

## **Interview with Thornley Wells**

**Interviewed by Wayne Ingersoll for the Heritage Education Commission**

**December 4, 1985**

**Thornley Wells - TW**

**Wayne Ingersoll - WI**

**WI: This is an interview with Thornley Wells, who served as Mayor of Moorhead from 1954 up into July of 1957. The interview was held at Moorhead State University in Moorhead on December 4, 1985. My name is Wayne Ingersoll, and I'm interviewing Thornley.**

**Thornley, I guess to get started here, we'll just get some of the personal data on you. Your name, Thornley Wells--there is an interesting story behind. Would you tell that to us with the spellings and everything.**

**TW: Well, the Thornley is Grandmother Wells's maiden name, and it was spelled "Thorniley"; and when my father gave it to me, he abbreviated it down to "Thornly." My first name was Frank, which I never went by. And when I went to the University, they all wanted to put an "ley," so I added that to my name; and then when I went into ROTC, the government wanted a middle initial and I started signing it "F. Thornley" and they turned it around to "Thornley F." so I thought if they wanted it that way, they could have it. So, now, my official signature is "Thornley F. Wells."**

**WI: I bet very few people, even your close friends, even realize your first name actually is Frank.**

**TW: Very few know it. Very few know that first name. In fact, I used to tell them "NMN," "no middle name."**

**WI: I find that very interesting. I was totally unaware of that.**

**What's your address now, Thornley.**

**TW: 422 South 5th Street here in Moorhead.**

**WI: Okay, and your age as of now.**

**TW: 84.**

**WI: And your birthplace?**

**TW: Cando, North Dakota.**

**WI: And what year?**

**TW: In 1901.**

**WI: And what was your birth date?**

**TW: July 20.**

**WI: I have a daughter who has a July 20 birthday.**

**What were your parents' names, Thornley?**

**TW: My father's name was Job Wells, and he added the name Thornley into his name; when he was given a name, as I understand it, it was just plain Job. And my mother's name was Elizabeth Briggs Ely before she was married.**

**WI: Briggs was her middle name.**

**TW: Briggs was her middle name, her grandmother's name.**

**WI: And what was her last name, her maiden name, your mother's maiden name?**

**TW: Ely, "e l y."**

**WI: And where were your parents from originally? Where did they come from?**

**TW: Well, they came here from Missouri. They were born in northeast Missouri, not too far from the Mississippi River and about a hundred miles or more north of St. Louis.**

**WI: What brought them up into North Dakota from Missouri?**

**TW: Well, my father was of a second marriage. The first marriage, there were several children; I don't know how many, but there were several. And then the first wife died and grandfather was married a second time to which there were, I think, about five children. Three of them died when they were a year or two old with measles. The only two surviving were a sister, Jenny, and my father. And then, I believe, his mother died at the birth of his sister, Jenny. And grandfather married a third time, and that time she and my father didn't get along. "At one time," he said, "she started after me when I was a youngster, and I didn't figure I had any whipping coming and I pulled out my old Barlow knife and I threatened her." "The result was I had to leave home at an early age." He was born in July of 1862, and he was up in North Dakota in the spring of '83. He worked awhile in the Larimore area and then finally went up into the Cando area where he filed for homestead, but he had to wait until after his birthday, until he was 21, before he could file. And he got three quarters of land, a homestead, a tree claim, and a pre-emption [spelling]. What the pre-emption meant, I don't know. But that's what he called it--three quarters of land. But in those early years, for some reason he moved into Cando; I think, probably, it was too**

**much for Mother trying to cook or a crew that would be necessary to do that farming, and he went into a blacksmith shop business and during the panic of 1890, it cleaned him out of everything he had. Later, they moved over north of Starkweather on a half section of land where he had to build house and barn and everything. And that's where I was raised.**

**WI: What nationality were your parents?**

**TW: How far back do you go? The Wells name was still in this country in 1706, in Baltimore [unclear].**

**WI: They were not first or second generation Americans, then?**

**TW: Well, they were way back.**

**WI: Okay, good.**

**How many brothers and sisters do you have, or did you have, if any?**

**TW: There was a brother born in 1890, Lem--Lemuel [spelling] M. Wells. Another brother, Fred Ely Wells, in 1894; he died in 1898. The older brother, Lem, was in World War II and died in France.**

