Mr. Cooper: Yes, the boys were even numbered, two, four, up to eighteen.

Interviewer: How many others were there in that cottage with you?

Mr. Cooper: Well, there was about thirty in each cottage. Approximately thirty in each cottage. And, uh, the population for the entire Orphans' Home was 500. Say between 500 and 550 because they readily adopted, the children were readily adopted out.

Interviewer: The younger ones anyway.

Mr. Cooper: Well, they adopted the older ones out too. The farmers really adopted the older ones so they could help work on their farms.

Interviewer: Oh sure, I can understand that. If you were a big strong guy you had a pretty good chance.
Mr. Cooper: But, they didn't let the football players, the athletes go (laughs), the basketball players, if you were a good sport, the Home...

Interviewer: A little selfish there, huh?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, well, sports was the keynote of the Orphans' Home. If you did it, we had all kinds of athletics: boxing, everything. Every kind of sport. We had music. I was in the band, I played the saxophone in the band, and I played the clarinet and the tenor sax in the band. And, uh, we had everything. In the wintertime, we had ice skating, we froze the front lawn for ice skating. We had a complete basketball, football, baseball, track, everything. Just like a college.

Interviewer: Isn't that marvelous! From what I've read, there was just an awful lot going on there.

Mr. Cooper: Oh yes, there was.

Interviewer: You could keep entertained and occupied.

Mr. Cooper: Right, keep busy, yeah, keep busy all the time.

Interviewer: Who was in charge of your cottage when you got there?

Mr. Cooper: Well, Mrs. Pratt, Hattie Pratt was there, first matron that they had.

Interviewer: She handled that cottage by herself, did she?

Mr. Cooper: She handled the cottage by herself when you were that big. In the smaller cottages the bigger girls, like in Cottage 2, where there was two and four year olds, well, the bigger girls, they would assign two of those girls to help the matron with the little ones. But in the big cottage she would take the biggest guy that was in the cottage, a couple of 'em, and we were more or less like the bouncers for her. (Laughter) And we all had jobs that clean up, you know, one had to clean the bathroom, the other one had to clean the living room, the other one had to do this and we had hardwood floors we had to wax. We all had jobs in the cottage.

Interviewer: Were you a pretty big guy when you were fourteen?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, I was big, yes, I was considered big, yes I was. And so--

Interviewer: How big are you now? What do you weigh in at now?

Mr. Cooper: I'm weighing three hundred now.

Interviewer: O, golly. How tall are you?

Mr. Cooper: Five eleven.

Interviewer: I see. You're a pretty good guard. (Laughs)

Mr. Cooper: When I was at the Orphan's--

Interviewer: You weren't packing quite as much weight then.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah. One thing they taught you to respect and that was no racial prejudice whatsoever.
Interviewer: I was going to ask you. How integrated was the home?

Mr. Cooper: Completely integrated and when we came into the office, like our first visit to the home, the head matron, Mrs. Larson, she set down and she filled you in, orientated you on the policies and what you were expected to do. And the first thing she said is, "We're all brothers and sisters. There's no race, no color, no religion difference, we're all brothers and sisters."

Interviewer: Isn't that great.

Mr. Cooper: "If anybody throws a racial slur at you, turn them in to you matron and they will be punished."

Interviewer: Did you have any problems in that way?

Mr. Cooper: Well, no, uh--the first day there's always someone, they say, "Here comes a nigger," you know, and he was immediately, his matron snatched him and they had their own way of-- of. Some had paddles, some had straps, but you got your rear beat. There was no question of it. You got it beat one way or another. But it was more or less a challenge, see, the strongest guys, you know you had to show that you weren't a wimp when you went in the home.

Interviewer: Sure.

Mr. Cooper: Otherwise they would shove you around.

Interviewer: Sure.

Mr. Cooper: So you know I popped one in the mouth and that was the end of that. Never had no more problem. As a matter of fact, you know, when we dated white and white girls and vice versa there was no prejudice whatsoever.

Interviewer: Was there a lot of dating that went on?

Mr. Cooper: Oh yes. Well, we all had boy friends and girl friends. We didn't get to go nowhere with 'em, but--

Interviewer: (Laughs). Just stayed on the grounds, right?

Mr. Cooper: We had dances. They had dances for us and we could dance with each other and I played in the band, you know, and we had a girl singer in the band, our own band, you know, the jazz band and we played for dances in town.

