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Sligh, Charles R., Jr. Oral History Interview: Local Business Persons

Abby Jewett

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FOREWORD

The Hope College Oral History Project was designed to record and transcribe for permanent collection the living heritage of Holland, Michigan. Since the project's birth in 1977, Hope student researchers have interviewed people with various perspectives on Holland's history. Past projects have included:

**Former Hope Faculty Members & Personnel** - 1977 - Nancy Swinyard  
**Past Executives of the Reformed Church** - 1978-79 - Conrad & Derk Strauch  
**Important Women of Holland, Michigan** - 1980 - Carol Bechtel  
**Links Between Hope College and Western Theological Seminary** - 1981 - Carol Bechtel  
**The History of Holland Business** - 1982 - Abby Jewett

The persons interviewed represent a vital, but non-renewable resource, whose reflections will provide primary material for future historical research.

Upon the completion of each interview session, the taped conversation was transcribed and edited by both the interviewer and the interviewee. Some alterations concerning accuracy of detail may have been suggested by the interviewer during the editing process, but at all times the viewpoint of the interviewee has been maintained. If the researcher should discover discrepancies between the interviews and published materials, it must be remembered that some divergence may be expected due to the highly personalized perspective of the interview. No claim is made that the information contained within these transcripts is absolutely accurate. No two people share identical viewpoints, and the interval of time between the interviewee's experiences and the events mentioned can sometimes intensify this divergence. Tapes of all the interviews are stored in the Hope College Archives in Van Zoeren Library.

Without the support of Dr. Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Dean of the Humanities and the Fine Arts, and Mr. William K. Anderson, Vice President of Business and Finance, this project would not have become a reality. Dr. Elton Bruins has given generously of his time and expertise as the advisor to the student interviewers. Finally, the success of this project must be attributed to the efforts of the interviewees - each gracious, receptive, and cooperative.
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Charles R. Sligh, Jr., is one of the prominent businessmen of Holland. He has been Chairman of the Sligh Furniture Company, a maker of high quality desks, and more recently, the manufacturer of clocks. But Charles Sligh did not have this success handed to him on a silver platter. His father began the Sligh Furniture Company in Grand Rapids in 1880, but the company had to be liquidated in 1932. Charles Sligh reinstated that company in Holland in 1933, and through thick and thin has taken that company where it is today—a respected furniture company, and a real asset to the Holland community. It has not always been an easy road, but through his dedication he has made it a success.

His accomplishments are great. He was President of the National Association of Manufacturers, as well as being actively involved in the Republican party. These noted positions have brought him a great deal of respect, and he has had contact with many nationally known figures, and has worked actively towards pushing public policy, and getting the views of business across to the public. Another accomplishment of Charles Sligh's is winning the National Championship in water skiing, and doing this only two years after he first set foot on a pair of skis. Obviously he is a man of great talents.

Yet, he is humble, and talks of these accomplishments as if they were nothing out of the ordinary. He has a very easygoing manner about him, and possesses a pleasant personality. I liked him as soon as I met him. At 76, he is still quite involved in his company, as well as in many civic activities.

The interview consists of a personal account of a self made businessman,
achieving greatness through dedication and lots of hard work. He relates many interesting stories about the hardships of the depression, how Sligh Furniture Company began, and gives some interesting tales of his activities at the National Association of Manufacturers. And, of course, when two Republicans sit down to talk, the conversation can't help but drift to public policy and political situations. This is an account of a great man--someone who knows the meaning of success, but does it through his own dedication.
Charles R. Sligh, Jr., has served the National Association of Manufacturers in more official positions than any other person in the history of the organization. In 1950-51 he served as chairman of the taxation committee, and in 1952 became a regional vice-president. In 1953 he served as president of the N.A.M. and in the following three years became chairman of the board, chairman of the executive committee and chairman of the finance committee. In 1957 he was asked to serve as the executive vice-president and chief administrative officer on a full-time basis and continued in this position until 1963. In 1957 he was elected honorary vice-president for life. His family is the only one in N.A.M.'s history to have had members of three generations serving as directors, beginning with Mr. Sligh's father in the early 1920s. His son Robert is currently serving as a director.

A native of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Charles R. Sligh, Jr., was the son of a noted furniture manufacturer and was associated with his father's firm until its liquidation in 1932. He lived there from the time of his birth on Jan. 8, 1906 until his move to Holland in 1937 where his new furniture manufacturing business was located.

During the depths of the depression in 1933, he and Mr. O. W. Lowry formed the Charles R. Sligh Co., and in 1940 the Sligh-Lowry Furniture Co. In 1945 he obtained control of the Grand Rapids Chair Co., and served as president from 1945 until 1957. In 1968 Mr. Sligh purchased Mr. Lowry's interest in the Sligh-Lowry Co., and that company became the Sligh Furniture Co., which he serves as chairman of the board and CEO, and in which his son Robert is president.

Mr. Sligh has been active in many civic and charitable projects on both the local and national level. He was a charter member of the Deafness Research Foundation and served as chairman from 1959 to
1963. Other leadership positions have included:

Director, Old Kent Bank and Trust Co., and Michigan National Bank of Grand Rapids

President, National Association of Furniture Manufacturers in 1944

President of the Grand Rapids Furniture Manufacturers Ass'n.