**WI: World War I or II?**

**TW: World War I, my mistake. I had a sister, Helen, that was born in 1906; she was five years younger than I.**

**WI: Is she still living?**

**TW: No, she passed away about 20 years ago.**

**WI: What's your educational background, Thornley?**

**TW: Business degree at University of North Dakota in general business.**

**WI: And what year did you--?**

**TW: 1927.**

**WI: And did you graduate from high school in Starkweather, in that area?**

**TW: No, in Cando, in 1921. I had to help a lot of times on the farm because, you know, to save money, usually going in about six weeks late to school. In my sophomore year in high school, I started about the second of January because that's the year of the flu and schools closed down about the time I was ready to go.**

**WI: That was 1918, wasn't it?**

**TW: Yes, that was 1918.**

**WI: This is digressing a little bit, but I think it's important historically. The flu epidemic of 1918--what did it do to your area where you were from? How many people perished from it and what effect did it have?**

**TW: We were on the farm and milking about ten milk cows besides having all the rest of the stock and this was in the fall that we had the flu. My brother and I and father were all down with the flu, and a neighbor came over and did chores for us and did the milking for about a week.**

**WI: Did a lot of people from your area die from that?**

**TW: Oh, yes.**

**WI: When did you come to Moorhead?**

**TW: In the spring of '32.**

**WI: What brought you here, Thornley?**

**TW: Well, I went through the University selling aluminum cooking utensils and I worked as a state supervisor for a few years; and during the latter part of that, I was down in the West Virginia area and then I came back. It got too hot weather down there for me, and I didn't like it so I quit down there and came back and helped in the harvest there in '31. Then I had a friend that was selling Wearever out in the Black Hills and during the Depression, gold mining was up instead of down like everything else, so I went out and we worked together during the winter there in the Black Hills. And then I decided I wanted to run some kind of a business of my own and didn't want to stay in the selling business so I came to this area, thinking I didn't want to get too far south to get hot, humid days and I felt that I could survive in this area better than any place else and that's why I came in here. And I sold appliances, or tried to, for awhile.**

**WI: And that's what brought you to Moorhead, then; you eventually wanted to start a business for yourself and you came in 1932.**

**TW: In the spring of '32, yes.**

**WI: Were you married at that time?**

**TW: No.**

**WI: When did you get married, and whom did you marry? What was your wife's name?**

**TW:** In '36, August 26 of 1936, Ethel Alyea was her name; she had been married prior. And they lived in LeMars, Iowa, and my sister had become acquainted with them. She had married a man from that area and so they were acquainted, and Ethel came up to visit my sister; and that's what happened.

**WI:** When we first started out the interview--oh, to go back a minute. And you have one son, is that right?

**TW:** One son, Jack T. Wells.

**WI:** And Jack is how old now?

**TW:** He was born in October of '38.

**WI:** Forty-seven, then. And where is Jack now and what does he do?

**TW:** He's working for a company by the name of Sonnakraft [spelling] in Chicago. He has spent 20 years in the Air Force and retired from that, and he's worked for this company a little over two years now.

**WI:** Okay, thank you.

Now, when we first started the interview, it was stated that you were mayor of our city from 1954 up into about July 1957. When you ran for office in the fall of 1953, whom did you run against? Was it a 2-way race?

**TW:** I think it was Sig Bjornson. I'm not sure.

**WI:** What motivated you to run?

**TW:** For mayor? Well, the wife and I talked about it, and I'd been on the council for six years. She says, "Well, if you're going to stay in there, run for mayor or get out." And that's about the attitude that I had. If I was going to stay on in city government, I was going to be the mayor or I was going to be out of it.

**WI:** What motivated you to become involved in government and politics originally?

**TW:** I had property on Main Avenue, and that's when Cass Clay Creamery was fighting the idea of widening Main Avenue because they said it would ruin their business, but the men who were working there at Cass Clay, while the street was being widened, said they were getting along better with it wider than when it was narrow. Anyhow, they were fighting it, and Ben Briggs came over and wanted me to run for council because he said, "You get in there and find out what this will do and you be against it." And I said I didn't know whether I wanted to be for or against it. And he said, "You get in there, you'll find out." Well, I got in there and I found that I'd rather have a nice, wide street in front of my property than the narrow street, and so I went along with that. And originally, A. M.

