Interview with Robert Fitzer
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Interview #1: February 7, 2013
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Kiefner: Today is February 7, 2013. This interview is part of *Will to Farm*, a Will County Farm Bureau Oral History project in collaboration with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield. My name is Sherri Kiefner and I am in Joliet today at the home of Bob Fitzer. It's a pleasure having a chance to talk to you today, Bob. Could you tell me a little about yourself, starting with just when and where you were born?

Fitzer: I was born on a dairy farm in Frankfort, Illinois in 1924, June.

Kiefner: Were you born at home or were you born in a hospital?

Fitzer: I was born in the house at that farm, so my mother tells me.

Kiefner: (Kiefner laughs) Where, specifically, was that farm located?

Fitzer: It was on Route 30, a half mile west of Wolf Road, which goes into Mokena. And when I was five years old I started school there, a little country school right in the corner of Wolf Road and Route 30.

Kiefner: What was the name of that first school?

Fitzer: Cleveland School

Kiefner: Did you have any siblings?

Fitzer: I had a sister that's seven years older than I am, so that's how come I started when I was only five years old, because she was going to be in eighth grade and my mother wanted me to start with her. She thought I was too bashful to start on my own, (Kiefner and Fitzer laugh) so I had to go to the first year with her. My birthday is in June, so I had that whole year in school before I got six years old.

Kiefner: So, tell me a little more about that school. How did that work with—?

Fitzer: My father was on the school board, I guess, and he hauled the coal and did all the work around the yard and everything else for it and cleaned the school occasionally, so I don't know why. But the last two years I was there, I was in fourth and fifth grade. I went to school with just another boy and myself, two students and a teacher. That's kind of odd; because we both had our initials

are R.F. I was Robert Fitzer and it was Richard Fisher, the other boy, and Ruth Frobish was the teacher.

Kiefner: Wow, so were they near the same age as you?

Fitzer: The boy was in the same class I was; we were both in fourth and fifth grade at the time.

Kiefner: Did your sister go to that same school?

Fitzer: She went there in eighth grade. She is seven years older than I am, so I was in first grade and she was in eighth.

Kiefner: Tell me, what do you remember about that farm where you were raised, that first farm?

Fitzer: It had a lot of cows. My dad had a pretty big barn. He was very strong with the Pure Milk Association and a great believer in it, and we had probably thirty, thirty-five cows for all the time. Shipped milk. I remember the milk truck driving in the yard every morning. It was all milk cans; there was no bulk milk in those days. I remember playing in the barn. I never did much work out there on that farm, as far as I was only ten years old when we moved away, but I remember a lot of history about it, and I remember when my grandfather bought my dad—my mother's father, my grandfather—bought my dad his first tractor.

Kiefner: Oh really?

Fitzer: I think it was 1931 or '32, and that was a big occasion when they drove that in the yard.

Kiefner: That was quite a gift.

Fitzer: It was quite a gift.

Kiefner: Tell me a little about your mother.

Fitzer: My mother was born in Joliet and I understand when she and my dad were dating he lived in New Lenox, and there was a trolley that went back and forth. He told about different times when he missed the last trolley at ten o'clock at night, he had to walk home.

Kiefner: (Kiefner laughs) That will keep you on time, won't it?

Fitzer: It sure will.

Kiefner: What about the house that you were raised in? Is there anything specific that you remember about that house?

Fitzer: It had the upstairs and had a downstairs. There was four bedrooms upstairs and I don't remember too much about it. My grandmother used to come out there and stay some, and my cousins used to come out there and stay for times. I loved the farm and I spent a lot of time, when I got old enough, feeding the pigs and helping with the chores. That was my biggest ambition, was to help with the chores.

Kiefner: Did your mother have a farm background?

Fitzer: No, she had no farm background but she must have learned a lot because later, the last year or two we were out there, she used to get two thousand baby chickens. All the roosters, the males, were butchered and delivered in Joliet. And she'd keep the pullets in the chicken house and that was her eggs for winter and the summer, until the next year when we got new ones. We used to take the eggs into Joliet. There was a Paradise Food Market where they would take the eggs in exchange for groceries. And what made an impression with me one night is, that was in '33 when things got really rough in farm, we didn't have enough eggs to cover the groceries that she bought and she took some groceries back, put it back on the shelf. I couldn't see why she was doing it. I didn't realize that she wasn't going to take any money out of the savings to buy groceries, but the eggs kept us in groceries, I believe.

Kiefner: Wow, did you or your sister do anything with the chickens or things like that at that age, helping, do you remember?

Fitzer: I remember when we first got them, we used to take each one out of the box and put its beak in the water so it could get used to drinking. It was quite a day when we got the … the biggest problem was cleaning these brooder houses out before we got the baby chicks. We had three houses and had to disinfect them and scrub them down with lye water and we used to buy peat moss to put on the floor for the baby chicks. Each one had a brooder, kerosene fed, and I can see my mother yet, walking through the snow drifts, carrying the kerosene to the different brooder houses. I used to watch, stay in the house, I don't know why she left me by myself but she did, and I used to watch out the window. It was usually cold when she got these chickens, in February.

Kiefner: Tell me about that first tractor that your grandfather—

Fitzer: It was a regular Farmall, offspring of that was an F20, but this was before that. It had the open steering gear in the front, steel angle lugs on the steel wheels, and it made an impression on me because Dad always farmed with horses. Dad still farmed quite a bit with horses, even when he got the tractor.

Kiefner: So you weren't as involved with the hands-on operation, but what do you remember about your dad farming with the horses?

Fitzer: My grandpa that bought the tractor for my dad also, he ran a lumberyard in Joliet, and one of the wealthier ones that run the lumber yards. Friends owned lumberyards in Chicago, and in the streets in Chicago the horses would get sore footed and they'd bring them out to the farm for a year. They'd get used to it and then they'd bring us another load out next year. Several years, I can remember bringing three, four horses out for my dad to use on the farm, just for free, just to get their hooves back in shape.

Kiefner: It sounds like a good deal, fresh team each year.

Fitzer: It was real good and they were real sharp horses; they were good horses.

Kiefner: How many acres was that farm?

Fitzer: Dad bought that farm I think in 1920, paid $400 an acre, and it was 400 acres, 420 acres, I believe. About half of it was woods; that's how come he went in the dairy business, because he had all that pasture. I used to love to go down in the woods. I used to go down and chase the cows up sometimes when they wouldn't come up in the evening. They had a spring in it; you could drink right out of the spring. And it had Hickory Creek going through the back end of it. Different highlights I remember is Dad sometimes would take the wagon and horses to go across the creek to work on the other side, to cut thistles or something in the pasture, and that always made an impression on me, going through the water. I loved that.

Kiefner: Tell me a little more about your grandparents; do you remember your father's family?

Fitzer: Yeah, I remember. He died about the same time we moved over to Plainfield. I think it was 1933 or '32 maybe, possibly. I remember shelling seed corn with him on the kitchen floor, one of the things I do remember. My mother and dad used to leave me there when they went to Joliet to go shopping and I'd stay there because it was on the way. They'd drop me off there and I remember a year or so, just before he died, that we shelled corn on the kitchen floor. When you husked corn by hand, you kept the best ears. He was shelling the tips and the butts off and I'd shell the kernels in between, which you kept for seed. The tips and butts you didn't use for seed because they had to fit in a seed plate.

Kiefner: So there was no buying your bags of seed and having them delivered.

Fitzer: No, not much. Hybrid corn came in a little later then.

Kiefner: So, you had the dairy and your mother had the chickens. You mentioned hogs too?

Fitzer: We had some hogs. Dad always had, maybe ten, twelve sows, baby pigs. They were what they call open range today. They had just little "A" houses

out in the pasture. We used to change pasture, pretty near every year, so they wouldn't get diseased and had four or five acres, usually always, for hog pasture.

Kiefner: Were the hogs that you raised primarily for your own family or neighbors?

Fitzer: No, we butchered some for some of the people in Joliet and some of them were shipped into Chicago to the stockyards.

Kiefner: Did you ever go to the Chicago Stockyards when you were young?

Fitzer: Yeah, a couple times I went out there. It was very (laughs) educational because it was just cattle and hogs all over the place, pens after pens. Buyers come around and bid on them. When you ship anything into the stockyards, you had to go through a broker, and that broker represented your cattle or hogs, whatever it was, and seen that they brought an adequate amount or whatever the market was for that day.

Kiefner: So, did you stick around usually to see what they brought, was that typical?

Fitzer: Yeah, if I rode up with a truck driver, sometimes I would. I had a good friend, was a truck driver. He had a small truck. He used to haul maybe five or six cattle at a time or maybe a couple dozen hogs, and I used to ride up with him occasionally. He'd usually go up in the evening and so he'd be there for the next morning market.

Kiefner: Did the family have a garden or orchard at that place?

