

THE CHINA CONNECTION

Black River to Shanghai



James Bowen Noble



Harriet Noble and son John

The Falls History Project 2012-13
Black River Falls High School

INTRODUCTION TO THE 2012-13 Project

*"All historical experience must be imagined before it can be understood."
(Historian David Blight)*

For twelve years we have been documenting slices of life in our region with the goal of engaging students in researching history on a local level. Thirteen outstanding young men and women have served as interns for the project since 2002. The process is pretty basic: we narrow to one topic, research local archives, and conduct oral research if possible. Through 2013, we have interviewed 42 local residents and have made the transcripts of the interviews available to the public. Collectively these stories have helped us imagine Black River Falls at a different time and from different perspectives.

Our 2012-13 research once again takes us back to the early 20th Century and the unique story of two Black River families who lived and worked in China during the period of the Great War and beyond. James Bowen Noble, originally from Eau Claire, Wisconsin and D.W.A. Holder, a native of England, both worked in China and ultimately married sisters, Harriet and

Grace Thomas of rural Black River Falls. We were able to uncover a few resources through the Jackson County History Room at the BRF Public Library, but also had the good fortune to interview three children (now elders) with connections to the Noble and Holder families – Basil and Richard Holder and John Noble.

China in the 1920s conjured up an exotic image for most Americans. It was a “world away” and to travel and work there took courage and an adventurous spirit. The four people documented here certainly had those qualities. As always, these projects remind us that local stories often intersect with the grander narrative of history, and this year’s project is no exception. The revolutionary internal politics of 1920s China along with the Sino-Japanese tensions of the period were developments with far-reaching consequences. We can see that complex period in a more personal way, perhaps, through the eyes of James and Harriet Noble and D.W.A and Grace Holder.

Finally, as with many of our projects, we started with several questions: how was it that two sisters from a large farm family in Jackson County ended up living in China as young adults? How did that experience impact their lives and the lives of their families? How did a young man born in London, England end up settling in Black River Falls by way of China? What skills did these young people possess that carried them off on a somewhat exotic adventure? Their story reads a bit like a Pearl S. Buck novel.

Our 2012-13 intern was senior Sandy Lin, a Chinese-American with a special interest in this story. Her unique perspective added to the energy she brought to the process. As with all previous interns, Sandy distinguished herself throughout her school years as an excellent and hard-working student and she will be attending the University of Minnesota in the fall of 2013.

In the following pages we have included several things: first of all, the transcriptions of the interviews with the adult children of this year’s subjects are included. One note about how we conducted the interviews this year – Sandy and I worked together on the questions and you will notice that I took the lead with actually conducting the exchanges while she did all the transcribing that followed. That seemed to be the more practical approach this time around. We also were delighted to receive a copy of Grace (Thomas) Holder’s family memoir, a portion of which is included here owing to the detailed information concerning the China experience. Finally, I also transcribed a 2,900 word letter that Harriet (Thomas) Noble wrote from China for publication in the Jackson County Journal in January of 1924, and have included a portion of that letter here. Harriet worked for the local newspaper off and on for many years and ultimately became a long-time employee of Congressman Merlin Hull who established the Banner Journal in 1926. The letter illustrates her love of writing while providing a window into Harriet’s personality and her impressions of China in the 1920s.

As always, we are indebted to the three individuals that took the time to share their stories for this project. In addition, thanks to Mary Woods at the Jackson County History Room at the public library for her continued support of the project. Local history is a “bottom-up” enterprise and pulling together fragments of information into a coherent whole is quite often challenging. Mary has been there from the very start helping us gather the information.

DEDICATION OF THE 2013 PROJECT

It is with great sadness that we note the passing of John Henry Noble on 29 June 2013, prior to us putting the finishing touches on this year's

project. John worked with us on two occasions with the Falls History Project, first in 2007 when we explored the Korean War, and again this year. His 89 years of life were rich and interesting and we feel fortunate that he was willing to help current students explore the past. We dedicate this year's edition to his memory.



Paul S Rykken
Falls History Project Advisor
BRFHS July 2013

Basil Holder Interview 29 November 2012



Rykken: Could you state your name and your age for the record.

Basil: Basil Holder and my age is 79. That was an easy one.

Rykken: And where and when were you born?

Basil: I was born in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, April 4th, 1934. The important thing that happened that day was that the ice went out of the river.

Rykken: Along with your birth.

Basil: Well, that was very secondary. Cause there was a lot of money placed in those days on when the ice would go out, so somebody won and somebody lost.

Rykken: Ok, I get it. Could you tell us, just a couple other quick things, the life span of your father—the years? You don't have to remember.

Basil: I don't know.

Rykken: How about your mother?

Basil: And my mother either, I don't know.

Rykken: Because I think we had that from a prior interview but we can find that out if we have to.

Basil: I can find out and tell you, but I just, right now those dates don't come to mind.

Rykken: That's fine. We'll start out with your perspective and your knowledge of everything that you learned. What were the circumstances that prompted your parents to go to China?

Basil: What were the circumstances? My father was an Englishman, grew up in London. And in the Second World War, he was in the RAF and he got snow blind, from going up and down the western coast of England, and so he joined the navy. And when the war was over, he was in Shanghai. He hadn't cared much for London so he just stayed in China. He ran an import export firm for some Londoners. That was how Dad got to China. Mom got to China—her sister Harriet Noble's husband, Bo, had been hired by the Chinese government to help build bridges. He was a constructional engineer in the state of Illinois, and one of the best in the country at that particular art form, and so the government sent him over. They wanted to put roads and unite China. Sun Yat-sen was interested in this because China had finally been united, (and) warlords have been defeated, is my understanding. So Bo went over to build bridges. Harriet, being his wife, was with him. My mother went over to visit her sister Aunt Harriet, and met my dad in China. That's how they got together and got married.

Rykken: Two quick things on that. One is we haven't heard yet, the use of Bowe. Was that his...

Basil: That's John Noble's dad.

Rykken: That's James Bowen Noble.

Basil: James Bowen Noble, yeah. Yeah, Bo.

Rykken: Was he referred to as Bo?

Basil: Yeah, Bo or Naden.

Rykken: The other thing that we haven't quite nailed down yet is, maybe you know, maybe you don't, it's a small detail but, where your mother and father actually met in China. The reason for the question is did your father know James Bowen Noble before the sister connection occurred.

Basil: Oh no.

Rykken: So that's two separate men.

Basil: But, they probably met in China because they kind of ran with the same groups. In China, dad met Harriet and they were good friends. Harriet and Bowe and dad were good (friends.) That would be covered pretty well in that piece of propaganda.

Rykken: That helps a little bit. She went over obviously to visit her sister. In social gatherings of some kind, they connected. Let's back up a little bit too. Your father was a flyer in the war. How did he end up in China? I didn't quite get that connection.

Basil: He was mustered out of the RAF because like I said, they didn't have gun on planes. All they did was reconnaissance, and he was going up and down the west coast of England, and he got snow blind. I mean, just white. He still wanted to be part of the war effort so they would take him in the Navy, so he ended up going in the navy.

Rykken: He was in a port, and he saw China then first...

Basil: As a member of the royal navy. My understanding is when the war was over, he either stayed and went back and came back. He went to Shanghai to live. He hadn't cared for London. It's sort of ironic, London and Shanghai were the two biggest cities in the world, and he found peace in and joy in Black River Falls, which wasn't one of the biggest cities in the world. He just fell in love with this culture, small town.

Rykken: Dick made that point with us that he didn't really even want to go back to London, even to travel.

Basil: No, no.

Rykken: Interesting.

Basil: He had been around that world seven times according to mom. Around the world, seven times according to my mother, unbelievable. And no, he got here and he wanted to have a garden, that's it.

Rykken: He really turned that page kind of into a different life.

Basil: Coming over in the early 30s, you know what the economics were like. What could he do for a living? Well, he—I think it was Fuller Brush, I'm almost sure that he took a job, door-to-door salesman, or else it was Watkins's products. It was something like that. Everybody was kind of

interested in him because he had this funny kind of talk and he never swore, he's a very polite guy. And of course being married to Mama Thomas, there were 15 kids I think in that family, so he had a pretty good built in market to start with. And then, I guess it was Watkins's products. He was selling anyway, door-to-door salesmen, making some inroads to Mr. Sechler. Mr. Sechler had a big business down the store. Dad was evidently making some inroads into Mr. Sechler's business, so Mr. Sechler suggested that he'd go into insurance. And if he did, he'd buy a \$1,000 policy, and which was a huge policy. So my dad did some research in oldest company that was Mutual of New York, and so he went to work for Mutual of New York And Mr. Sechler changed his mind, he didn't buy that policy, but dad stayed in the business then.

Rykken: Is this the Sechler of Sechlerville?

Basil: Yeah, yeah.

Rykken: Is it the man or is it the son?

Basil: No, that would be his son I think. The Sechler House was the Price Mansion in the middle of the block, the only house on block where the Lutheran Church is now. In the middle of that block, was the Sechler House. It had 11, as I recall, 11 fireplaces—unbelievable.

Rykken: It was the Price Mansion?

Basil: Yeah, it was—second Price Mansion. There was a price house. It wasn't really a mansion over on Main Street, and then the Sechler House, we call it because it had been built by Mr. Price since his house.

Rykken: And the house that you lived in is currently there...

Basil: Mackenzie, yeah.

Rykken: ...but it's moved, is that correct?

Basil: No, no.

Rykken: Is that the original site of that house?

Basil: I think it is, yeah.

Rykken: That house was built, I think in 1868 or something.

Basil: Old timer too.

Rykken: It's an old timer.

Basil: The fellow who built that house won a wonderful contest laying the most telephone wire in a given year. The reward was—the three guys were the winners, nationally, got this telephone, got a telephone. And by next year that telephone was already obsolete, he couldn't use it anymore. We had one of those and one was in the Smithsonian and one is the Denver Museum. Those were those three telephones. And I don't know where ours is now.

Rykken: That'd be interesting to find.

Basil: Yeah, I don't know where it is.

Rykken: Let's stick with your father for a little bit.

Basil: Excuse me! I got way off the track there. When he—this was the point I was going to make and lost myself in my blabber. When New York Life came by, I mean when Mutual New York came by, and they found that here's a guy that wants to be an agent, can speak four dialects of Chinese, and is very conversant, he can read Chinese and blah blah blah, and so they wanted him in New York.

Rykken: He said no.

Basil: No. Chicago.

Rykken: Black River was the place.

Basil: This is it. And he didn't have a real big client.

Rykken: Did you ever talk to him about how he learned the language?

Basil: No. Dad very seldom talked about the war, never, or any, or growing up, hardly at all. I learned quite a bit from his brother-in-law, who visited here. His sister came up. Win and Harry came. Win was his sister and Frieda came over, and so I learned quite a bit about Dad's upbringing, but he talked very little about it. I do know I found various book and flashcards with

Chinese characters on one side, and so know he did those kinds of things. I am sure he had an instructor.

Rykken: But he was able to—he apparently handled language well.

Basil: Very well.

Rykken: To even learn that way.

Basil: And the thing is, he was working with people who came down the Yangtze with hides, furs, feathers, wooden boxes, wooden chests, and so forth. As a matter of fact, you might like to get a picture out of my brothers I think, has a wonderful chest that dad gave mom for a wedding present.

Rykken: We actually got that picture.

Basil: You got a picture of that? Oh good.

Rykken: Dick sent that with an email. They were able to do that. That's quite a deal.

Basil: I mean that's the kind of stuff that came down that he'd traded. So I mean he'd have to have a fairly good comprehension of, maybe not all aspects, of Chinese, to be involved in the business.

Rykken: When he was in—let's just stick with him for a minute. It doesn't sound to me like from what we learned that he talked much to you folks about China.

Basil: Never did.

Rykken: So it's kind of whatever you had been able to pull.

Basil: Yep.

Rykken: Was he someone that was a—I mean, how would you describe him to us? Was he an engaging personality, was he – ?

Basil: Well, it'd be hard for me to describe maybe because he was my dad.

Rykken: Right.

