

Mike Mattson: My name is Mike Mattson, and today I'm talking with Amy Adams. Today's date is December 9th, 2015 and we are in the Campbell Room of Kansas History, Salina Public Library.

Amy Adams: Ok Dad, tell me about your earliest memories, here, in Salina.

MM: Well I don't remember this because I was still in my Mother's tummy, but I was born in Asbury Hospital, here in Salina, on March 4th, 1942. Uhm...my earliest memories were of the time when we lived on Funston Avenue, in a little ranch house. Uh... a house there, in a ranch type house there with a screened in front porch and I still drive by there, from time to time and think that's where I spent my earliest years. My earliest memory was one in which I was pedaling, in a little pedal car, down the sidewalk. And it was my favorite thing to do, was to be out pedaling in that car and I was having such a good time that day that even though I had to ... uh...heed nature's call I decided to just go ahead and keep pedaling. And so ... uh... I was quite surprised when my mother came racing out of the house and demanded that I follow her into the house and she took me into the bathroom and cleaned me up. And I wondered from that time on how in the world she could've known that I had soiled my pants ... how she could've know what was going on inside of my pants. And I thought that my mother from that time on my mother knew everything, that there was nothing that I could do to hide from her all my thoughts and my processes; that she knew what was going on. And I held that opinion of her until the day I saw my own child purposely soiling his pants and realized that it was all right there in the face. And so...but I held that memory of my Mom, and that first encounter for a long, long time.

AA: Uh, tell me about grandma and grandpa.

MM: Well my... my memory of my grandparents is... is mostly on the Lofgren side. The Lofgren side of the family was the maternal side of uh the family uh... the uh.., and so that's the side of the family that I remember most. My grandmother that I remember was horribly crippled with arthritis. My grandfather was a dealer of tires he had the Fire... Fire... Firestone tire company downtown and I would go into his store, he also sold bicycles, and I would dream about owning one of those shiny bicycles that he had in his store. We spent many, many days and nights at my grandmother's house uh...and at that time there wasn't television so we'd sit around and listen on the radio to such programs as; uh... the..."I love a murder mystery", "the Green hornet", and "the Shadow", and those kinds of programs and we would just be glued to the radio. And those are memories that I have of my grandparents.

AA: Were they here in Salina?

MM: Yes, they lived in a house over on South 9th Street, just south of Crawford, and again that house is still there and it holds many fond memories of me.

AA: And then, what about ...uh...your mom and dad?

MM: My mom and dad uh... dad...dad was a Swede and uh...came from a Swedish background and Mom was Irish. And so I had that mix of Swedish and Irish in my blood and they sort of pulled me in opposite directions. Mom was very fiery uh...high energy individual and uh.. Dad was very calm and unassuming and uh...so those two characteristics I guess found their way into me in one way or another. We lived, uh...after we lived in on Funston, we moved to a large brick farmhouse on the corner of Republic and Front Street or rather Republic and Roach Street. And at that time that house was way out in the country and Republic was just a dirt road and it was kind of a rural setting for us. And there was a big red barn out back and my Dad, who was deathly afraid of snakes, would take his razor blades from

his safety razor and stick them down snake holes, that were around the barn, to try to keep the snakes away from us. We went to school at Lowell school and as kindergartners and first graders we would walk to school by ourselves down that dirt road in the country. And gradually, as we walked along, we'd pick up other children so that by the time we got to Lowell, there would be a real gang of us and those were really wonderful days in my life

AA: Uh...How long did you live at that house?

MM: We lived there through...I think through second grade and then we moved to a rental house on Minneapolis. Actually we rented it from my grandfather and I uhm...I continued to go to Lowell school. There was a... there was a filling station on the corner of Beloit and Santa Fe the building is still there, but it's not a filling station. And that's where us kids would join up before school, and have a pop and uh...a penny's worth of peanuts, and we'd sit around and uh...talk about school and all the things that boys talk about. And also talk with the proprietor there who was a really...I don't...I forget his name, but he was a really cool old guy we thought. And uh...so he let us use that filling station as a hangout, before and after school.

AA: And what did Grandpa do, your Dad?

