Jack Stedman
Narrator

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Interviewer

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JF: Today is October 10, 1995. I am James E. Fogerty of the Minnesota Historical Society. Today I am interviewing Jack Stedman, whose family lived in the Brainerd Lakes area. The interview is taking place in the Minnesota History Center in the Gale Room.

Mr. Stedman, one thing I wanted to start out with today in talking with you is to get a brief recap of where you were born and how you came to be involved, or your family came to be involved, in the resort industry. Were you born in Minnesota?

JS: Yes, I was born and raised in Rochester, Minnesota, as was my grandfather. So we have long roots in Minnesota. Grandfather, father, and myself were born in Minnesota.

JF: Did you grow up in Rochester, then?

JS: Up to my ninth grade. Tenth grade, I went up to Brainerd. That's when my folks bought the business.

JF: Tell me a little about that. What business had they been in before?

JS: My mother was a registered nurse in Rochester. My father was a mechanic in a Dodge garage there. This was in the middle thirties. Things were kind of, you know, shaky, and they said, "We don't want to do this all our life. Let's try to find some other venture." So at age about forty-one, forty-two, they said, "Let's see what we can do." They had a friend who vacationed up in Brainerd, who said, "There's an interesting cabin business up here that's for sale. You may want to look into it." So they went up there and looked it over, and I think in a matter of about a year, well, probably six months, they finalized the deal in 1938.

I was then entering my sophomore year in high school. I was there through my junior college years, so that about four years is all I really lived there. But, of course, I kept in touch with my family after I left.

JF: Tell me a little about the business itself. Where was it located?

JS: Okay. You have a pretty good idea where this is. You know where [highways] 210 and 371 intersect, it was right on that corner. It was slightly to the north, an excellent spot, really, when you think of it. It was a nice grove of Jack pine, forty acres of trees, pretty much untouched, you know. This is where the previous developer, William Orloff, hacked this out of the wilderness in 1936 and built log cabins. He had about twelve of them, and he wasn't much interested, I guess, in ongoing work. He liked to start things, you know, and then carry on.

JF: So he was really the person from whom your parents bought the business?

JS: That's right.

JF: He operated it as a resort?

JS: Well, you have to understand the cabin business. That's different than a resort, because there's no lake on the property, but a nice forest, which was quite appealing. In the summertime it's always ten or fifteen degrees cooler out there, which was a nice attraction. So it was a rustic atmosphere, but people didn't usually stay too long. The sign says, "Overnight cabins." So right away they get the picture. But we did have people who stayed for several days, but really they were, in a sense, on their way someplace else. It was not a destination for them. So that made it a little different, which means they could be open about six months of the year rather than two and a half months at a resort. So it's a different picture. This is how the year went for them.

JF: Tell me a little about the relationship of that location to the town of Brainerd, because it's all changed so much since then.

JS: I would say we were just two miles west of Brainerd on Highway 210, when people would ask. Of course, the downtown is by the water tower, the old water tower, you know. So it's about two miles out from that.

JF: What was around it at that time?

JS: The cabins?

JF: Yes. You mentioned there was a grove of trees they were in.

JS: Yes.

JF: Were there other buildings there?

JS: There was a tavern across the street and a nightclub also on the other side, and a country club, which had a golf course. Then a few years later, this would have been in the late forties, Paul Bunyan Center, the amusement center, came in. So there was a pretty good focus of activity out there. A golf course, nightclub, Paul Bunyan Center, those kind of all surrounded us. We were on the back side, the outside of the circle, really.

JF: It was a lot more rural-looking than it is now?

JS: Yes, very much so. As we mentioned, just two-lane highways. Both highways, you know, were just really beginning to be developed.

JF: Tell me a little bit about what the business was like. You said that you could operate six months a year. What did they do the other six months a year?

JS: Well, they relaxed and enjoyed the winter. They did some work on the cabins. Sometimes they had some maintenance work, you know. But basically I remember those as happy years, because they had no pressure. We had a wood-fired stove, so we had to keep shoveling in the wood, shoveling snow, and it became kind of a little rustic retreat during the winter.

But during the war years, which started in 1941, came gas rationing, and you know what that did to the travel and the resort business and the cabin business. So from 1941 through about '45, my folks took some employment in the city, in Brainerd. My mother could go back to nursing in a hospital, and Dad could go back to his mechanic work in a service station. So that's how they survived the slim war years.

JF: Did they keep the cabins open at that time, too?

JS: Yes, they did. That's a pretty good question, I think. I don't know if they got a leave from their jobs or what, but they didn't close down. It was really on a reduced scale. So it was a matter of survival, and I think the mortgage wasn't paid off yet, you know.

I was going to tell you what the asking-price for that place was--about $7,500, if you can imagine.

JF: For the forty acres?

JS: Forty acres and the twelve cabins and a store. So that gives you some idea in 1938 what the exchange rate was then.

JF: Boy. Incredible.

JS: Even then, it was pretty serious, because my folks had to mortgage that property as well as the house in Rochester, as well as their meager savings, so they really were up against a wall. They had mortgaged themselves up to the hilt. So it was a little bit--well, they rented their house in Rochester, I guess, so they had some income from that.

Economically it was a little bit touch and go, so we couldn't go out and do a lot of extravagant hiring, building, developing, so that kept it kind of at a minimum development. We did all of our work ourselves. I think they hired a maid, but everything else was done by my family. They did their own laundry and did their own maid service. Dad was a handyman and did the maintenance part, the yard work. Of course, that was some of my job, too. But it was really on a shoestring.

JF: Tell me a little about what the average cabin looked like inside.

JS: Okay. Basically it was, what, twelve-by-fourteen, I think, room for one bed or two beds.[*] It had three nice windows in it, French windows which opened up and gave it kind of an open atmosphere. But there was a blank wall to the next cabin, so you always felt kind of private, you know. You never could see the next cabin. There was a little wood stove in the corner, a little laundry-type stove, with a flat top. That was about what the cabins were until a few years later, when Dad put an addition on the back which was for the bathroom, indoor plumbing, which they didn't have before in the early years. There was a nice pump with dandy water and a central shower house. So they were rather cozy, cozy cabins.

They built one larger one. They put two twelve-by-fourteens together and that was a double cabin. That was always kind of nice for families. But they were really basic, you know, with an open ceiling, just open two-by-fours, until sometime later they began to insulate it, because they could use the cabins later in the year. It wouldn't be so cold.

