

FROM THE HIDE HOUSE TO THE WHITE HOUSE

QUINN: After graduating from Loras in spring of 1964, I needed a summer job where I could make some money to pay for graduate school. So when I heard that they were “hiring at the Pack,” I jumped at the chance. My first job after graduating from college was working at the Dubuque Packing Company, where my earlier assignment had been screwing down the tops of jars of pork products to tighten them as they came past me on a conveyor belt. It was mindless, monotonous work. This time, I was hired to work at the Hide House. The Hide House was the place where the cattle skins, the hides, would be brought right after they had just been stripped off the slaughtered cattle. They would be transported in a huge dump truck that would back into this open processing area, where it would raise up and deposit in a huge pile all of these freshly cut hides covered with blood, fecal matter and other fragments of animal entrails left from “the kill” in the packing plant.

Our job, three or four of us, would be to sort through this incredibly gross, dirty, fetid and unattractive assemblage and pick them up, hide-by-hide, and spread them into an orderly pile. Somebody else would then shovel salt onto the hide to preserve it, while we picked up the next one. It was dirty, smelly and difficult work. The good thing about the Hide House was that if you could work fast enough to “make the rate,” you could earn a bonus payment each hour.

The Hide House was my inaugural job after college. But standing there amidst those piles of animal skins dripping with blood and feces in May 1964, I could never have imagined that just 10 years later, almost to the day, I would be walking into the White House with a foreign policy job dealing with America’s most significant military conflict at that time and involved in some of the most tragic and historic aspects of it.

Q: Oh, wonderful.

QUINN: Now, I look back with some considerable pride about getting, I mean literally, getting my hands really dirty. So as somebody said to me, the one thing this job at the Hide House will teach you is to not bite your fingernails [a subject that would come up again at other times during my career].

Q: Yeah (laughs).

QUINN: And it was true. So, I had that experience at the Dubuque Pack, but was rescued from it by the opportunity to attend the 1964 Republican National Political Convention.