Interviewer: I was going to say, that band got around quite a bit, didn't it?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, we went around a whole lot and played around. It was nice, but the main thing is what it taught me. You were taught to respect, you know. You didn't have a mother or a father, but you were always taught to respect adults.

Interviewer: In some ways you were better off than some kids are now who do have mothers and fathers.

Mr. Cooper: We was better off because we didn't have any parents, so you really missed your mother. You know many a night I wished I had a mother or something like that. But it taught you to be on your own too. When you went out in the world you were really prepared because you had to--.
Interviewer: Sure. Were there a number of other black youngsters there at the time?

Mr. Cooper: Well I'd say there was probably twenty, twenty-five.

Interviewer: I see. Out of the total population, huh?

Mr. Cooper: Out of the five hundred there was always twenty, twenty-five.

Interviewer: Were there any black people on the staff there?

Mr. Cooper: No. No.

Interviewer: The staff was all white, huh?

Mr. Cooper: The staff was all white.

Interviewer: Did they ever hire any black people on the staff during the time you were there?

Mr. Cooper: Oh yeah, they did, let's see, not while I was there, no.

Interviewer: More toward later days, huh?

Mr. Cooper: More toward later days they did then. There weren't any black on the staff. But you didn't know you were black.

Interviewer: Nobody made anything out of it.

Mr. Cooper: Nobody made -- you know, it was just everybody treat everybody the same. That's the way it was. You were taught to work. It taught me to work. When I got out of the home, why, I got a job because, having to work there, you know, it taught you to work and then--

Interviewer: How was your schooling there? Do you feel you got a pretty good schooling?

Mr. Cooper: I got better schooling than you'd get in the public school because they had teachers that had just graduated from college and different things. They took an interest into you and I'm not bragging, but I was exceptionally good in math and I got straight A's all the way in highschool, in every subject. And I was doing trigonometry and calculus when I graduated from highschool because they were feeding it to me as I could accept it, where in the regular school I would just got so much. But when I went to college I already had college algebra and trigonometry and calculus. I was way ahead of myself.

Interviewer: I never got any farther than algebra myself.

Mr. Cooper: You had to get you schooling. In the public schools, they just pass you along. There you had to do it. There was no question about it.

Interviewer: Yeah. There was a lot more expected of us back in those days, wherever we were. Times have changed a little bit.

Mr. Cooper: Right.

Interviewer: Okay, that's a pretty good coverage of what happened during the week. What did you do on the weekends? Could you leave the grounds ever, of the home?
Mr. Cooper: The ones, we could go, uh--

Interviewer: Of course you were in the band.

Mr. Cooper: The band, I went and I went in sports. But you could go to, there was a store up on the corner. You could go there. The whole home went to the movie. The Orpheum Theater would open up on a Saturday morning at nine o’clock.

Interviewer: Now this is on the grounds is it?

Mr. Cooper. No. No, this is downtown. We would be bussed to the movie downtown at the Orpheum at nine o’clock in the morning and then we would see our movie till noon before the regular people came and they would have special shows for us and then we would go on to the parks and picnics with the supervisors. The whole cottage could go or the ones that were bad couldn’t go. But, like I had relatives in town, in Davenport. I weren’t permitted to visit them.

Interviewer: You were not?

Mr. Cooper: I was not because that was one of the rules. They didn’t want you to get homesick.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Mr. Cooper: So I didn’t get to visit them till, I think you had to be sixteen or seventeen or eighteen, something like that, before you could visit them. But why they didn’t allow you to visit them.

Interviewer: Did you ever wish that you could just get off and mingle in the community?

Mr. Cooper: Oh yeah, many a time. I was born and raised in Davenport and I wish I could have walked down to my aunt’s house or something like that. But they didn’t permit that. The only way I got to see them was when I went to highschool. I went to Davenport Highschool one semester and then they transferred me to Toledo because I was an athlete, a star athlete. But that was one thing I didn’t like. I thought it was so silly, but they explained to you that if they let you go in town all the time, you said your relatives didn’t want you, so why should you go back there and visit with them all the time. If they wanted you, they would have took you in instead of you coming to the home. Which makes sense.

Interviewer: Yeah, I guess so.

Mr. Cooper: It does, because if they wanted you, they could have took you in, see. And so they said, “This way you’ll stay here. We’re raising you and you stay here until we give you the prop--- because we don’t want their interference. And I think it was a good thing too, now, because---

Interviewer: It was a little frustrating at the time though.

