

Interview with

L.J. ASPER

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by

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Oral Historian

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER LIBRARY

Abilene, Kansas

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, please identify yourself and tell us what your relationship to Dwight Eisenhower was.

MR. ASPER: My name is Asper and I was just a good friend of Eisenhower's and a neighbor. I lived about five blocks from his place. I chummed around with him quite a bit--fished and hunted, played ball and different things like that.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, where was your house located in relation to the Eisenhower family home?

MR. ASPER: It was south about three blocks and east about two blocks.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, can you remember when you first became acquainted with Dwight Eisenhower?

MR. ASPER: I believe it was in 1903, the year of the big flood. We used to go fishing together quite a bit--left a lot of water in some of these old river beds. They were full of carp and different things and we used to do a lot of fishing together and I believe that was the first I remember of being around Dwight.

MR. BARBASH: Did you go to grammar school with Dwight Eisenhower and do you remember anything about those years?

MR. ASPER: I went to grammar school the same time he did on the south side but I don't particularly remember anything about him. He was two years older than I was--I didn't hang around with that big bunch very much.

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MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, one author states that while Dwight Eisenhower was in grade school he preferred athletics to books--can you recall if this statement is true or not?

MR. ASPER: I don't know anything about the books but I know he was an athlete--he liked to play baseball and football and play shinny when we went skating and different things like that.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, can you describe the layout of the Eisenhower family home, that is, the house, the barn, and the garden and so on?

MR. ASPER: Well, the house was about an eight room house, a big square house, the barn set right north of it and it was eventually built for a doctor, veterinary doctor, and it had a lot of stalls and had a room that they called the operating room where he worked on horses and stuff like that. It belonged to an Eisenhower that was related to Dwight--I think it was Dwight's uncle and all of their ground lived right--layed right east of the farm home and they used to farm garden, alfalfa, and stuff like that and kept cows and chickens and everything--just a small farm.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you remember the incident of Dwight and Edgar climbing to the barn roof and going to the edge and balancing there?

MR. ASPER: No, I don't believe I remember anything about that, I imagine this could have happened all right they was always daring each other.

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MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you recall being at the Eisenhower home on Sunday's when the boys had to cook?

MR. ASPER: Yeah, I remember that all right. The folks had Church there at the house all the time and the kids wanted anything to eat a lot of times they'd do the cooking themselves and a lot of times we'd go camping and do cooking, too.

MR. BARBASH: Would you consider the boys good cooks?

MR. ASPER: Oh, yeah, I think they were--fine cooks.

MR. BARBASH: Do you remember any of the adventures the Eisenhower boys had during the great floods in Abilene?

MR. ASPER: I don't remember much about anything that Edgar had, but Dwight and I used to go fishing quite a bit after the flood, but I don't remember anything about while the flood was going on.

MR. BARBASH: What type of fish did you go for after the floods?

MR. ASPER: Well, they were carp--mostly. Once in a while we'd catch a cat fish but, mostly, it was small carp about a pound, pound and a half, two pounds. I brought a string of them in one time, my mother made me take them out and bury them.

MR. BARBASH: Did you and Dwight Eisenhower have any incidents occur while you went fishing?

MR. ASPER: Well, I remember one time we went out to Warfield's fishing-- we picketed the horse out so he could eat grass and when we came back from fishing he was gone and he stayed down along the river for pretty near a week before we found him--when we got home the folks didn't know what we'd done with him--they was pretty mad about it.

MR. BARBASH: Do you remember what kind of games the boys played, did they play war games or wild west or any games of that sort?

MR. ASPER: No, we didn't play wild west or war games or anything. We played baseball, football, hide and go to seek, tag--the little kids, they was "it" all the time and they'd try to catch us guys over there on the school ground.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, was there antagonism between the north side and south side children and how strong was it?

MR. ASPER: I'll say there was--plenty of it. It was plenty strong. I remember we wouldn't let the north side kids south of the Union Pacific track if we could catch them and they wouldn't allow us north of the track. We could go up town but if we got north of town, why it meant a fight.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you remember the Eisenhower boys selling vegetables from house to house?

MR. ASPER: Yeah, I remember that. I don't remember too much about it, but I think I used to ride along with them once in a while when they'd go around and sell vegetables. That was quite a gag--a lot of kids done that to get extra money.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, where did the Eisenhower boys get their vegetables to sell and how did they haul them around town?

MR. ASPER: Why, they raised most of the vegetables in their garden right east of the house and they had an old horse and a spring wagon that they used to haul them around town in. Two or three of them would go along-- one would drive the wagon and one on each side of the street making the houses.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you remember what kind of chores Dwight Eisenhower had to do around the house and did you ever work with him or help him with these chores?