Basil: If you know what I mean.

Rykken: I understand that.

Basil: He was—I never heard the man swear. He did have, course an English accent, he never got rid of that. His sense of humor was wonderful, but mostly it was his manner. He was not standoffish a bit. He was very confident of himself and very... easy... Well, let me give you a couple of illustrations. One time, mom and dad, being close to church and close to schools, whenever somebody would come to speak or anything, or music, Verna Keefe, for example . . . Mom and dad loved to entertain, so they would always have coffee, tea, or whoever. And so here's this story that's told, handed down about this one fellow came up from La Crosse, and he had been in the service, and he just hated the English—just hated them. After he's down talking, he over at the house, he's really putting down the English and all these bad things to say. Having been stationed there, he knew all about them. Well, dad's coming out serving tea. The gentleman he asked, would you care for more tea? Gave him more tea, and came around and served him. I mean the guy did not know that dad was English, and everybody else did. And just the way dad handled that situation, this man was a guest in his house, and that was just his character. One time we had just gotten in town and it was winter, and he came out of the Banner Journal carrying a bunch of groceries and slipped on the ice and went down on his backside. The city crew was right there in the corner and they stopped work. Lutey Fronson, everybody stopped dead in their tracks. They were going to hear this Englishmen cuss. And my dad gets up and picks up his groceries and he said, "My word!" And that was it. That was how it went.

Rykken: Formal Englishmen.

Basil: Yup.

Rykken: Did he become an American Citizen?

Basil: Oh sure, very proud of that.

Rykken: Were you around when that happened?

Basil: I don't know when he became a citizen. I was born in 34, no, I was--he was a citizen before. I'm sure of that.

Rykken: Let's shift over a little bit to your mother.

Basil: Good, yeah.

Rykken: Obviously she must have had an adventurous spirit.

Basil: Well the family did more or less. The family did. She's from Spring Creek country, just out of town. She had sisters that had—two of them, that had stores in Walla Walla, Washington, and one—Aunty Penton. The Doctor Penton was the first doctor in Black River Falls, before the Krohns. The Krohns came second. Dr. Penton left Black River Falls, went out to south eastern Saskatchewan. As I understand it, the Canadian government was selling, selling land for half cent an acre, but if you bought an acre of land for half a penny, they threw in an acre for free. So, pretty good bargain. Being a doctor, he bought so much of south eastern Saskatchewan, Canada, just above North Dakota border, and plopped himself right down in the middle. As a doctor, he got a post office from the government, he was a post office. He had a general store, he sold implements -- more like a company store in the Appalachians exactly what it was. People came out, they didn't have to pay—he'd give them land, and put them to work and share new crops, and they had to buy all the equipment and everything from him. So that's how the Pentons did. That's what he did.

Rykken: Grace's sister was married to him?

Basil: That was Auntie Penton. Margaret Thomas—

Rykken: Was she older than Grace?

Basil: Yeah, my mother was the youngest.

Rykken: I guess even though it's sort of difficult to do this, could you describe your mother to us?

Basil: Oh god, they are both so—I mean it's so hard to describe either of them. Just beautiful, beautiful people. If I could have chosen parents, if I could have lined up parents to choose, I never could have done better. My dad at night, you know, we went from seventy-eights to thirty-three and thirds, forty-fives and all, and every night my dad would after supper, be out by the fireplace with a pipe. And there would be Brahms, Beethoven, Bach, you know, whoever. And I would come in and have to flip on a Franky Yankavich, never a word was said. I would leave and back would go Tchaikovsky something, long hair like that. I mean, but that was in my home. My dad—it was kind of interesting, my father. I was very interested in sports growing up, and my father evidently had been a Polo player, horseback rider, good golfer in China and Shanghai, but he was not interested in organized sports. He never saw a football game when I was in high school. When I got out of high school, I played La Crosse and ended up in Stout, and he finally came to a game in Stout. Louie Gardipee had him come up and watch a game. He saw one basketball game when I was in high school—not interested. But anything in Forensics or music, they were so supportive. I can remember one time, the choir did (?) for a contest piece, when it was over, that was Sunday afternoon they had that... Was that in your time or was it too early for you?

Rykken: I don't remember that.

Basil: Sunday afternoon, they use to have a choral or band or whatever, in the old gym, and afterwards the band mothers—music mothers would have coffee and cake and everybody. But my dad, they were going to put out the tables, stood up in the balcony and asked for that again.

Rykken: Sing it again.

Basil: Yeah, he said, "Verna, can we have that again?" It's an English song about going off to war and it just blew him away.

Rykken: Interesting.

Basil: Yeah, it was. That's where dad was. There nobody else in that place that would probably be interested in hearing that song again. Anything that must love instant replay on touchdown

passes you know so, that just where Dad's hidden heart was—in literature and music. They both were wonderful readers.

Rykken: When Grace went to China, and then they obviously met, they went back and forth a couple times.

Basil: Yeah, a few times, yeah.

Rykken: I guess we would be interested in that too if you have any insight on that. I know it would be in that memoir.

Basil: It'd be in there too.

Rykken: Did they—again, I don't know how much you talked to her about China. Did she talk about it very much?

Basil: No, they'd know, but I could tell you one really interesting story. I don't know which friend of theirs it was. When they came over for the last time, a very wealthy friend of theirs told mom and dad, they were having lunch in an American Hotel, five stories up as I recall. Most of Shanghai is just flat. There's a dragon, evidently lives up in the sky, so they don't build up, and they don't dig. So there you are. Shanghai is very big. But on the outskirts, they could see the bombing. Mom said it looked like they were dropping flour sacks. He told mom that he had his boys put some trunks on the boat, and dad said, "Well, wonderful, we'll get them back to you after the war." He said, "I may not be here—I won't be here after the war." That was his prediction. I'm telling you that because I think it was that man, that fellow, who was their very best friend. Who (?) and the things that you'll get pictures of if you come over, and we'll go out to Dick's if you can if you want. During the war 1941 maybe 42, there was a movie called, *This is the Army Mr. Jones*. It was a musical, and I wanted to see it so bad because Joe Lewis was in it. So I talked mom into coming down there. Erving Berlin, "*This is the Army Mr. Jones*," and in those days, with the war on, they would pass the hat for the war effort—war stamps, they were called war stamps. Buy war stamps, put them in a book. \$18.75 would fill your books, and then you would buy a war bond with that for \$25. You'd get that 10 years later. Before they pass the hat, or sold their war stamps, they would show a film strip of what was going on in the war, the war effort, exactly. This was the Japanese coming into Shanghai and a firing squad. Maybe Dick told you this.

Rykken: No.

Basil: And a firing squad. Well, that was it. My mother, I've never seen her cry, and she stood up crying, and left.

Rykken: It reminded her of...

Basil: Well, I went outside, and one of the men, who was massacred or shot, was their friend.

Rykken: Isn't that something?

Basil: Yeah.

Rykken: That would have been years later.

Basil: Sure, yeah, it would have been 10.

Rykken: 10 years later.

Basil: 10 or 12.

Rykken: Wow.

Basil: Anyway, that and I think was that man who said, "I don't think I'll be here." I think it was him, I don't know. I'm making that part up, but that's where my mind goes. At least it was a dear friend.

Rykken: Just one more thing concerning your mother and China. In your estimation did the China experience have a big effect on her?

Basil: Oh gosh.

Rykken: Did you ever feel like she missed it or regretted it?

Basil: I think she could have lived in Antarctica if she'd been with dad, or wherever.

Rykken: Or wherever.

Basil: Cause they had their books. They didn't miss China, they would miss their library, and they would miss their music. Mom would especially miss her friends. Mom was a reporter for La Crosse Tribune and those days, it was all by letter. They were involved, and mom was involved in an awful lot of things, but they enjoyed it, and they enjoyed these trips around the world. You'll see when you read her talking about Holder's Hong Kong and whatever.

Rykken: Just one more on that one if you could give a little bit of insight, their parents, your in-laws, raised these kids, apparently to think it was ok to really explore outside of Black River.

Basil: The Thomas's?

Rykken: Yeah. What is going on there because this is a farm family, it's rural.

Basil: My grandpa, my grandpa Thomas, he left Ireland [during] the potato famine, and married.

Rykken: I didn't mean to say your in-laws, I meant your grandparents.

Basil: Grandparents. They married, settle down out there. He had a lot of land out there. First one kind of out in the Spring Creek Country. They were a Catholic family, and I believe there were 15 kids. Not one of them grew up Catholic. I mean they started splitting pretty quickly from home stuff. And as I understand it, my grandfather had a hard time hearing. Now, I'm not sure he did because let a kid cuss, and they had their mouth washed out with soap. I think he just was able to block out 15 kids. They had a big farm. The Winnebagoes came out and helped harvest, but those kids were given their freedom to roam. Like I said, he came from Ireland, himself, so they were given their freedom, and they were given their freedom to think for themselves.

Rykken: They must have been very independent.

Basil: Definitely independent.

Rykken: That's sort of not a stereotype of people that live in a small town.

Basil: No, you're right, but they kind of had their own, with 15 kids, you got your own small town.

Rykken: You haven't traveled to China. Has anybody in your family traveled to China?

Basil: Don, this is interesting, and again, I wish I would have refreshed that -- you will get that out of the book, that Mom's memoir as sort kind of ironic. Don was in the navy, like dad. He ended up the war in Shanghai, like dad did. On shore, went on a short leave, or got to go on and he found the school that he gone to, the hospital he was born in. And I believe it was a lady named Mrs. Kale, I'm not sure, but he found some of mom's and dad's old friends. This was one lady that would have loved to gotten to England before the war got started, but didn't make it, and now of course couldn't make it because there wasn't enough money. She didn't have enough money. Don went back on shipboard, got enough money, sent her to England. Isn't that a wonderful story?

Rykken: Now, she's Chinese?

Basil: No, no—she's Mrs. (?) was part of the English.

Rykken: English?

Basil: Shanghai was divided into I think six parts, I'm not sure, it may have been less, but, the biggest part of the town being, of course, Chinese. There was a Portuguese section, there was an English section, and the Americans were in there. People who were traders, like the Portuguese and the English and I can't remember who else, Spanish, I don't know, but there was a section of town where they sort of worked. The government was represented by somebody in each section.

Rykken: One other question that I wanted to ask about your father that I slipped on. Did he come from a background of having money?

Basil: No. Well, I don't know, to be honest with you, I don't know.

Rykken: He was kind of self-made when he came here. Definitely.

Basil: His dad—they evidently had, I don't know where he got his money, my grandpa, but when my mother would go to visit England, they were the best friends. And he would go to various government buildings and everybody knew him. He and parliament—he was a pretty

well-known guy. He had some sort of thing, but we don't know, I don't know, dad didn't talk. Don't know about his—

Rykken: We wanted to also in this interview, I forgot to put these in here but, we wanted to pick up a little bit of the story of Yep Ging.

Basil: Yep Ging?

Rykken: Are you familiar with...? He's the Chinese laundrymen from Black River?

Basil: I remember "no tiki, no laundry." That's all I know about him.

Rykken: I thought you told my one time that you remembered him.

Basil: I remember him, but I was just a little boy. And he had—

Rykken: Where was the laundry located?

Basil: Go down Main Street, turn to Cozy Corner, there's an alley, and that first building and I think they are selling sports equipment right now. But that was his laundry, hand laundry right there. I didn't know him.

Rykken: You didn't know him?

Basil: No, but I can remember that because it was mom's favorite things. When we would ask for something, and we wouldn't have it, 'Can I have some more potatoes and gravy? We're out.' And then mother would come from the side of the room 'no tiki, no laundry.' That was one of her favorite expressions.

Rykken: So we're going to have to explore that one a little bit. We were trying to find out how he got here.

Basil: I would guess, I don't know I would almost, I would hazard a guess it was after construction job. I would look at when the Northwestern railroad finished their last job in Wisconsin and how far away it was. Probably find out it was Tomah or something. Nine out of ten, laundry or the restaurant business. Many went into the restaurant business, but almost all from the railroad activity.