Mr. Cooper: It was frustrating at the time. You were lonesome, you wanted to be there. But after you stopped---now I’m glad, because it taught me. I learned much more, especially being black. The standard of living of the blacks was much lower then as it is now and I learned from the top. I learned etiquette, manners--everything. Some of the things I wouldn’t have learned if I would have been at home. Not saying my home was--we were poor and it was, you know, we didn’t have showers and things like that. It was substandard, but I did learn more than I would have learned.
Interviewer: You had some advantages.

Mr. Cooper: I had some advantages of being in the home. And the main thing I say it taught me about race is no prejudice. They say we're all the same under the skin. And so I was able to go into the Navy and go right to the top of the ladder and get along. I had a wonderful experience in the Navy.

Interviewer: How long were you in?

Mr. Cooper: I was in the Navy four years. I was wrote up by Ernie Pyle. Every paper in the United States knew about me because I excelled.

Interviewer: Did he write about you by name?

Mr. Cooper: Oh yes. I got the article right here.

Interviewer: Marvelous!

Mr. Cooper: Oh yeah, as a matter of fact, the public radio stations, they're doing this thing, see, there it is--June 1, 1945.

Interviewer: All right, all right, that's excellent.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, see, he wrote about me several--it was in the papers. (Looks through papers.)

Interviewer: Is this when you were "cheffin"?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, East Moline Downs---I had a barbeque stand out there. That's where I was head chef at Harold's on the Rock and uh--see this is the article about Ernie Pyle.

Interviewer: Oh yes, I see.

Mr. Cooper: We have our reunions. This is me in the South Pacific on an island there. A little island we took Ernie Pyle to where he was killed. I was the officer's cook and we were cooking for them there. This is me in the Navy on a ship, the USS Cabot, the Iron Lady, they call it. Our aircraft carrier traveled more miles than any ship in the United States Navy fleet. This is Jerry Ryan, used to own Ryan's Plumbing and Heating in Davenport. That's him. And there's his friend,________. That's when we were all in the Navy.

Interviewer: This is the three of you I guess.

Mr. Cooper: This is the three of us.

Interviewer: A few years later.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, this is in New Orleans. (Laughs). 1990, where we had a reunion.

Interviewer: Was that a ship's reunion there?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, it was a ship's reunion. This is my best friend. He's in California. That's ship's reunion. Our aircraft carrier's there. This is a graduation picture from ninth grade. From 1940. That's the Orphan's Home.

OH-82 Cooper
Interviewer: Now that's a picture I'd like to borrow. If I may.

Mr. Cooper: This is when we graduated to go to highschool, see.

Interviewer: If that's not stuck in there too tight.

Mr. Cooper: Oh that's not stuck in there.

Interviewer: Now I did promise you these'll be brought back to you in great shape either by me or by somebody from the library. Probably by me, since I've learned how to find you.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah. This is my graduation from ninth grade.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Now again, you were the only the black youngster in that grade.

Mr. Cooper: In the class, yeah. I was the only black in my class. See this is one class. All right. But there were--this guy's my best friend here. And Russell Root (?), it took him forty-five years to find his brother. He just found his brother, coming to our reunion the last time.

Interviewer: Really!

Mr. Cooper: Oh there's a lot of 'em. Yeah. There's a lot of them. Some of them are still lookin'. There's some of them that will find their relatives when they come this year. Every year somebody does. People know each other and they find out.

Interviewer: Now you had two sisters that you--

Mr. Cooper: No, one sister and a brother. My brother's deceased now. He stayed in the home and when he got seventeen he just walked away. Went to Chicago and got him a job.

Interviewer: Did you have any trouble keeping track of him?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, we lost him for about two or three years. And then we found him. Because he's in Chicago.

Interviewer: Did you find him or did he find you?

Mr. Cooper: Well, he found us. There was no way in hell we could find him.

Interviewer: Uh, huh. Chicago's a big place.

Mr. Cooper: It's a big place, yeah. He come home after three years.

Interviewer: Uh, huh.

Mr. Cooper: When I was in the service, well, my sister and I always wrote to each other. See, my sister, a year after I went to Toledo she was adopted by a white family in Atlantic, Iowa.

Interviewer: Oh, really.

Mr. Cooper: They raised her and put her through the high school. They had two children and they raised her just right along with theirs, just like she was one of theirs.

Interviewer: Isn't that something.
Mr. Cooper: It was Atlantic and there was one other black family in Atlantic, Iowa. They considered her as their real daughter. He owned a lumber yard and a Buick dealership. Matter of fact, she's going next week to their class reunion. He just died two years ago. She goes back every year to visit them. I took her back to the funeral. He'd take her to the country club, show her off--"This is my daughter, you know."

