Interview with Janet Roney

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Monday, September 22, 2008. My name is Mark DePue, and I'm the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. And it's my honor today to talk to Janet Roney.

Roney: Roney, mm-hmm.

DePue: And I was going to ask you that before the interview, to make sure I pronounced it right. Janet Roney.

Roney: (laughter) That's right.

DePue: Janet is the daughter of Charles Shuman, and that's—Shuman, and that's very much what we're going to be talking about. But we wanted to have an opportunity to learn a lot more about the family history, and how they ended up here in the Sullivan area in Illinois as well. So, Janet, what I'd like to have you start with is probably a question you didn't want to answer. Tell me your date of birth and where you were born.

Roney: It's not a problem. (laughter) I'm proud to be sixty-six years old; I was born March 17, 1942, at Decatur, Illinois, in the hospital. One of the first of our generation, of our family generation, to actually be born in a hospital. Prior to that, everyone was born at home.

DePue: And where did you grow up?

Roney: I grew up southeast of Sullivan, on the family farm.

DePue: Is that where we're sitting right now?

Roney: That is near where we're sitting; this is part of the family farm, but it is not the center of operations of the original farm.

DePue: Okay. And your parents' names?

Roney: My father was Charles Baker Shuman, or Charles B. Shuman. And my mother was Ida Wilson.

DePue: Okay. What we'd like to do now, because I know that you are the family historian, and we always like to talk to the family historian. So walk us way to the back of this nation's history, and how the Shuman's got here.

Roney: Well, it is like almost any family, really. We all lived—we have a family that's been here for several generations. If you're interested, especially today, you can find so many things about your origins, if you only take time to look. We have been fortunate in my family to have a series of people who—the different generations who like to pass down stories. And in fact, I had a great-grandmother who was quite proud of her family history, and so it came down word of mouth.

DePue: What was her name?

Roney: Her name was Mary McFeeders Shuman. Our family, one of the earliest origins of our family, came from Virginia. The first one that had some kind of notoriety was a man named Isaac Bowman. He was a Revolutionary War soldier. He lived in the mountains near the northern part of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. And he had an older brother who was acquainted with George Rogers Clark. And Clark came through the valley, trying to find soldiers for his Illinois expedition that Jefferson had just given him permission to do. And the sum of it was when his older brother, Joseph Bowman, who became Clark's second-in-command, joined Clark's party; Isaac came too. So Isaac and his brother Joseph, and many, many cousins and close relatives, were in George Rogers Clark's party. Now, the reason that's important is twofold. Clark and his men were the ones who secured Illinois, and all of the Northwest Territory. They were able to secure Kaskaskia and Cahokia, and then eventually Vincennes, and when the peace treaty was signed at the end of the Revolutionary War, then all of this territory west of the mountains was—the new United States had a claim to that because of Clark. So my great—I think it's—I've forgotten how many great-grandfathers it goes back, but anyway, several generations back.

DePue: Yeah, he was born, from what your records said, 1757.

Roney: 1757, yes. Well, the upshot of that was, as a Revolutionary War veteran, he finally received compensation from the new government of the United States. And among them were several acres of land in the north of Louisville, Kentucky, in southern Indiana. Through the generations then, that property was maintained within the family, and also sold, but the capital was kept together, and ultimately, part of his assets, of Isaac Bowman's assets, went to his granddaughter, who married a man named Addison McFeeders. And Addison McFeeders was the first man in my family, the first generation of my family, to come to this part of Illinois, and purchase this family farm. And that was in 1853, when Addison McFeeders and

Isaac Bowman's granddaughter came to settle here. So does that give you a little bit of the origins?

DePue: Yeah. That's a great start to it. And do you know where McFeeders, was he coming from a different location in the United States?

Roney: Yeah, his family, the early part goes back to Virginia also, but Augusta County, Virginia, which is a little bit south of where the Bowmans came from. And his ancestors came into Kentucky also at a very early age, as did the Bowmans. But his family were—well, he himself did not have very many assets. And as a young man in 1819, he strikes out on his own, goes to Missouri, takes up land in Missouri when it was just—before it was a state. And signs up with the [Black Hawk War] from Missouri. He has a wife by this time, eventually she dies, and he goes back to Kentucky to kind of reestablish himself, and then marries into this Bowman—it was the Bowman granddaughter.

DePue: Is that Susan?

Roney: That is Susan.

DePue: Okay. Now, I see that he's got a title of Major Addison.

Roney: Yes. He was—

DePue: So was that from the—

Roney: From the Black Hawk War. The reason we know quite a bit about him, he left a journal, right, he wrote—it must have been five or six, ten years at the most, before he passed away. And he told about some of his experiences in the Black Hawk War. He did not have active action; he was mainly maneuvered around guarding in the southeastern Iowa area, northwest Missouri area.

DePue: Well, I wonder if you know enough about him to know his views about slavery. He's the son of Kentucky, if you will, and he moves into an area of Illinois which is heavily populated by people from Kentucky and Virginia and places like that.

Roney: Right. Yes, I know quite a bit about it. In fact, I've spent a lot of time searching out his attitude. He mentions briefly in his journal about his attitude, but he doesn't dwell on it a lot. I know enough from other things, other letters and so forth, to know that he was avid anti-slavery man. I'm not sure I can call him an abolitionist, because as far as I know, he did not do active—he wasn't a part of an organized abolitionist movement, but he was very much opposed to slavery. He had seen what it had done in Virginia—well, he was not born in Virginia, but his family came from slaveholding area in Virginia.

