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Oral History Number: 024-001

Interviewee: Harry Oscar "H.O." Bell

Interviewer: K. Ross Toole

Date of Interview: December 13, 1965

Project: Harry Oscar "H.O." Bell Interviews Oral History Project

K. Ross Toole: This is an interview, one of what I hope will be a series, if Mr. Bell has time, with Mr. Harry Bell of Missoula, on December 13, 1965, concerning the early days of the automobile and roads and the early days of the Ford agency of Missoula. Now, Mr. Bell, you say a few words and then we will see if we can get a level here.

Harry Bell: Well, I started in business here in 1915, and I had a little place across the street here during the early model T days, and shortly after I also took the Buick [dealership] and had another room in the same building [on South Higgins Avenue]. You know, it really is just fantastic when you look back at it, all the things that I went through and the hardships and everything else, but I don't know, I always have so much drive it seems that nothing could slow me down.

KRT: The value of these things is that you can do that, you can sit at home and somebody says, I have heard more people say, sons and daughters say to parents, "Dad, why don't you write this up?" But it is a profoundly different thing to sit down with a pen or a typewriter and a tape recorder and that is the only value things have. Otherwise I think they're an invention of the devil because among other things they make everybody nervous and they get formalized and you don't get out of an interview, if it has to be question and answer, what you really want. But we will start with this rig anyhow. But you ought to go back and you ought to go back in these interviews to the time when you were a boy, because we are after a biography here and this I think will come out pretty slowly.

HB: It will bring it up and I think it would be quite educational to youngsters to see what a kid went through in those days as of now and the how easy the things we have that we never thought of having in those days and things of that kind, why it is just ridiculous.

KRT: Another thing is that there are not a great many places where this can be found out now because I travel around the state trying to find people who have been in the state long enough to have passed through much of the formative period, and I can't find them. Just to begin on this first interview, Mr. Bell, let me ask, you first of all, where you were born and when.

HB: I was born in Coshocton, Ohio. C-o-s-h-o-c-t-o-n.

KRT: Indian name.

HB: It's in the north, pretty well the northeastern part of the state.

KRT: Coshocton. What year, Mr. Bell?

HB: 1884. December.

KRT: Grover Cleveland was elected president for the first time that year. Now just take me up to the time through your early schooling.

HB: Well, I went to school. We lived in Coshocton after I was born until I was 5. My father was an agent for the Standard Life and Accident Insurance Co. And when I was 5 years old, we moved to Columbus, Ohio.

KRT: How big was Coshocton, would you guess?

HB: Oh, it was just a little town, probably like Hamilton is today. Something like that.

KRT: A couple of thousand people?

HB: Yes. But there was quite a plant started there which my father was interested in. It was called the Teskerolis. Advertising novelty company. And they made calendars and later made novelties of all kinds and the company is, I think, still in existence.

KRT: What was the name of the company again?

HB: Teskerolis. I don't know whether the name of the company now is the same as it was then or not. But I know that they developed into a tremendously big outfit. Later on, when we moved to Columbus, my father got out of that and was the general agent in the state of Ohio for the Standard Life and Accident Insurance Co. We were there in Columbus for about two years and then we moved to—he bought a little place down in Athens, Ohio. 40 acres. His idea was that there were four of us kids and we could be educated there and go through the university there and so forth.

KRT: How big was Athens?

HB: Well, Athens was just a small town. I don't think Athens was over 5,000 people then.

KRT: The university was there then, at Athens?

HB: Yes. That is a big institution now.

KRT: Oh, tremendous. So, you started school there in Athens. Or did you start in Columbus?

HB: In Columbus, yes. And then Columbus, they had a school on Fifth and Neil Avenue, and school's kind of set up from the street a little so you had to go up steps all around it to get in it.

Those days we read about the gangs, nowadays the kids. Well, there was two gangs at this school and when I started to school there, why they had to decide what gang I belonged to. [Laughs]

KRT: Gangs aren't new in other words.

HB: No, the gang I got to belong to was the Bungaloo Gang. [Laughs]

KRT: Were these pretty tough kids?

HB: Yes, they were. Just fighting, that is all. There was no stealing, or destroying property and things like that. I don't know, it was just a bunch of kids that got together and they kind of run their show and the other kids run theirs. But we'd had fights.

KRT: You had brothers and sisters. How many?

HB: I had an older brother, he was three years older than I am, and a younger brother—that was two years younger—and a sister that was 3 at that time.

KRT: Four all told. Now, how long did you stay in Athens?

HB: Well, my brother stayed there until he passed away, which is about seven or eight years ago now.

KRT: How many grades of school did you go through?

HB: Six. In Athens. That is all the schooling I ever had.

KRT: That was the works. That's amazing. Although, it isn't the same today as it was then.

HB: No.

KRT: You didn't need as much in order to compete as you do now. Although I'm not sure that makes it true, I suppose it made it rougher for you.

HB: Yes, I don't know. Although in our business here, we have never had any qualifications about education at all in our business here. Never had.

KRT: And it works?

HB: It has worked wonderfully well.

KRT: Yes, it has. Now when did you get to Indianapolis?

HB: Well, I didn't go to Indianapolis. When I was about 12—my father [William Jefferson Bell] died when I was 9—and left my mother [Susan] with this 40 acres with a \$600 mortgage against it in a yellow clay hill country. And we had a team of horses and we had a few Jersey cows. And my mother—and we had chickens—and my mother milked the cows and took the eggs and stuff and she had a regular routine of customers in Athens where we would go in every Saturday and deliver eggs and butter to these various customers.

