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## Joe Claus Memoir

**C573. Claus, Joe** b. 1902

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 45 mins., 14 pp.

Claus discusses his family neighborhood grocery store in Springfield: goods and merchandise sold, customers, credit system, and distributors.

Interview by Jiffy Johnson, 1976

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## Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by Jiffy Johnson for the Oral History Office, Sangamon State University in July, 1976. Barbara Dewhurst transcribed the tape and Carol Spiegel edited the transcript. Mr. Claus reviewed the transcript.

Mr. Claus was born in Illinois, in 1902. He was three years old when his parents founded a neighborhood grocery store on south Eleventh Street in Springfield; a store where he began his lifetime career at the age of six. Mr. Claus talks about changes he has seen in the business over a seventy-five year span.

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

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This picture from the State Journal-Register photo archives shows the store in its full glory in 1945. The horse-drawn carriage in the picture remained in use for another 29 years, as Claus continued using it to deliver groceries until 1974.

Photo and caption added 1/24/2017

Joe Claus, July 15, 1976, Springfield, Illinois.

Jiffy Johnson, Interviewer.

Q. This is Voices of Illinois History and I'm talking today with Joe Claus, who is the owner of Claus Grocery on South Eleventh. This is a store that, I guess has been a landmark for many years and we want to try to find out a little bit about Mr. Claus and his involvement with this grocery store.

When did this store--that's right next door here to your home--open up?

A. November 5, 1905.

Q. So you've been here practically since the beginning of the century?

A. Yes, that's right.

Q. Who was it that actually founded it. Did you found the grocery store?

A. My father founded the grocery store, my father and mother together.

Q. And how old were you at that time?

A. Three years old.

Q. What was it like, can you remember back when you were three--I suppose for most of us our memories are a little fuzzy at three--do you remember when they actually made the decision and some of the setting up of the grocery store?

A. Well, when the store was set up out here, there was no houses around it at all and from--you might say from Eleventh and South Grand on out south there were very few homes. A few of the older ones are still around the neighborhood, but not many of them any more.

Q. Well, why in the world did they pick a location like that, clear away from all of the other houses?

A. Well, my father was born right across the street from this location and his father gave him two lots to put this place up on.

Q. So, he was born and raised in Springfield as well?

A. My father was born in Springfield and my mother was born in St. Louis.

Q. Now when your father made this decision to set up the grocery store, then he had the land available that was given to him and then he had to actually get the store set. Was there a building available already?

A. No building on it at all. And at that time, as far as I can remember, it cost around the price of three thousand dollars. Yes, three thousand dollars was the right price at that time.

Q. Actually that's pretty low in comparison to today. I'm sure if you tried to replace this building, it would be much more than that. Now, did he build it or have it built?

A. He had it built by Joe Lorscheider, he was a general contractor at that time.

Q. And the structure, could you describe it for those who might not have seen the grocery store. I take it it's still more or less as it stands now.

A. The store is about the same as it was at that time, yes.

Q. What are its basic features? It has a large front room, a small back room?

A. Yes, it was sixty foot long and twenty feet wide the store was.

Q. Now, inside that store, when you first remembered the store, what did it look like? You'd walk in as a customer, let's say, what sorts of things would you see in the store?

A. Well at that time we had counters, showcases, bread cases, and refrigeration and that was about it.

Q. And the line of goods was basically groceries, or was it a general store?

A. Well, we handled most everything, groceries, we handled some school supplies, we handled--children at that time wore stockings, long stockings--and we also handled some yard materials for ladies for dresses.

Q. In other words a family could maybe complete all their shopping at this one store. Is that right?

A. That's right, they could get pretty near anything they wanted.

Q. How often would a family typically come to do that? Do you remember families coming once a week, once a month, was there any routine that they'd fall into?

A. The average family made a purchase about every two weeks. That's a coal mining district out here mostly, and the miners paid and they'd buy enough from two weeks to two weeks again.

Q. How would they come? Would they come--well, they must have, at least at the very beginning come by what? Horse and buggy?

A. That was all there was at that time was horse, buggy, wagons, everything was delivered to you in wagons.

Q. Now, what sorts of things did these people have to buy--you say they were mostly miners, so they didn't have like a backyard garden, supplies that they could utilize, they depended on you for most everything? Is this correct?