His uncle, his mother's brother, was a large landowner in Kentucky, his name was Wardlaw, in the Lexington, Kentucky area, and he had a large number of slaves. And when his uncle died, Addison, my great-great-grandfather, was his executor. And in the will of James, his Uncle James Wardlaw, was the direction that all of his slaves should either be freed and sent to Liberia, this part of the back-to-Africa movement. If they were not willing to leave and go to Liberia to start a new life, then they were not to be freed.

But as far as I know, from Addison's writing, he says that most of them took up this offer, and he heard from many of them years later, he carried on a correspondence with them, and I would give anything to have those letters. But they've not been kept, or not been found.

But anyway, when he came to—one of the reasons he left Kentucky, he had gone back and as I said married his second wife. Her family was also a slaveholding family. Her name, her maiden name was Richardson. So Addison was bucking his own family tradition, he was not in agreement with his own father-in-law. Eventually, he and his wife decided to come to Illinois, because the father-in-law had purchased land up here, in the Coles County area. So when Addison and Susan, his wife, came to the area of Coles County, they discovered that it was not only near his wife's siblings, who were mostly Copperhead, or—in those days, they were very much pro-slavery, this was before the Civil War.

Anyway, the sum of it is that when they got to Coles County, they realized they were in the area of Coles County that was the most pro-slavery in the whole county. It was a hotbed of pro-slavery people, including his relatives. So they sold their land in Coles, and he came over to Moultrie County, which was the neighboring county, and purchased land that now is our family home. So probably, if he had not been anti-slavery, he would have probably stayed in Coles County on the family land that his father in law had purchased for him.

DePue: But my impression is that this is better land here than in Coles County.

Roney: That is a factor also. (laughter) My husband and I found the land that Addison and Susan—well, it was Susan's land, you must understand; it was given to Addison's wife. And in those days, the wife didn't have a lot to say about things. She, yes, inherited it, but Addison, I'm sure, made the decisions about it. Anyway, my husband and I found this plot of land, and it happened to be after the big rain one June day, and that it was like in this big kettle-hole, this 200 acres of just total—a big 200-acre pond that had corn growing in it, but the water was about two feet high. And so there were other factors. Now, I can't say that Moultrie County land in general was better than that land, but the other factor, the land in Coles County was not too close to a wooded area, but this was, and this farm that we live on had about seventy or so acres of timber on it.

DePue: Do you have any ancestors who fought in the Civil War?

Roney: Yes. Well, I do on my mother's side, a direct ancestor. But Addison McFeeders, by his first wife, has two sons who went to the Civil War, and fought—two different units, the Addison Junior was in the 21st Illinois, which was Grant's regiment. And Rankin was in the 126th, and he attained—he was a captain eventually in that. My great-great-grandfather, Addison McFeeders, the first one to the farm, wrote quite an active correspondence with his sons in the war, and we do have all of those letters, about 120 letters, both from the home front and to the boys in the service, and then from Civil War soldiers back to the home front, and it's quite an interesting account.

DePue: Well, I would imagine the one who's in the 21st, the older brother? And his name again?

Roney: They were twins.

DePue: They were twins.

Roney: His name was Addison, Junior.

DePue: Okay. So Addison Junior, being in the 21st, and with Grant, so he was in all of those major Western campaigns.

Roney: Yes, until, I think, the last one that he was involved in, I think he went as far as the Murphysboro battle. But at some point, he got dysentery, and became—had to go to the hospital, had to be removed. So he didn't go on down into the Vicksburg campaign at all.

DePue: Oh, he didn't make it? But he was at Shiloh?

Roney: No. He did not get to Shiloh.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Roney: I think he was before—let's see, was that—I should have looked that up when I first heard, but I think that's—but Rankin went—was in the 126th, they eventually ended up in Vicksburg with the Army, and were involved in that siege.

DePue: Did he see some action following Vicksburg?

Roney: After Vicksburg, they went back up to—I think they were posted in Arkansas area, guarding the mouth of one of the rivers that comes into the Mississippi.

DePue: The Red River?

Roney: I believe it might have been. But he never wrote, in any of these letters, about his action, any action. I'm sure he had it, but—

DePue: The Red River campaign was not a very illustrious campaign.

Roney: No.

DePue: Okay. Now, I know that the Shuman name comes to Illinois at the same time, does it not?

Roney: Well, it was a little later, about ten years later, and, let's see. Addison McFeeders came up from Kentucky, and came into Moultrie, in 1853, and had the two sons farming. When those two boys went off to war, Addison was without as much help on the farm. And a young man, the story goes in the family, came wandering along looking for work. And the story is—well, his name was Charles Shuman.

DePue: And this would have been during the Civil War, when the sons were gone?

Roney: This was during the Civil War, maybe just immediately prior to the Civil War.

DePue: Okay.

Roney: But at any rate, he comes upon the scene here in Moultrie. Now, he had been born in Philadelphia in 1843. His father was a German immigrant, Shoemaker. And he was, I think, of very modest means. The father and his mother had brought their family West, they had lived in Lexington—wait, no, Louisville, Kentucky, for awhile, and then they ended up at Dudley, Illinois. And the family story is that the Shoemaker father, that would be my great-great-grandfather, Shuman—

DePue: What a perfect name. That didn't happen by accident, did it?