KRT: Did you did a wagon? How did you get into to town?

HB: We had a buggy and we also had one-horse wagon.

KRT: How old would your mother have been, about, when your father died. And she was left with four kids.

HB: She would have been in the late 40s. She was a schoolteacher when they were married.

KRT: Now, you took in eggs. What else did you raise on this 40 acres?

HB: Well, we raised a little wheat, which we took into town and had it ground at a grist mill that ran on the Hocking River. It was run by the flow of the water and it was some stones that rotated, you know, in opposite directions and ground it out and we got our flour that way. We also got the, what we called shorts, which was from the flour between that and the bran. If anybody today knows what shorts is. But, anyway, that was what we fed to the cows. My mother used to make it with hot water and let it cook up just like a mush and all the cows got that. We had about a half dozen cows.

KRT: Did you kids milk the cows?

HB: No, sir, my mother always milked the cows. She wouldn't let us milk the cows because she said you had to milk a cow completely dry. If you didn't, they gradually go down in the flow of milk. So, she wouldn't—

KRT: Did she sell butter?

HB: Oh yes. You bet. We made it in these round wooden dyes that made kind of a flower on the top of the dye and that would be a pound of butter. And she would work that butter in a wooden bowl, a great big wooden bowl with a paddle, a wooden paddle, to get all of the moisture out of it.

KRT: Did she churn it first?

B. Yep, oh yeah. We let the milk sour, she would skim the cream off the milk and that cream would go into the big crocks and then she would churn it when it got sour enough, she would churn it into butter.

KRT: What kind of a house did you have there?

HB: Well, we had a frame house, had a basement with an outside entrance to the basement. You couldn't get to the basement from the inside of the house. It was kind of on a little slope. We had a big spring, 150 feet from the house.

KRT: Did you irrigate these acres?

B. No, you didn't need irrigation in that country. The rainfall there is quite sufficient most always.

KRT: How long did you stay on the farm?

HB: Well, my oldest brother and I, we got to fighting so much between ourselves that my mother was, and I would get so mad that my mother got afraid that I would kill my brother. I hit him on the head one time with a hoe and cut a whole gash in his head.

KRT: How much older was he, now?

HB: He was three years older than I was. Another time we had got into a fight and he had gouged his fingernail into this eye of mine and that is really why I have to wear glasses. And so she asked her brother [Daniel Mullett], who lived up near Fort Wayne, Indiana, 20 miles out of Fort Wayne, if he wouldn't take me up there. He had a boy about my age, too, and there were two girls, also, in that family. He told my mother to send me up there and he would take care of me. Well, I went up there and stayed until 1901. And in 1899 my uncle bought the first automobile in that country. People never heard of it. It was made by some German people in Milwaukee. It was called a Milwaukee Steamer.

KRT: Was it a steam automobile?

HB: Yes, Milwaukee Steamer. It had a boiler with 350 copper flues in it; the way the boiler was made, it had a plate on the sides and these tubes went through and they were pinned over on each end. Here is a sample of what you might get around the steamer. I got a scarred there when fooling around.

KRT: Now, how was this thing fired?

HB: Well, with a kerosene burner.

KRT: How long would it take that machine to warm up?

B. Oh, not too long; it had a hot fire under there. And I have had two or three automatics so that when the steam pressure got so high it would shut off the burners so that just the pilot light would burn.

KRT: Just keep it simmering?

HB: Yeah, it was quite a thing. Made by some Germans up there.

KRT: Was this one of a kind, do you suppose, or would they have made three or four of them?

HB: Oh, yes, they made several. That is the only one I ever knew of.

KRT: Did you ever drive it?

HB: Oh, yes, you bet.

KRT: How were they to drive?

HB: It had a lever here, but no wheel. It just had a lever. It went with the shaft down here and a couple of lines across to the wheel and, of course, we know automobiles now. It would be so crude you wouldn't believe it.

KRT: What kind of tires? Did it have solid tires?

HB: Solid tires.

KRT: You must have gotten kind of a rough ride out of it.

HB: Well, it was. Of course, the roads were rough, too.

KRT: How long were you with your uncle?

HB: Well, I was there until 1901, the fall of 1901.

KRT: That would have made you how old?

HB: In 1901, I was 17 years old.

KRT: What did you do at your uncle's? Did you work?

HB: Oh, yes, he had a farm and I farmed. We had horses and mules and he had quite a few cattle and stuff like that. He was really a very prosperous farmer in that country. He was very industrious fellow. His farm was really the pride of farming in that area. Very prosperous as those days go. He had any new machinery came along that had any connection with farming. Why he had the first one that was. He was just that way. He had his own thrashing machine which he would thrash for neighbors, too. And then, later, that last year I was there, we had a corn husker.

KRT: Did he have a tractor?

HB: No, all pulled by horses.

KRT: This is too early for any tractors.

HB: Oh, yes, no tractors.

KRT: So, you are 17 when you leave the farm there and then where did you go?

B. I went to, in 1901, the spring of 1901, my uncle traded this car, the steam car, for a Winton, which was a two-cylinder gas car, the gasoline engine was a [unintelligible] two cylinders under the seats of the car.

KRT: Made where, Mr. Bell?

HB: Made at Cleveland, Ohio.

KRT: Let's go back a minute to this steam car. Were you extremely interested in this machine?

