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George Knight, Jr. Memoir

K744. Knight, George Jr. b. 1926

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 60 mins., 21 pp.

Knight, owner of Knight's Action Park in Springfield, recalls Springfield in the 1920's and 30's, his service during WWII in the Philippines, returning home after the war, and involvement in the family entertainment and recreation business.

Interview by Bill Ortman, 1988

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bill Ortman for the Oral History Office on February 17, 1988. Margaret Reeder transcribed the tapes and Linda Jett edited the transcript. George Knight, Jr. reviewed the transcript.

George Knight, Jr. was born December 19, 1926 in Springfield, Illinois. His father was a golf pro at Springfield's city parks plus he opened a driving range in Springfield in the 1930s. In this memoir Mr. Knight discusses his service during and after World War II in the Philippines and entering the amusement and recreation business.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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George Knight, Jr., February 17, 1988, Springfield, Illinois.

Bill Ortman, Interviewer.

Q: Mr. Knight, where and when were you born and who were your parents?

A: I was born in Springfield, Illinois, December 19, 1926 at St. John's Hospital. My parents were George W. Knight, Sr. and Olivia Taylor Knight. My parents were married in 1923. My mother's maiden name was T-A-Y-L-O-R.

Q: Your father had an interesting profession. You want to tell us this briefly?

A: Well, my father was a golf professional all of his life. He was a golf professional at Illini Country Club in Springfield, Illinois when he and my mother met. At the age of about two, we moved to Port Huron, Michigan for several years where my father was the professional at a country club for several years.

Q: One of your memories, as I would say a one or two year old, was you looked out over Lake Michigan, apparently, and see the car boats?

A: Stand on the beach and the car boats going by, right.

Q: And Port Huron is fairly close to Detroit.

A: Just north of Detroit. It's sort of a summer recreation spot, weekend recreation spot for people from Detroit.

Q: Your father was up there for a while and he apparently thought he could do a little better again back down here, Springfield area.

A: Right, came back to Springfield area. It was my mother's home, too. I think she liked the idea of coming back.

Q: She had some relatives here.

A: Right.

Q: A mother and a brother.

A: Mother was here and had a brother here.

Q: He came back to what was called at that point the Oak Crest Country Club.

A: That's right. Oak Crest was there for quite some time, just changed names here not too long ago.

Q: And you say it's now called The Oaks and it's northeast of . .

A: Right, it's northeast of Springfield a couple of miles, they call it The Oaks now.

Q: And your dad worked there until about 1934, 1935.

A: Right.

Q: Probably your father would have moved on and became a pro for the city about a year later, or about 1935.

A: Right, he was a pro with the city parks, he was a pro for all three city parks, Bergen, Pasfield and Bunn. For almost ten years, I think.

Q: While he was working for the city parks he kind of went into a little "interneurship" or (laughs), what's the word? He did a little private business enterprise, a driving range. And that was south of Reif's Furniture at MacArthur, probably about direct east of the Fox Theater, is that right?

A: That's right.

Q: How many acres would he have involved in that?

A: Oh, about twenty acres. There wasn't hardly anything out that way at that point in time. The only things I remember are a large nightclub which was north of us, that's a church now. We were sort of midway between it and Reif's Furniture Store, there.

Q: He was there for several years, right?

A: Right.

Q: And then what happened?

A: Then we moved to a location on Cook Street, which at that time we were across the street from what was then called White City, it was a carnival grounds and nightclub, and we would have been just west of where the Channel 20 Station is today.

Q: I think we were talking about that, we were talking about, probably about close to three or four city blocks, talking about twenty acres open area. Looking back from that towards the city, that was probably kind of a suburban area, at that point, wasn't it? Very little . . .

A: It was. Probably the, you know, the housing that's there, exists today, was there at that point in time. The city really hasn't grown

that much in that direction, other than the businesses on out along the bypass.

Q: Around 1937, 1940, I think your dad was probably working, what, pretty much both, was he working both jobs, the city and the . . .

A: Right, he was working as the pro at the city parks as well as having the golf driving range.

