

Interview with Lawrence Curtin

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Interview # 1: March 14, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, March 14, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm in the library this afternoon with Lawrence Curtin. Good afternoon.

Curtin: Good afternoon.

DePue: I think that might be the last time we refer to you as Lawrence in the interview. Is that going to be okay?

Curtin: That's fine.

DePue: You've been a lifelong Larry, as I understand.

Curtin: Right. Right.

DePue: Well, the reason for the interview is kind of twofold. I got to you after another gentleman that I had the chance to interview recommended that I talk to you, because you are a Korean War veteran, and I've got a big project on the Korean War. It's "the forgotten war," and I'm trying to make it so it's not so forgotten. But, as you know, you've got quite a story to tell, just growing up on a small farm in Illinois in the Depression. I always love to hear those stories, so we're going to spend quite a bit of time on that today, if you don't mind.

Curtin: Okay.

DePue: Tell us, when and where you were born.

Curtin: I was born April 5, 1926, in Taylorville, Illinois, in Christian County.

DePue: Were you born in the city of Taylorville?

Curtin: Yes, in Saint Vincent's Hospital in Taylorville.

DePue: Where was your family living at the time?

Curtin: Five and a half miles south of Kincaid.

DePue: I have a map here. I don't know if that's on your map or on one of these. I read something that it was the Bear Creek Township?

Curtin: Yes, and it was probably nearer to Palmer. Here is Kincaid, up here.

DePue: Kincaid and Palmer.

Curtin: It was between Kincaid and Palmer. It was probably three miles from Palmer.

DePue: What was your family doing at that time?

Curtin: They were farmers.

DePue: Were they owners or were they renting?

Curtin: They were renting.

DePue: I know you've got some siblings, several older kids in the family, as well?

Curtin: Well, I was the middle one, three older and three younger.

DePue: Was your father a World War I veteran, by chance?

Curtin: No. He had one brother that was, but he was not.

DePue: Do you know how the family got to this part of Illinois?

Curtin: He grew up just a half a mile from where my dad and mother were living, where they were living when I was born. His father came over from Ireland in 1866 and settled in that area, in Christian County, and raised a good-sized family. There were two girls and, I believe, seven boys. One of those boys was in the service, but none of the others were. They all farmed in their younger years. One became a schoolteacher, but most of them were farmers.

DePue: You know, the Irish that came over in that era, well, almost any era, you'd think that they went to the big cities, that they found urban jobs, and they settled in urban areas. So, how did your family end up settling on what's arguably some of the best farmland in the world?

Curtin: Well, he came from a farm family over in Ireland.

DePue: Did he come with some money in his pocket?

Curtin: No, not that I ever heard. My grandfather Curtin came over five years after a brother of his had come over. But his brother did work in Washington, D.C. for a year or two during the Civil War. I'm not sure how they got to central Illinois. But, from there, they came directly to central Illinois. They were both farmers.

DePue: Did you have a sense, growing up, that your family was farming some very good farmland?

Curtin: Yes, we did, especially after my family moved up by Blue Mound. They moved up there because they bought 160 acres out of this section of land that sold. It was one of the best sections, probably, in Stonington Township, anyhow. It was very well tiled and had forty-eight-inch woven, wire fence all around the section, with each 160 divided off with fences. It was a very good farm.

DePue: When you say, a section of land, for those of us who aren't farmers, how much is that?

Curtin: Six hundred and forty acres.

DePue: In other words, a square mile, basically.

Curtin: Yes. And this farm was divided up into four, quarter sections of 160 acres each. The previous owner had been a well-to-do person, who put up concrete corner posts, every quarter mile and a forty-eight-inch wire high fence, which is a tall fence.

DePue: Your dad was still a fairly young man then. Was this 1928, when he bought that farm?

Curtin: Well, he bought it in 1926 and moved on it in 1928. He was born in 1882.

DePue: So not so young.

Curtin: Uh, no. My mother had grown up just five



Lawrence and Marie Curtin, Larry's parents, on their wedding day on April 12th, 1921.

miles from that farm. That was probably the reason they bought in that area. But this is twenty-seven miles from where they were living when I was born. When I was a year and a half old is when they—well, almost two years old—when they moved up to this farm I just described.

DePue: Sounds like, then, you came along just about the same time that they bought this land.

Curtin: Yes. Yes, the same year. (both laugh)

DePue: You've written a book about all of this, *It All Started in Bear Creek: An Autobiography*. When did you publish this? When did you write this?

Curtin: Twenty-o-three.

DePue: Two thousand three. I guess my curiosity... In the book, you talked about the prices of food and commodities being fairly good in the 1920s. I had always thought that they were significantly down, from the World War I years. Even these were fairly tough years for farmers.

Curtin: Well, they always used 1910 to 1914 as the guideline for farm programs. That was a time when the farmers made a good enough income to live on well. But the 1920s...they were still good in the 1920s, until probably 1928 or nine.

DePue: We're going to talk a lot about what happened to farming in the 1930s, because it didn't stay that way. I guess what I'm curious about is... My guess is, your father had been saving up money, so he could buy his own farm.

Curtin: Yes. He had already bought forty acres down there, south of Kincaid. You asked if they owned the farm they lived on. They didn't, but he owned forty acres, half a mile from that, that was good land.

DePue: What was considered to be a good-sized farm that a farm family could really do well on?

Curtin: A hundred and sixty acres, they could really do well on. Yeah.

DePue: Okay, so buying this new 160-acre farm that, from your explanation, was very well-developed... It had already been tiled and fenced very well, but it couldn't have been cheap. Do you know how much he paid for it? Do you know how much he was in debt?

Curtin: It was in the \$200 range that he paid for it, I'm sure. I don't know how big his mortgage was, but, at that time, they had... I was the fourth child in the family. My dad was not a young man when he got married. In other words, I'm saying that he had a chance to save up money before he got married, and then he married. His wife, my mother, was from a fairly well-to-do farm family also. Between the two of them, they were able to save very well.

DePue: What's your mom's name?

Curtin: Marie.

DePue: Marie?

Curtin: Um-hm.

DePue: Marie. What's her maiden name?

Curtin: Colbrook, C-o-l-b-r-o-o-k.

DePue: Is that also Irish? It sounds a little English to me.

Curtin: No, it's German.

DePue: German, okay. Well, there goes my guess.

Curtin: Her grandfather came over from Germany and, when he lived in Germany, his name was Benedict Kaltenbach. Then he changed it.

DePue: How would you spell that? Maybe we can check that later.

Curtin: Kaltenbach, K-a-l-t-e-n-b-a-c-h. He Anglicized it to Colbrook—Kaltenbach is the same as Colbrook—and changed his first name to Benjamin, Benjamin Kaltenbach, Colbrook.

DePue: So, they moved on to this new farm in 1928. I'm sure you don't remember much about that move.

Curtin: No. I don't remember anything about it, except what my mom used to tell me.

DePue: And then, one year after that, when you're still very, very young, the Depression hits. Once we get into the 1930s, I don't need to tell you, the commodity prices, corn and wheat prices, plummeted. There were a lot of farm bankruptcies and things like that. Growing up in those years, did you ever have the sense that your family was hovering, right on the edge of having to declare bankruptcy or losing the farm?

Curtin: No, I didn't.

DePue: Did you know any other farmers who did?

Curtin: Well, I knew one farmer who did, but that was even better ground than down near the Palmer, Kincaid area. The farmers were able to make better money on that kind of land.

DePue: Was your farm far enough east that you never really experienced the dry spells that they had, farther west and the Dust Bowl conditions that they had in places like Kansas and Nebraska and the Dakotas and Oklahoma?

Curtin: That's right. We didn't experience that.

DePue: Tell me, how would you describe your parents? Let's start with your father.

Curtin: Well, he was a nice-looking; I guess you would say a handsome man. He was not quite as tall as my mom was, but he had a nice personality, a good sense of humor. It wasn't always obvious at home, but he became well-respected in the community, after he was there a few years and developed a good reputation as a farmer.

DePue: Did he have some of the traits of your typical Irishman?

Curtin: No. No, you're referring to the drinking? No. He would drink a beer, once in a while, but that was pretty rare. We never had whiskey around the house.

DePue: How about your mother?

Curtin: And none of his brothers were inclined to be that way, to be alcoholics.

DePue: Do you know much about the family, his family, when they left Ireland? Had they been farmers back in the old country?

Curtin: Yes, and he had a sister that stayed back there. My grandfather had a sister, who stayed back there, until she died. My great grandfather, I guess, lived with her. But I don't know much about their farming operation, at the time my grandfather came over here.

I've been back over there. The only relative that we've been able to locate, he was a pretty good farmer, when we went over there to Ireland. So, they all did pretty well, seems like.

DePue: This is pure speculation on my part, probably what I shouldn't be doing. But, I know a lot of the Irish, who were coming over at that time, had been tenant farmers in Ireland. And when the landowners converted from growing wheat, because the wheat prices had dropped, because American wheat was flooding into the English market, they converted over to more pasture or less intensive things. So, the landowners didn't need nearly as many tenants, and a lot of those tenants ended up coming to the United States.

Curtin: No one in our family was directly affected by that, but they knew people that were.

DePue: Well, let's get into areas that you know more about, when you were actually growing up, instead of putting you on the spot. Tell us a little bit about the farm. Tell us a lot about the farm.

Curtin: Well, it was 160 acres of good, black land, well drained. Shortly after they moved up there—I don't know which year it was—he rented, also, 80 acres that was just a mile from that. Therefore, he had 240 acres, which was enough that he needed a hired man. So, he had a hired man on that 80 acres.

He always had a lot of livestock, quite a few livestock. He wasn't a big cattle feeder, but he always raised hogs. Well, when I was growing up, we milked the cows, until about 1940. We only milked five or six cows, at the most. We had a few other cattle. Dad always raised quite a few hogs, like twenty, thirty liters a year. I know we always had a lot of hogs in the feeding lot, where the hogs were kept. We had a big cattle barn on the farm. He had a few commercial cows, until 1938. We started getting in the registered Angus business.

DePue: What does it mean to have a commercial—

Curtin: Just cows, not registered, not purebreds. They were just cows that raised calves. But he never had very many of those. I do remember he had sheep, also.

DePue: What was the cash crop?

Curtin: The cash crop was corn. In the '30s, they started growing soybeans. Of course, he would have had wheat and oats.

DePue: What was the thing that was bringing money into the family? Was it the cattle or the hogs?

Curtin: It would have been the hogs and the chickens and the sheep and the dairy cows, I guess, at that time, even though there were only five or six. But the corn and wheat and oats probably were the three best, when they first bought the farm.

DePue: Were they selling the grains, or were they feeding it to the livestock and using it for your own uses?

Curtin: We were feeding some of it, but he had quite a bit to sell, too. The oats, we fed; I'm sure.

DePue: You've seen a revolution in farming in your lifetime, but the very diverse kind of farm that you just talked about was the kind of farm every single one of your neighbors would have, I would guess.

Curtin: Yes, that's right.

DePue: How much mechanization was on the farm in those early years of the '30s?

Curtin: His first tractor was a Fordson tractor, which I don't remember. The first tractor I really remember was when he traded that one for a John Deere tractor, in about 1938. My brother, Leo, says that he traded the old Fordson tractor and a team of mules and, of course, probably had to give some cash.

DePue: Well, I was just going to ask; he had livestock?

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: Working draft animals on the farm?

Curtin: Yeah, we had horses. We had four or five, the most I can remember, when I was young. But yes, we cultivated corn with horses. Well, I can remember when they plowed, planted, worked the ground, everything with the horses.

But, by 1938, when I was twelve years old, and I had two older brothers, my closest older brother, he was a year and a half older than I, he and I cultivated a lot of corn with two, one-row cultivators, with a team of horses on each cultivator. We worked a lot of days together, cultivated ten acres a day.

DePue: You've got to forgive me for my ignorance. Plowing and cultivating are two separate things, correct?

Curtin: Yes. Plowing was turning the soil over. I can just barely remember that.

DePue: Cultivating wasn't nearly as heavy work?

Curtin: Cultivating was not heavy work. You sat there and just guided the

cultivator to keep from cutting out corn. We did that until about 1940.

DePue: Was that to cut down on the weeds in the rows or what?

Curtin: Yeah, to plow out the weeds between the rows of corn.

DePue: What do you do with weeds that are in between the cornstalks?



In the family scrapbook, Larry wrote, "I was the 'horse' pulling the wagon." Brother Bill was holding the reins (1930s).

- Curtin: Well, in the summer, after you got all done cultivating and everything, then there was a job for us boys, to walk the cornfields with hoes and cut the weeds that you're talking about. We did that from the time it was waist-high until it was pollinating. Anytime we had extra time, our job was to go out and cut weeds.
- DePue: You got plenty of practice walking, didn't you?
- Curtin: Yes. You carried a jug of water with you. You had a jug of water at the end of the row.
- DePue: Tell us about the farmhouse. You did a wonderful job of describing that in the book, but I wonder if you can kind of lay that out for us.
- Curtin: Well, it was a two-story house in the typical kind of a prairie style, you know, but not exactly Frank Lloyd Wright. I was a large living room, a pretty good-sized dining room, good-sized kitchen, on the first floor, and another room that Mom and Dad used for a bedroom. Upstairs, there were three bedrooms. It was a well-built house. We didn't feel like we were poor in that house.
- DePue: It sounded like it was a pretty spacious house, a big house.
- Curtin: It was.
- DePue: But then, how big was the family?
- Curtin: Well, by 1935, there were seven kids. Like I said, I was the middle one. So, we were always using all the rooms, except that—and you'd be interested in this—during a few of those Depression years, they closed off the living room. We never used the living room, just so they wouldn't have to heat it.
- DePue: Was the farmhouse already there when they bought the land?
- Curtin: Yes.
- DePue: How about some of the outbuildings?
- Curtin: All the outbuildings were. There was a garage, a one-car garage, but it was twice as long as it needed to be, because the shop was on the other end of the garage. There was a good-sized henhouse for the laying hens. There was a brooder house. There was a corn crib with sheds on each side of it for machinery, and there was this huge cattle barn.
- DePue: I'm going to take a break here. I'm being called away.
- Curtin: Okay.

DePue: Had to take a quick break, but we're back at it. We were talking about the farmhouse, but I think I missed an opportunity to give you a chance to talk about your mom's personality.

Curtin: She was a very outgoing person and a good head on her shoulders. She was the oldest in her family and the first one to learn to drive a car in the family. (laughs)

DePue: You mentioned she was taller than your dad?

Curtin: Just a little bit. She was kind of a husky lady. She always had trouble controlling her weight, but she did a pretty good job.

DePue: She had an opportunity to work hard for her whole life, sounds like.

Curtin: Yeah, and she did work hard, very hard. She was a good cook, had a big garden that she used everything out of.

That was another way we got through the Depression years, I guess, because we had a big garden. Any time you didn't have anything to do, there was stuff to do, rows to hoe, out in the garden.

DePue: I would think you'd keep busy hoeing the corn and the soybean fields all the time.

Curtin: Well, yeah, we had to keep the weeds out of both of those. The early years, we didn't grow a lot of beans. But, yeah, there was always plenty to do for the boys, and the girls always had to help in the house, with the canning.

Mom did a lot of canning, yet she still had time for her garden club and bridge club. About twice a year, we'd come home from school, and the ladies would be there playing bridge. She didn't give up that. (laughs)

DePue: Who had the biggest influence on you, growing up?

Curtin: It'd be hard to say who had the biggest influence. Probably my mom might have had a little more influence. But they were both a big influence.

DePue: Let's go back to talking about the farmhouse. How did they heat the house?

Curtin: It was heated with a coal furnace in the basement. It always was coal, never wood. But it did not have a blower on it to blow the heat up. It just depended on the heat rising into the center of the house, and then it was pretty cold on the outside edges. (laughs)

DePue: My guess is the farmhouse had big windows, because you didn't have air conditioning either.

Curtin: Yeah, right, it had big windows. Not really tall ceilings.

DePue: Coal, then, would be one of the biggest expenses the family would have, I would think.

Curtin: Yes, it would be.

DePue: How about indoor plumbing?

Curtin: No indoor plumbing, until we got electricity



in 1939.

The Curtin family farm, near Blue Mound where Larry grew up, 1958. (Patrons desiring to use this photograph should contact the ALPL Audio-Visual Curator.)

DePue: Well, there's one big difference from today, huh?

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: And if you don't have indoor plumbing, and you work on a farm, and you've got hogs, and you've got cattle, and you've got chickens, and you've got all this hard work, how do you keep yourself clean?

Curtin: Well, in the corner of the kitchen, there was a kitchen sink, with a pump there that pulled water out of the cistern. So, that's where you always washed up, during the week. Every Saturday night, you got a bath. The kitchen range had a reservoir on the end of it that held about five gallons of water, and they kept that filled with water. On Saturday night, everybody got baths, when we were little.

DePue: Baths? Five gallons of water? That doesn't sound like a lot of water for a family with seven kids.

Curtin: Well, now wait a minute. Three kids could take a bath in one, one after the other, in the same water. (both laugh) And in the summertime, sometimes we got our bath out in the yard, in a bigger tub. But, no, we had the ritual Saturday night bath. And like I said, the tub wasn't changed every time.

DePue: Five gallons is enough to wash in?

Curtin: Oh, yeah. Well, we did that in the Army.

DePue: So, what was the pecking order for you? You were the, what, the third or the fourth oldest?

Curtin: You know, I don't remember that. I don't know.

DePue: You also talked about getting showers.

Curtin: Yeah. We had an awful way to get showers. Of course, the oldest boy in the family is easily the most resourceful one. He had this idea, to take a...it was about a three-gallon bucket, punch holes in the bottom, put a pulley up on the ceiling. This was out in what we called the washhouse, or smokehouse.



Larry at age 10, in 1936, while the family operated a farm near Stonington, Illinois.