MM: My Dad was uh...originally he was, when I was very, very young, he was a grocer and had the grocery store called Wheat State Grocery and it was on the corner of Crawford and 9th Street on the northwest corner. That building has since been torn down, but later on he started up the uh...Mattson Locker plant which is now the Smoky Hill Meats and he started that. And uh...he was a butcher by trade, and uh...had a...this was before a lot of people had uh...frozen food lockers in their houses, and so they would rent locker space at his locker plant to keep their frozen food in. And usually they would buy beef by the split quarter, or in large quantities and store them...store the meat there at the locker plant. And Dad did a good business out of that locker plant for many, many years. After that he went into real estate and was a real estate broker until, a little after the time that the base closed here in Salina and, the real estate market just really took a dive. And so he wasn't able to make it in real estate any longer and had to go on the road as a traveling salesman.

AA: How old were you when the base closed?

MM: Uh the base closed in '64, I believe, and so I would've been uh...I would've been living in Chicago at that time and I was probably 22 or 23 or so. And uh...I'd chosen to go to Chicago to DeVry Technical Institute to get an education in electronics and uh I graduated from there and came back to Salina. And uh worked at...oddly enough, with my education in electronics I worked at Ashton's food market for a number of years. Until I kind of got my bearings and uh...I kind of wanted to stay in Salina and work here, but there just weren't any opportunities. The town was suffering from a real recession, because of the close of the base, and so I eventually moved to Colorado uh...to Colorado Springs, where I did find employment in the electronics industry. And there in Colorado Springs is where I met my lovely wife (laughter) of forty-eight years.

AA: So do you remember how the town changed when the base closed? Did the population drop a lot or?

MM: Well the town's population was really swelled by the uh...by the base and there were a lot of kids in school whose parents were stationed at the base. And at that time, the town's population, including

the base and all the personnel involved, was about 45,000. And so it was at then about the same size population-wise as it is now, but in between it really took a blow and the population really, really dropped off. I think in retrospect maybe the best thing that happened to the town was the base closing, although it was really painful for many years. I think the closing of the base really diversified the Salina economy in the end. And with the transfer of the base to the city...uh...some enterprising people in Salina really made the town blossom with the...uh...the industrialization of the base. Uh...we... uh...when I was going to school at Lowell, we had such an overflow of kids from the base that we had to uh...have an overflow class at the old Washington high school building. The Washington high school building was just outside of Oakdale Park on Mulberry Street, Mulberry and 3rd and 2nd. In that block right there, that was the original high school building. And at the time the top floor of the high school building was actually condemned, but we had such a desperate need for classroom space that they would bus us from Lowell school, and this was in the third grade, to Washington High for our third grade classes. And I remember one winter it had really, really snowed deep our bus driver's name was Shorty, and I to this day I remember that name and I don't know why but I do, but he was kind of a adventurous type fellow and uh...we all thought he was pretty cool, us third graders. But it was really snowed really deep that morning and he was driving, came around the corner on the corner of Prescott and 5th Street, and slid into the curb with the bus. The whole the big bus slid into the curb and got stuck and so Shorty had us all of us third graders get out of the bus and go around behind and push the bus out the...out of being stuck. Now if that would've been happened today... I just can't even imagine the uproar in the papers and the lawsuits and everything else, but us kids thought that was the coolest thing in the world and we really thought Shorty was cool for lettin' us do that.

AA: (Laughter) So it was like an adventure?

MM: (Laughter)...yeah. So and uh...course we were up for anything that would help prevent us from... delay us from going into class in any way. So that was really cool we thought.

AA: Uh...tell me about your brother and sister.

MM: Uh...I have...I have...had one brother, he is since deceased, and I have a sister who lives in Kansas City. Uh...we were all...all three of us very close and uh...the family was a close knit family in general. And uh...my sister is two years younger than I am and my brother was two years older than I am. So I was the middle child and I think I shared a bedroom with my brother and uh...I really gained a lot from him. He was...I was sort of uh, you know, outdoorsy ragtag kind of a kid and he was a lot more intellectual and he introduced me into uh...reading uh...reading classic literature and also classic music. He had a very good hi-fi, that's what we call uh... audio equipment in those days it was a hi-fi set and uh...he would play for me excerpts from Beethoven and some of the great classic musics uh...music composers. And so he was really a great counter balance for me in terms of my wanting to be outside and running around climbing trees and also learning uh...you know...more...uh...educational kind of things. And I really always appreciated him all my life for that. My sister was much more tomboyish, and I think we ran around together a lot more than I did with my brother. And uh...she was much more a part of the gang than he was. Uh...at that time uh...later on we lived on Lewis Street in a house there just right across from the Baptist church. And at that time the house was part of a new addition to town and uh...was right on the edge of the city. Across the street was a wheat field and uh...my sister and I and some other kids from the neighborhood would gather together and with my dog King who was a collie dog. We always had collies in our family because I guess we were influenced at the time by the TV