MR. ASPER: Yeah, I used to help him. We used to have to clean out the barn and haul in hay. He had to milk the cow and feed the chickens and everything and gather the eggs, and everything like that. I remember just before Easter we'd start out--we'd snitch an egg a night and hide it some place so we'd have about a half dozen or dozen eggs for Easter and then we'd take them down along the river and cook them and that would be our Easter.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, what kind of things did the boys do for entertainment around here besides hunting and fishing?

MR. ASPER: Oh, I don't know--played ball and played football and stuff like that. Go up town and look in the store windows--that's about all there was to do on Saturday night.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, where did the boys in the area go swimming?

MR. ASPER: Oh, we had two, three different places. There was one place south of town we called the Old Settlers-- it was on Mud Creek and there was another place out on the river that we used to go swimming--well, there was two places out there, one at Tompkins Grove and one out to Ross's.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you remember the famous fight between Dwight Eisenhower and Wesley Merryfield?

MR. ASPER: Oh, I remember hearing about it. I didn't see it. It happened up town and it was after school--they all went to the North Sider High School. I never seen the fight but I heard quite a bit about it. I know it was quite a tussle.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you know anything about the incident of Dwight Eisenhower and his infected knee and were you a visitor at the Eisenhower home at that time?

MR. ASPER: No, I don't remember anything about that. I heard that he had a bad knee at one time but I don't remember anything about that infected knee.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, in 1905, Dwight Eisenhower was out of school working at the Belle Springs Creamery and also he'd work at odd jobs around town-- what type of work did he do at the Creamery and what odd jobs did he do around town?

MR. ASPER: Well, the only thing I know of, he worked in the summer time at nights "pulling" ice at the creamery and, of course, later on, why we all worked there together--two, three years after that. He was engineer one time when I worked there with him--I think, during that time he was "pulling" ice. I understood he worked in a grocery store but which grocery store I couldn't remember.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, what do you know about Six MacDonnell and his association with Dwight Eisenhower?

MR. ASPER: Why, I know that Six used to play ball with Ike and they belonged to some kind of an association--I think it was Knights of Columbus or Knights of Honour or something up there. Fellow by the name of Joe Howe sponsored it--he run a print shop up there. Six worked for him and he had a bunch of boys--kind of a boy's club. They had a ball team up there and I think that was where he associated with Six quite a bit-- and then we went to High School together, too.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, were you a member of the Knights of Honour and do you recall what kind of organization it was?

MR. ASPER: No, I didn't belong to the Knights of Honour but it was kind of a boy's club. They had games and had a hall and had meetings--had games up there in the hall and then the ball team, football team and different things like that. It was kind of an athletic boy's club.--I guess you'd call it.

MR. BARBASH: Do you know if Dwight Eisenhower was a member of the Knights of Honour?

MR. ASPER: No, I don't know for sure but I just imagine he was. All the boys about his age was--he chummed around with some of them that belonged up there--Six MacDonnell and them boys were--Merryfield--that he had the fight with--they belonged up there.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, did you ever work at the Creamery with Dwight Eisenhower and do you remember any experiences that you had together down there?

MR. ASPER: Yeah, I remember one summer there we worked together at nights. I "pulled" ice and he run the engine and we worked there all summer together down there--that's about all I remember about that.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, what kind of machine did Dwight Eisenhower run and what did the machine do at the Creamery?

MR. ASPER: The engine he run there--they called it a compressor. It was an ice machine and he took care of that all the time while I was "pulling" ice. They had a fireman, ice "puller" and a engineer at night--that's all the crew that stayed there at the Creamery.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, for one year after Dwight Eisenhower graduated from high school, he stayed at home to work while his brother, Edgar, went to the University of Michigan to study law. Can you tell me what Ike did in his spare time during that year?

MR. ASPER: I think that's the year that he worked at the Creamery at night and he run the engine. Course he went to school after that but sometimes in the daytime we'd go out to Ross's and go swimming but that's about all we had time to do. We worked twelve hours a day.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, what sort of work were you doing at that time?

MR. ASPER: Why, I worked at the Creamery "pulling" ice and later on I got to firing boiler different things like that--worked around there.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you know anything about Dwight Eisenhower's dates with girls in town and what they did on these dates--who he dated?

MR. ASPER: Oh, I knew he dated girls, I remember--about the only girl I remember him dating was Ruby Norman and what they done--Oh, I guess they had dances and different things like that but I didn't chum around with him much in them days.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, did you ever play ball with Dwight Eisenhower and could you tell us when and roughly what type of ball player he was?