We were up there, I think when they pretty much decided to do this. The winter of 1938 was a cold, cold winter. I remember we were staying in one of the cabins, firing it up, and the frost on the windows was thick. Had to fire the stove. The cars had a little trouble starting. I thought, "Boy, oh, boy, do they really want to be up here in the winter like this?" You know, when you're a kid, fourteen or fifteen, it seems like a great adventure.

[*]See end of transcript for description of the cabins and property in 1938.

But I marvel at my folks, age forty-two, you know, jumping off like this. I think, boy, how many people would really want to do this? Our family tended to be a little conservative. They knew they were leaving something behind and embarking on something new. I think they were excited about the adventure, too.

JF: Did your family have a house on the property, as well?

JS: It was a combination living quarters and office and also a dining room in the summertime, which is rather interesting. Then the dining room part in the winter was converted to two bedrooms by removing a partition, and then in the summertime, we had about three little cabins in the center of the circle, and that's where we stayed in the summertime. But then we kind of drew in in the wintertime.

So that was the house from, again, about 1944, I guess it was. This was all on top of the ground, by the way--no foundations. In about '44, we excavated, put a foundation under it, put in a furnace, put in a water system, and expanded. Well, the dining room ceased to function then. So we had two nice bedrooms, a bath, kind of a central living room, and then another wing was where the office and our dining room was. So it was really quite nice, what we call a ranch style.

But during those early years, you know, we carried our own water. We did have electricity, so we could have an electric stove, which was a great thing. But we had to fire that old cordwood stove through the winter, and use the outdoor privy. As I recall, those were kind of happy, adventuresome days.

JF: The electricity came, then, after your family bought it.

JS: No, it had been there. So that really made the difference, I'm sure.

JF: Tell me a little about the dining room operation. That was built there and it was there when you were moved in?

JS: Yes, I think it was. Yes, it was there. That was completely equipped with about--what did they have? Two, three four, maybe about six, eight tables of four to a table. Then they cooked out of the kitchen area. That's where the electric stove was kind of handy, because they did mostly breakfast and light lunches.

We did that for a couple of years, and the maid also served as a waitress; my mother was the cook. So you can imagine. They were out making up the cabins and they got a call for dining room service, they had to run back to the house and cook the pancakes and eggs and

do the dishes. Then they had to run back out, because you had to have the place vacated, you know, for new rentals by noon or so, like hotels do now. So it was pretty frantic for a while.

So after a while, they gave that up. I think the dining room only ran for maybe three or four years, because it wasn't a paying proposition. Mother was too good a cook, you know. One of our little brochures we have describes some of that--"Delicious meals," you know. All homemade food. My mother was a good cook, and I think, boy, that was quite a deal back then.

JF: But it just didn't quite work economically?

JS: Well, no. We would have had to have more help, and it was kind of a strain on everybody. So they said, "Well, we don't really want to expand it," although they could have had the capital and all. They probably could have.

I was interested in the rates that we charged. You might be interested in that. A single cabin, I think, rented for two and a half dollars a night, and then for a double probably was three and a half. Then we had this double cabin, probably went to four dollars. One of them, I think the smaller cabin, was down to a dollar and a half, even. I thought, boy, how could you ever make much money on that? And gradually through the years we tried to raise it a little bit, but people were a little resistant, because you have to figure this was after the Depression. Shortly after the war, of course, business began to pick up. But, you know, it was kind of a recessionary time in there, too. People didn't have a lot of money to spend. I thought, boy, oh, boy, how did they ever make it on that? But they did.

JF: Tell me a little what you remember about the clientele, who came through as you were growing up. Who were the people?

JS: We tended to get an interesting mix. It tended to be families. They tended to be largely from the Twin Cities. We did have some commercial people, salespeople. Once in a while we had young folks. I always remember this was kind of a site for university graduation breaks, you know, so we did tend to have some wild parties once in a while. We always dreaded the springtime, you know. But otherwise, it was pretty much family, pretty much a sedate sort of thing.

I remember one of the crises that we had was, suppose a black person came. What would we do? Would we rent? And I don't think we really had that problem, but there was even a question about Jews. I don't know how you could tell a Jew except by their complexion, you know. But they were a little bit uneasy about that, even. So that whole racial thing back in the thirties and forties is kind of a touchy thing. I don't think they had a Fair

Housing [law] sort of thing for that type of person, you know. I can't remember us turning anyone away. We looked kind of askance. But I think probably this was a place, you know, as cabins, motels, hotels were, for liaisons sometimes, and my folks just kind of shrugged their shoulders and said, "Well, I guess that's the way it is." But basically the clientele was pretty respectable, good folks.

JF: Do you think that most of them would stop there on their way up to another resort?

JS: I kind of think a lot of the business was that. They were on their way, because, as you said, Brainerd was a big resort area, people were transients, on their way someplace. They did not stay too long, so like one night, two nights, so we had a pretty good turnover.

JF: When they stayed more than one day, what did they tend to do during the day?

JS: Oh, they went and toured the countryside, I guess, went up to the lakes, maybe. Maybe they'd do some fishing and sightsee. If they had family around, they might have visited. There wasn't really a great deal otherwise to do there. I can't remember people sitting around very much in the yard or anything, so they were out busy doing something. And probably some nightclubbing, you know. It tended to be these short-term stays.

JF: You just mentioned nightclubbing, which made me think about what did people do in the evenings for recreation when they stopped there. Did they mostly just go to bed? You said there was a tavern across the road.

JS: Yes. That was really kind of a honkytonk. I don't think many of our people went there--that was a local tavern. They might have gone over to Club La Guyal, which was on the other side, which was a little more classy. They might have gone to the theater, you know, movies in the evening. But if they were racing around all day, you know, they probably were tired and went to bed at nine o'clock. Then up in the morning to do their next thing.

JF: How many siblings did you have?

JS: I was an only child, which was interesting, you know. If there were chores to be done, we didn't have to argue about that; it was my job, outside of the maid and, of course, her chores were delineated quite carefully. So it made it a rather interesting growing-up time.

JF: Of course, no two things are ever exactly alike, but what was the pace of an average day, let's say, during the summer when there were people in cabins? When did you get up? What did everybody do? What went on?