Fitzer: We always had some garden, not a big garden. I remember Dad had an idea one time: he could make money raising potatoes, and he had about an acre and a half of potatoes. The neighbor had a potato planter and we used to plant them and harvest them. I think we had a whole wagon box full that year. Some of them we finally ended up giving away to the people in Joliet.

Kiefner: With the dairy, did you keep your own bull?

Fitzer: Yeah, in the dairy barn there was a place for some calf pens and there was a place for the bull pen. And the bull was in that pen pretty near year round as I remember. They bring the cow over to the bull, rather than the bull going out to the pasture. Usually, they are brought over to the bull pen.

Kiefner: So no real troubles.

Fitzer: No, they were mean. We weren't allowed to go very close.

Kiefner: What about crops on that farm?

Fitzer: Yeah, we had about two hundred acres; I would say almost two hundred acres of crops and some on both sides of Route 30. And I was pretty young to do much good. I used to ride with Dad on the seeder and stuff like that, but I don't think I did much driving horses out there. That was later, after we moved into Plainfield.

Kiefner: Did your father's father help out some, your grandfather?

Fitzer: No, I don't think he ever came out to do any helping. Sometimes we had a hired man. In fact, a good share of the time, when he got up to around thirty-five cows, we usually had to, because that was all milked by hand. And he usually had a man then; sometimes they stayed with us a couple years, sometimes only a few months. It was quite a job keeping help; not everybody wanted to milk cows (laughs). My dad loved it.

Kiefner: When you had a hired hand, did they live there in the house with you?

Fitzer: Oh yes, oh yes.

Kiefner: Eat with the family?

Fitzer: Always stayed with, just like one of the family, except for a room for them to go to sleep. And my mother always cooked for them.

Kiefner: What was a typical meal like at that time?

Fitzer: Well, most of the time, they'd usually go out and milk first in the morning, five o'clock or so, and then we'd come in and have breakfast around seven o'clock and it was fried potatoes, bacon, pancakes, sometimes. The big thing was in the winter when we used to butcher. That was the occasion when you really ate good. My grandmother used to come out and make blood sausage, and to me, that was delicacy.

Kiefner: Now, is that your father's mother?

Fitzer: That was my father's mother, yes. She lived in New Lenox and she'd come over and make the blood sausage because my mother never, even after my grandmother died, never could do it as good as she did. I didn't think so.

Kiefner: After your father got that tractor, what share of the work would the tractor do versus the horses, how was that divided?

Fitzer: I think that every year it got a little bit more used, I think. My dad liked the horses, of course, and he had a lot of hay. I don't think the tractor was ever involved in making hay. It was always cut with the horses, raked with the horses, and put up with the horses. It seemed like we were always making hay. And my job, even when I was just starting school, I used to turn the hayfork with one horse, but the horse, I think, knew more than I did. Pull the

hay up, you know, through the barn with a big rope and come back. The horse knew where to stop and Dad would yell after he got the fork in the wagonload of hay. He'd yell and the horse would take off. You didn't even have to lead the horse. The horse knew more than I did, but I was out there (laughs).

Kiefner: Were there a lot of outbuildings? You mentioned three chicken houses and—

Fitzer: Yeah, we had the chicken house, and we had three brooder houses, corncrib, tool shed, and the big dairy barn.

Kiefner: Then how long did you live on that farm?

Fitzer: Nineteen thirty-three. My dad bought it I think in about 1918 or '20. I think about 1920. And then in 1933, that's when the depression got pretty tight on the farm and they couldn't make the payments that year and they gave it up. My mother said they had two hundred dollars left to pay on it. They paid four hundred, two-hundred dollars an acre, and land was selling for less than a hundred dollars, so they just gave it up and walked away and bought a farm out in Plainfield for ninety-five dollars an acre, eighty acres only.

Kiefner: So how were they able to purchase that farm then in Plainfield?

Fitzer: They had this theory, and at that time, you had a base. The base was based on whatever your lowest milk production, pounds of milk, was for that month. And Dad was very fussy; a lot of times milk production would go down, and I don't know why, but it did. And sometimes he would even go out and buy an extra cow or two, to make sure that you kept base up because Dad says anything beyond the base they wouldn't pay you very much for it. And he said they just stole that milk, so to speak. The base is where the money was, because they had a guaranteed price. He was a very good member of the Prairie Milk Association, and I thought the world of them because they helped make the price. And I know they called a strike one time, and that's what I remember as a little kid—I think I was only about five years old—and he had to go out on this milk strike. And the word got around that these truck drivers were sneaking this milk through at night. He went out with a group and my mother begged him not to go. She said, "They are carrying guns."

He said, "I gotta go," and I don't think my mother and me ever slept that night.

Kiefner: That would have been probably like 1933?

Fitzer: Ah, it was a little before that. I think it was probably in the early '30s, but it made an impression on me because they said they had guns; I knew what guns were. It made an impression on me. But he came back in the morning and we were both real happy, my mother and myself. We asked him how it went and he said that they caught two trucks and they took the milk, it was all in milk

cans, dumped it in the ditch, and no arguments, no guns, or anything. And even helped the driver put the cans back in the truck, he said, after they dumped it in the ditch. So, I never forgot that.

Kiefner: Any other things that stand out in your mind with shortages during that time, during the depression—fuel etc?

Fitzer: I don't remember too much about that, most of those shortages. That came after, in '34, when we moved over to Plainfield. That's when I started taking an active role helping on the farm and I started driving a tractor right after that. And that's made an impression.

Kiefner: Did the horses come with you when you moved to Plainfield?

Fitzer: Dad still kept four horses. We had more when we lived out there in Frankfort. We usually had maybe eight or nine horses a lot of times then, because most of the fieldwork was done with them, but when we moved on this side he always kept four horses, I don't know why.

Kiefner: So, back in '33, '34, did you attend any special events back then—fairs etc.?

Fitzer: We always went to the Mazon Fair. I know that. That was the day when you milked early in the morning, because we always had to be home for milking, but I remember going out to that a couple years.

Kiefner: Mazon, was that a county fair?

Fitzer: Yes, Grundy County. It was a big fair in this area and I remember going to that pretty near every year. And Fourth of July was a big deal. In Frankfort they had a big dance on the Fourth of July and we would usually end up over there. They had a picnic in the afternoon where I got a chance to buy an ice cream cone, which I never did otherwise.

Kiefner: (laughs) All that milk on the farm and no ice cream cones.

Fitzer: Well'34, when we first moved out here, things were rough. That's when they first bought that eighty-acre farm. For this dairy they sold, they got two thousand dollars and that went on this farm, and ice cream cones were a nickel, but Mom wouldn't buy it and I knew. She said we lost one farm; we are not going to lose another one. She was very strict about what we bought.

Kiefner: 1934 was the year the Century of Progress World Fair was in Chicago. What do you remember about that?

Fitzer: I remember going to the World's Fair in 1934 and that was the year we had such invasion of droughts and chinch bugs and we fought chinch bugs all that summer. They ate the wheat up and they ate the oats up and then we tried to keep them from going into the corn field because corn field is one of the

lighter things that they wanted to eat. I don't know why, but anyway, what I remember about that was the government came out with—to fight the chinch bugs—was creosote. They had no chemicals otherwise and creosote has a very strong odor and burns when you get it on you, and the chinch bugs would not cross that line. So what we did, the government would bring these barrels of creosote into Plainfield and we'd get the barrels and bring them out to the farm. I remember about that: one morning, our milk driver, who hauled our milk for us, got me when he had the milk cans loaded, and he said, "Bob, you come down after. I got to get back on the route. Now, help me take the milk cans off; we'll go up and get a load of creosote." And I did, and we used to take them around in the neighborhoods. We got a whole load and took about two barrels in everybody's yard and I remember as a kid enjoying rolling [the barrels] down the back on planks, seeing how far they would roll across the yard. But I guess the farmers didn't think it was very funny.

Kiefner: (laughs) If you broke a barrel of that creosote, it wouldn't have been quite so funny.

Fitzer: Well, that was the thing—my first education with really working hard—that was hot, that creosote; we used to carry it in pails out to the farm. We would plow a furrow between the oat field and the cornfield so it would be a smooth bottom. Then we would put a hole in the bottom of the pail, put a plug in the hole in the pail until we got out in the field, and then take the plug out and walk along that furrow so there would be a steady line of creosote. The pail got empty; you would go back and get another pail. And that's the way it happened, these chinch bugs got so thick that they started crossing the line, so they would follow up and down the line because they wouldn't cross it. They just got thick, so we dug post holes in front of the creosote line so they'd fall in the post holes. even got full, it was unbelievable. That's how thick they got.

Kiefner: How big were the chinch bugs? What did they look like?

