INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MOORE

December 21, 1987

CNB: This is a recording session in Weckesser Hall on the 21st of December, 1987, with Mr. John Moore, long-time resident of the Valley, graduate of Harvard University, and long-time president of the Luzerne Bank.

John, let's start by telling a little bit about when you were born and a about your parents, and then I want to talk a little bit about the newspaper in your family.

JM: I was born in 1903; I missed the turn of the century. My father became General Manager of the Wilkes-Barre Record, the morning newspaper in Wilkes-Barre at the time, the same year that I was born. He had started out as a printer's devil in the composing room of The Record some years before when he was 14 years old, his father having been killed in the mines and he was needed to support the family. He told me that at the time he began he was paid the munificent sum of $2.00 a week, of which he gave his mother $1.75 and said that he kept 25¢ for riotous living. I don't think it was very riotous, but he said even with the 25¢ he usually spent 10¢ for a dime novel, leaving him 15¢ for other pursuits of happiness.

CNB: What was your father's name, John?

JM: My father's name was Guy W. Moore. He never had a middle name, but he thought Guy Moore, two one-syllable words, was far too short a name and therefore he picked out himself the initial "W" because it took three syllables to say "double U" and that gave him a five syllable name—Guy W. Moore.

CNB: And your mother's name?

JM: My mother's name was Esther Parry. Her father was a foreman in the mine in Luzerne, the old—it became later the Harry E. Coal Company. In those days there was no provision made for retirement. When my grandfather developed miner's asthma, the owner of the mine said, "Well, I'm sorry. You're not any good anymore. you can go home now, we don't need you." No pension, nothing at all. And the way the chickens sometimes come to roost. As I said, my grandfather was dismissed by Mr. W. G. Payne of—the old Payne Coal Company, and many years later his son, who succeeded his father, was not too successful with the coal company. In fact, reached the point where the whole thing went into receivership and my father, the son-in-law of the man he'd fired, was named receiver for the coal company.

CNB: Let me pick up on that. So he got out of the coal business, your father.

JM: No. His father-in-law. My mother's father.

CNB: Alright. Mr. Parry. Now, how did your father come into the newspaper business the year you were born? What transpired there?

JM: He, as I said, started out as a printer's devil at $2.00 a week, and was advancing to the point where—he was advancing really because he was doing more than was required, which I guess helps anybody to advance. In those days they had a union, as they do now. The Typographical Union was quite strong and there was discouragement among the employees for anyone who tried to excel. My father was trying to do a good job. He was setting type faster than most of the others in the composing room. The result was every now and then one of the employees would come by his case—the type then was set individually letter by letter; each letter was put in and at the end of the day taken out and put back in the case to be used again the next day—someone would come along and pick up a handful of "e's" and scatter them over his case so he had to spend the next hour resorting the letters out because—in other words, you're going too fast, slow down, which I'm afraid is typical of unionism to this day.

CNB: But somehow he came into the ownership of this venture.

JM: No, not exactly the ownership. He became foreman of the composing room. I think largely due to the fact that he was doing a better job than the others. And he was moved down from foreman to business manager in 1903, the year that I was born. He later on had a number of contracts with the owners. At the time he took over, Dr. Johnson and Joseph Powell were the two co-owners of the company. Powell was an editorial writer. He was involved in the news department. Johnson had taken his degree as an M.D., but never had a single patient. He never practiced medicine, but thought he would go into business and he was a partner with Powell.

CNB: This is not Stanley Johnson.

JM: No. Another Johnson family entirely. No connection. And later I had a lot of connection with the other Johnson. I was guardian for five of that gentleman's grandchildren later on.

CNB: So Johnson and Powell owned <u>The Record</u> and your father started moving up in the operation.

JM: Yes. And then my father with them . . . several contracts, ten-year contracts to manage the paper. And it was subsequently run by—it was owned by the two widows. Both of these men, Johnson and Powell, died many years ago. Powell died, I think, soon after the thing started. And Johnson died around 1912. Leaving two widows owning the paper and my father running it. And for a number of ten-year cycles—he had a ten-year contract to manage the paper—then they developed another arrangement which I think was very equitable because the two ladies were lovely persons but had no knowledge of the business at all. And the later contract stated that the profits of the company would be divided three ways—one to Mrs. Johnson, one to Mrs. Spears and one-third to my father. So the more money he made for them the more he made for himself. It was a very equitable and reasonable arrangement. That worked out as long as he stayed there.

CNB: How many other papers were there at the time in Wilkes-Barre?

