

**Interview with Herbert A. Fromelt**  
**March 23, 1978**  
**Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection**  
**St. Cloud State University Archives**  
**Interviewed by Timothy Nolan**

The date is Thursday, March 23, 1978. The Benton County Historical Society is interviewing Mr. Herbert A. Fromelt. Mr. Fromelt is a long-time resident of Rice and was at one time the Mayor of Rice for a period of 20 years. His community involvement includes President of the Businessmens Club, President of the Lions Club, and trustee of St. Mary's Church – besides being Mayor and a one time member of the school board. The interview is taking place at Mr. Fomelt's home. The interviewer is Timothy Nolan of the Society's research staff.

**Nolan:** Mr. Fromelt, where and when were you born?

**Fromelt:** December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1912, Rice, Minnesota.

**Nolan:** You've lived here all your life?

**Fromelt:** All my life, yes.

**Nolan:** Can you tell me something about your parents – where they came from, why, when?

**Fromelt:** My dad was born in Rice, and my mother was born in St. Cloud.

**Nolan:** How about your grandparents?

**Fromelt:** My grandparents – where they were born, you're talking about?

**Nolan:** Yes. Well, do you know where they came from?

**Fromelt:** Well, Julius came from the old country, but I don't know the background of that.

**Nolan:** What country do you mean?

**Fromelt:** Oh, Germany. He came from Germany.

**Nolan:** Do you know when?

**Fromelt:** No.

**Nolan:** This is Julius Fromelt?

**Fromelt:** Julius Fromelt, yes. Well, that has to be in the early, I would say, around 1870 in that neighborhood.

**Nolan:** What about his wife?

**Fromelt:** She was Anna Stitch. She came from Iowa. I don't know just how he migrated to Rice, Minnesota, but the reason that he came here was because there was an opening for clerk in the general store. He took this job at that time, and his wife, Anna Stitch, came to work in the same store. Through their acquaintance of them both working there, naturally this marriage developed. That was about 1880.

**Nolan:** Was your grandfather one of the earlier settlers here?

**Fromelt:** Well, at the time he came here I don't believe they were incorporated just yet. I think it was just a community or something or other.

**Nolan:** Did you ever talk to him about the way it was then or did you talk to your father about it?

**Fromelt:** No, my grandfather died when he was 37. My dad was the oldest of the seven children from this family of Julius and Anna. But he had acquired the business. He had purchased it from people by the name of Walters.

**Nolan:** Your grandfather did?

**Fromelt:** My grandfather, Julius. He had brought this business. Of course, my father's dead. Well, my grandmother didn't know just what to do, but people of the community at that time urged her to stay on in business, that she should just continue on. So, she managed the business. My dad, I think, only went to the seventh or eighth grade and he started to work in with his mother in the general store there. They followed with his business. It just continued from my dad, and then I took over the business in 1942.

**Nolan:** What was your dad's first name?

**Fromelt:** Herman.

**Nolan:** The business was already established when your grandfather took it over?

**Fromelt:** That's right. My grandfather took it over when it was established from the Walters. Then, in the course of my mother's business, there was the big fire in Rice.

**Nolan:** What was that about?

**Fromelt:** Well, at that time, everybody had a barn for their horses and what animals they had kept back there. Of course, the fire started in a barn and wiped out the house and their store building. It wiped out that part of town. I don't know those dates exactly.

**Nolan:** Do you know around when?

**Fromelt:** It must have been around 1910 because the new store building that was built – the one that is there now – that was built in 1911. So it must have been right in that neighborhood. When this new store building was erected, my dad then practically, solidly took over from my grandma.

**Nolan:** He sort of built the new store then?

**Fromelt:** Yes, the new general store. Along with the general store business, Rice had or was a big trade center. We had two big elevators that were built here during that time. We had that followed by the potato business. That was a big, very big, part of Rice. There were three big potato warehouses at that time. Potatoes came here – people hauled them in here from as far as, oh, further than Gilman into Rice. It brought a lot of outside trade in because of this big potato center here.