Q: And he worked for someone here at the newspaper, I understand, who . . .

A: Can't remember the gentleman's name. He was the sports editor at that point in time. They worked very closely together on promoting and they promoted and started quite a few tournaments that are still in existence, I think particularly the Springfield, the junior tournaments with the, dealt with, helped kids out a lot. And the Journal-Register, well it was the Journal at this particular point in time, I worked real closely with Dad on that.

Q: So that gets us up to about 1940. What happened around 1940 there in terms of where he was located?

A: 1940? 1940 I think we lost our lease there on Cook Street and Dad moved over to a location on South Grand Avenue, South Grand East and what is now Dirksen Parkway.

Q: That would be probably, what, just directly south of . . .

A: On the southwest corner.

Q: That would be directly south of where the Penneys Store is today.

A: Right.

Q: Would it?

A: Directly south.

Q: And how many acres are we talking about there now?

A: We're talking about roughly twenty acres.

Q: Let's go back to you for a minute, you're growing up here, and you've got a dad that's very knowledgeable with the folks that golf and probably a very well liked gentleman. Where did you go to school?

A: I went to grade school at Stuart School at Sixth and South Grand. I think part of the building, if not all of it, still exists there, on the northeast corner of Sixth and South Grand, took in the whole block. And from there I went to Springfield High School.

Q: You lived at 309 . . .

A: We lived at 309 East Canedy.

Q: For a young guy at that point in history, didn't have the family vehicle available all the time, how did you get around the community?

A: Well Dad used to let me have the car once in a while, I think he had a Pontiac at the time, if I remember right. (laughter) But after I finally got a drivers license I was able to obtain a Model A Ford. I think it was a 1929 or a 1931 model, in fact I think it had a 1931 engine that I put in it, into a 1929. One had a good engine and one had a good body. I think I paid fifteen dollars for one of them and ten for the other. I think the car cost twenty-five dollars. I'd like to be able to do that again.

Q: It would be fantastic, wouldn't it. I can remember also, we were talking a little while ago about the same time as the car, you were talking about the streetcars and some of the early busses that kind of come in on the streetcars.

A: Well, that was the mode of transportation then. I think today a lot of the cities are wishing they hadn't scrapped their streetcars. Basically, when I was growing up it was all streetcars, like in grade school, busses came in sort of a combination of busses and streetcars for a while. But, of course back then individual transportation wasn't as prevalent as it is today, people rode those things. Usually standing room only in busy hours.

Q: Let's talk about downtown, some of the old theaters, some of the memories, say the Orpheum, theaters that you had, the organ chandeliers . . .

A: The Orpheum Theater was, it was a great place. I did get around a little bit at this time and, you know, there wasn't anything as beautiful in Chicago and St. Louis as far as I'm concerned as the Orpheum was. Marble fountains, plush carpet, it was really a heck of a showplace. It's my understanding that the performers who showed there really thought a lot of the Orpheum Theater. It was a premier stop for a lot of them.

Q: Between like Chicago and St. Louis, something like that?

A: That's right.

Q: I understand that you actually worked as an usher in one of those theaters?

A: That's the way I worked myself through high school, (laughter) as an usher at the old Roxy Theater. It's right close to the Governor's Mansion there on Fifth Street.

Q: A lot of people don't know what an usher is anymore, young kids wouldn't. What were your duties as an usher?

A: I'd just show people to their seats. I don't think they do that anymore really.

Q: No, I guess not. Then also you worked at Walgreens?

A: Worked at Walgreens Drug Store as the pharmacist assistant, oh maybe, my last year in high school.

Q: We were talking about that time period in Springfield where, you know, you go back, you hear about the way the city was before the reformation age, so to speak. You were talking about the bars and whatever.

A: Oh, I think Springfield was a good place to be even at that point in time. I don't know whether it was different from other cities or not because, you know, I didn't get around to other cities at that point in time. But although there were a lot of bars and there was a lot of activity at that time, there was industry in Springfield working three shifts so people were out all hours of the day, but really you never had to be afraid of being bothered on the streets or having any problem going any place.

