

INTERVIEW WITH
Ivan M. Fitzwater

by

John E. Wickman
and
Maclyn P. Burg

on

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and
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for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library



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Ivan M. Fitzwater
Donor

May 25, 1977
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DR. WICKMAN: The first question I think I wanted to ask you, I wanted to get some biographical information on you because I just don't have it; it'll make it easier for the people that might use this transcript. When and where were you born, and how did you get to Abilene?

MR. FITZWATER: I was born on a farm near Batavia, Ohio, April 11, 1892--want me to go on?

DR. WICKMAN: Yes, go right ahead, just sketch out the first few years of your life.

MR. FITZWATER: My folks moved to Greenleaf, Kansas, in late 1899, just before the turn of the century, and my folks had a restaurant there. At that time the Duckwalls, who had been there a year or so before, had a bicycle repair shop. This was the business they were in. New bicycles, Singer Sewing machines and hand operated DeLaval Cream Separators were sold in this shop.

DR. WICKMAN: And you're kind of related to the Duckwalls--

MR. FITZWATER: My mother was a Duckwall.

DR. WICKMAN: So your mother was a Duckwall.



FITZWATER: My mother was a sister of the Duckwall brothers. Then my Uncle Lease Duckwall opened his first variety store in Abilene in 1901, you know about that. Then my folks--my mother and father separated when I was thirteen--and so my mother and we three children went to Abilene in 1905, early in 1905. Our household belongings, furniture and the like, were moved from Greenleaf to Abilene on a hayrack pulled by a team of horses. Mr. Alexander, a livery stable owner, hauled our belongings to Abilene in payment for a \$75.00 bill that he owed to the restaurant.

WICKMAN: Now, how far was that, from Greenleaf to Abilene?

FITZWATER: Well, it must be around seventy miles or thereabouts. And this was in the spring of the year. My brother and I rode on top of this load of furniture all the way down. And it was drizzling rain part way down, or part of the time. And when we got in there around Clay Center, as I remember, we got stuck in the mud. Oh, we had a dickens of a time. A wheel broke on his hayrack. I'll bet it took the biggest part of a week to get down there with all the troubles we had. We children had a lot of fun on that trip, we boys. I



finished up my sixth grade in Garfield School, after arriving in Abilene early in the spring.

WICKMAN: Now how old were you then?

FITZWATER: I was thirteen when we arrived in Abilene. My mother was one of the early clerks, clerking in the Abilene Duckwall store, after the store had moved across the street from Uncle Lease's original store, which he opened in 1901.

WICKMAN: I see, this is what she did in the Duckwall store. Where did you live?

FITZWATER: We lived with my grandmother Duckwall and Uncle Eldon Duckwall--Eldon was single of course--and he didn't even work in the store. He was a bookkeeper at Security Mills, I believe. And I found out later that he would bring his paycheck home, my mother the same, they would put that all in a fund, and that helped support we children, my brother and sister and me. And I bought my own clothes and books, everything of that kind from the time I was thirteen. And I always managed to have a little money to fall back on, some to jingle in my pocket.



WICKMAN: What did you do at thirteen to earn enough money for your books and clothes? That's kind of interesting.

FITZWATER: Well, at that time the Duckwall store handled Singer sewing machines, had a Singer sewing machine agency. So Uncle Lease had a salesman out calling on the farmer trade and so on, selling sewing machines. And he'd always have one horse, or maybe a team at times, for this wagon affair that hauled the sample sewing machine around on; so I took care of the horses, that was my job. It seemed, I got two dollars a week, but I can't remember for sure, the amount didn't mean much to me. My job was to hitch the horse or team up. Now, that was before I started working in the Bell Telephone office. My job was to hitch the team up or one horse, whichever,-- sometimes one horse, sometimes a team--and take them down to the store in the morning, that was part of the job. I fed them, took care of them, kept the barn clean and all that sort of thing.

WICKMAN: When you first went to Abilene, since you were thirteen years old, you may have some memories of first arriving in town, what kind of town was it?



FITZWATER: Abilene, well just one of the nicest places that I ever lived in; it was then. I can tell you, it was just, just a nice place to live.

WICKMAN: Busy town?

FITZWATER: Oh, yes--

WICKMAN: With commercial activities?

FITZWATER: Yes, and so many nice people, oh, we didn't have any slum area. There were several colored families in town, but we never had any trouble with them, as I remember.

WICKMAN: Which side of the town did they live in?

FITZWATER: Well, sir, I can't tell for sure, maybe if I would drive around I could tell; it was kind of the northwest part of town; it wasn't in the south side, no, no. It seemed to me it was the northwest part of town where most of them lived. And they seemed to like to be among their own kind, and I never heard of one of them ever being in jail. And, by the way, I don't know if Abilene had a jail or not, they must have had. Oh, they must have had one but, I can't remember for sure.



WICKMAN: No, I meant where did you live? I mean where physically in the town did you live?

FITZWATER: We lived with my grandmother, of course, as I mentioned before, just off of Buckeye on East Seventh Street. The house was the second house from what was an alley behind Cleason Brown's home. My grandmother's house was the second house on East Seventh Street east of Buckeye on the south side of the street. Now I can't remember the street number; isn't that something? It was a flat roof topped house (no inside plumbing).

WICKMAN: Well, is it the one that, the house A.L. Duckwall lives in now?



FITZWATER: Oh, no. No, it's not that one. It was on the other side of Buckeye street from Uncle Lease Duckwall's home.

WICKMAN: East of Buckeye.

FITZWATER: Yes. At that time Cleason Brown lived on the corner of Seventh and Buckeye; high school's there now, I believe.

WICKMAN: No, junior high school.

FITZWATER: Junior high. And so that's where we lived from 1905 to 1909. And, oh, it was just a nice neighborhood bunch of young fellows to play around with. We had a great time, like I mentioned. Playing shinny on Sundays, etc., and these kids weren't any angels, I wasn't either, but when we were out playing that way, really I never did see any smoking and no liquor, nothing of that kind. There might have been among some of them at other times, but not on those occasions. And we kids had a swimming hole up northwest of Abilene on Mud Creek.

[Interruption]

FITZWATER: Well, now let's see, we were up at the swimming hole.

WICKMAN: We were talking about Abilene.