**Bowman or A. W. Bowman used to work for The Fargo Forum, had been on the council for a number of years and I just wondered why he was in there so long. So that's one of the things.**

**WI: Were you the one who defeated him? What business were you in at the time?**

**TW: I was in the transfer business.**

**WI: And when did you start that business in Moorhead?**

**TW: February of '33.**

**WI: And then you were in that until you retired, is that correct?**

**TW: I owned it for a little over 30 years, just over 30 years.**

**WI: Now, you were involved in government locally, as a council member and mayor. Were you ever involved in party politics, over and above the city level in your career at all?**

**TW: Oh, I'd give a little money supporting some of the state people that were running for different elections, but not to any great extent.**

**WI: It was mostly local government that you were involved in?**

**TW: Mostly local, yes. I'm probably giving more now than I did then because then I had to watch my nickels pretty close.**

**WI: When you went into city government, one of the questions here is "Did you have a role model?" Is there anyone you looked up to and impressed you at the time that you were thinking of maybe modeling yourself after, if that's really the right way to put it. I see you as a pretty independent person.**

**TW: No, not that I know of. When I first filed for the council, I was called and asked if they could put my name along in with Fred Scheel who was also running for the council, and I said I'd be happy to have my name go along with his. I kind of felt that I went along in with Fred Scheel because the two of us were in ads together.**

**WI: Who was mayor when you went on the council, in '51? Was it Doc Bodelson [spelling]?**

**TW: No, Stenerson was just before I went in.**

**WI: Just after you.**

**TW: That was after I was on the council. There was Sliv [spelling] Nemzek who was mayor, and I think Ralph Hollands was mayor when I first went onto the council.**

**WI: And Ralph is still living, isn't he?**

**TW: Oh, yes. No, Ralph Hollands isn't living now, no.**

**WI: Then I was thinking of somebody else.**

**Do you think your occupation and your business either helped you or hindered you during your--I think we're going to limit this to your term as mayor, I think, more so than on the council term, when you were in the leadership position? Did your role help you, hinder you? How did it affect you and your business?**

**TW: At that time, I was riding a motorcycle, delivering groceries and everything else and had men on trucks, but most of my time was spent a little more on the motorcycle because I could be different places, handier that way, than if I were tied down to a job with a truck. So I was in many homes, delivering groceries. The name was pretty well publicized all over town.**

**WI: You had name recognition and people knew who you were and they associated that. It was a help to you, then.**

**TW: The fact that I was out working, I think, meant a lot to a lot of people--that I was right out digging in and working instead of on some other type of job.**

**WI: Now in your term of office, Thornley, can you recall any big items or issues that caused any lasting changes in the community during your three and a half years as mayor--major issues that you were behind?**

**TW: Well, during that time we were putting in storm sewers; and the first section of the storm sewer was between Eighth Street and west of the river and south of Ninth Avenue about. We got a pretty good figure as to the costs, and so forth on that. We were trying to figure out, should we pay for the mains and that way the city can control the size of the mains; or just put in mains that would be enough to take care of that particular area that we were going to put in storm sewer. We come to find out that the difference in cost on storm sewer between just putting in for that area and putting in larger mains was about 32 or 33 percent of the total bid, and the amount of property and streets and avenues and school property and parks amounted to approximately the same percentage as the storm sewer main. So we decided, if that's the case, then the city should bear the cost of the storm sewer main and then we can control the size as we see we need it for future expansion. And the other lateral areas more charged against the properties.**

**WI: Did Moorhead see a tremendous growth in this time during your term?**

**TW: It was spreading out considerably. After the first section we put in to the east of Eighth Street, in southeast Moorhead, and then people on the north side said, "We don't want to be in the mud and the water either," so they wanted it up there. At that time I told the engineer to try and break it into smaller sections so that smaller contractors were able**

to bid on it. And I still believe that the major contractors got together and decided who should have the bid (that's just personal feeling) because they all bid all or none, and the north section--we had that divided--and I think that ran around \$198,000 for that north section, which is a few percent above the engineer's estimate. But there was only one that bid on it. The rest of the larger contractors bid all or none, and on the south between Main Avenue--the smaller section was way to the north; and between that and the center of Moorhead, the lowest bid we got was \$412,000. And our engineer said that's out of line; that's too much; and he recommended throwing the bid out and calling for new bids. We did, and the next bid was for \$355,000 or \$358,000, somewhere in that neighborhood. It was about \$50,000 less and the engineer said that still is out of line. Let's re-advertise for bids.