MR. ASPER: Oh, about the only ball I played with him was over on the school ground--like all kids playing ball and he was always a pretty good player.

MR. BARBASH: Did you ever play on the town team with him?

MR. ASPER: No, I never did.

MR. BARBASH: Do you remember if he was the best ball player in the Eisenhower family?

MR. ASPER: No, a lot of them seem to think he was but I thought that Ed was the best ball player in the family.

MR. BARBASH: What position did you usually play when you played with Eisenhower and what position did he play?

MR. ASPER: He was supposed to be an outfielder but when we played over there we used to play rotation--when you play rotation, well, you play all the positions on the field--just work your way back up to bat.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, what kind of baseball did you play--did you play the regular nine man team or was it a different type of game?

MR. ASPER: No, we played what you call rotation. You just worked your way up from every time there was an out. There'd only be three batters-- every time there was an out when he went to the last position on the field and everybody stepped up a notch and that way you got to play all the positions on the field.

MR. BARBASH: Did Six MacDonnell ever play with you and what type of ball player was he?

MR. ASPER: No, he never played down there but I played with him a couple times up in some of the fields up town and he was a good pitcher. He was one of the best there was around this country.

MR. BARBASH: What happened to Six's chances of becoming a major league ball player?

MR. ASPER: Oh, I don't know, I just kinda think maybe that he pitched himself out when he was young. He didn't take care of himself too good.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, it has been stated from time to time that Dwight Eisenhower played professional ball in this area or semi-professional ball under an assumed name--do you know anything about this?

MR. ASPER: No, I don't know anything about that at all--I don't-- I never did hear anything about it.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, did you know Swede Hazlett when he lived here in town and of his relationship with Dwight Eisenhower.

MR. ASPER: Yeah, I knew Swede Hazlett and they were awful good friends. This Hazlett left here and went to the Navy Academy the same time Ike went to West Point. I think that Hazlett could have got the appointment there but he took the Navy and let Ike have the Army.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, were you a friend of Eisenhower's at the time when he got his appointment to West Point and do you know how he got it?

MR. ASPER: Yeah, I knew him pretty well then--they was some politicians around town here--talked him in the notion of going to West Point. Way I understood it was that the family only had money enough to send one of them and Edgar got that. Ike had to get his education by going to West Point and letting the government pay for it.

MR. BARBASH: Who were the politicians that arranged to get Ike into West Point?

MR. ASPER: Well, Joe Howe was one of them and Phil Heath--he was postmaster. I worked for him for quite a while and he used to tell me about it. Every time Ike would come back through here why he'd always come over to the post office to see Phil--he'd have quite a visit with him when he'd go through.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, did you see Dwight Eisenhower when he came home from West Point during summer leave and, also, after he graduated?

MR. ASPER: No, I never did see him--I always seemed to miss him.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, did you see Dwight Eisenhower when he came to Abilene in 1945, and what happened at that time in your meeting with him?

MR. ASPER: Well, I was on a welcoming committee, I don't remember just how many--there was twelve or fourteen of us--something like that. We was supposed to welcome Ike there but when the train came in, I understand that his mother went to Kansas City to meet him. She got sick down there and they was trying to get her off the back end of the train and get her down home--Ike was pretty well worried. He kind of drug us guys on up to the front end of the train and we didn't get to talk to him very much.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, did you see Ike when he came here in 1952 in the campaign for the Presidency and also in 1962 when he dedicated the Library?

MR. ASPER: Yeah, I seen him at a distance--I seen him in the parade and different things like that. In fact, the first time he came back here he had a special train and I lived over just about a block from the railroad track and the news reporter in here from Washington by the name of Morrison and we were making a tape recording that he was going to put on his broadcast up there and just as we got the tape finished--why--a big diesel came by there and blasted their whistle--just ruined the tape.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, in other words then you did not see General Eisenhower very often after he left here in 1911 to attend West Point?

MR. ASPER: No, I never seen him very often, I seen him at a distance when they had parades and stuff like that. That's about all, I didn't get to talk to him or anything.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, just to give us an overall picture. Could you tell us roughly the period of time that you knew Eisenhower and went to school with him?

MR. ASPER: Oh, I remember, I believe it was back in 1903, after the big flood or during the big flood and I don't remember--it was 1911--about the last that I was firing boiler at the Creamery at nights--night watch and took care of the storage rooms and he caught the morning train out of here going to West Point--he stayed there at the Creamery with me from midnight till about two o'clock, three o'clock in the morning until his train come.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, did you ever play football with Eisenhower or did you ever see him play football?