Rykken: Who did we talk to that told us about that? Was it John?

Sandy: I think so.

Basil: John would know.

Rykken: John seemed to know something about him, talked about the fine quality of his work.

Basil: I'm sure, I'm sure. Those were the days of artisans, whether it would be woodworking or laying—putting pipes in the basement. And he was an artisan as I understand it. And the reason why that was so important is because in those days, all the ladies, and you've heard the term, you haven't—lap-work or hand-work. After supper, the women would sit and talk and looking at each other— I'm looking at you know, but in my lap, my fingers are just going like this, and I'm crocheting. And here comes this beautiful lace work that today you'd kill for, but it was just sewed on a pillow-case or whatever. The really nice stuff might go on a scarf, and that's what he was known for protecting and taking such a pride. He saw all the artistry in it. I've heard that too.

Rykken: Sandy do you have anything that you would want to ask or add?

Sandy: I know you said your parents didn't talk about, well--your dad didn't really want to talk about China, did you know if anybody wanted to go back at all or mentioned anything about that?

Basil: No, that's a good question, and I think probably that we all would have liked to, but understand what happens is that they left, and the Second World War was on its way. We were 10 years later from getting into it from 31 to 41, and then after the war, with Mao Zedong, and Chiang Kai-shek that head on collision. And there wasn't a China to go back to. It was a communist China and you couldn't visit, so we kind of grew up without an opportunity. If we would have wanted to go back, it wasn't an option.

Rykken: That's the interesting thing you know. It would be interesting to get your parent's reaction to what's going on today.

Basil: Yeah..

Rykken: Because now the traveling and exchanges is much easier. Certainly than it was and the economies have changed and so forth.

Sandy: I think it would be really cool to go back to the places they've been to see what it is like now.

Rykken: It really would.

Basil: It would be like me crossing the bridge. What it is like now is nothing like it was. For you for that matter even. Or out by the golf course. When I see pictures of Beijing or Shanghai, my dad always appreciated communism. He said there is something to that government, form of government, he said they got rid of the flies in Shanghai. He thought that was pretty--he didn't know anybody could do that. But, when you look at what they've done, it's just unbelievable. The price that a lot of people have paid for, and don't you think from a historical point of view it's going to be very interesting this next decade what is going on over there because there is lot of people now. There's an introduction of computers and phones, and word gets around.

Sandy: It's really growing because the currency-- if you exchange a dollar, there's like six dollars and twenty something. I remember when I went back in fifth and sixth grade it was eight dollars when you exchange. The economy is really growing.

Basil: I'm not sure, but what they aren't going to have an awful bubble too though, in China. Which I hope doesn't happen till we dig out of our predicament . . . So many people now aspiring for reasonable wages and so forth. If they get a reasonable wage, all of this business we're having done over there, we might as well as have it done here and get rid of the import and all of that. Course, if things go back in China as far as creating with us, they only got about 69 billion people of their own. It would be like Henry Ford. If they start making money, then internally, they can go again (inaudible) a wonderful place for them to grow internally. Right now they have worked so much on external trade, but, internally they'll just go so well. There are so many people.

Rykken: Just a couple more things about Grace--or a want to drift a little bit into Harriet too. Were Grace and Harriet--would you describe them as friends?

Basil: Just real close.

Rykken: Harriet was obviously involved with the newspaper. One of the things we are going to do in the project, I don't know if you've seen it or not. When she was in China, she wrote back to the Banner Journal and there were letters from the Far East, or something called the—and she wrote long letters, reprinted in the paper and we've got a couple of them. When we get those figured out, I'll make sure to get you a copy. They're pretty interesting. She writes in a quaint way. You know...

Basil: Both mom and Aunt Harriet they were living high off the hog over there. They were in high society as it were, which you know, far cry from Spring Creek, but glad to get back to Spring Creek. They did help a lot, I know that their benevolent activity was helping the poor, in Shanghai and making people aware of this. That's why it was so interesting to me. Change the subject a little bit, but when news came up about Charlie Low Cloud, and heard the guy said that he didn't even get a paycheck well, it wasn't because he wasn't respected or anything like that, so that was so crazy. Her respect for him was just so astounding. That had a history of...

Rykken: That had gone back to the earlier time. Anyway, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Basil: Let me think.

Rykken: We kind of ran our questions through. If there is anything you feel like that you missed, saying that you'd like to say?

Basil: No, if I've answered those anywhere near sensibly, I'll count it as being good.

Sandy: I have two more questions.

Rykken: She's got a couple more.

Sandy: For the language aspect, you said your dad knew a whole bunch of dialects. Have you ever heard him speak any of the dialects?

Basil: Never, no. As a matter of fact, that brings up an interesting thing. One time, in his case, we call it “dad’s case” in the corner, I was in there rummaging around and I ran into these flashcards with the Chinese character on one side and English on the other. And I was kind of going through those, and I asked dad if he’d help me. He said no. He said “You don’t want to learn Chinese.” He said “You’ll go crazy.” And one time, there’s another thing about dad that kind of explains him. In this chest that Dick has, you have a picture of, one time we were looking through there; I was looking for a fish lure. Now, it wouldn’t be in that chest, but I had it open and I’m looking through stuff in there and I came (across) a wonderful medal that was presented to dad, by the Queen. I didn’t know that at the time. I just knew it was a wonderful gold medal.

Rykken: What was it for?

Basil: He sank a submarine, which was unheard of. He actually sank one. So he gets this. He came up and he came in the room and “What’s this?” I said “Dad, what’s this?” ‘Oh it’s nothing.’ He threw it back, kept on going and looking. ‘What are you looking for?’ he said. “I’m looking for this bass master lure.” He said, ‘It’s going to be in here!’ We close the door, and then I asked mother what it was and she explained to me what it was. And then I did find a picture of him and his crew standing on the hall of the submarine that was washed up on the beach. But like I say—or U-Boat, as it was called back in those days, but that was an unheard of event.

Rykken: Do you have that picture?

Basil: I wonder. It’s somewhere. We did kind of a wonderful thing—Dick, Don, and I, I think. If we had all to do over again, I don’t think we would. When dad passed away, then mom passed away, we had all of this stuff from China, I mean wonderful things. I mean there were some other things. I wanted the kitchen table and things like that. And we took a few things, very few things, and then we put the other things in a sale. We had a sale, auction or whatever. Yeah, auction. We told nobody the value of these things, not even the auctioneer. We wanted people to get this, that, or other things because of mom and dad, not because of what they are. Well, Tom and Sally Lister got these things called black and whites; they are stitcheries. And they are outlawed now. You can’t make them anymore because the people who made them went blind. But they found the value of those, and brought them back. They said ‘We can’t have these.’ We said “No, we want you to have them.”

Rykken: So that was interesting.

Basil: We took them back.

Rykken: So they were obviously, from what we’ve gathered from talking to three people, these people were very much community people, very community minded. They brought a lot back to Black River, in terms of who they were and just their personalities.

Basil: But it was never—I think dad and mom, they had real good friends, were Duane and Lavina. Would take them out to supper fairly often, and it was just because of who they were. I think this is the most important thing to think about. With mom and dad, it had nothing to do with China and around the world, it had to do with who they were as people, and the interest they had in the people that were here. Dad’s interest in gardening and oh the fun they made of it. They’ve three kernels to a hill or whatever it was, he would actually count. I mean, he did everything by the book.

Rykken: He was a passionate gardener.

Basil: He was an odd man I think.

Rykken: How about, on that note, can you describe James Bowen Noble to us at all?

Basil: No, I can tell you one thing, one story about him. One time, it was a day before peasant season opened, and their house right on the corner on 10th Street there, and then across was the Spaulding House that burnt down, but that was the end of town. There wasn’t any-- beyond there that we hunted. And I’m out hunting rabbits with a Single Shot 22; I’m out hunting rabbits, and in front of me, on the trail, jumps a pheasant. Pheasant season opens tomorrow, I didn’t shoot it. Walking along out in front of me, jumps another pheasant, or the same one. I didn’t shoot it, but I said, don’t do it again. It did it again. It did it again. “Pow!” I shot the pheasant, a

day early. Well, go to Aunt Harriet's house, last house in town. I'm sitting on the back porch. Between there and my house, there's five blocks. Al Young, the policemen live on this one. He knows all the rules. I'm sitting on this back porch with my pheasant hidden under the steps wonder how I was—I wanted to get home and get it dressed. You know, I didn't want to leave it all day. So the door opens and here comes Naden, here comes Bo. He was still in his nightgown. It must have been three in the afternoon. He had a printers cap on, he had his sleeves rolled up with a rubber band, and the door opened. I hadn't seen him, I don't know if I have ever seen him in my life, and the door opened and his voice "Basil." I looked up and he said, "Bring your bird in here." So I bring in my peasant. Bo takes some wax paper we called it in those days, and he put the peasant in this paper bag, in this wax paper. He brought out some carrots. (He) cut the tops off the carrots, put the tops—"Hold it here." Now I've got this pheasant and the carrots coming out of the paper bag. He said, "Now I think you can make it past Al Young's house." He'd been in Illinois, how did he know all these things? That's why I thought he must be a genius.

Rykken: What year would that have been?

Basil: That would have been 19—I should be able to tell you that. Probably 1947, 46 . . . 47 . .

Rykken: That's a small town story.

Basil: That is. You can tell it in clubs today and they'd laugh because they'd know Al Young and everybody else.

Rykken: What we've got about him, I guess the word would be eccentric, that's come across.

Basil: There can't be any question about that.

Rykken: The part that I'm not really clear on, but he didn't live in Black River?

Basil: No, he stayed in Springfield, Illinois.

Rykken: So he came back and forth?

Basil: Once in a while. I don't think Aunt Harriet ever went down there. John and Dave, they stayed with their dad when they went to college. No, I'm not sure of that, but they went to college in Illinois at least. So they were close, they just—he was just—I remember he came up, he was going to fix the furnace. It gets cold. It's a big house. So coming up out of the furnace, was this thing. It was about this big around-- huge! That was a register-- theoretically that was going to heat the upstairs! Well, it didn't even come close. Right at the top of the stairs was John's room, the one you interviewed. He had a 22 in his room, which you could shoot the water tower. Listen, ting! It was fun. That was how I learned about how fast time traveled. I mean, how sound traveled. He would have a glass of water next to the bed and the next morning it would be frozen over. But his experiment didn't work. You could of look at his furnace that he had hooked up. It looked like it might have been you know, underground somewhere. [Not audible] working on the atomic bomb project. It was unbelievable. That was his furnace and that was his take care a winner. Water frozen in a glass next to that bed.

Rykken: So he was a tinkerer as well.

Basil: Greatest imagination.

Rykken: Anything else Sandy?

Sandy: I had one last question. With the amount of time your parents stayed in China and other parts of your family. Do you think any of the culture there that they got in touch with, did it have any effect on your family?

Basil: Yeah. Not—boy that's another really good question. The part of the culture I think, that effected them mostly was they were laid back. They were not, I mean the huge things that would really upset somebody like—even today, we get upset right-left, you know, Republican, Democrat, whatever, I mean we just—. Mom and dad I think were able, I never saw them medi—well, I don't know. Dad was meditating wasn't he? Listening to that music after supper. He did meditate, but many times I saw mom and dad sit quietly and go inside you know. They weren't sleeping, so I think they did pick up the ability to meditate, to think quietly, and internalize things. I never saw my dad get upset about-- he had real attitudes about things,

feelings about things, but I never saw him get really upset about the fact that the mail was an hour late or something. You know the thump that would disturb the air out of the tire. I mean mostly-- I remember one night I went to bed, it's one of my mother's favorite stories. In the kitchen, this different, I'm in the kitchen and dad's in there cooking, he loved to cook, and all of a sudden, whop whop whop, Joan, Dick's wife was there. That night Dick and I, whop whop whop whop, we heard this in the kitchen, and here my dad shows up in the door. He's got on his pajamas and his robe, and he's holding his slipper, and he makes the announcement 'Black Ant.' "What did you do dad?" 'I slew the (?).' He killed an ant with slipper. If you hear what was going on in there, you'd think that we'd been invaded. One night-- this was the other story, one night that he was having a little coffee or something, put something in it that he got, and maybe taken some medicine or whatever, but anyway, by mistake he took some rat poison. Not a lot but he had taken rat poison, and oh my gosh, this is something. I went up to bed and dad didn't know if he was going to croak or not, and I went up to bed. I didn't start school yet, or else I just started kindergarten or whatever, but I yelled over the railing "Mom, mom" and she came to the door and says 'In the morning we'll know whether dad is a mouse or a man.' That piece of humor got my dad laughing and mom and so that averted that crisis, but it's just the things that happened with those two people that I think have an Oriental flavor to it, in that they took things—it wasn't that they didn't have opinions, it was the fact that they could change what they could and could live with what they couldn't change, and try to influence what they could. But they are ever eastern kind of a—I would say—

Rykken: Not Italian.