FITZWATER: About the swimming hole. That was quite a thing in the summertime there.

WICKMAN: Was that on Mud Creek?

FITZWATER: On Mud Creek. It seems to me it was up, oh, pretty well up there not too far from where the cemetery is, you know,



that far up. And the creek was just right for we kids you know, for depth and all. And I went out there one Saturday and I spent the whole day putting up a springing board for we kids. And the very next day I went out there and, before I got up to the swimming hole, I could see quite a bunch of people there, (not kids). And come to find out some fellow, I don't remember his name--he'd been drinking, it was brought out later--and he was going to show the boys how to make a dive. And he made a dive off of this spring board and he hit his head on the bottom of the pond and paralyzed him and he died within twenty-four hours. He was unconscious when I got there. And so I tore the spring board down, never used after that; spoiled it for us, you know. We kids could dive off of it and no trouble at all, and this fellow, if he hadn't been drinking, he probably would have been all right. But that was pretty sad.

In the wintertime we kids did a lot of skating on Mud Creek. We'd skate, some of us, starting north of town, go clear down to the Smoky Hill River, many times, with our skates. And we'd build fires along the way, occasionally you know, to thaw out our feet and so on. And, oh, we had another



swimming hole later when we were a little older, down on the Smoky Hill River. That was west of the power plant, Brown's power plant or mill they called it, it was a power plant or mill, anyway it was west of that, not very far. It was across the road from a family by the name of Ross. They had two boys; Ernie was the younger one, Harley I believe his name was, the older one. By that time I was night operator in the Bell Telephone long distance telephone office so my summer days were free, plenty of time for swimming.

WICKMAN: Now how old were you when you got that job?

FITZWATER: Well, I started in there in 1908, so I was sixteen. So in the daytime I didn't have to work at all; so I spent a lot of time down in the swimming hole along with some of the others.

Now this might be of interest to some of the folks there. This Bell Telephone office was upstairs over what was then Charley Townsend's drugstore; the location was 3rd and Broadway, where, I believe it is, the Abilene National Bank, isn't it or one of the banks, is there, now.



WICKMAN: Yes, 3rd and Broadway.

FITZWATER: Well, it was on that corner. And there was an outside iron stairway to get up to this office, (telephone office). At that time, the local telephones and the long distance telephones were entirely separate--they weren't even connected, there was no way to connect them. If we got a call for someone in Abilene, we had to send a messenger out, if that person had a phone it wasn't even connected up, you see. It might interest some to know that long distance calls were limited to a distance of about 200 miles, after that, voices would just fade out. (That's the way it was at that time.)

WICKMAN: I see, did he have to come in?

FITZWATER: Yes. If a long distance call would come into Abilene for someone in Abilene, we'd have to get a messenger and send out and get them, see. Of course, I was on duty all night seven nights a week--had a folding cot, army type cot, you see. Sometimes I could sleep pretty near through the night, without interruption, and many times I'd be up maybe



half dozen times during the night, you know, to answer calls and so on. I also had to relieve the day operator between twelve noon there and one p.m. every day and then Sundays, I had to work Sunday afternoons, as I remember to relieve the day operator. And let's see, what else--. While I was on night duty there, there was a livery stable that burned, which was on Buckeye between 3rd and 4th on the west side of the street, and I could look right out the window and see that, and that thing burned clear down one night and some horses were burned in that fire. I didn't know a thing about it till the next morning; I evidently hadn't been waked up during that night, you see.

WICKMAN: When did you first become aware of the Eisenhower family in Abilene?

FITZWATER: The first I remember of the Eisenhower boys, they were just--Eisenhowers, just another family in town, that's all. And the fact that they went to Lincoln School on the south side--I went to Garfield on the north side--we seldom came in contact with each other. So the first time I remember of the Eisenhower boys was when I'd go down and watch them practice



football on this athletic field which was then in the block where the fire station is, or was, may be still that way. (I believe the Library is there now.)

WICKMAN: In age you were actually between what, the General and Milton? You're older than Milton but younger than the General?

FITZWATER: Well, the other boys, I didn't know any of them except Earl. Earl is the younger one, wasn't it Earl?

WICKMAN: No, Milton is the youngest.

FITZWATER: No, what was the one in the picture there that let his hair grow? Roy. I'm sort of mixed up as to Eisenhower boys, other than Big "Ike", Edgar, and little "Ike", Dwight.

WICKMAN: Roy, yes, he went to Junction City.

FITZWATER: Now Roy, of course he was quite a bit younger, younger than I, you see. But the other boys I didn't even know them, no. And somehow or other I just admired those Eisenhower boys; they were such wonderful athletes, Edgar and Dwight, they were good in their playing; they showed good sportsmanship always,



you know; just plain type of fellows. And they weren't the only outstanding athletes in the high school at that time--of course, Herb Sommers was another one; he was catcher for the baseball team most of the time while he was in high school--probably one of the best that Abilene High ever had. So there were others that were outstanding too but something about these Eisenhower fellows that just, there was an attraction there somewhere. Well, Dwight, Little Ike they called him, he laughed a good deal, seemed to be a happy sort of fellow. I can remember that so well; about every time I'd see him, you know, he'd be laughing, kidding with the fellows and all.

WICKMAN: So then you really didn't know them until they got to high school, and you were all in high school at the same time, 1908 and 1909.

FITZWATER: No, I really didn't; I really didn't. Now in high school I was what you might say an athletic type, but I didn't go in for football. It got too rough for me, I was afraid that I might have an injury of some kind that might bother me the rest of my days; so I decided it wasn't worth it; so I didn't go in for football in high school. But I liked



turning pole work, horizontal bar work. And I got permission from the school board to build a turning pole, we called it, (horizontal bar). I got the four-by-four posts and the pipe and everything and went out there and dug the holes and set the thing up, guy wires and everything on the playground back of the High School building--did it all myself. See, mainly for my own pleasure and use, and others got started, too. I mastered all of the stunts that I'd ever seen anyone do. I stayed with them till I mastered every one of them--what we called the giant whirl, you go up to full arms length and all that--clear over the turning pole.

WICKMAN: Was that considered very unusual in Abilene that somebody would be interested in what today we might call gymnastics on a stationary bar?