series "Lassie." But any rate we had a collie, and I had fashioned a set of saddle bags that I would drape over the dog and put all my hiking gear in the saddle bags; all the things that I need to go out on an adventure with. And all of us kids would take off across the wheat field and down, at that time from Front Street, on East Crawford was a dusty country road and the bridge across the Smoky Hill River was one of those iron articulated bridges, and uh...we would head out to Crawford Street across that iron bridge and over into the bluffs along the river, which we now call Indian Rocks Park, but at that time they were called, it was called brick plant hill. And the reason for that is because along Connecticut Street there at uh...on the west side of the hill was a series of brick kilns and that hill was dug out to provide clay for those brick kilns. And so us kids knew that area as brick plant hill. And the river of course, this was before the flood control dike was put in so the river was all wild and overgrown with trees and that area was wild and overgrown and we would go there for our big adventures. And uh...you know this was...uh...I don't know a couple of miles away from home and the parents didn't think anything about letting us just go off to the river with the other kids and play in the woods and swing on the grape vines. And at that time we were at that point in life where we could imagine all sorts of things. We would imagine that the...those woods were filled with oh...pirates or head hunting cannibals or that sort of thing that kids would think about when they were out in the woods playing around. And we'd climb up the bluffs and slide down and uh...we even built a raft one time to float down the river, but our engineering skills were much...weren't nearly as good as our imagination and the raft sunk. But we would go to the river and then come home covered with mosquito bites and tick bites and poison ivy; just as happy as could be. Just filled with joy. Those were good times in our lives

AA: How does your Mom feel about you coming home all covered with scrapes and dirt?

MM: Ahh...mom was...mom was an adventurer herself and so she if not outright encouraged, at least understood our need to go out and uh...be adventurous. Dad was a lot more cautious it was just in his nature to be cautious and I think he worried about us kids being out along the river. He was taught...he never learned to swim and I think the episode was that in his childhood one of his friends drowned and so his parents, my grandparents...uh...really were afraid to let him anywhere near water and he never did learn to swim. So he kind of carried that fear over and he was very apprehensive about us going off to the river, but Mom would hold him back and let us kids be kids. Yeah uh...we went to school...from ... at uh, Roosevelt Lincoln high school and uh...we would ride our bikes from our home in...on Lewis Street across town through Oakdale Park and to Roosevelt Lincoln high school...junior high and uh...again it was a ride that nobody thought anything about. It was a different time and a different place in those days, it was a time when if you went down Santa Fe, which was downtown, there wasn't any mall the town ended at Cloud Street on the south uh...at Wesleyan; that was the end of the town. And uh...if you went down Santa Fe downtown 90% of the cars would still have the keys in the ignition. If you went to church at any time of day or night they would be unlocked. And it was just a different time and place for kids. And parents would... they call them... what, free range kids nowadays? Well we didn't think anything about it in those days. We would go off to play with our...you know, tell Mom that we're headed off to David's house or Jerry's house and uh...play all evening, all sorts of games that kids played in those days. And then one by one the parents would call out "Mike come home", "Jerry come home", "David time to come home", and slowly the crowd would thin out and we would all head back to our houses. And uh, nobody worried about the things the parents worry about today. We would ride our bikes from the Lewis street area to Roosevelt and Lincoln junior high through Oakdale Park and there were two bridges that we had to cross, one was a suspension bridge which in those days was a...an old