JS: Usually they had linen from the night before, so Mother could start the wash the first thing, because you had to get that out. By the way, we did our own washing and strung the sheets out on the line. They had a little network of ropes, and those all should be out there early in the morning so they could be dry by noon or so. So that was about the first thing they did, do the wash from the previous day. Then, of course, breakfast.

People checking out, that's another thing, too. You tried to have them pay as they came in, but a lot of people didn't do that and paid when they checked out. Of course, they wanted to talk, and both my mother and dad were good conversationalists, but it kind of fell to my dad, you know. He passed the time of day with them, so he had to be kind of free and floating around doing his maintenance work.

Then in between and after breakfast. People were checking out. Then you had to go make up the cabins, you know, clean them, change the linens and so on, which meant with overnight transients, you almost had to change almost every night. So there's a lot of linen.

By the way, this was the day of the slot machines, and the previous owner had his slot machine earnings pay for the laundry. He didn't do the laundry; he sent it out. But my folks--slot machines went out, you know, shortly after we got up there, I guess, so my folks were not very comfortable with that, either. So again, to save on the money, they had to do this laundry themselves. That was probably the rest of the morning and the afternoon, doing some sprucing-up, maybe some yard work and maintenance work.

Then by two or three o'clock in the afternoon, you had to be presentable to meet the public, because we were the room clerks. We had to be on hand for that. Then probably from four o'clock into the evening, you'd be receiving your guests and trying to work in your supper, which was invariably interrupted. And people didn't always come in before nine or ten o'clock.

Some came in closer to midnight, so somebody had to be on call. This was my dad again. One of the commendable traits he had was he could wake up and do his business, then go back to sleep. Didn't seem to bother him. That was a great trait, because my mother, she was pretty dead tired and said, "I can't get up and do that." So I always admired him for that, because I couldn't do it. I couldn't wake up and do that. So this is what he did. Of course, that's a little bit scary, you know, at night, midnight, one o'clock. What are you going to run into? Some of them were drunks, you know, and you had to kind of shepherd them around.

The other thing, since these cabins were spread out around a circle, you had to many times show people where the cabin was. You couldn't just say, "Go over there," you know. They were numbered consecutively. You had to show them where the water was, the pump, you

know, in the center of the circle, and the shower house, and explain how all of this worked. That was my dad's job, too, to go around and do that, as well as my mother's, but Dad did a lot of that. So that kind of accounted for the day.

JF: Do you remember, did most people check out pretty early the next morning?

JS: It varied, you know. People tended to be on vacation, so there was no big rush to get out unless they wanted to go fishing. Then, of course, they would leave earlier. But usually we had things pretty well cleared out by eleven, twelve o'clock, and they were on to their next thing if they were staying over.

One interesting trait, I think, on the rate matter was if you stayed a week, you got the last night free. So sometimes we tried to encourage people and say, "Why don't you stay a week? We'll give you the last night free." Many people took up on it. But that was one little thing that I just recalled now.

JF: Talk to me a little bit, if you would, about--I hate to use the word because it's a very current word now, but it probably wasn't even thought of back then, and that's marketing. Did your parents do any advertising? Where did they advertise? Who did they try to reach? Did you hear them talking about it at home?

JS: One of the best advertising things was the Chamber of Commerce [in Brainerd], because you belonged to that and then you would be listed in the directory. That was in the office at the base of the old water tower. This is at the junction of--what is it?--highways 18 and 210, 371, the corner. So the Chamber of Commerce was one of the better ones. We tried to do a few road signs, but those were very expensive, and we tended to do those ourselves: building and painting them.

Then I saw something the other day that reminded me of the early days. It was a clock with an advertising board next to it, and this was placed in restaurants. Your little name would be on there and it would flip around, you know. I thought, well, I remember that. Someone sold us one of those.

That was probably the extent of their advertising. Word of mouth was pretty good, because people would bring their friends or say, "This is a nice place to stay." So we had a lot of repeat business; not only new business, but repeat business. Some people kept coming back after year after year.

As I look back, the marketing was pretty slim, but, well, in those days, you know, nobody did much more than that.

JF: What was the name of your place?

JS: It was Pine Woods Overnight Log Cabins. A big spiel. The pictures will show that they had a big sign up over the main lodge. Finally we shortened it just to Pine Woods Cabins. Pine Woods is not a very distinctive name; everything was "pine" up there, you know. But it seemed to work all right.

JF: You mentioned cutting wood. Did people in their own cabins have a little supply of wood cut outside of each cabin?

JS: Yes.

JF: Did you use your own wood right on the place?

JS: Yes. Some Jack pine trees died every year, so you'd have to cut that up anyway. That, of course, was my job, not just to cut it, but mostly to split it. It had to be split to fit these little laundry stoves. What was it, eight or ten inches? So you had a lot of cutting, a lot of splitting, a lot of piling up outside. I think we probably kept most of it inside. I think we had a wood box, because you couldn't leave it outside. It would get wet, you know. So I'd keep the wood box filled. Of course, in the summertime that was no big deal because it didn't get that cold, but in spring and fall, we really used up the wood.

JF: When did you open up in the spring?

JS: We tried to say Memorial Day, which is May 30th, but we tried to be up and available maybe the first part of May, and then close down after Labor Day, when vacations are over. But we did go into the fall and into September and even October. As we developed more and more, we insulated enough cabins so they could be used even year 'round, and we had some people--sometimes we had some salespeople who would come, but not many tourists or vacationers. They were probably commercial people. So it was kind of a pretty slim pickings, you know, but we were open even in the winter sometimes.

JF: Did you have people stop by in the middle of the winter and just rent a cabin?

JS: Yes, for probably the location or the price, you know. As I recall, there was only--I don't think there was more than--I actually don't remember any other cabin businesses in those early years. I think in the early forties or so, there was maybe a motel on the outskirts of Brainerd, a couple of them, maybe. Otherwise, basically it was hotels in town. There was nothing much around. So this was a rather unique venture, you know, into this type of lodging.

JF: Did your parents ever talk about going into the resort business or did they not want to?

JS: No, we didn't. In fact, that's when they were trying to decide on their new venture and new vocation. We looked at some resorts up in the Leech Lake area, Cass Lake, and went up and looked at some there. Boy, that looked like a back-breaker. You had not only the lodging, but you had the boats, the fishing, and my folks were not that great in that type of experience. It looked like--well, what?--two and a half months a year, you know. How could you make a living? So that didn't have much appeal, but this cabin business looked like something they could really handle and which would not be that demanding. It had a longer season, and that had an appeal. It was a rather unique sort of business at that time.