Roney: No. No, no. I'm sure they were a long line of shoe cobblers. Well, his father made a statement to his son, prospects aren't too good around here at Dudley, that was over in Edgar County; you need to go west. I'll make each of you a pair of shoes, and you go west as far as the shoes last. And when they wear out, you stop and take up your life. That's the family story. Now, our dear great-grandfather, Charles Shuman, did not get very far, because Dudley is not very far from Moultrie County. But he came through at some point and made acquaintance with Addison McFeeders, and Addison hired him to be a farmhand. The letters show, these Civil War letters, there is one that says—it's from Rankin's wife to Rankin in the field—well, Charlie and Mary are in love. So Mary was Addison's daughter. So Charles Shuman, the immigrant shoemaker's son, comes to be a farmhand, and falls in love with the farmer's daughter. (laughter) I'm sure that happened many, many times, but that was the case in our family.

DePue: Well, it also interests me that he comes from a cobbler background, but finds a home on the farm.

Roney: He finds a home on the farm, I think his—I believe that he had done some farming in the Dudley area, the Edgar County, he wasn't totally unacquainted with farming. But he was a very industrious man, and apparently quite unusual in his talents and skills, and Addison recognized that.

DePue: How did it come that Mary and Charles then basically inherit the land?

Roney: Well, because the Major Addison McFeeders had two wives, his first two sons that were the Civil War veterans were the children of his first wife. Mary was the child of his second wife, the descendant of Isaac Bowman. And her grandfather had purchased, had provided the capital for this family land. So it is my opinion that—well, as time went on, Major Addison acquired a lot of other land after he got here to Sullivan, he had a good start, after all, with this nucleus of farmland. He kept adding to it. As his sons became more mature, they also purchased land. So at one point, southeast here of Sullivan, I've never added up how many acres that Addison owned. But besides what we now call the home place, there was a considerable acreage between here and Sullivan, and it went north beyond Route 121. Then he also owned some property up near where I lived, between Lovington and Sullivan, north of town. Quite a bit of acreage there. So there was enough assets that when the estate was divided, the other two sons that were the only ones really surviving into adulthood, had their portion. And Mary, my great-grandmother, received the home place, which was really from her line, her mother's family line. So that's how it came down to her.

DePue: So it wasn't that the other sons were lacking.

Roney: Oh, no.

DePue: They got something as well.

Roney: Yes, yes. There was enough for all of them to be equally treated.

DePue: Well, I guess the next thing to do then is to take us from that time frame just after the Civil War up to the early twentieth century.

Roney: Well, that's a really interesting time. I did not know either of my great-grandparents, but I've heard lots—they both passed on long before I was born. But Charles—this is now I'm talking about Charles Shuman and his wife Mary McFeeders Shuman. Charles continued to work on the family, on the McFeeders land, and began to do some school-teaching. It was a little country school up in the corner of the farm called Pisgah. It's no longer there, of course. And he, as I understand it, taught a couple of seasons there. Farmed for the McFeeders in the summer. But Mary was quite young, and they waited a long time before they got married. In the meantime, it appears that Addison sees Charles as a good prospect for his daughter, and sets about to encourage him in every way he could. He enabled Charles to go to Shelbyville, a town nearby, where there was an academy, where he graduated there, which would be similar to our high school today. Then, Addison encourages Charles, what he sees as his future son-in-law, to go to college. And in the 1870s, to find a farmhand going to college is an extremely rare experience.

DePue: Yeah, that's amazing to me.

Roney: It is. So the family story, once again, and I've never seen this verified in any writing, other than my father's recollections, Addison gave Charles a flock of turkeys, and told him to drive them to St. Louis and sell them, and then he could use the money from the turkeys to enter school at McKendree College in Lebanon. Now, you say, "Oh, that sounds just totally wild and ridiculous." (laughter)

DePue: I'm conjuring up images of driving this flock of turkeys anywhere.

Roney: All right, the story is, and I have had this verified in an article I read, I found some obscure book about driving turkeys in the East Coast. You could only take anywhere from fifty to seventy-five turkeys in a flock. And they were next to impossible to drive; you kind of had to just sort of let them find their way. And they went about one mile an hour. The turkeys, when it came time for nightfall, it didn't matter where they were, where you wanted to stop. If there was grove of trees nearby, within about a minute or two, they were all perched in the trees to roost for the night.

The story we get is that great-grandfather Shuman would approach a farmhouse, knowing it was about nighttime, decided to stop, and so they'd rest there and sleep there for the night. And when he left, sometimes the farmer's turkeys went with him. And by the time he got to St. Louis, he had many more turkeys than he started with. So he'd made a nice tidy profit. (laughter) So he took the money and he went to Lebanon, which was just outside of St. Louis, to McKendree College, which had been founded by the Methodist Church many, many years ago prior to that. And he enrolled in college there, spent several—I'm not sure what year he enrolled, but I do know that he graduated in 1872. Then he came back—no, he stayed in that area and taught school in a country school, in Looking Glass Prairie, which is near Lebanon. And then he got a little more training at Southern Illinois University for teaching purposes, got some teaching training. And then, I was just reading recently that he got also his Master's degree at McKendree College, which I had never processed that information. So he got his Master's in 1875.

