

HERBERT N. MACE

Tape 1

August 1, 1980

MACE SERVICE, 6-1/2 and Ohio, Terre Haute, Indiana 47807

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EH: I'm Ed Howard and this is the first of August, 1980. I'm talking to Herbert N. Mace who I see in the paper referred to as Herb Mace. We're here at Mace Service which is at 6-1/2 and Ohio.

Mr. Mace, you know the project, and we're trying to go back as far as we can in the past to take a look at what was happening in the area of transportation in those days. You came here from Putnam County. What year was that?

MACE: December 29, 1919.

EH: And you went to ISU? You came here to go to school?

MACE: [I went to] Indiana State Normal.

EH: Let me jump then, if I may, to the automobile business and tire business. I think you were in the tire business. When was that and where was that?

MACE: I began working for Mr. E. P. Whitmer, owner of the Terre Haute Tire Company [16 South 5th Street] in March, 1920. And I have sold tires retail ever since. We're still a tire dealer here now. And near that time, as I remember, there was Sam's Tire Shop in Terre Haute [ "Invite us to your next blowout" was their slogan. ], Vigo Tire Company owned by Stu Barret, Wagner Tire Company owned by Wagner and [later] Hall, a Goodyear store owned by Seeburger on South 5th, and . . . [Struble Tire & Accessory Co., 507 Ohio Street; Bernard Carney, 516 Cherry Street; Moon Tire Service, 1220 Wabash Avenue; The B. F. Goodrich Rubber Co., Otis Allen, manager, 672 Ohio; U. S. Tire Co., South 8th Street; Twenty Twenty Tire & Vulcanizing Co., 17 South 5th; and many others]

EH: There were several of them then?

MACE: There were. And, of course, they changed hands frequently. There was, after that, Schrepferman Brothers [667 Ohio Street], a Goodyear dealer; and then in the 'twenties, [19]25 I believe it was, I

MACE: became a Goodyear dealer and had a service station at 4th and 412-414 Ohio for 11 years.

EH: Well, would people bring their tires to you?  
How did they work that?

MACE: At that time, the dealer sold tires, aired them, and repaired them if they had a vulcanizing plant. Some of us made service calls to change tires for people -- put the spare on or fix it or take it back. For the most part, people didn't drive much in the winter; the roads were mostly gravel. Then the National Road wasn't paved yet. You know, between here and Indianapolis it was gravel or crushed rock. The business was altogether different than it is now. They weren't diversified like they are now, and most of the people had a tire shop or a battery shop or a specialty shop.

EH: Did you sell anything besides tires?

MACE: Later I did. We had batteries. Then I wanted to secure independence, so I diversified quite a bit. And then when World War II came, I overdiversified. Because we practiced good service and were popular, I was offered a lot of different franchises. I really attempted too many things. At one time I had an appliance store, a farm store, an appliance service store, a tire store, feed, paint, some furniture, and Crosley autos and an oil business. I didn't become an automobile dealer until 1945, although I had a chance to sell Ford in 1935 when I built this new store here. However, I sold a few of the tiny Crosley cars before 1945. But transportation is a great subject. It involves a lot of everything.

I remember one time at a Chamber of Commerce meeting -- I was a director then -- we had a vote on the St. Lawrence seaway, and I was the only one that voted in favor. All the rest voted against finishing the Great Lakes seaway. Lou Hart, the president, said, "Herb, why did you vote that way?" I said, "I thought it was the evolution of transportation. It would bring the ocean closer to Terre Haute." And due to the automobile . . . it changed everything.

EH: In the 1920's, was there -- you were speaking of water transportation -- was there transportation on the river in the 'twenties?

MACE: No, there wasn't a boat then that carried freight. But when the Great Lakes seaway was completed to Chicago, that brought the ocean that close. Whereas, it was hundreds and hundreds of miles before then from us. You know, the great big ships come to Chicago now.

EH: So they had quit running river barges then -- by the time you started in the automobile business?

MACE: They had. I don't think I ever saw a freight barge on the Wabash River.

EH: How did people get around in the 'twenties? What was their means of transportation?

MACE: Well, mostly Model-T's. That was the big seller then. They cost, at one time, \$265 in 1919. You could buy them by the piece. People liked them and they served them well. Henry Ford tried to help the people. He was a very objective person and I admire him very much. But the competitors offered options, you know, by offering the people different colors and different equipment, and he was slow to adapt to that kind of manufacturing.

EH: Were they still running interurbans then?

MACE: They were. I don't remember when they stopped. When we built this building in 1935-6, we had them haul part of the material that we used here in this building, and I know that they were still running then. I forget what year they did quit.