FITZWATER: Oh, yes, there weren't very many of us. One older boy in Ike's class, Pat Makins was his name--don't know his first name, well, it was Patrick, Pat Makins they always called him, Pat. He knew about these different stunts, and he instructed us, (just not in school work at all), see, but out at recess and so on. So he's the one that showed us the main



things to learn to start with, you know, (the break) what they call it, that's very important, and so on. So thanks to him, he's the one that got us started. And then there was a boy in our class, Ben Haskell, he was quite interested in this horizontal bar, (turning pole work). There might have been others, but most of them didn't stay with it.

WICKMAN: I think that's interesting, I've never heard of this being done before.

FITZWATER: Some of the "would be athletes" would swing a little bit, you know, and that was it. I'd go over after school and practice and practice; it's a wonder I didn't break my fool neck. I had many a bad fall. My grip would sometimes let go, you know; you have to have pretty strong fingers to be able to master most of the turning pole stunts and sometimes they'd let go on me and, oh, I've had some dirty falls. I tried to hang by my toes one time; I was there alone after school, and my toes unhooked and I lit on my head, it's a wonder I didn't break my neck, somehow or other--it wasn't my time I guess.

WICKMAN: Well, let's go back to the Eisenhowers in high school.

The General played football, baseball, right?



FITZWATER: Yes.

WICKMAN: And did you have anything to do with the teams?

FITZWATER: No, no, I didn't. I didn't take part at all. Like I said, football, I didn't go in for football, in high school.

WICKMAN: Were there any other extra-curricular activities?

FITZWATER: Baseball, I just couldn't play baseball. I didn't have a throwing arm, I just didn't have it. I tried out one time for baseball and they put me on short, shortstop. I never will forget it. Well a fast grounder came out to me and I fielded it all right, when I tried to make the throw to first base, I got it too low and I hit the umpire and about knocked him out. So I decided that was no good for me. I never tried baseball again.

WICKMAN: Well, what other type of extra-curricular activities were you involved in high school, any, besides the turning bar?

FITZWATER: Well, in the way of athletics that was all.

WICKMAN: Anything else besides athletics, I don't know what else they had but--



FITZWATER: Well, we didn't have basketball then, nothing of that kind. .

WICKMAN: No theaters or newspapers, school newspapers--

FITZWATER: No, no. I was determined to become an artist.

WICKMAN: I see.

FITZWATER: I thought I was going to be an artist. That was one thing that I liked most, but it had nothing to do with school work. We had one teacher, an English teacher--I can't remember her name right now (red headed). In study hall one time--she had charge of it--I don't know why I did it, but I just started staring at her you know instead of studying. And it made her so nervous after a while that she came back to me and she said, "Ivan," she said, "you don't need to watch me; I can take care of myself." And she didn't like me from then on, and I didn't like her very well either. Well, anyway, my brother was a year below me in school--he was a freshman when I was a sophomore. So this same, Miss Dixon was this teacher's name, Dixon, Miss Dixon--well she taught both grades in English, see. So my brother got these hand-me-down books



instead of getting new ones. So he inherited one of the English books that I had; it was a book on poems. So I had taken one of the poems and written with pencil, crossed out certain words and inserted others, written in others, you know all the way through the poem. And I remember the poem was, "What is so rare as a day in June," etc., you remember that one?

WICKMAN: Yes.

FITZWATER: Well, that was the poem. My brother was called upon to read that poem in class. So he got up and read it, but the way I had written it, I had written the words in. I had written, "What is so rare as a day in a brewry," and all that sort of silly stuff you know, and he read it and she let him go and read it clear through, see, the kids giggling, and all you know. And Miss Dixon said, "What are you reading?"

"Well," he said, "I'm reading what's in this book."

She said, "Well, let me see that book." So he showed it to her, then she whittled it out of him that I'd had that book previously.



So she kept me in after school that night and tried to make me say that I was sorry that I had done that. Well, I wasn't sorry. And she kept me in, oh, golly, I bet you for a couple hours, hour and a half, anyway, and came in every once in a while and wanted to know if I would say I was sorry. "No," I told her. "I'm not sorry."

And finally she said, (now this was along near the end of the term), she said, "Ivan," she said, "if you don't admit that you're sorry about that I'll give you a failing grade." And she did that very thing. I never did admit I was sorry because I wasn't. And she had no right to do that. If I'd taken that to the principal, he wouldn't have stood for it but she did it; she failed me because I wouldn't admit I was sorry about something I wasn't sorry about. I was just as stubborn as she was: I shouldn't have done that, but I did.

WICKMAN: When did you leave Abilene then that first time?

FITZWATER: My mother and we children, my brother and sister and I went to Manhattan, Kansas in 1909, that was when the Duckwall store opened there at that time; it was 1909. I was



there at the opening, my mother and Vera Tull, who later became my wife; we were all there at the opening of the store. My mother and Vera Tull were the first two clerks in that store. Then, if you want to know what I did after that--

WICKMAN: Yes, well, were you through high school when you went--

FITZWATER: No, I was only a sophomore, went through sophomore class that's all. In fact, I never did go any further than that grade, really. No, I never did. I went to art school instead. I worked then part time in the store in Manhattan until the fall of 1910. Well, in the summer of 1910--the store couldn't pay me very much then--seven dollars a week was all I got. I couldn't pile up enough money--I wanted to go to this art school, Chicago Art Institute, and I wanted to pay my own way--I knew my mother couldn't afford it. But I couldn't build fast enough at seven dollars a week. So I quit the store and went to work for a building contractor who was then building the post office and what was known as the Marshall Building katty-corner across from each other, he had contracts for both of them. So I worked all summer and part of the fall, can't



remember the wages--I think it was about two and a half a day, which sounded pretty good. Then I went to the Chicago Art Institute in October of 1910 and ran out of money in the spring. Well, I had a job there at a wholesale house. I got a dollar or a dollar and a quarter every Saturday. That was all of the income I had. I paid my own expenses from what I'd saved. So I had to leave when my money ran out, did leave in 1911, (April, 1911) and went back to Manhattan, Kansas, and went to work in the Manhattan Duckwall store again.

WICKMAN: Well, you were not in Abilene when the General left for West Point?