JF: You mentioned adding indoor bathrooms. When did that happen?

JS: I was thinking that was probably about in the middle forties, I think we started to do that. We called it "modern." That is, we have modern cabins. They started, I think, in the middle forties and then did basically a cabin at a time, because we couldn't afford to do the whole thing. My dad did most of the work. In the course of maybe five or seven years, we had them all expanded. I mentioned this addition they would put on. They were expanded into this "modern cabin" concept.

So at first, you know, those early years, it was pretty rustic, but people didn't seem to mind that, I guess. But otherwise, we'd have people come and say, "Are your cabins modern?" Then we'd say, "Well, some are." [Laughter] When we started out, you know. "Cabins 1, 2, and 3, they're modern, but the rest are not." There was a price differential, and if they were modern, of course, then the price range went up. But finally we had them all modern.

Each cabin, of course, had its own personality, which was interesting, too. They were decorated differently. And some people had a favorite cabin they would want. They'd say, "We'd like number 7 cabin. That's a nice cabin," or number 10, you know. So they kind of remembered the little touches that the cabins had.

JF: That brings up an interesting point, of course, which is repeat business. I think of repeat business coming at resorts where people come back to a favorite resort, but less so with the kind of roadside operation your parents had. But clearly you are talking about people who did come back year after year.

JS: They did.

JF: Did you have a certain number you think came back, like five percent, ten percent?

JS: I would say it could be five or ten percent, you know, that wanted to come back. My

folks developed friendships with these people, which was another part of it. They kind of wanted to stop in and see the Stedmans and see how they were doing, and my folks would remember them, which was a nice touch. So it was the homelike or family-type atmosphere that some people liked.

In fact, we did have one lady who stopped in, I remember. That was quite a story. She was from the Twin Cities. She'd just lost her husband and she was on the verge of suicide. She just happened to stop by one Sunday afternoon, and my folks were gone. I was there with my friend. We rented the cabin to her, and she said, "I want to stay for a short while." She stayed one week, two weeks, a month, and finally the year 'round, and did that for, I would say, three or four years. So she had her own cabin, which was like a custom-made cabin. She was a year 'round resident and became pretty fast friends with my family.

She didn't commit suicide, by the way. But she took a great interest in the out-of-doors. We always had these little Jack pine seedlings coming up, you know, and she said, "You know, we've got to encourage these plants to grow," so she would crawl around on her knees and cultivate these little trees so they'd keep growing. I often look back on this and thought this is the way to save your sanity, in a place where people cared about you, and there was something to do in the out-of-doors. She had her own piano. She did also have a business on the side. She and her husband were school-supply salespeople. He died, but she kept the business going. So part of the year she would have all of her supplies and samples in the car. She'd go around make her contact to school boards, mainly small schools. So she had this for a business during the--I don't think she did much in the wintertime, but spring and fall and summer, you know. So she had this to keep her busy.

She became one of our fast friends, and we followed her when she went back to the Cities. My folks kept in touch with her, and we did, I did, as a young person. She finally died a few years ago. She was very appreciative of what the family did. That was one instance where we really developed some close friendships.

Another one was where people were building a resort. A couple of people were building resorts up on the lakes, and, of course, they had no place to live while they were building. So they stayed at our place, and would go up during the day and work. There were two families that we developed quite close friendships with that. After they built the resorts, we'd go up there and visit them, and they'd come and visit us. We were even encouraging some of this new business to develop, because you had to have a place to stay.

JF: So for a while you had eleven cabins available, because this lady was living in one of them.

JS: Right. Then, of course, we had the big one, which was 14, number 14. There was no

Cabin 13, by the way. You'd go from 12 to 14. That had two divisions, 14 and 15, so it could be divided in half. It was back off in the woods, too, much more secluded, so that was kind of nice. That was about enough workload to handle the way we were doing it. How do you do laundry and maid service for that many units? That probably kept us from expanding too much, either.

JF: Your parents must have had to come up with quite a special rate for the woman who stayed all year.

JS: Yes, it was, really. Gee, I don't know what it was, but it wasn't very much. I suppose maybe, all told, maybe a couple, three dollars a night, you know, rented by the month, of course. So we were just happy to have her around, because the cabin in the wintertime would have been vacant anyway. As I say, they developed a friendship. They were great cribbage players. They played cribbage at night.

And they liked gardens, they liked flowers. My folks had a nice garden. There was a low place with rich soil. In fact, in those early days, my mother used to grow flowers for the dining room, so, of all things, you would have fresh flowers in the dining room. And we grew some of the vegetables in the garden. You can imagine there was plenty to keep yourself occupied in those early days. Gradually those things were kind of sloughed off and tended to just the cabin business.

JF: The cabins do not sound to me like they were equipped for housekeeping.

JS: No, they weren't, although we did have kind of what they called a housekeeping box, or a kit. I think it probably had an electric plate in it and some utensils, you know, very minimum. We didn't like that, because that always made a mess. You can imagine cooking in a little cabin like that. But people were into housekeeping, and either they brought their own stuff or they asked us to provide it. So they did have little housekeeping kits. I hadn't thought about that for a while now. So they did try to accommodate that, but we did not advertise housekeeping. We'd rather not.

JF: Did you ever have any problems with people bringing back fish, which is, I know, a big problem?

JS: Yes, I'm trying to think. We had a fish-cleaning place out back of the garage, so that they could clean their fish there if they wanted to. Of course, that would be important, because my folks liked to fish, and my mother was a great fish-fryer. Boy, she could fry a sunfish like nobody else. So we tried to accommodate that. That's when they would like housekeeping and say, "I want to fry these fish." They'd put them on the little electric plate and away they'd go.

JF: You said you were there for about four years. How long did your parents actually operate this?

JS: They started the operation in 1938 and continued through the war years, and sold the property and moved off in 1965. So that gives you the idea of the span of years.

JF: So they operated it for more than twenty years.

JS: That's right.

JF: Because you kept in touch, when you went up to visit them, how did the clientele change over the years? Clearly, by the 1950s that was a long time from 1938.