**Nolan:** What was this time – what years?

**Fromelt:** I would say that was in about 1915, in that time. I don't remember this stuff too much. I'm trying to piece together as I think what my dad goes back. He had this potato warehouse with the general store. Janski was big in the potato business here and Cairns was. There was Janskis, Cairns, and Gazettes, Gazettes was bigger than the elevator at that time. They were all pioneers of the people that I can just remember. The mill and all that is vague to me already.

**Nolan:** What was your family life like? Was it busy because of the general store or were you well taken care of or what?

**Fromelt:** Family life for me was well taken care of, but we lived above the store. I was raised by maids because my mother worked downstairs. She did the bookkeeping for my dad, and so we children – there three in my family – I have one sister that's in St. Cloud – Erma Reed – and my

brother, Art, is dead. He died very young, he was 35. That's our family life. We had a good family life, but we were so involved in business, that it did control our family quite a bit. The business was a big factor to the extent that back in those days, you were open on Sunday mornings, and that was almost a shopping morning for everybody that went to church. Church was the center of the town mostly. People would come in, and so they would tie in quite a bit of their shopping along with their coming to church. So, then you probably wouldn't get up until noon at that time in those days, because dinner was at noon. All the time. So by the time we'd get up there, well, of course, you were, probably twelve thirty it would be, and by the time you'd sit down, somebody was probably rapping at the door then. Wanting to get in because they forgot something, so that's how business was controlling. When you lived above the place, besides. But outside of that, we had a very wholesome family life.

**Nolan:** Were there any special traditions or anything that stick out in your mind?

**Fromelt:** Special traditions?

**Nolan:** Yes. Any special traditions or lifestyles that stick out in your mind as being special?

Things that the Fromelts would do or things that maybe your parents were strict upon. May something that was just in your family – a family tradition-- Well, let's go onto your education.

For instance, what kind of education did you get?

**Fromelt:** Well, like you were saying, strictly tradition. I would say that we closely followed the habits to what our church prescribed, and what your community was at that time. You lived in that environment, and didn't travel much beyond that. So whatever tradition was in your nationalities was carried out quite predominately. If you were German, if you were Catholic, that's what you were centered around – your school, your church – and that's about what it was.

**Nolan:** German-Catholic people primarily?

**Fromelt:** Yes, German-Catholics. We were the German-Catholic people, then we had a strong tradition of German-Lutheran in our area. That's what they called the Grail Evangelical Church. Back in those days, there was quite a bit of religion prejudice. If you wanted to go with a Lutheran girl, you have to have a good reason, and they would frown on it. But I could always remember my dad. My dad would always say "That's humbug." He said 'I don't believe in that because I don't think there is any such thing as any real differences in people.' But being in business, and associating with all of them, he had a different outlook on people than those that were just in the home and stayed right in their own area. So his ideas were what I could always remember and appreciate that. Now, later on in life, he would say 'I don't believe that there is any real difference in religions. I think if they believe in God and practice as good people, I can't see why they're not just as good as we are. Maybe even better.'

**Nolan:** So he was pretty open, huh?

**Fromelt:** Well, very much so. I suppose the reason for that was because my grandmother was a convert. She was a Lutheran back in her early training in her life. So maybe that just carried over.

**Nolan:** What kind of prejudice and things were taking place because of that?

**Fromelt:** It wasn't really out in the open. It was probably just in the matter of boys and girls going together, and that stuff. They would try to separate them because of religious differences. That was about all.

**Nolan:** No real hostilities or anything?

**Fromelt:** No, none of that.

**Nolan:** Let's go into your education then. How did you get educated?

**Fromelt:** Well, there was no high school in Rice, and there was no bus service out of Rice at that time. So, if you went away to school, you either went to live with some people you could stay with in St. Cloud or at Royalton or Little Falls or wherever there was a high school. But it was very rarely that people ever went to school. Not a great deal unless there was somebody in the family that was following more of the learning part of it. So, they sent me over to St. Johns high school. Then when I finished over at St. Johns in 1929, that was the stock crash. That's when there was no more money. Everybody went down. So, that was the end of my education. I was taken in with my dad and he said I might as well go in the store and educate myself here. That was quite general with or in these types of communities where you would follow in line with what your dad did. If he was farming or if you were into business or if you were a carpenter or if you had a trade, the son would naturally take into it and he'd follow in the community.