wooden bridge and it was truly a bouncing swinging bridge. And we...there was a sign above the bridge in the girder work up there that says... laugh...do not swing the bridge; which of course invited us to absolutely swing the bridge and it would sway back and forth as we would ride our bikes over the bridge. And then the other bridge on the other side of the of the park was an old iron truss bridge and down below that bridge was the marina on the river. Uh...and so we would go down to the marina from time to time after school and get a bottle of pop there and...talk to the...the proprietor of that marina. In school there was an old...there was an old Quonset, a wooden, Quonset hut at Roosevelt Lincoln junior high that was the gym. This was way before that the hideous monstrosity... of a blond brick building that they put in there. And ... I remember our gym teacher was (laughter) was a fellow who believed in ...what is now out of fashion corporal punishment and if we got out of line he would tell us to grab our... grab our ankles and he would swat us with this paddle. Well, of course, being junior high kids we thought that it was a mark of honor to have been swatted by Mr. Weadmer's paddle. And so his efforts at disciplining us were really kind of counterproductive because we considered that to be, you know, when you... when you'd been paddle by Mr. Weadmer you had arrived. And so and uh... we had shop class there and Mr. Elder was our shop teacher. And uh...of course us kids would take uh...there was a time when we'd brought water guns to school and we would squirt each other with water guns. And one of the delights of Mr. Elder was to confiscate all of our water guns and in front of the class squeeze them and crunch them up in the big vise that he had there on his workbench. And of course if we had our water guns scrunched by Mr. Elder we thought we had arrived in the woodworking class. Also I learned woodwork...basic wood working from Mr... Mr. Elder and uh...never thinking that ever in my life I would use it other than as in a hobby but as it turned out you never know exactly which way your life is going to turn. The roads... the road of your life is forever turning in ways that you don't anticipate. And so later on in my life I became employed as a woodworker and used the skills that I had learned in Mr. Elder's class. So it's kind of odd how...I'd always envisioned myself as being a great scientist, but as it turned out I used the skills that I learned in Mr. Elder's class and at Roosevelt junior high to make my living.

AA: Uh...you talk about how you envisioned being a great scientist; can you tell us a little bit about your experimentation?

MM: Ok, well all right, (laughter) this taxed my... I told you earlier that my mother was very indulgent in my...uh... my adventures and...so this was at a time and when we were living on Lewis St. at the edge of town and this was a time during Sputnik and the country was obsessed with rocketeering and getting a satellite in orbit to match the Russians. And so some friends of mine and I began to experiment with rocketeering ourselves. And we hit upon a formula for rocket fuel, solid rocket fuel. And it consisted of...for all of those who are listening out there, of one part potassium nitrate which is saltpeter which you could get in vast quantities at any drugstore I don't think they sell it now because it must be a banned substance. But anyway a half...one half saltpeter and one half sugar and it would ignite furiously and made the greatest rocket fuel. And so we started setting off rockets in our backyard much to the horror of the neighborhood. We were generally...we generally terrified the entire neighborhood with our rocket experiments going off in the backyard and later moved them out to uh...to a open field across the road. But uh...one day I was experimenting with different uh, mixtures of rocket fuel in my laboratory in the basement of our house. And I had a can of rocket fuel setting...set aside and I ignited a little sample of it on my special rocket fuel igniting stand. Only a spark from that combustion flipped over into my can of rocket fuel and lit the whole can on fire and set the whole (laughter) filled the whole house up with smoke. And this was in winter time well, it was in March and was very, very cold outside

the uh...explosion from that blew open the uh...basement door and filled the whole house with smoke. To the point that we had to leave the house and sat in the car with the motor running and the heater going to keep us warm while the house with all its windows open cleared of smoke. And my mother turned and looked at me with a look that I hope never to see again in my entire life until the day I die and ... my experiments with rockets came to an abrupt end at that point.

AA: So, after you went to Roosevelt Lincoln, you went to Salina High, right?

MM: I went to Salina High and generally took science courses and after I graduated from Salina High I went to Wesleyan for couple of years. And then went to Chicago to DeVry Technical Institute, which was located in an old shoe factory and uh... got a...an Associate's Degree in Electronics and then went out into the world with that degree. It was a really good experience living in Chicago. It was my first time in a very, very large city and so uh...I had to learn to adapt to a city environment rather than a small town environment but I was lucky because I...the school arranged housing. They didn't have a dormitory per se, but they arranged housing with...with folks around the school and they arranged housing for me with a...an Italian barber. And there were several of us students that lived in the back of his barber shop there in Chicago. And on Sundays he would have all of us students to the family house, which was further behind the barber shop, for a big Italian meal. And I tell you I really learned to love Italian food. His uh... family consisted of three daughters, his wife and himself and a young son, and I also learned to talk very loudly because...in that household, at any rate, the Italians didn't just talk they yelled at each other across a table. They weren't angry they just yelled and they yelled a lot and so I learned to make myself heard in that environment. But, boy, the food sure was good and it was just a great experience for me to be with other kids from all over the country living in the back of this barbershop and going to school in Chicago.