HB: Well, that was my greatest trouble. I couldn't keep my nose out of machinery. I couldn't keep my nose out of anything that was mechanical and I think, like most people, I think they are born with some, you might say, super—I don't know what you would call it—urge, push, or something. Or in other words, every human being, I believe, is made with more qualifications in one vocation than in any other for instance. I think that one great trouble with our country today is that too many people fit in the wrong hole.

KRT: Well, your interest in the automobile certainly then and in machinery went back a long way.

HB: Well, yeah. Anyway, that year I was going to go home that fall, I was going to go home and stay over Thanksgiving and Christmas and then come back. I got to thinking that if I could, well, while I was working with my uncle I got 16 dollars a month and my board. And I had to buy my own clothes, of course. But there wasn't much to spend any money for in those days. Well, then when he bought this Winton car that was in the early spring. We bought it from the Fisher

Automobile Company at Indianapolis, Indiana. And that was the first agency in Indianapolis and he had a brother by the name of Earl, and Earl Fisher delivered the car up to his place and stayed there with us for several days to learn us how to take care of it and run it and so forth. Of course, as much as I could, I was trying to learn all I could. So that fall when I was going home that I would go by Indianapolis and if I could get a job at Fishers [Carl Fisher Automobile Agency] that I wouldn't go home. So, I went down that way to go to Athens, and which I would have to go by Indianapolis or Columbus, and I got in there on a Saturday evening and I went directly from there. It was about 8 in the evening, and I went directly from there to the Fisher place by inquiring where this place was, which was at 330 North Illinois Street, if anybody ever wants to know. I never forgot that.

I went in there and there was a little colored boy washing some cars in the back end of this building. It was one story about 50 feet wide in the back end. And I went back there and asked this colored boy if Mr. Fisher might be there and he said, "I saw a light in the office when I come by" but you couldn't see in. It was frosted glass. He said, "Yes, I think he is in the office there." So, I went back down there and kind of peeked in and I saw somebody setting there and I went in and asked him if he was Mr. Fisher, and he said yes. And I started to tell him who I was and about my uncle and, of course, he knew my uncle and never heard of me. And, of course, I told him how good I was with machinery and mechanics and so forth and I can still see him just smile a little bit and finally he said to me, he said, "Well, I'll tell you, if you want to come down here Monday morning, we will give you a job and see what you can do. We will pay you a dollar a day."

KRT: Well, that was twice what you were getting.

HB: Yep, so I was there. And I stuck on the job. I evidently met all of the qualifications and so forth very quickly and it wasn't long until I was making a little more money and in two years after that, I was foreman of the shop there.

KRT: What did you do when you first started, Mr. Bell? Mechanics?

HB: Yes, I was a mechanic.

KRT: On Winton cars?

HB: On Winton and we also took on other cars. You see, Indianapolis at that time was really the Detroit as of today. See, there was an awful lot of cars, the early cars were made there. When you stop to think that there has been in the neighborhood of 3,000 different makes of automobiles made in these United States since its infancy and while now there are only a handful left, there's names that even I never heard of. And I have been in it all my life.

KRT: Of course, all these cars when you were working there were hand-made. There were no assembly lines.

HB: Oh, yes. There was no such thing as parts. You didn't have parts room.

KRT: Now, how did you get the body, for instance?

HB: They were made by carriage makers.

KRT: And then how did you get the engines, the pistons?

HB: They were made by blacksmiths, mostly, and then there were machine shops, you know, in those days and stuff like that.

KRT: Now, this Winton had two cylinders. What would the average car of that day have had? Would it have been a two-cylinder?

HB: Well, most of them were one. The first Winton was a one-cylinder, but in 1902 they came out with a two-cylinder and in 1905, they came out with a four-cylinder.

KRT: That is a big engine. Now, you were foreman after about two years there?

HB: Yes.

KRT: How many people would be employed, for instance?

HB: Well, we only had a handful, five, I think, or six. Something like that.

KRT: Now, were you mostly fixing these automobiles or making them?

HB: Mostly fixing.

KRT: This was not manufacturing there.

HB: No, there was a lot of manufacturing there though on cars. It was the National, the Premiere, the Marion, the Cool, the Apperson was made in Kokomo just a little north of Indianapolis.

KRT: Those names mean absolutely nothing to anyone. They are a long time gone. Was the Reo in existence then?

HB: Reo was not in existence. The Oldsmobile Company was in existence. The Curve Dash Olds. And the Reo, I guess with the stockholders, fell out in the early, about 1904 or along in there and R.E. Olds pulled away and started his own company and called it the Reo.

KRT: Oldsmobile.

HB: That's right.

KRT: Was the Hupmobile being manufactured then, do you know?

HB: Well, Hup come along after that, I think.

KRT: How about Buick?

HB: We had Buick along about 1904. We had Buick there. We sold Buicks, two-cylinder.

KRT: How about Packard?

HB: Packard, yes. Packard was the one-lunger.

KRT: Why the one-lunger, just because it was a two-cylinder and sounded like a one-cylinder.

HB: Yeah, I suppose. We called them one lungers.

KRT: Were these shops pretty well equipped mechanically?

HB: Well, we had lathes, we had shavers, we had all kinds of welding stuff, not the kind that we know of now. There was no such thing, understand, as arc welding. Or acetylene welding. I must tell you the whole history of acetylene some of these days but that would be too long right now to tell you. But I would like to tell you about it because that originated with Carl Fisher.

