

**Interview with Richard "Ray" Stordahl**

**Interviewed by Dorothy Johnson for the Heritage Education Commission**

**Interviewed on May 7, 1985**

**Ray Stordahl - RS**

**Dorothy Johnson - DJ**

**DJ: This interview is with Ray Stordahl, who served as Mayor from 1964 to 1972. The interview was held at Moorhead State University's recording studio on May 7, 1985. The interviewer is Dorothy Johnson, representing the Heritage Education Commission.**

**So, first of all, Mr. Stordahl, we have personal background. Your name, then?**

**RS: Well, my name is really Richard Stordahl, Dorothy, although very few people in the community know me by that name because "Ray" is the name that I've gone by since grade school. I live at One Riverside these days. I'm one of the empty-nesters that we have in this community. I raised my family in a single-family residence down by Concordia College; and when my children grew up and moved away, I sold the house, moved to a condominium, and I'm enjoying condominium life these days at One Riverside.**

**DJ: And your age, please?**

**RS: I'm 59, actually closer to 60 than 59; but I'm still in the 50's, Dorothy.**

**DJ: And your birthplace and parents' names?**

**RS: I was born in McIntosh, MN. My folks' names were Henry and Clara Stordahl. We lived on a farm in rural Minnesota. I started my education in a one-room country schoolhouse in old Minnesota District 134.**

**DJ: What was your parents' nationality and their place of birth?**

**RS: Well, both of my parents were born and raised in Minnesota. My father is Norwegian and my mother was Norwegian, Irish, and English; so I'm a little bit of a mixture of everything.**

**DJ: When and why did you come to Moorhead?**

**RS: I came to Moorhead in 1946, and my reason for coming here was to attend Concordia College. I had just returned from service in World War II in the Army; and as many of the servicemen did in those days, I immediately headed to college and had selected Concordia College and arrived here in 1946 and I've been here ever since.**

**DJ: Your education, then, was at Concordia, which led to an occupation?**

**RS: Yes, I started at Concordia in 1946 and graduated in 1950. During the period of time that I was in college, another student and I (we were slightly older than the average college student because of our military service) had started a small business while we were in college, so we actually had our jobs ready for us. We were already working at them the last year and a half when we were in college.**

**DJ: When were you involved with local government or politics and for how long then?**

**RS: I guess maybe my first involvement with local politics, as far as partisan politics or as far as official politics, really was running for Mayor. I had not been on the council previously, but I had a fairly good knowledge of the city operations. The business that I'd been in from the time that I'd left college (or actually started during college) until 1960 was in a small construction company that we had organized, and we did a lot of work for the city, so I knew all of the city officials. I knew the people that were both working in City Hall and the city governmental people; and when I was approached and asked if I'd be interested in running for Mayor, it seemed that I would be working with people that I was pretty familiar with. So I started right off the bat as Mayor.**

**DJ: And so being involved in government and politics was not a career decision because it was not in your career. Actually, what was your career then? I think you were involved in some large company.**

**RS: Right. I had sold my construction company in 1960 and gone to work for a local company called Silverline Boat Company. This was a boat manufacturing firm that had been started by some people from Minneapolis. I started there in 1960 as Business Manager and at the time I was elected Mayor, I was Vice-President of Finance of the company. And, as Vice-President of Finance, it was the kind of job that I could group my work together and work evenings at my job to get my work done at the job and still have time to do work in community involvement as Mayor.**

**DJ: Were you involved in making any lasting changes in the community? If so, what were they?**

**RS: I think we made some very substantial changes in the eight years that I was Mayor. I suppose the largest project of all, Dorothy, would have been our urban renewal project. Our urban renewal project was really the largest undertaking that this community has ever undergone in its history, and it involved the removal of the major portion of the old original downtown and replacing it with a modern uptown as we see today. All of those decisions and all of the planning for that was done during the period of time that I was Mayor.**

**DJ: Do you feel you had any disappointment or failure, then, at that time when you were doing all these extensive changes in Moorhead?**

**RS: We had some short-term setbacks, that's for sure, when we were doing our urban renewal project. There were many times that the project looked dismal because it's a very difficult project to tear down large, large portions of a community and try to rebuild them in a planned and purposeful way so that it can be of good service for people for many years to come.**

**I think one of the disappointments I had was that during this period of time we had an opportunity to really also look at the way the city government was organized; and although we had many successes, we also had some failures. One of the failures that I've always felt was that when we needed to build a new fire hall and a new police station, we had an opportunity to combine the police and fire forces into a single public safety department which over the years would have resulted in just substantial savings and increased service to the citizens of the community, but that was not to be; and what is one of the disappointments is that the people who voted on that decided that was not a good plan for Moorhead.**