Interviewer: (Laughs) Uh, huh.

Mr. Cooper: I've seen those programs where they said that white people couldn't raise black children, but that's a lie.

Interviewer: Huh. They did just fine, didn't they.

Mr. Cooper: She did just fine, that's right!

Interviewer: Now I see all of you young men here in this picture are all dressed up in fancy suits.

Mr. Cooper: Well, that's our church suits. We all had a dress suit to wear.

Interviewer: Who provided that? The home provided that too?

Mr. Cooper: The home provided all the clothes. And we had work clothes and this is our dress clothes. We had to dress like that for church and if we went to the movie or anywhere we went. We had two suits. The girls, you can see, they all had dresses the same.

Interviewer: Very nice. They do look like a bunch of bridesmaids though, don't they? (Laughs)

Mr. Cooper: They do, uh-huh. These girls make these dresses.

Interviewer: Yeah. Oh, they do, they made them themselves, huh?

Mr. Cooper: Oh yeah. They had sewing classes there. They were made at the home.

Interviewer: Girls took what we call Home Ec in those days, huh?

Mr. Cooper: Yuh, and our suits, they come from Fort Madison. The prisoners made our suits.

Interviewer: Really? No kidding. Well, they're good looking suits.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, they were nice.

Interviewer: Well, that's outstanding. So about the time you got there, they didn't have uniforms anymore, did they.

Mr. Cooper: They had uniforms when I first got there and then the uniforms left a year after I was there. It wasn't even about probably a year. I think the uniforms left in '39. They left in '38 or '39. Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you wear a uniform at any time?

Mr. Cooper: When I first got there, everybody wore a uniform.

Interviewer: You wore a uniform all day except when you were working, I suppose, huh?
Mr. Cooper: You worked in uniforms.

Interviewer: Oh, you did? That was work clothes as well as dress up, huh?

Mr. Cooper: When they had the uniforms they still had a suit to dress up in on Sunday and to come in town. You didn't wear the uniforms in town. No, you had dress pants and things you could wear, but while you were there you had to wear the uniforms.

Interviewer: I see.

Mr. Cooper: But you had other clothes you could wear when you come in town.

Interviewer: Girls had uniforms too, huh?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, girls had uniform dresses. But when they came in town to the movie or anything, they'd be dressed like that. That was our Sunday "go meetin' clothes" they called it.

Interviewer: I see. What's this picture here I'm looking at?

Mr. Cooper: This is where I--when I had my business going successfully, I had barbeques. I went to the Orphan's Home and put on a free barbeque for all the kids there, five hundred kids there.

Interviewer: What year would this have been?

Mr. Cooper: This would have been 1966.

Interviewer: 1966, huh? Is this the same event here?

Mr. Cooper: No, this is another--that's my catering service. This is my sister and I. We had the ribs on there. We barbequed ribs for all five hundred in the home.

Interviewer: Oh my.

Mr. Cooper: We just put up cement blocks and put grates on 'em--barbequed right on the ground for 'em. See, the kids though it was really somethin', you know. And I felt I owed it to them, give me my start in my life, so I give somethin' back to them.

Interviewer: Terrific.

Mr. Cooper: Uh, hum. I've been a gourmet chef all over.

Interviewer: Well I guess you have been. Tell me about--now you were in the Navy for four years. Did you get into cooking in the Navy?

Mr. Cooper: That's when I started to cook and the Navy sent me to Cook and Bakers School. I graduated from that in San Diego. I was at the Bachelor's Officers Quarters there for a year. Then I put in for sea duty and I got aircraft carrier. Went to the South Pacific, went all the way through the war in the South Pacific. I started out as a third class cook and I ended up as captain's--admiral's cook. I was the top cook on the ship before I ended up. If I'd of stayed in the Navy I'd have been a commissioned officer. They offered it to me and I didn't want to stay in. I wanted to go to college. So I went to college--Iowa one year and I was going to be a football player. Then I got married. It was hard for a black person to get residence and everything. So
when you were married--so I transferred to St. Ambrose. Everybody here in the Quad-Cities knew I was a good chef and I went to work for the Davenport Club.


Mr. Cooper: And so I said, "I'm going to put my school on hold 'cuz I had no one--I had to support myself.

Interviewer: I see where Moskowitz is going to open that up again as a new place.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, right. I put in--I don't know--five or six years there, at the Davenport Club.

Interviewer: Did you work with Chef Tony there?