JS: Yes. Right. And even into the sixties, you know, they were there. I can't remember saying much about that. I think it stayed pretty much the same, except the prices got higher and I think maybe people were a little more affluent, you know. The other thing, too, of course, is there were more motels around, so we became kind of the low end of the rental agency units. People with a little more money would stay in these little more elaborate--the old motels, connected motels. But people who stayed in the cabins wanted a little more of the not-so-costly and out-of-doors thing. So it was kind of a self-selecting thing. That's probably about the only thing I would notice. More people would stay in the more modern cabins, motel types, and we would have a different clientele, both as to atmosphere and money. But otherwise, it was basically the same.

JF: As the years went along, did they stay open longer? Did they stay open a shorter time?

JS: I think pretty much the same, because they lived there, you know. They said, "We have nothing else to do. Why don't we stay open. As long as somebody knocks on our door, we'll try to accommodate." So it stayed about the same. A lot of it depended on the weather, too, by the way. If it was a nice fall, you'd have a lot of business. In early spring we always looked for an early thaw, because that meant people would come up. Of course, fishing season--when did that open? Memorial Day? Is that when fishing season opened? That was always kind of a big time. So a lot of it depended on the weather.

If it was hot, especially if it was hot in the Cities, that was good, too, because people said, "We've got to get out of the Cities." So we'd always watch the weather a little bit and say, "Oh, we're going to have a good weekend."

JF: And there wasn't so much air-conditioning in those days.

JS: No, there wasn't. In fact, one of the things we had in this little brochure was "air-conditioned in the pines." Because the wind would always be blowing out there, as I mentioned, and it was ten to fifteen degrees cooler. There was nice fresh air and green grass. So it was really quite attractive.

JF: Did your parents, as the years went along, add any amenities like sandboxes for children or anything like this to play in?

JS: I don't think they did. We might have had a swingset they added, but I don't think they fussed with a sandbox. Mostly they'd say, "Kids, go run in the woods," or do something like that. Of course, there would be the matter of hazard insurance, which I guess wasn't that big then, you know, but that could have been another reason that they might not have done this thing.

JF: You never remember them talking about building a swimming pool?

JS: We talked about it, because this garden area was so low, we said, "Boy, wouldn't that be neat?" But then, of course, you looked into the cost of it, and that killed it right away. We live now in a condominium that has two swimming pools, and I kind of oversee the operation. I think, boy, I'm sure glad that we didn't get into that, because swimming pools are a real drag. People think they're so lovely, but pretty soon they're filling them in with dirt and planting flowers. We went the other way; we just kept the flowers and didn't bother to dig the hole for the pool.

JF: Did you notice anything as the years went by, did your parents change the way in which they--once again I use the word "marketed," the way they advertised their services anymore?

JS: Not too much. I think the few road signs and the Chamber of Commerce. There was an interesting relationship between some of these motels or cabins. When we were full, people would say, "Where can we go?" So we had to have a little private network, you know. We'd call up and say, "Have you got some room? We've got people here who'd like to stay." Then they'd reciprocate, you know. So we had kind of this networking, which was an interesting marketing thing in those days. But otherwise, we never advertised in the paper, I don't think. There were the road signs, the Chamber of Commerce, the networking; that was probably about it.

JF: If you had to estimate--and I realize this is always difficult--but during the summer months particularly, which was clearly the high season, what would you say the average nightly occupancy rate was? Was it seventy-five percent, was it ten cabins kept full, or five, six?

JS: We noticed, of course, that the weekends were good, because that's when people were off work. Then the first part of the week, many times we had salespeople, so that kind of bridged the gap. I think probably maybe middle of the week might have been a little bit lighter, but weekends were good, and during the week if we had salespeople. Or in the summertime, people were on vacation anyway, you know, so they had no time constraints at all.

It was pretty much full capacity. We had the "No vacancy" sign, you know. We were always thrilled when we could put that out, because that meant good money tonight. Of course, if we didn't have, that meant you had to get up all hours of the night, because people were coming in late. So it was always a happy day when you could put out the "No vacancy" sign at five o'clock. Boy, we could have an evening, a quiet evening.

JF: You mentioned about a store. Tell me about this.

JS: They did have a store, I suppose kind of like these filling-station food shops, you know, because people would come up and if they did some cooking, they'd say, "Well, have you got some bread? Have you got some milk? Have you got some beans?" Mostly non-refrigerated stuff. And they had pop. The previous owner had beer, but my folks didn't believe in selling beer, so that went out. So they did have a small store. Candy and gum, snacks, that sort of thing. This was kind of an accommodation to the people. It never really took off, especially, but it was there.

JF: Was it part of your house?

JS: Yes, it was part of this small office we had. There was a set of shelves on one wall, and that's where the commodities were, and a counter where they registered, and the cash register. Not much of a lobby. They had a few chairs around, but it was pretty small.

JF: Did people ever ask for accommodation for doing their laundry when they came up?

JS: No, we never had that. That's an interesting question, because I can't recall, and I don't think my mother ever offered, either. Of course, we were doing our own personal laundry. And laundromats weren't there years ago. I guess people just brought enough clothes or went dirty or something. We never had that kind of request.

JF: Interesting. Did you go up and visit your parents quite frequently after you left?

JS: Yes. This was, as we mentioned earlier, a good place to bring the grandkids. They had a great time. We always would block out a week or so. But the dilemma was--where

would you stay? Because if we stayed in the cabins, that was a loss of income. So my folks had to make that decision. Luckily, as we had grandkids, my parents were financially more solid, you know, so they could do that. But that was kind of fun, because they could have the grandkids there and say, "Go off in the cabin. Don't bother us." And, of course, we could go up to the lakes and swim, and we could go to Paul Bunyan and play. They could ride the riding lawn mower, you know. So it was a happy time. As my son Joel mentioned, he has some fond memories of that sort of place.

Then, of course, in the wintertime we tried to encourage the folks to come to see us. We lived in Waseca during those early years, so they could make a trip down there and stay with us. We tried to keep in touch every year a couple of times.

JF: Tell me what you remember of how that long strip of highway west of Brainerd began to develop over the years. When you started out, your parents were kind of out there by themselves.

JS: That's right.

JF: Tell me about how you remember it developing.