He ends up back here in Sullivan, he marries Mary, he married Mary—that's hard to say—in 1874. So one year before he got his Master's. And I really suspect—I don't know what Mary was doing while he was doing—whether he was doing it from long-distance, or whether he actually left her, because I also read a reference that he did some teaching in southern Illinois in 1876. So it's possible she was with him down there briefly, but I've never heard that mentioned. And then he comes back to Sullivan with Mary, and he does farming on the side, and he also teaches school. Eventually became the principal of the grade school, I assume, or the school system here in Sullivan. And then in the early part of 1880s, I don't know whether it was 1880 or 1882, he ran for county clerk and became county clerk for Moultrie County. So he seems to have a strong desire to get ahead. But everything I've read about him, he's kind of a—not shy, but very quiet man. But determined, and everybody seemed to think he was very—had a strong character.

DePue: And it still amazes me, though, that at a time when I would think that if you planned to have farming in your future, then an eighth-grade education would have sounded like a lot, that maybe a lot of people were not even making it to the eighth grade. And then he's going on to college and to graduate school, for God's sakes.

Roney: Right. I think he must have been especially gifted. We would call him a gifted student today, I guess. But I'm not certain that he ever had farming as his main goal, because it wasn't long that after this, he's thinking of himself more as a businessman, I think, because he started what they call the Sullivan Grain Elevator, and I'm not sure which one that was, there used to be three elevators in Sullivan, I don't know which one it was. And then he went together, after he got out of, he did two terms as county clerk, and then he started with a group of investors, what eventually became the First National Bank in Sullivan. And that is where he continued to thrive financially, I'm sure.

DePue: Okay. So let's get to the next generation then.

Roney: Okay. That's an interesting generation. Mary and Charles had three children who survived. Bertha was the oldest; the second oldest was Bliss, who was my grandfather; and the youngest was Irving. And they were born in the late seventies, early 1880s. My grandfather was born in 1879. My grandfather's name, Bliss, comes from the last name of one of Charles Shuman's good friend at McKendree College, his last name was—Charles, I believe it was Charles Bliss. His descendants still run a newspaper in Montgomery County. So my grandfather was named after a college friend. It's a very unusual name. And so anyway, these three children were, I think lived—I'm not sure when they moved from the farm, I think they were still living on the farm through part of that period. But then they moved to Sullivan, the family moved to Sullivan into a beautiful red brick home that my great-grandfather, Charles, had remodeled, more fitting as the local banker, I guess. I think they moved into that home in the 1890s. So those three children essentially grew up in the country part-time and then in their later years in Sullivan. Bertha never married; she was a teacher in the local school system. And she was kind of a family genealogist/historian, she kept a lot of these stories alive. She wrote down these stories and applied for various memberships in things like the DAR and stuff. So as a consequence, a lot of these stories are known because of her. Bliss, my grandfather, started farming, that's all he ever wanted to do, and he farmed the home place. Irving was a very talented, brilliant, handsome young man, young boy, the favorite, the family favorite. My father always talked very openly about this. My grandfather, Bliss, was pretty shy and very quiet, and not really as outgoing, in fact not outgoing at all. I'm sure there was—

DePue: But it sounds like he followed his father in that respect.

Roney: Yes. He was a very steady person, hardworking. He worked—he loved to work. And so farming really suited him. Irving graduated—I am not certain that he graduated from high school, because I read somewhere where he quit school, he was out of high school by age sixteen. Now, that could mean he advanced and got

out early, or that he quit. But he went immediately to work in the bank for his father there at Sullivan. He was a charming, charming person, and had personality just dripping from him. He had a lot of gifts that we would see today as perfect for people in the public. And he soon got involved in—I'm talking about Irving now—he soon got involved in the Masonic organization big time. In banking circles, he was on various committees for the state banking organizations. And eventually, he was a staunch Democrat, and was a supporter, a very early supporter, of Woodrow Wilson. Now, we're talking about a man about age thirty-two here. And, let's see, in 1912, that would be when Wilson was elected; Irving was born, I think, in '82, so we're thirty years old, I guess, when the convention for Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic Convention of 1912. So Irving becomes very involved in politics, and is given some credit, quite a bit of credit, actually, for—that was a deadlocked convention in 1912, I think they had forty-six ballots and hadn't come to a resolution who they would nominate.

DePue: In an era where you still selected the candidates at the convention, quite unlike what we have now.

Roney: Right. So Irving, along with a man named Stringer, from Lincoln, Illinois, who was—I'm not quite sure his position in Wilson's campaign. But they did some wheeling and dealing, and eventually, when the Illinois delegates at the Democratic convention switched to Wilson, it kind of confirmed the ball rolling down the hill towards Wilson. And Wilson gave, I guess, it's been credit that that Illinois switch of votes to Wilson was what secured the nomination for Wilson. So Irving was rewarded then as being appointed as an assistant US treasurer, which, in those days, meant that you were the head of what would be a predecessor of the Federal Reserve banks, but he was the head of the sub-treasury, they called it in Chicago, for three or four years then, from 1912 to 1917 or so, something like that. And then Irving is quite colorful thereafter, and I'm not sure that you want to know all of that. (laughter)

DePue: Well, see, that's exactly what I want to know. You know that.

Roney: He signed up for—I'll just, if you want to hear some more—

DePue: A little bit more.

Roney: I won't go into all the details. But he had developed quite a few enemies by that time, and he quit as sub-treasurer and then got involved with a department store, which went bankrupt in Chicago. And my dad always thought that he was just getting out of town when he signed up for service in World War I. Well, he was appointed—with his skills, he was put into—he never saw action, but he got involved with—about the time he got in, as I understand it, the war was about over, so they kept him in helping dispersal of military supplies in Europe, and some relief work, and he became financial advisor to Paderewski, who was considered the founder of Poland. About this time, he became interested in a woman not his wife, who was a nurse, and serving in the war. And they were eventually divorced; a

great scandal ensued, newspaper articles were published with letters from Irving when she sued for divorce. Great embarrassment to my great-grandmother, I'm sure. And—tough times.