President of the Holland Chamber of Commerce

President of the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce

Captain of the Civil Air Patrol and Industry Member of the Michigan War Labor Board during WW II

Director of the Grand Rapids Y.M.C.A.

President, Ottawa-Allegan Council, Boy Scouts of America

President, Laymen's National Bible Committee

President, American Water Ski Association

Member, Rotary International

Twice honored as Furniture Man of the Year, Mr. Sligh also found time to devote to water-skiing and was National Water Ski Champion from 1941 through 1945. He is honorary vice-president for life of the American Water Ski Association.

Currently, Mr. Sligh serves as chairman of the board of the Center on National Labor Policy and as trustee of Grove City College in Pennsylvania. He has also served on the board of the Leelanau Schools, as well as Alma College and Kalamazoo College.

Mr. Sligh attended Colgate University and was a member of the Delta Kappa Epsilon Fraternity. He received an honorary LL.D. from Grove City College in 1960 and an honorary D.Sc. in Business Administration from Cleary College in 1953.

He is married to Elizabeth Adams Sligh. His first wife, Charlotte Klumph Sligh, is deceased. He is the father of four sons and one daughter, 13 grandchildren and 7 great-grandchildren. His church is Episcopalian.

8/24/81
Biographical Data Sheet

Hope College Summer Oral History Project 1982

Name: Charles R. Sligh, Jr.

Birthplace: Grand Rapids, Michigan Date: January 8, 1906

Education: Elementary - Fountain and Lafayette St. School, Grand Rapids

High School - Lawrenceville School, Lawrenceville, New Jersey

Central High School, Grand Rapids

College - Colgate University-1 year

Parents' Names and Occupations:

Father: Charles R. Sligh, Furniture Manufacturer

Mother: Edith Clark Sligh, Homemaker (Latin teacher)

Family Information:

Spouse's name: Charlotte Klumph Sligh (died 1964)

Elizabeth Adams Sligh

Date of marriage: January 2, 1926

May 1, 1965

Children's names and present occupations:

Charles R. Sligh, III - Senior Vice-President, Sligh Furniture Co.

Robert L. Sligh - President, Sligh Furniture Co.

Richard C. Sligh - Director, Special Projects, Sligh Furniture Co.

Patricia Ann Sligh VerSluis - Homemaker

Honors: National Water Ski Hall of Fame; 1982, Winterhaven, Florida

LL.D., Grove City College, 1960

D.Sc., Business Administration, Cleary College, 1953

Present Activities:

Chairman and consultant, Sligh Furniture Co., Holland, Michigan

Vice President, St. Andrews Club, Delray Beach, Florida

Trustee, Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania

Chairman, Committee on National Labor Policy

Thank you for your cooperation,

Abby Jewett
This is an interview with Mr. Charles R. Sligh, Jr., of the Sligh Furniture Company, and it was conducted on June 8, 1982, by Abby Jewett.

ABBY JEWETT: Mr. Sligh, could you tell me basically how Sligh Furniture began?

CHARLES SLIGH: Well, the Sligh Furniture Company as such, was originally started in 1880, by my father. And he ran the Sligh Furniture Company in Grand Rapids from 1880 until he died in 1927. And then the company was headed by my brother-in-law, Mr. Norman McClave. In 1932, we found that the business had turned completely unprofitable in the depression, and as a result, we liquidated the company. We did not go through bankruptcy, nor did we go broke, but we decided to liquidate the business before those things did happen. And then in 1933, Mr. O.W. Lowry and I started the Charles R. Sligh Company in Holland, Michigan, in the old Thompson Products plant. I purchased the name of the Sligh Furniture Company as one of the assets from the Sligh Furniture Company in Grand Rapids. I did not use that name until 1968, when I bought Mr. Lowry out. We owned the company together for all of those years. We were partners for 35 years in the business. That is how the company started. And, as I say, then in 1968 we changed the name to the Sligh Furniture Company, which we purchased. The Sligh-Lowry Furniture Company was started in 1940, and we purchased the assets of the Charles R. Sligh Company, and then when I bought Mr. Lowry out in '68, we changed the name to the Sligh Furniture Company again. And it has been the Sligh Furniture
Company from that day until this.

JEWETT: Getting back, let's say, to when the company first started, what were the business conditions like during the late 1890's and early 1900's, and how did your father get the company going?

SLIGH: He started in a comparatively small way back in 1880, and the plant grew to a rather large plant. Eventually we had over 600,000 square feet of space in Grand Rapids, in one plant. It was a very profitable operation all during those years. But the Grand Rapids furniture business generally started to deteriorate in 1924-25, when the southern furniture manufacturers began to take over the operation of the larger companies. So the Sligh Furniture Company's biggest year in Grand Rapids was in 1924. And from that time on, as was the case with several other companies in the town, the business deteriorated. So the depression hit, of course, in 1929, and by 1932, the volume of business in all Grand Rapids' furniture company plants was very, very, low. Those factories were paying 35 to 40 cents an hour, and the plants in the South were paying 10 cents an hour. And the plants in the South had available lumber sources that had existed in the Grand Rapids area years before, but no longer existed. So, gradually, the large production of furniture left the Grand Rapids area and went to the South. But the quality furniture was still made in Grand Rapids, the highest quality.