Fitzer: Oh, they were pretty small, maybe a quarter the size of a fly, I would guess. They were small, but there was millions and millions and millions of them. In fact, in 1934, farmers had it so rough that year, with droughts and everything, that the World's Fair let the farmers go into the World's Fair with a pint of chinch bugs. And we took a pint of chinch bugs because the holes were full of chinch bugs, no problem getting a pint (laughs), and we all went to the fair with a pint of chinch bugs on each one of us. That was the entrance fee.

Kiefner: So, that was your entrance fee? They accepted chinch bugs in lieu of cash?

Fitzer: That's right, to get into the fair.

Kiefner: If they were a little smaller than a fly that had to take quite a bit of work gathering them.

Fitzer: Oh, millions and millions. Well the postholes were practically full sometimes. We'd get them out of the postholes. But the thing about it, they got so bad that my dad—that year we had almost forty acres of corn I think—and he said we are going to put the corn in the silo, because if they are going to eat it up anyways, we might as well put it in the silo, what there is of it. It was just starting to set ears, and we put all the corn we had, almost forty acres, in the silo and only got the silo half full. So that's what we fed, and we had some hay.

There was a little hay, but the hay was a short crop and at the same time, sweet clover… With extension service—Farm Bureau extension service. I don't think it was called farm bureau at that time, but it was Extension, and they recommended sweet clover put with the oats as a nurse crop to bring nitrogen for the next year's corn crop, and that was just starting to take a hold real strong. Dad believed in it. But we had two neighbors that were raising the sweet clover for seed and they'd cut it with an oat binder, shock it, and then when it got dry, they'd cut it and run it through what they called a clover huller which looked a little bit like a threshing machine, but it would take the seed off the clover, and what was left was supposed to be small pieces of stems. That year one of the neighbors said we could have that stack because a lot of times they just burned the stack because there wasn't much food value in it. And Dad brought that home. We hauled that one stack home and mixed it with the silage that winter to feed the cows because in those days there wasn't any hay you could buy from Wisconsin or some place, it just wasn't available. And if you didn't have enough feed, you shipped the cows to Chicago to the Stockyards and Dad wasn't about to do that, so by hauling this stack of clover, hauling it back to the farm, we mixed it with the silage and kept the cows going for that winter. I don't suppose it brought a lot of milk in, but I don't know. It was to keep the cows milking.

Kiefner: Tell me about going to the World's Fair. What did you know about it before you got there? How was it advertised?

Fitzer: It was advertised in the paper, different articles in the paper all the time. It was the World's Fair ordeal. It was all over the country, but one thing that struck in my mind was Sally Rand the fan dancer, which brought my attention, (laughs) because it was advertised in all the magazines. I was ten years old, but it was the difference between boys and girls, but I hadn't really realized all the details yet, so I wanted to go see that. But anyway, we went to the fair, got into the fair and walking down the streets and I could see these girls dancing in the distance, and well, that must be Sally Rand's tent, and my mother wouldn't go down that street. We went down another street; she says you're too young. (Kiefner laughs) So that was the end of Sally Rand.

Kiefner: The beginning and the end.

Fitzer: But she was a fan dancer and I guess she must have been quite an artist because she could really dance with those fans, different things they had in the magazines, and never reveal anything.

Kiefner: Was it your whole family, mom, dad, sister?

Fitzer: As I remember, it was just my dad and my mom, my sister and myself. It was four of us.

Kiefner: And how did you get there? Did you have a car at that time?

Fitzer: We had a car at that time. That was a time when everyone was buying Model A Fords.

Kiefner: What were the roads like?

Fitzer: They were mostly gravel, of course. This was summer. It was dry. But I think the second year we went up—Dad didn't like driving in Chicago, I think—the second year went up with the hired man, drove us, I believe, if I remember right. It was a big day, but don't remember too much about the exhibits, I think a lot of the companies had exhibits there, but I was pretty young yet; I was ten years old.

Kiefner: What was the farm in Plainfield like? How did it differ from the farm in New Lenox?

Fitzer: It was a little better productivity. It had better ground. It was a good farm, in fact. It only had room for about, I think sixteen or seventeen cows. There was the pens in the middle, horse barn on the other side, so we always had the three or four horses in there. It had a tool shed and a corncrib and the house was real similar to what we had in Frankfort. It was a two story with four bedrooms upstairs. This one out here though had a bathroom, which we didn't have in Frankfort, so we were modern. I think my parents put in electricity when we moved there. It didn't have electricity. I know they put in electricity. It was a little different. Of course, I was getting a little older and I helped more on the farm then, too. But Dad, right away, we had a hog house there too, and we had usually eight or ten sows. And I know, that was my job a lot of times, in the winter, when they farrow, to go out and watch the… All night we'd take turns, so they wouldn't lay on the baby pigs. First few days after the pigs were born, these bigger, older sows would flop down and flop right on the baby pigs; so that was our deal. So whenever the sow got up during the night, we had a cot out there, and we would wake up and make sure she didn't lay on the pigs when she laid back down.

Kiefner: How would you go about keeping a sow that size from doing whatever she wanted?

Fitzer: Well, you just touch them and hit them a little bit with a stick. They would get right back up. Then you would try to pick the little baby pigs back, away from there, where they wouldn't get underneath her right away. They didn't seem to stand up too long. They'd get up sometime during the night, but a lot of times if you didn't get out there with them, the next morning you'd see half the baby pigs—they'd have eight or ten baby pigs—and half of them would be dead. They'd lay on them.

Kiefner: How long would you have to do that until they were safe?

Fitzer: Four or five days

Kiefner: So you had pretty much the same diversity early in Plainfield that you had—

Fitzer: But not near as big of scale. We went from about thirty, thirty-five cows down to sixteen or seventeen. And Dad was a pretty good dairyman, as I look back. He wouldn't keep a cow if it wasn't producing at the top. We had a fellow up in Wheatland Township that used to go up in Wisconsin and buy dairy heifers, and people around, dairy farmers, would buy. They'd go up and buy these heifers and dad was pretty good at judging cattle. He never went to a fair and judged, but he knew a good cow when he saw it. As I look back, he could make more milk out of a few cows than any of the neighbors could. But it was all in milk cans. We usually had four, five, six cans of milk a day from sixteen or seventeen cows. But Dad was real fussy. In the winter, we didn't have drinking cups or anything like that in the barn, and they always went out into the shed to get water, but if it got below freezing, we had to carry the water to them. A good dairy cow will drink four or five, six pails of water a day, so it was quite a job. I never really had much love for the cows, but I think my dad loved them (laughs).

Kiefner: Tell me about your first school in Plainfield then, going from, you said your first school in New Lenox, there was only two students.

Fitzer: Well, we had four there for awhile, but then just before I moved, there was down to two. But when we came out here to Caton Farm School in Plainfield; Caton Farm was another little town at that time. It was on a map, in fact, but they don't even bother to put it on the map, now it's in the city of Joliet. So it has the original seven houses. It's still there, but it isn't on a map anymore. But they had two grain elevators and they had a small stockyards and a blacksmith shop and a school and a little store, and that was at Caton Farm.

Kiefner: How far was that from where you lived?

Fitzer: Just a mile.

Kiefner: And where was the farm in Plainfield? Where was that located?

Fitzer: It was on Caton Farm Road, at Caton Farm. Right now it would be about two miles west of 59 on Caton Farm Road. It was just a little bit of gravel, not much gravel at that time. What I do remember about that school there—I think it was in 1934 or '5, probably in 1935 when things got so rough in town. I went over one morning. I always rode my bicycle to school. And going there one morning there was three truckloads, gravel trucks, small gravel trucks, full of men. And, it scared me, because I was going with my bicycle, and nobody else around. And I realized what was going on then. It was the WPA—sent men out there. Caton Farm was always a wet area. They dug a deep ditch, all the way from Caton Farm, by the railroad tracks there, down to the creek, about a half-mile, east, and dug it deep. And they shoveled the dirt up on the bank and then another group shoveled it in. But they tell me, when they worked all day for the WPA, they got enough money to buy groceries for the family for a day. But that's the difference between—as I look at the depression then and the depression that we've got right now—is they had to work for it. There was no free handouts. They had to work for any money anybody got. I do remember that much.

Kiefner: So these men were local men that were doing the work?

Fitzer: They could have been anybody. They could have been bankers. They could have been businessmen. Things got pretty rough during in '33, and '34 and '35 in Joliet.

Kiefner: How did your school here in Plainfield differ? How many students were there?

Fitzer: There were six and seven of us most of the time until I graduated. Seven. I don't think we ever got beyond seven. It was quite a shock to me when I went to high school because I went to Joliet High School with four thousand kids and went from a school with seven (laughs). The shock was fantastic. My sister warned me, but it didn't make that much impression. But I went to high school for four years in Joliet.

Kiefner: When you were still going to Caton Farm School did you walk to school?

Fitzer: I always rode a bicycle, even in the winter, pretty much rode a bicycle unless it was severe, Dad would take me. I always rode a bicycle – even in cold weather – it was only a mile. If you rode fast it didn't take long.