KRT: It did. Well, welding was no cinch, then, the way you were doing it.

HB: No. See, acetylene gas is the most explosive gas known to man. It is the only gas you can take and cut a piece of steel like a knife and a fellow by the name of [P.C.] Avery developed this thing. That is, he was the first man ever to be able to do it. And not get killed. All the automobiles of those early days were either kerosene or acetylene with a carbide generator. They had a little box below or a tank that held the carbide and they had a tank above where you opened a little valve and let the water drip down in the carbide and that made the gas for the lights. Well, of course, that was these carbide generators would get plugged up and it was just one source of trouble after the other. When the Prest-O-Lite then come along it just replaced that overnight, you might say.

KRT: Now, how long were you foreman and how long did you stay at Fisher's?

HB: Well, I stayed there until 1906, August 1906.

KRT: Then where did you go?

HB: Spokane.

KRT: Spokane? Did you come through Missoula en route to Spokane?

HB: Yes, on the Northern Pacific.

KRT: That was your first glimpse of Missoula as you went through?

HB: That's right.

KRT: What did you think? [Laughs]

HB: I had a great ambition to, I don't know; I'd been reading some stuff about the wild west and so forth and that's a long story I could tell you about the why and wherefore and something else.

KRT: Tell me just roughly why, what motivated you to leave Indianapolis.

HB: Well, there was a fellow in Spokane, two fellows, a fellow by the name of C. D. Bibbins and a fellow by the name of [C.F.] White, I can't remember his initials. And Bibbins owned the Mohawk Block there and White owned another one of the older big buildings which stands today. Both of these buildings do. But, anyway, they had ran the old Owl gambling house in Spokane for years and became quite wealthy people. And this fellow Bibbins had married a girl whose maiden name was Rose and she had a brother in Indianapolis who had a boy by the name of Lou Rose. And the Bibbinses had no children of their own at all and he was getting up in years and he thought that it would be a nice thing if he would finance this youngster in some business of some kind to get him started in business. So evidently, they, through their correspondence and so forth, this fellow Rose thought he would like to go into the automobile business and so he got a job with Carl Fisher as a salesman and he was there a year. And along toward half of the time he got to talking to me about, and telling me all about the west. But he had never been there himself, and evidently, he had corresponded a lot about it. Well, he told me about this rich uncle he had and wanted to start him in business and so forth and wanted me to go with him out there. Well, of course, I had been thinking about this a lot and then he would keep talking to me about various things and show me letters that he would get from his uncle and his aunt and so forth. So finally, I decided that I would go and they had sent him a letter of credit for us to take the agencies for what cars we thought ought to be taken. Those days, everything that you had on a car, even the windshield was an accessory.

KRT: The body and the wheels, and everything else was an accessory?

HB: The windshield was an accessory—the top was an accessory and stuff of those kinds. So, we bought a lot, of course. We went to Chicago and we bought a lot of accessories and of course he depended on me a lot for what we would take and what we wouldn't and so forth. Well, he got his letter of credit for \$100,000 which was a lot of money for those days. We took on the National Automobile Agency and the Mitchell. I don't suppose you ever heard of either one.

KRT: Never heard of either one.

HB: Well, the National was made in Indianapolis, and the Mitchell was made where, I have forgotten now just where it was made. [Racine, Wisconsin]

KRT: Now, Mr. Bell, when you got these agencies, how was it done?

HB: In those days when you took an agency, you contracted to buy so many cars and you had to put up 20 percent of the cost of those cars as a guarantee that you would take the cars.

KRT: In other words, you had to have some capital.

HB: And that was—the automobile business was run that way for years. Yes, 20 percent. And it took a lot of money to go into the automobile [dealership] as those days.

KRT: What would you have had to pay, roughly, for a Mitchell at that time?

HB: Well, a Mitchell was not a high-priced car. It was about along from \$1,500 to \$2,000 and National was from \$3,000 to \$4,000, along in there.

KRT: And you had to put up 20 percent in cash. Wow!

HB: That's right. And then every car, all the cars were shipped. Of course, sight draft attached. In other words, when they loaded the cars in the box cars, which everyone in those days shipped by rail, you would load the cars and the railroad company would get a bill of lading and a draft attached to this bill of lading and the railroad company were not even allowed for you to open the car until you had brought the paid draft from the bank to them, before they could even open the door of the car to let you unload.

KRT: You better not run short of cash. Now, just one more question. When you got the car in those days, you might have 20 percent in it in cash. Who determines the retail price? The agent?

HB: No, the factory. They tell you what the car is to sell for.

KRT: How much a margin of profit would they leave you on this?

HB: Well, they'd vary, of course. Most of them would be from 20 to 25 percent. Now, one of the great handicaps out in our country here, we had to invest in that car, oh, from \$200 to \$350 in freight. Then, too, there was other expenses that were added, which if you would figure as compared with the dealers in the vicinity of where these cars were made, their percentage, actual net percentage, was greater than ours, because we had a greater investment. And we had to add that on the price.

KRT: As to accessories. Could you make anything on accessories?

HB: Oh, yes, we generally got about 40 percent discount.

KRT: And this, how about lights? Are they part of the car?

HB: Oh, no, lights were accessories.

KRT: Now, when you were in Spokane, were you beyond the carbide stage or were you still carbiding?

HB: No, we were carbiding. That is—oh, no, when I got to Spokane, we were not carbiding or we were Prest-O-Lite gas tanks. The carbide entered about 1905. There were still some carbide after that, of course, but they went over to these gas tanks.