FITZWATER: I missed him entirely, see. Well then in 1912 I went back to Washington, D.C. and I worked there, well, just about a year, as apprentice artist; I wasn't actually in the service, in the agricultural department where I worked. And I finally decided that kind of work wasn't for me, and I went back to Kansas and started working in the store then again.

WICKMAN: In the Duckwall store?

FITZWATER: Yes, the Duckwall store in Manhattan. Well, I was



sent to Junction City, Kansas, oh, pretty soon after I returned to Manhattan. No, it wasn't real soon, because I went up there in 1913; I managed that store in 1913. That was the sixth store in the chain, at that time. I gave up this art work because I couldn't see any future in it; I couldn't see how I could make a living at art work. So then I missed Eisenhower when he had been back to Abilene some years later. I read about it you know. My brother got to see him--(he isn't living now)--he told me he got to see him when he was there in Abilene visiting-- I mean after he had been out of high school and all, but I didn't get to see him at all (I mean Dwight Eisenhower).

WICKMAN: Then you moved back to Abilene a second time.

FITZWATER: We moved back to Abilene in 1918, must have been early in '18 or late '17--(it was early '18.)

WICKMAN: Had there been a lot of changes in the interim while you were gone? Did you notice many changes in Abilene from the time when you left?

FITZWATER: No, not a great deal. You know Abilene had always been, and probably is yet, a good substantial business town.



What I mean by that, the business doesn't fluctuate too much from season to season, year to year. It's just a good substantial town and was then and is yet, but not many changes, no.

WICKMAN: So what did you do when you went back to Abilene then?

FITZWATER: Then I went to work in the wholesale department of the Duckwall Stores Co. called the Western Merchandise, Co. which handled mainly merchandise for Duckwall stores. However we did some selling to other stores. And we issued a catalog, a monthly catalog, so I had charge of that. And working in office work that way--I'm not the office type--I like to be outdoors more, and I could see that was no good for me. So, after while, a couple of years of that, well, really four years of it, I could see that I was not the office type, (wasn't for me); I didn't like it. Duckwalls treated me just the finest in the world. I think they had more patience with me than I would have had with anybody else. Anything I wanted within reason I got it. So I had to come to a decision, whether to go ahead with office work or not. My Uncle Lease had high hopes for me in the company. He thought that later on I could be, you know, advanced



and all, but my heart wasn't in it. I didn't like it well enough. It was either go ahead that way or go back in a store. So I thought it over, oh, gosh, it took me six months or so to decide that the thing to do was just to get out on my own completely. And so, then I came to Idaho in 1922.

WICKMAN: What did you do up here?

FITZWATER: We located in Burley, Idaho, opened up our own store at Burley in July, 1922 under the name of "The People's Variety Store". And of course I did some buying in connection with the Duckwalls and so on--they helped me a great deal. But other than that it was our own business; we had no connection, (financial connection). Still the store work wasn't what I wanted; I'd been educated in it; that's all I knew in the way of business. So by the time our five year lease was about up, which was 1927, I was looking for something to do where I could get outside more--I wanted to be outside more. And some company had a set of penny scales in our store, (some Chicago outfit) on a profit sharing basis. So I watched those scales, you know, and I got to thinking maybe there's a field I could get into. I had to get into a bigger place though, I realized



that. It was where I could be outside. Penny scales would be a beginning, that is. So from that idea, that was what got me started in the vending machine business. And I decided to come to Boise, the largest city or town then in Idaho, about 23,000 I believe it was, and started in the vending machine business-- didn't know a soul in town at that time, not a soul.

WICKMAN: This would have been when now, in the early '30s probably?

FITZWATER: Oh, that was in 1927.

WICKMAN: 1927. What kind of vending machines?

FITZWATER: Well, it started with these penny scales, but I could see that it would take too many of them to make a living from income from scales alone, so I tried out various penny machines. I've handled these ball gum machines, cigarette machines, finally discard most of them and then--this might be of interest to you.

WICKMAN: Yes, go ahead, it is--

FITZWATER: You can cut it out if you don't want it--



WICKMAN: Go ahead.

FITZWATER: Well, anyway, to show how a business is started sometimes. I got into operating package gum machines, Wrigley gum, 5¢ packages, I got a few of them, along with some of these others you know, trying out different machines. And I had one of them in a restaurant, and every time I'd go in there to check that machine, a woman, (a man and his wife ran this place), about every time she would ask me if I couldn't get cigarette machine for them, a machine to handle cigarettes. And she told me of all the trouble they had with their cigarettes; she said the help would carry them out just like they were free, you know. She said they lost money on them; they couldn't afford to handle them any more. Well, I kept stalling her you know, I had never heard of a cigarette machine; they were that early in the vending machine field, in that business you see. I had never heard of a cigarette machine. And I thought there wasn't enough profit in cigarettes--I tried to discourage her. She kept after me though, so I mentioned that to a wholesaler where I bought my gum. I said, "Have you seen any ads of cigarette machines in any of your trade magazines?"



This bookkeeper said, "By golly," he said, "I just got through looking at one." He had seen the ad of the cigarette machine manufacturer so he leafed through it and gave me the dope, gave me the whole magazine. And that's the way I got started in the cigarette machine business. And that first machine, I still wasn't satisfied--I thought there wouldn't be enough profit, but the turnover was terrific. And that first machine, I used that one for, oh, I expect about three months before I ventured enough to buy another one.

WICKMAN: Where did you put the first one?

FITZWATER: Well, it was a place called the Pure Food Cafe; it's not in business any more. It was right here in Boise, of course. Thanks to them, they're the ones that really got me started; they gave me the idea. And gosh, it wasn't long then till other places would see the machines. I didn't really have to go out and solicit locations; most of them came to me. So I finally built up quite a nice business, but took it pretty slowly at first, learning the business as I went along. Well you could do that then, there was no competition. In fact I learned later that I was, not one of the first, I was the first cigarette



machine operator west of Denver, between Denver and California. There were one or two in California. I was that early in that field at that time but I didn't know it until I read the articles later.

WICKMAN: Well, did you stay in this business then right along, while you were working all the time?