Q: We're about the 1941 period, and can you remember basically where were you when somebody announced "Pearl Harbor", you know, and we got World War II?

A: I think I was in a theater, and I'm not sure now exactly which one. Watching a movie when the movie was interrupted and the announcement was made from the stage that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

Q: What kind of reaction did the people in the theater have?

A: I think everyone was sort of dumbfounded because everyone thought of Japan as, well, less than a state. (laughs) I think the reaction was "How could these old buggers do that to us?"

Q: And then later, probably a day or two, it dawned on them, you know, "My gosh."

A: Oh, I'm sure when they saw the news reels and one thing or another, why it dawned on them it was a little more to it than that.

Q: You were still in high school at that point.

A: Right.

Q: And you graduated about what, 1943?

A: About 1943, yes.

Q: And I think you were a little younger than normal.

A: I don't know how—I think I got through high school in three and a half years.

Q: About seventeen or something like that.

A: Yes, I was seventeen when I graduated.

Q: And then you went to another school.

A: Went to Springfield Junior College for a year.

Q: What did you major in, or what was your field?

A: Took sort of a pre-engineering course there.

Q: I see. Anyone who lived through that time period obviously would have some memories of Springfield in World War II, fuel, car. I mean metal collections, cars you couldn't drive, that sort of thing. What are some of your memories?

A: Everything was short. It was hard to get tires for your car, it was hard to get gas for your car. Public transportation did real well at that time. You had all those metal, or cans, glass collections, whatever, it was quite different than it is today, I'd say.

Q: We're talking about the major news, too, and how the newspaper used to post it in the window or something?

A: Well the newspaper office then was in the downtown area and of course, downtown was where everyone went at that point, that was it for Springfield.

Q: Capitol Mounds and Sixth or something?

A: Right. Of course the newspaper, any late daily paper, whatever just come off the presses plus any late news items were posted in the window of the Journal there on Sixth Street. There were always people walking by to see what the latest news was and so forth.

Q: You were getting to be about eighteen at that particular point.

A: Yes.

Q: So then what happened?

A: Well, Uncle Sam called. (laughter)

Q: Greetings.

A: And this has happened to a lot of people, so it wasn't that bad, really. I was drafted in the early part of 1945 and went to basic training at Camp Robinson, Arkansas, just outside Little Rock. I remember those hills were awful hard running up and down. Sometimes I wished they'd had that flat country. From there after basic, it was

during basic the war in Europe ended. From basic we went to California for advanced training, this was I think in August. The temperature was 105 on the beaches so they called off advanced training and they put us on the boat. Thirty days later I wound up on Luzon in the Philippine Islands and my first stop was at a camp next to Clark Air Force Base up in central Luzon. We were there for about a month or two and then moved down to a replacement depot by Manila and I spent the next year, oh, year and a half in that location.

Q: One of the things that I want to mention here that we talked about is on the your trip over on the what, General Bruster?

A: We went over on the General Bruster which at that time was a new army transport vessel.

Q: Talked about the sardine effect (laughter) in term of bunkbeds.

A: Well the bunkbeds, one on each deck, were stacked about five or six high and you had one and a half to two feet between bunks which, it really wasn't that bad, but if you get rough weather, which we did one time on the way across and the guy on the top bunk gets sick, everybody's really got a problem. (laughs)

Q: I imagine. (laughter) Talking about the Philippines. I guess it was about one million Americans that eventually . . .

A: There were, when I got there, they were primed for the invasion of Japan. Obviously they were supposed to jump off from Manila Bay in the Philippines. There were close to a million troops on Luzon in the Philippines and most of the Pacific fleet was in Manila Bay at that point in time.

Q: I understand by the grapevine that what you heard and what you felt, whether it's part of history or not, this is important probably because this is what the troops felt. That there were several things that could have happened and you mentioned that the United States really didn't, hopefully didn't want to use an A-bomb.