**Nolan:** Tell us how you started in your experience?

**Fromelt:** Well, I started with my dad then, and the following year, when I was going to school, I met my wife, Maureen. We were married very young. I was only nineteen. Then I stayed with my dad in that business and that was from about 1932 until 1942. Then I took it over completely in '42. I brought the building. He made arrangements for me to take it over. Then in 1945, I went to into the International Harvester business – farm implements.

**Nolan:** Is that with the store?

**Fromelt:** Yes. With the store. So then I built a building, and started the Fromelt Implement Company is what it was called. Then in 1946, I sold the general store building. I just stayed with the Harvester business. From there on, things really were very successful.

**Nolan:** Way back when your father first started the store or as far as you can remember back, can you go through some of the changes as he owned it, as you owned it, and as it grew?

**Fromelt:** The big thing back in my dad's day was practically everything we did was by barter. They brought in eggs, and we unpacked the eggs – they would bring them in, all the way from grape baskets to fifteen dozen cases. Twelve dozen cases up to thirty dozen. A few people had had that many. Thirty dozen was the limit of capacity of a case. That's why you packed them in and brought them in and sold them. I can remember eggs at eight cents a dozen or I can remember them at fifty cents a dozen – variations in price. That determined the amount that people brought for groceries is what they had to trade. We bought poultry that was dressed – the geese and the turkeys. The people at that time would dress their own. They brought them in, we packed them in barrels, and they were shipped mostly to Duluth – to the markets. That was a season of its own was just before Thanksgiving which was the big poultry season, and that was about it. I can just remember, it was just passing out my day, was carloads of flour that was shipped in. We bought our crockery was shipped in. It was packed in straw. We upload half gallon crocks up to twenty gallons that people would buy. It was quite interesting when you think back how that came from Red Wing, Minnesota. You'd go out and sell flour in advance to people that would buy quantities of it. When it came in, you'd deliver the flour out to them or they would come and get it. That was the way that they did business. But that was just passing out. In my time, that all out. It was when I worked in business with my dad that I can remember



this. When I actually took over in the '30s, that was going out, this big bulk thing because in 1918 or 1919, that was when the highway was built through Rice.

**Nolan:** How did that affect things?

**Fromelt:** That was the change. That was when the fall of that was the trucking and all the things that started to service the community instead of just by rail. It was served by trucking. When I mentioned rail that brings something back to me, too. When the depot was going here, I can remember that. This was called the Rice station. We had two hotels, and this was kind of a stop off for the salesman. They would come into town here and they would stay here, and then they would go to the inland towns like Mayhew Lake and even Buckman and I think they even went up as far as Pierz in the early days because of the railroad going through here. Then from here out, they had what was called a livery stable which would be like renting a car when you get into the airport today. When the salesmen get here, they would go to the livery stable and they would rent a team and away they'd go calling on these inland towns and sell their goods. In fact, even in my day yet, we had what is called a candy seller. He came around with his candy samples, and you would pick out of there, and they would shipped to us and it wasn't handled. Everything was in bulk. I would say it was comical in the early days. We got prunes, raisins, apricots, all that type of fruit and dried fruits, and they'd come in 25 pound boxes, and you would just have them in your drawer or in your caldrons. There would just be a drawer that you would put all this stuff in. Talk about sanitary conditions, it was fine, but you dug it all out with your hands. You put it in a bag and you sold it. Maybe just before that, you handled kerosene and everything there was, and you never washed your hands after they came in. So when I think of some of the things, the way it was handled--

**Nolan:** Where did you store those things? Didn't you have to keep those things cold?

**Fromelt:** In my early beginning, it was just ice. We put up our own ice from Little Rock Lake. Well, I wouldn't say we put it up, exactly. People would bring it in and we had our own ice house. That was stored in there. You put in a layer of ice, and then put in a layer of sawdust and then a layer of ice and you would cover it with sawdust and you'd go about eight tiers up. In your ice house, you had to have, like for businesses, a building of about 20 x 20 – pretty good size. That's the only way you could keep anything and that was just a cooling method. That's all it was. That's the way things were handled then.