JM: The Times Leader, which was a combination of two older papers—The Times and The Leader, it became one paper—The Times Leader, an evening paper and a somewhat smaller paper The Evening News. That's a little interesting, too. Originally, what became later The Evening News was a morning newspaper. It was a small paper, but it was a thorn in the flesh for The Record. And my father developed a brilliant idea of buying the Morning . . . whatever it was, I don't remember the name of it . . . and turning it around into an evening paper. He removed the competition from the morning and threw it in front of The Times Leader in the evening. So then we had The Times Leader and The Evening News (which was the paper my father created). He gave The Evening News to John Hourigan, the composing room foreman at The Record at the time The Evening News started out. He presented him with The Evening News to run—"It's your paper. You run it; you make money with it and, incidentally, it caused The Times Leader considerable difficulty.

CNB: Now, how far back did The Record go? I know way before your father's involvement.

JM: Yes, way before that. He started there, as I said, when he was 14 years old, that would be in the early '80s he started there.

CNB: But between The Times Leader and The Record which was the older paper?

JM: I think The Record; I'm not sure. The Record used to be called The Record of the Times and it was a weekly paper long before it became a daily, but it went back, I think, at least as far as the Civil War.

CNB: Now at the same time your— Through the World War period, was your father's primary business the newspaper?

JM: Yes.

CNB: Somewhere the Luzerne Bank comes into all of this.

JM: Well, he became a director of the Luzerne Bank. That was started in 1907. I, incidentally, had Account Number 31 there. I was four years old at the time. Obviously, I didn't open the account myself; it must have been done for me. I still have the same original savings account. With the computer system, I'm no longer 31; now I'm Number 000001. But I've lost my original number.

CNB: How did he happen to get into the bank, because that's really only four years after he took a step up at The Record?

JM: Anyone that's running a newspaper has a lot of political pull in the neighborhood. My father was never a politician; he never had a public office; he never wanted one, but a newspaper has a great deal of ability in dictating who does get jobs. Governor Pinchot, former Governor of Pennsylvania, used to call him. "Who would you suggest I appoint for judge?" And one time my father suggested John Fine who later became Governor of Pennsylvania. He was the one that had suggested that Pinchot appoint him to the Luzerne County bench, which followed, I think, an appointment to Superior or Supreme Court judge and later governor of the state.

CNB: Was The Record in those days identified with the Republican Party?

JM: Not in so many words, but it was always a Republican newspaper.

CNB: Was The Times Leader a Democrat?

JM: Yes. Not perhaps as much as The Record was Republican. The Record was always rather a staid, conservative paper. In fact, The Times Leader used to refer to The Record as "Old Granny Record." We got back at them at the time of the first World War when the armistice was signed The Leader announced the armistice unfortunately a day before it happened. They had it all ready and somebody made a mistake and they put it in, so from that time on The Record used to refer to The Leader as "the newspaper with all the news the day before it's made."

CNB: Sounds like rough competition.

JM: It was. It was pretty— There were some nasty words said between the papers.

CNB: How did the two papers stand on the various coal strikes through the years. Was one more pro-management and the other more pro-union?

JM: No, I don't think so. Neither one took any particular stand on that. They kept pretty much on the outskirts of that.

CNB: That must have been hard to do. Those strikes tended to divide the community pretty sharply, didn't they?

JM: But they didn't want to get into that because it was rough fighting with that and nobody wanted to be burned down.

CNB: Now, where did you go to school before you went off to Harvard?

JM: Well, I went to grade school, the first eight grades, I never went to first grade. My family had a good friend who taught second grade and they got her to come to our house and tutor me all through my first grade, so she gave me the first grade work at home. Then I went to her class for the second grade. My family felt I was too young to advance. They wanted her to keep me another year even though I passed everything. So I had Miss Mackey for three years.

CNB: At what school?

JM: At the Maple Street School in Kingston. And then after eighth grade I moved on to Wyoming Seminary where I enjoyed four very happy years before going to Harvard.

CNB: And what did you major in at Harvard?

JM: Mathematics.

CNB: Alright. And you graduated in 1925?

JM: Yes. 1928 from the Harvard Business School. I took one year out. I worked in the Luzerne Bank as a teller to get a little practical hands-on experience. And after one year at the bank, I went back and took two years in graduate school.

CNB: What are some of your dominant memories of Harvard?