A pulley, up on the ceiling, had a rope that went through that pulley and tied it to the bucket. So, then, you brought out hot water from the house, or warm water from the house, and you could get ready for your shower, and then, pour it...fill that bucket with water, and then pull it up and hook it on a nail, hook the end of the rope on a nail, and you had about two minutes to take a shower. (both laugh)

DePue: And you better be quick, huh?

Curtin: Yeah. You had to be well organized.

DePue: Where were you getting your haircuts? Did Mom take care of that?

Curtin: Dad cut our hair, until we were about ten years old, probably.

DePue: And after that?

Curtin: Then they took us to Stonington or Blue Mound. Those were the closest two towns.

DePue: With a two minute shower, you don't want to be spending too much time cleaning your hair, do you?

Curtin: No. No, every Saturday night, I think Mom washed our hair, once a week.

DePue: When you're out there taking a shower, was this a wooden floor?

Curtin: Concrete floor, with a drain.

DePue: So, that wasn't too bad then.

Curtin: No.

DePue: Again, it seems like a far cry from what we've got today.

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: How about electricity? When did you get electricity?

Curtin: August of 1939. No, it would have been a little later, about October of 1939. They set the poles in August.

DePue: How big a difference did that make?

Curtin: It made a lot of difference. I can still remember that evening that the lights came on, because they had to wire up everything ahead of time, the house and the barns. Of course, we always had chores to do after school. It was late in the fall, I guess, because it was almost dark. All the wiring was done, and about five o'clock, we were doing chores, and the lights came on.

Now, you talk about a big event in your life. That was a big event. There were switches that were already on, you know, and here they all lit up. We thought we had it made then. (both laugh) Didn't have to carry a lantern anymore. Of course, they had lights in the house.

DePue: What was the first appliance or two that the family got?

Curtin: Probably an electric radio. We had a radio before that, but it ran off of batteries.

DePue: Did the family have an icebox before that?

Curtin: Yes, and probably that was one of the first items that they got, too, and an electric iron to iron clothes. But, yes, we didn't have to buy ice anymore.

DePue: How about a washing machine for Mom?

Curtin: Yeah, and I think, probably, within a few months, she got a washing machine, too.

DePue: What was she doing to wash clothes before then?

Curtin: Well, in the washhouse that I just talked about, where we took our showers, she had a washing machine that ran off of a gas engine, Maytag washer. So, we had to carry the water out from the cook stove, in the house, carry it out there on Monday morning, because Monday morning was always wash day.

But, before that Maytag with the gas engine mounted on it, they had a washer that ran off of a gas engine that sat in a building next to the washhouse. They had a belt that ran through there, to run this washing

machine she had. I don't remember that one very well, but I remember that gas engine. It was a one-cylinder gas engine.

DePue: You mentioned when you got electricity, maybe, an electric radio would be one of the first things you got. Did you have no radio before then?

Curtin: Yeah, we had a radio. We had a console radio in the dining room. It ran off of batteries, in the basement.

DePue: Did you get much of a chance to listen to the radio growing up?

Curtin: In the morning, when we'd be getting ready for school, we listened to Jolly Joe from WLS in Chicago. And in the evening, we always... Well, Mom and Dad and most of us kids listened to Lum and Abner. I remember they used to listen to Lowell Thomas, with the news. There were probably other programs, but we didn't spend a lot of time listening to them. We had studies to do at that time. We didn't spend a lot of time listening to the radio.

DePue: How about newspapers? Did you have some newspapers?

Curtin: Yeah, we always had a newspaper. There was always a newspaper there to read, when we got home from school. Of course, we'd check the funnies. That was the main thing we read. But we always had a newspaper in the house.

DePue: What was the newspaper?

Curtin: *Decatur Herald*.

DePue: And the other thing that we couldn't think how we'd manage without today, a telephone. Did you have one of those?

Curtin: My folks did not have a telephone during the early Depression years, until about 1937 or eight, probably. But my grandma always had one. That's where I first learned to talk on the telephone.

DePue: (laughs) Was that a big occasion, to get to talk on the phone?

Curtin: That was a big occasion. (laughs) You can't imagine that, shy country boy. It was just a new experience.

I was over there one day, and it was a custom, back then, you could call the operator, sitting there at a switchboard in the nearest town. You could call the operator to ask her what time it was, because that's how people knew how to update their clocks, get them on the right time.

So, she asked me to call the operator, and get the time. It's hard to describe what kind of a feeling I had then, I guess. I could talk over that phone to a live person in town. (laughs)

- DePue: What, that seemed rather miraculous to you?
- Curtin: Well, I guess I was shy enough that I didn't feel comfortable talking to her, but I asked her what time it was, and she told me. I thanked her, and I hung up.
- DePue: How old were you? Do you remember?
- Curtin: I was probably nine or ten years old. But, like I said, they always had a phone, and we did not have a phone until '37, probably.
- DePue: When you got a phone, I'm assuming you had a party line.
- Curtin: Yes, and I remember that a little better as I got older, because we had at least four people, probably six or eight people, on the party line. I remember my mom talking on the party line quite often. And they listened in sometimes.
- DePue: They listened in? Other people listened in to your conversation?
- Curtin: Well, we listened. My mom would listen in, once in a while, when she knew whose ring it was. But no, we kids were always very self-conscious about that, because we didn't want the neighbor ladies hearing our phone conversations. If we wanted to call a girlfriend that we didn't want them to hear the conversation, we went into town, to the central's office, and called from in there.
- DePue: Was there one of the local gossips who would listen in on the phone?
- Curtin: They might.
- DePue: Do you remember anybody in particular who was the one that you most feared, in that respect?
- Curtin: No, not really.
- DePue: What was your ring?
- Curtin: One long, three shorts. Isn't that funny? You still remember that.
- DePue: That doesn't surprise me. You talked about in your book. Your father had a pretty serious accident, with the horses, which illustrates a couple things. You still had horses pretty late in this time period.
- Curtin: Yes. We had them until about 1940, I'm sure.
- DePue: Tell me about the accident.
- Curtin: Well, at that time, when they sowed clover seed in the fall, they used a wooden box wagon, with a seeder in the back of it. The wooden box wagon

was pulled by two horses. So, he was driving it, driving the wagon, and had my brother Bill in the back, putting the clover seed in the seeder. The horses got a little unruly, and he was trying to slow them down. One of them kicked the neck yoke off of the tongue, the long tongue that ran down, in between the horses. It fell on the ground. Then, that kind of scared them.

Dad was having trouble controlling them. Well, I guess they panicked. The horses were getting more unruly, and the tongue fell down, ran the ground. It hoisted the wagon up, the length of the tongue, and threw my dad out on the ground and broke his back. So, he lay in the hospital for six weeks to recover from that, and then, had some recovery at home, too.

DePue: How old were the boys when that happened?

Curtin: Well, if it was in 1939...Is that what I put in there?

DePue: I think so, yeah.

Curtin: Yeah, it was the same year that we got electricity. I would have been thirteen, and Bill would have been fifteen. He's the one that was in the back of the wagon. He jumped out. Dad told him to jump out and try to stop the horses, try to force them into a fence. He got out, but this happened before he could force them into the fence.

DePue: Are these not your typical, thoroughbred riding horses, but bigger draft animals?

Curtin: Yeah, draft animals. Uh-huh. I saw lots of things happen like that on the farm. I remember a couple of other times when horses got spooked and got out of control. They would come running back to the farmstead.

DePue: What were the chores you had on the farm?

Curtin: Well, I was kind of the chicken man, I guess, at my age.

DePue: Is that one of the things that the age of the kid determines the job you have?

Curtin: Right. The oldest one was the first one to start feeding cattle and milking cows. Then, when the second one got old enough to do the same thing, he was helping do it, and feed the hogs.

Then, I was the third boy, so my job was helping my mom on the chickens. Of course, she did less all the time, and I did more. So, I was the one that kept the laying house, where the hens were, kept that clean and gathered eggs and took care of baby chickens in the spring. That's how I fell into that job. I just liked doing it, because it was in a warm building.

DePue: Again, having not grown up on a farm, I can only imagine, but I would think the prestige job was working with the livestock, the big livestock, not with the chickens.

Curtin: You didn't worry about prestige when you were that age, not when you were thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. No, you just did what you were told to do, and you did it. I mean, you didn't say, "Oh, I don't feel like doing it today."

DePue: Tell me, then, for you personally—and we'll get to going to school here pretty soon—but, did you have chores before school and chores after school?

Curtin: Right.

DePue: What were they?

Curtin: Well, you always had to help milk cows. That was the first thing you did in the morning. But I always took care of the chickens, when I was old enough to start doing it. Somebody took care of feeding the hogs.

DePue: When you say you took care of the chickens, what did you have to do, in the morning?

Curtin: In the morning, you had to see that they had fresh water, plenty of feed. And then, the baby chicks that you started, why, there was always a lot of work to do with those, because they were started in a house, a brooder house, that was about twelve by twelve, that had a heater in it. You had to make sure the feeders were full of feed and the waters were full of water. So, yeah, we did that before school.

Then, when I was in high school, if the baby pigs had to be taken care of—like vaccinated or castrated—why, Dad had that organized. We'd get that done before we went to school. We were late for school a lot of mornings.

DePue: So, you'd help him even castrate pigs, before you went to school, huh?

Curtin: Yeah, and then you didn't take a shower. You went to school. (both laugh) I can't imagine that. We didn't know any different. When we probably got to be juniors in high school, we were aware of how clean we ought to be.

DePue: Well, I would think, before that time, before you got to high school, you were pretty much going to school with a bunch of, other farm kids, too, aren't you?

Curtin: Yeah. In the country, at the country school, yes.

DePue: Were the chores any different, coming home at night?

- Curtin: No, except vaccinations were always done in the morning, it seemed like. But, at night, well, you'd always change clothes, when you got home from school, because you had to put those school clothes...keep those clean, if you could.
- DePue: Did you have work clothes for the morning chores and then change into your school clothes?
- Curtin: Right.
- DePue: Okay.
- Curtin: Then, in the evening, you changed back into your work clothes, but we always had time to read the funny papers and to have a snack, after school. Then we went out to start chores. So, basically, the same chores in the evening then, usually between 5:00 and 6:00.
- DePue: Did the cows get milked twice a day, then?
- Curtin: Yes.
- DePue: How early were you getting up?
- Curtin: Probably 6:00. Yeah.
- DePue: Okay.
- Curtin: Then, when we milked the cows—and that became my job later—after somebody milked the cows and brought it in the house, to the basement of the house, we had a cream separator down there. You had to take care of all that, run the milk through a strainer and separator. So, that was part of your chores, too.
- DePue: Was there some manual labor involved with the cream separator?
- Curtin: Yeah, you had to turn it by hand. We never had one with a motor on it.
- DePue: Centrifugal force is pretty much going to do the separation for you, then?
- Curtin: Yes.
- DePue: Was there somebody coming to pick up the milk and the eggs every day?
- Curtin: Uh, no. Now, in the early years, before I started helping much with the milking, someone came and picked up the milk. But then, in those later years, when we had the cream separator, they sold the cream in town on Saturday night, and they took the eggs to the grocery store and sold them.
- DePue: Was yours a religious family?

Curtin: Yes, it was. We belonged to the Catholic Church. I don't think we ever missed Sunday mass and went to Stations of the Cross during Lent, even though we lived five and a half miles from town.

DePue: Was your mom born and raised a Catholic, as well?

Curtin: Yes.

DePue: Was that something that was pretty important to the family?

Curtin: Yeah. We didn't think we had a choice.

DePue: It was never presented to you as a choice, huh?

Curtin: No.

DePue: I wanted to spend a little bit of time about your experiences going to school. I'm assuming this is a one-room schoolhouse?

Curtin: Yes, a one-room schoolhouse.

DePue: What was the name of the school?

Curtin: Ireland School, district seventy-one.

DePue: Ireland School. Does that mean most of your neighbors were Irish?

Curtin: Several of them were, yeah.

DePue: Well, describe the school for us.

Curtin: It was just a typical, one-room school building. And then, when I was in the seventh grade, that burnt down. They built another one-room school, but it had cloakrooms in it and two rooms that would become a bathroom, whenever we got electricity, and had a little library room in it. It had a full basement under it. So, it was a nice building. But it was only used for a few years, before they consolidated the country schools.

DePue: What's the experience like, going to a school where you've got, what, seven or eight grades in the same room?

Curtin: Right. Seven grades, usually. The reason for seven is because the seventh and eighth grades were alternated. One year, they would teach seventh grade. One year, they would teach eighth grade.

DePue: You mean, you could get eighth grade one year, and then the next year you can get seventh grade?

Curtin: Right. Yeah.



Ireland School, 1933, the rural school that the Curtin children attended. Several Curtins attended that year, including (lft-rt, second row) Bill, Larry and Leo. Larry's sister, Catherine, is in the third row, with her head down. The teacher, in the back row, was Mr. Cashin, a WW I vet. The small children in the front were probably siblings of other students. (Patrons desiring to use this photograph should contact the ALPL Audio-Visual Curator.)

DePue: (laughs) That's a subtle difference, I suppose, important, I'm sure, at that time.

Curtin: By that time, it was. I think, by seventh and eighth grade, you could change the subjects around.

DePue: Were there certain chores that the kids were expected to do at school, as well?

Curtin: We always carried in the coal. I think that was about the only thing we did.

DePue: What kind of education did you get?

Curtin: Well, just the basics. You learned as much as your teacher...It depended a lot on what kind of a teacher you had, as to how much you learned. I was fortunate to have good teachers [for] reading and writing, Palmer method of writing, arithmetic, geography and history, I suppose. That's about it.

DePue: What's Palmer method of writing?

Curtin: I'm surprised you haven't heard of that, somewhere along the line. That was a method of teaching writing to students, and well, all the papers that you had to copy from, to copy the style of letter, you know. Somebody probably had a patent on it that they put that course together. Those are the materials that the teacher used to teach the writing classes.

- DePue: So, the style of the longhand writing is what you're talking about?
- Curtin: Um-hmm.
- DePue: Explain this one to me. You've got seven grades in the same room, and you've got, what, maybe twenty-something kids sitting in the classroom, and one teacher?
- Curtin: Yeah, fifteen, twenty.
- DePue: How does that work? Does the teacher stand up and say, "Okay, now we're going to talk about math, and the kids in first grade are going to learn this?" I'm trying to visualize this. Did you do a lot of work on your own? She'd give you an assignment, and you would do your work on your own?
- Curtin: Oh, yes. I don't know what the order of the classes was. Probably she started with the first grade. There might be two or three first-graders, and they would come up to a bench in the front of the room, near her desk. There were blackboards around there, all across that wall. She would teach those what she wanted to teach, in the time she had allotted for the first grade, which would be, like, fifteen or twenty minutes. The rest of us would be working on homework, at our own desk, and—
- DePue: Quietly.
- Curtin: Yeah. And the older kids sat to the back of the room. The younger kids were at the front of the room. She would call them up, class by class. While there was a class up there, you weren't paying any attention to them, usually, if you had work to do at your desk.
- DePue: It seems like an opportunity for a lot of horseplay, if you were the rambunctious type.
- Curtin: Well, I always heard stories about the trouble teachers had with seventh and eighth-graders that were maybe fourteen or fifteen years old and only came in the wintertime. But we never really...I don't remember anything like that, when I was in the one-room school. We always had a good teacher, and we always had pretty good discipline.
- DePue: Were you in the position, where you get a little older, then you start helping to teach the younger kids?
- Curtin: No, you never did that that I recall.
- DePue: Recess. Was there a scheduled recess you'd get?
- Curtin: There was a scheduled recess, morning and afternoon, fifteen minutes, I think, was all it was. Noon, however, you had almost an hour.

- DePue: That's a stupid question. A school bell?
- Curtin: Our school didn't have a bell. Most schools, I think, had bells. But I don't believe ours had one.
- DePue: Now, the classic story for your generation, the kids growing up in the farm, in the country, is that you walked two miles in a blazing blizzard—
- Curtin: Through two feet of snow.
- DePue: Exactly.
- Curtin: Yeah, my kids even kid me, joke about that, once in a while. But, no, we never had to walk through the snow. Well, there was a family that lived across the street, across the road from our house. Usually my folks and they took turns taking us to school. Most of the time, we were taken to school in the morning. We never walked to school. It was a mile and three quarters, a little over a mile and a half.
- DePue: Somebody drove you to school?
- Curtin: Yeah. It would be a mom, usually. But, in the evening, we walked home from school, only on good days. We didn't have to walk in the rain or snow.
- DePue: How far away was the family from school?
- Curtin: A little over a mile and a half.
- DePue: So, that would have been a good healthy jog.
- Curtin: Yeah. And it was, like I said, usually nice weather. It wasn't bad.
- DePue: One of the stories you told, in the book, that caught my attention, was the story about Mr. Cashin and his Veterans Day observances. Tell us about that.
- Curtin: Well, my brother, Bill, remembers it better than I do, because Mr. Cashin died the year before I started school.
- DePue: Oh.
- Curtin: But, he was a World War I veteran, and Bill always told the story about Mr. Cashin taking all the students out in the schoolyard and having them face east at 11:00, on the eleventh day of November, to observe the armistice. He was a World War I veteran, himself, and that was important to him.
- DePue: And it obviously was something that stuck with your brother, as well.
- Curtin: Yeah, it did.

DePue: Do you have some stories like that, things that happened in grade school that stay with you?

Curtin: Oh, boy. One of them was when I got my two front teeth knocked out in a baseball game, during the noon hour. (laughs) That wasn't the fault of the teacher. We played a game, called rounders, in softball. We didn't even have enough kids to have two teams, see, so you played rounders. That was, you'd have three batters, and the rest of them played bases and the outfield and pitcher and catcher. So, each time someone struck out, or was put out, running bases, why, then that person moved to the outfield, and everybody else moved up one notch, so you got your turn being a catcher.

I was the catcher, and the batter swung at a ball and missed it. Well, he hit it on the ground. It was a foul ball. I started to pick up the ball, and about that time, he swung the bat to try to hit the ball back out to the pitcher. When he swung the bat back, it hit my mouth and broke off two teeth. I didn't know they were broken off, at the time. I don't know if the teacher did or not, but the teacher looked at my mouth, and she decided I could finish out the school day.