A: No, I don't think anyone wanted to see an A-bomb used and like I say, it's just grapevine. Incidentally, on the way over on the General Bruster, the war with Japan ended. So this is a matter of three or four weeks after the end of the war and backfeed I got from people who were there that the . . . On the invasion of Luzon the Lingayen Gulf, the Japanese committed quite a number of kamikazes and that they had to fly from Kyushu, the main island of Japan to Formosa and then refuel and then hit our fleet at the Lingayen Gulf. And it was my understanding, what I was told, that out of like several hundred Japanese planes that we were only able to intercept two and the rest hit ships. Our intelligence in Japan told us that the Japanese had several thousand kamikazes waiting for the invasion and this would have caused unacceptable losses before we even got on the beaches. Due to this fact, the loss of life there and the loss of life to the Japanese themselves from saturation bombing and so forth, which would be a prelude to any invasion, possibly running into

several million lives, the trade off was made and the Atomic bombs were dropped.

Q: We know that say six, seven months previous to what we're talking about now that the war in Hitler's Europe had ended, approximately April 1945. We talk about the invasion vessels that were located in the Philippines, but the larger transportation vehicles being located in Europe. What did that mean to you?

A: Well, that meant that we had a million people on Luzon who were ready to go back to the States and the ships were not there to take them back, (laughs) made a lot of people unhappy.

Q: Lots of sharks and no swim. (laughter)

A: No swimming. Twelve thousand miles would be a long swim. So actually it was almost six to eight months after the war in the Pacific ended before any volume of troop ships, the bigger troop ships got there to bring troops back to the States.

Q: Now what happened to you? I understand you were in a replacement depot in northern Luzon close to Clark Field.

A: Well that's where I first went when I was over there and then I was transferred down to a, in fact that depot was closed out and I was transferred to a depot down south of Manila and from there I was assigned to that depot and we processed the troops going home. I went overseas as a rifleman and I wound up as a medical in the medical processing station.

Q: You mentioned riots, not only, not just Philipinos to say, "Go home, Yankee," or something, but actual soldiers rioting, the MPs locking them up. They said that, "We want to go home, we want to get out of here."

A: At that time when the rioting went on I heard about it. I didn't observe it personally, but there was some rioting in some of the camps around Manila.

Q: And there was a way, you say that there were tents, some of them were lined up with signs on them, Singapore, Brisbane. Tell us what someone would do that wanted to get out of Manila or that area for a while.

A: Really, really the government appreciated the situation. In this period after the war they worked with the Chinese, they opened four or five enormous restaurants, delicious food really, in Manila. Also at the air base there were pilots and planes flying every day to locations all around the Pacific. And if you had a pass and you wanted to go to Hong Kong, you could walk into a tent marked Hong Kong and if a pilot was heading that way he had to fill his plane with passengers.

Q: Talking about DC3s, it took about it took about thirty of them out at a shot?

A: DC3s, C54s, anything that could carry people.

Q: C54 would run about what, fifty?

A: Probably get sixty or seventy in a C54, maybe thirty, thirty-five in a DC3. But even some of the smaller bombers and so forth, if they had room for passengers they were required to take them.

Q: Then how would you get back if you got into Singapore? Was there another tent there?

A: (laughter) There was another tent there and you hoped you'd get back before your pass ran out.

Q: (laughter) Take care of that, too. We were talking about just the average day, breakfast meal of dehydrated and reconstituted foods. What's your memory on that sort of thing?

A: I'll never forget the reconstituted eggs. Those dried eggs don't make a very good breakfast. But we survived. I can't complain.
(laughter)

Q: Anything else with the eggs, like coffee and eggs?

A: Oh, we had good coffee. (laughter) We were well fed. We weren't starved or anything like that. We were always well fed.

Q: A lot of boredom time?

A: A whole lot, a whole lot.

Q: You said that you had a friend from Manila and you'd visit the country side and talked about just real briefly, we don't need to go into lots of detail on this, but the fact that you basically felt that anyone who at that period was not supportive of a government, you thought was, you know, pretty oppressive, that the government didn't care what they were, they just called them communists.

A: I think there's some truth in that.

Q: Okay. (laughs) That kind of simplifies matters.