A. Most of the miners as a rule was on strike in the summertime and they all had a little backyard garden, but they bought flour in fifty pound bags, and potatoes in them days come in two and a half bushel bags that we had, and well, you naturally handled coal oil because there was no electricity in most of the houses. And everything was bulk, your groceries, your beans and everything like that was bulk product. Rice and all that.

Q. If they did their shopping every two weeks, but they bought these items in bulk, they just rotated the number of staple items that they would buy, in other words if they bought many bushels of potatoes at a time they certainly wouldn't have to replenish their potatoes again in two weeks, would they?

A. Yes, in the fall of the year, we put down as many as forty and fifty bags of potatoes in some of the basements in the fall of the year, for it to run through the winter.

Q. Did they come regularly on those two week intervals in the winter too, when the snow was pretty heavy and the traveling conditions were pretty rough?

A. It made no difference how bad, I've seen the time when you couldn't hardly drive a wagon down the street--from Ash Street going into what they call Harvard Park, at that time, the ruts were so deep and so bad.

Q. But they'd come anyhow?

A. They came. (laughs)

Q. Now, when they came to buy things and you provided them, were they in their own containers? In other words, if you bought potatoes, did you supply as the grocery store the container or did the person buying the goods in some cases bring a bin or a bucket or something?

A. Everything--the potatoes were already sacked in burlap sacks and the rest of it, you'd put it in paper sacks or cardboard boxes and deliver it. Sometimes one good big order would fill a delivery wagon.

Q. Well, how did you usually get these items? That's a question, I think, that a lot of people might not know the answer to. Did you as a grocer get supplies from where, from the railroad station, or where would you get these items?

A. That time, you had many distributors. Now you haven't any. We had Bunn and Company, LaFayette Smith, and all those, they supplied you with groceries, and then you had your--George E. Coe was for produce and T. E. Ball is produce and you bought everything from them, they delivered it out to you, and you delivered it from them on to your customers.

Q. So you actually did not have to pick up anything. You just acted as a trading point, you might say, things were delivered to you and then people came and picked them up from you?

A. That's right, they'd come here and you may run short and have to run down and pick up some, but they had one delivery as a rule and the produce houses made three deliveries a week to you.

Q. The produce situation must have been a little different than it is now. We see things nowadays in stores in the middle of winter that just aren't available from an Illinois market, but I would take it that your produce would have fluctuated quite a bit from the time of year because you would be depending on things from this area of Illinois, would you?

A. Yes, oranges and that was a treat for Christmas and that was it, and your bananas--you never bought a hand of bananas like you buy them now, everything came in bunches, and you cut them off yourself. And cranberries and that, that was all just holiday items, the rest of it was staples and things that you used; potatoes, and onions, and cabbage and carrots, they were always on the market.

Q. Did you handle meat?

A. Not much meat, no. We handled some bacon and some lunch meat, but we didn't have a meat market.

Q. So if a family didn't have their own personal supply of meat, then they would also, perhaps, go and visit a butcher shop?

A. There was regular shops that handled nothing but meat at that time around here, and they would buy meat off of them.

Q. What about dairy products?

A. Well, it's just like it is now, we have no dairies here in town at all, any more, and at that time we had the Illinois Dairy, and the Sangamon Dairy--they were the big ones--and then Producers was big, and there was at least two dozen small ones, just home owned dairies that delivered house to house.

Q. Now this would help the person that lived within the city of Springfield. Did you have customers that came from further away that would not, perhaps have a dairy delivery or any other kind of delivery and might have to come some distance to your store?

A. No, because everybody--there was a lot of people had cows on the outskirts and fields in them times and farm trade that you had, they didn't need any dairy products, but we had neighbors all around us here that had cows and they had their own milk. (laughs)

Q. Did you have a large school population that would visit you, say after school? I know that some of the grocery stores that have been around for some time remarked that the youngsters on their way home from school or on their way to school would stop--I was wondering if that was a big part of your business or something that you noticed a lot of?

A. Well, in the morning they went over here to Iles School and they'd run in for pencils or tablets or something like that, but that's about as far as it went on the schools.