AA: Uh... let's skip forward a little bit and tell me how you convinced Mom to move from California to Kansas.

MM: Ok well, I met your mother in Colorado, in Colorado Springs. She was working in the same factory that I was working in and we soon became acquainted. She was working in the same department, but on a different shift. I was working the night shift and she was working the day shift. But we would pass each other in the morning as she came to work and I left from work. And we slowly developed a romance and it blossomed and we got married in Colorado Springs. Shortly after we were married, we moved to Boulder, Colorado and this was in 1967 and it was at a time of great transformation in the country and Boulder was kind of the epicenter of that. It was called uh...Berkeley East or something like that or Haight-Asbury East. And uh... it was kind of a hippie town and so we sort of gravitated into that uh... into that community there in Boulder. We were young and free and...carefree and ... a little foolish and ... just really got involved in that lifestyle and enjoyed it immensely. (32:06)It has...it was a time of great has... uh... given us a lot of great memories. But I was sort of always...sort of the adventurous type and so... I hit upon this scheme of building a great sailboat and sailing around the world. As I had mentioned earlier, we were free, we were carefree and uh...thought that we would be young forever and so from Boulder we moved to the San Francisco Bay area to a little town on an island called Alameda, the island just off the Oakland shore. And we began building our boat, took us about seven years to build that boat, and for the last couple of years while we were building it we lived on it and then sailed it in the bay and outside the bay along the coast a little bit. Uh...we really, that was a great time in our lives, again we were young and foolish and had a great set of friends from the marina where we built our boat and just

really enjoyed that part...that time in our lives. Uh...while we lived there my mother passed away and so we moved, we came back to Salina for the funeral and it was during that time I think when our first son was conceived. And uh...so we decided that after Penny became pregnant that our dreams of sailing around the world would have to be postponed for a while. There were other people who had done extensive sailing with young infants on board but we just didn't wanna try to have to do that. And so another one of my big ambitions was to be a farmer. I had been an electronic engineer. I had been a mountaineer in Colorado. I'd been a sailor in California. And so I thought the next obvious and logical step would be to be a farmer. My sister was living in Salina at the time and working for Jerry Knowles Realty and he listed a farm for sale that was out west of Salina on the Ellsworth-Saline County line. And uh...so she called me up and informed me of the availability of that farm. So our boat was sailing at that time and pretty much complete and so we put it up for sale and found a buyer and sold the boat and decided to move back to Kansas. Penny had said...earlier that she would... was not any remotely interested in moving back to Kansas from the places that she'd been. Penny was an Air Force brat and had been all over the world and in many parts of the country and in Colorado and in California and just didn't feel any exotic pull to Kansas. But Penny is one of these people who is a living angel and probably oughta be nominated for Sainthood any day now, because she has put up with so much foolishness on my part. And she uh...resigned herself to go... move back with me to a farm in Kansas and that began another episode in our lives. Uh...Josh, our son, had been born and was about a year old when we moved back to Kansas. And then a year later, you were born on the farm there, while we lived on the farm. And so we had our little family there on the farm, Josh and you, Amy, and settled into the farm life; which we came to enjoy thoroughly and which Penny found to be absolutely delightful and was and was so glad to have moved back with us. Uh...one of the things that we enjoyed very much on the farm was, as a family, we would walk up to the hill at the sunset, the hill where our windmill was, hand in hand, and uh...sit and watch the sunset. The farm was in the hills out there, the confluence of Mulberry creek and three other tributaries were on that farm, and it was wooded and hilly but had farm ground. And it was just, it was a really a paradise on earth. It was our Garden of Eden there. And the kids spent many happy hours, in the barn and around the farmyard, and uh...down on the creek and the fishing and the doing rural things that kids do and it was a time in our lives that was filled with a great deal of joy.