Mr. Cooper: Oh, before Chef Tony

Interviewer: Before Tony, huh?

Mr. Cooper: Walter Deldorf (?) was the chef when I went there and he was still the chef when I left there.

Interviewer: Now when you left there did you go into your own business then or did you go someplace else?

Mr. Cooper: No, I wanted to be the executive chef at Johnny Hartman's down on the river where the Legion is, you know, where the Dock is. I was a chef there. Then I went to the LeClaire Hotel.

Interviewer: I saw the LeClaire Hotel in here. Yes.

Mr. Cooper: I was a chef there for a couple years. I started the smogasbord. And then I went to the Ship's Wheel. I was out at there at the Ship's Wheel.

Interviewer: There's a lot of shots of you in a big white hat, I see that.

Mr. Cooper: That was when I was at the Davenport Country Club. 1952 I was executive chef at the Davenport Country Club.

Interviewer: Yes indeed.

Mr. Cooper: Then I went in business for myself. I had a rib house on 9th Street. I worked at the Arsenal and then I started catering. I did the Arsenal picnic here--ribs and chicken stuff. And then I started catering while I worked at the Arsenal because I had a family--children. And then after I got secure I quit the Arsenal. Thirty days after I quit the Arsenal one of my trucks turned over on me and that's why I'm crippled now.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Well you get around a little bit because I see a truck out there with your name on it.

Mr. Cooper: Oh, I go fishing around. As a matter of fact, I still--

Interviewer: Did the accident force you to retire?

Mr. Cooper: No. The accident happened in 1968. I cooked right on. I'd take a stool and I'd go in OH-82 Cooper
the kitchen and I had to sit on the stool sometimes, you know, like that, but that never bothered me. It just didn't bother me. What messed me up, the SBA let me down because the doctor said I'd die within a year. Then after a year they said I'd die within the next year. Said my leg would drop off--so the SBA wouldn't finance me. So I just scuffled along and eventually I had the Downtowner Restaurant in Moline. Finally I just started catering out of my home and I was licensed and I'm certified by the state and everything. I catered out of my home 'til--let's see, that was '65--'62. All my children are through college and they all got college degrees. They got good jobs, so I retired.

Interviewer: Bless your heart. You've only been retired, though, for seven or eight years, right?

Mr. Cooper: I still--there's a catering service, Jackson's Catering.--look in the kitchen there. Just look in that door there. I'd do stuff for them.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Yeah.

Mr. Cooper: There's cobbler for two hundred people. (Laughs)

Interviewer: My Lord! I'd sneak out of here with one of those. That's beautiful. Gee, it smells good.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, I got some in the oven I got to check.

Interviewer: You want to do that right now? We can stop for a minute here.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, stop a minute. (Recorder turned off)

Interviewer: We're back on the air here, having checked the cobbler. Tell me something about the special times at the home, if you will, like--oh, Christmas and Fourth of July. I understand there were a lot of celebrations around there.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, we had our own fireworks and Christmas, we all got presents. The matrons knew each child individually and they bought presents for them according to what they thought they needed.

Interviewer: I see. They went out and made purchases.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, they went out and made purchases.

Interviewer: Where'd that money come from?

Mr. Cooper: Well, that came from the general fund.

Interviewer: I see.

Mr. Cooper: We could work part-time on little jobs off the place.

Interviewer: Oh, could you. When you reached a certain age, huh?

Mr. Cooper: When we reached a certain age. The money was put into our savings. Like when I left the home I had probably three hundred dollars in savings that I had made working.

Interviewer: So you didn't leave the home with an empty pocket, did you.
Mr. Cooper: No, so they transferred that to Toledo and then up there I made money and when I went in the service they kept the money in the savings ’til I got discharged and then I got it. So that’s the way it was.

Interviewer: Got you off to a little start there.

Mr. Cooper: You could buy what you wanted to and we used to buy stuff out of the Sears & Roebuck catalog and stuff like that. But it was real nice at Christmas. We had good Christmas programs and we had iceskating contests in the winter.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Cooper: Especially the basketball--the sports was the main thing. We played Eldora. Davenport High School wouldn't play us. We played Cedar Rapids High Schools. But Davenport High would never play us, because it was embarassing to get beat by the Orphan Home team. (Laughs) We played all the small towns around. And those are special times. They would take you sometime on a camping, you know, on an overnight camping trip. And then the supervisors sometime they would--what I liked the best--when the teachers or supervisors, they could take you home for the weekend.

Interviewer: Oh really.