JS: The highway west, 210, went on to Staples and Wadena, and that tended to be a less traveled road, because there weren't many resorts out there. So that stayed a two-lane for a long time. But that one going north on 371, that was the heavy traffic line up to Nisswa and Pequot and on up to Leech Lake. That developed into a four-lane in the early fifties or so. That made a great difference in the traffic volume, with fewer accidents.

One of the things my dad didn't do, he didn't opt for a frontage road, but I don't think that hurt us too much. Otherwise, we could have had a frontage road, you know, paralleling the four lanes. But we were kind of on the corner, so it didn't really make that much difference. That was kind of the main road development, and I'm sure that was in the fifties.

JF: When the amusement park began to come in and some other things, do you think your parents noticed people staying longer, or did that affect them in any way?

JS: I think it probably made it kind of a happy diversion for them if they had families, you know, and it might have induced them to stay another day or something because they were having fun. "We have to go over to Paul Bunyan now and have fun." So it might have had a slight impact, although it's hard to measure what that would have been.

JF: Did the business stay pretty healthy right up until the time your parents decided to sell it?

JS: It was probably declining, because, again, more motels were coming in. We were not a first-rate motel or cabins, you know. Cabins are cabins, and they were always clean, but the furniture was pretty much nothing great, and the bathrooms weren't that great, either. I think business kind of began to decline a bit. Of course, my parents' vigor was declining, too, so it was a kind of happy circumstance. They didn't care that much, because they had been over the hump, had everything paid off, were saving money, and were just kind of holding on. It was something to do.

I'm trying to think of their ages when they retired. I think they were in their sixties, maybe sixty-five or so. I think they began to draw Social Security. So it ranged from forty-two to about sixty-five years of age; that was their age span up there.

JF: Why did they finally decide to sell?

JS: They were getting ready to move on. They said, "We're not going to do this much longer." They had a few nibbles from some people who wanted to buy it, because this corner, as we mentioned, was very attractive. You can imagine, at the junction of these two major highways. We always dreamed of the day that 371 would bypass Brainerd and go directly south, but the railroad tracks were there, so they would have had a big overpass, a big interchange, and that never happened. Even to this day, it hasn't happened yet. But it was still a good corner.

Interestingly, we had several nibbles on the place to buy, I think over the course of a couple of years, and we almost lost our shirt on one of them, because the person made us an offer for the whole property, but there was a clause in there that he'd buy it in sections, I guess. It was sectioned off in such a way that he would have the prime part on the road part that he'd buy first, and the rest we didn't know if he'd ever buy that. So the price, of course, was rather low. We took that to a lawyer and he said, "Boy, I don't like the looks of this. You want to sell the whole thing. You don't want to just sell the prime part." So we backed out on that deal and waited 'til somebody came along and bought the whole property.

But the people that bought it, I think was from the other motel in town. They bought it primarily for speculation, but they kept running the cabins for a couple more years. But their eventual goal was then to clear out the cabins, clear the land, make it available for commercial development, which, as we mentioned, has happened. It is where the big Fleet Farm store is and all the other strip-mall stuff out there. That was in the sixties, the early and middle seventies. Things were really booming up there.

JF: Over the years, particularly during the fifties, did they add any amenities to the cabins at all?

JS: Not much. I think they tried to upgrade--better mattresses. That's always important. And better floor covering and maybe better beds, Hollywood-type beds. That's probably about it. There wasn't much more you could do with a little twelve-by-fourteen room. They did put in--I think we put in oil-burning heaters so we didn't have to chop that wood all the time.

We didn't have natural gas, although we could have had bottled gas, but that would involve a bigger investment. We talked about that; bottled gas so you wouldn't have to have to bother with kerosene stoves, which are kind of smelly and needed a lot of tending anyway. But we never went into the bottled-gas heating. Again, you know, in the summertime, you really didn't need it so much; just the spring and fall. That probably was the only other improvement. Heating was probably a little better then. So that's about the only other amenity they had.

JF: You mentioned the cabins were log. Were they unpainted?

JS: What they were, it was log siding. These were big two-by-six timbers that were cut on a curve, you know, so they looked like a log, but they were tongue-in-groove, so they fit very tight. You'd get the effect of a log siding, but they were very uniform. At first you'd varnish those and they looked kind of nice, but then they would age and turn black. Then what do you do? They didn't look very good.

We had to decide, are we going to paint them or do something else? They discovered someplace where you can get this decorator-type paint. You put on an undercoat, you know, then you can paint on the knots so it looks like pine, you know. My mother was very good at that. So we painted the knots on the logs, you know. That was fine. They didn't always last. Maybe lasted several years, as long as the paint job, but they had to be redone once in a while. So we kept true to the log cabin motif, you know, because she said this would kind of spoil the ambiance if we just had old painted boards, you know. That's not very good.

Some of the [other cabin operators] at that time were doing different colored cabins, the red and green and purple and all this stuff. We didn't want to do that, so we tried to keep them all alike, painted as imitation log.

JF: What about the roofs? What were the roofs made of?

JS: This was a roll of roofing paper. I don't think they ever shingled, but it was the granulated asphalt roofing. I can remember, of course, that was a maintenance job that I helped my dad with, and had to replace that once in a while, but they held up pretty good.

And they were green, to match the surroundings, so the roofs didn't look too bad. That's what they were.

JF: What about the flooring inside the cabins?

JS: Wood floor with linoleum, and had a few scatter rugs, I guess, but no carpeting. Linoleum and some scatter rugs, that was about it.

JF: You mentioned that there was a bed or two. Did they have chairs, tables?

JS: Yes, they had this collapsible table which, of course, gave you more room until you needed a table. You'd have maybe four chairs or so in there, but not much more than that. By the time you had a stove, this collapsible table, and two beds, it was pretty cozy. Except with the bathroom, you had the addition of the shower and a toilet and the washbowl. You'd have a little more room and not much closet space. You had brackets coming out from the wall to hang your clothes, so it was not very spacious.

JF: You mentioned that there were casement windows that opened up. Did they have screens?

JS: Yes, they had screens, not removable, but just tacked on the building. Those were dandy for opening in the summertime, but when it rained, you can't really seal a casement window very well. If you got a driving rain, you'd have rain coming in. I guess that was the only problem there. Of course, in the wintertime, you couldn't close them very tight either; they just didn't seal up. It made it a little harder to heat in the winter, but basically we left them pretty much as is, because air, wind coming in from three directions, was always very pleasant.