MR. ASPER: Oh, I used to play rough and tumble football over on the school ground but I used to go out and watch the high school games. Him and Edgar both played on the high school team--that's about all. He was pretty good football player--him and Ed both.

MR. BARBASH: What position did he play in football and how well did he play it?

MR. ASPER: Well, I'm not sure but it seems to me like it was guard or tackle that he played but, Ed, I think played in the back field. I'm pretty sure that Ike played in the line some place. Oh, he was a pretty good football player--about like the average.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, you said once that when you were a young boy here in town that you used to spend some time at the Eisenhower home over night or weekends. In that matter, do you remember any interesting incidents at that time or what the occasion was that you spent at the Eisenhower home?

MR. ASPER: Oh, I don't remember particularly what the incident was, but kids used to once in a while stay overnight with each other. I had a tent down at my place and they used to come down there and stay all night with me--sleep out in the tent and we used to steal cherries and stuff like that out of the cellar--canned cherries, and we'd have something like out at our camp and we'd cook our own meals and stuff like that. I remember one time the Eisenhower boys brought a can of cherries down there and they had never been pitted and we got to eating cherries and spitting the pits out all over the ground and next day my mother was out there around camp and seen all these cherries seeds--she got kinda of suspicious wondering where they come from. I guess she went and talked to Mrs.

Eisenhower about it, but, oh, we never got too much about it.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, you knew Mr. and Mrs. Eisenhower pretty well, could you tell us what sort of people they were?

MR. ASPER: Oh, they were just wonderful people. I worked for Mr. Eisenhower for three or four years up at there at the Creamery--he was head engineer and one thing I liked about him--he was always for the fellow that worked for him, he'd stand up for you all the time. Any time that you had any trouble or he thought you was into trouble, why, he'd sure go to bat for you.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you remember any incidents where Dwight Eisenhower's father did stick up for you in a work situation?

MR. ASPER: Oh, one time we got into trouble with the boss about something or other and he come over there and took our part--told us not to do what he wanted us to do because we wasn't supposed to do that. It wasn't long after that, why, he left the Creamery and went to working for the gas company.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you know why Mr. Eisenhower left the Creamery?

MR. ASPER: No, I don't know for sure cause I was gone from there then, but, I think the place was getting kind of run down and needed a lot of repairs and they was blaming a lot of the accidents onto him and I think he just walked out and left her set.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, do you remember what Mrs. Eisenhower was like-- what sort of a woman she was like and so on.

MR. ASPER: Oh, she was an awful swell lady, I don't know--awful religious and stuff like that, but, she sure took care of us kids all right. She treated one of us just like she did the rest of us. She was around there playing, why, you was just like one of her boys--if they got cookies or cake or anything, why, you did too. That was the way she was all the time.

MR. BARBASH: Do you remember anything about the fight with the colored porter, Tyler, at the barber shop that Dwight had with him--the fight that Dwight had with him when he came back from West Point?

MR. ASPER: Oh, I don't know too much about--I heard about it. Ike always bragged when he went to West Point, he was going to learn to box so when he came home he could slap his big brother around. I guess he got to be pretty good with the gloves. This Dirk Tyler was quite a boxer around--he was a big colored boy--pretty good size and he thought he was pretty good. I guess they got into an argument down at the barber shop one day and they went somplace--I wasn't around here then. I was gone from here, but I heard about it afterwards. They went some place and had it out--guess Ike really worked him over.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Asper, you told me an interesting story about your service in World War I and this story was in regards to several soldiers

who had served under Eisenhower at Camp Colt, Pennsylvania. I wonder if you'd care to put it down here for the record?

MR. ASPER: We was in the Signal Corps over in France. We patrolled about fifty mile of telephone line over there and we had to drive it every day and the government furnished a car and chauffeur. The motortransportation corps was taking care of us for a while and the Armistice was signed, why, these tankers were on the way over and they didn't have nothing for them to do when they got over there so they replaced this motor transportation corps with these tankers. There was one of the boys came up there to drive for us--I asked where he was trained at and he told me--I figured that was Ike's camp and so I asked him if he knew Eisenhower. Boy, he couldn't say anything too nice about Ike. He was telling about one of his buddies being on guard duty one night and he had been drilling all day and I guess the boy fell asleep and they got caught and that was a pretty serious offense---guard duty asleep. They tried and was going to court martial him and I guess Ike came to his rescue and turned him loose and, boy, that sure made the rest of the boys think a lot of him.

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