Q. Now, you had--we were talking here about your opening period of time, you were just a few years old, this was in 1905. What sorts of changes did you notice taking place, were you aware that the business was getting less diversified, that you were no longer a general store, when did that kind of change start to come about?

A. Oh, that came back quite a little while. You could notice it coming and as the larger stores came they don't close on Sundays and they're open part of the night--we close, always closed Sundays, we never opened on holidays and it just got--the younger people went for the big store and the older people passed away and that's just all you can say about it.

Q. When did you stop carrying things like, say yard goods, for example, which I presume would be pretty far from what we would call a grocery store nowadays?

A. Oh, I imagine about fifteen years ago, we quit the yard goods and a lot of the little novelty things we used to have.

Q. Were you aware of other stores in Springfield that featured the same sorts of things that you did? Were there very many other grocery stores available to the population?

A. There were a lot of stores around here, but the stores at that time were all home owned stores, they were local people and we all got along nice and if one ran short of something we'd hand the other fellow what we didn't need and when he got it back he'd give it back to us again.

Q. I was talking with somebody recently for this program series who remarked that she walked to the store and you remarked here, I think, that a lot of the people would come, from obviously not too great a distance. Were there more stores in the community? Did you feel that, you know, in a given area there were more stores?

A. Oh yes, yes, we had Ed Gallaway just two blocks away from us and we had Steel Brothers--they were in an old location down on Eleventh



and Kansas, down there. They were there for years and out south we had the Schnirring boys and there were just a lot of grocery stores around--Doerflers Market and all them.

Q. Was there any real difference--in other words would there be any reason that a consumer would say, "I think that I won't go to the store near me, I'll go to another store," would there be any items that one store would be more likely to carry and another store just might not have any of?

A. No, I think they just, you know, it was more of a community, they just traded with their neighborhood grocer because in them days there was lots of people got out of work and they had to fall back on their grocer to kind of help them out until things cleared up and they got a job back again. And most of the people would always pay, too.

Q. Now that means you extended credit, is that right?

A. Yes.

Q. Was there any formal arrangement or was it just a question of well, you don't have to pay today, we'll wait till next week kind of thing?

A. Most of them would just ask you if you could hold them for a couple of weeks until they got another job and as soon as they did, most of them were really honest and come back and pay.

Q. Well, they lived right there on the street with you, so you knew where they were, didn't you?

A. That's right, they was all neighbors.

Q. Would any people have a system where they would regularly have credit and they just totaled it up at the end of the month when the paycheck came in or something like that?

A. Yes, yes, most all of them did. Now the factories--there was a few factories around here like the old Sattly Factory and the Weaver Manufacturing Company--they paid as they received their pay about every two weeks and the miners did the same when they were working, but of course, the miner had to be held over sometime, on account of he just didn't have it.

Q. Can you give me any general impression for how much people spent on groceries--I'm sure it varied, you know, from family to family because of the size, but can you remember totaling up bills that would run about how much a week? You got any feeling for that at all?

A. Well, I'd say for twenty-five or thirty dollars you could buy a lot of groceries.

Q. (laughs) Keep you going two weeks anyhow?

A. You don't get anything for sixty dollars anymore.

Q. I wanted to ask you when you actually started working in the store. Now obviously living next door to it and having your father personally ran the grocery store, I'm sure you were aware even before you started to do any real helpful work in the store, what was going on. When did you actually put in some effort in working at the store?

A. Well, my father passed away when I was six years old and my mother run the store up until, oh, I guess about 1949 and I worked right in--I might as well say from the time I was six years old in the store. When I'd go to school I'd come home and change my clothes and if there was any orders or any errands to run around the neighborhood, you did it. (laughs)

Q. Did she have any other help?

A. No, well, we had hired delivery boys at that time.

Q. What deliveries did the delivery boys make?

A. They would deliver orders that were sent in from people that didn't have no way--everybody didn't have a horse and buggy and there wasn't no automobiles then.

Q. And these delivery boys would make deliveries with their own horse and wagon or what?

A. No, we had our own wagon and our own horses, and they just worked here just by the day, you know.

Q. How many of your customers, do you think, asked for delivery? Was it a large percentage or maybe half of them or was it just a few that demanded delivery?