Basil: No, not Italian. Not English.

Rykken: Well, some of that would smack a little bit of Englishmen too.

Basil: They are reserved. They want to get to the bottom of this, and the Chinese just want to be satisfied with it. That's what I've understood mostly about. I'm very much into yoga myself, I love it. It's really just if you can learn to breathe, it's a beautiful to be able to do and I saw mom and dad do that so to answer your question, I think they absorbed that part of the culture. And dad had an awful lot of respect for the people he dealt with, who came from the interior down the Yangtze on a boat with furs and feathers. I mean he just had so much respect for the Chinese that lived in London. And I don't know if he knew many from-- across China goes the (?) Mountains. You know 25th parallel I guess it is and the Chinese north of that are mostly grain-fed. They look like our American Indians, they probably should. [Not audible] our Indians should look like them. And then south being rice and water buffalo and that environment and that live, and that's who we kind of thought Chinese were but Chinese were really in an amalgamation. Just like what we learned in the last election, the Americas fighting about the mix of colors.

Rykken: Yes, that's the way the world is right now.

Basil: I'll knock this off cause I'm just talking.

Rykken: No, we're good. I think we've got quite a bit.

Basil: Anything you could use?

Rykken: Yes, for sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

John Noble Interview 8 November 2012



Rykken: Could you state your name and your age?

John: John Noble and I'm 88.

Rykken: We'll just start right off with, and we have a set a questions but it could branch into many different directions here but...Where and when were your born?

John: I was born in Shanghai, China, December 25, 1923.

Rykken: Christmas Day.

John: Christmas day about noon too.

Rykken: That's great.

John: Course that was Chinatown.

Rykken: The question that we are trying to get at this story is: what were the circumstances that prompted your parents to be in China?

John: My father was working in China. He was an architect and structural engineer by trade. He was an MIT graduate, course earlier. His first wife died in childbirth about 1915 or so, and then he married my mother who was his first wife's sister. They went to China... He'd been there I believe for, five years after his first wife's death.

Rykken: What was his first wife's name?

John: Sadie Thomas.

Rykken: Didn't the Thomas family have... A number of girls?

John: There were 13 of them... Dr. Holder's mother (Richard) was his sister.

Rykken: So he'd been married to her and how long had they been married?

John: I don't know how long they were married. I would gather five years or so before the second child she . . . died four-five days after the birth. That was quite common back at that time.

Rykken: What about the first child?

John: First child, my brother Jim, was actually a half-brother, but a half cousin, so I assume the same gene pool.

Rykken: Interesting.

John: He would have been the best one to interview, but he passed away a few years ago. He went to 8th grade in China, as far as 8th grade. He'd been there with his, I don't know how far, the whole time, because when he came back here, he entered his freshman year of high school

in Black River.

Rykken: Let me go back just a little bit to your dad. Where was he born?

John: He was born in Eau Claire, WI.

Rykken: And his name was James Bowen?

John: That's correct. His father was a physician up there and also a state senator.

Rykken: Wow, interesting.

Rykken: And that would have been pre-nineteen hundred.

John: Yes, he was born 1880, my father was.

Rykken: Right, so I wonder when his father was in government?

John: Grandfather, state senator of Wisconsin. I don't know what the years were, that's way back. Course he died way before I was born.

Rykken: Sure. Your father had the first marriage and his wife died, and was that point in which he went to china?

John: They were living in Chicago at that time.

Rykken: When she died, did that have anything to do with his decision to go to China?

John: I don't know. It was kind of wanderlust I guess.

Rykken: So then he got involved with an architectural firm, or had he already been working with that?

John: He was working with some firm in China at the time and I believe the second time when he went back he was working independently but doing something with that structural engineer type thing.

Rykken: And so was this a company in the United States that sent him over there or they had some kind of...

John: I assume so. I believe that was an American company.

Rykken: The first time he went over there would have been the late teens?

John: Probably about 1916 I would gather, somewhere around in there.

Rykken: And so then off and on for 12 or 13 years?

John: Then he came back. He married my mother in 1919. Probably early in the year, they went back to China. My sister was born in China.

Rykken: Your mother's name was Harriet.

John: Harriet Thomas

Rykken: So it was her older sister that had been his original wife?

John: Yes, she must have been eight or ten years older than my mother.

Rykken: I don't mean to pry too much on this, but was he in Black River when he met her?

John: I don't know what he was doing when he married his first wife or where he was living. I believe mostly Chicago. I don't know where he encountered her.

Rykken: What brought him—I guess that was my question, what brought him to Black River?

John: I don't know. Apparently, one or the other. The second time was my mother. I don't know where he met Sadie.

Rykken: But he was from Eau Claire?

John: He lived in Eau Claire. He graduated from MIT quite early though. That was the early 1900s. I don't know how he ever met Sadie. She was working in Madison for some Levis company or something like that. Levis Creek bunch was tied in that way.

Rykken: That's the connection. He obviously met this Thomas girl and then he got to know the family and so on and so forth.

John: That's right.

Rykken: Then they got married in 1919?

John: That was my mother. That was the second marriage of course.

Rykken: Then he had then already been in China?

John: He had been in China before that time.

Rykken: So Harriet was going with him back to China basically.

John: She did in 1919. So it must have been right after they were married.

Rykken: Did he have any involvement in World War 1?

John: No he had...it was kind of interesting. He tried to volunteer for the... I was listening to his heart one time. I said you had quite a heart murmur. He said that kept him out of the Spanish American War. He went down to volunteer. That kept him out of that and he went back for World War 1. They rejected him because of his heart murmur and he lived to be 80. To the best of my knowledge he had no problem with his heart at that time.

Rykken: He had a medical reason?

John: That was the reason.

Rykken: So the company who he was working for had some connection into China.

John: They were doing something with construction in China.

Rykken: So then they sent him to Shanghai. Was he with a lot of other Americans from that company?

John: I don't know who he lived with. There was a settlement they were in. Course it was mostly British and Americans, and I don't know what else. I was born in the French Concession, where ever that is, or was.

Rykken: We're back at 1919. Were they there all the time from 1919 to when you were born?

John: No, they came back because my brother was born in 1922, May of 1922. They were back in the U.S at that time. He was born in Sparta. A cousin of my mother's was a physician down in Sparta at that time was the reason he was in Sparta. I don't know if they even had a hospital here in Black River I don't believe in.

Rykken: So they were somewhat back and forth?

John: That was the only time they came back, until they came back in 1927.

Rykken: Ok, 1927. Can you kind of give us a description of your father? What kind of man was he?

John: He had a rather slight build, about my height -- maybe a little shorter an inch or two. I don't know. He always wore a straw hat -- one of raw Panama type hats -- almost always. He was a great reader. He went down to the library and got all of the National Geographics. He was binge reading them -- read them off the page as far back they had in the library, and then subscribed to them. That type of thing.

Rykken: Did he travel to other parts of the world?

John: Not too much. When we came back to Black River, we were at a course of the beginning of the Depression. In 1927, when I left China, the recession hit overseas before it hit here in the United States. Then of course the Great Depression started and that's probably why he came back, or they came back at that point. Then he was around in Black River for about a year or so, and then had a job in Springfield, Illinois as a state architect. He stayed there till he retired, but my mother did not want to move to Illinois so we stayed here in Black River. I was fatherless for a while.

Rykken: Was he...I guess I want to stay with him for a little bit. Did he speak Chinese?

John: Pigeon English, I'd imagine, whatever it took. He must have had quite a vocabulary because he was there quite a few years.

Rykken: When you came home, did he talk much about China?

John: Some, but not a great deal.

Rykken: I guess I was curious too; did you go back to China?

John: We went back in 1997 on our 50th wedding anniversary for a trip. (We) stopped at Beijing, and then they flew us over to Xi An, and then Chongqing. That has a new name now. I don't know what it is, you probably know. It used to be Chongqing. Then (we) took the boat down through the three gorges. Then from there (we) flew down below there and got out there someplace and flew over to Hong Kong. But that trip, I regret not having Shang-hai on the itinerary, but it didn't work out.

Rykken: How did that feel for you to be back? I know that you had no memory of it really.

John: No, I wouldn't at my age.

Rykken: But it must have been kind of an interesting feeling to have been there.

John: Oh it was. It was getting very well developed at that time. They were remodeling the airport. Huge airport actually, in Beijing. One thing that was impressive about it was the bicycles going to work. I was up pretty early about 6 o'clock every morning. (There were) thousands of bicycles. They had three or four television sets, two or three at least on the back of their bikes going. I don't know what they did with them. I think they went shopping and then went home. There was a little bridge by the hotel and I was watching by the hotel window. A lot of them had to stop and push their bike up because of heavy load they had. I imagined the same thing occurred at night, I'm not sure. Really mobile, expect Chongqing and that had no bicycles. It's all on a big steep hill.

Rykken: I guess I want to swing it around a little bit to your mother because that's another whole story itself. One of the things that Sandy and I have looked at was at least one of the letters that she wrote back, that were in the paper. We have one of those, especially that's rather lengthy. From the tone of the letter, she seemed like she would really, you know, enjoy being in China. That it was kind of a... you know there were a lot of experiences that she was trying to relay back to the people here.

John: I think it was kind of a laid back experience while she was there, course they had help. Children were probably raised by the ah-ma we had at the time.

Rykken: What was the word that you said?

John: Ah-ma. I think that's a generic term for the nurse or whatever, homemaker. What is it? Do you know?

Sandy: Ah-ma? I think that's kind of like a grandma.

Rykken: Like a grandma.

John: Maybe back in Shanghai, but whatever.

Rykken: Yeah. So this was help?

John: She had to help Harriet. There was a lot of help all over . . .

Rykken: And how many of you were there, siblings? You and?

John: Patricia was born there and I was born there, and then they were back in United States in 22 sometime. I don't know the time frame there. And when we were back my younger sister was born in 1926 in China.

Rykken: Did any of the siblings, you or your sister, ever spend more... Did anybody go back to China more than that after?

John: No.

Rykken: Sort of an experience that was singular to that time. So Harriet ended up being there simply because she married James and they went back to China.

John: I think so.

Rykken: And they went back to China.

John: And then Grace Holder, not Grace Thomas came to visit her and that's where she met her husband. Donald William Alfred, or "Newt" as he was known here in Black River.

Rykken: Yes, that's the whole other side of that. We're going to interview Richard and Basil. We'll get those two interviews.

John: They would know more of that. They came back from China considerably later than we did. We came back October 27, 1927. I believe they came back and visited, if my memory is right, around 1930 or so, and then I think they went back because Don Holder, the oldest was born in China. Then Richard, Dr. Holder, was born in Sparta.

Rykken: I guess one of the things I want to kind of back up. So your father and mother are in China, and then Grace, did she just come on her own to visit her sister?

John: She took a trip around the world.

Rykken: These people must have had an adventurous spirit to be doing some of this stuff.

John: Grace must have had. She traveled a lot. I don't know what other stops she made. She did stop in Shanghai where she met her husband.

Rykken: I'm curious about...yeah, that's the other thing I couldn't piece together when I was looking at the information. When Grace went over there, did your father and D.W.A. Holder know each other?

John: No, no, I'm sure they didn't. Maybe he did. I don't know how else Grace would be introduced to him.

