

Interviewer: AJ Spear
Interviewee: Keith Fitzgerald
HBR Modern US History
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Oral history of Hinckley Residents- Transcription

AJ: What was Hinckley like when you were younger?

Keith: I don't think anything really earth shattering different from now. No special events that I can think of.

AJ: Are there any places in town when you were growing up that might not be around anymore?

Keith: Oh sure since I moved here. I've been basically born and raised here since I was six years old. At that time the population of Hinckley I believe was 620 people. You know, the village was a little bit different at that point in time. We had quite a downtown and in the surrounding area, we had a lot of farming families. So if you were to start in the southeast corner of downtown along Route 30, there was a little insurance agency, then a little post office, and then the Hinckley Review. That was a newspaper that put out a weekly newspaper. Continuing west there was a little dress shop. Eve Finley, she had a dress shop there. And then a restaurant on the corner of Sycamore Street and Route 30. And then you crossed the street heading west along Route 30 on the south side was the Hinckley State Bank. Then Bastian's grocery store. Past that was a saddle shop where you can buy leather goods and farm stuff. Next was Ron's Tavern. Before that, it was called the Welcome Mat. There was a feed store on the corner. Then you crossed over the street to the Amico gas station and south was the grain elevator. Continuing west from the Amico station you would come to Nehring's Case Implement dealership.

Across the street on the north side of 30 was a Sinclair gas station then was Freundt's International Harvester Implement and Buick car dealership. He had all sizes of tractors. Then continuing East was a parking lot, next Doc Keys' doctor office, and Nash furniture store. Next was a bowling alley in the basement, another tavern called The Other Place. And then past that, was a Texaco gas station. Across Sycamore Street was another grocery store and then was a beautiful place called Goerlich's Bakery and Luncheonette. It was a unique meeting place run by a German immigrant. Oh, of course I liked it. I grew up with Chris Goerlick. Her father fought for Germany in World War II. He was in Hitler's youth and served an apprenticeship in Germany as a baker. I remember he had his apprenticeship certificate on the wall. He ran the best bakery God ever invented to this day. I probably should have been a cop because I love donuts, and just kidding of course, but the bakery was a wonderful place. Then there were other shops, a hardware store and Voss Motor Company.

AJ: What was your experience going to HBR?

Keith: Well first of all I graduated high school in 1977. I think we were the largest graduating class for a long time and maybe still today. I think we had 80 people in our class. How many are in your class young man?

AJ: 56.

Keith: Okay, so we were one of the largest classes to come through here. I spent my whole life in this little farming community; elementary school, junior high, and high school. I played pretty much all the sports, and I also was in band and music. I did that until I was a sophomore in high school and then I started working while going to school. We had a program called DO. It was an occupational training program where you worked pretty much almost full-time. I worked like 32 hours a week at Eagle Foods. I was a stock boy at night and got in at six p.m. and work till one or two in the morning. Then I came to class at like 10 o'clock. And so I worked all through my junior and senior year. My goal was to improve my living conditions. We came from very humble beginnings.

Hinckley-Big Rock was a typical school at that time and gave a high caliber of education. We had French and Latin, higher math with Mr. Hillman. We had business classes and shop classes. So our high school and our education, I want to believe was very good.

AJ: What did you do after high school?

Keith: My father was in plant engineering at Caterpillar Tractor Company in Aurora. I started working there right out of high school. I started on a wash tank, deburring parts, didn't go to college, and came out of there dirty as a coal miner every night. Then I got into the apprenticeship program at Caterpillar as an electrician. Caterpillar Tractor Company at that time was the largest purchaser of steel in the United States; I think it also was the largest private employer in the State of Illinois at that time.

As Caterpillar was downsizing, I applied for the apprenticeship program with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, IBEW. One of my first jobs as an apprentice was remodeling the old Egyptian Theater at DeKalb. Then I went from there to remodeling the Sandwich Opera House. I was working for a DeKalb electrical company that served all of the industries throughout DeKalb and Sycamore. I had great mentors.

AJ: When did you start your own business?

Keith: I was married and we had our first son. I wanted to pursue my dreams so I started Fitzgerald Electric around 1985. I thought I could do better electrical work, hire people as they went through their apprenticeship program, and pay fair and equitable wages. We provided the electrical work for the Hinckley United Methodist Church new building and won bids for many large projects. I was able to build our dream house, send our three boys to college, and live in dignity.

AJ: How long did you run the company?

Keith: I ran it for about 30 years. We've been in business about 35. My three sons have now taken over the business and we employ about 75 to 100 electricians. We do all types of electrical work for all types of customers including data centers. My sister, brother and I grew up in a garage in Hinckley. From there my sister became an attorney, my brother and I are electricians, together our five sons are electricians. I think that is an amazing story that started at HBR.

AJ: How dose it feel to be leaving your company to your sons?

Keith: It means a lot. I'm glad to leave something for the next generations. If you look back at your life, you can see many times God's work in your life.

AJ: What made Hinckley so special?

Keith: So, you know, Hinckley was a small community, kind of like the TV show Andy Griffin in Mayberry. I owe a lot to this town. The church has always been a part of my life and those people in this community that cared; they've always been a part of my life. People reached out to me as a kid and gave me an opportunity. How people treat the young and the old is the quality of your society. That's what makes Hinckley special. Giving an opportunity to others will change his or her life forever.