DePue: It wasn't a bloody mess?

Curtin: No. Well, there might have been a little blood, and my mouth was numb, so I didn't know what was going on. But it actually broke both teeth. I don't know...Of course, you have to remember, we didn't have telephones. So, the teacher thought I could finish off the day.

When I got home from school, my folks took me to the dentist in town. They were both broken off, and he had to pull them out. Pull the roots out.

DePue: You remember your mom's reaction coming into the house with those broken teeth?

Curtin: No, I don't. (both laugh)

DePue: What's a young kid do without two front teeth?

Curtin: Well, that dentist said, "Well, his mouth will still be growing until he's sixteen." We didn't have much money then. He said, "You need to wait until he's fifteen or sixteen to get a partial. So, I went without my front teeth until I was graduated from grade school.

My grandma Colbrook, my mother's mother, told my folks that, if they would let me do it, she would pay to have her dentist put in a partial, make a partial for me. So, that's when I got my first partial. I think I mentioned it in the book, that that's why there's no pictures of me in my seventh and eighth grade. (laughs)

- DePue: I'm thinking that's got to change your diet pretty significantly, during those years.
- Curtin: Your diet?
- DePue: Yeah.
- Curtin: Oh, no. You could learn to eat apples and everything. No, it never changed my diet, because I could still chew. But it did create a problem in my high school years that those front teeth would break off once in a while, if I was eating an apple, and I'd have to take them to the dentist to have them repaired. So, I'd have to go without my teeth for a day or two.
- DePue: But all of that, I would think, gets expensive too. Doesn't it?
- Curtin: Yeah, but they didn't charge as much back then. Buying the partial was expensive.
- DePue: But, once you had the partial, wasn't it expensive to replace the teeth?
- Curtin: No. I'd usually have the teeth, and they'd just, you know, glue them back on. I very seldom swallowed them. (both laugh)
- DePue: Were you a little bit self-conscious, though, those years you didn't have teeth?
- Curtin: In high school, I was. But, in grade school, I don't remember being self-conscious about it.
- DePue: Didn't slow you down any, huh?
- Curtin: I don't think so.
- DePue: One thing we probably ought to mention here, you did talk about in the book. You got accelerated pretty early, when you went to the grade school, didn't you?
- Curtin: Yes. That was when I was going into second grade. I think I had one other kid going to be in the class with me, and then that family moved away. So, the teacher talked to my folks and said she thought I could skip the second grade and go into the third grade. So, I only spent seven years in grade school.
- DePue: You were fine with that?
- Curtin: Yeah. Yeah.
- DePue: Here's something else I don't think most people even think about today. I understand there was a grade school graduation.
- Curtin: Yes.

DePue: When you were done with eighth grade, basically?

Curtin: Yes. We had a superintendent of schools, who regulated and oversaw all the grade schools in the county, and they had a county graduation in Taylorville, the county seat. So, I was the only one in my class, by that time, again. I graduated with a bunch of people I didn't know.

DePue: But, did they make a pretty big deal out of that?

Curtin: I suppose they did, but it wasn't important to me. They had a program, down in Taylorville, at what is their high school—well, it was their high school at that time, too—in the gym. They had a graduation for the whole county.

DePue: Were there some of the kids, a lot of the kids, that didn't go on to school after that?

Curtin: Not a lot. Most kids went on to high school at that time.

DePue: But the high school experience has got to be different, because you've got to go farther, quite a bit farther, to go to high school, I would think.

Curtin: Yeah, five and a half miles.

DePue: Where did you go to high school?

Curtin: Stonington High School.

DePue: And how did you get there?

Curtin: We had to furnish our own transportation. So, the first year, my two brothers and I rode a motorcycle a lot, all of us on one motorcycle.

DePue: Three of you?

Curtin: Yes. Then our dad bought a 1937 Ford. That would have been in the fall or sometime in '39, '40 school year. It was a two-door, '37 Ford, and we drove it back and forth to school.

But, we had to improvise some, because there were three of us, and sometimes there were sports to stay for. We never had to stay in after school for detention. That was our way of getting to school. That's how we could go into last minute or sometimes couldn't get there until the second period, if we had to vaccinate pigs.

DePue: I know the tradition, at that time, you had these large...especially farmers, had large families. You wanted to have boys, and the expectation was that the boys would inherit the land and stay in farming, continue that tradition. Was that the expectation in your family?

Curtin: No, we were never pushed to do this or that.

Apparently, my folks thought my oldest brother should go to college. I remember they helped him get into U of I. The second boy was my brother Bill. He was ready to quit. He had no desire to go to college. And then, by the time I graduated from high school, World War II was going on.

DePue: That's a little bit ahead of the story. We'll pick that up here in a little bit. I wanted to ask you about the traditions in your family, for Thanksgiving and Christmas. I'm assuming that those are the big celebrations, maybe Fourth of July, as well?

Curtin: Yeah, Fourth of July wasn't as big as Thanksgiving and Christmas. Those two holidays, we usually went over to my mom's mom's house, my grandmother's house, almost always did. Sometimes she had them over to our house, I guess.

DePue: What was on the table?

Curtin: About everything you could name that goes with Thanksgiving and Christmas. We always had a big dinner. But, you know, it was all homemade things, turkey, stuffing, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberries, all that stuff. Yeah, I think, on both those holidays, we usually went over there.

DePue: You hadn't mentioned turkeys. Were there turkeys on some of the farms, on your farm?

Curtin: We never had turkeys, but they had turkey dinners quite a bit, like at Thanksgiving. Yeah.

DePue: Let's talk about some of the other things that people don't do much anymore, shucking corn.

Curtin: Yeah. I grew up when they were still hand-shucking corn.

DePue: What does that mean?

Curtin: You hitch two horses to a wagon. You have the sideboards higher on the far side, on one side. You had a hook attached to a leather band that you put on your hand, and that was how you pulled the shucks back and broke the ear off from the shank, and threw it into the wagon.

When I was little, my dad never shucked much corn by hand. He hired a couple of guys that would come up from Mount Vernon, Illinois area to come up and shuck corn for him, and he paid them. At that time, the going rate was a penny and a half a bushel. Then it went to two cents, I remember. But, they would go out, while my mom would cook breakfast for them, like 5:00 in the morning. Dad would do chores, while they went on out to the field and started shucking corn.

As I got older, I remember my dad had us kids, help shuck some to get fields opened up, after we got the corn pickers. But, as far as the hand-shucking, it was usually a couple of guys, came up to do it. They shucked one load in the morning, which would be about sixty bushels, and eat lunch, which Mom fixed for them, and then get another load in the afternoon. It was usually getting dark when they were unloading the second load. They stayed at our house all the time they were there to shuck.

DePue: Does shucking include taking the husks off?

Curtin: Yes.

DePue: So, you had to grab the ear of corn, take the husks off and then toss it into the wagon?

Curtin: You grabbed the ear of corn, pulled the husks back, while it's still on the stalk, and then break the ear off, out of the shuck. And then, pitch it to the wagon. That's why the boards were higher on the far side of the wagon, so that they'd pitch it up there, and it'd hit that and fall into the wagon.

DePue: That's a lot to do in a couple of seconds.

Curtin: Yeah, and it was kind of a game of skill back then, I guess. They had corn husking contests, in the fall, to see who could shuck the most bushels in an hour or something like that.

DePue: But that's going out into the fields and walking the fields.

Curtin: Right.

DePue: What happens, then, if it's been raining the last two days before?

Curtin: Well, as long as it wasn't too muddy, they could do it. But, sometimes, it did rain hard enough and enough days that even these two guys, who shucked, would go back down to Mount Vernon for a few days, if it really rained and the fields were muddy.

DePue: Do you remember baling hay?

Curtin: Oh, yes. Well, I remember the time before we got the baler. We had about four acres of alfalfa, near the farmstead, and they would mow it. My dad worked with two or three neighbors, who always helped each other put up hay. They'd put it up by hand, pitch it up on the wagon, and haul it to the barn. Then, we started hiring somebody to come in and bale it. So, that took a lot of that work away.

DePue: So, even in these years in the 1930s, during the Depression, we're seeing a lot of new, modern techniques coming into farming, sounds like.

- Curtin: Yeah, but not until the end of that, about the last couple years of that decade.
- DePue: One of the things that surprised me, in there, you were talking about threshing wheat. The thing that surprised me, because this is prime corn and, later, soybean land, it's not land that grows a lot of wheat on it.
- Curtin: Well, back then, almost all the farmers grew wheat and oats. They didn't specialize like they do now.
- DePue: What was done with the wheat crop?
- Curtin: The wheat crop, they brought in and threshed it and took the wheat to town, and used the straw for bedding for the cattle and hogs.
- DePue: So, it wasn't locally milled and used in your own household, necessarily?
- Curtin: No.
- DePue: The oats, was that for the livestock?
- Curtin: Yeah. That was livestock feed. I'm sure they sold some of that, but we put enough in the granaries to last a year, for feed.
- DePue: Well, then, what's the experience of threshing wheat?
- Curtin: Well, if you go back to the threshing days, you maybe have heard of the McCormick reaper, which is a binder that cut the wheat and put it in little bundles and kicked them out on the side, and then, the farmer had to come along and stack those in a certain way.
- DePue: Those are what they called the sheaves, then?
- Curtin: Well, the sheaves were the small bundles. They stacked those into what they called shocks, I guess. There's another name for that. I can't think of it now. But, anyhow, they stacked those, about ten or twelve of those, in one shock. It always had two or three on top to shed the rain, if they got rain before they got threshed.

They had threshing rings then. A fellow would own the threshing machine and the steam engine. He'd come around from farm to farm and set up at the farmstead, and then, they would load those bundles onto rack wagons, bring them up to the farmstead, and feed them into that machine, which would thresh the grain out of it.

The grain would go out into wagons, and the straw would go out into a straw pile or into a barn. I'm old enough to remember seeing that done a couple of times at our farm.

DePue: But not old enough to have participated in it yourself?

Curtin: Well, I always say, my first dollar I earned was for hauling water to the threshers, jugs of water. We had a buggy and a horse that was broken, to pull the buggy. So, my job was to go up to the well and put cold water in those jugs, and take it out to the field, and make the rounds around all the guys out in the field and up to the threshing machine, and give everybody a chance to have a cold drink of water.



Larry on a friend's pony, 1937.

Now, the first time I did that was at home, for my dad. One of the neighbors was going to be threshing next, and he asked my dad if I could go to his farm and do the same thing. So, I took my horse and buggy and followed the rack wagons to the next farm and worked there that afternoon and then the next day. He paid me two dollars for those two half-days. That was my first dollar.

DePue: Did you know what you were going to spend that money on, when you had it?

Curtin: No, I don't think I did, and I didn't save one of them. (laughs)

DePue: You also talked about getting in trouble. Or, at least in your own mind, you got in trouble.

Curtin: On one time around, they hadn't near-emptied the jugs, and I didn't think I had been out very long. So, I just filled them the rest of the way with water, without rinsing them out and putting fresh water in them. The first guy that took a drink out of that knew the difference, and they gave me a pretty good scolding. So, I went back to the pump at the house and made sure I rinsed them all out, put cold water in them.

DePue: So, the water wasn't cold enough, and he knew it, huh?

Curtin: Oh, he knew it. Yeah. I thought I'd get by with that one.

DePue: Well, being a kid, growing up in Illinois, during those years, were you involved with things like 4-H and the county fairs and state fairs and all?

Curtin: Very much. My oldest brother started in 4-H with sheep. I think about the next year, Dad bought a steer for him. After that, we always bought steers. Just a couple years later, my dad bought a registered Angus heifer for him. That was 1938, when he bought that. So, he must have had the sheep in '37.

So, that's when we started in the Angus business. Our farm has been in the Angus business ever since then. My brother, youngest brother, maintains a herd now. I got out of it about the 1970s. They just had their seventy-fourth anniversary sale the other day. That farm has been in the Angus business since seventy-four years.

DePue: Talking about the Angus cattle, and before, you were talking about the commercial cow and the difference there. Obviously, I would think, the difference is the hybrid animals, that they're specially bred.

Curtin: Well, we don't call them hybrid, like the corn, but they are specially bred. There's a record of them, of their ancestors. That's to make sure they stay that true, the full-blood, registered animal. That started us in the Angus business, and that's what I was showing when I was in the 4-H, but we still kept showing steers, through that time.

DePue: What was special about the Angus, the quality of the beef, how quickly they were raised or what?

Curtin: The quality of the beef. I guess we got on to that right away. We were fortunate in getting some good ones. My dad had been a Shorthorn breeder in his younger years, but he sold them out. So, when we started up when we were kids, why, he bought Angus. He bought, kind of, one at a time, for us to show, and then, of course, finally accumulated quite a few of them.

DePue: Was that a fun thing to do, to go to the local fairs and the state fair?

Curtin: It was very much a fun thing in those days, because you didn't have many other fun things to do. All my brothers and I did that, as we were growing up. But, yeah, it was a chance for you to get out and meet other people and have fun and get off the farm.

DePue: And see the life that was on the fairground, huh?

Curtin: Yeah. (laughs) Yeah. But we didn't have much money to spend, while we were there. We didn't go to the carnival very much.

DePue: All right, no stories to talk about going to the carnival, then?

Curtin: No, not really.

DePue: You talked before about having hogs, and it sounded like you had enough hogs that you were selling them at the market, as well, but also had enough hogs that you butchered your own hogs.

Curtin: Um-hmm.

DePue: Let's start with you telling us the difference about the hogs in 1939, 1940, from what we've got today.

Curtin: Well, they're probably faster-growing now. But, back then, they looked a lot the same, back then. The method of raising them was a lot different, because we raised them in pens. You had more losses of little pigs, with sows laying on the pigs. But they used to call them "the mortgage-lifter" for farms, because that was pretty good income. You put a lot of labor into them, taking care of them from the time they were born until they were ready for market, and feeding your own corn.

The hogs themselves weren't a lot different than now, except, I'm sure, the ones now are more feed-efficient.

DePue: I thought the hog today is a much leaner animal than you had, back in those days.

Curtin: Yes. Well, yes, he's leaner than they were back then, yeah. But we still sold them about the same. We sold them a little heavier. But yeah, you're right. They were more lardy.

DePue: How old would the hogs be when they went to market?

Curtin: Oh, gosh. They weren't much over six months old, I don't think. We had pretty good hogs, and we took good care of them. They were ready for market, I think, about six or seven months.

DePue: How long would it take the chickens to come to market?

Curtin: Well, the baby chicks, in three months, they were ready to sell as fryers. They would weigh about three, three and a half pounds. You kept the hens for at least a year. They started laying, about six months old.

DePue: I assume a lot of those chickens ended up in the pot at home.

Curtin: Right, yeah.

DePue: Who got to do the plucking of the chicken?

Curtin: Well, my mom always did that, but I helped her kill them lots of times.

DePue: How did you kill the chickens, back then?

Curtin: You really want to know? Okay. Well, if they were young enough, she could take them by the head and wring their neck. But, as they got older, I chopped their head off with an axe.

DePue: Hold them by the beak?

Curtin: Well, put their head down on a piece of wood and...(both laugh)

DePue: Okay.

Curtin: And then, you hung them out, so the blood would drain out of them.

DePue: And hand it off to Mom, and let her do the plucking.

Curtin: Yeah, she was the one that always did that. I think I helped some, probably.

DePue: I'm hoping you can go through, in some detail, what happened to the hog-butchered days. That was quite a ritual.

Curtin: Yes, it was. And this goes back to the thirties. The neighbors got together to do that. In our case, it was usually my uncle, and maybe one neighbor. That was only done once, during the winter.

So, they would, like, get up at 4:00 in the morning. They'd have about three big kettles, and build a fire around them. Of course, we always had plenty of junk wood around the place, from fences being repaired and everything. They'd build a fire around the kettles, which then it'd take about an hour to heat that water up to boiling.

They would have the hogs that they were going to butcher, out in the barn. About daylight, they would kill the first couple of hogs, with a rifle, and then drag them up to the center of the farmstead, where they would have these kettles.

They usually tried to have a vat. Sometimes it was kind of crude. It was like a barrel, I guess, at first, that they would put that hot, boiling water in and dip the hog down in it and had it in there just the amount of time that it would loosen up the bristles on it. If they pulled it out, and they couldn't get the bristles to come off with a scraper, why, they'd put it back down the water again. Then, they would pull it out and put it on a table. They had these scrapers that they would take all the bristles off of the whole hog, then lay it out on the table and start cutting it up.

Now, maybe I should tell you, when they shot the hog, they had to slit his neck, so he would bleed right away. I don't know whether you wanted to know that.

DePue: Hanging upside down, so the blood would drain out of it?

Curtin: No, his heart kept pumping the blood out on the ground. But they never hung him up, until after they had cleaned the bristles off and got him clean and hung him up then, so they could cut him open.

DePue: So, somebody is cutting him open, taking all the innards out?

Curtin: Right, yeah.

DePue: I know, with some of the innards, at least, they're going to be used later in the process, aren't they?

Curtin: Yes, they save the large intestines, I guess it was. They save those to clean up later. They spend a lot of time cleaning those up and scraping them out and everything. Then, they use those for stuffed sausage.

So, then, they've got them hanging, and usually they'd kill about four hogs. Just as an aside, I can remember waking up one morning—I slept upstairs—and looking down there and seeing the burning fires and the kettles and everything, and everybody was there, ready to go. And it wasn't daylight yet. They got all four of them hung up by noon. Then, they stopped for lunch. That way, the carcasses already had the insides out of them, had them cleaned out. Then the carcasses would cool out, over the noon hour.

In the afternoon, they cut them up, into hams and shoulders and hind quarters. That took most of the afternoon, to do that and to stuff the sausage and to grind the sausage, and then stuff it and make lard, I guess. When they cut, they trimmed fat off of the sides, a lot of the pieces, and those scraps went into containers.