Kiefner: And then when you went to high school?

Fitzer: First year I rode with a neighbor and then after that I started driving. I was only fifteen when I drove to high school. You didn't have to have a driver's license in 1935. Oh, let's see, that would have been '38. I didn't have to have a license. I think that's the year everybody had to have a license. I drove, and then the next couple years I drove, my sister rode with me, and I had seven kids, six besides myself, going to Joliet High School. I was the only one in

the neighborhood that had a car. My folks had a car and an old pick up truck and they always drove the pick up truck and I got the car, and that was when I drove to high school.

Kiefner: Who were your friends growing up in Plainfield, from the time you were younger through high school? Did you have much free time?

Fitzer: Not a lot, Saturday night was the big thing. We used to go up to roller rink up in Plainfield, after I got old enough, went to high school. We used to go up there Saturday nights. Roller rink, that was about it. We had another neighbor that used to work. The two of us used to go out shocking oats a lot when I was going to high school, because that was a miserable job that nobody wanted to do. And we used to go out a lot of times and do that together.

Kiefner: A friend of yours and you?

Fitzer: Yeah, Dick Reis. But anyway, we had one neighbor we used to love to go up to, because we shocked there three or four nights, and a lot of times we shocked at nights because it was cooler. We'd go over about five o'clock, work till, a lot of times, moon light and you could a long time, but anyway, when we got done with his place every year, he'd go up and get four or five gallons of ice cream and pop and we'd have a feast (laughs). We did that quite a few years.

Kiefner: After all that work, you deserved ice cream.

Fitzer: Well, he paid us good, too. He soon learned I did a lot of working around the neighborhood when I was in high school; because I had the eighty acres and there wasn't enough work there. And I worked for a lot of the neighbors. You soon learn who the good ones are, and the ones are that aren't so good. We had all kinds of jobs, so you did a lot of jobs, but one neighbor I loved to work for. He'd never send me out to do anything that he wouldn't go with me to help. It could be cutting thistles in the field or it could be cleaning out a bullpen. He would always work with me and he was a good man to work for. He got done, whatever your salary was, he'd give you an extra couple dollars. He lived to be ninety-five years old. You remember those people.

Kiefner: Absolutely. What about holidays? What do you remember about holidays as a child?

Fitzer: Not too much, except Christmas usually was a day that my mother would have most of the relatives come out, and she'd usually fix the turkey. And Fourth of July was always a big deal, because we always went to Frankfort to this picnic area; they had with a dance at night. Hardly ever missed that. But otherwise, holidays were pretty much the same as any other day, because you still had to milk the cows. That's one reason I didn't like the cows, I guess.

Kiefner: Did your family have a radio?

Fitzer: We had a radio. I don't remember what year it was, but I know we had a radio in the barn and that's how come I heard about Pearl Harbor. We was listening to the radio and they came on and flashed on the radio that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. I'll never forget that one either, because I know I had just got up from the cow with a pail of milk and I stood there listening to it and my dad came over and listened to it too and it gave us details. I'll never forget that one.

Kiefner: What were your thoughts? Did many of the students that went to high school with you work or help out at the arsenal at all?

Fitzer: Some of my friends down there at Joliet High School, they went down there and got some night jobs, or whatever, to bring in some extra income, because they were hiring anybody they could get when they first got opened. In 1942 one of the buildings down there blew up and that was the night of graduation in Joliet, and a lot of them took off working at the arsenal to graduate, and a couple of them that I know of would have been killed there if it wouldn't have been for graduation night, which meant quite a bit to me. They never slowed down anything and they just kept on building ammunition, but I thought there were quite a few lives lost. But everything was trying to win the war, and that was the main goal was to win this war, regardless, and the few lives lost down there didn't seem to bring any delay to the ammunition plant at all.

Kiefner: Did you serve in the military during the war?

Fitzer: No I didn't. I had a deferment because of agriculture. Three or four of us boys in the neighborhood here did, and went along until I think it was in '43 maybe that we all were called in. And we all went to Chicago at the same time and took examinations. We were ready to go and then they had VJ day, where they declared and we didn't have to go. So we were close; but we didn't get in there.

Kiefner: So, Bob, did you have friends that did serve?

Fitzer: Oh yes, I had a lot of friends that served. A few of them lost their lives, high school buddies. Don't think there is anything here in the immediate neighborhood. But when we were preparing for the war, I remember this though, there was quite a few that went in the CCC[1] Camps. Well, Starved Rock, for instance, down at LaSalle County, was built by CCC Camp employees. They were shipped all over. I know of one; they called John Drauden, a neighbor of mine. And he used to be down at our place a lot, because I thought he came down to see me, but as I look back, he came down to see my sister (Kiefner laughs). But anyway, he went to the west coast and I

[1] CCC – Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal program during the Great Depression providing employment for young men to build improvements such as state and national parks.

thought I would never see him again, and I haven't seen him again, I know he was never killed, but he went to CC Camp; that was in preparation before the war.

Kiefner: That was part of the depression?

Fitzer: The older people worked for WPA[2] and nobody had a job. The older people worked for WPA. They were just digging a ditch or whatever they were doing, and younger ones, I believe the age limit was about twenty-six or twenty-seven; they went CCC Camp. They were shipped all over the United States and they did a lot of good jobs: cleaned out forests for the park districts, and stuff like that, built camps. The lodge down there is still standing in Starved Rock, and that was what built by the CCC Camp employees. I think, as I remember right, the pay was about thirty dollars a month and half of that had to go home to the family, but they got all free food and lodging.

Kiefner: That wasn't their option, it was automatically sent back home?

Fitzer: Yeah, yeah. That was compulsory in order to join the CCC Camp. It was kind of an honor to join that, I think. I don't know, he had pretty strict regulations you had to abide by. You couldn't go out and get drunk or something like that, or drink beer.

Kiefner: But they sent him to California, even though they had projects local? Was that kind of typical as a separation?

Fitzer: I think it was as I look back, because I don't think any of the ones that I knew went away in CCC Camp ever stayed here in the area. I think that was kind of a way to get them away from their family. I don't know why, but they did. But it was very, very, good for the younger people.

Kiefner: So from the depression and moving to Plainfield during World War II, how fast did the recovery come from the depression to—?

Fitzer: Well, I think, as I look back, my folks paid for that farm in the next four or five years, I think though. After '34 the chinch bugs never came back. I don't know why. We were preparing for them and they never came back. In '35 things begin to pick up. There were some good years in there, farming, and the farmers made some money. I don't think they got the farm quite paid for, but I think they pretty well did before. Then, when I got married in 1944, when I went on my own, Dad kept his dairy for a while, but he couldn't do it, so he finally had to get rid of the cows. But every time I went over to the farm, he was getting rid of a couple cows; it was just like pulling a tooth. He couldn't part with them. It was terrible. He loved the cows that much.

[2] WPA – Works Progress Administration, another program to provide employment by improving infrastructure.

Kiefner: So the farm was starting to transition from a more diverse operation with the livestock, leaning more then towards—

Fitzer: Yeah, like after I got married and got my farm on my own, he slowed down. He had a heart attack a couple years later and he practically quit. I helped him farm on the eighty acre farm. I planted the crops, and that, and he helped me a little bit, too. We worked back and forth. When I got this farm that I'm living on here now. It was right next door here. It was two hundred and forty acres and I made up my mind, I wasn't going to have any livestock, because I didn't like the cows. The pigs were all right, but I didn't have anyplace to put them. And my dad thought it was terrible, my mother, too. That we couldn't survive without that milk check every month. You just couldn't; you wouldn't get any money for a year if you grain farmed. But I said, "I'm going to try." And the thing about it though, that bothered me, was the fact that my wife and me went to town one Saturday to get groceries; we came back and there was two cows in the barn.

Kiefner: Did they just wander down the road? How did those cows get in the barn?

Fitzer: My dad bought them or brought them over. He said, "You can't buy milk and live on a farm." I never forgave my dad for that, but I kept them for a long time.

Kiefner: Oh, you did keep them?

Fitzer: I kept them. I used to buy calves from the neighbors that dairies and leave them for a couple months and sell them as beef, as veal, and kept enough milk for the house. We had to pasteurize every day, which was a nuisance, because my wife's mother had undulant fever and we weren't about to drink unpasteurized milk. And so we always pasteurized; everything the kids or we drank was always pasteurized, but it was a lot of extra work.

Kiefner: So tell me, when did you meet your wife, Jean?