FITZWATER: Oh, this was my only source of income, oh, yes. So I stayed in that business until 1945. We have two boys, and neither one of them seemed to be interested in the vending machine business when they were growing up. They weren't paying any attention to what I was doing; I tried to get them interested-- they wouldn't have anything to do with it. So our oldest boy, after the war he said, "You know, dad, I think I'd like to go in that business with you." Well, that was just what I wanted one of them to do, one or the other or both. So instead of taking him in as a partner, I sold out to him completely, sold the business to him. I said, "A business can't run successfully with more than one boss, and you're going to be the boss." It's an odd set-up. So I let him pay me off by the month, no down payment and one hundred and fifty dollars a month, no interest,



just start paying one hundred and fifty dollars a month. So that's the way he got in the business. And then I went to work for him, and I also repaired other vending machines for other folks. They found out I did that kind of work. I kind of took it easy. Now that was 1945, twenty-five years ago. And this boy, oh, he's a go getter. He is still in the business, and he built that business up, my goodness, it was just the right time for a younger man to take over, and I knew that. I didn't want to carry the load anymore; it was pushing me too much. But he built that business up, oh my goodness. Within a year he doubled it, and in another year more than that.

WICKMAN: This is still what he does?



FITZWATER: Yes, I started in '27, that was forty-three years ago, so between the two of us, we've been in that business during the forty-three years.

WICKMAN: Well, you've seen a lot of changes in Boise then too?

FITZWATER: Oh, my goodness. I had a lot of faith in this area

as to future development there. That's one reason I located there.

WICKMAN: When you came out to Idaho, why did you come back out?

FITZWATER: Oh, my brother and sister were at Twin Falls, Idaho; they had been there a year or so before that. They didn't ask us or anything; it wasn't that. And my mother had been out here a time or two visiting them and she always talked about Idaho you know, she liked Idaho.

WICKMAN: I was going to ask you this question too just for the record, it might be of interest to the people down at the [Dickinson County] Historical Society, but there is a Fitzwater family that was one of the early pioneers in Idaho.



FITZWATER: I heard of them and--

WICKMAN: This is a different family; no relation.

FITZWATER: Oh, entirely different.

WICKMAN: Interesting coincidence though.

FITZWATER: My initials as you know are I.M. Well, the first year we were here, I used to get mail addressed to Ida M. Fitzwater--I'd get it sometimes. And found out this was some woman with that name, Ida M., I never did meet her. Then I heard of some Fitzwaters in Mountain Home, Idaho, no relation that I know of.

WICKMAN: Let's also go back to something for a minute, after you left Abilene and came out to Idaho, when was the next time you saw General Eisenhower? In '52, was that it?

FITZWATER: I didn't see him until '52. Oh, yes, that was the first time I got to see him after 1909 when he was in high school.

WICKMAN: Well, tell me about how you met him over here at the state house.

FITZWATER: Well, there were three or four others waiting to get in to see him, other than politicians. We sat out in an adjoining room in the Capitol building. I got a first glimpse of him coming down the corridor with a bunch of politicians, and



well I could see right then he wasn't a politician--he didn't look like the rest of them; he just wasn't a politician--I knew he wasn't. It just went through my mind, that guy is a misfit; he's not a politician. Well, he's not, or wasn't. Well then when I came in contact with him to get him to autograph this book, yearbook, 1909 high school annual, I could see he was still a down to earth person.

WICKMAN: The yearbook from Abilene?

FITZWATER: Yes, autograph his own picture in there, see. Well I had to crash the door to get in the Governor's office because the doorkeeper kept stalling we fellows; he wasn't going to let us in, I could see that. He'd say, "Oh, in a little bit, in a little bit we can get in there." Well, time was getting to almost the time that Ike was to go out and make his speech, out in front of the Capitol building. So I thought, boy, now I'm not going to miss this because I may never get to see him again. And so when that doorkeeper turned his back I opened the door, in I went and Ike was back there kind of in a corner and two or three politicians had him collared there. So I went over and I grabbed him by the arm, I took him over to this table, shown in the photograph, and I had this book so I didn't have to leaf



through it--I knew where to open it. And he said, "What do you want?"

"Well," I said, "come on over here," or something like that. So I pulled my pen out of my pocket. I said, "I want you to autograph your own picture there." So he did. Then it was just time for him to go out and make his campaign speech, so they grapped him and out they went. Well, then I got to looking it over. He just signed his name you see, and so I thought that isn't complete; I should have the date under it, you see. Well, I thought, I can write that in there myself, but I don't want it that way. So I stayed in that governor's office--that's where this was as I mentioned. I didn't get to hear his speech at all. I was determined to catch him when he came back in, which I did. I looked through the window and see him; oh, I could hear him a little bit you know, but couldn't make out any of his speech; so I had to miss his speech. And so when he came back in I caught him right away and I took him over here to the desk again. Well, by that time he remembered my name. He said, "Fitzwater," he said, "what do you want now?"



"Well," I said, "you forgot to put the date under this." So he put the date on; so it took two different times to get that the way I wanted it.

WICKMAN: Well, did you have any conversation with him?

FITZWATER: No, they wouldn't give me time. Oh, others were tugging at him trying to get him away from there you know, politicians.

WICKMAN: I just wondered if he remembered you, I mean--

FITZWATER: Oh, he couldn't place me, I could see that. If we could have sat down and talked, I could have told him the family connection and all and he could have maybe patched things up together and figured out who I really was. But the thing I wondered about was after he'd been, you know, in the world war and the glory that was heaped upon him you might say, I wondered if it might have changed him. You know it changes people sometimes--I mean, you know, the glory and being in the public eye and so on. But you know the minute I got up to him I could see that it hadn't changed him a bit. Really, it hadn't, it hadn't changed him at all.



WICKMAN: Well, I think in his reaction of course to you seems to indicate that. He was willing to do this.

FITZWATER: Well, he seemed to have a way of immediately coming down to the other people's level--I felt it, you see. Now when I was managing the Duckwall store in Junction City, Kansas, we had army people from Ft. Riley come over there quite often, peacetime it was then, but most of them (with all due respect to officers) they showed that they were just something special--they kind of wanted to put on that kind of an air, but not him. I thought it might have changed him, but really, I'm honest about it, he just hadn't changed a bit that way.

WICKMAN: Did you see him after this?

FITZWATER: No.

WICKMAN: Never wrote?