Then they heated those in another boiling water thing, a kettle. That's how they got the lard. They put lye in it. No, not in that. I'm talking ahead of myself. That's how they got the lard. All those scraps of fat were heated in the hot water, then they were taken out. They were strained and run through a lard press [that] would press the lard out of it, while it was hot.

Then, what was left, then was later made into soap, with lye, on another day. By that time, it was dark again.

DePue: So, it took all day, and you used just about every part of the pig.

Curtin: Yes. Um-hmm.

DePue: One thing you didn't talk about is how they got the hide off.

Curtin: They didn't take the hide off. Well, they cut it off later, in the afternoon, when they were trimming the pieces, the hams and the sides and everything. But no, they only scraped off the bristles.

- DePue: So, this wouldn't have the same uses that a cow hide would have?
- Curtin: No. When they butchered a cow, they cut the hide off, took it all off in one piece. It would take half an hour to do that.
- DePue: Do you know what they did with the hide for the hog?
- Curtin: We sold the hides.
- DePue: For the hogs?
- Curtin: No. The hogs?
- DePue: Yeah.
- Curtin: Well, that was the part of the fat that you cut off of those pieces.
- DePue: Well, parts of this almost makes me hungry, listening to it. What else went into the sausage, any idea? Were there any spices that went into the sausage?
- Curtin: I think everybody had their own formula for spices.
- DePue: I'm sure a lot of salt went in there, to begin with.
- Curtin: Well, I'm sure, during the later years, when I was aware of what was going on, they were buying those spices by then, I think, to put in the sausage. Sometimes they might have had a little more of what they liked the best or something. They were buying spices.
- DePue: Several families would get together to do this, then?
- Curtin: Yeah. Well, in our case, it was.
- DePue: The day or two after the hogs were butchered, or the cattle were butchered, were there special things that ended up on the dinner table?
- Curtin: No. I suppose, but I don't remember that.
- DePue: Well, you've got plenty of chickens, a sizeable number of hogs, lots of cattle. So, you've got lots of manure, as well?
- Curtin: Right.
- DePue: What did you do with all that manure?
- Curtin: You had to pitch it on a rack. We called it a rack wagon, a hay wagon. We never had a manure spreader, until sometime in the mid-forties, probably, or early forties. You pitched it on the wagon with pitchforks, took it out to the pasture, and pitched it off with pitchforks.

DePue: In the pasture?

Curtin: That's how you spread it. Yeah, that's how you got rid of it.

DePue: You didn't put it in the corn or the soybeans?

Curtin: No, we used it for fertilizer on the corn and soybeans, on the fields.

DePue: You said you took it out to the pasture.

Curtin: To spread it on the pasture as fertilizer.

DePue: Okay.

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: Well, I'm thinking a pasture is not the same thing as your cornfield.

Curtin: Well, the next year, the pasture might be cornfield.

DePue: Okay. So, you were rotating crops as well?

Curtin: You're right; we were.

DePue: Did Mom save some of the horse manure for her roses or anything like that?

Curtin: Yes. She was a big one on growing gladiolas. She took them to the fair, even. And, yeah, she saved some of that. (both laugh)

DePue: Well, I've gone through quite a litany of farming. What have I missed that you remember, that would especially be different from what our experience is of farming today?

Curtin: I told you about the cultivating, one row at a time, cultivating ten acres in a day. Of course, you could only work from 7:00 in the morning on that, until about 4:30, because the horses couldn't handle it any longer. Then, you had to stop and rest them at the end of the field. That was one thing. That's why you had an hour off at noon, because the horses had to have their rest.

Yeah, we've been through the butchering part. We've been through the chicken part. And then, as we boys got older, we were showing at the fairs. We also showed at the International Livestock Exposition, had a beef show in St. Louis, where we sold our club calves.

DePue: Well, we're talking about all the animal manure, but we didn't talk about the outhouse. How far away was that from the house?

Curtin: It was down by the chicken house. You know why I think it was down there? Because, if Mom went down to go to the outhouse, why, if somebody drove in, she could get some eggs out of the chicken house and...(both laugh)

DePue: Well, that's a good, practical German thing to do.

Curtin: Yeah. But, yeah, it had to be moved, almost every spring. I think it had to be moved and had to dig a new hole and just move it over on the new hole and cover up the old one. It was a two-holer.

DePue: Did you have windmill?

Curtin: Yes. We had a windmill and a big, concrete water tank that was there when Dad bought the farm. It held enough water to last for two weeks, if it didn't rain, you know, but you tried to keep it full.

DePue: Did anybody, back in those days, think about the quality of the water or whether or not it was healthy to drink or those kinds of issues that we're so concerned about today?

Curtin: Well, I can't remember that we did, except we always got a lot of compliments on our well water.

DePue: The taste of the water?

Curtin: The taste of the water, and it was always cold. But no, in later years, we maybe had it tested, but not in the early years. We had two wells, one at the house and one down in the cattle lots, with mud all around it. And we even drank that water. (both laugh) It was cold.

DePue: That was the important thing, it was cold? Of all the changes that you saw in the late thirties and early forties, what would you say was the biggest change, the most important change?

Curtin: I think the biggest one was the mechanization, there in the late thirties, when we got a tractor that could cultivate corn. We had enough corn then that my oldest brother got to use the tractor. Bill and I still had to cultivate with horses. But, then we started baling the hay.

And then, the combine might have been the biggest one of all. The tractor was number one, I suppose. But when we got a combine, it ended that threshing ring thing, and every farmer could harvest his own grain, when he wanted to harvest it.

My dad bought his first combine in 1939, I believe it was. Then, it just took a lot of the work out of it, out of harvesting. And then, the tractors got more versatile. We could cultivate more with them. We could hoe with them,

harrow with them, a lot more acres, disk with them. And that started happening there in 1939, '40.

DePue: And these things are as much to do about modern innovations in technology, but it's also a lot to do about improving commodity prices and grain prices. The farmers had a little bit more money. Would that be correct?

Curtin: Well, you could grow more crops. Then, hybrid corn came in about that time, in about 1937, and the yield started increasing. Then, we got the mechanical corn pickers. The first one was about 1940, and could harvest a lot more bushels of corn in a day. And then, of course, that speeded it up.

Well, during the war, it was hard to get machinery, but they were making some of it. But you couldn't hardly get a tractor, during the war. I think my dad was able to get one.

DePue: What year did you start high school, then?

Curtin: Nineteen thirty-nine.

DePue: So, in 1939, were you paying attention at all with what was going on in Europe, with what was going on in the world?

Curtin: Yeah, I remember reading about Poland falling.

DePue: That was September of '39.

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: Did it occur to you this might have some impact on you or your family's future?

Curtin: Not until December 7, 1941.

DePue: Tell us about that day.

Curtin: Well, I remember December seventh. We were coming back from a beef cattle sale in St. Louis when we heard about it. The morning of December the eighth, I can remember the guy who was custom harvesting our corn. He was getting a team of horses out of the barn, and I remember him talking about it. He said, "Yeah, it won't last very long. We can burn down Tokyo in a day."

But my oldest brother was in ROTC, up at U of I. My second brother and I were helping out on the farm. He graduated in June of '42, I guess. So, we knew things were different from December seventh on, but we never had anybody go into the service until '44, because there was a big push on for farm production for the war effort. We worked long hours. We were all fully

employed, and our dad was kind of semi-crippled, you know. He couldn't drive a tractor long days.

So, we increased our acres of corn. I remember that. We only had a two-row corn planter, and they cut the tongue off on it, put a clevis on it, put the tractor, one of those small tractors, on it. One of us boys had to ride on the two-row planter so that, when you came to the end of the field, you could pull it out of the ground. The guy on the tractor would turn it around, and then you put the planter down. Then you rode all the way through the field. We planted the most acres of corn. We had 130 acres, I think, of corn on the 160 acres that year. We would run tractors at night. Even when we were in high school, we were running tractors at night.

DePue: Pretty powerful, profitable years for you?

Curtin: Yeah, they turned out to be. The price of corn went up. Yields were pretty good. Well, by those standards, it was good. If you had eighty-five or ninety bushels corn, that was good. Livestock, meat, was in demand, and you could get gas rationing. You had a better supply of gas, because you were a farmer, but we never took advantage of that. We had to have ration stamps, too.

DePue: You say you didn't take advantage of the gas rationing?

Curtin: Well, no, of abusing the rationing privilege.

DePue: Okay.

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: But farmers got a lot more of a ration simply, because they needed to have it.

Curtin: We had to go through an application process of some kind, and we got, instead of an "A" sticker that most people got for their cars—which gave you a certain number of gallons—we had a "B" sticker, I think, because we lived out in the country, and our tractors had to have gas. I can't ever remember it being a big problem. My mom probably had a bigger problem getting sugar and stuff for her canning.

DePue: It was gas you were needing, not diesel fuel?

Curtin: Right.

DePue: Do you remember anything like metal drives, like aluminum or rubber drives? You guys would have been using a lot of rubber on the farm.

Curtin: No. Well, by that time, our tractors ran on rubber tires. Well, I remember scrap paper drives, and we sold scrap iron. We had scrap iron drives in the

FFA at school, the Future Farmers of America chapter, which was our full Ag instruction.

No, everybody was working for the war effort then. There weren't very many cheaters, not on the farm, especially. Everything was for the war effort. We had a forty-five mile-an-hour speed limit. You know, everyone obeyed that. We shared rides a lot more, even my dad. I remember the neighbor across the road would stop in to see if he wanted to go into town for anything. They'd go in together.

DePue: The family still had that motorcycle?

Curtin: No, they wrecked one of them. I never got into that motorcycle riding, myself. One brother wrecked one. I think they wrecked another one. I don't know—

DePue: I would imagine, by that time, it wasn't Mom's favorite thing.

Curtin: No. (both laugh)

DePue: Do you remember what you had to have food coupons for? Sugar is one thing you mentioned. You guys wouldn't need meat coupons?

Curtin: No. No.

DePue: Well, how about something like coffee?

Curtin: I think you're right. Yeah, my mom probably didn't have to use them a lot, but that sugar was the one that I know she really wrestled with, with the canning, you know.



L.F. and Marie Curtin family picture, 1943. Front row: Paul, Dorothy, Dad, Mom and John. Back row: Leo, Larry, Bill, and Catherine. (Patrons desiring to use this photograph should contact the ALPL Audio-Visual Curator.)

DePue: Well, you guys were kept pretty busy, but did you have opportunities, once in a while, to head to town to watch the Saturday evening movies or the matinees or things like that?

Curtin: Yes. Saturday night was a big night for my folks' grocery shopping. Back to selling the eggs, I remember them, her and Dad, talking on Saturday night about what the eggs would bring and what she needed to buy. And I remember her saying, "I need a fifty-pound bag of flour tonight." It was going to take more of the egg money for that. But then, we went to town with them on Saturday night, when they went in shopping. I can't remember every Saturday night that we went, but I'm sure they did.

But I was in high school then, during those war years, and Saturday night was a bigger thing for us, when we were able to be out on our own. I do remember, they had free movies—there were other towns besides ours that had that—that they would show on the back wall of a store. You'd sit out there, on benches or buckets or whatever you could get. to watch these Saturday night movies. They were free. That was a big thing during World War II.

DePue: Do you remember any of the movies you saw?

Curtin: Well, it was usually like Tom Mix or something like that.

DePue: Did they have newsreels? Were you hearing about what was going on in the war?

Curtin: Yeah. Of course, I remember the newsreels better when I got into junior and senior year, you know, and going to the theater. They always had a newsreel and a cartoon and then the feature.

DePue: Did you have any personal interest in the military at that time, thinking that might be something you'd want to do or that you needed to do?

Curtin: No, I didn't. But, my brother that was a year and a half older than I was, it bothered him that he had a lot of buddies that were in the service. He told my dad he wanted to give up his deferment to go. Dad agreed he could go. But I was sent up in 1944, probably, for a physical, sent to Chicago. They were trying to see who all was available and, at that time, they discovered I had a hernia, so that guaranteed my farm deferment.

DePue: The teeth weren't a problem, though, for you?

Curtin: No. No, they would have taken me without teeth. (both laugh)

DePue: They needed people at that time, huh?

Curtin: Yeah. But my brother went in as soon as we harvested, in the fall in October, I guess, finished harvesting the corn. He notified the draft board that he was available. He had to appear before the draft board. This was typical of how things happened then.

There were three guys on the draft board, and one of them, Dad knew real well. He asked Bill, he said, "Does your dad know you're doing this?" He said, "Yeah, and he said it's all right." He said, "Okay. You report next week." (both laugh)

DePue: And Bill knew that if he was lying about that, he'd find out about it.

Curtin: Yeah. He was determined. He wanted to go. So, that was probably October or November of '44.

DePue: Your mother's family had been in the country for a long, long time, but I'm assuming she was 100% German?

Curtin: No. No, her grandmother... Let's see, her mother was Irish. Her father was... Well, let's see.

DePue: You're taking out some notes here.

Curtin: Yeah. Her grandfather was Benedict Kaltenbach that came from Germany in 1842.

DePue: Oh, even before the Civil War.

Curtin: Yes. Then Mom's mother was born in Ireland. Oh, that was her grandmother that was born in Ireland. But there was a German-Irish connection there.

DePue: So, that kind of makes my question moot. They'd been in this country for 100 years by that time.

Curtin: Yeah. I told you the year he came. He was born in 1826 in Germany and came to U.S. in 1842. And then, in 1870, he bought the 160 acres that Mom grew up on.

DePue: Let's talk about your high school years, then. You've kind of talked about it a little bit already, but did you and your brothers get involved in some of the extracurricular activities?

Curtin: Yeah, we were. We were in plays, and they had dances once in a while. Bill played football his senior year. Leo was in track. I was in track, ran the mile and the half-mile. And we went to basketball games, even though we didn't have very much of an interest in basketball, at that time. And there were other things went on.

DePue: This was in Stonington?

Curtin: Yes.

DePue: Five miles away, you said.

Curtin: Yes.

DePue: How big was Stonington at the time?

Curtin: About twelve hundred.

DePue: Were there just as many farm kids going to Stonington high school as there were city kids?

Curtin: Yes, I believe it'd be about fifty-fifty.

DePue: So, how many were in your high school class?

Curtin: About thirty-two.

DePue: Well, this doesn't have anything to do with that timeframe, but I'm curious if Stonington still has a high school.

Curtin: No, they don't, but they merged, annexed to Taylorville. They still have the K [kindergarten] through five.

DePue: Did you have any jobs, other than working on the farm? I'm sure that kept you very busy.

Curtin: Well, I never worked away from home. Bill shucked corn, but I never did that. By high school age, I was bucking bales, but not for other people. It was always in the family.

DePue: What did you think you wanted to do then, as you're going to graduate in May of '43, is that right?

Curtin: May of '43, yeah.

DePue: So, this is in the height of World War II. What did you think you wanted to do with your life at that point?

Curtin: I was happy farming. I really thought that was what I wanted to do. I never felt any desire to go to college, and there wasn't an opportunity to go to college at that time.



Larry Curtin's Stonington High School graduation picture, 1943. (Patrons desiring to use this photograph should contact the ALPL Audio-Visual Curator.)

When the war ended, I still didn't have a desire to go to college. I liked farming that well.

DePue: So, you were more than happy to go back and work on the family farm?

Curtin: Yes.

DePue: Was there some understanding that you had with your dad about what would happen with the farm, after he was ready to hand it over?

Curtin: No, there was never any discussion about that. It was a family operation, and we just did what we needed to do. I never remember hearing a conversation between him and my mom about that.

DePue: So, I'm assuming, then, following graduation, you just went back, and now you can work fulltime on the farm.

Curtin: Well, I was almost working fulltime before. (both laugh) But, yes, two years later... Maybe you aren't at that point yet.

DePue: Go ahead.

Curtin: In 1946, which would have been three years after I graduated, I kept thinking I wanted to be a Catholic priest. There were a lot of things going on at that time. I mean, as far as what different ones in my family were doing, but I had that kind of urge and didn't know whether I wanted to do it or not or whether it was my thing. So, I talked to a Catholic priest, the local one. He had me talk to another one. Finally, after a few meetings, they said, "Well, you need to try it, and you can always leave." So, I went to the seminary for one semester in January of '47, I think.

DePue: That's what's in the book.

Curtin: Okay, good. I took a years' worth of work in one semester, Greek and German and Latin and history and some other things, I don't know what. When I came home that summer, during the summer, I decided I wouldn't go back. Then I was a fulltime farmer after that.

DePue: So, a couple questions that are kind of implicit in that discussion, what led you to make the decision, that made you think you wanted to be a priest in the first place? Was there a specific moment or an event?

Curtin: No, I'd had a good Catholic upbringing, I guess. I just had a feeling that I wondered whether that was what I should do or not. But it wasn't that I was disappointed with the farm. [I] always liked the farm. So, there was something pulling me there.

DePue: But kind of hard to put your finger on it now?

- Curtin: Yeah. Um-hmm.
- DePue: How about on the reverse side? What led you to the decision, well, this isn't for me after all?
- Curtin: I just decided, just during the course of that summer, that it wasn't the life for me, that I was studying for. I had a chance to come back to the farm, so that's what I did.
- DePue: Well, one thing we haven't talked much about yet, Larry, is girls. Did you go to high school dances and those kinds of things?
- Curtin: Yes, I did.
- DePue: Were you one of those guys that just didn't want to use the telephone at home when you were inviting a girl out?
- Curtin: Yeah, yeah. I didn't date a lot during high school. I had girlfriends, some that I really liked, but I wasn't a party guy. After I got out of high school, I guess I started dating some other girls. Oh, I had a couple of special girls, when I went into the service, but didn't marry either one of those either.
- DePue: Let's go back to the end of World War II, then. Just a couple questions there. You were already out of high school, back on the farm. Do you remember V-E Day in Europe, for example?
- Curtin: Yes. I remember V-J Day better, because we were at the county fair that week. I was there showing cattle. They had a beer tent, had a band in it. I remember the band playing all night long. It was that big of a deal.
- DePue: That would have been when?
- Curtin: August of 1945, when Japan surrendered.
- DePue: When they said, "Okay, we're out of it," not the formal surrender? That was September second.
- Curtin: Yeah, probably.
- DePue: Yeah, I'm sure V-J Day was a much bigger day than the formal celebration. Well, just a few days before V-J Day, the U.S. decided to drop the atomic bomb, first on Hiroshima and then on Nagasaki. Do you remember hearing that news?
- Curtin: Yes.
- DePue: What did you think about that? I mean, first of all, what in the world's an atomic bomb, I would think.