A: I think there's some truth in that.

Q: Let's go to languages, we had a number of languages, break them down.

A: Yes, the Philippines were sort of odd in a way. The Philippines were controlled by the Japs, they were controlled by the Japanese for a while, (laughs) but they were controlled by Spain for over four hundred years, so the language used in the government there is

Spanish. All government business was conducted at this point in time anyway in Spanish. The official language, because of the United States presence for so many years was English and most of the businessmen were Chinese so most of the business was conducted in Chinese. So anyone who was really into things had to speak two to three languages.

Q: You had a fairly serious storm while you were there.

A: We had a nice little typhoon about the end, the first part of 1946, that it hit Manila directly. Winds were over two hundred miles an hour. It was quite an experience. At our depot we had a latrine that was a three hundred seater, or something like that (laughter) and when it hit a lot of the people went, the tents were down and all the people headed for that latrine and it had a steel sheet roof. Well that roof didn't last very long in that. In Manila Bay in heavy winds like that, they try to get the ships out to sea to ride out a storm of that magnitude because they can head into the wind and waves and take it. In a locked-in area like a bay why they are subject to damage. The navy managed to get everything out except a couple of large new mine sweepers. The next morning after the storm they were up in the middle of Dewey Boulevard which runs the bay there at Manila.

Q: We were talking about modern technology ships, buildings versus the old fashioned navy bamboo huts in this storm.

A: The only thing that I didn't see that had any damage after that typhoon were the native huts out in the boondocks, the small villages. They were all built with bamboo framing and dried palm fronds and they just seemed to sway with the wind and kind of ride back up.

Q: You mentioned the fact that some of them actually had, what, a dug out for animals or . . .

A: Well they built them about eight feet above the ground with the floor and then underneath the floor of the hut is where they keep their animals and so forth.

Q: So you climb up a ladder.

A: Climb up a ladder or a set of steps.

Q: What would be the reason for going up there, rodents or . . .

A: That's one of the reasons they build them off the ground like that, yes, rodents.

Q: We're back to about December 1946, you've been up there somewhere like sixteen months, probably in there two years. You came home, right?

A: Right.

Q: Want to tell us a little bit about that.

A: Well, flew back home on a C54. I was fortunate there, I was in a replacement depot and most of the personnel there from the replacement depot got to ride a plane back if one were available. I flew back on a C54 and we had to make three or four fuel stops in the twelve thousand miles to San Francisco. I think we had to take a train to Chicago and I was mustered out of the service in Chicago.

Q: That was Fort Sheridan?

A: Fort Sheridan, yes.

Q: Then you came back by train to Springfield.

A: Right.

Q: When you came back here I think you tried to pick up college where you left off.

A: Right, went back to Springfield Junior College, Springfield Junior College in Illinois I think it is now, for one year. Met my wife Audrey there. Went on from Springfield Junior College to the University of Illinois and of course I was running back to Springfield almost every weekend. I rode the old traction line then, it was still in business.

Q: What's the old traction line?

A: It was sort of an interurban and electrified railroad car.

Q: From the University of Illinois to Springfield?

A: From the University of Illinois to Springfield, right.

Q: And which line, did they have their own private tracks, or . . .

A: Yes, they had their own line. I think it was about five dollars a round trip or something like that. So, came in to see my future wife quite a few weekends, probably more than I should have, going to college.

Q: She was working for the Department of Internal Revenue?

A: She worked at the Department of Internal Revenue after she got out of Springfield Junior College, yes. And then when I was out of college I also worked for the Department of Internal Revenue.

End of Side One, Tape One

Q: George, you were talking about working for the Department of Internal Revenue and future wife and all this. Your father was still here in Springfield, South Grand and Dirksen with his golf range, right?

A: Right, he was still there. He and my mother operated it. They were here for like eight months out of the year and then they went to Florida for two or three months in the winter time.

Q: Then that period of time you went to work for the Department of . . .

A: Right, I went to work for the Department of Internal Revenue and my wife and I both worked there. In fact we were married while we were working for the Department of Internal Revenue, in I think 1952.