KRT: What is the gas they were using?

HB: Acetylene gas.

KRT: You were using the acetylene? The terrifically explosive stuff? Boy, I didn't know that. One more, going back. You came through Missoula. Did the train stop at all in Missoula?

HB: Oh, yes.

KRT: But you get out?

B. Well, I can't remember. I imagine I did. We generally did get out and stretched every place we could.

KRT: You don't remember any particular impression of Missoula at that time?

HB: Well, I was impressed by the setting. I remember that. And I was back over here in 1908. I don't really remember how I happened to come back over here. But I remember that I went to Libby, too. There was no road into Libby, you know, for years and years. You could only get in there by rail. I went to Libby, and at the same time, and I went across from Missoula, I think I got off at Ravalli and went by stage up to Polson and by boat to Kalispell and got the Great

Northern and went to Libby and then from Libby back to Spokane. I went to Libby to—this was not the same company that I was with anymore. That company only lasted one year. I really don't know the details of what happened because I didn't know anything about bookkeeping and cared less. All I was was a mechanic, and so forth.

KRT: Well, during that one year, Mr. Bell, was business pretty good?

HB: Well, we sold quite a lot of cars, but this fellow didn't know anything about business any more than I did and I knew very little, if anything.

KRT: So it lasted about a year. Then what happened?

HB: Well, he got a fellow by the name of Delmidge, who ran a drugstore there to go in with him and they started another company and called it the Delmidge-Rose Automobile Company and they talked me into going with them over there. So, over there, we had taken the agency for the ALCO trucks, American Locomotive Company. ALCO. And that was the first trucks in Spokane.

KRT: Hard tire cars?

HB: Oh, all solid tires.

KRT: Chain drive?

HB: Yep. And we sold the first trucks there, believe it or not, to the Spokane Dry Goods Company. That was the same as the Crescent Store there.

KRT: For delivery in town. There was no real business going out into the country with trucks this early?

HB: No, it was just mostly around town. But it did later.

KRT: How big were these trucks?

HB: Oh, they were up to five tons. Something like that.

KRT: Do they have dual tires in the rear?

HB: Not at first, but we did later. But they were solid tires, all solid tires.

KRT: You would get a terrific hard ride on some of those.

HB: Yes, of course, and you didn't drive as fast as you do now.

KRT: Would those have been four-cylinder?

HB: Yes, all four-cylinder.

KRT: Well, now how long were you with this second company?

HB: I was there until 1908 and then I was, I went to work for a fellow by the name of Bennett who had a place in Portland and he opened a branch in Spokane which was run by a fellow by the name of Stoner, Jack Stoner, who came to Spokane to run this place and they had this Stoddard Dayton car.

KRT: Stoddard Dayton?

HB: Stoddard Dayton. And it was, and it had been made for quite a few years already then. It was a very good car and a fast car. It was one I liked very much to drive because it had lots of soup and everything like that. And I went to work for them until 1910, and in 1910, some fellow by the name of Briggs from Seattle, their father was in business with Jim Hill on the Mississippi River years before in boats, running boats on the river, the Mississippi River. And Briggs sold out to Jim Hill and come out here and started a boat line on the Columbia and they had several boats, I don't know how many, that ran up and down the Columbia River. And I remember that they had maybe one or two boats that ran clear up in the Okanogan Country then. And they had windlasses on these boats on the front end and they would throw a line out on the shore and they would take the lineup and snub it up on a big dead head to get over these rapids and stuff like that.

KRT: Haul themselves up by the wench?

HB: That's right. They didn't have power enough to get over these rapids. Well, anyway, they were, these boys evidently, the old man had passed away and they had sold the boat outfit and left these boys quite a lot of money and they went into the automobile business in Seattle. So, they wanted to open a branch in Spokane. So, they talked me into running this branch. I didn't know an awful lot yet about business but they sent somebody over to keep the books and things like that. Well, that went along for, oh, I could go in with a lot of things in between there about my racing and stuff, which we will have to do some other time.

KRT: I'll catch you; don't worry.

HB: So, I went to work for them and ran that place and we took on the Lozier car and we had the York. The York was a four-cylinder, a very good car for those days. Probably no one ever heard of it in this country. But those days a lot of the cars were, there would be some company that would make the motor and some other company would make the rear end, some other

company would make the transmission and things of that kind. And this York car was, had a Rutenbur motor in it. You never heard of it, probably.

KRT: Rutenbur, no, but it must have been a good motor.

HB: Oh, it was for those days. But you got to remember this, that we talk about the fuel that we have to use in cars today. Those days the fuel we had, you could take a quart of gasoline and set it out here in the sun and it would be all evaporated in an hour. Nowadays, you can set it out there and it will still be there a week from now.

KRT: What did this do an engine?

HB: Well, I was going to tell you. The motors in those days were low-compression motors. They very seldom went over four-to-one compression ratio and when that exploded, it just exploded, just like a bunch of powder would, don't you know. Well, there was no push. Our gas nowadays, it pushes all the way down the whole length of the stroke. Those days they just gave one big puff and bang, that was it.

KRT: What would a car, for instance, the Lozier or the York do in terms of speed?

HB: Well, they were pretty fast cars. And then, we had Locomobile, too.

KRT: Well, now, that is one I have heard of.

HB: Locomobile was one of the best automobiles ever made, to me.

KRT: Made where? Indianapolis?

HB: It was made in Concord, Mass.