- Curtin: Yeah. Yeah, I don't think I knew anything about it before that. What'd I think about it? Japan wasn't going to give up any other way, and it was just something, if we had it, we should use it. They were preparing their people to defend their homeland. We were losing thousands of guys on our side. My brother was over in Europe. Both brothers were in Europe, but the one that was an infantryman, there was a chance he'd get sent to Japan and to the Far East, also. Everyone was, at that time, if that's what it took to end the war, that's what we need to do.
- DePue: How about hearing the news about what the Nazis were doing in Europe, the concentration camps against the Jews and all the others that they were—
- Curtin: Yeah. You know, that took a while to soak in, how bad that was. You know a lot more about it now than we knew in the first few weeks, after they found those. Well, nobody liked Hitler. His troops were killing our troops. If the guy was shooting at you, he was your enemy.
- DePue: Pretty black-and-white world then?
- Curtin: Right. Right.
- DePue: Once you got past the process of going through the seminary... Was that a Franciscan seminary?
- Curtin: Yes.
- DePue: Did you have your mind pretty well made up that, I'm going to be a farmer for the rest of my life?
- Curtin: Yeah, and I never even gave any consideration to going to college.
- DePue: But there were kids at that age who were going to college and pursuing degrees that were related to agriculture.
- Curtin: Oh, yeah. My brother came back and continued on with his—I mean, my oldest brother did—and graduated from U of I.
- DePue: Well, maybe this is a good place to finish off today, with this question, then. June 25, 1950, you're pretty well settled into a farming career, and you hear about the news that North Korea invades South Korea. I don't know if you heard about it that day or not, but do you remember that?
- Curtin: Yes. Yeah.
- DePue: Did you think, at that time, ooh, this might have an impact on me?
- Curtin: Well, not that day, probably, but it wasn't very long until they started speeding up the draft, and I knew I was eligible.

DePue: Well, let's take it through December of 1950. What happened that year for you?

Curtin: That's when I was drafted into the Army, on December eighth, seventh or eighth.

DePue: The book said the eighth.

Curtin: Eighth. Yeah, that's right.

DePue: Interesting, so—

Curtin: That's right.

DePue: Six years, well, December 7, 1941—a day that lives in infamy—and nine years and one day later—

Curtin: Yeah, that's right.

DePue: An important day for you personally.

Curtin: Yeah. And by that time, I thought, well, my other two brothers had served their time, and it was my time. So, I just was ready to go, although it was really a hardship on my dad at the time. But there wasn't any choice for me. I mean, they drafted me.

DePue: How many acres was the family farming at that time?

Curtin: I think he had 480 acres at that time.

DePue: So, this is not your 160-acre farm anymore.

Curtin: No, unh-uh. We had a hired man. He always had a hired man when I was in service, I guess.

DePue: Well, I'm sure you're working very hard in these years. I don't know if you had a chance to pay much attention to what was going on in the war in Korea, during those months between June of 1950 and December, when you're drafted.

Curtin: Yeah, I wasn't really following it that close. I don't remember that I was.

DePue: Well, let me just kind of lay it out very quickly here, to kind of set the stage for next time. North Korea invades the South, June twenty-fifth, as we mentioned. It very, very quickly turned bad for the South Koreans. They're pushed back. Truman makes the decision, well, we can't let this stand, and gets the U.N. to declare war against them. It wasn't war. There wasn't a declaration of war.

Curtin: "We will not let this stand," or something like that.

DePue: Yeah. A decision to send the United States in there barely survived the Pusan Perimeter. That's in July and August and early September. Inchon was in September, Inchon Landings, which is the port city for Seoul. Then, they drive the North Koreans all the way up, close to the border with China and the Yalu River. Maybe about a week and a half, two weeks, before you're drafted, the Chinese come in. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese come in.

So, by the time you're drafted, this has turned into one of the biggest military disasters in American history, going on in North Korea, at the time. Both sides of the peninsula, the Chinese are driving the Americans out. They have the Chosin Reservoir on the east side, where the Marines in the Seventh Division barely get out. On the west side, it's a complete route. The Eighth Army is completely routed and pushed all the way back down south of Seoul. Now, they're in the process of moving south, when you're drafted. But, how much of that did you know about?

Curtin: I really didn't follow that much. I just thought, if it was my turn to go, I'd go.

DePue: Sometimes parents have stronger opinions about these things. Do you remember what your mom thought, for example?

Curtin: No, you know, they never said much to me. I'm sure Mom was glad to have two sons back home, alive. She went through all that, she and Dad did. But, as far as me going, why, then, we never even talked about it much.

DePue: Did you have a steady girlfriend at the time?

Curtin: Not one. I was dating. Well, they were close to being steady. There were two of them.

DePue: You're a pretty handsome, young guy at the time. (both laugh)

Curtin: Yeah. I had kind of a fatalistic attitude, I guess, about things. If something's going to happen, it's going to happen. So, that took me through basic, you know, without a lot of problems.

But I just say this, when I went overseas, I kind of broke off relationships. The letter writing kind of faded out, because I didn't know what would happen over there, and I didn't want a steady girlfriend back here, if something happened to me.

DePue: Well, we've got quite a bit to talk about next time. We're going to start with the day after you're drafted, then the start of your military career.

Curtin: Okay.

DePue: It's been a lot of fun. Thank you for allowing me to pry into your early life and learn a lot more about farming, back in those days.

Curtin: Well, thank you for your interest. I didn't know I had that interesting a life, but it's been fun reliving it.

DePue: I'm sure people will enjoy listening to it. Thank you, Larry.

Curtin: Okay.

(end of interview #1)

Interview with Lawrence Curtin

VRK-A-L-2012-009.02

Interview # 2: April 9, 2012

DePue: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, April 9, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. This afternoon, we're in the library with Larry Curtin. Good afternoon, Larry.

Curtin: Good afternoon, Mark.

DePue: This is our second session. We spent the first session talking about you growing up on the farm and what it was like on the farm, during the late Depression years and into World War II and beyond that timeframe. That was very interesting, and that certainly was justification enough for talking to you.

But I definitely wanted to hear about your experiences in the Korean War, because they're a little bit different from a lot of people's. Maybe, not necessarily, as painful as some people's experiences, but we'll let the listening public decide that. We finished off last time with just getting drafted. So, why don't you start with that, and then take us into your boot camp experience?

Curtin: Well, I was ordered to report to the train station in Taylorville, Illinois for induction, on December 8, 1950. I was supposed to be there at 4:00 in the morning, but there was a very large snowstorm that night and morning, and the train did not get there until about 8:00. We got on the train. There were about twelve or fifteen from our Christian County that were going at the same time. We got on the train. We went to St. Louis. We debarked there. We were taken to some federal building and sworn in. Then we were put back on a bus and went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and got in there that evening. That began my basic training. Of course, we were processed for a few days. They gave us aptitude tests and other kinds of tests and shots. So then, I was assigned to a barracks. It was called the 68th AAA Tank Battalion, I believe. But anyhow, we were a training company. There were four barracks, or companies, in that battalion.

DePue: AAA, Anti-Aircraft Artillery?



Several basic training buddies gather for a picture. L-R: unknown, "Whitey" Liewinski, Larry Curtin, Spike Spears, Metzger and Schuerer.

Curtin: Anti-Aircraft, but that was just in name only. We were all being trained for the infantry.

DePue: Do you remember them telling you anything about—you took that aptitude test—what you had a good aptitude for?

Curtin: No. We just answered all the questions, and I don't know. They were all kinds of different questions. I don't know whether I failed or passed or what. (laughs) That didn't make any difference. They still trained me to be an infantryman.

DePue: Well, that's because, in December 1950, January of 1951, that's what they needed.

Curtin: Yes, right.

DePue: How much did you know about what was going on in Korea at the time?

Curtin: You know, we didn't know a whole lot. We just knew that they needed bodies. We'd read in the papers about the armed forces. By that time, I believe, they were up to the Yalu River, weren't they? Or close to it. But that's about all I knew about it. I knew I was being trained as an infantryman.

We had about thirteen weeks, I think, of training like that, where we marched, you know, learned all the basic Army routine and marched out to firing ranges, pretty long walks, or hikes, lots of mornings. It was all wintertime, and it was a very cold winter. Reveille came early and got you out there, before you had breakfast, lined you up and made sure everybody was out. By daylight, we'd be hiking out to the firing ranges. It was just the mundane, infantry training that everybody had to do the same thing. Do it, not complain.

DePue: Is that how you described it when you wrote home, that, oh, this is just mundane training?

Curtin: Well, I didn't call it mundane. It was basic training. Of course, I had two brothers that knew for sure. They had been in the service before me, during World War II. But it was a hard winter. It was cold, and really, basic training is very tough.

DePue: Do you remember any of your drill sergeants?

Curtin: No. They were so short on help then that our squad... Well, our company's acting sergeant was a new inductee, just like we were. He was from the same county I was from, but they made him acting sergeant. Our lieutenant was an Army regular, who was our company commander. He was a lieutenant. But a lot of our training was done by pretty inexperienced, acting sergeants.

DePue: There weren't some World War II crusty, old veterans who were training you?

Curtin: Only... Oh, well, yeah, we did have one master sergeant that... I never got to know him personally, but he was a—

DePue: Well, I don't think you're supposed to get to know him personally at boot camp.

Curtin: No. In fact, you didn't want to get to know him personally. The less you saw of him, the better. (both laugh)

DePue: Part of my curiosity...I'm always interested to hear people's basic training stories, but you were going through basic training at a time when the United States Army was having one of its most serious, if not its most serious, defeats ever. I mean, maybe the early days in the Philippines could compare, but you had the entire Eighth Army on the west side, and Tenth Corps on the east side of the Korean Peninsula.

Like you said, they got all the way up to Yalu River. And then, right after Thanksgiving, the bottom drops out. The Chinese come in, in hundreds of thousands, and it is just ugly, what's happening to the United States Army at the time. So, that's my interest, to how much you guys were aware of that and what they were telling you officially about what was going on.

Curtin: You know, they weren't really telling us much, and if we had TV, we didn't have time to watch it. We didn't get newspapers to read. We were aware of what was going on, but their emphasis was on training us to be soldiers.

But I do remember, now that you mention that, that we had several fellows who had been in World War II and were discharged. They were in the inactive reserves, and they were called back in. They were in charge of a lot of our classroom work that we had. We just did our thing. I mean, basic training is so demanding that you just...It's all training, from morning until night.

I do remember that we'd have a class, like once a week. It'd be an hour-long session, where they would tell us about current events. That was to keep us up-to-date, I guess. I don't remember much about what they said, but I do remember that that instructor was one of those who was called back into service. He had been out and was called back. Otherwise, it was just rough training. It was all training.

DePue: Did you have an opportunity to perform KP [Kitchen Police]?

Curtin: Oh, yes, quite a few times. That started about 5:00 in the morning. That was not a pleasant experience. I'd rather be out training on the ranges than doing KP. You get a lot of that. In fact, that's why you didn't want to stay on the base on the weekend, if you didn't have to, because you'd get called out for KP then. But I had my share of KP during basic. Then, after that, when I didn't have to do KP, I thought I was pretty lucky.

DePue: Was growing up on the farm, being a farm kid, knowing how to do chores and that kind of hard work, was that helpful going through basic?

Curtin: I think it was, yes. It was noticeable that the guys that didn't come from the farm had a harder time adapting to basic training.

DePue: Thinking back on it now and knowing what was going on in Korea at the time, do you think that the Army was trying to kind of play down what was happening to it in Korea?

Curtin: I never felt like that. I think they were just so determined to get us trained right and get us over there.

DePue: Did the fact that there was a shooting war going on help focus your attention?

Curtin: Well, yeah, when we were on bivouac, why, I tried to learn all the evasive tactics and things.



Larry Curtin and his unit are ready to go on a speed march during the 9th week of basic training at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri in early 1951. They carried horseshoe rolls on their shoulders.

DePue: Did you feel like they did a good job of teaching you basic infantry skills?

Curtin: Yes, I think so.

DePue: Not that you're going to have too much chance to use some of those skills later on, what was your follow-on schooling?

Curtin: Follow-up schooling?

DePue: After you got done with basic.

Curtin: Yeah. That's when I got to go to leadership school. There's an interesting story about that. My squad leader was a fellow from Chicago who came into my barracks one night, about, oh, the eighth or ninth week of training, and he said, "Curtin, they had me on a list to go to leadership school," and he said, "I don't want to go to school, so I just put your name on there."

I thought, well, that's all right. So, that's how I got to go to leadership school. He went overseas, and he died over there. I don't know what outfit he was with, but I heard that he got killed over there. His name is on the monument, the war memorial, Korean War Memorial, out here at the Oak Ridge Cemetery.

DePue: That's the first experience of the fates of war, huh?

Curtin: Yes. You mentioned KP. That was when I found out how nice it was not to have to be on KP, when we got into leadership school. We didn't have to do something like that.

DePue: When you say leadership school, what kind of leadership role are we talking about there?

Curtin: Well, we had classes every day, five days a week, and they were on leadership skills, handling troops. We didn't actually practice handling troops. It was practically all classwork.

DePue: But I'm assuming this isn't for officer training. This is to be an NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer]?

Curtin: Yeah, the potential for being an NCO.

DePue: Does that mean it didn't necessarily translate into getting promoted earlier?

Curtin: I don't think so. What they trained us for, we were only in leadership school, in classwork, for one month. Then, the second month of leadership school, we were sent out to training companies at Fort Leonard Wood, and we helped train new troops. That's where we were probably tested the most, on what we could do.

DePue: Did you go through basic and this other training as an integrated unit?



Private Larry Curtin at Ft. Leonard Wood's 'Leadership School' in April 1951.

Curtin: Yes, until I was sent out, on the second month of leadership school. Then I was assigned to an all-black company, or battalion—

DePue: Platoon?

Curtin: Platoon. Platoon. That's the word I wanted. Two-story barracks, that was a platoon, wasn't it?

DePue: There would probably be about twenty to thirty people on a floor?

Curtin: Yes. Oh, at least. There may have been fifty people on the floor.

DePue: It might have been a company barrack then.

Curtin: Okay. Because there were two floors. I was given a room to live in, up there. I was to help a sergeant with the training of that platoon. We marched out. I was in charge of the group when we were marching out to all the firing ranges. The sergeant wasn't around very much, it seemed like. When we were marching out to the ranges, why, I was always in charge of them.

They had me take details out to work on. I remember working on some sidewalks somewhere, and they told me I had to take about ten troops out, across to the other side of the camp, to carry back some telephone poles to outline the parking lot. I thought, gosh, that's a long ways to carry telephone poles.

So, I went into the orderly room and saw the captain, and I complained to him a little bit. He said, "Curtin, if you can overwork those troops, you're a better man than I am." I said, "Yes, sir," and I walked out. (both laugh) So that's what we did.

DePue: Well, I'm assuming that, when you grew up, that you had very few, if any, experiences with blacks.

Curtin: Right.

DePue: So, tell me your impressions, working with an entirely black platoon or company, at the time.

Curtin: It didn't bother me. I figured they're people like the rest of us. I was assigned the job of training them. The sergeant that I was under had a more difficult time with it than I did, but I told him I'd do anything he wanted me to do. We got along pretty well. That's where I learned to use a lot of discipline on the troops. They were a little bit of a challenge sometimes.

DePue: What was the nature of the discipline?

Curtin: At night, when lights went out, why, they'd start out kind of low talking and everything. Then, it'd get louder and louder and louder. The worst problem I had was one night when I'd go out of my room, and I'd call out and go down the middle of the barracks and say, "Lights are out. The barracks is to be quiet." Go back into my room, and then a little bit, why, it was noisy again. So, about the third time I went out, in a very loud voice, I told them, if the barracks didn't quiet down, we were going to have a GI party that night, to clean the barracks. And, if they didn't believe that, they could go over and ask the captain. And that was the end of the problem. (laughs)

DePue: You called their bluff then. You said the other NCO—I take it, a more experienced soldier—had some more problems with it than you did?

Curtin: He was from the South, I think, and I think that's why he had more of a problem.

DePue: When you say a problem, what do you mean?

Curtin: Well, he was really down. He was really disappointed that he had a barracks full of black troops. He really was having a hard time with it. I told him I'd do whatever he told me to do. I'd do my part. I really never saw him very much after that. I don't know.

DePue: Did you ever see any experiences where he was derogatory or mistreating the soldiers?

Curtin: No, I did not.

DePue: Well, that's quite an interesting experience to start with. You haven't even gotten close to combat, have you?

Curtin: No. (laughs)

DePue: What happened after that experience?

Curtin: After I finished leadership school?

DePue: Yeah. Did you get any leave, any time during it?

Curtin: Yeah, then I got two weeks' leave. I already had my orders that I was to report to Chicago and go overseas. FECOM, they called it, Far East Command. So, I was home for two weeks, and then, I guess I had my ticket on the train.

I got on the train in Decatur, went to Chicago. Then, when they assembled a group of us there, they put us on a train for the West Coast. It was a regular passenger train, but we had our own car for our group of military guys. It was about a two and a half day ride to Seattle, Washington, my first long train ride.

I got to Seattle, Washington, to Fort Lawton. I was there about ten days, I'd say. Really didn't have much to do. They would call us out every morning. They'd have a few things for people to do, and then release us for the rest of the day, until our time to get ready to get on the ship. That's where we boarded the ship, then, to go to Korea.

DePue: In your book, you mentioned you had some time to form a friendship with a couple people, as well.