FITZWATER: No, I didn't get to see him any more after that.

WICKMAN: And you've never seen any of the Eisenhowers? I noticed your scrapbook had a letter from Edgar?



FITZWATER: Well, I knew he wouldn't remember me, of course only the name, that's all, but I thought after I'd done all this I would just write him a short letter, which I did.

WICKMAN: I'm kind of curious about how you got through, wasn't there security on the state house that day, how did you get through that?

FITZWATER: Well, this letter of introduction that I showed you from a committeeman who was my son's personal friend.

WICKMAN: Yes, I see--

FITZWATER: I had to have that, that was my way of getting in the Capitol building.

WICKMAN: You got a letter of introduction from Edgar Eisenhower, is that right?

FITZWATER: No, no, it was from a local committeeman, as I just mentioned.

WICKMAN: Oh, I see, I see.



FITZWATER: That's the way I got into the capitol building in the first place, and I wasn't going to let that opportunity go by; oh, boy, I fought too, I mean, not fight but I laid ground-work before that, you know, leading up to this and I wasn't going to miss having "Ike" autograph his own picture in my 1909 Abilene High School Annual, and coming in close contact with him momentarily.

WICKMAN: The high school annual was one you had, that you had saved?

FITZWATER: Oh, yes. Luckily I had saved that thing and carted it around all through the years. And the binding that you saw, I had that put on after this you know. And I also dug up the one of 1908, the year before. I let my brother have that one, and so after he passed away I talked his daughter out of that one; it was mine to begin with. So I took it and had it bound also and this one of Ike's yearbook you might say, the 1909, I've given that to our oldest daughter. In fact some time ago, I wanted her to have it, and, the second daughter, I gave her the 1908 one. So they'll be kept in the family no doubt for a long, long time, I hope.



WICKMAN: Let's go back to Abilene for a minute. You want to tell me your badger story again; I think we ought to save that; I think that's one of the great stories.

FITZWATER: Well, now first of all I want you to know that this is absolutely true because (I was there).

WICKMAN: We can probably find it; I'm sure we can find it in the newspapers, you know.

FITZWATER: This is not hearsay. Oh, no, I was there, and I'm not making any of it up, this is absolutely true.

WICKMAN: About what was the date now?

FITZWATER: Well, of course to kids, dates didn't mean too much--

WICKMAN: Was it during the first time when you were in Abilene?

FITZWATER: Oh, the first time--

WICKMAN: The first time, O.K. You were somewhere between thirteen and sixteen?

FITZWATER: Oh, no, wait a minute. It had to be--it was before I went to work in the telephone office, and I worked there nights



from 1908 on; so it was between 1905 and 1908; it had to be. So it was, I'd say, roughly guessing, about '05 or '06, along in there, because I wasn't too big a kid then. Well, this was to play a joke on the mayor, Abilene mayor. And to my recollection I think the mayor was Harry Litts at that time; I believe he was mayor. Now I wouldn't be positive, but I kind of think it was Harry Litts. Someone had a badger he'd captured, a wild badger, and they had a pen built in back of what was then the old Central Hotel, the back of it was on, oh, I don't know what street that is but anyway--I believe it was Spruce Street.

WICKMAN: Second and Broadway, didn't we say or--

FITZWATER: No, what you say, mention the hotel that's there now.

WICKMAN: The Forster Hotel.

FITZWATER: Well it was in that location, I'm sure. Well, anyway, the back of this hotel, the old Central hotel, the way it was then--

WICKMAN: That's Spruce, I guess.

FITZWATER: Yes, facing the street, the back of it, you see. So



they had this pen built for the badger and had a chain on him and a doghouse affair built for him with, I kind of remember, old berlap or rag or cloth or something hanging down over the door so he could go in and out, you know at will. And so it was publicized all over town--people talked about it you know. They were going to have a dog fight the badger--somebody was going to furnish the dog and they were going to get in there on a certain day and they were going to have the dog fight this badger, and it was going to be quite an event. As I remember, this went on for a couple weeks beforehand. And I even think, I'm quite sure the Reflector, (who was it ran the Reflector?) was in on this badger dog fight.

WICKMAN: Charley Harger.

FITZWATER: Harger, I always thought that Harger was in on that too and my Uncle Lease Duckwall, I'd bank that he was in on it. But they must have been pretty good at keeping secrets, whoever arranged this, because it didn't leak out and I would have heard about it if it had. But it absolutely came as a surprise. Well anyway, the thing of it was they were going to honor someone by having him pull this badger out of his house when it came time



for the fight, that was going to be quite an honor, whoever would do that. So they decided the mayor was the one to do that. So it came time for the badger fight, dog fighting the badger and, oh, gosh, drew quite a crowd--that street was just full of people--people sticking their heads out of the windows of the hotel and across the street you know, big deal for Abilene. And I was right up in front so I got to see it first-hand. So it came time to pull the badger out of the house, doghouse affair. And they told the mayor, "Now you're going to have to pull pretty hard because he's kind of stubborn, might have a little trouble getting him out of there." So Harry Litts, (I'm quite sure it was Harry Litts), anyway the mayor, he gets a hold of the chain and gives it a real hard yank and here came, one of these old thunder mugs hooked on the end of the chain, came bouncing out you know, it was one of these old stoneware chambers with a side handle on it, the kind that people usually kept under the bed, they were sometimes referred to as thunder mugs.

WICKMAN: Chamber pots.

FITZWATER: Well, chamber, one story high but a wide one. It



was made of old stoneware, glazed stoneware, one with a handle on the side. And that was hooked on the end of the chain and the badger was gone. Now those businessmen, some of them, went to all that trouble just to play a joke on the mayor.

WICKMAN: Was this sort of thing very common in Abilene then, where people would play practical jokes on each other?

FITZWATER: Well, a bunch of businessmen, at that time business pressure wasn't anything like it is today, you know; they had time for a little fun once in a while. And my Uncle Lease, he had a sense of humor, he never lost that even when he was the busiest, you know. So I'd be willing to bet that he was in on that; I bet that he furnished the thunder mug.

WICKMAN: You talked earlier about a skating rink, Parker's skating rink.

FITZWATER: Yes.

WICKMAN: Where was that located?