Fitzer: The year I graduated from high school. We went to the same high school, but she was a year behind me in school, but we never dated. We knew each other, used to pass each other driving to school. She drove and I drove. She drove her and her sister. And I began to think, after I got graduated from high school, maybe I made a mistake. So I started dating and we dated two years and got married. And Jean's, my wife's folks, were very good to us, because they had farmed this area for about twenty-three years, I think it was, and we were looking for a farm to rent. We found a couple small farms, but not enough to really make it without livestock, and we was about ready to give up, but we were still going to get married and anyway. Jean's father came to me one day and he says, "Would you want to take this farm over?" And I couldn't believe it. We went to see the two owners. It was all rented ground. It was two different owners. We went to see the two owners and they said

we'll try it for a year, and that's where I started out. We got married and my wife, in fact, when we moved in the house, when we got married, she never moved; I just moved in. Her folks moved to town and bought a house in Joliet and went to work in there. He had been farming. It was pretty rough farming, and all on rented ground, and he had enough of it, I think, as I look back. I think he did it as a favor to us, but also, he had enough farming; he was ready to give up.

Kiefner: And at that time there was other work available?

Fitzer: He didn't have any trouble getting a job. He worked for the high school and so we went on from there. I think he did us a great favor by doing it though, because it got me started, where I wouldn't have got started, because Dad only had an eighty-acre farm. It wasn't big enough to make it without livestock, and I just didn't like livestock.

Kiefner: And about how far was the new place then, Jean's old farmstead?

Fitzer: They were three miles apart, so I still worked and helped him and he helped me. When we got married, rented some more ground and so we went on from there.

Kiefner: Tell me about dating at that time. What did you and Jean do when you were dating?

Fitzer: Well, we went roller-skating, pretty near every weekend. We both had roller skates. Went to a few dances, not very many. O'Henry [O'Henry Ballroom, Willow Springs, IL] was one up near Chicago we used to go to a few times a year, but shows, we went to a lot of shows. That was a date, was go to Rialto in Joliet.

Kiefner: Were those live shows at the time or was it a film?

Fitzer: No, they were all movie, and well, Rialto had a few of them, but I don't ever remember going to a live show there until after, later on in life, when they re-opened it. I think you could get into the Rialto for forty-five cents, I think the Princess was another theater down the street, was twenty-five cents, so that's where we went most of the time.

Kiefner: And then when did you get married?

Fitzer: October '44, and been farming ever since; still farming. The place where we rented down the road here was sold for houses on half of it, the other half I am still renting, the same farm I rented in 1944, still renting this year and that's quite a few years, from '44 till '13.

Kiefner: Going back with the crops, tell me a little more. Let's fill in some of the gaps. Tell me about some of that early corn production and how that changed over the years, from the time that you started farming, helping your dad, to present.

Fitzer: Well, I remember when I was real small yet, going to grade school, I used to go out with my dad and husk ear corn, by hand. And the good ears he'd save and put in a separate box on the wagon, and those were the ones he kept for seed next year, But then, I think it was the year after we moved over in Plainfield—I believe it was about a year, might have been two years—they come out with hybrid seed corn, at least that's the first I knew about it. And he bought a couple bags of hybrid corn, paid about twice as much as corn was worth, or three times maybe. And that was the last time we ever saved any ear corn, because it was so much better. That's all he ever planted from that day forward was hybrid seed corn.

Kiefner: And going back to those early years, were you still using the horses—back like '34, '35—or the tractor?

Fitzer: We'd plant with the horses. We'd work the ground with a tractor. We cut the oats with an oat binder. I run the tractor and my dad rode on the binder. But then I think it was after the war that we bought our first tractor, after I got married. I bought it with my Dad. I think we each paid half. It was a John Deere, two-bottom plow. Those days you plowed everything; you didn't "no-till" or anything like that. That wasn't even thought of; even the bean ground was plowed, which was foolish, but we did it. I mean that's pretty near all I did every fall, all fall. So I had quite a bit to follow, because I had to follow my father-in-law who was a pretty strict farmer, and I know a couple things he really bawled me out for. The first year, I didn't get all the ground plowed in the fall. He said, "This is heavy ground, Bob. You can't plow it in the spring and make any money. You won't work it down, never raise a crop like you should," and he bawled me out for that. Another time, I remember, he came out one Saturday and looked at the bean field across the road from the house. And he says, "Got quite a few weeds over there."

"Yeah," I said, "I didn't get it dragged in time." There was no chemical for weeds, didn't get it dragged in time.

He says "It's going to hurt that bean crop a lot."

I said, "Sorry."

He says, "You got to make up your mind, you going to raise beans or weeds. You can't raise both," and he went back home. I never forgot that one either (both laugh). That was the way he did things. He had a way of telling you that it sunk in.

Kiefner: What about harvest? You said, you know from husking and then did you go to a single row picker?

Fitzer: The year that I got married was the first combine we had. We bought a combine just before I got married and started combining beans when I came back. And we went away for three days and came back and started combining beans, soybeans, and that was the end of the thrashing machine. The last year, I went thrashing five years before that though and that was quite impressive. I loved going thrashing. The competition in thrashing wasn't out in the field. It was all in the house, between the women (Kiefner laughs), how much food they could put on the table. It was wonderful.

Kiefner: Now that's for shelling or thrashing, was that?

Fitzer: Thrashing – oats and wheat – and it was a pretty big ring. We used to have a big thrashing machine, used to feed it from both sides so we had eight wagons. We had five pitchers in the field. We had two people hauling in the grain. We had one up at the elevator, in the yard, because most of them had elevators, but there was a couple of them didn't have any. We had to shovel it off, so that extra man helped shovel it off. So we had to be sure and get the oats off the wagon and back out to the thrashing—we had two wagons—before the other one got full or we really caught heck.

Kiefner: So, did you and your dad own the thrashing machine?

Fitzer: No, no, no, no, it was a company that owned it, and I think we had—well, they called them rings of people that thrashed—I think we had eleven or twelve in our ring. Take two or three weeks, oats were all shocked in the field and we had eight wagons, two at a time, unloading, and we used to haul it up to the thrashing machine and pitch it in the thrashing machine.

Kiefner: Now was this custom work for hire? Was it bartering with neighbors, helping one another out?

Fitzer: As far as the labor, was all between, just bartered. We used to pay the fellow that owned the thrashing machine. I think it was a couple cents a bushel or something like that. And we never had a steam engine on it. The neighbor, the other ring around here, had a steam engine on it. We had a Twin City gasoline tractor and I remember, it used to steam all the time. I remember that. I don't know, but they had a man that just kept the thrasher going, and one that kept the separator going. It was a big crowd of people, but the interesting part was—it was kind of sad in a way—but the new bride in the neighborhood always got—especially if she came up from town, didn't have any experience growing up on a farm. They'd scare her to death. "You've got to get ready for thirty men and they got a big appetite, and they want four or five kinds of pie", just to scare her. But then by the time it got close to thrashing time, all the neighbors would come in and help her. It was interesting, but the competition was there. It got so bad, as far as, and they didn't ask you what kind of pie you wanted when you came in the house, they had four or five kinds of pie.

Kiefner: So everyone ate together then, this huge crew?

Fitzer: Yeah, yeah, sometimes it was big tables; sometimes it was a series, a bunch of tables. I loved to go thrashing because it was good food and I was young enough; the work didn't bother me. The heat didn't bother me.

Kiefner: What time of year was that usually taking place?

Fitzer: It would be August, September, I suppose. But the other thing we did was fill silo. All of the neighbors had silos because pretty near everybody at that time had livestock and had silos and we used to go around, had the same ring, filling silo. In fact, we used the same tractor, big Twin City tractor on a silo filler. The corn was all cut in the field with binders and hauled up in wagons, filled in silo filler, which was nothing but a conveyor, took it into a bunch of knives, there was big paddles on it threw it up in the silo. It took a good tractor to do that, but that was harder work than thrashing because corn bundles are a lot heavier. The other things we did as a group with farmers was shell corn. Everybody had a corncrib. And it was odd, if somebody called you up and said they were going to shell Thursday, it don't make any difference whether you had a date to go to town or whatever, you didn't go. You always helped the neighbor when he called you. You never said, "I can't come." Unless you were sick or at a funeral or something like that, the only way you got out of it. Neighbors just respected one another in that respect. It was interesting, but they don't have that today. You're lucky if the neighbor goes by if you get a wave. (Kiefner laughs)

Kiefner: That's true. Are those some of the neighbors that you still have today?

Fitzer: No, this is getting to be pretty well built up with houses, and there is only really one neighbor here that had one friend that was my best man when I got married; he died last year so that's… They are getting pretty scarce in this neighborhood as far as neighbors and I've got one or maybe two that I still neighbor with, but just on a friendly basis, to stop in, say hello, not exchange help. I don't know if there's anyone that exchanges help around this neighborhood anymore. It's pretty well changed.

Kiefner: What were some of the more dangerous jobs on the farm?

Fitzer: Well, they were all dangerous, but I was pretty fortunate. I was pretty careful until first yea, I bought a self-propelled combine. I had two combines before that. I got caught in it and I was in the hospital for twenty-four days. I had both my hands caught in it but I survived. People said I wouldn't work anymore, but I did.