A. Oh, I would say about half, because some of them lived within a mile or a mile and a half away, see. And when they ordered, they'd order maybe once or twice a week and you didn't have to run to them every time they set down at the table to eat.

Q. Now you had hired delivery boys and then your mother manned the store just about all of the time that it was open?

A. Yes, I got out of school and I quit school at fourteen and I've been here ever since.

Q. Now at fourteen you became a full-time employee then, and your mother was able to slack off a bit?

A. That's right, from fourteen on that was it until the present day.

Q. Did you have any brothers and sisters to help out?

A. No brothers and no sisters.

Q. This sounds like a--what happens when you got sick or when you had problems with not enough people to go around because somebody's trying to unload an order in the back and somebody was up in front waiting for their order to be picked up?

A. Well, I guess I was just lucky I didn't get sick (laughs) because, well, if you had a delivery boy he was here all the time, you know, six o'clock in the morning, and generally closed the store at six and on Saturdays nights she was open until nine and you were done for the week.

Q. Did people expect when they came shopping to spend quite a bit of time--how long would you spend, if I came in to buy my groceries and it had been two weeks since I'd been in, how long do you think I might spend in the store? Might that be an hour or two that I'd spend there or five or ten minutes? I'm just curious about how long it would take to put everything together.

A. No, the women then came and they knew just what they wanted and it didn't take them very few minutes to put in their order for the week or two weeks. They knew before they left home what they needed. And you had no trouble like you do now where they stand and shop and look around.

Q. Now, they'd give you what, a list of items and then you'd go pull them off the shelf, is that the way it would work?

A. Well, some would and then others--you had a lot of Lithuanian people at that time--sometimes you would have to kind of listen to see what they really wanted, you didn't understand their language but you got by all right, but you never--no woman ever took up much time in giving an order.

Q. And after they'd given you the order, then you'd start to pull the items off and they'd just stand around and talk and wait while you got the order compiled?

A. Well, as a rule if they had a large order, you took the order and you delivered either that day or the next day to them.

Q. So that they didn't have to stand around and wait?

A. No, they didn't have to stand around and wait, unless it was just something they just had to have to take with them like coffee or something like that.

Q. Did you handle a large amount of canned goods when you first started? Was that typically available, you know, canned peaches, tomatoes, that sort of thing?

A. Oh yes, there was peaches, and tomatoes and corn and all that. Your bulk items was your, oh like rice, and you did have a bulk powdered and

brown sugar--kind of a loose sugar, the bulk sugar--and coffee, some was packaged and some was bulk, but a lot of the items were bulk merchandise.

Q. In the canned goods, were those the kinds of cans we have now? They weren't in the glass jars, were they? They were canned commercially.

A. They were canned. Most of them were put out by Bunn and Company, you know, he ordered them from a canning company and he'd have his own name on there, Bunny brand, and he had his own coffee brand, and there were some others like well-known brands, there was a few of them on the market, but everything was in cans, no glass hardly.

Q. Were there items that were considered to be really exotic from foreign countries, did you have much--I know coffee certainly came from another country and you said the bananas you had, were you able to get imported goods very regularly or was it mostly Illinois produced items?

A. Well, most of it was articles that were raised around here, course, your coffee and your tea and all that was imported, and they came in--well, some of the coffees came in bulk, in hundred pound boxes or barrels or something, and your tea, you got them in the chests, they come in a chest.

Q. When you started you were talking a great deal about the grocery fair, now, your store is now carrying what line of goods? What sort of transition have you made, can you describe what things you're now selling?

A. Well, what few things we handle now is like, oh, milk and eggs, and oh, a few canned goods like corn, peas, some soap powders and that, but the full line of groceries, we're just out of it, because it just don't pay us to handle it, because you can't buy it here in town, you have to ship out to all of the little towns around us. It doesn't seem right, like Decatur, Jacksonville, and that because they have wholesale houses and we don't have anything here. And by the time you do all that and pay the freight it just don't pay out.

Q. And you find that you just can't compete pricewise with the larger stores and that's what people really notice?

A. Yes, that's right because you can't compete with the larger stores because if we had wholesale houses here and bakeries like we have--we haven't got a bakery in Springfield no more, no dairies--why you could buy local and it'd help everybody, but this way it don't.