EH: Where did they haul it from, Indianapolis?

MACE: Somewhere, yes, along the line. Maybe it was further than that. You know these transportation companies have deals that they finish up each other's job.

EH: Do you . . . I don't know exactly how to ask this, but as you look back over your sixty years, do you recall what people thought of cars? What did they think of the Model-T, compared to the V-8 and compared to what they think today? Has there been a change in how people look at cars?

MACE: Well, I think that depends entirely on their economic circumstances and the custom of the day.

MACE: When you are in Rome, you do as Rome does; and if you have plenty of means, you buy what you want. But most people have to . . . are limited by the budget, and they buy what best they can with what they've got to buy with. I think the automobile has been everybody's magic carpet. Next to a home, it is the most anticipated purchase they can buy and has been for many, many years. To illustrate the point, I walked so long that when I got my first bicycle, I thought I was flying! I'd walk up the hills to get to ride down, because it's so much more of a thrill than walking. It's just like bring the great St. Lawrence seaway closer to where you live. The evolution of transportation . . . now we've got airplanes and many other better means that we didn't have then. Of course, the automobile needs and caused the good roads. I've always been grateful to AAA American Automobile Association because they marked the roads early and I joined when I was a kid going to college. I've been sixty years a member of AAA. They at first didn't charge very much. I forget. It was a dollar or two, but they give good service and what you pay now is a bargain.

EH: When you came to Terre Haute, were there bus lines then?

MACE: Yes, I think so. Yes, I'm sure there were because I remember going from Poland to Brazil in a little old one-cylinder International truck. It was used for a bus to haul passengers. They used to have no regulations. We used to have jitney buses here in town. They did a good job and helped a lot of people very economically and made work for people. It's a wonder to me that they don't use them again. I read where they were in some places.

EH: What do you mean by jitney bus?

MACE: Well, at that time, they just charged a nickel for a ride from downtown to Twelve Points or West Terre Haute; and that's what we used to call a jitney.

EH: Was it a Model-T?

MACE: No, they had different makes. You could have any kind you wish.

EH: That was in the 'twenties that you were talking about?

MACE: Yes, and I think they had a city ordinance that put them out of business. It might have been gotten by the cab or bus companies; I don't know what caused them to outlaw them. [It] might have been insurance problems.

EH: Were they open vehicles?

MACE: Well, they had mostly all ragtops back in the early 'twenties, you know. They called them touring cars, but then the coupes come and then the sedans. The first enclosed car was called coupe. The first car I owned was a ragtop -- a 1923 Gray touring car. It had a Continental Red Seal motor, and it gave 27 miles to the gallon. But it didn't have much power; I had trouble going up the Reelsville hill with it -- you know, to have enough power. It was made by the company that made the Gray motorboat. I owned it two years [and] traded it in on a Buick, secondhand. It belonged to . . . used to be Len Marshall's car [when it was] new. Then I bought, in 1928, a new Hudson. Then in 1931 I bought a new Nash. Harry Cole was the oldest automobile dealer in Terre Haute at that time, I was told. In the early 'twenties, most automobile dealers were on North 7th Street. However, Cole was located down on Ohio Street right east of 5th [Street] where the Woodburn Printing Company's big place is there now. He had the Cadillac and Nash, I believe, agency. He was considered the oldest car dealer in Terre Haute for years. Cliff Shanks worked for him, and he later quit and started the Studebaker agency here in the 'twenties.

EH: They sold . . .

MACE: On 7th Street, there was Buick, Pontiac, and quite a few different makes in the car agencies. Of course, in those days there were many manufacturers still left -- Hupmobile, Franklin. Chrysler didn't begin making cars until about '25, 1925.

EH: Now, the dealers then, did they all work on cars? Did they have a service department?

MACE: Yes, they all had a service department, but mechanics weren't very well equipped, and they weren't factory trained. They didn't have so much testing equipment. It was more of a hunt-[and]-peck -- like working a typewriter with one finger. I don't know