Rykken: I was trying to kind of figure that out. Maybe we'll piece that together.

John: He was an import-export, something or another. Leather expert among other things.

Rykken: I was wondering if they would have been, maybe living in the same part of Shanghai.

John: They probably were. I think it was the British section where they were living.

Rykken: So these two men ultimately end up being married to sisters,

John: That's right.

Rykken: And that kind of draws the group together. Now I want to ask about... a little bit, I'll come back to Harriet in a minute, but I wanted to ask something about 1927. You mentioned earlier that this was the beginning of a recession that would have been more global.

John: It was world-wide. The Great Depression was world-wide. It started out in other countries before it hit here. They had it earlier time while they were force. They were supposed to be, I think it was Shanghai, Scheck was moving and then they gave them the notice to be out of the country, they could only take one suitcase; had to get out of within "x numbers of days" within a week or something. But then the gun bolts came up the Yangzi River and put that to stop.

Rykken: That's kind of what I wanted to get at.

John: It wasn't the box about it, but it was a similar type thing.

Rykken: There was some concern for foreign people that were there.

John: They were given notice that they had to leave, but that didn't pan out of course.

Rykken: That's what I wanted to ask a little about. I know a little bit of the Chinese History there that there was a Civil War that started to brew about the late 20s.

John: The Civil War was really starting out in that time.

Rykken: Is that what prompt them to leave?

John: No. That one threat, but I'm not sure the year of that, but I remember my mother telling me about all that and all. She said that they were all set to leave and they were wondering what they were packing in one bag and stuff. Then the British shops were somewhere in that area and came up the river and threatened (them).

Rykken: I wonder if that was the government telling them to leave for their own safety.

John: No, I don't know. I think they just reversed the decision as I understand. It wasn't that of [not audible] or whatever but...

Rykken: Something like that. We'll dig into that a little bit too because I think that will be kind of interesting.

John: You might run into the timeframe of that one.

Rykken: Harriet, the other thing I just--kind of play out her story a little bit. She ultimately ended up working for Merlin Hull at the paper.

John: Yes, I think she was working before she went to China.

Rykken: She was? Okay. And she was working at the newspaper office?

John: She was in Madison for a while. She taught school for a while. Almost everybody that graduated from high school ended up being a teacher for a while.

Rykken: For a while.

John: It seems like.

Rykken: In less time of training I know that; six weeks or something. Do you know how she ended up working for Merlin Hull? Was that just...?

John: No I don't. I don't know how she started.

Rykken: I was down in Jim Ritland's office, and he was telling me that that was Merlin Hull's office at one time. That was where the Paper had been? I don't know. He was giving me kind of a tour of that building there that he's in.

John: The one that's on Main Street?

Rykken: Yeah.

John: The antique shop in the basement?

Rykken: I can't remember if it's that building or a different building. Yeah, I guess it is that building. It is that building.

John: That was the Banner Journal, at least when I in high school. I use go down there to work sometimes. They'd call the school and let me out to go down [not audible] on the press when they had the extra seat to put in.

Rykken: When they came back here, you said that your mother and you stayed here, and your father was working in Illinois.

John: He went to Springfield.

Rykken: Was that for a long period of time?

John: I would say from about maybe 1929 till he retired. I believe about 1948. So he was there quite a while.

Rykken: Once Harriet had come back from China, which was in 27, then did she ever go back there again?

John: To China? No, no.

Rykken: She never did. Did she ever talk about it much, that she wanted to?

John: She didn't mention it to me.

Rykken: It wasn't something where she had a burning desire to go back to China?

John: No, I don't think so.

Rykken: I want to ask you one other question about when you were—this would have been when you were a young boy probably, in Black River. There was a Chinese person that worked in Black River.

John: Yep Ging.

Rykken: Yep ging. What did he do and what's your memory of him?

John: He was a laundry. He had "Yep ging's Chinese Laundry." It was kind of interesting because Tommy Hagen and I were down there one time . . . We went down and climbed up on something and were looking in the window where Yep ging was working on it. He did a beautiful job. He had these shirts that had big starch collars and all. The thing that kind of impressed me—throw a small dose of water and sprayed a little bit about as he's ironing. And he had the old gas stove sitting there with the irons. You know where you click one on and you let it heat and then you drop it, the little button, and you can click the other one. Ironing with that—and just was beautiful work, but a little questionable on a couple of the steps. I was always trying to find his grave out on Country Trunk C. They had that cemetery. Are you familiar with that there? It was kind of a powdered field I guess?

Rykken: The Pauper's Cemetery?

John: I went out to find...could find his grave, but all they have are numbers, and I don't know his numbers.

Rykken: Why would he have been buried there?

John: I don't know. I suppose that the town or country, whatever they were doing at that time, buried him.

Rykken: I don't expect you that you'll have all sorts of info on him, but I'm curious to how he ended up in Black River.

John: I don't know. He was the only Oriental in Black River at that time, I think.

Rykken: Somebody told me one time that his parents or his father had come to the United States to work on the railroad—the building of the railroad.

John: That may well be.

Rykken: Which a lot of Chinese people did.

John: Very likely.

Rykken: I'm just wondering how he kind of gravitated to this...

John: I don't know how he got to Black River, but as I said, he ran a nice laundry. All hand-hard work as far as I...

Rykken: In your recollection of him, did he speak English and did he...?

John: No, I did never talk with him.

Rykken: But he was just around. I guess we'll find that out. I think Basil had some experiences with him.

John: He may have something more on him. There are probably some light ups about...

Rykken: Do you remember where his laundry mat actually was?

John: Next door [not audible] tailor right down there. It was right there, right below where the old clinic was, or where the bank is now -- Savings and Loans in there now.

Rykken: You know at the time in history, it was common for Chinese people to be involved in laundry. Do you why that is?

Sandy: I'm not sure. Maybe it's something possibly back then you know the U.S. developed faster maybe, they had laundry machines. Some reason, they had to hand-wash all of their clothes and take care of their clothes all by hand so that might be the reason.

Rykken: It's just interesting because it was a very common thing. Out on the western frontier of America if they had Chinese laundry that was kind of--Black River fit right into that.

Sandy: I think right now they still kind of have that because in Brooklyn, when I went to New York and Chinatown, they have laundry mats.

Rykken: One thing that I always heard about--I have one small antidote about Yep ging that I remember myself and that's that this comes from my own father, Chris Olson, who you would remember as [not audible]--

John: He had a restaurant down town.

Rykken: He had a restaurant and apparently he, Yep ging would eat there pretty regularly. Chris would sort of, I think help him out. And kind of the irony of that Chris's own son had been in Korea and had been starved. You know, during the Korean War, it's the prisoner of war.

John: Yes, that one.

Rykken: Arnold or?

John: Arnold I mean.

Rykken: And you must have been somewhat familiar with Arnold.

John: I knew him quite very well.

Rykken: I just remembered, and the only the reason I knew that cause I remember Chris telling me about that when I was a kid for some reason. I don't know why that came into the conversation for some reason.

John: I think Yep ging died before the Korean War. I believe it, not something--

Rykken: That could be. Just the irony that Chris had befriended this man, you know, not that--

John: That might have been part of it. I don't recall any clues to his laundry.

Rykken: We can find that out too. We may end up doing a little research on him because there's more of a story with Yep ging. He sort of comes into the picture. Just maybe one more thing about Harriet that I wanted to ask. Harriet came back and then obviously worked for Merlin Hull for a number of more years and did she do a lot of writing?

John: Yes, she did very much of the Banner Journal. Wasn't under her name, but she had done quite a bit of it.

Rykken: Filling in and writing here, and whatever needed to be written, she was probably doing it.

John: All the time. She did quite a bit of it yes.

Rykken: Was she political?

John: So-so I guess. My father was a rabid Republican and she was more of a Democrat kind of a little girl.

Rykken: The reason I ask is because she was working for Hull.

John: Haul because he was progressive at first and then switched to the Republican Party but, at that time he'd been in Congress for years as Progressive. Actually, he went on one term, he was elected the second term he was defeated a second time and then he went back and again and was in until they died in office.

Rykken: He died. He actually died in office. I was just wondering if she was part of his--the politics of his world?

John: Not too much cause he didn't do too much. One time I was home here. I must have been in school sometime along the line there at that time. I had to drive Merlin Hull around when he was out politicking, he didn't do very much of it. Then he went down to Galesville. He was all kind of shook up on the way down. Got down talked to Bert (?). He was the editor down at the newspaper in Galesville and Bert said 'Oh you don't have to worry [not audible] and then he was real cheerful on the way back. That was all kind of campaigning he did that day. I don't know how much he did otherwise.

Rykken: What kind of man was he?

John: He's a real nice person.

Rykken: He must of--he was in politics for a long time.

John: Yes, he was in, I forgot what year he went in. It was 1930 or something earlier, and then up until, I don't know how many terms he had – I believe he'd been there longer than any other person.

Rykken: 1953 I think he died.

John: 1953, I was in Korea at that time.

Rykken: I just have another question or two John and whatever we want to talk about. Because of the fact that you were born in China, has that prompted you to be interested in China throughout your life?

John: Not too much. I had to get a certificate of citizenship. That was when I was getting my--

Rykken: I was going to ask about that.

John: I had to because wanted my radio-operator's permit for my airplane and they would license a alien and they'll license a citizen, but if there's any question, they wouldn't license you so I had to go forth, judge over and Wisconsin Rapids and [not audible] where any foreign princes or potencies.

Rykken: Now, that's curious to me because you would have been-- you were born to American parents.

John: I never did have a birth certificate, but my father took the birth certificate over to the American Counsel and registered it as foreign born of American parents. That's what I have for the--it's a registration from the American Counsel that's all I had for a birth certificate not that I wouldn't have registered it.

Rykken: But I thought that would make you an American citizen?

John: Well you're an American citizen but you can't be president, but they wouldn't accept that out of the whole thing, they had to --

Rykken: You still had to--

John: For some reason at least to get my radio-operator permit. Now you don't even need one. Everybody has a radio.

Rykken: The fact that you were born on foreign soil, you couldn't be president. Darn huh?

John: Coincidentally, I wondered what happened, Romney's father was supposed to have been born in Mexico wasn't he? And he ran for President, how did he get about that?

Rykken: Let's see. How did that work? That's a good question. That's a really good question.

John: Couple of times I heard Romney was saying that his father was born in Mexico.

Rykken: That's true because they were Mormon and they had to leave. His grandfather had four wives, so that's kind of interesting too. I don't know, that's a great question. I never thought about that.

John: That didn't make sense to me when I heard it. [Not audible]

Rykken: I'm going to look that up. That's a good one. I'll find that out. Anything else that you want to add or any other?

John: Of course I don't have much recall about China itself.

Rykken: Sure.

John: Came back on a slow-boat. I believe from China was September into October of 1927.

Rykken: And you would have been 3?

John: Three and a half maybe or whatever.

Rykken: Do you have any memory of that?

John: No I don't . . . have some recall. Suppose to take a little suitcase and haul it on the port. A port window and rope build. I actually didn't have a good knot according to the story. The only thing that was in it was my suitcase and a hat box that my father had, stuff like that, but that's all hearsay. Course when I came back to Black River I started 1st Grade. Missed Kindergarten for some reason, but 1st Grade was 1929 September and October 1929 was the big crash, onset of the big depression.

Rykken: Now that do you have memory of?

John: Yes, I remember some of that. That was all through grade school and kind of son picking son.

Rykken: Did the fact that you've been born in China ever--did that prompt people's curiosity at all or did you ever talk about it much?

John: Never had much trouble.

Rykken: Did Harriet talk about this quiet a bit or did she come to school ever and talked about it?

John: She use to come to school and bring Chinese artifacts that they brought over, give a program every now and then, things like that.

Rykken: Do you have lot of artifacts or that type of thing from?

John: I don't have too many of the things, couple of the items, most of them are auctioned off at her demise.

Rykken: How about letters or--?

John: I have some, some of her letters.

Rykken: The letters back to the paper, did she do that at the request of Merlin Hull?