JEWETT: So, then, it wasn't just the depression that caused the company's problems?

SLIGH: Well, no, it was a combination of the change in conditions—wage scales in the South versus wage scales in the North, the availability of raw materials in the South as opposed to the North, and certainly, the depression played a very large part in it.

JEWETT: When did you begin working for the company?

SLIGH: Well, I started working for the Sligh Furniture Company in Grand Rapids,
as a part time employee when I was in high school, and then I started on a full time basis in 1926. And, I worked for that company, my father's company, until 1932, when it was liquidated.

JEWETT: I was reading somewhere that your father went to Europe, and passed away on ship board, returning home. Did you take over the company, then?

SLIGH: No, I was only 21 years old then, and I wasn't capable at that time of running the business. My brothers-in-law, Mr. Norman McClave, and another brother-in-law, Mr. Milton Miller, both had been active in the business for some time, and Mr. Miller became the Secretary-Treasurer and Mr. McClave became the President of the company. And then I later became Treasurer of the company. But I worked there as a salesman. At first, I worked in the plant as a laborer and then as a salesman, and then in the office. Then we started the business in Holland in 1933.

JEWETT: To me, that seems like such an accomplishment for you to take a company that was so down in 1932 that it had to be liquidated, and then bring it back up a year later! It must have been really something!

SLIGH: Well, you know, 1933 was about the best time you could start a business, although nobody thought so at the time. Everybody said, "Well, what are you starting a business now for? Nobody can make any money today." But, Mr. Lowry and I have often said, "If we had known then what we know now, we probably never would have started the business, because we would have known it couldn't be done!" But, then, we didn't know that it couldn't be done, so we went ahead and did it. However, the first year, our sales were only about $140,000 for the whole year. So we started on a very small scale.

The city of Holland was very good to us. I came to see Mayor Bosch, who was then the Mayor of Holland, and he put me in touch with the Chamber
of Commerce, with Mr. Connelly as the secretary of it. And they introduced me to Mr. Don Matheson at the bank, and Mr. Matheson really helped materially in setting up a plan so that we could take over the Thompson Manufacturing Company which was a "defunct" company. It had gone broke, and the plant had not been operated for three years. Nobody had worked in it. And the city agreed to let us have the plant for a fair amount of money, but they said that if we produced $7 worth of payroll, they would give us credit for $1 toward the purchase price of the plant. They gave us 7 years to build up enough payroll to equal the purchase price of the plant. Actually, in 2½ years we accomplished that, and so the title of the plant was given to us, 2½ years after we started. And Mr. Matheson had enough faith in us, that he participated in the founding of the company. He bought $6,000 worth of stock, and I bought $6,000 worth of stock, and Mr. Lowry eventually bought $6,000 work of stock, so that we had a total of $18,000 to start with. From that, we've been going ever since, without any closing-down, or any major lay off, or anything like that.

JEWETT: That's really good! What type of furniture did you produce, starting with the 1880's, and all the way through?

SLIGH: Well, in the 1880's, they started making bedroom furniture. And back in the 1920's we started to add dining room furniture, and some tables. Then, when we started here, in Holland, in 1933, we were able to get the design of one of the bedroom suites that had been made by the Sligh Furniture Company in Grand Rapids. I hired a salesman that had worked for my dad, since I was one year old, and that salesman, Harry Story, went to R.H. Macy Company in New York, and sold two car loads of that bedroom furniture, maple bedroom furniture, to R.H. Macy. That was our first order. And, then, we wanted something to produce that would go through the plant a little faster
than bedroom furniture, which takes a long time because of the number of pieces in a bedroom suite. Mr. Lowry was in Chicago one time, and talked to the Davis Company there. They said they would like very much to have a desk that they could sell at a very reasonable price. So, Mr. Lowry designed that desk. We priced it so that it could be sold for $27.50 to the ultimate consumer. We did very well with it, and finally decided to drop the bedroom furniture, and start manufacturing desks exclusively. And, we've been doing nearly that ever since. Of course, now we're making clocks, making some wall units and things of that nature, but our basic business for the last 45 years has been desks.

JEWETT: (listening to chimes of clock in office) That's a pretty clock there. I like that. I guess it was during the 1950's that you ventured into dormitory furniture?

SLIGH: Yes, we made dormitory furniture. I think probably we produced more dormitory furniture than any other company. Over the years we furnished many colleges. The University of Pittsburgh, those big towers that they have there, that's all furnished with our furniture. A lot of other schools throughout the whole United States, we furnished. Of, course, that is not a very good business at the moment. College dormitories are not being built in any quantity today. And we decided too, that we would like to stick to furniture that carried our name, and that we could sell to the ultimate consumer, rather than do contract work, which is a feast one month, and a famine the next.

JEWETT: So, selling through stores to consumers is more steady? When you first started out in 1933, could you feel the effects of the depression? Was there a big difference once the depression was over?