Q: You relocated something across from Penneys, didn't you, northwest, built a golf course?

A: In 1953, across from Penneys, or right where Penneys is located now, Penneys Service Station, we built a miniature golf course and an archery range. We operated that there for a number of years.

Q: Maybe four or five, something like that?

A: Yes, I'd say four or five years.

Q: Then your father was still operating something across the street.

A: Still operating across the street there. Then about 1956 we decided that the amusement and recreation business just might be a business we wanted to be in. I wasn't about to give my father competition in Springfield so we went to Bloomington, Illinois, leased some property there, and we put in what we called the Bloomington Golf Range. It was on Market Street, no, the main street, I don't remember what the name of it is, on the south side of Bloomington. We had a golf driving range, miniature golf, baseball batting, in that location and we were there about four years, I think. At the end of four years we still had the place in Springfield, the miniature golf and archery range, we had that leased out, not leased out, but we had someone running it for us actually. We sold that and we moved to Florida for several years, moved to Ft. Lauderdale. We'd been going down there for the winter, we liked it, and down there I got into the boat building business.

Q: Let me interrupt and say how did you get into the boat building business? (laughs)

A: I ask myself that question sometimes, it didn't turn out too well. It was fun and I learned quite a few things, I'm sure. I was in that for about two years down there. At that point we moved back to Springfield and then we put in a go-cart track adjacent to the golf range and so forth which my father was still running. We operated the go-cart track, the miniature golf, and the archery, and we had a few other little things, I think we had pony rides there for a couple of years. The liability of ponies was a little bad so we dispensed with those, although I liked the ponies. (laughs)

Q: Your mother and father retired about that time period, about 1966, didn't they?

A: About 1966 they retired and they've been spending their winters in Florida for about ten or fifteen years. They moved to Florida and, actually Dad didn't quit. There was a golf range maybe three or four blocks from where they retired to down there and he continued teaching golf down there. My wife and I took over the golf range and we operated there up until 1977. At that point we started developing the location that we moved to here.

Q: That area that you had before, that was leased land, right?

A: Yes, that was leased from Mr. Paul Wanless.

Q: How was he to deal with?

A: We leased land from him for quite some length of time. He was a gentleman. What can I say? We never had problem one.

Q: Very good. Now that basically takes us to the area we're talking about right now. We are sitting out here in one of your buildings this evening. How did you get here?

A: Well, we looked around for, we knew we were going to have to relocate in Springfield because Paul had advised us that this land, that in a year or a year and a half, something was going to happen. He'd already had a lot of people interested in it. He wanted to let us know in plenty of time so we could find a place to move to. We wanted to come to the south or the southwest side of Springfield. I think it's probably the best side of town for us to be on. We found this property here through Mr. Leonard Sapp. Originally what we did, we leased with an option to buy, twenty acres which was enough ground just to replace what we had there on South Grand and Dirksen, which we did. We kept South Grand and Dirksen open during the summer while we built and opened that up here. Then we moved the next year, actually closed down South Grand and Dirksen. We saw the potential for expansion to the waterslide area and this type thing which was just coming in and starting to go very strong. We made arrangements to buy all of 46 plus or minus acres including the twenty we had leased with an option. At that point, the next year we built the waterslide and followed that up with bumperboats and a dock to the lake, paddle boats on the lake, and a year or two after we built the Tradewinds facility which consists of a large picnic area so we can cater to large company picnics, and we built a good sized stage where we could have special events and so forth.

Q: Also I think maybe you were maybe subsidizing a little bit by actually going out and selling waterslides. Is this right?

A: Yes, that's true. After I bought mine, the manufacturer was Creative Recreations, at that time out of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, needed a representative. I was actually flying quite a bit at that time so I could get around from point to point pretty fast, so

I took on their representation for the Midwest. Actually they would refer any potential account to me and I would go out and sell the job. I worked on strictly a commission basis which worked well both ways.