KRT: Is that so? It was made that far away?

HB: Yes. I was back there once during that period, about, I must have been there about 1910-1911.

KRT: You would have a terrific freight bill, wouldn't you? All the way from Massachusetts.

HB: Oh my, yes. You see, you could only get two, sometime three maybe, in a car. Those days.

KRT: How many cars, for instance, would you have on the floor at this late date? Two or three? You are not selling cars in great quantity.

HB: Well, we didn't really have any saleroom. We just had an office and the rest was just all open building. These buildings are still standing in Spokane, yet. They were built very good at that time. They were brick buildings and cement floor and stuff like that.

KRT: Now we've got you up to about 1911, or along in there. What happened then?

HB: In December 1912, before that, a fellow by the name of R. P. Rice, who was the Seattle branch manager of the Ford Motor Company. Really, I think everybody knew me in the country, because, I don't know, I don't mean to brag, but I must have been a pretty good mechanic and knew a lot about automobiles and could figure out a lot of things that was not so easy to do and things like that, because everybody knew me. In fact, everybody wanted to come to me to get their car fixed, but I couldn't fix them all. [Laughs] I had imported a couple of boys out from Indianapolis to work for me. And one of those fellows by the name of Davidson, he ran a shop after I come over here, for years. Out on East Sprague there.

KRT: Well, your first contract with Ford then was 1912.

HB: December 1912.

KRT: And this was from Seattle?

HB: Well, they wanted me before that to take a dealership and, of course, I didn't have any money. I was just working on wages and things like that, but I had always had about half a dozen different people, wealthy people in Spokane, who always wanted to put me in business. But I never would let them put any money behind me because I didn't feel that I was competent enough to run a business because I had seen so much of these businesses start and go busted and things like that, and I just couldn't face it. Well, anyway, in December 1912, a fellow by the name of F.A. Williams, he came to me and wanted me to go with him. Those days, the Spokane dealer was what they called a distributor. He got a percentage above what the other dealers got and he was the warehouse. He warehoused the cars and he put in his own dealers and things like that and that was, he wanted me to come to work for him and run the wholesale department. Well, that was quite a change in a way, not like when I was with the Grigg boys which their company was known as the Metropolitan Automobile Company. And when I was with them I was a mechanic, a salesman, and everything else. But we had, I had some other good boys working for me, but I was, of course, the boss. But anyway, he wanted me to go to work for him and run the wholesale department and put in dealers. So, in December, I went to work for him. And I used to travel all over the Palouse country and we had Yakima and Wenatchee, Walla Walla, Washington. Clear over here to Missoula and Great Falls.

KRT: How did you do your traveling?

B. By train, part of it and part of it with the car. I established most of the dealers all through that country. All these little towns, you see. And we would sell 1,500 to 1,600 cars a year.

KRT: A lot of automobiles for 1912. Now, are these all Fords?

HB: Oh, yes. All Fords. Model T's.

KRT: All Model T's by 1912? The generator on a flywheel. Going through the coils.

HB: That's right. The cylinder on the dash.

KRT: Roughly, now, it was about 1912 or '13 say. What was the price of the Model T: Do you remember?

HB: Well, they were about \$600 or \$700, along in there.

KRT: When you sold one was there credit at all, time payment or was this all cash?

HB: Not until about about 1913, I think the first contract papers were taken and Mr. Williams, he had connections there through the old Traders National Bank and so forth. And we started taking some contracts. There was very little of it, most of the cars were paid for in cash.

KRT: Now, we are up to about 1912 or '13. You stay with them until '15. You had in the meantime made visits to Missoula, I take it?

HB: Yes.

KRT: Was there any agency here at all?

B. Sure, a fellow by the name of Floyd Logan was here. He had a place right next to the Murphy's Corner. It was one of those little stores west of Murphy's Corner there.

KRT: Off Higgins? [It was in the 200 block of North Higgins Avenue.]

HB: Yes. I presume those rooms are about 21 feet by 40 or 50 feet deep. Something like that.

KRT: Was he the Ford dealer?

HB: Yes. He was the sub-dealer.

KRT: You set up this dealership via the Spokane wholesale outfit. Whatever happened to Logan? Was he out of business fairly shortly?

HB: Well, those days the Ford Motor Company were very exacting in their way that a dealer does business and they had had complaints in Detroit. I don't want to go into detail what these

were because I would be reflecting on somebody's character, so. But, anyway, they were cancelling this dealership. I had no authority to cancel a dealer, but Mr. Rice, who was the Seattle branch manager, wanted me to take this dealership. And I had no money, but as I said before, I had several wealthy people in Spokane always wanting to put me into business and one of them was R.B. Porter. There used to be a large railroad construction outfit by the name of Porter Brothers and Welch. And later on, they split up and it was Porter Brothers and there was one of the Porters lived in Spokane and one lived in Portland. And R.B. Porter lived in Spokane and became an admirer of me, I guess, because he always wanted to put me in business and stuff like that. They used to take me out on picnics with them. Sundays and stuff like that. So, when this thing come up, I went and talked with Mr. Porter and told him about it and, he said, "Harry, you go right ahead and whatever you want to do over there, why don't worry about the money part. I'll take care of that."

Well, I told him, I said I have to have \$30,000 to put in the business and I have to have \$30,000 credit at the bank so I can borrow that much more. "Fine, go right ahead." So, I went and then later I told Mr. Williams about this thing and then I was calling him Frank.