SLIGH: Well, of course, the depression never got over. We were slowly coming out of it, but it wasn't really over until we went into World War II.
The war production, of course, put a lot of money into the hands of people that couldn't spend it, because most of the production at that time was on war material, so that they were saving a great deal of money. And of course after the war, they had these savings which they then decided to spend, and the demand for automobiles, furniture, and everything else was very, very high, and the supply was comparatively low. And that really is when the big change came, as far as the amount of business that was available.

JEWETT: So was it kind of a struggle all the way along until the early 1950's?
SLIGH: Well, it's always a struggle. But it's the kind of struggle you enjoy. You get a fellow that runs a mile, now that's a struggle. But he wouldn't be doing it if he didn't enjoy it. He likes the competitive test, and so on. And I think that business is the same way. You have a desire to excel and you keep trying, even though it's hard. You have to give up some other things in order to reach your goals.

JEWETT: What kind of sacrifices did you make? I'm sure you must have probably made many to get the company going.
SLIGH: Today, young people would find it hard to believe the way we started (laughter). Mr. Lowry and I started out here, I was President of the company and in charge of sales, and Mr. Lowry was Vice-President, in charge of production. And we each got $35 a week. And we owned the company, so we were really paying ourselves $35 a week. The people in the plant were getting only 35 cents an hour. But, they hadn't worked for three years, so they were glad to get a job, and, we were glad to work for $35 a week. In fact, we made an agreement, having both gone through the traumatic experience of seeing the Sligh Furniture Company go from a very successful, profitable firm, to nothing. And Mr. Lowry had worked for that company too, for a couple of years. So we both decided that IF we ever came to a time where
for 6 months we didn't make a profit, we would do something very radical to change that situation. Because we saw so many Grand Rapids factories that just kept thinking, "Well, next year it will be better", and so on, and they just kept their salaries up, and their prices up, and the result was that most all of them went out of business.

So, we did have a period there at one point, I forget the exact year, I think it was 1937, that we went 6 months and made no money. And so we immediately went to our employees and told them that we were going to cut out our salaries entirely, and that we were going to ask them to take a 10% reduction in their pay, so that we could pull through this period, and that if, as, and when we got out of it, we would be sure to take care of them, which we wanted to do. So, by the end of the year we had been able to turn the whole thing around. We reinstated our own salaries, and we gave them the 10% retroactively back to the time they had started on this low pay. We haven't had a loss year since then. That wasn't a loss year either, but it was a 6 month loss.

JEWETT: That's so much better than having to lay people off. Taking a 10% cut was hard on everybody, but at least no one was out of a job.

SLIGH: Well, that's what you try to do, but of course sometimes, you just can't help it. You have to lay people off sometimes. Right now, we're not hiring, as I say, we're not laying them off, but we are letting attrition take care of the situation. If somebody quits, if they retire, well, we don't replace them, under these conditions.

JEWETT: I bet it was awful not being able to have a salary for 6 months.

SLIGH: Yes, it's not the way you want it. (laughter)

JEWETT: That's admirable though, that you could do that. I was wondering, too, what else went on during the depression? How was the whole area of
Holland?

SLIGH: Well, it was down, you know. We started the Sligh-Lowry Furniture Company in 1940, in Zeeland. We bought the old Dutch Wood Craft plant, for a pittance, frankly. But, it was closed, it had been closed for some time, and no chance of opening it, seemingly. So we bought it, and that's been running ever since. But there were a lot of companies that went down, like Limbert Furniture Company, which Baker now runs. The piano factory which Baker got during those years, was a very nice deal, where they traded their old, run down factory in Allegan, for the piano factory here in Holland, and they've been running ever since there, and doing a very fine job.

JEWETT: What year was that, when they moved in?

SLIGH: They moved in '32 or '33. They were just a little ahead of us. We would have liked to have gotten that plant, but they got it, which is fine. They've done a good job.

JEWETT: Good. You worked with Mr. Lowry for, 35 years, you said?

SLIGH: We were partners for 35 years.

JEWETT: That's a really good relationship. I don't think a lot of other companies do that.

SLIGH: No, most marriages don't last that long anymore.

JEWETT: Yes, today they don't. Yes, that's for sure.

SLIGH: Well, we're still friends. I see quite a bit of him. He's retired. He's 82 years old, now.

JEWETT: How did you make the decisions that affected the company? Did you make them equally?

SLIGH: Well, we agreed that I should be President, and that he should be Vice-President, and we each owned equal shares after we bought Mr. Matheson out, and then we each owned half. And naturally, when you each own half,
you have to both agree on whatever is done. Because neither one of us can control. Now, it's different, since I bought him out. I do have a controlling interest in the company.

JEWETT: Now, I know you were President of the National Association of Manufacturers, right? How long were you President of that?

SLIGH: At the time I was President, that was a one year stint. It was a lay position, the President at that time was the chief executive officer of the National Association of Manufacturers, and the staff job was the chief administrative officer. So, I was the President in 1953, and then Chairman of the Board in '54, and Chairman of the Executive Committee in '55, and Chairman of the Finance Committee in '56, and part of '57, because one of our men went into government. One of the NAM past presidents.

JEWETT: Who was that?