Curtin: Yeah. I had met them during leadership school. It was a fellow from Chicago and one from southern Illinois. So, we had a lot of time to spend together on the train going out to Seattle. We remained good friends, except we were sent separate ways, but we always remained good friends, the rest of my life.

DePue: Tell us, then, about the actual crossing the ocean.

Curtin: I think we pulled out of port late afternoon, and the first night, it was—

DePue: This is June twenty-ninth, according to the book here.

Curtin: Okay. It was very nice sailing. We saw the sun go down.

DePue: Do you remember what the ship was? What kind of ship it was?

Curtin: It was called a liberty ship that was built during World War II to haul troops.

DePue: Most people, when they describe it, they don't talk about it being a nice, comfortable trip.

Curtin: No. It's a rather small ship for an ocean crossing. It didn't handle the Pacific Ocean very well. The next morning, after we left port, why, we were out in the ocean and hitting the high waves. It was so rough that we only got two meals a day on that ship, and we couldn't keep that down the first two days. After that, we kind of got used to it, but it was a rough ride going over.

It was a thirteen-day trip, I believe, and about halfway through that, we docked at Adak, Alaska. They took us off the ship and took us on a hike. Within a couple of hours, we were back on the ship again, and then went from there to Yokohama, Japan.

DePue: What was the purpose of the hike?

Curtin: Just to stretch our legs, I think, and exercise.

DePue: Tell me, Larry, were you happy to have your feet on ground when you got up to Alaska?

- Curtin: Yes. Interesting, that was in July, and there were some snowflakes in the air, while on our hike, I remember. But, yeah, we were glad to get off and hike.
- DePue: Had you decided, by that time, you were thankful you weren't in the Navy?
- Curtin: Well, I never thought about it that way, but one of these two fellows I just mentioned had been in the Merchant Marines, towards the end of World War II, and he never got seasick. He had a lot of fun watching the rest of us. (both laugh) Something about it...I guess you do it the first time, anyhow. He didn't go through that with us.
- DePue: What happens after Yokohama, then?
- Curtin: Yokohama, I remember exactly the date we landed there. It was Friday, the thirteenth. If you were superstitious, why, that would have been a bad day. But I wasn't that superstitious. We docked early morning there. They put us on a train, took us down to Camp Drake, where we processed. They always called it processing, whatever they had to do to equip us and find out what we might fit in next.
- While I was at Camp Drake, I was called out with a bunch of other guys to a room in a building. They started telling us about cook and baker school and cleric school that we might be eligible to go to. About midway through the presentation, the officer in charge stopped and went out for a while and came back in and said, "You guys have all been to school back in the States, so," he said, "that means you're not eligible to do anything else but be an infantryman, until you get to your final destination." So, that ended that chance.
- DePue: Were you thinking that maybe you were going to take an opportunity there?
- Curtin: Well, I would take an opportunity like that.
- DePue: As a cook or as a clerk?
- Curtin: Oh, I don't know. Yeah, I'd probably even do that, rather than go to Korea. (laughs)
- DePue: Well, Larry, I'm getting the impression that you weren't too excited about being an infantryman in Korea.
- Curtin: Who would be? That wasn't my life ambition, to be...(laughs) But I was just taking it a day at a time. I figured, you know, when you're in the Army, why, you aren't always your own boss. You do what they tell you. That's the easiest way to get by, is do what they tell you.
- DePue: When you got drafted, how long was your term of service?

Curtin: I think it was designated as eighteen months.

DePue: Eighteen months? That short?

Curtin: Year and a half, yes. I think that was designated from the beginning, I believe.

DePue: Where to after Camp Drake?

Curtin: Then they put us on a train. Of course, we had our rifles. We had zeroed in our rifles on—what do you call that? Shooting range—and had all our equipment or our duffel bag and everything to go overseas, to go on to Korea. So, they put us on a train. We were on that overnight, going down to Sasebo in southern Japan. We did a little more processing down there. I can't remember what else they did.

Then they put us on a small boat, almost like a fishing boat or a ferry, I guess. It'd be more like a ferryboat. We went from Sasebo across to Pusan, and



Larry and fellow replacements wait in a chow line at the Replacement Depot in Sasebo, Japan, before being shipped to South Korea. 1951

that was an overnight ride. We got

into Pusan Harbor in the early morning. It was so foggy they couldn't dock, so we didn't get off until about 9:00. They gave us breakfast there, a hot breakfast.

Then they put us on a train, an old train, pulled by a steam engine. The train had wooden bunks in it and fifty-caliber machinegun holes in the sides of it. I can't forget that. So, you knew things were getting tougher. Then that was another overnight ride, from Pusan up to Chorwon, which was up fairly close to the front lines. That was about 10:00 the next morning. The train stopped, let us all off.

The only thing that you could recognize, there was a sign that just had three words on it, "This was Chorwon." We waited about an hour for trucks to come and pick us up. They took us back to the Third Infantry replacement depot. That was my home for a few days. There, we knew that the next move

was. A truck would back up there, and we'd get on it and go up to the front, as an infantryman. We all had our rifles.

DePue: Before you get too much farther, this all sounds like the typical military deal. You get to sit around and wait, and then suddenly had to rush through the next activity, until you had to sit around and wait again.

Curtin: And then riding the truck for an hour, maybe, in the back of a truck. Yeah.

DePue: Sitting on a train—

Curtin: Yeah. When we got off the train at Chorwon, I remember laying our bags down on the ground. We sat down there. Some of us took naps, even, because you knew somebody was going to come pretty soon and tell you what to do.

DePue: Here you are, a kid who's grown up in the Depression, hard times, on a farm, in the middle of Illinois, great farmland, but it's still hard times. You go through this military training. You get over and you see Japan, just five years after the end of the war, and then you get to Korea. I want your impressions of what you remember, those initial impressions about Japan, and then the initial impressions about Korea.

Curtin: Japan, there were still signs of the war damage. I do remember now that they did take us in a bus around to see different parts of Tokyo. There was still a lot of signs of war damage.

One of the most memorable things was on the side of this, like a three-story brick building, was a painted map of the United States. They had it colored in, to indicate how much of the United States they had done damage to, I guess. They surely didn't believe they had occupied it. But they had the western states, from California and Oregon and Washington, west, a couple of states. That was a different color. That was supposed to be the one that they had an influence in. I don't know whether they caused some forest fires or anything, but I do know, and I'll back up on this a little bit.

When we were up at Seattle, these two buddies of mine and I rented a car for the weekend and went to visit his sister, one of the fellow's sisters. Of course, that was in a civilian area, around Puget Sound. Of course, GIs usually end up in bars. We heard stories about how they had volunteers patrolling Puget Sound coastline, during World War II. They were that worried about invasions.

Well, back to Tokyo, this was propaganda, painted on the wall, how they thought they were winning the war, I guess. Also, they took us and showed us equipment that they were bringing back from islands around Japan, U.S. Army equipment, trucks, et cetera, that they were repairing them and everything, and putting them back in condition, so they could be used in Korea.

So then, as we went down through Japan, there were kids running out to the railroad crossings, as we went through cities, because they were so used to having GIs throwing candy out the windows, candy and gum. The old train had windows you could roll down, and the cinders from the locomotive came in through the windows once in a while. So, that took us down, through Japan, and then you wanted to know my impressions.

DePue: Yeah. The countryside in Japan, was that similar to what you remember growing up in Illinois?

Curtin: Oh, no. No. They had rice paddies and mountains and little fields on the edges of mountains, terraced fields. It was entirely different.

DePue: Did it look prosperous, though?

Curtin: It looked like they were recovering from the war, all right. The cities, they were beginning to be prosperous. I remember the people in Yokohama, as we marched to our train there. I remember seeing these people on the streets, pretty well dressed. But that was the first time I had seen people going to work, wearing masks. I assume, if they had a bad cold or a disease or something, they wore a mask, because it was a heavy population. That was the first time I had seen that.

DePue: Let's get you to Korea, then. Your impressions—

Curtin: Okay, Korea. Well, of course, we got on the train, and then we went all the way up to Chorwon, about the same thing there, just rice paddies and hills and mountains and trees. It was an overnight ride, of course, and so we didn't see a lot. But, by the time we got closer to the thirty-eighth parallel, cities were bombed.

So, a few days later, when I went through Seoul, it was like the scenes you saw in magazines about the wreckage, the bombing in World War II, in cities in Germany. Buildings were bombed, bombed-out. But the farmers were still working the rice paddies.

DePue: Did you see any machinery in those fields?

Curtin: Near our replacement camp was the first time I had seen an oxen pulling the plow. Never saw a tractor, not even a garden tractor, but there was a guy driving some oxen, pulling the plow. That was about the most I saw of the power they used, was the oxen. That was the only thing I saw, was oxen power or hand. Everything else was done by hand. If they had a lot of digging to do by hand...I saw three guys. They had two ropes tied to a shovel, one guy on each rope and one guy on the shovel handle. That was the way they turned over the ground.

DePue: Just trying to visualize it. That's weird.

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: Fair to say, it was a little bit more primitive than what you grew up with?

Curtin: Than anything I'd ever seen before. (both laugh)

DePue: This is at a time when the peace talks just got started. About the time you got there, they were just getting started. Were you aware of that at all?

Curtin: Yeah, we heard that on the ship, going over, that peace talks had started.

DePue: In your mind, you're hearing peace talks started. What did you think?

Curtin: Well, that cheered us up a little bit, but we never spent much time talking about it. Those things always take a long time.

DePue: Okay, so that was the attitude, even back then?

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: That it was going to be a while?

Curtin: Well, I never heard anybody say a long time, but we knew, or I knew, that they had to go through all kinds of maneuvers.

DePue: You're at Chorwon. You're there. What happens after that?

Curtin: Then we get on trucks, and they take us to the repo depot, to the replacement camp, which we always called repo depot. We were there, and that was kind of a nice, relaxing place. They played music over the loudspeakers and made announcements once in a while and fed us good.

I think I'd only been there a day, when they called my name out, along with twenty others. We went up to the supply tent, and this corporal was telling us about this new class they were assembling, for a signal school, training school, Third Signal Company training school. It was a six-week school, he told us, where you learned how to use radios. I thought, that sounds pretty good to me, so I signed



L.- R. Schenk, Larry Curtin and R. Elzy at the 3rd Division's Signal School near Seoul. An open well in the background provided water for bathing, shaving, and "beer cooling." August 1951

up for it.

So then, a few days later, got on another truck, and they took us to this old, bombed-out high school building, where they were going to have the six-week training school.

DePue: What was it that made them decide to call you out in the first place? Did they go back to those tests that you had, when you first got in?

Curtin: Well, some... Yeah, that's what I always assumed. It was to test all your records. They picked out the ones they thought might be most qualified, I guess. I don't know. I hope it was picking out the ones that were most qualified. But they didn't have to say very much to me to make me want to go.

My next move was going to be getting on the back of that truck, with my rifle, and going up to the front. You know, you've got to look after yourself, too. So, if you get a chance to go to school, why, you go to school. (laughs)

DePue: Where was the school?

Curtin: It was near the capital city of Seoul. But it was out in the country. It was also near Seoul University. That was about a quarter of a mile or a half a mile away. So, it was probably in what they would call suburbs of Seoul. It's a pretty good-sized building. It had a school building and a building where we slept. I wouldn't be surprised if it was a dormitory for school.



This building in Seoul, Korea was used by the 3rd Infantry Division during the war. It has been part of Seoul University.

There, we started that school, started going to classes. We had classes every morning after breakfast, through the day, in a regular school room. We were learning Morse code and voice communications and how to work on radios.

That was, like, August, and the mosquitoes were so bad, I remember we had mosquito nets over our cots. You kept them closed. I don't know if we went to school seven days a week or not. It seemed like we had one day off. Had a latrine that had an eighteen-holer latrine, under a separate tent. (laughs)

DePue: For some reason, that's memorable to you.

Curtin: That is memorable, because there was a lot of GIs, they called it, at that time. It was hot summer weather, dysentery.

DePue: GIs? The GIs?

Curtin: Yeah, the GIs.

DePue: Do you know what the GI stood for? GIs get dysentery so often that that's the name it got?

Curtin: I guess. That's what they called it. Yeah, when it went through a company, you know, it went through bad.

DePue: Okay, Larry, were you one of them?

Curtin: Yes, I was. So, that's why I remember. (both laugh)

DePue: Gosh, I don't remember that being in the book. Okay. Good school?

Curtin: Yes, it was. They had a good instructor. He was a sergeant. We, I think, learned everything we were supposed to learn. But the thing I learned that stands out the most in that one... Of course, we had to learn the Morse code, and you had test after test on that. That's a pretty hard code to learn. The dashes and dots, you know. You had to be able to take messages down.

We only learned the basics on using the different radios that you carried on your back and handheld radios, the walkie-talkies, were pretty crude. There was a radio called Angry Nine. It stood for ANGR-9. That one was used a lot in battalions on the front, so you had to learn how to use that one and how to make minor repairs to it. But, what I remember the most was a sergeant saying, before class one day, when we were just talking, he said, "Usually the division picks the top ten in the class, in the signal class, to be at division forward. The rest of them all go out to the line companies."

I made a mental note of that. And he talked about how we had another winter coming up, about the HOs they had, the trucks with housing vans on them, that had radios in them, and how it was warm in there in the wintertime. I thought, boy, I'm going to try for that. When we finished the class, I was one of the top ten that got to go to division forward.

DePue: Did you have an understanding that, if you weren't one of the top ten and you went down to the infantry company, that you might be the guy toting a radio in the back—

Curtin: Right.

DePue: ...next to the company commander, as he's charging up the hill, the main target of the enemy?

Curtin: I didn't know who I'd be following, but I knew I'd be carrying a radio for somebody.

DePue: That you'd be a likely target?

Curtin: Yeah. Yeah, when you get up there, where the bullets are firing.

DePue: So, you must have focused your energies to do well in the school, it sounds like.

Curtin: I did. I was always a good student. I usually did what I was told to do. But, if I had a chance to better myself, why, that's what I was going to do.



Larry Curtin was assigned to the 3rd Sig Company, 3rd Infantry Division, winter of 1951-52.

DePue: I think you mentioned this already, but you were in the Third Signal Company, after the end of the training?

Curtin: Yes.

DePue: It's the Third Signal Company, because they're the signal company for the Third Infantry Division?

Curtin: Right.

DePue: Which had been in the war for a long time and gotten beaten up pretty badly, by that time.

Curtin: Yeah, unh-huh.

DePue: What happens, then, in that first day, when you actually get assigned to the company?

Curtin: First, we were taken back. Well, I remember we went by truck. I don't know whether they picked us up right there at the school or not. I think we went back to the replacement company, and then they called your name out, when your truck was there. But we rode in the back of a deuce and a half truck, towards the front lines.

We were on the truck for several hours that day. The sun started going down, and we were still going north. They were pulling the big artillery back for the night. That started to concern us a little bit, that we were still going north.

DePue: While you were watching the artillery going south?

Curtin: Yeah. (both laugh) About dark, we got to Third Signal Company headquarters. All of us got off the truck, went in a tent. Somebody put a clipboard on a cot there and said, "Sign in." Guys kind of held back, so I just walked up, signed my name. Then they assigned us cots, and then, about twenty minutes later, some fellow, one of the GIs, came over and called me out. He said, "You're assigned to our radio team that's out with the Belgians." He said, "That's the best assignment in the company." So I lucked out again.

The next day, they took me out to the Belgian unit. The Belgian battalion was assigned to the Third Infantry Division, and they were in reserve at the time. I joined a three-man team there that provided communication between the Belgian battalion and Third Division headquarters. I was out there on that job for about six weeks. We pulled radio duty every twenty-four hours.

There were four of us. We'd pull radio duty, on eight and off twenty-four, I believe it was. Really wasn't much to do, except radio checks. Well, there really wasn't very much to do on that team at that time. The other three guys that were on the team were all veterans from almost the start of the war.

They had been up to North Korea and back. They said I was their first replacement they had had.

We were out there about six weeks, providing



communication for them.

[We] Ate

with the Belgians. They prepared our food. We slept in tents. Our unit that we worked from was a little, three-quarter ton truck, with housing built on it that had a voice radio in it, a pretty good-sized voice radio. Well, a pretty good-sized radio unit that we had voice communications on, plus CW, they called it, Morse code.

We had messages, once in a while, to convey, but mostly it was radio check every hour. Of course, you never knew what was going to happen, but nothing ever happened. Then, when that Belgian unit was going back closer to

Two Belgium switchboard operators flank a ROK soldier at mealtime. Curtin's assignment in the fall of 1951, working with a Belgian infantry battalion

the front for some more training, before they went up on the front line, our job was finished, and we went back to Third Signal Company headquarters.

DePue: How did the Belgians treat you?

Curtin: Great. They seemed to like Americans real well. I was with them again later. They were a happy bunch, and they always liked to talk to us. They could talk good English. They were a nice group to be around. You felt like you were appreciated.

DePue: You mentioned that you were the first replacement this small team had seen since they'd been in the war. How were you treated as the new guy?

Curtin: Very well. They told me where I fit into the rotation. They were glad to have somebody helping pull duty. No, there was no problem there.

DePue: What happens, then, after that stint with the Belgians?

Curtin: Then I was back at Third Signal Company again. I don't really remember what we did, back at Third Signal Company, but not much, except pull guard.

DePue: You're at Division (Forward)? Is that what you said?

Curtin: Division (Forward).

DePue: So, is there a Division (Rear) as well?

Curtin: Division (Rear) was clear back at Seoul. That's where all the records were kept. Division (Forward), I don't know how far we were from the lines, from the front lines, except I got closer to them one night.

The first night I was at Signal Company—I mentioned those big guns pulling back for the night—I was put on guard duty that first night, on a two-hour guard duty, and it was pitch black, no lights in the camp, even. The big shells were going over us. You could hear the firing, and then you could hear the sound of the shell coming over. I don't know how far that was from the front, but that was my first real indoctrination, I guess you'd call it, with fairly close front line service.

DePue: It sounds like the Division Forward was typically within enemy artillery range?