Kiefner: About how old were you? Was that after you were married?

Fitzer: It was a long time after we were married. I just can't put my finger on a year. I had children. I know my wife wasn't home that day; they couldn't get a

hold of anybody and they got my daughter out of high school, so that would have probably been later on. And it was dumb, I knew better. It was a combine with a cab on, even, and I got out of the cab with it running, and I should have never done that. It was starting to rain. It was plugged up and I thought I was going to get it unplugged without shutting it off and I shouldn't have done that. And I got caught.

Kiefner: Twenty-four days, wow!

Fitzer: Yeah, I had all eight fingers. That was quite an experience to try to get a glass of water to our mouth with two thumbs (Fitzer laughs), but I took therapy for a long time and I can't get them shut, but I have survived.

Kiefner: Better than they anticipated, it sounds like.

Fitzer: Yes, a lot better. They didn't think I would ever work.

Kiefner: Thank goodness.

Fitzer: But it didn't slow me down much.

Kiefner: Tell me about soybeans. When did soybeans start becoming a crop and why?

Fitzer: Well, as I was younger, when I was in grade school, younger, early days of grade school, I don't remember ever having any soybeans; but dad bought some seed beans, I think through the extension service somehow, a few bags. And that was '34, the year when the chinch bugs got so bad and he planted them in for hay. They were ebony, what they called ebony beans; they were real fine-stemmed with black seeds. He planted them, and the odd thing about it, the chinch bugs would not bother them. So we didn't have that much hay, but he wished he had more. But I think we had four or five acres and we'd cut them just before they would get really ripe, started to dry, and then we'd leave them in the field for a couple days and put them in what they called cocks. Maybe make piles, maybe four or five feet tall, and then we'd leave them there and haul them in in the winter. We even had to dig them out of the snow banks. The cows loved them. They turned black almost, sometimes, but the cows seemed to eat them and ate them all.

Kiefner: So you fed the whole plant? You didn't thrash it or anything?

Fitzer: No, no, in those days, we didn't. Then later on, we started combining some of them. But, that was pretty much after I got married though. Dad never had very many. He just had a few for feed before I was married. But that was the beginning of the soybeans. I guess if you look back, soybeans, I guess, were in Asia way back, 16th century; but I don't think they ever got much here in America, that I ever saw. At least I never saw any until my dad planted them that time. I don't know when they started, but now look at them today, almost half the ground is soybeans. Miracle crop they call it.

Kiefner: What about the yield? How did the yield for corn change from the time you started farming to present? Let's take that whole timeframe and what do you think had the most impact?

Fitzer: I don't remember too much before I was married. We always fed most of the corn to the cattle, but after I got married, rented this farm, it was right next door to where we are today. A man from Joliet, he was a bachelor, Mr. Karney, owned the farm, and then after the first year I was farming, we shelled the corn in the winter. He came out, drove in the yard with a black Chevrolet, which I knew he owned, and I thought, man, maybe I'll probably be pushed off the farm. He won't want me to rent it anymore. He drove in the yard and he said, "I see you shelled corn the other day."

And I said, "Yeah."

He said, "I see it made sixty-two bushel to the acre.

I said, "That's right."

He said, "That's the best we ever raised," he says, "Just keep it up." He drove back to town.

Kiefner: How did he know you raised sixty-two bushel an acre?

Fitzer: When we shelled it out of the crib. The farm was worked on 50/50, so he got the other half of the crop, so he knew exactly what it yielded, because he had his check from the elevator. And he knew it made sixty-two bushel to the acre. And now we are raising—the same farm, I still work half that farm—if we don't get a hundred seventy, eighty bushel, we've got a crop failure, almost. We did last year because we only got about seventy-five bushel—the drought. But we've almost tripled our yields, I think, in my lifetime. And I think it is done mostly, when I look back, with fertilizer and chemicals. We had a big weed problem back in those days. There was no chemical to take care of the weeds and you either hoed them or they just competed with the corn crop. I don't know, I think the big breakthrough… I was one of the first ones in the neighborhood—after I got married—to buy a corn planter with fertilizer attachment.

Kiefner: Bob, so when did the use of commercial fertilizers come into play?

Fitzer: Well, the year after I got married, my Dad and me had too many acres to plant with horses anymore, so I bought a tractor planter, a four row, which was big at that time. I bought it with fertilizer attachment, and I had some neighbors around here were pretty skeptical about that. He says, you'll kill all the earthworms and all that kind of stuff, but I continued with it. We had really low analysis at that time, 3-12-12 and 4-16-16, but it was all in bags, and I used it for years. Then it was only a couple years that nitrogen became into use, and I bought a side dressing attachment for my four-row cultivator and

that's when the big increase came. Within a couple years, we jumped forty, fifty bushel to the acre. And it was quite outstanding. In fact, the next-door neighbor was watching me husk corn that one fall. He came down later, he says, "If we could work together maybe we could run my farm and your farm together with the same cultivator and side dresser."

I said, "It's fine with me." So we got it down. We put the fertilizer on the wagons and went across the field, made a platform over the plant cultivator so we could stop and dump it in the boxes on the cultivator. We did a lot of acres in a day with it. And we'd run from daylight to dark with it. We did his farm and my couple farms and there was a big increase. We did that for quite a while, and we jumped a lot in yields. We kept going. First, we were only using forty, fifty pounds, and we finally got up to almost a hundred pounds of nitrogen and yields kept jumping up. After maybe six or seven years anhydrous came into use, and then we started side dressing with anhydrous, and then we started using more pounds, and it was easier to put on; otherwise it was all bags. It was a lot of work.

Kiefner: Okay, that was what I was going to ask; what was the nitrogen like prior to the—

Fitzer: We used ammonia nitrate and it was all in bags, piled in plastic bags. We had trouble with getting it through the side dressing attachment, because it would get hard in spots, so we finally got to the point where we'd run it through screens, a quarter inch holes, so it wouldn't plug the fertilizer. Then we got along real good with it. But the neighbor and me worked together for quite a few years on that, and we really increased our yields. A couple neighbors thought we were going to kill all the earthworms, but the earthworms are still there.

Kiefner: Where did a lot of your education come from, and the other farmers? How did you know all of the new innovations coming out?

Fitzer: Extension had a good program. They sent a lot of literature out; plus the fact that we had a farmer's short course that started right after the war. We'd meet once a week, all through the winter; and we got up as high as a hundred twenty members sometimes. I was on the committee, thinking out the programs. We'd get different people from throughout the states to come and speak to us. It could be how much fertilizer? How much nitrogen? Weed control? Chemicals started to come into use, and that went on for quite a few years. And I think I learned a lot there, plus magazines. I'd pick it up. I never went to college, but I think that I learned a lot of it just by experience. You farm sixty-eight years, you learn a lot. I'm still learning. In fact, sometimes, I think I am getting dumber.

Kiefner: Would you say all of the farmers are as open minded as you? Have they been over the years, to new things?

Fitzer: I think so. I think most of them are. Some of them thought I was foolish when I started with fertilizer on the planter, and then side dressing nitrogen. Thought I was foolish, but I think it all paid out; in fact, most of them have gone to it after a couple years. They've all gone to it now, but things have changed a lot. Now we are doing more custom work, as far as having the fertilizer put on. I am getting older, so that's why I am doing more having the fertilizer and the chemicals custom applied. I still plant and I still harvest. Weed control, I've pretty well left that to custom operators. And they do a better job. They've got the licenses. I don't want to bother with the license anymore. The license, I think, was a real good thought in its day. I remember the first time I took a license to apply chemicals, and one of the questions was about how harmful they are and we used to use Force for a chemical, and it only takes a couple ounces of that to kill you, and I was using my hands to mix it from one box to the other in the planter. I didn't do that anymore after I took the course, so I think it was good. A lot of people don't like the examination, but I think it was good. It made us alert—how dangerous all of this stuff—because I was eating lunches in the tractor and handling this chemical, and I'm still alive. (both laugh)

Kiefner: Good thing you caught that in time. Have you worked off the farm, at all?

Fitzer: Yeah, I did for a while. I did quite a bit a couple years before I was married, after I got out of high school; because, my dad only had the eighty acres. Then after I got married and things were a little tight there for a few years, I worked in Chicago for a couple winters, for three or four months; but that got to be a nuisance because I was working a lot of nights and my children were all small babies, and trying to sleep in the daytime with small children is pretty hard to do. I worked two winters and I gave up.

Kiefner: What was it that you were doing in the city?

Fitzer: I worked in a gravel pit up there, mostly as a watchman and maintenance in the evenings. It was a good job. It was a cold job in the winter. Gravel pits are cold, but I did it, and I earned pretty good money. They paid good, and I appreciated it; but it got to the point where it was wearing on me. I think the biggest thing that changed my mind is, one spring, they wanted me to work through March and April. I was planting oats at that time and it got too late to plant oats and we got a rainy spell. The oats weren't much good that year; so I think I lost almost as much money on the oat crop as what I made that year, so I said it wasn't worth it, so I gave up working in town, and I haven't worked in town since then.