SLIGH: Chad McClelland. And, he would have been Chairman of the Finance Committee, but he left. So, I was asked to take that job, which I had for 4 or 5 months. And then they asked me to come to New York, to serve as Executive Vice-President, which was the paid, staff position, as chief administrative officer. And I was there for 6 years, until 1963, when I then resigned, and came back here.

JEWETT: I see. So then you left the company for that amount of time to move out there? What were some of your activities that you did while you were at the NAM?

SLIGH: What were my activities? Well, I had the job of administering the Association's activities. I had 400 employees under me. And, we had an office in Washington, we had an office in New York, and about 6 or 7 regional offices around the country. I did a lot of speaking, and administrative work, with a lot of speeches to various groups all over the country, and
testifying before Congress, pushing tax programs, and things of that kind. But, I've got, if you ever care to look at them, I've got a lot of scrapbooks here concerning all that. The Bentley Library on the University of Michigan campus has most of my papers.

JEWETT: Yes! I went to Washington this past semester. We did a series of interviews, and we interviewed someone from the National Association of Manufacturers. I think his name was Paul Huard, and I think he was Vice-President, director of finance.

SLIGH: Well, I don't happen to know him offhand. Sandy Trowbridge is the President now. Since I was there, the President's job, let me put it this way, the title of the chief administrative officer today is the President. And the chief executive officer today is the Chairman. So that it has been changed since I was there when the President was the chief executive officer, and Chairman was the job following that. That was back...probably that pamphlet shows...the work I was doing in connection with being Chairman of the Tax Committee of NAM, in 1951, and '52, and this probably got me into the position to become the President of NAM, and then the chief administrative officer eventually. When I was doing that, I debated Senator O'Mahoney, Walter Reuther a couple times, and debated Hubert Humphrey, Leonard Woodcock, Roy Reuther, and a bunch of different people on national TV.

JEWETT: Great! What was the debate with Hubert Humphrey about?

SLIGH: Well, it was supposed to be on taxes, but we got into lots of other things (laughter). It was the David Susskind show. And for two hours we were on together.

JEWETT: That's really neat. So what was your view on the taxes?

SLIGH: At that time, we were promoting the flat rate manufacturer's excise tax as a means of raising money for the Korean War, if additional taxes were
needed. They were talking about getting additional tax revenue, and we felt this was the fairest way, and the best way to produce the revenue, with the least disruption. And Walter Reuther was advocating a spending tax, which we thought was more of a socialistic approach. In fact, he wanted to tax everybody based on what they spent. If they spent $2,000, as an example, and these figures aren't accurate now because I can't remember them. Say, you spent $2,000, you wouldn't pay a tax. But if you spent $5,000 you'd pay maybe 1% or 2% tax. If you spent $50,000 a year, you'd pay 25 or 30% tax on what you spent. Not on your income, but this would be an ADDITIONAL tax. So it was very evident that he was trying to get everybody's income down to one level. And in my debate with him, the first debate I had with him, I kept pushing him, asking him, "Very evidently, Mr. Reuther, you want everybody to be at a certain level, you don't want people to rise above the masses, you just want everybody to be on a certain level. WHAT do you think should be the top earnings of any individual?" And I had to ask that question 4 or 5 times before he finally, just at the end of the program, came back with an answer.

JEWETT: What was the answer?
SLIGH: The answer was that nobody should have more than $18,000 a year after taxes.
JEWETT: NOONE should have more than $18,000 a year?
SLIGH: Yes. So, needless to say, seeing there are quite a few labor leaders at the time that were getting considerably more than that, and any smart reporter like you went around and asked the labor leaders, "Do you agree with what Mr. Reuther said last night?" And they, of course, said, "No, we don't", because some of them were getting $75,000 a year.
JEWETT: He kind of put his foot in his mouth, there.
SLIGH: Well, I had a lot of fun with him.

JEWETT: Yes, that must have been. And was Hubert Humphrey a senator at the time?

SLIGH: Yes.

JEWETT: So how do you feel now about Ronald Reagan's tax policies and supply-side economics?

SLIGH: Well, I think he's right. His policies, unfortunately, that he advocated haven't gone into effect. He wanted a much greater cut in the budget than there has been. He wanted a greater tax reduction several months ago, which he didn't get. He's finally getting some July 1. Yet, everybody's judging him on the fact that he's been in office, so everything should have been turned around by now, just because he was in office. Well, just being in office doesn't do you much good, if your program hasn't been accepted. And the Congress fought against his program, to a very great extent. It took us fifty years to get into this mess, now you're not going to get out of it in a few months. It's going to be a hardship on a lot of people. And we're going to have to work harder, and be willing to dig in and take a little while to at least change direction. I think he's trying to do a good job, but he's got a lot of people fighting against him, including the media. And it's going to be a tough, long haul, I think.

JEWETT: We talked with the Office of Management and Budget, while we were in Washington, and they described it as a big, huge elephant, and what they're trying to do is to just get it turned in the other direction, if they could just get it turned a little bit in the other direction, in the four years, that's an accomplishment. They're not going to get it all the way around.

SLIGH: I think I might have described it differently if I was a Republican in the Office of Management and Budget, I would have said it was a donkey
who was very stubborn and trying to go in the wrong direction, and they were trying to turn it around.