Curtin: Yeah. This was why the perimeter was closely guarded at night. Gosh, each guy would only march 100 steps, about 100 steps, turn around, go back 100 steps, just keep marching back, and that closed the range. There was a perimeter all the way around that camp, but it was a pretty good-sized camp.

- DePue: Were you being told that the Chinese would infiltrate the lines occasionally, if they could?
- Curtin: We didn't get many orders. I was used to walking guard at night. They told me where I had to walk, and we had live ammo. But I wasn't given any other instructions.
- DePue: Were you ever in an enemy artillery barrage?
- Curtin: No.
- DePue: Did you guys have bunkers that you had to dig, in case you did get a—
- Curtin: No. Well, no, we had machinegun nests around the edge of the area. But no, we always slept in there, in squad tents on cots.
- DePue: What was the specific job you had? In as much detail as you can, explain what your job was. Let's start with this; what was your MOS, military specialty? I put you on the spot here, didn't I?
- Curtin: Yes, you did. I don't know what my MOS was.
- DePue: Radio telephone operator?
- Curtin: I guess. I really can't answer that question. I just did what I was told to do.
- DePue: Talk about the specific things that you did.
- Curtin: Well, like I said, I had to use a key, a telegraph key, you know, to correspond on the CW network. I don't remember whether we checked in. We had radio checks on the CW network, but I can't remember if we checked in on the voice network. I never used the voice network much, if any.
- DePue: What's CW?
- Curtin: CW is Morse code, using the telegraph key. I don't know if I knew what "CW" stood for then. I probably did, but I don't know now.
- DePue: Sorry to play stump on you here, just curious. I hadn't heard that one before, myself.
- Curtin: Hadn't you?
- DePue: No.
- Curtin: Oh. It was sure a term then. Yeah, you used it so much, you didn't think about it. You never thought about the words that it meant.

DePue: So, most of your time was spent sending and receiving messages in Morse code?

Curtin: Yeah. When I was out with that team, it was. We didn't have any other duties, except we were in the network with division and the three regiments. They checked in on the same network. After that first six weeks, out with the Belgians, I was back in camp for maybe a week.

Then they sent my team chief and I out to fill in at some other location. I don't know where it was. Then we came back. Then they put me in charge of a team a few weeks later and sent us out again with the Belgians. You asked me how the Belgians liked us, or how I liked the Belgians. I remember going down to see the movie one night, with one of my team members, and soon as some of them saw us, remembered us, why, they yelled out, "Hi! Di-vis-ion!" That was French for "division."

I had a team of my own for just about four weeks. Then I remember I was assigned to the communications tent in the Signal Company, where they had several guys with telegraph keys. If there was a message for you to send, you sent it, but I don't ever remember sending a message. We listened to the voice radio a lot at night on the transmissions, but we never had to do any of those transmissions. I was just there at a quiet time.

The front lines weren't moving much, and we were never associated with the front lines, but I was far enough up that I got the maximum number of rotation points. I got as many rotation points, four points per month, as a guy on the front lines. But I was just in a better spot.

Then, after I had been with them for several months, they took me off of that kind of work and had me monitoring transmissions. Someone was copying down all the transmissions, the voice transmissions, and I was supposed to monitor those and see if they were using the proper procedure. If they weren't, I was to go around and visit the teams and tell them, point out what they were doing wrong.

DePue: That's always a popular thing to do.

Curtin: Yeah. That wasn't my favorite thing to do, while we were at the last camp we were at, signal company camp. We were about a mile from Division (Forward) at that time, I remember, and we were up on the side of a hill.

By that time, things were so quiet they had us building sand walkways between the tents and putting up rail fences and pulling guard duty at night. Oh, I think, even while I was there, they put me and another guy in charge of making a sign for the front entrance to the camp. We had to go around, confiscate our own supplies. That was the way you had to get what you needed in the Army, if it wasn't on the supply company list.

DePue: I know you had a short stint with the Greeks, as well.

Curtin: Yes. That was another time. We were with the Greeks for a couple of weeks. It was a smaller unit than the battalion of Belgians. That was kind of a different experience. We couldn't talk to them. We couldn't converse. We didn't know their language.

I still remember them going down to the stream, along the camp, to do their...to wash up in the morning and even brush their teeth, I think. I don't know. It was kind of a dirty-looking stream, I thought. But, we had our own clean water where we were.

They were a Greek battalion, never got acquainted with any of them. We were only there about two weeks, I think.

DePue: What was it like in Korea in the winter? You talked about Fort Leonard Wood was cold. You're used to cold, coming from central Illinois.

Curtin: Um-hmm. The winter I was there was not near as cold as the previous winter. I heard old-timers talking about that cold winter in Korea, when they were up in North Korea. They didn't have enough winter clothing. Some of the guys were remarking, when we started getting winter clothing in the fall of '51, that they never had that last winter. So, we were getting better clothing. The winter was mild, about the same as Illinois. I know, from letters from home, they were getting about the same weather.

That reminds me of another part of my service, there in Third Signal Company. They set up camp in another place, along a stream. I was assigned to the power units for a few weeks, to keep these big power units going.

DePue: Are you talking about generators?

Curtin: Generators, right. We were there several weeks. I don't know where it was. I can remember going to movies there, more than I can anything. But I was taking care of power units. I guess I'd have to go back and look at my book. I remember that was the beginning of winter, and we got a little light snow, but not much. It really wasn't too bad.

DePue: Do you remember either Thanksgiving or Christmas celebrations?

Curtin: Yeah. There, I remember the snow more, I guess, because there was snow on the ground at Christmas. I remember that that is where, I guess, I was on radio duty some there. But, I remember, on Christmas Day, I was helping another guy string telephone wire over a hill. We knew we were going to have a big dinner at noon, but, when we got in for the dinner... We did have a big dinner at noon, but they told us we could have the afternoon off on Christmas day. That was the only afternoon we had off, all the time I was in Korea. Otherwise, it was seven days a week.

I'm trying to sort out my timing, here, on things now. We were at another location, and this was one of the last locations I was at. That was around Christmas. Whenever there was a mass going on, or church service, mainly, they would tell us on the loudspeaker that there would be a truck for us to ride over there.

I remember going over to this midnight mass at Division (Forward) and rode the truck over there. There was snow on the ground then, I remember. But, we never had a big snow. We had a pretty mild winter.

DePue: Can you tell me more about this job you had, with the sound truck? That's not the typical experience, when somebody thinks about combat.

Curtin: No. (laughs) They get four points for, huh? Well, the signal company had a sound truck that they used for ceremonies, like giving out awards to different soldiers. Also, they provided sound service back at the MASH hospital on Sundays when, I guess, all the doctors had a meeting, and they had somebody in talking about new surgical procedures. That's all I remember about the gathering.

Usually, two or three guys would go out with that sound truck. I only went out with them a couple times, I think.

DePue: Did you ever have any experiences with front line troops, where there might have been some misunderstanding or resentments, because they didn't view you as being front line troops or your views towards them?

Curtin: No. We just never had that kind of contact. One night, or one late afternoon, one of our radio teams had a fire in their tent. I don't know what outfit they were with, but one of the regiments. So, our signal company decided they should send a new tent out to them for the night. So, they told me to ride shotgun on the jeep that was taking out the tent.

The jeep driver is the one that's supposed to know where he's going. All I had to do was ride shotgun. We took the tent out to them, and we got lost coming back that night. He got



Larry Curtin and the unit's chief radio operator on top of their radio truck, while assigned to the Belgian infantry regiment, September 1951.

lost, and I was with him. (laughs) All we could use was the little lights, blackout lights, they called it, on the front of the jeep. He got lost. We were trying to figure out how to get back, and we were close enough, then, we saw tracer bullets going across the valley.

We met another jeep on the road and asked him where we were and how to get back. He wasn't able to tell us. He said, "I think you better just go down the road to the next outfit and stay overnight there, and go back the next morning." But the jeep driver thought he could find his way, and he found his way. That was as close as I ever got to the front lines.

DePue: Close enough, as far as you were concerned?

Curtin: That was close enough. (both laugh)

DePue: Did you ever have any injuries or cause to go to any medical units to get some care?

Curtin: The only time was, I had an abscessed tooth that was giving me a lot of pain, and I went over to the medical tent in our company. The dentist looked at it. This was just a small tent that he had his own operation in. He said the tooth needed to be pulled, and he said, "I think you ought to go back to MASH hospital to get it pulled." He said, "They've got a lot better equipment back there than I've got."

Now, I kind of forget what all I went through. But then, you just winged it. So, I got a ride on a jeep that was going back to MASH hospital. It was late afternoon when I got there, had to stay overnight. I, of course, had my duffel bag with me, slept on the floor that night. I didn't actually see troops being brought in, but that's where they brought them in, wounded troops.

The next morning, I went to the dentist, and apparently I turned white or something. I don't know. He looked at me, and he said, "I can't work on you here." He said, "You'll just have to go back to your outfit." Of course, an officer that was a doctor, you didn't talk back to him very much at all. So, I said okay. He was pretty firm about it, that I had to go back. Maybe he had something bigger to do. I don't know.

I picked up my duffel bag, went outside, started asking around, different jeeps, which way they were going, told them where I had to go. And so, I got a ride with somebody, back to my outfit. I went over to the medic the next day and told him my story.

He said, "Okay, we'll just pull it here." So, he pulled it, and I was okay. That was the only medical problem I had.

DePue: Did you receive any awards while you were there?

Curtin: No.

DePue: Just a standard good conduct medal?

Curtin: Well, I only had two ribbons, and one of them was FECOM, I think, and the other one was related to Far East Command.

DePue: The standard, service in Korea, medal, basically.

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: Did you work with some blacks in the unit that you were with, some African American troops?

Curtin: No. I don't remember that we had any in our outfit. We had a black in our leadership school. We were pretty good friends, and he rode over with us on the ship. One of my buddies, that was a good friend of his, was giving him a hard time, all the way over there, but it was always good-natured. But, no—

DePue: A good-natured hard time?

Curtin: Well, yeah.

DePue: Were there some racial overtones to what was going on?

Curtin: Well, between the two of them, not bad racial overtones, no. We never had much association with the blacks then. When I was in this black platoon, I was told that that was the first time they had had a black platoon in a white company. That was 1951.

DePue: Of course, Truman had integrated the military in '48, but these things don't happen overnight. They took some time. By about the time you were there, most of that, whatever black units there were, they were being integrated into the rest of the force.

Curtin: But, see, at that time, they didn't even have them in the same barracks with the whites. We had a black platoon, a whole barracks of blacks, and then we had three white platoons. That was as close as they were to integration, by that time.

DePue: What did you think about your fellow soldiers that you were serving with?

Curtin: Well, there were differences in personalities. Most of us were doing our job, but a lot of different personalities. When you live ten to a tent, why, you get to know them pretty well.

DePue: Get to know how to get along with each other?

Curtin: Yeah.

- DePue: How about your impressions of the noncommissioned officers? I would assume, once you got to theater, a lot of these guys were veterans. They had seen action, not only in Korea, but perhaps in World War II?
- Curtin: Well, if we had any that were World War II veterans over there, by the time we got over there, I didn't know it. When you get overseas, why, everybody's nicer to everybody else. Back in the States, the NCOs can be pretty rough, you know, but when you get overseas, guy's carrying a loaded rifle, why, they're a lot nicer to you.
- DePue: Do you think that they were professional and competent in what they were doing?
- Curtin: Yes. Um-hmm.
- DePue: How about the officers you dealt with?
- Curtin: I never dealt with them very much, but they were good officers, as far as I could tell.
- DePue: Was there a reason you didn't deal with them much, because I would think—
- Curtin: Just because a private didn't have many dealings with an officer. You didn't want to have very many dealings with an officer.
- DePue: I guess my understanding would be, though, if you're working in a signal center someplace, and you're passing out information, that you're oftentimes close to or in a headquarters, where you would encounter more officers.
- Curtin: Yeah, but you just weren't around them enough. No, I never had any bad encounters with them.
- DePue: How would you describe the morale of your unit?
- Curtin: Good. You know, you always have some that provide the humor in the outfit. That kind of lightens your workday.
- DePue: Do you recall any humorous incidents?
- Curtin: (laughs) Well, we had one guy from Pennsylvania that was kind of the joker of the bunch. He'd come in at night, and he'd gripe about things. What was the line I used with him to shut him up? "What do you think about Korea as a 'whole' (hole)?" He would answer, "It sure is!" (laughs) But, by the time you got into the tent at night, everybody was glad the day was over. We all got along fine.
- DePue: So, it sounds like most of the time, you were keeping regular hours, that you were able to sleep at night, unless you were on guard duty.

Curtin: Yes. Um-hmm.

DePue: Did you have Koreans working with your unit?

Curtin: Yeah. They worked the KP tent, the mess tent, you know. We didn't have any waiting on us in our tents, but in replacement camp, I know we had Koreans that washed our clothes, though.

DePue: A lot of the units had what they called KATUSAs. Did you have any KATUSAs?

Curtin: No.

DePue: Korean Augmentees to the United States Army is what that stands for. How about the enemy you faced? Did you have enough dealings with the Chinese or the North Koreans to form any definite opinions, one way or another?

Curtin: I never had any dealings with the Chinese or North Koreans.

DePue: And again, you were happy for that?

Curtin: Yes.

DePue: And how about civilians? Did you run into Korean civilians?

Curtin: Yeah. Occasionally, we had, at the signal school, I think, they came in and sold lettuce and stuff. We usually had a boy or two around who was kind of a houseboy, you know, that would take care of things, shine shoes if you needed. We didn't need that very often.

But I remember, at replacement camp, they would come up to the fence around the replacement camp, and we'd hand clothes to them to wash.

They'd wash them, right out there in the river. It'd be Korean women. And the Koreans came and entertained us, once in a while, at the replacement camp. They'd have little stage shows and try to sing American songs in

Korean or in their version of English.



"Some of the 'Gang," read Curtin's caption of this group of Korean children, while he was stationed in South Korea, October 1951.

- DePue: I guess that, in itself, was kind of entertaining, huh?
- Curtin: Well, that was entertaining. (both laugh)
- DePue: How did you manage to keep in touch with the family?
- Curtin: I wrote home about twice a week. On that first job that I had for six weeks, pulling radio duty by myself, why, there was lots of time for letter writing, at that time. But I tried to write home twice a week.
- DePue: Was mail call a big event?
- Curtin: Yeah, it was. Well, it wasn't really a big event, like it is in the movies, but... We never missed mail call.
- DePue: Yeah, I think in the movies, it's always troops on the front lines who are getting letters.
- Curtin: Yeah.
- DePue: Tell us about the food.
- Curtin: The food was always good.
- DePue: You were getting three hot meals a day?
- Curtin: Yeah, we were, in a mess tent. Of course, an old farm boy like me, you know, I wasn't hard to please, as long as I got enough to eat. We always had enough to eat. We didn't have any fancy things, but we had enough to eat.
- DePue: Well, you're in a society where Korea is really struggling, because of the war. They were under the heel of the Japanese a long time before. My understanding is, many of the Koreans were close to starving, that they were desperate for the food. Were there people, Koreans, who would hang around and wait for your garbage? Anything like that?
- Curtin: No, no. I just remember one Korean in the garbage dump, outside the mess hall. They had a big hole dug, and they threw all their garbage out there, and then they poured gasoline on it and lit it. He almost didn't get out in time. But he wasn't searching for food, he was lighting the gasoline.
- DePue: You talked a couple times about movies. That was even part of the job description, delivering movies?
- Curtin: Well, Third Signal Company had all the movies that would be distributed in the division. So, we had access to all of them, and we had a movie almost every night, a feature movie.
- DePue: Was there a tent that was used for that?

Curtin: It was in the mess tent. There was one location where we had to watch them outside. I can't remember where it was, but it was usually in the mess tent. It was usually a good movie every night.

DePue: Do you remember any of the titles of the movies you saw, while you were over there?

Curtin: Well, Doris Day movies were very popular, at that time. Do I remember the names of them? Gosh, I don't think I remember the names of them, but any time Doris Day was in it or some of those female dancers, why, it was a popular movie.

DePue: Was she one of the pinup girls of the war?

Curtin: Yeah, she was.

DePue: Who were some of the others? Do you remember?

Curtin: I don't remember Marilyn Monroe at that time, but there was another lady that they used...Gosh. She was a dancer. I can't remember what her name was. But Doris Day was very popular then, so was Betty Grable.

DePue: It wouldn't have been Ann Miller, was it?

Curtin: But she was a favorite of mine.

DePue: Did you have any USO shows come to your area?

Curtin: We had a couple that I got to go to. One of them was a bunch of singers, dancers, musicians that I had never heard of, but I did get to go to the Danny Kaye/Monica Lewis show. That was a good one. That one...Gosh, I think half the division came to that one.



Danny Kaye & Monica Lewis's 3rd Division USO, seen from a distance. The show spent November 1951 touring Korea, often near the front lines.

DePue: Was Bob Hope visiting Korea, during the time that you were there?

Curtin: No. No, not in our area.

DePue: You mentioned that you were pretty much working seven days a week. I'm sure, most of the time that you were awake, you had something to do, but what did you do during your free time?

Curtin: Wash socks and...I'll tell you my whole story that I've told my kids a lot of times, that you got a helmet full of water, and you brushed your teeth first. Then you washed your face and took a bath. Then you washed your socks, and you always want to do it in that order. (both laugh)

But, we'd heat that water on the little stove in our tent. We lived under those conditions for quite a while. But that was better than living in the foxhole.

DePue: In the book, you talked about getting into another profession.

Curtin: Oh. Yeah, there'd always be somebody that would give haircuts, and they only had hand clippers and a comb. Those guys, they'd get to do it in the daytime, and they'd get a can of beer or something for doing it.

So, when things were going pretty slow, I thought I ought to do that. The guy who was a barber was going home. So, I gave haircuts for a couple of months, and got pretty good at it, I think. What, I tell in my book about this one fellow, who was rotating home, and he wanted me to give him a haircut. I said, "I can't give you a haircut. You're going home, where the professional barbers are." He said, "No, I want a haircut." I argued with him a while. Finally, I gave him a haircut. That was probably the best haircut I ever gave. (both laugh)

But that only lasted for a couple of months. That was when things were slowing down.