Frank said, "Well, why didn't you talk to me about it?"

Well, I said, "Frank, I didn't know. Mr. Porter talked to me a long time off and on about wanting to put me in business."

"Well," he said, "you better let me do it because," he said, "I know something about the automobile business and I can be quite a lot of help to you," and so forth. He said, "I think it would be much better for you if you would let me do it."

Well, I said, "on what basis, Frank, do you want to do it?"

He said, "You just write up what you think is fair and that will be all right with me." So, anyway, to make a long story short, I did. I sat down and I still have what I wrote down.

KRT: The original contract?

HB: Yeah.

KRT: About the same amount of money? A total of \$30,000 and \$30,000 credit?

HB: Same thing. That's right. So, here's what I wrote. I wrote that he would supply this money, \$30,000, and arrange at the bank for me to borrow \$30,000 and after the first year, I would pay him back \$10,000 of his original investment plus 60 percent of the profits. The second year, I would pay him another \$10,000 of his original investment and 40 percent of the profit. The third year, I would pay him the last \$10,000 of his original investment plus 20 percent of the

profits and the business would be mine. So, that's the deal we made. And that's the way it started and that's the way it is. [He began the business in 1915.]

KRT: And you made it.

HB: I made it.

KRT: That's paying it back pretty fast according to today's standards.

HB: That's right.

KRT: You borrow capital today, frequently you do it for 20 years.

HB: That's right.

KRT: Rather than three years.

HB: Well, here is the thing, now. Those days, you could just figure out almost how much you were going to make. There was no such thing—we did no trading of cars, see. And there was no, we sold a car, you knew exactly what you made on it gross, started right out with, don't you see.

KRT: So, it's predictable.

HB: Why sure. I knew what we could sell and it worked out so I got along fine and wasn't long until I had all the credit I wanted without any help anyway. Those days, of course, we got to remember this, it was a lot different than it is today. I think a man's character had more to do with what he could borrow than the assets he had. Nowadays, you have to give them two to hold for every one you get.

KRT: You sure do. You didn't take over the Larson place though.

HB: You mean the Logan place? No.

KRT: You scouted around, did you?

HB: This building over here, Mr. Simon's. [This was the 300 block of North Higgins.]

KRT: This is across the street?

HB: No. Judge Patterson's had built this building right here, this first building and it is still here. And there were three rooms in there. I think they are about 20 some feet and I think about 50

or 60 feet long or so. So, I started in one of those. I bought Logan's parts, you see, and whatever stock he had and stuff like that.

KRT: Did he have any cars?

HB: I can't remember. He had probably two or three, maybe, something like that.

KRT: Now, would you put a car in a showroom at all or did you just?

HB: No.

KRT: How many cars did you sell the first year?

HB: Well, to tell you the truth, I can't remember.

KRT: This would be in the neighborhood of what? 10? 12?

HB: Oh, no, 100. Those days, we were selling more than half of the cars. The bulk.

KRT: That's a lot of automobiles. This is 1915, isn't it? Strictly the Model T. Who were your competitors in town in terms of other automobile makes?

HB: Well, we had Chevrolet, and we had some other cars. I have forgotten, now, just what all.

KRT: It couldn't have been a great many.

HB: No.

KRT: Three or four, four or five?

HB: Yeah, something like that.

KRT: How difficult were the parts to get?

HB: The Model T's were never hard to get.

KRT: By this time, this is an assembly line production?

B. It was a standardized product. They made the Model T from 1908—of course, there were minor changes through this whole sequence—from 1908 until 1928.

KRT: When the Model A comes in.

HB: When the Model A started, yes.

KRT: How substantial were the improvements? Take the clutch, for instance.

HB: Basically, all improvements were—style, meant nothing. It was fundamentals that made the product a better product.

KRT: Would the clutch have been about the same? The same theory on the clutch from 1908 to 1915?

HB: Yes.

KRT: The same on the brakes?

HB: Practically so, yes.

KRT: The same on the tires? Or were tires developing?

HB: No. They were developing. You see, also, we took on Firestone tires. We bought several carloads of tires in the early days when we were here.

KRT: Did you say you took on Buick somewhere along the line?

HB: Yes. We had Buick for about a year or two. In one of the other rooms there.

KRT: Who owned that building?

HB: Patterson. Judge [J.E.] Patterson.

KRT: Now, could I ask you if you, let's take the year 1915, the year that you arrived here, or '16, or early in your arrival here, if you had wanted to drive to Bonner, a short trip, what kind of a road would you have encountered?

HB: Well, it was dirt all the way, of course.

KRT: Gravel or just dirt?

HB: Well, there was very little gravel. It was generally just what you—

KRT: Washboard?

HB: The country board. A regular country road.

KRT: How about the road to Helena? Would you have taken off in 1915 or '16 to go to Helena? Or would you have taken the train?

HB: Oh yes. Oh no.

KRT: You would have driven.

HB: Yeah.

KRT: How much tire trouble would you have had between here and there?

HB: Well, it depended. If you were good with your eyesight and could dodge the stones and obstructions that would punch a hole through a tire, why you could do pretty good.

KRT: Could you get there without any—get there and back without a flat?

HB: Yes, a lot of times. Sometimes you did, sometimes you didn't.

KRT: Now, that road, for instance, you must have gone over Priest Pass.

HB: Well, that one that followed the railroad, you see. Over Blossburg and around through there.

KRT: How would you have done on power, getting up the hills there?