Mr. Cooper: That's what I liked. If you behaved yourself, you know, then they could take you home for the weekend. And that was really nice, you know.

Interviewer: Of course you were always well-behaved. (Laughs)

Mr. Cooper: Well no, not really. (Laughs) We all had our devils there. We used to sneak our at night and sneak downtown.

Interviewer: Did you? Did you ever get in trouble?

Mr. Cooper: Oh yeah, we'd get caught sometimes. We'd get out of bed at night. We had to go to bed at nine o'clock and sometimes the matrons would go out and go to the movie, you know and there wouldn't be nobody there. They had a night watchman, you know, and we'd sneak out and go downtown and we'd come in town and sneak back and everything. We'd cut across Eastern Avenue and go through the cemetery so nobody'd see us, you know.

Interviewer: Did you ever run into any of the matrons when you were skipping or anybody like that?

Mr. Cooper: Oh, no.

Interviewer: What happened if you got caught? What kind of punishment?

Mr. Cooper: We got a old fashioned whipping, that's what we got. The supervisor would take you in the room and they took a belt or a strap, whatever they seen fit, and they'd take you in the room and talk to you, tell you why they were doing it, and then they would do it. And I believe in it. I don't believe in the system today at all. That's what's wrong with the system.

Interviewer: You think it's too permissive?

Mr. Cooper: Too permissive and the children nowadays--"Well, he's just gonna talk to me. I'll let the old windbag talk." But when they spank your rear, it makes you think twice, you know, and I
believe in that. And that's the way I raised all my children. I had one of my children tell me one time, "You're abusing me. I'm going downtown and report you." I says, "When you go," I says, "take your clothes with you." I said, "Because as long as you live in my house, you're going to dance to my music." And that's the way I raised 'em. And they all thank me now.

Interviewer: How many children do you have?

Mr. Cooper: I have six and everyone of 'em makes fifty thousand dollars a year or better. They all got good jobs. I only got one that doesn't make that. She's a school teacher and she's workin' on her Master's. She's deaf in both ears an yet she went all the way through college.

Interviewer: Well, bless her heart.

Mr. Cooper: Took her six years to get through college. She teaches the handicapped and hearing impaired in Sterling, Illinois.

Interviewer: Wonderful--marvelous!

Mr. Cooper: Yeah--Carol. And I have one, she's Director of People's Housing in Chicago and she makes around fifty-five thousand. And another one, she's a Director of Lakefront Single Occupancy. That's a national company, housing for the homeless. It's private, not-for-profit. She's Director of that. She's been on TV--WHBF and she's on WGN.

Interviewer: Really, uh-hum.

Mr. Cooper: And then I have one, she's a nurse.

Interviewer: All girls?

Mr. Cooper: I've got four girls. My oldest son, he's in Lincoln, Nebraska. He graduated from the University of Nebraska, Child and Family Services. He works with children. He worked there three or four years before he got his degree. And then my youngest one, he's just like me, he's a chef. He's called a gourmet culinary chef. He graduated from Chicago Institute of Cooking and he's got their Master's Degree, not only their Cooking Degree. He is the executive chef of the Cook County Hospital. It wasn't even built in Chicago before he cooks for the employees, you know, dining room. That's the youngest one, so--

Interviewer: Wonderful! How many grandkids you got?

Mr. Cooper: I've got three. There's one up there. He's just graduating from Lakeview High School this week in Chicago. That's his prom picture last week.

Interviewer: Is that right.

Mr. Cooper: And then I've got the other one over there--he's five.

Interviewer: (Laughs) He's a rascal.

Mr. Cooper: And then I got a girl eleven, one eleven, from all this.

Interviewer: We're looking at a lot of pictures around her on the wall right now.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, that's the family there.
Interviewer: That's marvelous.

Mr. Cooper: My wife and the eleven-year-old granddaughter, they're on their way to Chicago now to his graduation. (Laughs) I couldn't go 'cuz I had to work.

Interviewer: You seem to be a board game fan.

Mr. Cooper: Well, this is the thing about--in the Home. We played a lot of games 'cuz we couldn't run the streets. And the thing with the families today is--is why they're--they give their children ten, twenty dollars and tell them to go out. My children, we sit here and play games with them. I play games with all the little ones, the big ones, the older ones. We play Dominoes, we play Scrabble with the older--we play everything. That's what holds a family together. When my children come from Chicago here they don't say, "Dad, we're goin' to a nightclub" or something like that. They say, "Dad, put up the card table, we're gonna play cards" or "We're gonna play Scrabble" or "We're gonna play this". Just like Father's Day, they invited my up to White Pines Lodge up there. And I drove my truck up there and they had high barbeque 'course. Took the meat up there. Then I had all my grandkids and my children were all there. And we had a big picnic and we fished in the river, in the Rock River. That's what we do.