**However, there were very many real highlights. The construction of the new City Hall, which is a beautiful, beautiful new edifice and is really the core of the downtown urban renewal project--I still have the shovel that turned the first shovelful of dirt in my office--so we had a lot of excellent things happening during the period of time I had the opportunity to be Mayor.**

**DJ: What was the power structure in government or politics at the time of your involvement?**

**RS: I think the power structure of Moorhead has been an interesting study over the years, and I don't believe that it's really changed over the years that I've been here in that there is no centrally focused power structure in the community; and the power structure really depended then, as it does now, on what the issue is. We have a clearly identified business group when it's a business matter; we have a clearly identified education group when it's an education matter; and we have several clearly identified political sort of groups when it's strictly a political matter. So, there isn't any clearly identified power structure, and there wasn't then. Of course, there were key people in each of these areas and those change from time to time as people retire and new people move into positions.**

**DJ: Was there someone you called on for advice or support, then?**

**RS: I expect that one of the people that I worked with most closely was Bill Dosland who was state senator at that time. Bill was also a college classmate of mine and I sought his advice and counsel many times as well as some key people on the city council--Dwaine Hoberg was on my city council, who, after I left the position of Mayor, became Mayor and subsequently went to the state legislature, and also Don Birmingham, who is a local insurance man and still in the community. Those two were very key advisors of mine that were on the city council during the period of time that I was Mayor.**

**DJ: This is an interesting question. What kind of coverage did you get from the media--the press, radio, television? Did you think this was fair, or what about it?**

**RS: I think a lot of the fairness or unfairness on the part of the media is maybe a more modern thing because I felt that I was treated quite well. The press always attended all of our meetings. I had a good association with the key reporting staff, particularly at the newspaper in those days, and I felt that I got good, fair treatment and good cooperation from the media all the time.**

**DJ: That sounds good. What community changes have you seen or participated in or even precipitated or been unhappy about during your time or since your time?**

**RS: A couple of things outside of the urban renewal project, I think, that were important things that I was pleased to be involved in, is that we started a sewer separation project really early on. Many other communities, Fargo particularly, is just now doing their sewer separation project and that means separating the sanitary sewer from the storm sewer. We did that 20 years ago when I was Mayor and we did that at a time when costs were much lower. It helped to clean up the Red River because previous to that time we had some of our combination sewers dumping into the Red River and causing some pollution.**

**We also started a project of paving all of the streets, and that's turned out to be just an excellent program--widening some of the streets, providing some arterial streets that many communities of our size do not have--the sort of planned network of streets that we have in Moorhead to handle increasing traffic as years go by.**

**I mentioned the police and fire stations and, of course, those were an outgrowth of the urban renewal project.**

**And the financing of the city buildings is one of the things that I worked with particularly hard. We had felt that we did not want to put an unnecessary burden on the taxpayers when we found we had an old, worn out police station, an old, worn out fire station, and an old, worn out city hall; and we developed a plan for financing this that used a small portion of the reserve funds from the public utility--the citizen-owned public utility--and we were able to actually rebuild all of these buildings without increasing taxes to the people in the community.**

**DJ: How did the nature of your community involvement change over the years?**

**RS: I think although my first really formal effort was as Mayor, I found that really led me to an awful lot of other things.**

**As an example, during the time I was Mayor, I was on the Board of Directors of the League of Municipalities; and immediately after leaving the post of Mayor, I was asked to serve on the City of Moorhead Charter Commission. That was in 1973 when I was appointed on the Charter Commission. And I'm still on the Charter Commission and still very active on the Charter Commission. I was Chairman of that group from 1973 to 1979 and during that**

period of time, we created an all-new home rule charter for the City of Moorhead. Our old charter had been in place for almost a hundred years and was really patched up and obsolete; and we spent a good solid five years during that period really creating an all-new Moorhead City Charter, which we think will last for, hopefully, another hundred years in this community.

**DJ:** Did you assume other leadership roles in the community; that is, in church, school, or service clubs, etc.?

**RS:** Yes, I think I really became very active. I was on the Moorhead Public Service Commission which is the Board of Directors for the local public utility, from 1977-1981. I served on the Moorhead Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors for four or five years. I also served on the Board of Directors of the Minnesota Commerce and Industry Board which is the state Chamber of Commerce. I spent ten years on that Board, and it was a very interesting and exciting experience for me.