John: I don't know. I think she's probably just corresponding with them.

Rykken: Sure.

John: She might have.

Rykken: The one letter, I've got a copy of it here. It was right on the front page of the paper and it was actually quite lengthy. She wrote a lot in there. She has kind of a style that's kind of conversational and you know, kind of folksy, a little bit.

John: I have a book at home, a copy of it. She kind of kept kind of a dairy, daily dairy on board the ship on the way back from China. [Not audible] Some of it was directed to some of her friends and so on and so forth.

Rykken: And she wasn't--in your recollection of her, she wasn't someone that would be sitting around and sort of talking about China or what's going on in China, or following that.

John: No, I don't think she was into the history too much.

Rykken: So she was more just living her life here. Were she and Grace close?

John: Yeah, pretty close. She and Grace and Tress, Tress Duran were quite the-- they were alright here in Black River. Couple of the sisters were too, but I she was closer with them, the two of them.

Rykken: When they came back, and they were all in Black River together, including DWA Holder who was British. Right? Did they spend a lot of time together?

John: Moderate amount. I don't know but they were-- I don't know how many, they use to have big gatherings here back then -- that was a Thomas bunch, but there'd be a whole bunch of them out at that time, at least twice a year--Thanksgiving and probably July Fourth or something.

Rykken: Did Harriet, excuse me, did Grace and DWA Holder do quite a bit of travel? Once they were here, were they settled in Black River?

John: I think they pretty much settled. I don't recall them traveling too much, occasionally on a trip.

Rykken: Now what sort of a guy was Holder?

John: Newton? He had an insurance business for years here . . .

Rykken: When you were growing up, were you around them a fair amount?

John: Quite a bit through the years.

Rykken: Basil would be quite a bit younger than you?

John: Don was born in I believe 1925 or 26. Don is the oldest.

Rykken: That's the oldest.

John: Dick was born I believe 1930 and Basil had to be 32 or later, I'm not sure exactly what year he was born.

Rykken: Did your children have curiosity about China?

John: Not too much.

Rykken: Because maybe they want to go there? That type of thing?

John: No, not so much no.

Rykken: I guess that's kind of the questions I have. Is there anything that you add?

Sandy: You kind of already asked mine. My questions were: you said back then when the Great Depression hit, your parents—

John: I can't hear you.

Sandy: Mr. Rykken kind of already asked it. When the Great Depression hit, you guys, or you said that you were only allowed to bring one suitcase. I was going to ask what kind of things you guys brought other than clothing.

John: I still can't hear. I have some hearing aids but--

Rykken: She's asking about whether-- when the depression hit, now they would have been--I think you were--Sandy might have been drawing in from that other story. At one time they had been sort of warned that they might have to leave, all they could get into one suitcase, but that didn't really happen.

John: No that was stopped and I don't know how they brought the boats up there that fast and maybe they were waiting. I don't know.

Rykken: I guess maybe bouncing off of that question a little bit, did the economy in China in in such a way that it affected them?

John: That's basically why they came back. Whatever that business was that he was working with, he was going to pieces with it. I'm sure it had to do with that whole world-wide depression that was hitting. That hit here 29 and there earlier, and Shanghai at least. That's the story I heard.

Rykken: I think Shanghai if I'm not mistaken might have been--I think Shanghai and London were the two biggest cities in the world at that time, I think.

John: They were pretty good size.

Rykken: I'm pretty sure.

John: Course it was a deep water port and they had a lot of--probably most active city in China would gather there, probably still is. I wish I would have stopped on that trip.

Rykken: Should we get some pictures or do you have anything else that you ask about or?

Sandy: Yeah. No my other question you kind of also asked it. I was going to ask if children or your nieces or nephews wanted to go to China.

John: Not too much.

Rykken: Not really, not necessarily. Where are your children now? I should have asked you that.

John: One's in Brule and one's in Marinette up by Michigan border.

Rykken: What are their names again?

John: James is up at Brule and John up at Marinette. Jane is in Madison -- she teaches art at a Catholic school.

Rykken: You and your wife are both still over on Harrison street?

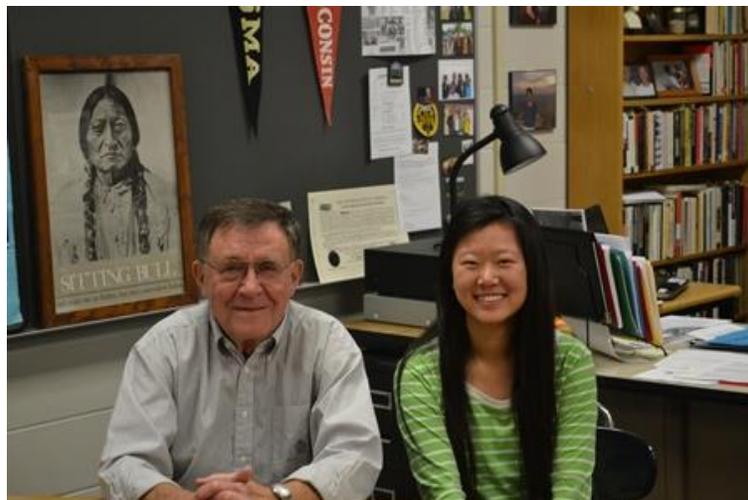
John: Same old house that the folks were on. Fixed it up.

Rykken: That's where James and Harriet lived too then.

John: Yes. I think they bought the house in 1919 it must have been before they went to China because they had it. They were probably there for a little bit.

Rykken: Thanks very much John, that's all the questions we have.

END INTERVIEW



Richard Holder Interview November 2012

Rykken: We want to welcome you here and could you just for the start of the interview give us your name and your age.

Richard: Reluctantly. I remember, once we just finished Lutheran choir practice, my mother lived right across the street from the church and we came over to sing her Happy Birthday and someone in the choir asked 'Would we mind if we ask how old you are Grace?' and she says 'No, not at all' she said 'I'm happy to say that I'm 86 and it's certainly beats the alternative.' I'm 82. I'm gaining on her and my name is Richard Holder.

Rykken: We've got a set of questions Dick and we'll-- there are maybe things that will come up in the flow of the conversation. We might go off our script a little bit, but anyway, where and when were you born?

Richard: I was born in Sparta, Wisconsin, in 1930, March 29, 1930. The reason it was Sparta and not Black River is at the time we still didn't have a hospital here and my mother's first cousin was a physician in Sparta, Dr. Scamleton (?) and so she came here from Shanghai to have me delivered.

Rykken: Really?

Richard: My father accompanied her and she tells me that after he saw my face and heard my first wail, he headed for Seattle and went back to Shanghai, and it was true. I just the other day came across his trunk of the ship he sailed from. I think it was called the Asian Empress sailing

from Seattle to Shanghai and in those days he had to take the train to get from Black River to Seattle so it would work out right and it was March 30th, of 1930 that he went back to Shanghai.

Rykken: Now did he go back by himself?

Richard: Yes.

Rykken: What was your mother's name?

Richard: Grace Thomas.

Rykken: Grace Thomas? So she stayed here.

Richard: She stayed here for several months after I was born then she and my older brother Don, who had been born in China wet back with her to Shanghai and I was there for just a couple of years that's why I have no recollection.

Rykken: So you would have been in China from?

Richard: Later 1930s or mid-1930 until 1932-33.

Rykken: Following up on that a little bit, did you ever go back to China?

Richard: Never did, no.

Rykken: We'll come back to that too in a little bit. We did some research on this story before we come up with these questions, but there are parts of it I'm a little bit unclear on and hopefully we get some of it cleared up. The circumstances that prompted your parents to go and I know it's a separate story for each obviously, so I guess I'd like you to tell us a little bit about your father.

Richard: My father was born in London England, in 1898. He served in the British Navy in World War 1 as a navigator on an airplane and in those days I think they were just two-seaters. Not kind of like the Spirit of St. Louis with a second seat behind it. He was navigator/observer and I don't know what they were doing over there, but that was his position in the navy. He liked the Orient and after World War 1 ended, he stayed there and began working for a British company engaged in selling furs and importing. I think mostly exporting furs and that was his position when my other met him. It's interesting-- he came by that naturally his mother's last name as Skinner and the English just like the Norwegians name after their son and their occupation, so I assume that somewhere on her side of the family they were cannery and skinner of furs.

Rykken: Just backing up, was he in the military?

Richard: Yes.

Rykken: He was?

Richard: I'm pretty sure, in the Air Force. That was 1915, 16, 17.

Rykken: Wow, interesting. So he had seen it from that vantage point.

Richard: And I don't know if he went back to England following discharge or if he stayed there. His two sisters also, I think in those days the sun never set on the British Empire, and his two sisters, one was in Nairobi, Kenya colony in the other union of South Africa. They didn't stay in England either, and I think that was common with younger English.

Rykken: How many siblings were in their family?

Richard: Just the two sisters and him and there were no children. One sister, the one in Cape Town never married. She was the secretary to the Chief Justice in Cape Town, and then the one that did marry was married to a banker in Nairobi, and they had no children. As far as children in the family, it's just my dad's three sons.

Rykken: How about his father? Do you know much about him?

Richard: I don't know a lot other than what my mother had passed down. He never talked about his father. My mother and he got along just fine. Actually after they were married they took honeymoon trip around the world and stopped in Wisconsin to see her side and in England to see his and that's when she first met him. From what I've heard, they were great friends.

Rykken: I was just curious because that would be a whole other story. His British-ness, I wonder.

Richard: He never talked about his relatives, not much.

Rykken: So your father's occupation you already talked about. He was working with import, export through a British company I'm assuming and can you tell us anything more about, maybe you already answered this but, can you tell us anything more about his growing up years. Did he talk to you about that very much?

Richard: He's very [not audible] he never talked about the past, he never talked about China. Partly, it may be I was just too young to ask questions at the time he came back, and he came here in 19, either 32 or 33, right at the beginning of our Great Depression. This wonderful British accent into a rural community of Norwegian farmers. I heard from my uncle that he wore knickers, he still had his British knickers and he started selling Watkin's products. That's how we started here and I'm sure it was a hard beginning again.

Rykken: I was wondering, he sounds like a man that was well educated, so I'm wondering if that's the case.

Richard: No, I have a feeling that he was born in 98, World War 1 started in the 1914. He went there and I don't think he went to-- I'm not sure but I do know that my mother said that he spoke and wrote in five Chinese dialects. He had to in the business so he got education somewhere, but he never talked about it to me and I don't know where it was.

Rykken: That in itself tells me that he was a pretty bright guy if he can handle the language. [Not audible]

Sandy: You said he spoke in five different dialects--

Richard: That's what my mother told me, I don't know what a dialect would be in Chinese, but maybe it--

Sandy: It depends on the location and then there are different dialects. It's complicated.

Rykken: And they were in Shanghai?

Richard: Shanghai.

Rykken: Do you know if your family, when you guys were in China, did you guys move around a lot, or did you stay in the same location?

Richard: No, while I was there and as far as I know, they were always in Shanghai. I assume in the International Community of whatever it was called.

Rykken: Community of Commerce--sorry. This is the part where it gets a little fuzzy for me. What was the connection between James Bowen Noble and your father? Any connection?

Richard: Yes, by marriage.

Rykken: Anything before that?

Richard: No, not that I'm aware of.

Rykken: It was the fact that they married sisters.

Richard: They married sisters.

Rykken: Noble and his wife Harriet, your Aunt, they were living there. And as I understand it, Grace went to visit.

Richard: To visit her sister Harriet.

Rykken: And then met...

Richard: And met my dad over there.

Rykken: I guess I was curious how they met.

Richard: You might get that from my wife, but I don't know. If my mom talked to me about it, I didn't remember it, but I think it was just in some social circles and probably related to Harriet knowing somebody and Bowen Noble. I assume it was through the Noble tour there before my mother was.

Rykken: I'm assuming they became friends of sorts? Noble and your father?

Richard: Yes.

Rykken: Through marrying sisters obviously and they lived here.