DePue: So was that his second marriage then?

Roney: It was his first marriage that he divorced, and then he married this nurse. And he even contemplated—now, get this—in one of his letters—you see, at that time, the Russian Revolution occurred in 1917. And there was resistance, and you may have heard the story of the White Army and the Red Army. Well, he, with his banking skills, he thought he might be able to help out in that situation in Russia, and contemplated—he did not do it, otherwise we might never have met Uncle Irving, but he did not go to Russia, but he seriously considered going to Russia to get involved in financial—in helping, I'm sure, the White Army, or the government that they were trying to set up opposing the Communists. So, wouldn't that have been an interesting story? (laughter)

DePue: Yeah.

Roney: I'm not sure whether this was from conviction of interest and sympathy towards the cause, or just putting a lot of space between him and his creditors by that time.

DePue: Well, I seem to recall that he had something to do with land purchase in Florida as well.

Roney: Yes, well, he came back with his wife, and my father says, and I don't know all—this wasn't written down in any kind of a journal, but he came back, bless his heart, he had so many gifts, but he went through several different wives, and at one point, he was living in Florida, at the time of the land boom, the Florida land boom, in the late twenties, which, when it went feet up, and had the panic, lots of people lost lots of money. He was an agent for a land development agency, and probably involved in the leadership of it. He bragged to my grandmother once that he had once been worth two million dollars, and she asked him, "How much are you worth now?" and he pulled out a few handfuls of change and a few bills and says, "Well, that's about it." (laughter) But he went through several fortunes and lost them, and he would come back and ask for help from his mother, which came to be quite an irritant in the family, of course. But he was very colorful. I met him one—oh, I met him twice, when my mother died, he came back for her funeral, and I thought, Where has this man been? I never knew I had an Uncle Irving. And he enthralled my brothers and I with story after story of life when he was growing up here in Sullivan and experiences. He was quite a colorful person.

DePue: What did your grandfather think of him? They were such different personalities.

Roney: Well, I never heard an opinion from my grandfather, he was so quiet, he never passed judgment. I do know that my grandmother, my grandfather's wife, Grace, who I haven't talked about, did not think much of him, and was quite upset with the course his life had taken. And I think my great-grandmother, Mary, was very deeply

troubled by his behavior in his later years. They were quite proud at the beginning, but—

DePue: Well, let's talk a little bit more about Bliss, and especially how your father and his siblings came along.

Roney: Bliss was the middle child of Charles and Mary Shuman. And Bliss married a neighbor girl, Grace Baker, who—they were my grandparents and the parents of my father. And he farmed all of his life, as I said, very hardworking. Grace was a schoolteacher before they were married. In fact, our family has had lots of schoolteachers and lots of farmers, so that's kind of the family occupation.

DePue: We're getting a theme of both, because we're sitting in front of a great collection of bells.

Roney: Yes. I didn't count how many schoolteachers I'm related to, but my sister-in-law, I was a schoolteacher, all three of my sister-in-laws in my side of the family were schoolteachers, my mother was a schoolteacher. Already has this marvelous collection.

DePue: And how many children did Bliss have?

Roney: Bliss had three. My father was the oldest, Charles Baker Shuman. And the next one was Bernadine, who married Homer Curtis, and the last one was Mildred, who married Earl Hughes. Those were both men that my father introduced them to when he was at the University of Illinois.

DePue: Well, I think we need to move along and get to more about your father, Charles, because he's so important to American farm history, and American history in general. He was born in what year?

Roney: 1907, here on the farm, in the farmhouse.

DePue: And he grew up on the farm as well?

Roney: Grew up on the farm, spent most of his life on the farm, until he went to college. And when he went to college, his second sibling, his younger sister, Bernadine, who was a couple of years younger, was a brilliant woman, young girl, and she had advanced in grade school, in the country schools in those days you could jump ahead, and she started school when my father started school, at age four. They both skipped grades, and eventually, though, they both graduated together from Sullivan High School, and both entered the U. of I. at the same time. So my grandparents moved to Champaign-Urbana to be with them, because she was so young when she entered U. of I. So that's, yes, other than that, he lived all of his life there.

DePue: How would you describe your father, his personality?

Roney: He was—

DePue: More like Bliss or Irving?

Roney: He had the good qualities of both. He was grounded, he was very comfortable in his own skin. He knew who he was and what he stood for, and he was extremely ethical. Very strong character, and very personable. And the quality that he had that many people who get some renown don't have, his fame never went to his head. He was still Charlie Shuman, the farmer from Sullivan, all his life. When he'd come home from being gone all week, you see, every week, when he was in the Farm Bureau, he lived in Chicago, in the Sherman House Hotel through the week, and then came home every weekend. As soon as he could, he'd put his blue jeans, his overalls on, and go to town to see what was going on in town, and get his hair cut, visited, did a little bit of gossiping. He was just as common as an old shoe. He was a very unique character.

DePue: Was he working on his father's farm then?

Roney: Yes. He started farming on the Shuman family farm.

DePue: He eventually inherited that?