JM: Work. That's the main thing I remember. I was not a brilliant student. I got through Seminary with reasonable grades. I was never cum laude or anything of that sort, but I succeeded in graduating properly and at Harvard it got— First of all, I hardly had any social life at Harvard at all. Girls took too much time, and while my father was doing fairly well at the time, he didn't believe in throwing money at me. I never had money to blow at all. Therefore, taking girls to parties, dances, and what not was— First of all, it didn't appeal to me. I wasn't a social minded person and secondly, I didn't have the wherewithal to do it. And thirdly, even more importantly, I realized my father was doing the best he could. He never had anything beyond an eighth grade education, and he wanted me to have a good one. He was keeping me in Harvard, and I wanted to do the best job I could to show I was worthy of what he was doing. So I really plugged pretty steadily. When I went into Harvard-Oh yes, I had too much fun at Seminary my senior year. I became quite enamored over one of the young ladies in my class and was spending too much time with her the last year. The result is I was admitted to Harvard on probation because it was a touch and go whether I would make it or not. At Harvard we had hour examinations in November where you are tested in everything you have taken up to that point, only a couple of months. Most people, if they fail in November hour exams, are on warning they better do alright in the mid-years. But in my case, with probation, I was told that if you don't pass the November hours that's the end of it right there. You don't go to mid-years. So I had a note on probation right on my desk facing me all the time. And I didn't forget it, believe me, and I worked. The only really pleasures I had at Harvard was the theater. Boston was only eight minutes away on the subway and Boston had five or six theaters that had tryouts for most of the New York plays before they went there and it was very tempting and the price in the first balcony was not too excessive and I used to spend many evenings-In fact, I kept my theater programs. My senior year I saw 65 shows in Boston. That was my recreation. Girls took a lot more money than the theater did. . . .

CNB: Do you have any professors that you remember as being particularly . . .

JM: Bliss Perry I remember particularly who taught me English 41, a survey of English literature. And that was delightful. I think I thought more of him than I did anybody else. I had one man at Seminary, Dr. Fleck, that I thought very highly of.

CNB: Who do you remember reading during those college years who had a great influence on your thinking? Were you reading Shaw or . . .?

JM: No, there was a great variety of most everything. I wasn't emphasizing one . . . one particular author didn't entrance me to the point where I . . . I wanted to read everything.

CNB: Was Mencken somebody that you followed?

JM: To a degree, but not heavily. I was distributing all over the place, not concentrating on any one. And remember, my chief interests were not in English and not even in history that much, but more in mathematics and science. I took a lot of science courses and chemistry and physics. I remember one in acoustics that didn't do me much good, but I often tear my hair when I go into a place now and think why on earth can't they have on acoustic ceiling in here so I can hear somebody talk. I took a couple courses in astronomy. I had a good chance to distribute around a lot and most of it . . . My natural bent was towards things scientific rather than the . . . .

CNB: When you came back to Wilkes-Barre in 1925?

JM: 1928.

CNB: 1928. That's right. Was it an MBA?

JM: Yes. MBA.

CNB: Did you pick up with <u>The Record</u> at that point?

JM: Yes. My father had a job waiting for me when I got here. He didn't want me to waste any time.

CNB: And what was the job?

JM: I started out as Assistant Circulation Manager.

CNB: And that went to what for you?

JM: Remember, my father was not there very long. That was 1928 and in 1930 he was out. Well, I hadn't better talk about that on this tape.

CNB: So you left when he left.

JM: No. I stayed there most of my life.

CNB: What are your recollections of the impact of the Depression in those first years—1929, 1930, 1931—on the economy here in Wilkes-Barre?

JM: Well, I don't think it made that much impression on me. We were fairly well off anyway. Nobody in my family was suffering directly. We could see a lot of it around, but . . . How do you mean, Chris?

CNB: Well, you were associated at this point with two organizations—The Wilkes-Barre Record and the Luzerne Bank. Just as those two institutions worked their way through those years and worked with local businesses and advertisers, customers at the bank, you must have seen some of the displacement.

JM: It didn't affect either of those two institutions that much. The bank continued to go up slow; perhaps, it would have gone up more rapidly if there hadn't been a depression, but we never suffered to the point. . . As a matter of fact, there was another bank in Luzerne at one time, the Merchants and Miners Bank, which, perhaps, did feel the Depression much more. We were the old established bank. The other was a new, young. . . . We had to take them over one day because they were going up the spout. We absorbed them and most of their employees came to work for us. That became . . . I think, the Liquor Control Board had a liquor store in the old bank in Luzerne, the one that we took over. It didn't affect The Record or the bank that much. Of course, a great many people were badly affected by it and we probably lost customers, but not to the point where the bank was in danger. We were in far more greater danger under the young man I told you about who almost sold us down the river.

CNB: Just a few years ago.

JM: Yes. That was a really bad time.

CNB: What condition was the bank in at the time of the bank closing in March of '33, when Roosevelt became President?

JM: We were in pretty good shape.

CNB: We talked about this before we started the tape recorder, let's just go through the chain of command of the bank from the time it was started in 1907 because it's been an unusually contained leadership in terms of two families, three families I guess, since that time and this is your last week as President, so we are talking as if another transition is about to take place. Who did start it? Who was the first leader and how did the chain of office come down to you?

JM: Who started it?

CNB: Yes. Who was the first President?