Kiefner: Was crime much of a concern – back then?

Fitzer: I don't think it was ever a problem; in fact, it was years and years before we even locked the door on our house when we went away. It was just the last twenty-five or thirty years or so that we lock the door; otherwise, we didn't

lock the door in those days. A lot of times, we didn't even lock the car. The truck sat out in the yard. We didn't lock it, but you can't do that today. I don't know why it has changed so much, but it has.

Kiefner: How did the number of acres you farmed change?

Fitzer: Well, Dad raised a family on eighty acres. I started out with 240 for years. I got up as high as 800, then I started cutting back again. A lot of this ground was subdivided around here, so I just automatically cut back. And now they got farmers that are farming seven, eight thousand acres, neighbors; so there's a lot of farms and buildings been torn down and gone by the wayside, and larger farmers; so there aren't near as many farmers as there used to be, I don't think, in this neighborhood. Because we got several subdivisions here now, which I find out they don't want a neighbor. They like to complain. They don't want any dust. They don't want any odors. They don't want any smoke, but they live there. They want to get out in the country.

Kiefner: Right, right. What type of organizations have you been involved in, over the years?

Fitzer: Quite a few, I guess. I have been a strong supporter of Farm Bureau. Interesting part of that, I remember, back the year I got married. My dad was a strong Pure Milk Association, but he didn't belong to Farm Bureau. My father-in-law was a strong Farm Bureau member; and he got me to go to Joliet one day with him; we went up to the old Farm Bureau building—which was down across from the library in Joliet—and we went up the steps and he said he had to pay his bill. Well, we went up there; and he wanted to enroll me as a Farm Bureau member. He signed me up. He handed me the receipt. He says, "Now remember, don't ever drop it." And that was in 1945, and I haven't dropped it since. I believe in it. I think they have done a lot of good.

I've been on Extension Council for seven or eight years. I also was one of the instigators of getting the Will County Corn Growers started. We were at a Farm Bureau meeting in Bloomington and they came up to several of us farmers from Will County – wanted to know if we wanted to start a Corn Grower's association. I said, "Sure." We all agreed, and we started; and then we went out and sold memberships. We have grown and grown to where we are pretty strong today.

One thing about it is – it goes back to when ethanol first came in, about twenty-five years ago. Bob Muehling was the Farm Bureau manager, and myself, we spent several days going around the gas stations in Will County and seeing which ones carried ethanol, because then it was optional whether you put ethanol in or not. I think we only found nine stations that had ethanol. Well anyway, we put a little book together with pros of using ethanol, and also the stations that used it. And we passed it out at the fairs, and asking people to read the book, and patronize these stations. Ever since I started

farming, we have had some kind of a farm program. First, it was just pay you for setting the ground aside, then we had the PIC program; and we still got direct payments and we got counter-cyclical payments today. And I thought, with ethanol, it would be the only way I could see of getting rid of the surplus corn, because we always had a surplus, ever since the depression back then, in the '30s, we've had a surplus. Even last year, with the drought, we still haven't used up the extra corn. But anyway, that was my idea. I thought it would be one way of getting rid of the extra corn when we had a surplus and maybe when corn got scarce, in a drought or something, we could cut back on the ethanol plants. But I found in the last twenty-five years, it hasn't all worked that way. People thought it was raising the price of corn. Now they say we are using food for fuel, which I don't think we are, very much, but maybe we are. There's still plenty of corn, but it hasn't worked out quite as good as I had hoped it worked out. But I was a real strong instigator on the ethanol promotion; we went to a lot of fairs promoting it. We went down to the Springfield fair and promoted it. We had a couple race cars down there, years ago, burning ethanol. And I worked the fairs down in Springfield several years when I was on the Corn Grower Board and enjoyed it. So where it is going to go from this day on, I don't know. I still hope it can stay there.

Kiefner: What about Cooperative Extension? How were you involved with Cooperative Extension?

Fitzer: Well, I belonged to co-ops for several years. Andy Wicklein was the manager in Joliet and he got me to come out one day and said, "Would you like to join?"

And I said, "Sure."

"And be on the board?"

And I said, "I'll try. Well, just what do we do?"

He says, "Just think of it as the long arm of the University reaching out to help the farmers." And so, that is pretty much what it is. It's the university reaching out to help farmers and that's what they are; and I think they still do. But I was on there for quite a few years.

Kiefner: And was most of their role educating farmers or—

Fitzer: It was educating farmers. They had 4-H. They had homemakers. There was five different branches, I believe, at that time; and agriculture was just one branch of it. But they did a lot of good, I think.

Kiefner: What about the role of Farm Bureau? What have you seen as their main role in agriculture?

Fitzer: Well, I have been on the board a couple times and I just think they are a wonderful organization. They have done a lot to keep the farmers on top of everything. I can't put my finger on anything special, but I really believe it is a wonderful organization. I know I don't intend to ever drop it. And I think most of the people in this neighborhood all belong to Farm Bureau. We've got an excellent manager right now.

Kiefner: And how has the role of the government in agriculture changed over the years?

Fitzer: Well, I really can't put my finger on how it has really changed, roughly, but there has been a lot of changes. I think the government is trying to keep the price low, as I look back. And then they are always subsidizing us, because that meant cheap food, and that's what the government wanted was cheap food. I don't know whether that was the way to go or not, but that seems to be what they are pushing, cheap food. And now they are complaining because the price of grain got up there, and milk and so forth is falling a little bit, and they just don't like it because consumers in town are complaining because food prices are going up. And I don't know how we are going to justify it. Inputs are getting so expensive. You can't raise corn for a dollar and a half a bushel anymore. Corn, when I started farming, was a dollar a bushel. Well, a dollar went a long ways. It doesn't go far today. But we made money. I had some good years in the 60s and 70s. I bought two farms, two small farms, eighty acres each, and had some good years in there. After my children got through college, it seemed like it was easier to make money. And I bought these two farms and paid for them.

Kiefner: Tell me about your kids, Bob. How many children did you and Jean have?

Fitzer: I have got three girls. One lives in Ohio, one lives in Phoenix Arizona, and one lives here in Illinois, about thirty-five miles away.

Kiefner: When they were kids did they help on the farm?

Fitzer: Yes, quite a bit, in fact, in those days, we didn't have chemicals when they were small. I used to take them out in the field and make them hoe weeds out of the soybeans and they still remember that and they think I was mean (Kiefner laughs). I paid them, I taught them how to make money, I believe. I know my middle daughter complained one night; I said, "think of all the money you are going to make." And she said, "Yeah, but I won't live long enough to enjoy it."

Kiefner: (laughs) That's funny.

Fitzer: But it gave them a good education, I think. They all went through 4-H House, down in Champaign. Four years of college, each one of them, and I think that 4-H House is wonderful. It gives them a chance to realize what life is like. Sharing, and they do all of the cooking, and I think it was a good education for

them. It was cheaper in our respect, as far as housing, but it was, I think, a good education for the girls. This is the first year now they are not going to require 4-H as a requirement to get in 4-H house. There is less kids going into 4-H, there is less farmers.

Kiefner: Right, were you involved in 4-H when you were younger?

Fitzer: No, I wasn't; my wife was. She was a leader for quite a few years and all of my three girls went through 4-H. In fact, two of them won "Make it with Wool" contests and went to state.

Kiefner: Make it with what contests?

Fitzer: "Make it with Wool" contests, which was a division of 4-H, where they sew, make a wool outfit. One went to Las Vegas and one went down to—boy, I don't know where it was—south someplace, but I think it was a good education for them.

Kiefner: What do you see as being some of the greatest challenges you faced in farming?

Fitzer: Well, I don't really know. There has been a lot of changes. We went from all plowing to no plowing. I know plowing cornstalks was quite a feat, because cornstalks were hard. You had to go through a plow, especially after you got bigger yields, and I kept trading up in plows, and finally, in the '80s and '90s there, I got a plow with some terrible width, that would finally take the cornstalks through. Then in a couple years, you weren't supposed to use a plow anymore. They went to chisel plows where you left the trash on top. But back years ago, we had an invasion of corn borers one year, no chemicals, and the university even advocated clean plowing. Every stalk had to be covered, because that would kill the corn borer so it wouldn't be there for next year. We had quite a contest: we did all things we could to the plows, put more curve for the mouldboard, put a tension on corn, put chains to drag all the cornstalks underneath so they get buried. Now it's just the opposite, because then we got the wind erosion, and now we're supposed to leave the trash on top, and it's okay. I think that's the way it's going. That's one of the big changes I can see. And the fertilizer is a terrific change then when they came out with chemicals that just made farming so much easier. We went from a couple hundred acres of farming to a couple thousand acres with the same amount of work almost.