**Nolan:** What about during the summer? How did you keep things cold?

**Fromelt:** That's when we used the ice?

**Nolan:** In the summer?

**Fromelt:** Yes.

**Nolan:** And it stayed cool in that house? It never melted?

**Fromelt:** Well, you had iceboxes. You'd take the ice out of the icehouse, and chop it into sizes that would fit into these iceboxes you had. It would hold about a one hundred pound cake – some of the bigger ones – and then fifty pounds – different sizes. That would be your cooling. And underneath that, you had a drain pan. In the store, you drilled a hole down through, and you had a pipe that went up and you just let the water drip through into a bigger container downstairs. But in the small ones, you just used a pan underneath to take care of your cooling system. And that was your cooling system.

**Nolan:** How did they insulate the ice houses?

**Fromelt:** There was no insulation. That was just sawdust. You had sawdust on the outside of the cake, and that kept it from melting.

**Nolan:** You cut it up to last all summer?

**Fromelt:** Sure. You knew what your needs were, and by the end of the summer, it was pretty well gone. Our store was built in 1911, but we didn't have electricity in it. We had the regular old gas system yet – gas mantles, and that type. So, I think, right around 1917 that electricity came into our community. Then we were wired electric. That brought in a whole new set-up or a whole new change in business.

**Nolan:** How did that change?

**Fromelt:** Well, you could see it followed with electric refrigeration and electric motors. That was the beginning of a big change in what the small communities could do to service the people.

**Nolan:** How did that change the products or prices?

**Fromelt:** No, it didn't change the products. Well, when you get into refrigeration and that type of thing, then you're starting to handle lettuce and perishable vegetables and all that type of thing. They used to be seasonal, but that began the change that type of business. That was the beginning of the change. That, I would say, would be the biggest change when your fresh vegetables began to come into where they middle out to people at the bottom. Then, of course, along with that, that was the beginning of two of your big Kraft companies. Your Kraft salad dressings, at first delivered by truck, and there was a little bitty eight ounce jars, and they'd set it on the counter – it was mayonnaise first. Then you'd have a mixed one that had chopped pickles, and it was called sandwich spread. From then on, Kraft has really grown since then.

**Nolan:** How did all this change affect prices?

**Fromelt:** Well, of course, with all improvements, prices raise. For what the consumer had to buy, he was paying more money for it. But, of course, along with that, came advertising programs. I remember Lee overalls who had a store. That was one of the first that I can remember that had a solid advertising program.

**Nolan:** How did they advertise?

**Fromelt:** Well, that was done by radio and magazine and that type of advertising. But I can remember when a farmer told me if they quit that darn advertising, all would be cheaper. So I remember Lee overall, when he came to call on me once, that I brought this up to him. He said ‘You’d be surprised. It’s one half cent per garment that we pay out for advertising. It would be nothing to the consumer himself.’ But that is what they paid per garment over to the advertising field. This same person that was, just some of the things that I remember how advertising affected people, he was walking out of the store after complaining about how it would be cheaper, he looked up at the calendar and he said ‘Well, there’s that Sanka coffee up there. That’s the one that’s got that caffeine out of it. Gosh, I have a little heart trouble, maybe I should try a pound of that once. Maybe it’d be all right.’ That’s what advertising did. Otherwise, how would you know about it?

**Nolan:** So advertising began to get big when?

**Fromelt:** Advertising was the beginning of controlling the minds of people of what they bought and how they reacted to products.