**DJ:** Did your family support or discourage your involvement in community affairs?

**RS:** I think that one of the highlights of my work in the community has been the fact that my family has always strongly supported my community work. My wife was many times really put at great inconvenience because of the poor scheduling that I found myself involved in particularly during the period of time I was Mayor, although it continues on with other community things.

But I raised my family, and my wife and I have three sons. Two of them graduated from local colleges and one from an out-of-state college--two of the three with their education right here in Moorhead. The family has been of great help to me.

**DJ:** Would you like to see your children or grandchildren involved in government or politics?

**RS:** I think that everybody ought to select a time in their life when they spend some time in their community involved in community activities. I think it's one of the most satisfying parts of anybody's career. I believe that it's a part of living in a community just like your job is part of living in a community.

**DJ:** What about the stress that goes with political or public office? How did you deal with that or feel about it, and so on?

**RS:** I've always had a management job as a career, and I've become used to and maybe trained myself to handle stress. So stress has been something that I've learned to live with and live with in a healthy fashion; and although sometimes the heat's kind of on, you get used to that and many times it's actually stimulating.

**DJ:** Well, everyone loves a winner. If you ever lost an election, how did your standing in the community change or, in fact, did it change?

**RS: One of the things that's happened to me, Dorothy, is that I never did lose an election. The four times that I ran for elective office I won every time. When I left the position of Mayor, I left it because of the press of business. I had to make a decision of whether I was going to move forward in my business career, or whether I was going to continue to be that heavily involved in politics; so at that stage in my life I found it necessary to move forward rather in my business career.**

**DJ: The next question that I have happens to continue that one--if you had your years in government and politics to live over, what would you do differently, or why?**

**RS: I sometimes think about that, and I guess we've all made our share of mistakes. However, if I were going to do it over, I might not make the same mistakes again; but I'd probably make some different mistakes. I don't think I'd do very many things different. I've enjoyed my career here in Moorhead. Moorhead has become my home. I think it's been just an outstanding place in which to live and to work and to be involved in community affairs. There are few communities of this size in which a farm boy can come to town and get involved in things to the extent that I have over the last 30 to 40 years.**

**DJ: Would you name any particular thing that you feel is your greatest contribution towards making Moorhead a better place? Is urban renewal it, then?**

**RS: I would say that urban renewal is one of the major things. I believe that the new Moorhead City Charter, although it was not at a time when I was actively involved in elected politics, is something that's going to be in place for many years and it's providing a very efficient government system here in the community and it's something that's going to stay in stead for a long time.**

**I think some of the things that I really felt good about in the City of Moorhead is that people have selected me and given me honors from time to time and I've been pleased at that; the business that I was involved in was a nice business--we were a good-sized employer. There have been so many opportunities here that I just think Moorhead is a grand place to live and raise your family and do your work and have your career.**

**DJ: What are you doing now to keep busy?**

**RS: I'm currently still full-time employed. The manufacturing business in which I was involved for something like 20 years was a branch plant, and the home corporation moved it out of the city. I went to work in a project called the Fargo-Moorhead Heart Health Program, and the Fargo-Moorhead Heart Health Program is a research and demonstration project designed to determine to what extent we can reduce the risks of heart attack and stroke through community education means. It means working in the community full time. It's interesting for me to sort of wind up my career at this kind of a job because in previous years I'd sort of take time away from my regular vocation to do community work. Today I can do community work on a full-time basis and this project is being conducted by the University of Minnesota. I am now a University of Minnesota employee. It's just a**

**marvelous project and, to me, an excellent way of winding up a community career as well as a public and private career.**

**DJ: Ray, this has been very interesting. Do you have anything else that you'd like to tell us about or say?**

**RS: I spend a lot of time out walking in the evenings, and it's interesting to me when I walk around, particularly in the residential areas of Moorhead, that in the last four years there have been so many changes in some parts of Moorhead; but most of the central portion of Moorhead has just maintained its vitality in such a fine manner. When you walk through the residential areas, there is very little urban blight. Most of the homes, although many of them are 50, 60, and 70 years old, have been maintained so well. I think it's just an outstanding community and one that everybody that lives here can really be proud of--the people that are here and the kind of work and the pride they have in the ownership of their homes and the kind of community that it really is.**

**DJ: Thank you very much.**

**RS: Thank you, Dorothy.**

**DJ: This has been very interesting.**

**[End of Interview]**