Roney: He and his sisters would have inherited it, but in advance of my grandparents' death, my father arranged to purchase the family farm from his parents, who then in turn gave cash gifts to his two sisters. So it was an arrangement where—and then Dad immediately put the land in trust for myself and my three brothers. So he did not inherit that land, he purchased it from his parents. And it was a way of doing some advanced estate planning, even in the 1950s.

DePue: Yeah, I was thinking that that was quite unusual for that time period.

Roney: Yes. He was very up on what would be the best way to do things.

DePue: Was this, in some respects, trying to avoid the onerous aspects of inheritance law?

Roney: I'm not sure that that was the only reason. I'm sure there was an aspect to that, because they didn't—I don't think they had the capital gains tax like we have today. But there were taxes, it did skip a generation, in essence. But that wasn't the only reason. He really wanted this land to stay together as a unit, because he knew at that time, my three brothers wanted to farm it. And if the family land had not been kept together, it just dispersed—I mean, it made it less likely that they would be able to be successful farmers. So if you had to, at some unknown time, purchase from your sisters their inheritance, then maybe you wouldn't be able to do it, it might have to go up for auction, who knows what would happen. So Dad, in advance, wanted to control how this happened, so that land would have a stronger chance of staying as a unit.

DePue: And you said that happened in the fifties.

Roney: 1954 was when the trust began when my dad purchased it.

DePue: So we obviously have to go quite a bit back into that again, because he got involved in farm organizations very early in his adult life, did he not?

Roney: Weel, he says he got out of college, he came back to the farm and got involved in local community activities, of which included the Farm Bureau. And we're talking 1928 is when he graduated. He also got his Master's degree the next year, but he was farming, though, at that time too.

DePue: Tell me again where he went to college?

Roney: The University of Illinois.

DePue: And he got his Master's from there as well?

Roney: Yes.

DePue: Do you know what he would have majored in?

Roney: I believe he was an ag-econ major.

DePue: Okay. Well, that makes perfect sense; that's following in the tradition of the family, isn't it?

Roney: Right, it is.

DePue: Okay. And did he have any involvement with the bank side of the family business?

Roney: No, he did not. My grandfather, Bliss, continued to be on the board of directors, and served at one time as president of the bank. But my grandparents, neither one of them were very enamored of being involved with the banks. So ultimately, their interests were traded off for other assets. And one of my aunts did inherit some of the bank stock, but she eventually sold it too.

DePue: Okay. Tell me a little bit about when you and your other brothers and sisters came along.

Roney: I am the youngest, in spite of the fact that I have the whitest hair. But my oldest brother, Charles, was born in 1935; John and Paul were twins, born in 1937; and I was born in 1942. And we were all raised on the family farm.

DePue: Okay. I wanted to find out a little bit more about your father's early involvement with the Illinois Farm Bureau, if you can take us through that process.

Roney: Well, he had been involved with the county farm bureau, and had worked, oh, my goodness, he was at that time—at that time, it was the Depression era.

DePue: And these are very tough times for everyone.

Roney: Tough times. And Dad had just as tough times as anyone. He did have an advantage in that there was more farmland for him to control. But it was difficult. He and my mother married in 1933, and so as I recall, they were, just like any farmer, in a lot of debt. They purchased a home to live in, and some more acreage, and then not long after that, he purchased some more land from his grandmother, who was still living. So they had just as much as struggle. But he and my mother were very involved in, and interested in, helping farmers have a better life. In those days, you didn't have electricity, very few had running water. None of the modern conveniences that we think of today. So one of the things that my father worked on was rural electrification, he was involved with Coles Moultrie, that was pretty much through the Farm Bureau, got a committee together, as I recall him saying, to work on this. They started through Farm Bureau a marketing—a Moultrie County livestock marketing association, a farm supply, which was an effort to get less expensive prices for products that the farmers needed. They got local insurance going. Some of this may have been going before then through Farm Bureau, but—and then, one of their main interests were improving our local county schools, our little country schools were scattered, every two miles there was a little one-room school. And he led the first consolidated school effort in our county. In fact, in central Illinois.

DePue: Well, I know that—my understanding of the problems, these central problems that agriculture in the United States had in the twenties and especially in the thirties was the incredible bounty of the land, and the end result was you had this imbalance, a gross imbalance between supply and demand, so the farmers were having bumper crops and they couldn't find a market for it. So the prices were very low.

Roney: And they had droughts, and by the time they started to have some of the droughts, the government was trying to figure out how to keep farmers going, and free market essentially disappeared is the way I understand it. Lots and lots of—there's a lot of theories about why the Depression lasted as long as it did, and many of them believed that we would have snapped out of it quicker if the free market had been allowed to operate in all cases.

DePue: Well, many, and maybe especially your father.

Roney: Especially my father.

DePue: Was that what drew him to the Farm Bureau work in the first place?

Roney: No, it was—I've talked to him about that. It was more he wanted to help improve the local farming community.

DePue: So all of these other things you're talking about, early involvement in REA, which was so important to these rural communities, and the grain elevator, and the livestock. So being in the Illinois Farm Bureau was kind of a natural extension to that?

Roney: Yes. And he was a very young man, you see, doing all of these things. He was just out of college. And so he got to the attention, he became eventually the county Farm Bureau president, and then he was selected as a district director, which put him on the Illinois Agriculture Association, or the Illinois State Farm Bureau board. And then he became noticed there, of course, and became quite involved in more statewide events, and then eventually, I believe it was 1948, I believe, he was selected as the Illinois Agriculture Association president, which changed his life, really, and changed the life of our family. I was just six years old when he was selected, as I recall. That meant that he no longer could actively farm, because the Illinois Agriculture Association offices were in Chicago, and it involved a fulltime job. So he went to Chicago during the weekdays.