Richard: They lived here but I only knew Bowe Noble mostly from Harriet talking about it, but he was seldom in Black River. He was an engineer and he taught at the University of Illinois. I

think he spent most of his time there. He would come here in the summer and pick up Harriet and they'd go to Canada for six weeks on vacation.

Rykken: Before we get off the subject of him, just as you knew him, what sort of a person was James Noble? I mean how would you describe him?

Richard: What little I knew about him, I would say he was a little eccentric. He was very bright, but had eccentricity. I remember him being told he went to the bakery downtown to buy a loaf of bread and then he would tie a string around it and carry it home. A string wrapped around this loaf--I don't know why, but things like that. He raised mushrooms in the basement of the Noble house.

Rykken: He was a unique man.

Richard: He was very unique.

Rykken: And he had to be obviously to do some of the things he did. John told us he had graduated from MIT for one thing which is kind of interesting coming out of Eau Claire, Wisconsin and ending up there. How did Grace end up going to China? Was it simply to visit Harriet?

Richard: It was to visit Harriet. I think she finished following her graduate. She was two years older than my father and I think following graduation from high school, I'm vague on this, I think she was in Madison and in Chicago, and she went to Palmer School of Correspondence and all. She was a very good writer and really knew penmanship, which doesn't mean much anymore.

Rykken: It's that generation. They were wonderful with writing.

Richard: She was as her sister Harriet, were both excellent writers.

Rykken: Now their family, did they have many daughters? Did they have many daughters in the family? The Thomas family?

Richard: The Thomas? I think there were about-- pretty much fifty-fifty. There were fifteen children. My mother was the second youngest and I think it was about half boys, half girls.

Rykken: Did you grow up surrounded by that family?

Richard: I did. I enjoyed the farm that my grandpa homesteaded. My mother's father who was Irish, came here the time of the Potato Famine and I spent all my summers and my weekends and even after I started college, my summers I would go back to the farm with my uncle and aunt.

Rykken: Was that right out here?

Richard: Right out here.

Rykken: Right where you live now?

Richard: Just the next farm down.

Rykken: That land has been in that family awhile.

Richard: I bought it from my aunt after my uncle had died and she could no longer handle it, and recently sold it to my son.

Rykken: Interesting.

Richard: Because I can't handle it anymore.

Rykken: So it'll stay in the family.

Richard: It will.

Rykken: That's great. Did your father and mother talk-- you've already said this a little bit about your father, but did your mother talk about China very much to you?

Richard: She did more maybe to my wife than to me, but it was more the old jokes they had a servant. I think she called it an ah-ma. Does that sound right? Ah-ma?

Sandy: Yes, it does.

Rykken: Grandma.

Richard: Their grandma or servant, and she enjoyed her a lot and had some jokes about her. I think it was more on the social aspect. The only thing I recall her saying, and I may be getting ahead of the story, but I recall her saying that from where they were in Shanghai, they saw bombs falling on the French concession or that area of Shanghai, but neither of my folks talked

too much about their Chinese experience. I think they were too busy trying to stay alive during the depression and finding food for five mouths.

Rykken: Did Grace work outside the home?

Richard: She did.

Rykken: What type of work did she do?

Richard: Stenography, she did very well with shorthanded; she always took the county board minutes. Later on, after I was into junior high in high school, she taught commercial at Melrose and from some of her pupils that became my patients, I got the impression that several of them said she was best teacher.

Rykken: Isn't that interesting?

Richard: But she had to quit because she didn't had a proper--

Rykken: Proper degree?

Richard: Right. She did go to summer school for whatever.

Rykken: When was she had been born?

Richard: She was born in 1896.

Rykken: They both come across to me, both her and Harriet, in what little background I have, is just very interesting people.

Richard: They were. They were fun loving and enjoyed life. I never heard either of them say negative things about anyone.

Rykken: That's the feeling I get too. Let's go back. This is another part of the story that we thought was pretty interesting. They were there roughly a decade it sounds like? Off and on?

Richard: My folks were married in 1924 in Shanghai, I summed that she met my father several years before I would guess. My older brother was born there in 1926.

Rykken: Was that Don?

Richard: Don and so I assume they were there from the early 1920s. My father maybe even before that and until 32 about, so a decade is about right.

Rykken: Basil related an interesting tid-bit to me that I guess I'd like to ask you too then. Your father had been born in London, he lived in Shanghai. These were two of the biggest cities in the world at the time, probably the two biggest cities, and then came to Black River.

Richard: Never wanted to leave.

Rykken: Just thought Black River was fantastic.

Richard: He didn't want to go.

Rykken: It's just such an interesting...

Richard: He didn't even want to go back to England, but in the 1960s, we saved enough money to take our four children, I guess it was the 60s early 70s to England. We wanted to see it and we took mom and dad. It was a tough trip. The four children, my parents, and my wife and myself never driven on the wrong side of the road, but we got through it, but my dad didn't want to go and I said, "Well, if you don't want to go, no one's going." But he had no desire to go back.

Rykken: Any sense of why that was?

Richard: I don't know, and his sisters were both back there then they retired, but he just seemed content here.

Rykken: This was his place.

Richard: It was and I think the happiest day of his life was when he became a citizen.

Rykken: Now when would that have...?

Richard: I can't put a year on it.

Rykken: So he went through the naturalization process? He became an American citizen. Very interesting. Back to something you said just a bit ago here, we were interested to know if they had to leave China at any point because of political unrest there.

Richard: I had the feeling that they left because they both became concerned for their own well being as well as their two kids. And I know a little bit of history and I know the Sino-Japanese

war wasn't declared till 1937 and they were out of there long before then, but as I say mom had mentioned that she saw the fireworks over the French quarter and all.

Rykken: And there would have been--they would have been there at the time the country was dividing into civil war with communism vs. nationalism. The nationalist...

Richard: I think it was more the Japanese beginning to come in prior to the so called incidence. Shanghai was where they were striking first, skirmishes I guess.

Rykken: When you think about it, they were in a really volatile area at that time in history. The connection to Black River was simply that he had married a Black River native and they came to...

Richard: And she liked it here too.

Rykken: So they came back.

Richard: Yep.

Rykken: You said he sold Watkins and then did he not also end up having an insurance company?

Richard: He did. He started out with Watkins's products and then I think self-taught and became an insurance agent with Mutual of New York.

Rykken: Interesting. You didn't travel to China. Have you gone through periods of your life where you've felt curious about this?

Richard: I have.

Rykken: Your wife has dug into it a little bit and she has talked to your mother.

Richard: We've talked to some people both here and Florida that have been there and sounded interesting, but most of them, I guess it was too late in my life to try to attempt to--I wouldn't now. I'm glad did the traveling I did, but that wasn't on the list.

Rykken: Help us out a little bit on your background too; you would have ended up going to school in the Black River schools. When did you graduate from high school?

Richard: I graduated in 1948 from high school and I went to La Crosse State College at that time for one year, and then to the University and graduated from medical school there in 1955.

Rykken: Was this at UW-Madison?

Richard: Yes.

Rykken: Were you prompted to go into medicine or that was your own choice?

Richard: It was an interesting story and a true one. It's funny how certain things stick in your mind. I was ten years old and I had strep throat and I think penicillin had come on within that decade or something and I just thought I was dying. I couldn't remember how it hurt and I could swallow, couldn't breathe, and Dr. Johnson came from the Krohn Clinic and saw me. Diagnosed it and gave me a shot. The next morning I felt like a new person and I said, "When I grow up, I want to be a doctor."

Rykken: Wow, that's great.

Richard: That was it.

Rykken: That's a great story.

Richard: Pretty simple.

Rykken: That would have been in 1940?

Richard: About 10, so yeah, about then.

Rykken: Interesting. You'd think about experiences kids have when they are young.

Richard: I know, it can have a lot of effect.

Rykken: Profound effect. How long did you practice medicine?

Richard: About 42 years you know.

Rykken: Was it all here?

Richard: I interned one year in Detroit then I went into the service or was drafted into the service and was in the army medical core primarily for Jackson, South Carolina, for two years, and then following that came back here, and practiced here till I retired.

Rykken: So you would have been in the military in the early...

Richard: Late 50s, 56-57.

Rykken: So you had your medical degree at that point.

Richard: I did. They were sort on physicians and they called it the doctor draft, but we had to go, and the Korean War was over.

Rykken: Didn't Dr. Noble do the same?

Richard: Noble was in the Korean War and I think Dr. Jean Krohn was also.

Rykken: He was. Yes, I think we've interviewed him before on that very subject. That's interesting too. So then you all ended up back here practicing ultimately. When has the hospital actually come into Black River, the first hospital that was built?

Richard: About 1932 I think the Krohn Clinic and the hospital. I think it was 32 to 33.

Rykken: And that would have been down at Main Street?

Richard: Right on Main Street.

Rykken: So you were really growing up in that area. That's a terrific story and I don't really have any other questions unless Sandy does. Is there anything that you'd like to add about anything? I think I've got it finally. It's taken me a while to piece this together. The reason we were so interested, I just think it's so unique that a small town had two families that had this thing going on in China back in the 20s.

Richard: It was interesting.

Rykken: Very unusual. We have to ask about this because this came up in the other interview. The Chinese man that lived in Black River that had the laundry, Yep ging. Are you familiar with him at all?

Richard: I can't help you at all.

Rykken: He's somebody that Basil has mentioned to me and John mentioned him also the other day. At one point we thought about going down the road of his story a little bit too because that's kind of another unique story of how he ended up in Black River.

Richard: I can't help you there. I think partly because when I wasn't in school, I was on the farm. I didn't spend much time in Black River.

Rykken: You were a farmer.

Richard: I loved it.

Rykken: Could you have ever ended up being a farmer?

Richard: My aunt wanted me to be one, but I'd already decided.

Rykken: Would you say you're a hobby farmer?

Richard: I have been yes.

Rykken: [Not audible]

Richard: I enjoyed that.

Rykken: I'm sure that all has served you well with being a petitioner here.

Richard: It did. I got along just fine with rural people. I did.

Rykken: People that you understood. That's a huge part of that work for sure.

Richard: Just as an aside one, my Uncle Art, who's a bachelor, had the farm with my mother. The thirteen children or however many of them were left when my grandmother died, and I remembered her. I was five years old when she died, but she was bed-fast for all those five years I think.

Rykken: [Not audible] grandmother?

Richard: My grandmother on the farm and my Aunt Tress took care of her. Uncle Art was farming the farm. My grandfather had died years previously and the thirteen children got together after grandma died and decided the farm should go to Uncle Art and Aunt Tress who are the two that I really grew up with. But they weren't giving up a gift, the farm was in debt, the Jackson County Bank, several thousand dollars so they formed a dairy and that's where I grew up was milking cows and helping deliver milk to get the farm out of hack and we finally did.

Rykken: This was in the depression?

Richard: It was yes. It was, the depression days.

Rykken: Those were stories that were common place.

Richard: For sure yes.

Rykken: At that time. There's a Kin Burns thing on right now about the whole...

Richard: Right, right, I recorded it and I looked at some of it today.

Rykken: I watched some of it and like my parents who are both 88, my mother is suffering Alzheimer's.

Richard: I know that.

Rykken: But my dad is sharp as a tack so he was glued to the T.V. last night.

Richard: I'll bet. He would remember that well.

Rykken: He grew up in North Dakota you know so he grew up in the Dust Bowl. I remember, he was reliving, it was great. Very well done. We appreciate it very much, and Sandy, do you want to ask anything else?

Sandy: You kind of asked this one in the last interview. I know you brought these pictures today, but aside from these, do you have any other items or things from China that you guys brought over?

Richard: We do in our house. We have a number of things that my mother brought back. Also things from Africa from my aunts that lived there. We have a large chest, actually I got it at the auction when Aunt Harriet. Aunt Harriet's auction that probably should be Noble's, but it's all hand-carved and it's--I forget the wood now, but it apparently was carved by a Chinese prisoner while he was in prison. And we've had Chinese students at our house that were here for medical school and they were able to decipher it. I can't remember it at all but it's really neat.

Rykken: Interesting.