JEWETT: (laughter) That could be very true, there. I worked for Senator Jack Schmitt while I was in Washington, and he's a Republican, and he's up for reelection this year in New Mexico, and I know the Republicans are very worried that if the economic conditions don't turn around, they're going to be in trouble. What do you think? Do you think Ronald Reagan's policies are going to have some effect in November? Do you see the interest rates coming down?

SLIGH: Well, I'm hoping so. I think we are beginning to see some effect. Inflation has been very definitely reduced. It's no longer double digit inflation. But, who's saying so? You know, you don't see that in the morning paper every day. You see the bad things, but not the good things. The interest rates, of course, are a tremendous problem. But Ronald Reagan cannot change that. In order for that to be changed, I think the Congress has to show that they recognize the problem we have, and get that budget set, a reasonable budget set, and give the money people some confidence that this thing is going to work. And then, I think, the interest rates will start down a little.

But, you know, I can remember in the depression, why, I had a man come who was a banker from Chicago, and he came over to see me. Well, actually that was in the 1940's when I was also running a Grand Rapids chair company in Grand Rapids. My office was there at the time. The man came from Chicago to try to get me to borrow money from him at 3% interest. Now here we are paying 16% interest. And that was in a depression. Do we want that again? In other words, I think we just have to give them a chance. If we give them a couple of years, and do what he's asking, I think we'd come out
of this thing. Politicians are mainly interested in the next election. Not what's going to happen to the country in 20 years.

JEWETT: Yes, that's true. Do you see Reagan's policies affecting your company at all? Do you think what's gone on so far, like the inflation rate coming down, has helped?

SLIGH: Well, I think it will help, yes. But, as I say, we're feeling the recession. But I'm not resenting that. You know, if you have appendicitis you go to the hospital. And you're sure that that's going to hurt. It's going to hurt, and it's going to take time to heal. And you do it anyway. If you don't, you die. Now, this is the situation we're in. We've GOT to take some medicine, now. We've got to have this operation. And it is going to hurt. But if we'll grit our teeth and stay with it, we'll come out of it a healthier country. And have a future that is much brighter.

JEWETT: That's a good analogy. I agree, too. I think that Ronald Reagan will pull through. I notice your picture of Dwight Eisenhower on the wall. How did you become acquainted with him?

SLIGH: Well, I was Chairman of the Kent County Republican Committee for four years, '52 to '56, when Ike was elected. And I gave him a desk back in 1952 when he came to Grand Rapids to campaign. And we saw Mamie and Ike, and my wife and I were the last ones to visit Mamie before she died. We had lunch with her at their Gettysburg farm. On Sunday we were with her for three hours, and Tuesday she had a stroke and was taken to the hospital and died a few days later. But I have seen, well, I've had a lot of experience with various politicians.

JEWETT: Mr. Sligh, your house had burned down in 1971. What happened, and how did you manage to come back from that loss?

SLIGH: Mrs. Sligh and I had gone out to play golf at Clearbrook Country Club, and we played nine holes and went into lunch. And as we came out of lunch we
were told that a call had just come in and our house was on fire. So we rushed to change our shoes and leave for home, and as we started out the door, they came to us again and said they had just had another call, and that there was no use hurrying because it was hopeless. It would be a total loss. So we got out on the road between Saugatuck and Holland, and we saw the smoke in the sky, and got there and it was burning, crowds of people sitting around on the lawn, watching it burn. My eldest grandson, Charles R. Sligh, the fourth, was there and risked himself by going into the house to throw out the flat silver that was in the dining room. He saved that, which has since been given to him for his efforts. And my wife's wedding ring had been left in her room, and he went up and tried to find that, and the house was burning around him. But he came back, and he couldn't find it. But after the house had burned down, the next day he brought a metal detector, and finally found the wedding ring in the rubble. But, the house was a total loss. We lost a lot of things that were very valuable...things that we'd had, we'd purchased years ago, in Europe, and so on...all our pictures of the family, and things of that nature, were just gone. A beautiful tea service that NAM had given me when I was President of NAM, had, evidently, just melted down and disappeared. So, it was a very tough loss, but we rebuilt. We built a new house, and probably a little better suited to our present situation--there are just two of us at home. The old house was wonderful, when we had 4 children there.

My first wife died in 1964. And we had lived in that house since 1937. She had raised with me, our 4 children. So, it meant a lot, the house meant a lot. I was remarried in 1965, and there were just two of us in the house, although, there were some more there for a while, some of her children. They're all gone now, it's just the two of us. But we find that we have the family
back every once in a while. Some of them live far away, and they come
back, so we're glad we have room for them.

JEWETT: That is something. Could you give a general overview of the
business conditions in Holland, from 1933? Where are the good years, where
are the bad years? I know the depression was bad, but...

SLIGH: Well, I can't give you too much detail on that. I think '37, that
immediate area was a little bit shaky, '37-'38. Then, of course, in 1941,
when we went into the war, that was a tough change. We started the Holland
Industries at that time, of which I was President. And that included
several of the companies in the area, and I was trying to get war work for
them. And we did get a fair amount of war work, for members of the Holland
community.