JF: During the winter, were they just all pretty much left the way they were so they were available for rental, or did you seal some of them up?

JS: We pretty much closed them up, maybe put newspapers on the windows to protect from the sun fading and so on. But I think they pretty much left the linens, the blankets and spreads, you know. They might have brought the sheets inside.

Once in a while we had a little trouble with red squirrels, because they can gnaw in most anyplace, you know. But not a great deal of problem there, gnawing into the wood. So they pretty much just closed the door on them and that was it.

JF: How active were your parents in the Brainerd community?

JS: They were active in the Chamber of Commerce and also in the tourist business. You mentioned the Ruttgers and some of the other people there. They had a Tourist Association they belonged to. They were active in the church up there, in the Baptist Church. That was kind of their wintertime community activity. I think Dad was on the Baxter town board for a while as it developed a little bit more, but that was probably about the extent of it. They didn't really do much more; that was plenty, I think, because in the summertime you worked and had no time. Wintertime, they used to have some card games they'd play, but they didn't otherwise fraternize much. They didn't know many people in the Brainerd area as such. I tended to know more of the kids, of course, through high school. I'd have some relationships there. But my folks didn't really know much about the Brainerd community other than that.

JF: It seems to me they were kind of in between; they weren't really running a resort, but they weren't really running a hotel. Where do you think they saw themselves falling in those early days?

JS: I think it was, as you say, a rather distinct niche in the housing thing, because it was not a resort, although some people treated it like that, and it wasn't exactly a cabin business, you know. It wasn't just on-the-road stuff. So it had a little blending of both. I think they always wanted to emphasize the fact that, "We are cabins," although they did have that little price inducement, "If you stay for a week, we'll give you the last night free." But I think they thought of it mostly as this unique slot of overnight accommodations. That's probably the way it stayed.

JF: Really an early motel of sorts.

JS: Yes, that's right. In fact, we were always saying, "Maybe if we changed the name, we'd get more business." But then you have to connect things together. Motels implied connection. "I don't think we want to do that, because we have something rather distinctive here. There's a lot of motels around. We're cabins," even though the word "cabins" today is pretty much a "down" term because they're not run very well, although we rented to some people who said, "We've stayed at some lovely cabins," overnight cabins.

But that was interesting. My folks, in the wintertime, would take time off. Sometimes they'd go to Florida or travel a bit, and, of course, they would stay in cabins and always could compare and say some were pretty good or some were just like ours or some sure aren't very good. So they kind of kept the cabin idea rather than a motel.

JF: They would travel during the winter?

JS: Sometimes they would. Not to a great extent, but they spent some time in Florida,

which was kind of a nice thing in their older years. My dad's sister and husband, they were kind of a close group, and they used to travel together, which made for some good diversions.

In fact, my dad's sister and husband were kind of instrumental in buying this place. This particular brother-in-law had the Dodge agency in Rochester and was pretty knowledgeable about business, you know, so we relied on his judgment kind of heavily. He would come up there and look it over. He'd try to project earnings for the year and how much would pay off the mortgage and what would be the upkeep on this sort of thing, and is this a good deal. So the family thing was quite important here.

The other thing I remember now, too, when I think about it, when we first went up there, everybody had to come up and see us--relatives, you know. Most of the family lived in Rochester and our friends, too. They all had to come up and see us. Of course they'd have to put them up for the night and not charge them, so that made the folks a little bit uneasy. But we were glad to see them, and, of course, it's like when you move to a new town, everybody has to come and see you, you know. So this was where we had a lot of our family visiting taking place.

JF: I can see how that would be a problem when it's your business.

JS: That's our business, yeah. They had to kind of remind them, "This is costing us bucks." We tried to say this is the price you pay for being part of a family, and somehow the Lord provided. They didn't go broke. And it didn't go on forever, you know. After they'd seen where we were, they didn't always have to come back every year. They did at first.

JF: You mentioned that your parents were part of a tourist organization. Do you think they participated in some of the discussions that clearly were going on in the resort industry about its expansion as both Brainerd and the Pequot Lakes area north of it began to be self-consciously built into a resort complex?

JS: I think probably not so much, because they were not in that type of business. I think their annual meetings and dinners they had tended to be probably some business. I'm trying to think if they even had a publication that they put out. I don't even quite recall that. But I think they were kind of on the fringe, as far as any development was going on. My mother was always interested and trying to pick the brains of these people, and sometimes we'd go up and visit the resorts and maybe talk to them about, "How is your year going? What are your plans for the coming year? What about the traffic situation? What about rates?" So I think whatever they did, they did on their own, as far as contacting people.

JF: Do you recall, when you were working there, that people would come up that far,

knowing there were resorts in the area, and then ask your parents for advice on where would you go, so they'd steer them to this resort or that resort?

JS: I recall some of that, but they tended to stop at the Tourist Bureau first, so they had their brochures already. I can't recall ever having a display of brochures at our place.

An interesting thing is that Brainerd, in the early days, was just a nice travel time from the Twin Cities. It was a good place to break, you know. You could get that far but maybe not all the way up to your resort, so they'd stay overnight. It was a nice mileage break for people, or you could stay a little longer if you wanted to. It was readily accessible. Of course, in those days, it was mostly just two-lane roads, the Mille Lacs road or the St. Cloud road, you know, was the only way you could get up there. So you couldn't make fast time. It took you a while--125 miles from the Cities took two and a half, three hours, but you could make that after work sometimes or early in the morning.

The road development made a lot of difference, and we used to watch that, because there would be little strips of four-lane road, you know, on highways 371 and 169. Some of those began to develop, so we watched that quite eagerly, hoping better roads makes for more business.

JF: So your parents were supporters of the "better roads" movement.

JS: I would think so, yes. They thought traffic management was very important for their business, to get more people up here.

JF: Do you have any other particular remembrances, Mr. Stedman, or particular events or people or things that happened while either you were there or in later years, that your parents talked about?

JS: Once in a while we'd have some convention business, even. Some buses would stop. They'd reserve a block of rooms. That was something a little different, you know, because you could fill up easily then. We were not too far from Camp Ripley at Little Falls, so once in a while we'd have wives and families of the fellows at Camp Ripley, or we'd have some of the Camp Ripley guys on leave come up, but that tended to be kind of a boisterous time, you know. But we'd have some of that.