JM: I think his name was Stanley Perrin. I'm not sure of the first name, but the poor fellow was ill and died six months after the bank opened in 1907. He had it a very short time. And then my uncle, W. J. Parry, my mother's oldest brother, took over as President. He had it the longest period of anyone until he died. Then my father. . .

CNB: Which would have been when?

JM: I don't know the exact date, but I would guess around 1940. He had it from 1907 to 1940. I know it was 30 some years. And then my father took over at that time and had it till he died in 1953 when Stanley Johnson became President. His father had been one of the original directors when the bank was formed, but had never been President of the bank. And Stanley, in 1971, told the Board that "I can no longer see, and I can no longer hear and it's time for me to get out as President. I suggest Mr. Moore become President." Which was rather a shocking surprise to me because I hadn't anticipated it. But I couldn't find anybody that was willing to take it, so I ended up being more or less pushed into it and I've been that ever since.

CNB: So you've been President from 1971 through 1987. What are some of the highlights of that period at the Luzerne Bank?

JM: The highest light of all was really a low light with the gentleman I told you about. That's the thing we'll always remember the longest. Elsewise, it's been a steady, progressive growth. One of our big things was when we opened a branch in Swoyersville. Swoyersville never had a branch. Luzerne had never had a branch. And we figured that shortly there was going to be a branch in Swoyersville. If we didn't put it, somebody else would, so. . . some of the things I'm telling you here should not be used for general distribution.

CNB: OK.

JM: We applied for a charter in Swoyersville for permission from the Borough fathers to open a bank. And they didn't say so in so many words, but it became obvious that they were going to drag their legs until they got something under the table. I said, "If we never have a branch in Swoyersville we're not going to do it with bribery." After about three years apparently the feeling got through-we're not going to see a bank if we don't let them open, so they dropped their objection. Then we opened and have been very successful ever since. I talked to a president of a bank—First Valley Bank—down in Bethlehem at the time asking how long it took usually for a branch to become successful financially. He said usually you run at a loss for about five years. By that time you should have assets of around $5 million, and at the end of five years I would anticipate you would, if everything's going alright, you would make money. By the end of four years we had $5 million and were definitely making money, and we are now up to around $10 million, so the branch has done very nicely.

CNB: When did you quit The Record?

JM: I quit The Record when I was 62 years old—1965.

CNB: So you were a bank director from '65 to '71. You didn't own The Record at that time.

JM: We never owned The Record. The Record was always owned by the Johnson and the Powell families. My father was an employee there; he was general manager.

CNB: What was your position at the point you retired?

JM: I had so many things over there. I was in national advertising, which I liked very much. I think I was working in local advertising.

CNB: But advertising really had become your specialty?

JM: That's right. Circulation was only the first few years.

CNB: So you really saw a revolution in advertising strategy in the years that you were doing that in terms of Madison Avenue, national magazines, and television. You really watched an industry grow from infancy. Was it hard to make the transition away from the newspaper business to retirement?

JM: No, not at all. Not in the least. I was happy I worked there as many years as I did—from the time I was 28 until I was 62, but when retirement age came along I left happily and rarely even go in there. I have a much closer connection with the bank than I ever did with the publishing company.

CNB: When did The Record close?

JM: Well, they've never really closed, they just became a morning and evening edition of the Wilkes-Barre Publishing Company. Later on they changed the name to The Times Leader. The Wilkes-Barre Publishing Company owned The Record and The Times Leader, and we published for a while in two different plants. Then they brought The Leader over and we published everything in the one plant on North Main Street, the old Record plant. Everything was enlarged and everything, both morning and evening papers, were put to bed there.

CNB: Now, DeWitt Smith and his family were The Times Leader part of that marriage. But they were getting out of the business the same time you were.

JM: Smith was something like my father. He was a manager of The Times Leader working for the Kirkendall family who owned it. But they owned it no outright because they had some huge debts and a bank in Cleveland was financing it. They had more debts than assets, but Smith—Col. Ernest G. Smith—was the manager who ran the paper for Kirkendall.

CNB: I've got to close this off, but I want one more quick question. Looking back on it now, as you watched the anthracite industry go through its many changes, were you aware by the end of World War II that the industry was really in a permanent skid?

JM: I think so. Yes. There was so much of it downhill all the time. One closing up after another. Breakers around here falling into disrepute. It was diasterous, it was falling down. I think we could all see the coal industry was a thing of the past. Until finally they broke through the river up here and let all the river into the mines and that was really the end of it in one hour.

CNB: As you watched this, was oil the culprit as far as people were concerned and did you see it in those terms? That this was just a cheaper fuel that was going to do the same . . .

JM: Yes, I think so. It just didn't compete anymore.

CNB: Well, that ends our session for today and I hope we can pick this up some other time. Thank you, John Moore.