Hoe handling. Today, they don't even know what a hoe is. A lot of farmers never seen one or never used one anyway, and I grew up with them. In fact, that was a lot of the extra money. I used to work off the farm when I was in high school, working for the neighbors, was hoeing thistles in the cornfield and bean field. That was always a problem, had no chemical, they had thistle patches out there, maybe an acre or so, the only way you could get

rid of them was to hoe them, cut them off. And that was slow and hard, it was usually hot, but that's some of the extra money I earned.

Kiefner: So what would you say has been your biggest benefit? What has helped you the most? What innovation?

Fitzer: Well, I think the extension service, the farmer's short course that I belonged to for years – and most farmers went to that, and we had a wonderful instructor for that, Max Custer. He is deceased now, but he was wonderful, and he worked with the farmers, he went out to the farms, and helped them through the times. But I think the big things in my lifetime has been the chemicals to take care of the weeds, and the fertilizer and the nitrogen was a big thing. We can't raise corn without nitrogen. And we are trying to cut back on the amount we are using so it doesn't pollute, but we haven't come up with a solution just how to do that yet. I wish we could. We are just putting the application up. I went from all pre-plant to – last year, I split it up, about a third pre-plant and then the rest of it is side-dressed, so it feeds it just when the crop needs it, so it doesn't wash out in the tile lines or in the waterways. I don't know how we are going to stop that. We got pollution. New Orleans doesn't like us because we are sending all of our surplus food, and it is washing off the ground down there and its got to stop and I don't know how we are going to stop it. We can't grow crops to feed the world without nitrogen and how are we going to keep from polluting. I don't know. If they can solve that one, they'll have a lot of problems solved.

Kiefner: Bob, what accomplishments would you say you are the most proud of?

Fitzer: I think I was proud when I showed some of my neighbors that we could grow better crops with fertilizer. I was one of the first ones in this neighborhood to instigate it. We had a Farm Progress Show in my neighborhood in 1960, and the farmer over there didn't believe in fertilizer. After that Farm Progress Show—we put fertilizer on over there—he came around to it. The next year, he put everything on all his corn with fertilizer. That year, I had a brand new 490 John Deere corn planter, and the manager over there came over to see me to see if he could use it that year. It was just a mile down the road here from where I live, and he wanted to use that corn planter to plant the plots, to do a better job, he figured, for the Farm Progress Show. I planted most of my corn that year at night. The corn planter went over in the day and I'd bring it back at night and plant my corn and take it back the next day. I worked a few days, but most that year it was planted at night.

Kiefner: It didn't occur to you to let him use it at night and you could plant yours during the day. (laughs).

Fitzer: No, he didn't want to do that. He had hired help; he didn't want to do that. That was an interesting experience in my life, the Farm Progress Show. I worked real close, because the farmer and me, Johnny Baltz, we worked

together. In fact, we even had a tiling machine together. We tiled a lot of this ground ourselves with a tile machine. He owned half and I owned half. He had the Farm Progress Show, and I was in charge of the corn combines that year for three days of harvest, and it was interesting. Most of them were engineers from the factory. They put on the combines. When the Farm Progress Show started were engineers, and they could put this stuff together, but they didn't know how to operate it in the field. Some of them had never been on a combine and I told them a few things, adjust the stripper plates so they wouldn't plug up and so forth, which they didn't know themselves. It was interesting.

Kiefner: Tell me a little more about that tiling.

Fitzer: My dad even put in some tile, and he always said – my father in law too – and he says, "Money you spend for tile is the best money you spend." I have done a lot of it. A lot of this ground had a main line through it. It went from several farms over here, all the way down to the open creek. The first few years I was farming, we were getting stuck with the combine all the time even, and muddy. We started tiling, and this is one thing the farm program did – We had set-aside, and we'd put fifteen or twenty percent in oats. They couldn't harvest them, but then that was set-aside cover crop. Then we'd tile that, so that it would give us a chance in the summer, when it was warm, to tile this ground. So a lot of this ground was all put in small branches, usually four or five inch tile, and hooked into the main lines. But a lot of the higher ground was wet, because it wasn't tiled. So we had this tiling machine and we worked together. At first it was all clay tile. We brought them down from St. Anne, and came out of the tile factory down there. One thing I remember, for instance, after a few years they came out with hydramatic transmissions, because we used to string these tile right off the truck, right along where we were going to put them in so you didn't have to handle them, because they were heavy. We'd string them along, and the trucks with hydramatic transmissions, they would go slow enough so that we could feed the tile off, because when you have one-foot tile, they disappear pretty fast out a chute. When the hydramatic transmissions came out they went slow enough for the tile to string right along-side the ditch where we were tiling, so we always just sat them down, dig the ditch and set them right over into it. But then they came out with plastic; now you can carry five hundred feet on your back almost. (Kiefner laughs) Things have changed, but I am still tiling. I've got a farm that I just got done pattern tiling, now we're pattern tiling a farm down near Varna, Illinois that I bought here with some ground that I sold for subdivision. We pattern tiled that last year, where we put tile every ninety feet apart, then run into a main line along the lower end of the farm and run all of these every ninety feet apart into it so that every bit is tiled and this tile man plows them in. It is a lot cheaper. You don't have to dig the trench. He puts the tile down on the ground, three, four, five feet, whatever it takes, and he covers them back up and its just about as fast as you can walk, so its about half the price of what it would be when we used to use the wheel, tie up, dig

the trench, then we had to go back and cover it up after we put the tile in, but this makes it a lot simpler.

Kiefner: When did you part with the tiling machine and turn it over to someone else?

Fitzer: When the other partner with me died, then that was the end of that, because he did the surveying and I wasn't any good at running the surveyor. I never got onto it, so we sold it. Big operators come in now, self-propelled outfits, tile. It's mostly to be done by one or two people in an area, that tile, and they are professional, and it's all done by laser. I still don't understand the laser part, but they can set that up and sit on a machine and the machine automatically does it, all on grade, whatever grade they want.

Kiefner: The tiling is definitely a conservation practice as well. Have you been involved in Soil and Water Conservation over the years?

Fitzer: Oh yes, I have been on that board several years and still think a lot of them. Bob Jankowski, he laid out some terraces for me on one farm I worked. It was quite roll-y. He laid out the terraces. It's still got the terraces on it. And he helped me build two waterways. I think that's done a lot of good. It keeps the soil in place. It stops all of this erosion. We're still getting too much erosion, I think. I don't know how we are going to stop it. We're using some no-till. It's all this heavy ground. I no-till soybeans, but I don't no-till the corn. It seems like I just can't get the yields with no-tilling corn, so I work the ground, chisel it in the fall and work it once in the spring and plant it, but I think the Soil and Water Board has done a lot as far as keeping the soil in place. We still got a long ways to go, but I think they have done a lot.

Kiefner: Definitely, definitely. So what is keeping you busy these days?

Fitzer: Well, I am eighty-eight years old. It doesn't take much to keep me busy. It's like my dad said. When he got old, he said, "It's a full time job to stay alive." (Kiefner laughs) I'm not quite at that point yet, but I am doing the planting and I am doing the harvesting, as long as I can get up in the combine. I love to combine beans and corn. That is my favorite, favorite thing in all farming operations altogether. I love that, so as long as I can get off the combine, I'm still going to run the combine. My combine is twenty-six years old, but I have had it rebuilt every year, pretty near. I have a service man that goes through it, and I didn't have any trouble this year at all.

Kiefner: Do you hire help at all here on your farm?

Fitzer: I have got a retired fellow from Caterpillar that helps me when I need him, but just by the day. I can't lift the seed bags anymore. He lifts the seed bags for me into the planter. Otherwise, he'd like to see more work, but I don't have enough work for him anymore. I am down to two hundred forty acres and that's about it.

Kiefner: What about your family? How has your family grown over the years?

Fitzer: Well, I've got nine grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren, and so its part of our enjoyment just to see them. I've got one family that's over in Seneca and I see a lot of them. We go back and forth a lot. In fact, I think he might plant my corn next year. He's a part-time farmer and a carpenter and I think I am going to have him plant my corn. He's got a new twelve-row planter and I'm still going to try to harvest.

Kiefner: Absolutely. Well Bob, thank you so much for spending time with me today and sharing some of your experiences. It has been wonderful.

Fitzer: It has been a wonderful road up the sixty-eight years I have been farming. I have enjoyed every bit of it. I wouldn't trade it for any other job in the world. I knew when I was going to high school – that's one reason I had trouble keeping my grades up in high school, because my thoughts were always out on the farm, and they still are. That's my roots, and I think I'm going to die there.

Kiefner: Well, we're hoping not too soon. You have still got another crop to put in this spring.

Fitzer: I hope, God willing, I'll still be around for a few years yet.

Kiefner: Thank you so much.

Fitzer: Thank you.

(end of interview)