Interviewer: Together.

Mr. Cooper: Togetherness. That's the way it is. And every week out of the year, just about, there's one of my children here, two or three. They come home.

Interviewer::: Was there a lot of that kind of attitude at the Home? Was there a lot of comaraderie?

Mr. Cooper: That's the way it was. That's the way it was at the home. And that's the way I like it. Because people don't realize what a family is nowadays. They're out running the streets. We never had a babysitter. The only time we had a babysitter actually, was when my wife started workin'. But in the evening after I got off work we would go to the park, Indian Bluff or someplace and have a cookout. Or we'd go to drive-in movies when they had 'em. Or we'd take the children to movies. And naturally when I was younger I was--I'm still poor but I would guarantee that every other Sunday my family went out to dinner and ate at Jumer's Castle Lodge or ate someplace like that, you know. We put that money away for that. And we would do that rather than having them run the streets. Teach them to be a responsive citizen, see. That's the answer to the whole thing.

Interviewer: You brought quite an attitude away from the Home with you, didn't you.

Mr. Cooper: Right, that's right. That's what they taught us, see, to be a responsible--. And 'course it didn't work on everybody. There's some went to Eldora, some of 'em, and--

Interviewer: There's always individuals, of course.

Mr. Cooper: There's always individuals, it did. But this is what they taught us, to be a responsive citizen and live up to the standards of the community. Don't just walk around here a sloppy joe. When you dress up, dress up, be a gentleman, you know. That's what I was taught. And that's the way I taught my children.

Interviewer: Is there anything else about your experience at the Home that I haven't asked about, that I've skipped over or anything like that, that occurs to you, that you'd like to add to this history that we're putting together? Anything that we've missed? I don't want to leave out anything important.
Mr. Cooper: Well the main thing of the whole stay in your lifestyle in the Home was your attitude and your incentive and your aggressiveness. The more aggressive and the nicer you were and the more things you wanted to do the better they treated you and the easier your lifestyle was. For instance, if you played in the band or you played the piano or you played a football team, you kept your room, your clothes clean and you did your jobs real well and you didn't argue and fuss, well, you got the better privileges. You got more privileges. And they trusted you just like they would on a prison farm. When they said we're gonna to take twenty of you down to see Wayne King or a band down here at the Coliseum, you'd be one of the twenty that went, see. That was the main thing in the Orphan's Home. If you behaved yourself and respected them, you got more privileges.

Interviewer: You earned your way.

Mr. Cooper: You earned your way. That was the main thing. And that's what happened, you know. Because you didn't have to be a star athlete or nuthin' like that. You just had to behave yourself and do your job, what you're assigned to, well. Then if they said, "Well, we got tickets to go to the Wharton Field House to see the Globetrotters. We only can take forty." Well, you'd be in the top forty, see. See what I mean?

Interviewer: Sure.

Mr. Cooper: And that's the main thing in the Orphan's Home what I learned. And it really worked too, because you say, "Well, you can't go because you haven't behaved yourself," you know, like this. And that's the thing that I remember the most of, you know. "Course, some of the employees weren't just right. Some of 'em were mean and some of 'em didn't give a damn, but nine out of ten of 'em gave you better attention than your own parents did, you know. That's true.

Interviewer: That's quite a statement, that's quite a statement. How do you feel about the home being gone now?