Q: Back here, so you're doing this and you're selling waterslides and so forth, backtracking, you say the waterslides are beginning to get popular, you picked up the extra twenty acres. About 1981 you constructed the waterslide here and you put the bumperboats in about 1982 and the docks. One of the things we talked about earlier, too, was the fact that this area, your lake area which is twenty-five, thirty feet deep at the deepest point, is that right?

A: I've got a deep point in that lake that's sixty feet.

Q: Oh, wow, I didn't dive that.

A: Most of it is about thirty feet.

Q: But that is a borrow pit for the overpass.

A: Borrow pit for the overpass. There is an area of it, maybe one or two acres of it on the east side that we excavated for the dirt to build the waterslide hill. The pit was about half full of water when we did that so you only go down so far. It's about fifteen feet deep there.

Q: I see. I wondered where all that dirt came from. One of the things that would concern anybody from Walt Disney to you, anybody that's a businessman working with folks is your liability insurance rates. Now, we were talking about like you have to have about a million dollars worth of coverage, is that right? Something like that.

A: We carry a million. I'd recommend that for anyone in almost any type of business anymore, really. (laughs)

Q: And what, four or five years ago or something it was running you . . .

A: Oh, five years ago it was like four thousand. Today it's . . .

Q: That's with a hundred dollar deductible.

A: That's with a hundred dollar deductible. Today it's like forty to fifty thousand with five hundred dollar deductible.

Q: I've been out here a number of times and I can see that you folks have been very careful about what you tolerate and what you don't.

A: That's true.

Q: It's very hard for someone to come back to you and say you're really negligent about something. What kind of insurance claims have you been getting, have you been getting anything big or just. . . .

A: Never had anything real big. Basically any problem anyone has out here is basically their own fault. Running on slick concrete, or wet concrete that's slick; someone stopping, deliberately stopping in the middle of the waterslide, this type of thing. That's where any injuries we have occur actually. I guess we are not negligent when we do have an accident but it's our fault because it's on our property.

Q: It's like walking down the sidewalk, on a smooth sidewalk in front of somebody's house.

A: Right.

Q: Just to put it in here, so it's here, you mentioned California, Illinois and New York with it. Insurance claims for this sort of thing are the worst?

A: One of my insurance representatives told me that. I think California is first and New York is second and Illinois is fast catching up with New York if it hasn't caught up already.

Q: Let's go to the future here, we are in 1988 right now and you're obviously a family-oriented establishment, what are you going to add here?

A: We are a family-oriented establishment. In fact we like to have things to do for each member of the family. We want to be a family-oriented business. We have missed out, I think in the past, on the two to seven age group. At that age they are really too young for the waterslide and they can have problems there and some of the other things, so we're putting in a kiddy park this year to cover that age group so that we really do have something for the whole family.

Q: We can locate that.

A: It'll be on the west side of the waterslide area.

Q: It will be a fenced in area where Mom goes in and . . .

A: It will be totally fenced in. The kids will have to pay, parents we are going to let in free.

Q: And of course, some sort of restriction that they have to have a parent there at all times?

A: They won't have to have a parent at all times. We will have it supervised.

Q: So parents can go out and have a little fun as long as they come back.

A: Parents can go hit golf balls.

Q: As long as you have to take the kids home with you.

A: Parents can go hit golf balls or do anything they want to do. We'll watch the kids, we will have it supervised.

Q: What kind of market area are we talking about in terms of a circle?

A: Actually, our thinking really when we started this business was pretty limited. We were thinking Springfield but actually we draw as many people from twenty, twenty-five, thirty miles away from Springfield as we do from Springfield itself. We actually market in an area say within a fifty mile radius.

Q: We were talking about some of the families' duties and that was one other thing I wanted to get into. We talked about the liability insurance and also about the fact that you, really in a business like this, have to stick your neck out. We've got places here where people can drink beer and somebody may be taking drugs and slip in on you, how do you handle this kind of thing? It's a heavy load to put on somebody's shoulders.