WI: Who was the engineer at that time, do you recall?

TW: Wasn't it Olson? I can't remember. But anyhow, the third time we bid on this south section on the north side of Moorhead, Abbott, Arney, and Schwindt [spelling], with the help of Larry Mauritzen [spelling], had enough financial background so they could get a surety bond on it and they bid. And that time we got the bid at \$297,000 on the same specifications that were first issued and Abbott, Arney, and Schwindt were just \$150 below Barbarosso [spelling] who was from St. Cloud and so we feel that we saved about \$115,000 by throwing out and rebidding.

WI: That was a considerable amount at that time.

TW: Yes.

WI: It sounds to me like that was one of the most important things that took place then during your term of office, that expansion of the sewage system.

TW: Financially, I think it was, yeah. Otherwise, we were trying to keep everything pretty much on an even keel.

WI: Did the city council and the mayor have a lot of control over the expansion of the city and the growth at that time? Was it controlled growth?

TW: Not too much, I don't think. We were careful in how much we would allow out for public improvements, and so forth, as I think they probably are now.

WI: One of the questions here: What was the power structure in government and politics at the time you were mayor? Were there any people behind the scenes who wielded a lot of influence and power that you were aware of at that time or tried to influence you and others that you think?

TW: Not that I was particularly conscious of. There were others that did a lot of talking and all of that, but not as controlling.



**WI:** Was there anybody that you looked to for a lot of advice? Any predecessors or you just pretty much called your own shots and worked with the council and your staff?

**TW:** Pretty much that way. Oh, I visited with Henry Steening and others that had been mayor, but not particularly.

**WI:** When the bottom line is, I suppose the decision is yours and you have to--your signature is on the bottom line.

**TW:** What I felt was right, I stayed with it.

**WI:** What kind of coverage did you get from the press at that time? Fair, unfair, too much, too little, what do you think?

**TW:** Well, there was one time I got a little adverse publicity. I kicked the reporters out because we were discussing the official printing bids--who should get the minutes, and so forth. And I felt that if we were going to have a contract out for some other type of work, I didn't let the contractors in and listen to us discuss the bids; and I didn't feel that the newspaper was any privileged character and I felt that if we're going to discuss the pros and cons between different papers, then I thought we should be able to do that without them being present. And I moved them all to the office, and I got a little adverse publicity on that but I still think I was right.

**WI:** Today, with the new laws and regulations, it might be kind of hard to do that. They'd scream bloody murder, wouldn't they?

**TW:** I'm afraid they would. [Laughter]

**WI:** Talking about your term as mayor now, is there anything that you were unhappy that took place during your term that either at the time or in reflection on it?

**TW:** Not that I can think of, that I was particularly unhappy about. We were watching parking areas all we could because we felt if people could park close to where they wanted to buy something, why, that was good business; and we watched our parking problem as close as we could.

**WI:** Who was your police chief at that time? During your term--police chief?

**TW:** I think Cy B. Felt [phonetic].

**WI:** You finished your term of mayor in 1957. Could you explain how you happened in mid-term to go on to something else? Could you explain the situation?

**TW:** Well, the county commissioner whose district was entirely within the city of Moorhead, passed away, and it was up to the council to appoint a commissioner to take his place.