The Sligh-Lowry Furniture Company made truck bodies, and things of that
nature, for the armed services. And, very few desks were made. So that was
a tough period, didn't put us out of business, but it was a tough period.
Then, after the war, we did, very definitely, start on an upgrade, and have
been going ever since. We've had a very consistent growth, and I think
Holland itself, of course, has had a very consistent growth. I think the
HEDCOR was a wonderful thing for Holland. It set up this Industrial Park,
and made it possible to draw in from outside a lot of companies, and the
type of company that had never been here before, like the Excello Corporation,
and Lifesavers, and a lot of others that are here now. Chris Craft came in
here. We got them in here the year I was President of the Chamber of
Commerce of Holland. And I think they've been an asset to the community.
I guess they've had some tough times, too. But, I think it's been a
generally, constantly improving situation over the years.

JEWETT: That's good. What was Holland like in the 1930's, compared to the
1980's. Pretty much the same, or changed a lot...?

SLIGH: Well, I think, of course, when we first came here that Holland, well, the Warm Friend Tavern was the focal point. They had just about everything in town. The Chamber of Commerce was located there. The Tavern Club was located there. The parties were held there, during Franklin Roosevelt's time. The March of Dimes Annual Ball was held there. So that has changed now. You've got Point West now--replaced Macatawa Inn. And Castle Park is very much the same as it was. Well, in those days when I first came here and shortly after, I think the furniture industry was a pretty big part of Holland. I think today, it is, well, I know, it is a much less important part...as far as the overall picture is concerned, because a lot of these large, national companies have come into the picture here. So, the community is not as dependent on one industry as it was in those days. And the Holland Furnace Company, of course, WAS Holland practically, at that time. And of course, that is no longer in existence. So, I've noticed a lot of traumatic changes, but I think, getting back to today's economic situation, we have a better community today, because of a lot of those changes.

JEWETT: So then, all these companies have improved the whole situation?

SLIGH: Well, a lot of them are no longer here. But others have taken their place, and it's a more diversified community today. And I think, a better community.

JEWETT: That's good. I just wanted to insert a little note here. I know you're a water skiing national champion? And you got inducted into the hall of fame?

SLIGH: Yes, this picture just came in from the executive secretary of the deal. And the Hall of Fame this year, was the first year that we have had
any inductees. And there are seven of us now in the Hall of Fame. But, each year there will be seven more added, and it's a kind of fine thing.

JEWETT: How'd you start water skiing?

SLIGH: Well, I started when I was going to the World's Fair in New York as Michigan's representative. The governor of Michigan appointed me as Michigan's representative to the opening of the New York World's Fair in 1939. That's when I met Franklin Roosevelt. All the representatives of the states were sitting on a platform with him when he opened the fair. And as I was walking around the fair grounds, I saw three water skiers go by. And, I'd never seen water skiing. I'd done a lot of aqua planing, and loved it, and put on shows. But water skiing, with two separate boards, seemed just about impossible (laughter). So, I was impressed by it, but I didn't see them start, and I didn't see them finish. I just saw them go by. So, when I was in Marshall Field, and Co. that summer, selling furniture, I went through the sporting goods department, and I saw some water skis against the wall. So I bought a pair. And I brought them home, and realized that I didn't know anything more about it than that. So I wrote to the Winner Manufacturing Company that made the skis, and asked them. I said, "I bought a pair of your skis, what do I do now?" And they said, "Well, get a line about 75 feet long, and put a handle on the end of it, and attach it to a boat, sit on a dock with your skis on, and let the boat pull you off the dock!" So, I did. Fortunately, I was able to stand up the first time, so I've been doing it ever since.

JEWETT: How neat! Was it 1943 then, that you were the champion?

SLIGH: No, 1941, and then we didn't have a tournament until 1945, and I lost the championship to my 16 year old godson, Lew Withey, III, in 1945.

JEWETT: (laughter) So that was okay then, huh?
SLIGH: Yes.

JEWETT: So in two years then, you got that good at water skiing?

SLIGH: Well, of course in those days, it was a very different sport. I look through that book and see all the equipment and everything today that they have, and having just been down to Cypress Gardens for that induction ceremony. I can't believe the things they're doing today. It's fantastic!

JEWETT: So, in closing, I'd just like to say, you've accomplished so much in your life, and you've had some hard times, too. Do you have a personal philosophy that keeps you going? Can you give any advice to someone just starting out, like me, who's about ready to graduate from college, or something like that?

SLIGH: Well, nothing very erudite, I'm sure. But, I've seen so many people who are really brilliant, scholastically. They do a fantastic job in school. And I see so many of those people that get out of school and that's it. They don't seem to go any place, from there on. So, I think, one thing is to have "stick-to-it-iveness". In other words, you know, really stick to it, and dedicate yourself to something, whatever it may be, and really work at it, not expect something to be handed to you.

I always look back at one of the men we hired, who walked into my office in 1933, and he's still here in town, George Lemmen. George walked into my office in 1933, in the fall, just after we'd started business. And he said he wanted a job. He was out of work--had been for some time. And he had worked for the Ottawa Furniture Company, which is no longer in existence. And I said, "Well, we're really not hiring anybody." And he said, "Well, I've got to have a job. I want a job." And I said, "Well, what have you done?"