DePue: And this is a time, this is obviously after the Depression, after the Second World War, at a time when a farm market was quite different, in terms of a rebuilding—the foreign market was, I would think, much better in terms of farming at that time.

Roney: Yes. Yes, it was. But we still had government involvement, and so Dad had developed a free market philosophy before he became Illinois Farm Bureau president. He told me once that he attended some—there were some things called Illinois Farmers Institute, and also one of these that he attended religiously that were informational meetings. And he became acquainted with also one of his professors at the U. of I. was very much—an economics professor, ag-economics professor, who influenced him a great deal about just the basic idea of the free market. He at the time, of course, this was a time of Roosevelt, and then later Truman, he was very unusual, because many farmers thought that the government had saved them from total disaster, and I don't doubt that it did in the programs. My dad's big gripe was that, yes, they stepped in when they were needed, but they never got out. And that's even today, they're still going with it. (laughter)

DePue: Well, I'd like you, and maybe put you on the spot a little bit, describe a couple of these government programs that were involved with farming that—and then maybe that your father found especially distasteful.

Roney: Well, I'm not real up on things and reaction to it, but I just do know from my general information that there were, to get rid of an oversupply of hogs, for instance, farm animals, there was the effort, and it was actually done, in not taking those pigs to market, not selling them, the government purchased the hogs, and they were essentially not put on the market. The dumping of milk, I know that went on.

DePue: Just pouring it on the road.

Roney: Pouring it down the road. This was during the Depression. And it was—I think Dad's basic philosophy was, and it was born out by how he treated his neighbors, he believed that the common farmer had just as much sense about how he should run his life as some bureaucrat in Washington, which is the basic conservative philosophy, if you really get right down to it. A trust in the common man.

DePue: And a distrust in government?

Roney: And a belief that government is there as a backdrop, but not your sustainer. A person, an entity that, yes, maybe is a protective shield, but if you are protected too much, just as raising a child, you become just a servant or a slave. And that's really where he got it. But it comes from his absolute total trust of the common man, because they were his neighbors. He knew them. He knew who he was; he knew who his family were. He knew that these people—he worked with them day by day. They were not stupid people. They were not in their financial situation because of their stupidity. It was a temporary thing. And the thing that really—I think that's what drew people to Dad, because they recognized that he respected them. And that still is a theme of conservative thought.

DePue: Okay. I want to go a little bit—I want to go quite a bit more into the philosophy here, and we probably need to take a break here pretty soon. But—lose my own train of thought here. Your father wasn't shy to use terms like socialist, in terms of describing this relationship.

Roney: Absolutely not, that's right. He was a very—(laughter)

DePue: Outspoken?

Roney: I call him outspoken, because there weren't very many people in those days calling a spade a spade. And he was not shy about controversy either.

DePue: And you expressed that he had developed these very strong views about where American agriculture was going, even before he got to be president of the Illinois Farm Bureau.

Roney: Oh, yes.

DePue: Were those thoughts, his outspoken effort on behalf of the farmers, what drove him to the presidency of the American Farm Bureau?

Roney: I know that by that time, yes, he was very committed to the whole concept of getting government away from involvement. When I say getting out of agriculture, he recognized that the government has a role in certain things, like supporting extension ideas, supporting research, safety, this kind of thing. But his problem was with their involvement in the pricing mechanisms, in dictating to farmers what they should or could plant, and how much they should plant.

DePue: Well, I know part of the effort of the price supports was set-aside programs of convincing farmers who had land, don't plant that land, we'll pay you money for each bushel of corn that you might have produced.

Roney: That's right. And then also, they stored up excess grain, and we used to have all of these grain bins all over the country, and excess commodities. And that act in and of itself acted as a depressant on the market. We had a large supply, people knew the

government had all this corn, and the market is not going to respond when there's a glut.

DePue: But if the market had played itself out, and the government had gotten out of that business, then—the problem with American agriculture is you've got two or three or ten million farmers all producing the same thing, and they're producing as much as they can to make as much money as they can, and then in the process of producing an incredible overabundance, the prices just collapse.

Roney: That's right, temporarily. But what happens? Are you a farmer? Do you know what happens when you have too much of—too many pigs, for instance? What do you do?

DePue: You drive out some of the people who are producing.

Roney: What do you do? You don't breed as many pigs next year. You cut back on your production naturally. And as a result, this is what we've lost. And even today, we don't understand that the marketing, that the free market is a self-regulating—yes, there will be some people that go bankrupt. Do we have the same number of farmers as we did in the 1930s now? What happened to them? We had government programs. They're not there. (laughter) Are they? I'm having an argument with you. (laughter) So you can't say that government programs maintained or sustained farmers over the long haul. In fact, you can make a huge argument that they had encouraged, the government programs have encouraged the enlarging of farms, because even today, there was always the support there, and you didn't have the natural give and take of the free market.

DePue: Well, this is wonderful, because we're getting to the very heart of these impassioned arguments that your father was right in the center of.

Roney: Yeah. I'll fight you about them any time you want. (laughter)

DePue: You betcha. That's just fine. His was—the American Farm Bureau wasn't the only organization out there who were advocating, representing the American farmer, was it?