**Nolan:** When did this come in?

**Fromelt:** Well, that was with radio. That was the start of radio.

**Nolan:** Where were the dates on that?

**Fromelt:** Well, that, of course, I don't know. You'd have to get some radio man or something of that nature. I was speaking of it in our business around the '20's and '30's when it started to really take a hold. But it was a big factor. Well, we know today. What advertising does today. It's solid. I remember Wrigley gum, at that time, they said that without their advertising, it'd would be just about like having to trade with auto or locomotive. That's the way they expressed it. So, that's what it meant to them.

**Nolan:** How did the Depression affect the business?

**Fromelt:** I would say, when I spoke about school, and that there was no more money for education, as far as my family is concerned, along with that, it was a terrible deterioration of people. Because of the slow decline with it, people lost their farms, they lost their home, they lost their business. It was just something that was demoralizing to the moral spirit. It just depressed people to the point where you didn't know what was going to happen next. I remember in our store, at that time, there were days that we didn't take in four dollars. How I arrived at the four dollar figure, was because my dad always used to say that if you can't take in at that time at least \$25 a day, that you had to make at least four dollars in order to pay expenses. Then he said with four dollars, you couldn't pay expenses. Even with the whole, you couldn't pay expenses. The only thing that saved our family at that time was insurance. My dad invested in an insurance policy, and we could borrow money, I guess. That was the only place that you could go to get money. The banks were folding just like dominoes. What started things uphill again, was when Roosevelt started WPA in the small communities. I think practically everybody

in Rice worked for WPA. I knew people at the garage and everybody couldn't get there lined up quick enough to get a job. They got their checks – we called them the green checks – for their pay, and they'd start buying at the store. And that started the old mill rolling again.

**Nolan:** What does WPA stand for?

**Fromelt:** Work Progress Administration

**Nolan:** When did that come in?

**Fromelt:** That was in '34 or '32 when Roosevelt was in. That just started the ball rolling. I can remember land that the Federal Land Bank owned around here that people were buying land at \$1 an acre. They were buying it back at that time just to get it back on the tax rolls and get the people back into it. so you can see how far it had depressed them before it started to ride itself. Of course, along with WPA came inflation, too. It's one of the vicious cycles of prosperity, and along comes – book. When I looked back, I guess it never stopped it. Then, of course, they're working, and that was 1942. I don't know how far off track we are.

**Nolan:** How did the war affect things?

**Fromelt:** Those that were already established in business, those were boom years. Everything you could get, you could sell. Everybody was rationed on many of the items – meat, all your fat products like lard, Crisco, sugar, and all those. Flour wasn't, but sugar and all that was. See, they had the ration books at that time. You were allowed so many stamps per person.

**Nolan:** Did you deal that out then?

**Fromelt:** We didn't deal them out. they were given out through a government agency, but we took them in in business. They all had a value – so many points. Then we would take these

stamps, during the war, and deposit them in the bank just like money. Then we would buy products that were under the rationed items. We would issue a check, and that would go to the banking department just like the checks do today. They were handled on the same basis. But we were fortunate in our area that we were a farming area and a large family area, so there was no problem with rationing. In fact, many of the people that would come in, I would ask if I could have their stamps out of their books. 'Yah. You can have them.' So then when people would come through that didn't have stamps, I could sell them goods because I could in turn buy the stamps. It wasn't an illegal process, but if they knew about it, I'm sure, they would have frowned upon it, but it was very good for business because I could sell these products to these people. In business, it enabled you to have an increased volume of business.

**Nolan:** So it was good business.

**Fromelt:** Well, it was. It's funny how I was robbed three times, and each time I was robbed, they cleaned out my stamps. They stole all the stamps. The stamps, as we would get them in, we had a box in the store, and we would put the stamps in the box, like a cigar box. We also had them in the till. Our sugar stamps, we would keep in the till because they were more valuable than any. When we were robbed, they took the stamps at that time, too. I don't know what they did with them, but anyway, it was interesting.

**Nolan:** And continuing now, in 1946, was it, you went into the implement business?

**Fromelt:** That's right.

**Nolan:** And gave up the general store then. What was the implement business like? What brought you to go into the implement business?