Q. When did these resources that you were talking about, the bakery, the dairy, so forth, start to fold up? When did you lose these resources that had helped you stay in a competitive kind of business?

A. Well, your Sangamon Dairy, and your Illinois Dairy and that, they went out a long time ago. I don't know how many years and Bunn and Company, they quit considerable long time ago--they went into just

institutional merchandise--and Lafayette Smith they closed up a long time ago, that was an old established place. Amrhein's Bakery, they quit here, Shultze don't have any bakery here anymore, everything's shipped into Springfield.

Q. I'm just kind of curious in sort of a chicken and egg question in my mind, which quit first, did the smaller grocery stores start to close up or did the wholesalers start to close first? I'm wondering--or was it really kind of jumbled up, do you have any recollection about which started going the first?

A. Well, I think the smaller groceries started to quit first and then your wholesale houses they just started one after the other just giving up, and towards the last it was just no place to get it.

Q. Well, you made the decision then because the wholesalers were not available locally and you couldn't get the items at a cost that would be reasonable for your customers to stay in business, which is a decision that's quite different from, I think, most of the stores. You talk about all these other stores, they're not here any more. They decided to quit and you decided to do what?

A. Well, we always did from the time we started the store, we always handled some feed and I've always owned horses myself, and my boy likes horses, and we just decided to go into the feed business for poultry, rabbits, and horses and we sell a world of dog food. Then my boy, he was interested in tack and saddles and he can also do repair work on saddles and all that if anybody asks him to do it he can do it, and there's no saddle makers hardly in Springfield anymore.

Q. So instead of stacking people's orders you're stacking animals orders, you might say.

A. (laughs) That's for sure, we're taking care of the animals instead of the people.

Q. I take it that that works out reasonably well, that you've been able to shift and take what was probably a very small segment of your business and enlarge a plant and become specialized like everybody else?

A. Yes, well really, we have all we can do for the two of us with our feed business and tack business, it keeps us busy all the time.

Q. Now do the customers that come to you now range further than they used to? The customers that you're getting for the feed and the tack and so forth, are they going to be coming from even out of town now?

A. Oh yes, we have them from all around us here; Auburn, and clear over to Pleasant Plains, and Riverton and all around we have them.

Q. I've seen some stores to go along with this discussion we're having about the trends and the change of the types of the stores that are in

business. I've seen some small or general type stores starting to crop up again in isolated situations. Do you think they're coming back at all?

A. Well, I think in some locations--I've got a friend that runs one in a kind of a neighborhood where there's still a lot of elderly people. And old people have an awful time when they get sick to get somebody to bring something to them. We have had calls here where people said they were sick, they couldn't get nobody to deliver to them and ask me if we still delivered. The only thing I could tell them is I didn't have the merchandise to sell them, I'd be glad to deliver to them if we had it, but we just haven't got it. Them people are going to have to be taken care of some way or the other.

Q. So that's one of the needs that just hasn't really been replaced by the modern supermarket kind of entity?

A. No, that hasn't been replaced because when you go there you take it with you and these people that are old and can't carry it and have no car or no friends to take them over there, they're just in a bad way of going.

Q. You don't have any plans though, to enlarge the items that you're selling for people--grocery items, you mentioned you have just a few now.

A. I've thought in time to kind of put in a little more stock again, but it's going to take a little--to see what people, I've got to wait now to see, kind of what people really want--but I'm still in the grocery business by heart. (laughs)

Q. Is it something that you found that you just really couldn't get out of, you know, I would think that maybe if things got a little hard and you got to the point where people were just not coming in as they had and the stock was harder to come by. Did you ever consider going into some business other than the grocery business or did that not even occur to you?

A. No, because I just felt after I seen the grocery business slipping I knew I could make a good living at the feed and all that and the tack business because I know every horseman within a radius of fifty miles around Springfield, but at the same time I still miss the old grocery business.

Q. Well, it's nice to know that at least the store's here and we appreciate at least having that as a memento to your effort for over many years. Thank you very much, I appreciate it.

END OF TAPE