FITZWATER: Well, it was located on the second floor of one of the Parker Merry Go Round factory buildings; it was on the



second floor, as I mentioned.

WICKMAN: Roller skating rink.

FITZWATER: Roller skating rink, yes. They used the pipe organs that they built for the merry-go-rounds, for music and, oh, that was wonderful music for skating. It wasn't a very big rink as compared to the ones they have today. It was very, very popular.

WICKMAN: When would that be about?

FITZWATER: Oh, that was, let's see, that was after I was in high school up until maybe 1908 or '09, until that time. They had a mask skating contest on one time, or they did, for the best costumes and all. A chum or a schoolmate and I, we figured out something for the two of us. So I blacked my face up--I was to be the colored boy--and to make this complete I thought I should have a cigar. So I got a hold of a cigar, somebody got it for me, and I'd never smoked you see. And so we skated around there quite a while and after a while I commenced to feel kind of woozy.



WICKMAN: Smoked the cigar while you were skating?

FITZWATER: No, I wasn't smoking, just chewing it. And I didn't feel so good so, oh, gosh, I couldn't figure out what was wrong. And it finally dawned on me it must be that cigar. So I got rid of it, but it was too late--I waited too long. And so this being on the second floor, you see, people were coming in, and I couldn't get anybody to take my skates off, oh, I had to get out of there in a hurry and so I clunk, clunkety, clunk, I rolled all the way down the stairs to get out in the open. By then it was too late, I was really a sick boy; I was really a sick boy for several hours. That was my first experience with a cigar, didn't smoke it all.

WICKMAN: I was wondering, do you remember, surely on your way down to the Smoky Hill or somewhere you must have had a general area around Lincoln School. What was that area like besides-- I mean, the Eisenhower home was behind the school, the school was on the school grounds--but what was the general area like down there? Was it homes, or stores, or--

FITZWATER: Oh, most homes.



WICKMAN: Homes along there.

FITZWATER: Yes. I think that must have been some of the older part of Abilene, maybe not necessarily so. But they were not shacks, no, it wasn't that way at all, no. In fact Abilene didn't have any real, you know, shanty town or area; we didn't have it. There were some poor families here and there, but respectable. No, Abilene south of the tracks, well, just as nice people lived down, as the ones who lived on the north side it seemed to me, as I remember.

Oh, I'll have to tell you something else. In there where Viola's store is now, when I was working nights at the telephone office, there was a family--maybe they'd been there before that too--but I remember them so well right then. There was a family, father and his son really, ran a bicycle repair shop. And they were big people, fat people. And this one boy, which was the oldest boy--there were two boys, I believe--but this oldest one helped his dad in the bicycle shop, can't remember their names, he weighed over 500 pounds and the father wasn't tiny by any means. And they used to say that that family, the mother, and father and the two children weighed a ton. And I wouldn't doubt it. They were awfully big people. And if you think that



wasn't a sight to see a fellow that weighed over 500 pounds riding a bicycle going away from you--you couldn't see the seat. You knew there was one there but you couldn't see it. Those fellows, I never did know what happened to them after that (the father and son).



EDITORS NOTE: A second interview was conducted with Mr. Fitzwater on May 28, 1976 by Dr. Maclyn Burg in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library. Portions of the second interview necessarily duplicate the first. What follows are two excerpts from the second interview which supplement information provided in the first interview.



DR. BURG: Now how long did you live near Batavia?

MR. FITZWATER: Well, as a youngster I'd have to sort of estimate.

DR. BURG: Okay, fine.

MR. FITZWATER: My folks moved to Cincinnati when I was quite young. I must have been not over five years of age and my father was a motorman on the street car, street car motorman from that time on, see. And then, do you want something further along that line?

DR. BURG: You moved to Cincinnati--

MR. FITZWATER: This is about me, not about Eisenhower.

DR. BURG: Yes, but we want to know something about you in order to make the rest of it understandable.

MR. FITZWATER: Well this might be of interest to some folks. Evidently we lived in a German community and my first grade in school is in the school where the student had to take one-half day German, one-half day English every school day--no choice.



Had to do that. And even if the person wanted to leave the room necessarily, he had to say that in German or else he didn't get to leave. Now half a day every day--half a day German, half a day English. So I learned some German. I was only in that school one year, you see. We left Cincinnati when I was between seven and eight years of age. So I'd only been in this first grade just that one year and no further in that school.

BURG: So around 1900 you came from Cincinnati to Abilene?

FITZWATER: No--we did not move from Cincinnati to Abilene. We moved from Cincinnati to Greenleaf, Kansas. It was in late 1899, and we located in Greenleaf, Kansas.

BURG: Why had your dad come out here? Did he have relatives out here?

FITZWATER: Well, my mother was a Duckwall. You know of the Duckwall brothers.

BURG: Right.



FITZWATER: My mother was a sister of those Duckwall uncles of mine. And they came out, the Duckwall family, not my mother but the Duckwall family, they came to Greenleaf, Kansas earlier. They didn't intend to locate there, but my grandfather was ill and he had been advised to seek a drier climate, by his doctors. Well when they arrived in Greenleaf, he became worse, the grandfather. So they couldn't go any further with him. They just had to stop right there. And my grandmother had a cousin living in Greenleaf at that time and so that helped with grandfather's condition. And that's the reason that they located in Greenleaf, they didn't intend to stay there. They just had to stop there on account of grandfather's poor health. In fact, he passed away not too long after that, (in the year 1900).

BURG: After they got there.

FITZWATER: Right. And of course that had something to do with the beginning of the Duckwall Stores, which the company has developed into in all these years later. It began right there from that incident--we'll call it an incident.



BURG: So your family, part of the family, was located in Greenleaf and that was why your father chose to come out here.

FITZWATER: Yes, that's the reason that my folks went there.

BURG: Did he come out to farm, Mr. Fitzwater?

FITZWATER: No. No, my father bought a half interest in a restaurant in Greenleaf. And we were there, let's see, from 1899 until 1905, (1905). Then we moved to Abilene, 1905, that is, my mother and my brother and sister and I moved to Abilene in 1905. My mother and father separated at that time. I only saw my father once after that. So my mother and we three children, I have one brother and one sister, came to Abilene and, well, in fact, since this came up--my mother was one of the early clerks in the Duckwall Store at that time, from 1905 to 1909.