- MACE: if the manufacturers furnished them specs for the cars then or not. Of course, they were a lot more simple. They didn't have all these extra goodies that they've got now, and they weren't as hard to work on. The Ford Model-T, you could buy them a part at a time and assemble you a car.
- EH: I read somewhere that in 1927 the first public restroom in a service station was built at 8th and Ohio [Streets]. Did you know that? Do you . . . .
- MACE: You mean the first one in the United States?
- EH: Apparently so.
- MACE: I don't know; I never read that, but it might be true.
- EH: Service station at 8th and Ohio, 1927. Whose service station would that be? Do you recall? 8th and Ohio?
- MACE: No, I don't think there was a service station there then. That was Gerstmeyer, a doctor. I tore the old building down . . . . On the northwest corner of 8th and Ohio? What year did you say?
- EH: 1927.
- MACE: That couldn't be. No, it wasn't true. There was a service station at 9th and Ohio. That was the one I own now. It was [I think] a White Rose. It belonged to the Trimbles in Indianapolis. They had a whole string of stations; and they sold out to Shell for, I think it was nine million dollars in 1929 -- the father and two brothers. One of their old stations is still standing in West Terre Haute. It used to be on old [U.S. highway] 40 where that package liquor store is in West Terre Haute -- on old 40 there, on that north-south street on old 40 on the southwest corner. They had a different style of service station. They had a canopy and you'd drive around behind the main building for the gas pumps. Everybody else had the gas pumps in front. But they were real successful and they were a very big jobber with headquarters in Indianapolis.
- EH: About what year was that, sir?
- MACE: Well, when they sold out to Shell Oil Company, it was 1929; and in '27 they owned the corner of 9th and

MACE: Ohio which I own now, which is presently a Mobil station. That was a White Rose then. [I think.]

EH: Well, the cars then would drive in either to the front or the back like over at West Terre Haute you were talking about . . . .

MACE: I could be mistaken on the trade name of White Rose. It might have been . . . and I am. But it was the Trimble Oil Company that owned that station and built the one in West Terre Haute, and they did sell out to Shell Oil in 1929. I'm sure of that. On second thought, the White Rose and National Refining . . . I bought them out in 1945 or -6. They had a little business left in Terre Haute, but they had a good bulk plant which I needed at 13th [Street] and 6th Avenue, which is our main bulk plant now. That was a White Rose and National Refining. That Trimble Oil Company had a trademark and I'm having trouble remembering what it was.

EH: When the person would drive in to the service stations then in the late 'twenties in their car, could they get the oil checked and the tires checked and the windshield cleaned and things like that?

MACE: Yes, I don't remember if they [service stations] checked the tires, but they would check the oil, I'm sure of that. [Tire shops always checked air pressure.] Service improved and increased as [a] merchandising tool later more due to the competition between the tire companies and the petroleum companies. When I started 24-hour service here, 53 years ago, there was no one else that stayed open all night except us; but it wasn't long until the oil companies would have their better dealers and stations that they controlled stay open all night and have a wrecker. They compelled all the area dealers to be more competitive and have the best values. They pushed them to the point where a lot of them didn't make any money. Likewise, right now [in 1980], with this cut price on gas, they didn't lower the wholesale price for them. [Many dealers are] being pressured to sell cheaper to use up their allocation because there is presently a surplus of finished product. You know the media loves to allege and insinuate and all that. They claim that there's price wars. They aren't price wars. They're just price reductions to try to satisfy the supplier. If crude oil would come down and stay down, it would make the price cheaper sooner or later. It is presently lower on the spot market. The spot market is not what they contract for by the year to run their refineries. It's

MACE: [the spot market is] what it [oil or gas] happens to be for a shipload now or a truckload, either way. Local distributors of petroleum like we are buy some that way if we are short, and we sell some that way if we find that we're long and find that somebody needs it.

EH: When was it that a large number of cars were in Terre Haute? In other words, in the days of the Model-T, I understand that there weren't so many of them. When did you start seeing a lot of them on the street?

MACE: In 1929 -- '28 and '29 -- there were very few good roads. They [people] were out taking trips [on the paved roads] where they were just bumper to bumper, you know, all wanting to use the same road at the same time. Like Brown County in the fall [when the leaves are pretty].

EH: And so you would drive over there in the late 'twenties?

MACE: Well, I wasn't going to Brown County then, but I have been in those traffic strings back in 1929. Of course, in '30 and '31, '32, and '33, people were financially distressed and out of work, and they didn't drive so much. They didn't sell very many new ones during those years.

EH: And then business picked up again, I guess around '37, in there somewhere.

MACE: Yes, it improved substantially, but there was another depression in '38. Roosevelt made his quarantine Hitler speech in Milwaukee and then created his defense program. And then that primed the pump. At that time there was about as many unemployed as there was in 1932 -- about ten million in both cases. But there was a bigger work force in 1938 which meant a smaller percentage of the total was unemployed.

EH: Then during World War II . . . .

MACE: Business has always been cyclical. You have those ups and downs. Of course, some of them are much worse than others. We had a big depression right after World War I, before the Great Depression in the early 'thirties. In '38 and in '74 and now '80 . . . same way in the automobile business. It's like that