**WI: The city council?**

**TW: The city council. So the aldermen were all told if they had somebody they thought would be a good county commissioner for Moorhead to submit the names, and we had about 15 names on the list; and we could discuss the different ones that way. Finally, when we were going to have a meeting, one of the aldermen said, "Are you going to run for mayor this fall?" I said, "No, I think ten years in city government is enough for me; let somebody else carry on." "Well, then, we'll put you in for county commissioner; you know more about Moorhead than the rest." And that's what happened.**

**WI: And it didn't bother you at all to step down at that time and move on to the commission?**

**TW: I felt that I was leaving the mayor's chair in good hands with Ingeman Stenerson, and so it didn't bother me and it was a change, and I thought, well, I'll enjoy it up there.**

**WI: How long were you a county commissioner, then?**

**TW: About 14 1/2 years.**

**WI: Fourteen and a half years.**

**TW: Yes, I went through nine elections, counting the city council, the mayor, and then on the county board. I went through nine different elections and had opposition at every time but I never lost an election**

**WI: That's quite a record. When you ran for mayor in 1955, your second term, who was your opponent or opponents at that time?**

**TW: I don't remember what one ran against me, whether it was Sig Bjornson--he ran against me one time.**

**WI: Was he running against you or running for mayor?**

**TW: He was running for mayor at the same time.**

**WI: Yeah, I understand that. But was he running because he wanted to beat Thornley Wells or because he wanted to be mayor?**

**TW: I think because he wanted to be mayor. But I'd have to go back to my scrapbooks to answer that. I don't remember now.**

**[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]**

**WI: So you saw your community involvement change over the years--city council to mayor to county commission. When you retired from the county commission, I believe in '70 or '71--**

**TW: '72.**

**WI: --'72, pardon me. Have you had other involvement in city government in any other role since that time?**

**TW: Not since then.**

**WI: Any appointed positions at all?**

**TW: No, I kept pretty well clear of that because I felt as long as I was on the county board, I should be there, so I didn't spend any winters in the south or anyplace. It restricted my activities, so after I left the County Board, I pretty much kept clear. I was on the Lakeland Mental Health Board for awhile, but not too long.**

**WI: You were involved for over 20 years, then, in city government.**

**TW: It's about 24 years.**

**WI: Okay, a quarter century. Did you have a lot of support from your wife and son in your endeavors?**

**TW: Oh, yes, they supported me. When I first went on the council, my son asked what it meant. I said, "Well, I'm one of the city dads; I help run the city." "Well, if you're a city dad, I'm a city son."**

**WI: It didn't have any adverse affect on your family life, then, your involvement.**

**TW: No, other than it restricted our freedom of movement after I got out of the transfer business, and so forth.**

**WI: There's always stress in holding public office--it can come from many different areas. How did you deal with stress?**

**TW: Well, I guess I just more or less analyzed the problem as I saw it and made up my mind as to what I stood for and if it wasn't right for the majority of the people, then they'd let me know at the election.**

**WI: Or somebody could file against you and see what they could do.**

**TW: File against me and run, but that's the way I saw it and that's the way I stayed.**

**WI: You never lost an election.**

**TW: No. None of them were too close. They, of course, got fair representation, but not close enough to want a recount or anything.**

**WI: If you had a chance to do this over again, Thornley, your service in city government, would you do anything differently?**

**TW: Would I do any different?**

**WI: Yeah, would you do anything differently?**

**TW: I don't know. That's a question--you know, you analyze things at the time and decide what you think is the best and would mean the most to the most people, and that's the thing that I do.**

**WI: At that time. Maybe that's really kind of an unfair question. We'd probably do a lot of things differently with hindsight, but we don't have that luxury, do we?**

**TW: One thing that was kind of a hot issue while I was mayor was closing the streets and avenues through the Concordia campus. A lot of people--you would think we'd taken their right arm off to close the street that they'd been using to cross the campus there, and there was some argument there. I knew that had to be done if they were going to have a campus, and I felt that that meant a lot to Moorhead and so I went along with them on that.**

**WI: This wraps it up, but I think it's a very important question: What do you feel is Thornley Wells's greatest contribution in making Moorhead a better community? That might take some pondering; I understand that.**

**TW: Yeah. I don't know, other than I just tried to make it a good, livable city that was convenient and nice to live in. I've known for years that we need more commercial property to help pay taxes because we haven't as much percentage of commercial property as we should have and there's always an argument when you start to bring someone like that into the city, but I don't know just what I would add should be different.**

**WI: Okay, good. Thornley Wells, thank you very much. I think I have found this interview enlightening and I think anybody who listens to it would find it a pretty valuable piece of Moorhead history. Thanks again.**

**TW: I hope it's interesting to them.**

**[End of Interview]**