Mr. Cooper: I think the government has made a big mistake. They've got all these group homes and they've got all these counseling things. It's a farce to me because I have girls. They went away to college, Rosary College in Chicago. They come home and they come in my house and my wife says, "Cindy, you do the dishes." She says, "Oh damn, Mom. Shit." I said, "What did you say?" I says to one of the other children, "Go in that closet and get my big trucker's belt out." She says, "Oh no, Dad, I didn't mean that. See, I'm just trying to find out where I am. I says, "You at 1003 25th Street, Apartment 68, Rock Island, Illinois, 61201, about to get your ass beat." I says, "As long as you live, if you get to be eighty years old, and your mother's a hundred, she's still your mother and you respect her and you don't curse in front of her. Or at her either.” I says, "Same way with me." I says, "As long as I got breath in my body I'm your dad and you're gonna give me respect." And I said, "Thirdly, as long as you're in my house, you're gonna dance to my music. I don't care how old I get or how crippled I get, when you come in my house, you go by my rules and regulations. That's one of 'em, is respect your parents." She apologized and she didn't have to whip her. And now you couldn't get one of my children to disrespect us. You know, that's the way it's gotta be. That's what's wrong today. They put 'em in these group homes. These people just want the money to take care of 'em. The state gives them two or three hundred dollars apiece to take care of 'em and they let 'em go. They don't care about them. Half of them take the money that they get and spend it on theirself, buying new cars and things. I've had some lady had four or five girls. The girls would come in my place and want something to eat. They didn't have nothin'--tell me about what slop that she bought, they'd take the money and she'd drive around in new cars. There's no togetherness because you have to want a child. There's people that really want children, to adopt 'em and raise 'em, can't get 'em. But the ones like you read in New York. This woman had a hundred and fifty kids on the list there, you know?
Interviewer: Read that!

Mr. Cooper: It's all bullshit. In the Home they had the hands on to you. They could teach you and they had control of you and they know where the dollar was going. And they said it's cheaper this way. It isn't cheaper this way because you had five hundred children there. If you took the cost of the operation of that home against the cost of what five hundred kids would cost getting public aid and stuff, it'd be a lot more.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Cooper: Because the home grew their own corn, they raised their cattle, they raised their pigs and we had a cannery there. We canned stuff and we raised our own hay to feed the cattle, raised the corn to feed the cattle. They raised oats, green beens. You know, it was--

Interviewer: Pretty self-sufficient.

Mr. Cooper: Self-sufficient.

Interviewer: Now the reunion that's coming up, I think on the 10th, isn't it?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah. The 10th of July.

Interviewer: Okay, how many do you expect to be there?

Mr. Cooper: We expect about two hundred. They average between about a hundred seventy-five and two hundred. It might be more. Each year it gets bigger. As a matter of fact, there will be a writer, I don't know, just like you, from California. They're doing a story on orphans. They're flying in from California. They'll be here for our reunion.


Mr. Cooper: Gathering information. And then we have 'em from all over--from Seattle, California, Florida.

Interviewer: These are former residents you're talking about.

Mr. Cooper: Former residents. They'll be there. And some of them who were in the home after we were, they'll come there trying to locate their lost brothers and sisters. See, we got letters, my sister has letters there so, you know. And what it was, the state would not give out no information to where you went.

Interviewer: Oh, yes.

Mr. Cooper: If I wouldn't of been writing with my sister writing me letters in the Navy, I would never know where she was. When my brother went to Chicago, we never knew were he went. They wouldn't give out who adopted who. So, by coming here and talking, through camaraderie, well, every year someone finds their brothers and sisters. And you can see in that article,-- where's that article I had here? At the last one, forty-seven years--what'd I do with that article?

Interviewer: Well, I think the only thing we took out was this photo here.

Mr. Cooper: I had a newspaper article. Here it is, I think. Yeah, it's in here. In this here, this here picture here, Russell Rudd (?) right here, forty years ago before he found his brother.
Interviewer: Really.

Mr. Cooper: And he was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Interviewer: Same age as you are, isn't he?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, he comes to the reunion and we found his brother. You know, 'cuz every year there's more come and they know where somebody else is. And he found his brother after forty, forty years. Forty-five years. That one right there.

Interviewer: Isn't that something!

Mr. Cooper: And then--you can take this article if you want to.

Interviewer: I'm going to ask you a real big favor. Can I take the whole album? Would you let me do that?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah.

Interviewer: 'Cuz I will bring it back, you know.

Mr. Cooper: Oh, this here one?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, it's very precious to me.

Interviewer: I know it is, and I certainly--

Mr. Cooper: This is just--uh--

Interviewer: If you're uncomfortable with that, well, you tell me.

Mr Cooper: No, no, I would. Unless you want both of 'em.

Interviewer: Well--

Mr. Cooper: This is more or less my business one.

Interviewer: Yes, I think this has business background and for the purposes of the library, we're interested more in what happened at the Home of course.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, this was when I was chef of the year.

Interviewer: Yeah. Big Daddy, huh? (Laughs)

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, you can take them. I do have some other pictures from the Home in another book in here.

Interviewer: Well, I'd be interested in those if you have time to dig 'em out sometime.

Mr. Cooper: Well, it'd only take a minute to get them.
Interviewer: Okay, if you know where they are. I'm going to turn this thing off now. I think we're finished with it for the time being.