**Fromelt:** Well, Marie and I were blessed with five children already at that time. I said ‘Marie, I tell you think business is going to change again. It’s the highway and the way people are. These small town stores are gonna go, and they’re just not going to be able to hold their people. So, I’m gonna go into something that fits my locality, and that would be in the farm implement line. I’m sure that that can be built into a very successful trade area because they need a lot of this in the farm implement field because through the Depression and that things have deteriorated to the point where there they needed everything they had to have.’ Another thing in history happened there when I think about it. That was the Sleeping Sickness. Sleeping Sickness had come in with the farm horses. That was the big change in the tractor area in these communities.

**Nolan:** When was that?

**Fromelt:** Well, as you go into the farm area, why don’t you check out those dates. It seems to me it was in the thirties.

**Nolan:** What was the disease?

**Fromelt:** It was a sleeping sickness, and the horses would just be taken over by that, and he would just pass out of the picture – he would die. They didn’t know what was causing this. You’d go out in the morning with a perfect pair of horses and there they’d be. So, that’s when people started to buy tractors. It was just coming in. they were on steel and the older makes – the International and John Deere and all of them. That was the time, of course, the farmers decided to buy the tractor in our area because it couldn’t get the sleeping sickness and die, anyway. Then it was just being advertised and brought out that the tractor was the thing to have on a farm, and you could use, in their advertising programs, for which you were feeding all those horses, you could more than buy gasoline for it. And then when it was through, then it’d sit there, you didn’t



have to feed it every day. You were through with that. Of course, that was the beginning of the tractor through this big push of it through the sleeping sickness. That was quite a point in the change of our history and of our farming methods. That was one of the big points.

**Nolan:** Is that one of the reasons you went into the implement business?

**Fromelt:** Well, it was quite well established into the area, but I said that I knew that to follow in the business field, and if I was going to stay in this community and support my family, and do things that I figured I wanted to, as you looked into the future, that was the only thing for me to do. Being I was well established in business, had my people here, it was just natural for me. It was no problem at all. I just went into that and hired people around me that knew mechanical work. I knew the business end of it, I didn't know the mechanical ends or that type of thing. I did very well.

**Nolan:** How long were you in that business?

**Fromelt:** I stayed in until 1970 when I turned it over to my sons. So I would say that'd be 25 years I was in business. I know it was 25 years because I got my pin form Harvester – the 25 year pin. Then I sold out. With them, I think I signed the contract in 1944.

**Nolan:** Before we change the subject, is there any other things you'd like to say about the business end of your life?

**Fromelt:** I would say in our history, things that affected the community would be through advertising and how people were affect through advertising was that in our potato business, we used to have what we called, we'd bring them in and we'd sort them. Then we shipped them to different markets. The farmer was encouraged at meetings in town to go to certified seed, and

that they should change their seed every year, and that they should do different things with their ground and that to improve the potato and its qualities. But they didn't fall in line with it through this area here, they just planted different crops. And that was the end of the end – practically the end – of the potato business in Rice. One after another the warehouses closed and were gone. That's the effect of the farming area in this area not following in line with what they were telling them they had to do to improve the quality. So that was the end of the potato business.

**Nolan:** When did that come around?

**Fromelt:** That took place, I would say, the tail end of that was in the thirties, too.

**Nolan:** A lot of changes in the thirties.

**Fromelt:** Oh, yah. Of course, with the certified seed and everything, what affected that, too, was that there was such a price deterioration at that time through the Depression. They see no need for it. They just wouldn't use it. Why pay a big price for seed and put it in the ground. I would say that was the end of the potato era in this section of the country.

**Nolan:** What crops did they change to?

**Fromelt:** They just reverted back more to dairy. Dairying came in big then. So then they went into grasses and corn and the feed plotted. That's what picked up big then was the dairying. That was a big change in, oh, I would say, what we call cash crops. Everybody raised a certain amount of cash crops at that time to pay their taxes and different things that came due. When they went into dairy, they had their monthly checks come in. It increased, more and more and more.

**Nolan:** So that was a big change.

**Fromelt:** I think it will bear this out more as you get into people that talk about farming. This concludes the interview.