A: It is heavy. We try to work with all ages, we want to be a family park. Where liquor is involved, this type of thing, we have concerts in the Tradewinds area which is the only area that we allow liquor in or serve liquor in and we do let under twenty-one year olds in to that, however, the ones who are of age are identified by a wrist band which is destroyed if they try to transfer it or something. Plus when we have those type of events we always have a goodly number of qualified security persons to watch this type of thing, so we really don't have too many problems. We have seen some problems as we go along and as we see a problem we think we have to solve it. We really don't have any problems there, I don't believe.

Q: I noticed tonight when I got ready to call to confirm that we were going to sit do this that I looked under, for lack of a better place, went to the Yellow Pages and looked under taverns and Tradewinds isn't listed, and I noticed that it is in small print in the business section. Is that intentional?

A: Yes.

Q: You're not, in other words, you're not. . .

A: No, we're not in the tavern business as such, we're in the entertainment business. That's our business. We're in the family entertainment business. That's the way we want to keep it. Family entertainment and sports oriented.

Q: Let talk about your sons and your wife's positions, what their duties are.

A: My wife, she pretty much takes care of the book work and does a lot of the supervisory work with the employees. We employ about seventy-five people in the summertime, most high school and college students. She handles a lot of the book work, the uniforms,

scheduling and this type of thing. It keeps her pretty well tied to the office.

Q: Does she enjoy it? (laughter) Be honest now.

A: She told me she's ready to retire (laughter), to be honest, but I don't think she really means it. She likes people.

Q: What about Doug and George?

A: Doug? You have to realize that this business if you're really working in it for about six to eight months is a seven day a week, an eighteen hour a day business. We all have to wear a lot of different hats. Doug handles all of the special events, he handles the sales, the group sales and really that should be a full time job, but he really doesn't do too much on those on Saturdays and Sundays. On Saturdays and Sundays he's repairing tractors and whatever has to be done. George pretty much sticks close to the waterslide area because that is the area where most of the—it is very critical, more critical than the other areas, let's say, from the liability stand point, things that can happen. It is the most labor intensive area because we do have a lot of people on the waterslide when people are sliding in order to provide safety. So it's necessary to have someone in a top management position there pretty much all of the time, so he stays pretty close to that area and he pretty much supervises the personnel on the total park.

Q: Is this basically a full time job for your entire family or do some of your sons have other jobs?

A: Yes, it's a full time job for the whole family.

Q: Do you think they enjoy it?

A: I think they do.

Q: Or they see it as a job?

A: Doug just went to Disney World for a personnel seminar down there, I was telling you, for about seven or ten days. He said he almost went to work down there, I almost lost him. (laughter) We try to stay up on things, we belong to the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, we go to the trade shows, that's every fall. A week's seminar, all types of operations, things change all the time. You have to really stay up on it.

Q: Talking about staying up, and so as we end this particular tape, what do you see? One year, two, three, four, five years down the drain here, or up the tube, I should say up in the air, make it positive.

A: Economically, I see the next year as being a good one. Our business is pretty dependent on the weather, I mean you can catch a good year or a bad year. I think the future looks good to me.

Q: One more thing and then we'll end on something other than this. This liability insurance that's apparently putting the burr in everybody's saddle, are there being moves to maybe keep that down or do something about it?

A: Some of the states, I understand, are putting some limitations on liability and what people can sue for. It seems to me that there should be a point where a person is responsible for their own actions. I think in a lot of instances anymore they don't think they are just because they're on your property or whatever. You're going to get sued and in a lot of states they are going to collect.

Q: To end on a real happy note, overall, obviously from this interview, that you are a very positive person and you've got some new kind of concepts out for younger kids out here. Sounds like they are very safe kinds of games and mazes and rides and things and so forth, and we talked about the ups and downs in this kind of business. But you put this in a plus and obviously you are a gentleman that enjoys working with people and I think that probably means a lot. If you were in here just for dollars, George, I don't think you'd have been here. (laughs)

A: No, not really. (laughs)

Q: Do you have anything else you'd like to add, or . . .

A: No, I think we have pretty well covered it, really.

Q: Like I say, if anything else comes up, you know this tape will be at Sangamon State and you are welcome to add to it later on. Thank you very much. (laughter)

End of Side Two, Tape One