HB: Well, we had a fellow by the name of [Glover] Ruckstell that originated, over here in Seattle about that time, and he made a two-speed axle, and when that come along—that was not in production yet—but later on, we had that. But the gas tank on all the cars in those days was under the seat and when you go up a hill, why the gas, if your tank was a little low, why the gas wouldn't run up into the carburetor. So, there was occasions when you would have to back up. Of course, there was hills that you couldn't get up.

KRT: Did you have more power going up backwards?

HB: No.

KRT: I can remember in the early days with my old Model T, backing up when I couldn't go up frontwards. Why that was just as easy.

HB: Well, you see you just couldn't get the gas to the carburetor.

KRT: Now, where did you live, Mr. Bell, when you first came to Missoula?

HB: We lived in the Sacajawea Apartments.

KRT: The same apartments that are now there?

HB: That's right. They were, of course, pretty new then.

KRT: You would sell as many as 100 or 200 automobiles as 1915-1916?

HB: Oh, yeah.

KRT: These all came in on the railroad?

HB: Yeah.

KRT: Who was your biggest competitor? Chevrolet in that early period?

HB: Well, I can't recall. Chevrolet, of course, was one and there was several others. I would have to go back and—

KRT: Now, were you, in those early days, how much credit was, how much time buying were you permitted?

HB: Not very much. No, we could handle anything we wanted to, but we didn't take contracts mostly, so we would just take a man's note. Some businesses here, we would put them on the books. And send them a bill at the end of the month.

KRT: Now, were you selling trucks to any degree?

HB: Oh yeah, pickups and we had a Model T truck, too, you know.

KRT: Well, I wanted to ask you about the Model T truck. Was this a sizable one?

HB: No, it was a tonner. It would haul a couple of tons, of course.

KRT: Were these sold mostly for delivery purposes?

HB: Mostly, yes.

KRT: Not much trucking, beside that. No out-of-town trucking. This is much more recent. Now, another question, when did you begin to get the pressure, Mr. Bell, for improved roads and where does this pressure come from? Roads are being made by counties now, in this period.

HB: Those days, in the early days, of course, the roads, I can remember when I was in Indiana with my uncle, we used to have to put in so many days working on the roads. Every farmer had to put in, based on his acreage and such, he had to spend so many days improving roads.

KRT: He did?

HB: Yes, sir. That was in Indiana.

KRT: Was that done by counties in Indiana?

HB: That's right.

KRT: Every farmer had to put in days working on the roads. I wonder if there was any system like that in Montana.

HB: Not that I know of, no. I think that what was done was done by the counties and the state did some, I can remember when I first came here and before that. What was the fellow's name that was head of the State Prison, old- timer? You know.

KRT: Oh, he's been there for years and years. I can't remember his name now.

HB: Well, anyway, he had a crew up here, between here and Drummond, where those big slides were and such. I know they did some work in there, because I can remember that because I went through there one time when there was a whole crew working there. Conley or Donnelly, wasn't it?

KRT: Donnelly.

HB: Conley, I think.

KRT: Conley. Wasn't it Frank?

HB: Frank Conley, yes. That's right.

KRT: Now, you are getting, by 1915-16 and in the teens, an automobile that is pretty darn effective in a Model T and I suppose in other makes, too. Were there any automobile clubs in those early days?

HB: Well, there were, but not in here. But in Spokane we had one there. And we used to go out on the roads and work on them there, but we did it as a voluntary thing. To improve the roads. A fellow by the name of Gilbert and his son still runs the club in Spokane, today. Frank Gilbert.

KRT: Was it the Spokane Automobile Club?

HB: Yes.

KRT: And you would go out and work on the roads?

HB: Yes.

KRT: As a voluntary kind of thing? There wasn't any group this early in the game going down to county commissioners and saying, now, damn it, we want some better roads around here?

HB: Well, of course, there were pressures from certain, maybe ranchers or somebody like that, you know, to fix the road so he could get from his place and so forth.

KRT: Well, the reason I was asking was that I was curious as to whether or not the automobile gets better than the roads get, I think.

B. Well, the automobile has been, the roads have been behind the automobile all the time.

KRT: All the way through, including today?

HB: Yep.

KRT: I just wondered whether it was spontaneous that finally a bunch of county commissioners say, ye gods, we got to do something about the roads.

HB: Well, when the Bureau of Public Roads was organized federally and they set up a system whereby a state could get federal aid, then the state had to set up a commission to function through the Bureau of Public Roads. And in our state, as I remember, I think it was 1925, I don't know, I was in on it because I have always been on this road thing an awful lot, all the time. But I think it was in 1925 that we passed legislation whereby we had a highway commission.

KRT: This is due to the entry of the federal government into putting up cash on roads. It puts the pressure on counties or states to make many roads. I am having a hard time with this young man who is doing road building in Montana, trying to trace down early pressures to make roads better because the automobiles already were capable of doing more than the road would let them do.

HB: Yeah.

KRT: Another thing I am trying to trace down is paving. Early paving. When and how that stuff was mixed. Was it just oil spread on gravel first?

HB: Well, the first oil that we had, of course, we didn't have oil at first, we just graveled. And then when we come through, we got to thinking at first, I remember, that there was only one oil that could be used and that was asphalt-based oil, which is more or less true today. And we had to get that in California.

KRT: Had to ship it in.

HB: They would ship it in, and we mixed that with a regular blade, you know, and [unintelligible] and stuff like that.

[End of Interview]