So, he listed the things he had done, and there were quite a few of them. He knew about dry kiln work, he knew about bookkeeping, and quite a few things
he had done in his life made him a pretty valuable type of man. Well, I said, "You've got so much experience, we couldn't possibly afford to pay you what you're worth." And he said, "I didn't say anything about pay." I said, "I know, but you certainly want pay." And he said, "Well, is $10 a week too much?" And I said, "Why, I can't pay you $10 a week." And he said, "Well, I want to work! And I'll take $10 a week if I can get a job. I want an opportunity." And I said, "Well, it's hard for me to believe, but if you really mean that, we really don't have an opening, but if you really mean that, I'll pay you $15 a week." And he said, "Fine. Where do I hang my coat?" And he hung his coat, and he worked for us for about 40 years. He's now retired, living here. He became the Treasurer of our company, he became a stockholder of the Sligh-Lowry Furniture Company. He was on our Board of Directors.

But, he didn't come in and apply for the job, and say, "Well now, wait a minute. What retirement plan have you got? How much vacation do I get? What are the fringe benefits?" All he asked for was an opportunity. And because he was willing to take the job on that basis, he became all the things he would have wanted to be...Treasurer of the company, being able to retire, and live comfortably, and so on. So, I guess, I would suggest that any young person look for a job that presents a chance for opportunity, rather than whether he's getting $3.95 an hour, or $4.50 an hour to start.

And I think that being dependable, is vitally important, along with a high degree of integrity, and a willingness to work, and not expect hand outs, freebies. As I say, that's not a very studied or scholastically satisfying description, but that's the way I feel about it.

JEWETT: Oh, no, that's good. That's the way you've become successful, huh?
SLIGH: When I first started out working in my father's plant, I wasn't any
prize, I'll tell you. I was goofing off a lot, you know, it looked like I had the thing made. I was going to be President of the company, my dad owned it. But all of a sudden I woke up, and I not only wasn't going to be President of the company, there wasn't any company. And I didn't even have a job. That seemed like a disaster, but probably was the best thing that ever happened to me. Because if it hadn't happened, I probably would have sat back, and taken everything that anybody would give me. But, I wouldn't have had to work hard for it. So, when I finally, Bill Lowry and I, started in the business, I remember definitely, making a commitment to myself, that from now on, the job is the important thing! And whatever I had to do to get it done, that's what I had to do.

And I was traveling as much as six weeks away from home at a time. Today, you talk to these kids, you know, about a sales job and they say, "Well, I don't want to leave home. I don't want to go away, and travel on the road." You just can't do it that way. You've got to give up some things in order to do it.

JEWETT: You've got to be willing to make sacrifices.

SLIGH: Yes. Which in the end, will accrue to your benefit. Perhaps at the time it doesn't seem like it, but...

JEWETT: So, when life gave you lemons, you made lemonade?

SLIGH: That's a good way to express it.

JEWETT: Well, thank you so much, this has been really good.

SLIGH: You're welcome. I want to show you something over here, speaking of that type of thing. My dad was born in 1850, his father was killed in the Civil War when my father was twelve years old. So he never got past the eighth grade, that was it. But, he was a VERY well educated person. But he was educated only because he educated himself. And, he started with nothing,
he was a tinsmith. And then became a worker at a furniture factory, Berkey & Gay Furniture Company in Grand Rapids, in the finishing room. It is a dirty job, but he became the finishing room foreman, then a salesman, and then started his own company. He was very successful, with an eighth grade education. Now I'll show you his picture.

His father was killed in the Civil War, and my father was very patriotic. He would have signed up for the Spanish-American War, but he had three daughters by his first wife, and a booming business.

So, when World War I came along, he wanted to enlist. He decided he was going to fight. Well, he went up to Plattsburg Training Camp, and they didn't allow you in there after you were 45. Well, he told them he was 45 years old, and he got in. He was 66 years old!

JEWETT: Did he really fight when he was 66 years old in World War I?

SLIGH: No, he didn't fight because somebody told on him and they kicked him out! (laughter) But here he is! When he was up there in training he ended up in that war as a major in the signal corps, buying the spruce lumber for Allied airplanes. That's the best he could do, but he was going to get out there and fight. At that time he knew Teddy Roosevelt's son. Up until then, he had been a democrat. He ran for governor of Michigan on the Democratic ticket in 1896, and lost to Mr. Pingree, Governor Pingree. He told me one time, "Pingree was the best governor we ever had." Then, he ran again in 1922, on the Republican ticket, but in the primary he was defeated by Alexander J. Groesbeck.

JEWETT: He was quite involved. You look like him.

SLIGH: Yes, I guess.

JEWETT: Well, I don't want to keep you, but thank you so much.

SLIGH: Well, you're very welcome.
JEWETT: This will be really good.

SLIGH: Most all my papers and things I have, and my father's are in the library in Ann Arbor. They're trying to get all the history of Michigan, and papers on the history of Michigan. If you ever need anything about me, that would be the place to go for it. It's right next door to the Gerald R. Ford Library.

SLIGH: Well, Abby, it's nice to see you, and best of everything to you.

JEWETT: Ah, well, thank you!
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