I guess one thing I remember was in the year 1940, we had a horrendous sleet and wet snowstorm, and all these tall Jack pine, you know, forty, fifty feet, began to break from the weight of the snow. I remember staying up that night and hearing "crack, crack, crack" all through the night. We said, "Boy, there goes our business. There goes our ambiance. We're not going to have any trees left," which was probably one of the darker moments of

that whole experience. We never had problems with wind that I can remember. Sometimes we'd get tornadoes up in that area. But we never had that problem. But winter, wet, heavy snows were really bad, because that would take out the trees. So what was once--and we'll show you on the pictures--was a nice stand of trees that all of a sudden became kind of slim. We tried to do a little reforesting, but it takes a while to grow a forty-foot Jack pine, you know. That was kind of a sad sort of memory.

A lot of that has to be crammed in these four years that I was really living there and having a close living experience. It was basically rather pleasant, a rather happy sort of time. I think we always kind of worried about finances 'til we got the thing paid for, until we were able to sell the Rochester house and had enough to pay off the bank at Brainerd.

A lot of it, I think, was how we could adjust to the workload, because you got a little bit older. Of course, as business kind of changed, the motels came in and ours kind of went the other direction. That was always kind of a worry, you know--how long do we keep afloat? I think business did fall off enough so that it made them think about selling later on.

In those early years, they were always in the process of developing something. First was to modernize, insulating the cabins, modernizing them, building on an addition, building our own living quarters. Those years were always kind of busy, which is a good thing. Expansion is always kind of a nice feeling. After a while it kind of solidified and they said, "Well, that's enough. We've got enough now. Let's just continue on."

I think it was a great place to grow up, because you had to be outside. It was good for my folks' health, because you had to be outside, you had to be active. My dad lived to be eighty-nine, which was a pretty long life. My mother died at seventy-seven. But basically they were healthy. I remember my years as being pretty healthy there. You didn't seem to get many colds, even though you had to go out to the privy. It was a healthy time, a busy time. I had good experiences in the town, in the school, in high school, and that was all part of my relation to the town, which was more than my folks had.
Some of those memories: I mentioned that one long-term-stay person. That was quite a memorable thing. It was always fun, I could have my buddies out there for an overnight in one of the cabins, in the off-season, and that was always kind of a thrill. You can imagine a couple of guys getting together and having this cabin to yourself out in the woods. We were pretty abstemious. I think we tried to sneak some smoking, but we never really got into booze or beer, because that was a little bit hard to get. But we had a phonograph. We'd play records and we'd talk and stay up all night. So in a sense, I had kind of an attractive commodity there, you know.

I had my buddies, I could have them out, and in the summertime we could go fishing. We'd patronize a lot of the lakes around there. We had some good lakes for swimming and

fishing, which I always thought was kind of neat. In the afternoon, you worked hard. "I think I'll knock off and go over to Whipple Lake and swim for a while." Almost like having a pool in your back yard. Another reason you wouldn't have a pool up there, because there were some very nice lakes around there. If you think of a young person growing up here, it was pretty ideal.

I remember when we first bought this place, I was kind of intrigued by the fact this is out in the wilderness, forty acres. I thought, "Gee, there must be a lot of wildlife out there. I think I'll get a gun and go hunting." But I discovered there wasn't much wildlife out there, and I wasn't that great on guns anyway. But just the idea that here was a wilderness out there that you could explore at will--I think that was part of the memory that I liked about the whole experience.

JF: Was most of your land forested?

JS: Pretty much. There were some meadows, but I would say probably three-fourths of it was woods, maybe a quarter of it was kind of a meadow. All of this, by the way, was adjacent to the golf course, the country club. I don't think--we might have sold off some roadside or some corner back there to the golf course, but it butted up right to the golf course road. So this kind of locked out any other development around there.

JF: But it meant that a good deal of your property wasn't really used a whole lot.

JS: That's right, when you think of it. Forty acres, you know, and development just on one corner of it. A lot of it just was idle, nothing on it, "waiting" to be developed.

JF: Right, which it certainly has been.

JS: It has been now. That's right.

JF: Did your parents ever talk about developing the rest of the property?

JS: I don't think so. They had no idea. I think in the early days they did have a gas pump, and that was just for the convenience for some of our guests. You could fill up before you went on your way. We got a little off-the-road traffic, but that wasn't that much. That could have developed, you know, a filling-station-type thing, which is what is there now. But we never really wanted to get into that, I guess. That was about the only thing as far as development that they were thinking of.

JF: Great. Anything that I haven't asked you, that you think I should have, before we talk about the things you brought with you?

JS: I can't think of much else now. I kind of rattled on here.

JF: One of the things you were just mentioning to me is that when your parents sold the resort, the cabins got moved. Did they sell them?

JS: They sold the whole package, of course, cabins and all. But when they cleared the land, what do you do with the cabins? Then, of course, they're attractive buildings, you know. They were well built. People would buy them and move them off. One day [much later] we were driving along the highway in Staples and we said, "Now, there's one of the cabins," because they're very distinctive, this painted-log business. We went up north on 371, by the road, and said, "Oh, there's another set of cabins." And they went all over the countryside, really. I suppose they're kind of long gone now, but for a while there was something ongoing; some kind of eternal part of this Pine Woods Cabins was being spread around the countryside.

JF: That's great. Did your parents sell them or were they sold by the people who bought it?

JS: They were sold by the ones who bought it. Well, you know, they make attractive woodsheds, garages, mostly, I suppose; sheds or cabins. One of the marks of Brainerd is boxcars. I don't know if you know this, but Burlington [railroad] would sell off boxcars. You'd buy those, and those became storage sheds for people.

JF: Because you had that big trainyard up there.

JS: That was a rail center. People would buy them and convert them to cabins. We were up on Sylvan Lake at a resort up there, and I was hiking around in the back roads. I said, "There's a boxcar, a Northern Pacific boxcar made into a cottage." That was kind of a big deal.

JF: Another distinctive piece of local lore.

JS: That's right. So when I see a boxcar up here, I say, "Oh, yeah, those can be made into cabins."

JF: They don't have to stay cars.

JS: And they're well made, you know. They're really built. So it's a way, I guess, when things decline or disappear, they don't really; they kind of have some ongoing life.

JF: And for all you know, your cabins live on someplace.

JS: That's right.

JF: That's great. Thank you very much, Mr. Stedman.

[End of interview]