BURG: Here in Abilene.

FITZWATER: In Abilene, yes.

BURG: So that was what brought her down here. Sort of re-establishing her life.



FITZWATER: The Duckwalls had already been here, you see. See they came here in 1901. So that's the reason my mother and we children came to Abilene, because of the Duckwall family.

BURG: So you were about thirteen years old when you got here.

FITZWATER: Yes.

* * * * *

FITZWATER: This might be of interest to some folks. Joe Howe of Abilene--do you remember of him? He printed a newspaper here of some kind, can't remember the name, a weekly I think it was. Well anyway, he formed a club that was called the Knights of Honor, K of H Club. Just a boys' club, you see. And they held meetings upstairs over his printing shop in that same building. Now that was, oh, let's see, it was between Buckeye, on Third Street, Buckeye and the next street west. It was in the middle of that block on the south side where he had his printing office and this K of H meetings. The K of H meetings were held on the second floor as I mentioned. And Six McDonnell belonged to that club as well as myself and, oh, I could name



several. Bud Huffman, Earl Merrifield, Clio Woodward, Howard Funk, Carl Nickolay, Bud Jeffcoat to name a few.

BURG: Eisenhower did not.

FITZWATER: No, no. No, see he was that much older. And so we had a football team. I say "we", the club had. And, oh, we played in Chapman, the Chapman Irish, as they were nicknamed, and in Herington, Kansas, too. We went that far away to play football. This might interest you, too--the last football game I played in was in Herington. And we played a team that averaged just a little heavier than our team, outweighed us, just a few pounds. And some of those fellows, when I'd tackle one of them, he'd fall so hard he'd bruise me, you know, just tackling him. And after that game I was just bruised everywhere, and I said, "No more football for me." I never played a game after that. I figured it was getting a little too rough, and I was afraid I might have had some injury and it might have stayed with me the rest of my life and I figured, well, it's time to stop. I never did play football after that.

BURG: Because you were playing with very, very little in the



way of protective equipment.

FITZWATER: Well at that time it wasn't very good protective equipment, no, best that was available, of course, at that time.

BURG: Yes. Do you remember if the high school team, did they wear helmets of some sort?

FITZWATER: Oh, yes.

BURG: Protect their heads.

FITZWATER: Yes, helmets. They were kind of in strap form, see, across the top here with a band around the head, padded a little bit. And a rubber nose guard, made of moulded rubber. The nose guards were separate from the helmet, as I remember this was standard equipment at that time.

BURG: Oh, really.

FITZWATER: Oh, yes. And a part of it you could hold in your mouth, (the nose guard).

BURG: Yes.



FITZWATER: Had a strap affair so it'd fasten on to this head gear. It was made of rubber, molded rubber.

BURG: And so we can assume that Eisenhower wore that kind of thing, too, when he played.

FITZWATER: Oh, yes, that was worn in high school, same thing, as I remember.

BURG: So the whole thing sort of fit to the band at your forehead, hung down, covered your nose--

FITZWATER: And then strapped here somehow so you could keep it on. I don't remember just how.

BURG: Part of it also could stick in your mouth to help protect your teeth.

FITZWATER: Oh, yes. Protect your teeth, keep from getting your teeth knocked out or broken nose. And shinguards were worn. But not very good protection.

This doesn't have to do with Eisenhower, but there was a game played on this field where I told you about the fire station with the high school rooms above, second floor. Well at that time, the whole area other than where the building was,



that's where they played their football games. It was about a block square as I remember.

BURG: The high school played there, too.

FITZWATER: Oh, yes. The high school games and all. Well, there was a game played there--and it had to have been between 1918 and 1922, a high school game, and I don't remember the opposing team. But anyway it was brought out later on the opposing team there were two or three fellows on that team, who decided beforehand they were going to knock out the best player on the Abilene team. They planned this--they were going to knock him out, see, so they could win the game, get him knocked out. And they accidentally threw him someway and broke his neck, killed him right there on that field. Now his name was--well, his father ran a blacksmith shop--Baer, I think it was. But anyway, it was terrible, you know, that they broke his neck right there.

BURG: And this would have been somewhere just in the year or two years before Eisenhower graduated?



FITZWATER: No, he was still in high school then. Now wait a minute, now wait a minute. I have that wrong. No, it wasn't at that time. It was later. It was later than when Ike was in high school. But it just was an incident, you know.

BURG: So, an incident in a high school football game just after--between 1909 and, say, 1914.

FITZWATER: No, it had to have been later than 1918. But anyway I saw the game. I saw this when this happened.

BURG: Did you come back over from Manhattan?

FITZWATER: No. We moved back to Abilene from Beloit, Kansas, where I had managed the Duckwall store there, (year 1918). Well, you see, we'd been away from Abilene. I'd been to Manhattan and then later, we moved back to Abilene, working with the company. Quite a long story when you get into that. But it was after we'd been to Manhattan and Beloit and, later we had moved back to Abilene that this occurred.



BURG: I was just wondering whether Eisenhower might have seen the game himself.

FITZWATER: No, I think it was after he had left Abilene. It must have been.

BURG: He left here in June of 1911 to go to West Point.

FITZWATER: In 1911 I was in the Chicago Art Institute.

BURG: So we know it wasn't at that time.

FITZWATER: No, it was later than that.

BURG: Let me ask you this, Mr. Fitzwater, have you ever heard of this social group I guess it must have been, a club called the Bums of Lawsy Lou?

FITZWATER: No.

BURG: We occasionally run into it; the General speaks of it in some of his works. Bums of Lawsy Lou, and it was some sort of social group, perhaps very informal that he and others belonged to and some of the gals belonged to it, too.



FITZWATER: No. I didn't know anything about that.

BURG: I thought of it when you mentioned the Knights of Honor that you yourself belonged to, and I suppose that the school had some groups that were kind of formally organized, and this group that he speaks of may have been just an informal, in fact almost a joking kind of thing.

FITZWATER: No, I don't know anything about that.

BURG: All right. You never heard of that group.

MR. C.L. BRAINARD: That could have been upperclass.

BURG: Yes, it probably was. It would just be probably seniors who would hold everyone else out at arm's length.