Richard: That's the thing that really stands out. We use it as a coffee table, put a glass top on it

Rykken: That's great..

Sandy: Would we be able to get pictures? Would you be able to take a picture and send it to us?

Richard: Of that chest? Sure.

Rykken: Would you be able to do that?

Richard: Sure.

Rykken: [Not audible]

Richard: Can he mail it to you? Put in your email?

Rykken: Yes, could you do that?

Richard: My wife could.

Sandy: Excuse me.

Richard: I'm not very good with a camera.

Rykken: Before you go today too Dick, we will get a couple of pictures because that will be part of our report.

END INTERVIEW

PORTIONS OF A LETTER FROM HARRIET (THOMAS) NOBLE TO THE JACKSON COUNTY JOURNAL

24 January 2013

Harriet Thomas Noble was married to James Bowen Noble in 1919 and it was sometime in that year that they left for China where "Naden" (nickname) had been working for several years as an engineer. Coming from a large family, Harriet had strong connections to Black River Falls, and on several occasions penned letters from China to keep the "folks back home"

apprised of this life being lived a world away. The following letter appeared in late January of 1924 on the front page of the Jackson County Journal, forerunner to the Banner Journal. Harriet had written for the Journal before leaving for China so there was natural connection. Merlin Hull, in fact, established the Banner Journal in 1926 and eventually Harriet helped him publish the “new” paper for a number of years after she returned from China. The headline for the letter read, FROM THE OTHER SIDE, and the following introduction was included:

We are pleased to be able to publish a good letter from the underside of the world, written by Mrs. Harriet Thomas Noble, formerly of the Journal staff. It is evident that life in the Far East, among people of a far different language and civilization has in no way lessened her skill in descriptive writing. We hope that the Journal and its readers may be favored with more such epistles:

For lo these many moons I have contemplated climbing into print by way of my old friend, the Jackson Country Journal. Like most of our friends, it stands for a lot and in an unguarded moment it even invited this infliction. Having thus shaken any possible blame on the part of our suffering subscribers from my shoulders to those of the Journal itself, I'll ink up and be on my way.

First the time. It's mid-autumn. In China that means festivals and fights and funerals. It also means a touch of comfort in the temperature and the natives sit on the streets winding yarn for knitting and tying last year's, or last decade's, quilt stuffing into a newly washed dress. That is, the subscribers to Good Housekeeping do. I reckon, judging from the externals, that a goodly share of our four hundred and thirty million do not trouble to clean up much of any. I admire their spirit of preparedness, however, polishing their knitting needles about the first time they can sleep with their tongues in. Mid-autumn gives us a slight reverse on the weather report sent to Grace's employer, away on holiday, by one of his Chinese clerks. “The weathers in Shang-hai continue exceeding heat.” This clerk was very funny . . .

Shanghai is as picturesque as ever and half a hundred times a month I see something or other that I wish I might pass a sight of on to the little valley of the Black River. A wheel barrow coolie staggering along with from eight to ten women workers from a cotton mill perched like rows of crows of each side of his wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow has a wheel about four feet in diameter and the load is balanced on each side of it. A man asleep at midday with his back snuggled into the hollow of a triangular concrete telephone post, sitting bolt upright, head back. You would think the sun would bake him half an inch deep before he woke. A tall, brown baked coolie, standing in front of his shack holding a tiny, almost white by contrast, baby tenderly in his arms. He looks down at the baby and the baby wide eyed at the sun. One a sun and the other a son, worshipper. Only Mary or Jane Spaulding, Fred Farmer, or someone who has been here can really see the pictures.

Just this morning I saw something I had never seen before . . . The sight was an old Chinese coolie combing his hair. Queues are still fairly common among the older natives and some of the younger who don't believe in adopting present fangle fashion too quickly but I had never seen one in anything but a pigtail and from the more or less ungroomed look of them in most cases, had about decided they were freshened up for Chinese New Year and no other time. This man sat on a stool on the sidewalk, calmly making his toilet. He wore his basketball panties and nothing else but, and had a basin of steaming water and a little barber size. Turkish towel to distribute it about. His hair was wonderful. Black and shiny as a crow's wing and ripplier, from its tight braiding, and longer and thicker than that of any dame demonstrator of Ayer's hair tonic that ever looked out of an advertisement. They use wooden combs.

Little Turkish towels are very popular. The wheel barrow coolie knots one about his forehead to keep the perspiration out of his eyes. The ricscha coolie always has one dangling about his person and when you go to pay him he breathes exhaustedly and mops his face with

his never again to be clean towel. At a Chinese dinner, after each course, and twenty at least are served, these towels are passed to the guests wrung out of boiling hot water. Towels not guests. I am always glad to wipe my hands on them but the Chinese use them on their faces. Their skins are most clear and firm, no doubt partially due to the use of these hot towels.

Speaking of skins, I wish you might see the beautiful smoked side of bacon tone the natives acquire as summer climbs over them and piece by piece they discard their coverings. To begin with their skin is only a slightly darker shade of yellow than mine, but by the end of August I am a pallid lily in comparison – and I'm no lily, as any of my friends can testify.

October 10.

Shanghai has changed and grown since we were here before and is harboring some sixty thousand Russian refugees in addition to its own many thousands of natives that live or die on a few coppers a day. A great many of these refugees are destitute and it is a miracle that they can live here at all for living is not cheap. The foreigners maintain a soup kitchen where over seventeen thousand meals are served free per month. Recently three ship loads that arrived were not permitted to land. One wonders where they went and what they did, but on the other hand the town has all it can care for. I'm no preacher nor much of a prayer, but I'm a doggone good hoper and I sure do hope that our country never sees fit to kick the stuffing out of its prevailing form of government however full of saw dust it may seem. I exceedingly unlike the thought of herding what population might be left in our Jackson County on stock cars and shooting them down to Tampico, Mexico, for instance, and letting them depend on a soup kitchen for sustenance. And Rock Spring park getting all moth eaten and the Country Club full of cobwebs and Highway 12 full of ruts, and Garden Valley just a valley and not a garden, and that beautiful Melrose and North Bend country running all to burdocks and tumbleweed – nossir. It isn't a pretty thought a-tall.

There is talk now of repatriation of the refugees here and wails go up from one side as to the cruelty of sending them back where they would be worse off than here – and from the other the dignified defense that they could not be worse off than here, where there is no future for them and they must compete with the Chinese laborer if they make a living at all. Not far from where we live there is a big three-story stone house that has been turned over to a bunch of Russian cadets. Their ages probably range from ten or twelve to twenty. The balconies are always draped with scores of boys and washings and stuff and things, and the gate with Chinese glued to every crack, especially when their band or orchestra is practicing in the garden. They can emit music that gives you pause. Another place on our street that is daily decked by a crowd of Russians is the entrance to the French Sister's Convent. Between certain hours they conduct a free dispensary and the halt and the lame and the hurt gather for succor . . .

November 1st

Wonderful how time flies in this nothing-to-do land. Here is it November and this thing hanging around and not growing old gracefully either, or like wine, improving with age. Back there frosts are chronicled and the fair has been and we are looking forward to learning who got the prizes on what. I enjoyed Mr. Jones' plea for exhibits in the farm produce department and should certainly have contributed to it had I had anything to contribute. I might have sent in Mr. Noble's cucumber. He planted seed in a flower pot and in the course of time had three plants that he transplanted to the flower garden. Two of them sickened and died but the third lingered bravely on. Even got big enough to have a little fence of bamboo sticks to warn the garden man from mowing it down. Finally it put forth a blossom which in time, actually took on the shape of a cucumber. Mr. Noble was pretty proud of that cucumber, but fate and a worm were against it, and it began to wither. He picked it and brot it in to show me and I put it on the mantel to exhibit to Grace and Jimmy, but when I went to get it, it was gone. Either it had evaporated or the boy

thot it a little green worm and removed it. So that's why I couldn't bust into the exhibiting class this year.

It is much cooler here, although the last two days have been almost uncomfortably hot. Before that I saw a Chinaman with five coats on. I am kind of worried about what he is going to do when it gets really chilly. The people of this land just climb into more and more clothes as the temperature goes down.

I, too, have been to a fair. The British Women's Association gave on called "Ye Olde English Fayre." No time, labor or expense was spared to turn the club house at the race course into an old English village. The workers were all in costume and the whole thing really was interesting and realistic. Contributions from England, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. In one corner of the village was a little fenced off spot containing a turkey or so, ducks, chickens, a little grunty white pig. While I don't think it crowded the Jackson County livestock exhibit exactly, I lingered lovingly over it. My father always claimed that "what you are raised on you hanker for."

Grace, Sister and I were out to an interesting tea yesterday. Interesting enough to tell about, I think. It was at the home of a young Danish woman whose husband wears two names with a hyphen between them and either name is enough for anyone. It is like saying Mr. Gibson-Gorreson. Anyway, Mrs. G-G is very domestic and devoted to her family or anybody else's for she asked me in her pretty broken English wouldn't I bring my children, and it is unusual to have your children asked to tea. I had been there before and told Grace how much of an experience it was to see this house, and she admitted afterward it was an occasion. Mrs. G-G's sister-in-law was there from Peking. She is a Norwegian and both interesting and charming. To lend further interest a young woman had arrived there the day before from France on her way to Peking to take unto herself a Danish husband. She couldn't speak a word of English and the Norwegian lady was the only one with any French so conversation was a bit spasmodic altho I noticed that Grace, Miss French, and Mrs. Peking seemed to get quite a bit said about clothes by feeling of one another's gowns. Miss French, by the way, was just from Paris where she had done something or other in the biggest music conservatory, according to our hostess. After a bit she played and sang for us and it was beautiful. As Mrs. G-G said rather quaintly, "The music is international. American, Dane, Norwegian, French – all can understand." Miss French wore her hair parted in the middle and done very simply along about where the hair quits in the back. She didn't have much. Perhaps it isn't the style in Paris. She also wore a string of tiny pearls that fit closely about the base of her neck. Her skirt reached to the ankles. These "hints from Paris" are for the benefit of my feminine friends in Spring Creek. While doubtless very musical, there was an air on the part of Miss French of not carrying it to the extent of neglecting her clothes. By and by a card was brought in and it was followed by a tall young man who shook hands with the accumulated nationalities and proceeded to take hi tea off his knee without spilling it . . . Tea was served in the drawing room. Mrs. G-G and Mrs. Peking did the work and it was a relief from having a Chinese boy messing around too. Nobody ever saw a more elaborate tea service of shiny silver with fat and well fed dragons crawling about everything even to the jam pot. There were hot scones, butter, jam, two kinds of open faced sandwiches, three kinds of cake to be cut and two kinds of little home grown Danish cakes. Never have I seen more pictures and pillows and bouquets inhabiting one room. I hope I was unobtrusive about it and I didn't turn around and count behind me, but on two walls there were twenty-five pictures, good ones too. And my horoscope or periscope or whatever it is you glance about with took in seventeen vases of cut flowers not to mention potted plants and ferns. I quit when I reached seventeen pillows. The room was "done" in blue and orange. A baby grand piano had managed to edge into the room before the blue satin upholstered furniture began to fill it. A vitrola, a few tables and lamps and that's all. Probably the only reason that's all is because that's all there was room for lessen the folks stayed out. Mrs. G-G sent us home in her motor car and when I spoke to Sister, who was sitting on the very edge of the seat looking haughtily out, she said, "Don't talk to me. I'm being a

lady. I have my feet on the floor.” And, who knows, maybe that’s all that’s necessary to be a lady.

Except to chronicle the fact that we are all very well and that so far Shanghai has escaped typhoons and tidal waves and earthquake shocks and other afflictions that this part of the world has been falling heir to I’m about to release this “Grandmother’s Spell” – with one last plea to anyone who has stayed with it this long.

Give your news to our home papers. Whether it is a new buggy, a new baby, a backache or a bonanza – pass it along. All your far away friends are interested. Why I care more to learn than the Sparta hospital has succeeded in safely impeaching a Black River appendix that I do to learn that the Oklahoma legislature has done the same to their governor.

--HARRIET THOMAS NOBLE