DePue: Did you guys have a beer ration? Is that what I heard you say?

Curtin: Yeah, a weekly beer ration. There'd be seven cans of beer. I think it was seven cans of beer and one can of Coke. So, that tells you the ratio of the beer drinkers. Guys that didn't drink beer would trade off their beer for Coke. But I usually drank all of my beer.

DePue: Were you a beer drinker beforehand?

Curtin: Yeah, just occasionally.

DePue: I'm trying to get the timeline here. What was the legal age in Illinois, at that time?

Curtin: It was probably eighteen.

DePue: ...legal in Illinois?

Curtin: Yeah. I never was an illegal beer drinker. No. What was I, when I was in the service? I was twenty-four, twenty-five.

DePue: So you were a little bit older by that time.

Curtin: Um-hmm. We had guys in the Army that were legal age, I imagine, but they just didn't know how to handle it. They didn't know how to limit their drinking.

One guy was a corporal and got broke back to private one night. Well, he went to the movies with us that night. It was on the other side of the stream we were in. He didn't want to walk back home, so he saw a jeep out there, and he decided to take the jeep back to his tent. He got it wound up in some barbed wire. The next morning, he was a private.

DePue: As far as you know, were the guys in the trenches, in the front lines, getting their seven days, or seven beers, as well?

Curtin: I don't know. I don't know.

DePue: That seems like that could be a little bit more dangerous mixture out there.

Curtin: Yeah. I imagine they had to wait until they got back in reserve.

DePue: Did you have a chance to get a leave or a pass, while you were there?

Curtin: Yeah, I had a three-day leave to Seoul, Korea. Then I got the five-day leave to Japan. That was about the last month I was there.

DePue: So, right at the tail end of your tour?

Curtin: Yeah.

DePue: What did you do when you went to Seoul?

Curtin: I lived by the book. I stayed at the hotel that they assigned us, and I did a lot of sightseeing in Seoul. There wasn't anything else to do. In Tokyo, we went to bars at night. There were taxis running there. We went to bars at night and did some souvenir shopping in the daytime. It was just a chance to get away.

DePue: And you said that was right towards the end of your tour?

Curtin: Yeah. Um-hmm.

DePue: Is that just how it happened to schedule itself?

Curtin: Yeah. You just do what they tell you, and they said I was to go to Tokyo. I don't know how I got there. I guess I rode a truck to an airfield. We went by plane. I know that. In fact, we were on a four-engine plane, with all of our

duffel bags. They had us all move up to the front. There were seats, down the sides, benches, but they had us all move up to the front, so the weight would be on the front, so the nose wheel wouldn't come off the ground until we took off. Then, we'd get in the back of the plane.

DePue: You don't have any memorable stories of that time in Japan?

Curtin: No, not really. I went to the USO several times, too. No.

DePue: Let's talk about bringing you home. You had mentioned before, that you guys were far enough forward in the Division (Forward) that you were earning, what, four points?

Curtin: Four points per month.

DePue: Tell us more about how the point system worked.

Curtin: You had to have thirty-six points to get to rotate home. That would be nine months. When we were approaching thirty-two points, some of us, why, they told us that we might get sent to another outfit. Then word came down that the guys who had thirty-two points could go home.

DePue: You had been there close to nine months by the time you start—

Curtin: Eight months.

DePue: ...contemplating that you're going to be going home pretty soon. I thought peace talks were going on. What had gone on with the peace talks?

Curtin: They were still going on. They were deciding which side of the table to sit on and all that stuff and what size table.

DePue: Does that mean to say that you guys were rather cynical about the prospects of the peace talks?

Curtin: Well that I always read in the papers. I was sent out with a radio team, one or two Sundays, to do dry runs, to practice for exchange of prisoners. But nothing happened while I was there.

DePue: What would you have done, if you were involved with exchanging prisoners?

Curtin: I don't know. They didn't really tell us very much, except I had to get set up to make radio communications with headquarters. Otherwise, they were all doing their thing, getting ready for it.

DePue: Were you hearing any stories, while you were there, about what was going on with American prisoners of war?

- Curtin: No, unh-uh. No, we never heard anything like that. We did get the *Stars and Stripes*, but they didn't put things like that in the *Stars and Stripes*, I don't think.
- DePue: Did you know anything about what was going on with the Chinese and North Korean prisoners in the South?
- Curtin: No. I never had any association with the prison camps.
- DePue: Well, about the time you were leaving, was about the time that there was a prison outbreak. Let me try to explain this right. In Geoje Island, which is off the southern coast of Korea—
- Curtin: Yeah.
- DePue: ...the North Korean prisoners actually took the American general prisoner, themselves, and held him hostage. There was a lot of fighting, within the prison itself, between those who were hardened Communists and wanted to go back, and those who didn't want to go back to North Korea, China, at all. You weren't hearing anything about that?
- Curtin: I might have heard about that one time, but I didn't hear much about it.
- DePue: Were you ever exposed to any of the propaganda, because, again, towards the front, there's a lot of leaflets being dropped on both sides, things like that.
- Curtin: No, no. We weren't.
- DePue: Well, then, let's talk about coming home. Tell us about that.
- Curtin: Well, it was just kind of the reverse of going over. No, not exactly. Of course, they took us back to replacement camp, and the train tracks ran right alongside the replacement camp. That's where we got on the train and rode to Inchon.

We were in a pretty crude camp there, right in the city. We were there about five days, and then, one night, they told us that we would be shipping out that night and to not go to bed. They'd be ready to ship out. About 11:00, they called us out into formation, and we marched down through the streets of Inchon to the port, where we were to get on a ship. Down at the port, of course, it was dark.

The procedure was that someone with the roster called out your last name, and you had to answer with your first name and your serial number. Then, they told you to walk on down to the beach. We loaded on landing craft and packed us in there pretty tight, but nobody minded. We were carrying our duffel bags. [They] Took us out to a ship. Got on that.

We went to Sasebo for a couple of days and processed through there, turned all of our old clothes in and took a shower and got new clothes. Then, I guess, we got on the boat from there. Yeah, I think we got on the boat from there to come home. It was a bigger boat, and it was a lot better ride coming home.

DePue: Not a liberty ship?

Curtin: Not a liberty ship, right. [We] got three meals a day and a movie at night.

DePue: What timeframe are we talking about now?

Curtin: Well, I walked down and got on the LCI, the landing craft, 2:00 in the morning, on my birthday, April fifth. So, it was after that. That was a good birthday present.

DePue: Nice way to remember the date.

Curtin: Yes.

DePue: Did you make landing in Seattle, then?

Curtin: And came to Seattle through, the



same camp, and took the same train ride, back across the northern states to Chicago, to Fort Sheridan.

Sergeant Curtin sailed back to the US from Japan via Alaska to Seattle, Washington aboard the U.S. Naval Ship Frederick Funston. The ship was his home for 13 days before arriving in Seattle on March 23, 1952.

DePue: Do you remember the reunion with the family?

Curtin: I rode home with somebody else from Fort Sheridan, and, no, there wasn't much about the reunion with the family. Our family was a little reserved, maybe. (laughs) But I was glad to be back home, and they were glad to see me home.

I rode back, with this family from Stonington. A mom and dad came up to get a buddy, a guy that I knew, and so, he asked me if I wanted a ride home with them, and I said, yeah. So, they dropped me off at the farm. I really

can't remember anything special about that, except it was nice to be home, to get Mom's cooking.

DePue: You weren't quite done with your military career, though, were you?

Curtin: No, I had about three more months to go.

DePue: What did you do for those three months? How did the Army keep you busy?

Curtin: Well, they didn't keep me very busy. But they assigned me to a AAA (anti-aircraft) battalion on the outskirts of Chicago, in the suburb of Park Ridge.

You have to remember, this was 1952. They were still worrying about Russia and the atomic bomb. So, they had about six sites, I was told, around Chicago, where they had the anti-aircraft guns set up. This was out in Park Ridge, in an open field, with houses all around it. They had sandbags around the gun positions, around the edge, the machinegun positions. We had some anti-aircraft guns, and they had a big communications trailer and, of course, tents for us to sleep in.

This unit was based in Fort Sheridan, but they went up to camp in Wisconsin for two weeks, and they didn't send me up there. They sent me right out to this unit that only had five guys on it at the time. I don't know how you defended Chicago with that, but—

DePue: What kind of artillery piece was it?

Curtin: Well, I just called it an anti-aircraft artillery. I don't know what you call it.

DePue: Do you know the caliber or the nomenclature of it?

Curtin: I don't.

DePue: Because, I know, later on, they had Nike Herc missiles in those sites.

Curtin: Yeah, and they didn't have them when I was there.

DePue: That came much later, then?

Curtin: Yeah. They had to have communications with downtown. I was always a pretty good reader—to read the manuals and everything,—so I helped them set that up. When we got it up, I didn't think we did anything special. **But**, when we got it up, a GI said, "That's the first time we've really been able to contact downtown." (both laugh)

DePue: Maybe they never wanted to contact downtown beforehand.

Curtin: They had radar there. I remember that.

DePue: Anything else memorable about those last two or three months in the Army?

Curtin: That's when I met my future wife. I had met her back at Fort Sheridan, before I was sent out to the anti-aircraft site, because they had dances every night there, and they had bands.

My wife was one of a group of telephone employees, AT&T employees that came out to entertain the troops one night. I danced with her, and we liked each other, so we kept up... Well, I dated her, then, while I was there for three months. Let's see. But what we did on the site there was...

I just remember, we had an inspection one day. They had an exercise one day where they sent me, with another guy, with a message, to a general or an officer, over in another outfit. Then, we found out later, they had girls that were actually acting as spies. I mean, these girls were friendly with the troops. Then it got back to the headquarters that the troops had been telling things they weren't supposed to tell. (both laugh) But I never got caught on that one.

DePue: Was your future wife one of those girls?

Curtin: No, she wasn't. (laughs)

DePue: I'm assuming also that she wasn't a farm girl.

Curtin: No, she wasn't a farm girl. She lived in Oak Park, which was a nice suburb. She worked for the telephone company, the time when they were just switching over to dial phones in

Chicago. That was about the time period then.



Civilian at last! November 1952. Pat and I on Euclid in Oak Park, IL

So, we went to musicals during the summertime. At that time, they had summer theatrical productions around in different suburbs of Chicago. They put up a tent, and maybe semi-professional actors, that was their summer income. We both liked to go to those, and we went to those a lot. Servicemen were always let in free.

September the eighth was when I was supposed to get out of the Army. I remember the inspection real well that we had. Some of the soldiers were kind of sloppy there. They hadn't been overseas. I was maybe the only one that had been overseas. But we had an inspection, and this made quite an impression on the captain. That morning, when I was getting ready—we all had to be dressed up in uniform and everything—I had a carbine rifle, and I

just happened to remember, back to basic days, when the inspector would ask you the serial number of your rifle. So, I just memorized it.

When the inspector got to me in rank, why, he thought he'd really get me, I guess, because I was a sergeant. He says, "Soldier, what's your rifle number?" I rattled it off to him, and he handed it right back to me. The captain, when he called the troops together after the inspection, he mentioned that. (both laugh) It made quite an impression on him.

DePue: That's interesting.

Curtin: But I think they were going to get a bad report on their inspection, regardless of what they did.

DePue: By the time you were ready to end your military career, had you decided that... What was your future wife's name?

Curtin: Pat Biehle. B-i-e-h-l-e.

DePue: B-i-e-h-l-e. Pat or Patty?

Curtin: Pat.

DePue: Had you decided that Pat was the girl for you?

Curtin: Well, I really liked her, and I knew I wanted to go back up and see her again. I would go back up, about every two weeks, to see her. We got engaged and were going to get married. Then, she started having second thoughts.

DePue: Wasn't sure if she wanted to be the wife of a farmer?

Curtin: Yes, um-hmm. And I don't know who else influenced her, but her parents probably didn't raise her to be the wife of a farmer.

DePue: It is a different lifestyle, I would think.

Curtin: Yeah. So, we broke up. Then, almost a year later, we got back together again, and we decided to get married. So, she

made the adjustment. She was a good mother. She was a good housewife. She was a good cook. It was quite an adjustment for her, sometimes harder



Larry and Pat Curtin on their wedding day, January 15th, 1955. The couple were married in Oak Park, Illinois, Pat's home town. (Patrons desiring to use this photograph should contact the ALPL Audio-Visual Curator.)

than I realized. But she did her thing all the time and took good care of the kids. We're still in love, after fifty-seven years.

DePue: And how many children?

Curtin: Nine children and twenty-five grandchildren.

DePue: That sounds like a lot of loving.

Curtin: Yeah. (laughs)

DePue: Let's wrap up a few questions here, then, just kind of in the general sense. Did you get involved in any service organizations?

Curtin: Yeah, that was kind of my big thing. If you go back, you know, I was valedictorian of my class. I was a conscientious guy. I got along well with people.

Just within two years after we got married—we got married in 1955—and by 1957, I was asked to be on the school board. About the same time, I was asked to be trustee of the church. Then, shortly after that, I was asked to be on the elevator board. I always thought that a person should do that.

DePue: This is the grain elevator you're talking about?

Curtin: The grain elevator board in Stonington. That one I really liked, and I really felt like I was helping farmers. So, I stayed with that one for twenty-three years. I went on the county FS board. Most of them, I'd stay about nine years, and then just go off. I was on an ASCS [Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service] board.

Then, I was asked, in 1974, if I would help organize a new bank in Stonington. We didn't have a bank in the town of 1,200 or 1,100, I guess. So those things led to other things, like our bank joined some other banks and formed a bank in Springfield. So, I was on that bank board.

DePue: What was that bank?

Curtin: Illini Bank. We organized that in 1984. I was on the holding company board and the bank board, and I was chairman of the audit committee. I was the first chairman of the audit committee that they had. I had that job for about twenty years.

Then, in the grain business, our local elevator belonged to the Illinois Grain Corporation, which was a statewide organization. So, I was asked to go on that. I thought that would be an interesting one to be on. So, I served on that one nine years, I think. But, while I was on that, I was there at the time that Illinois Grain Corporation, which was a statewide grain cooperative, and

FS, which was the statewide farm supply division, associated with Illinois Farm Bureau, we merged those two into a new company, called Grow Mark. I was involved in that.

Those things, I just liked to do them. My wife went along with me on it. That gave her more duties at home. But I never let it interfere with my farming. When I started farming, I was farming 480 acres. When I quit, I was farming 1,200 or 1,300 acres.

DePue: How much of that did you own?

Curtin: Well, I bought a little more land after I retired, I guess. But now I have a farm corporation, which I have 525 acres in. I've given 45% of that away, to my kids. Then, I have 300 acres besides that. But we rented more than half, probably three-fourths, of the ground we farmed.

DePue: Did you make use of the GI Bill?

Curtin: Yes, but only to go to an ag-related school in our county seat town, Taylorville. I didn't go away to college.

DePue: Looking back on your military experience—I know you were very proud of your farming career, and rightfully so—but, do you think those years in the military were beneficial to you?

Curtin: Yeah, I think it was. It gave me a different outlook on life. For one thing, when I came back from Korea, I thought no one that lived in the United States of America should ever complain about anything, after being in Korea for nine months, eight months, I guess. It was time to grow up. You turn into a man.

DePue: Are you proud of your service?

Curtin: Yes. I was lucky. I'm very fortunate that things happened to me that did happen, during my service. But I was proud of my service, yes.

DePue: What do you think about the American public, in general, that was somewhat apathetic about what was going on in Korea? Maybe that's too strong a word. But, over the last several decades, Korea has been known as the forgotten war, because most people don't know a thing about it.

Curtin: And you know, I never looked at it that way. I know I had people back here that had been over there, that felt that way, and I asked one of them one day, why he had that attitude. He had been in battle over there. He said, "When I came back from Korea and went back to the plant, where I had worked before..." The guy next to him, he says, "Where you been?" He took that as kind of an insult. Apparently, a lot of guys were like that. But I never had that feeling.

I guess I was more in a World War II mindset that, when I came back from Korea, why, that was it. I wanted to forget about it. I didn't think anybody owed me anything. We had some of those...Bands met the ship and welcomed us. But I, maybe, hadn't been in a bad enough situation over there that I felt neglected. I really don't want to criticize those guys that were in combat. I mean, they could have come back with a different idea.

DePue: But you said that you did have...When you landed, there was a band onshore?

Curtin: Here in the States, I remember. And I think, maybe, in Japan, one met us. That made you feel good for five minutes. (both laugh)

DePue: You had other things on your mind, did you?

Curtin: Yeah. Like I said, I was not in combat over there, and so, maybe these guys, we ought to cut them a little slack. But I just never had that feeling myself, that no one gave me credit for being over there.

DePue: How about this question. Do you still know your Morse code?

Curtin: No. Except SOS, I believe I know.

DePue: How long did it take you to forget that?

Curtin: Not very long. You know, just being frank about it, I wasn't a very good CW operator. I couldn't relax on the key. I think that's one reason I was taken off of that job, about midway through my service in Korea.

DePue: They needed to find something you had a better aptitude for.

Curtin: Yeah. Yeah. That's right.

DePue: Any final comments for us, then, Larry?

Curtin: No. I'm satisfied with the life I lived, the breaks I got. A lot of times, they say, you're lucky, but you make your own luck, lots of times. You have to make your own luck. I'm happy with the way things turned out. I met a lot of interesting people in all the organizations I was involved in. I enjoyed the people I met in the Army, even though I didn't enjoy where I was at. But, if you get along with people, your days go better.

DePue: Thank you very much. You certainly have impressed me, as we go through this. You did take advantage of the opportunities you got.

Curtin: Yes. Yes.

DePue: And, for that reason, you had a little bit different kind of career, but just as valuable to the military service. So, thank you very much. It's been an interesting experience. Enjoyed it.

Curtin: Okay. You're welcome, Mark.

(end of interview 2)