Roney: No. That's right. We had a great deal of agitation through this whole period—I'm moving up to the American Farm Bureau Federation—

DePue: And maybe what we should do is take a natural break here, and then we can get into talking in more detail about his time as the president itself.

Roney: Okay.

DePue: Okay?

Interview with Janet Roney

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Interview 2: September 22, 2008
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Okay, we've taken a very quick break here just to change the tapes, because we're in the midst of a pretty lively story about your father, Charles, and his involvement—he became the president of the American Farm Bureau in what year again?

Roney: 1954.

DePue: Okay. And that was an important year for them in a couple of other respects, is it not?

Roney: Yes. In the summer of '54, my mother, who had had rheumatic fever as a child, developed very severe heart complications, with a series of heart attacks, and died in August of 1954. My brothers were still teenage age; I was twelve. And it was tough. A horrible time. And awful for my father, because my mother was his right hand.

DePue: During the time when he was Illinois, president of the Illinois Farm Bureau, was he traveling or working someplace away from the farm?

Roney: Yes. He traveled every Monday morning, he went to the train, whether it was—we still had train service in Sullivan, or later years, to Mattoon, went to Chicago, spent the entire week, working week, either in Chicago or traveling to all the various county farm bureaus, making visits, annual meetings, meeting with the board, making speeches. And—but most of the time—well, probably about half the time was in Chicago. And then he would come home on Friday night, and my mother was the manager of the home front, essentially, he had rented the farm to George Waykaiser, a young man right out of the service, I believe, and my brothers maintained our family livestock, our Angus herd, and had other livestock enterprises. But they were still in high school.

DePue: Well, with the passing away of your mother then, did your father consider stopping his work with the Illinois Farm Bureau and coming home?

Roney: No, not at that time. Since I was so young, one of my aunts offered—about that, after a year or so, my brothers all went away to college, and it was just me at home then. And one of my aunts offered to have me come and live with them in northern Illinois, but Dad would hear nothing of it. He hired a lady to be with me, and he continued his IAA work, but just for three more months he was with the IAA. By that time in December of '54, the convention, the American Farm Bureau Federation was, and Dad was elected to the presidency. And I remember when he called home, he talked to each one of us by phone, essentially to get our permission to do this. He says, "I will accept this only if you children think I should." I

remember that vividly. He did—also meant that he would—it would not change, because the American Farm Bureau offices at that time were in the Merchandise Mart building in Chicago. So he continued his weekly custom. Nothing essentially changed, except for my dad's name—for me, anyway, except for my dad's name kept popping up in the newspapers and in editorials in farm magazines and so forth. So my life didn't change that much, and neither did Dad's.

DePue: What did you say in that phone conversation that you had?

Roney: Well, we all said go for it. We knew that our mother would have supported that.

DePue: And that's what comforted you?

Roney: Mm-hmm.

DePue: But it had to be awfully difficult for a twelve year old girl—I mean, that's an age when most kids are just trying to figure out who they are, and now your mother is gone, and your dad is practically never there.

Roney: Well, my dad hadn't been there in my childhood, either. The quality that my father had, they say that quality time is more important than quantity. I kind of tend to believe that. Dad was always present when he was there. He was very involved in our lives. We took to having family meetings when he would be home on Sunday. This was also the time—he and Mom had decided to purchase this family farm from his parents; this was also the time that had already been initiated. So he brought us right along, with our knowledge and understanding of what was happening. So we felt, all of us, I think, felt a part of the family. And the family meetings helped, but Dad had—I was very close to him, in spite of the fact that he had been gone so much of my time, of my youth.

DePue: So you don't remember any really traumatic experiences during that time frame that you're—

Roney: No, other than trying to deal with the loss of our mother. That was traumatic, of course.

DePue: How about reading about your dad in newspapers and magazines and radio shows and things like that?

Roney: It was a mixed blessing. I was very proud every time Dad's name would be in the newspaper, or every time—by that time, television was here. And I—but also, I knew that there were lots of people who didn't like my dad, because it was very obvious, if I'd open up a farm magazine, inevitably there was an editorial against Dad. And I knew enough about what was going on, even at that young age, I knew that that wasn't very nice, and I didn't like that very much. And it gave me a reticence about even bringing my father's name up to people. People knew around here who he was, but I didn't like to mention it, really, that he was—because I didn't know what their thought would be, if they were farm-related.

DePue: Can you recall any specifics? Or a general nature of the criticism he was getting in some of these farm journals and elsewhere?

Roney: Well, they just thought that he was misguided, that it was impossible for farmers to exist without government help. And that he was just going down the wrong track. I remember one—it popped up in the most unusual way, one night I was reading late at night, and my bedroom happened to be towards the front of the house, so there was a light on, and this was before air conditioning, so the windows were open. And a car—we're talking midnight or later—drove by the house, and someone yelled out obscenities that I could hear very clearly against my father. It was just things like that, out of the blue, that really got to you. And it was—kind of shook you up.

DePue: Well, let's talk a little bit more in detail about his presidency, if you will, at the Illinois Farm Bureau. He was president for how long?

Roney: From '48 to '54.

DePue: And during that time frame—oh, I thought he was—okay—

Roney: You said Illinois Farm Bureau, yeah.

DePue: That’s right, I'm sorry. American Farm Bureau.

Roney: American Farm Bureau, from '54 to 1970, I believe, is when he retired.

DePue: '70, '71?

Roney: '71 maybe.

DePue: And did he travel more then? Did he travel around the entire country?

Roney: Oh, yes. Foreign countries, and—he was very much involved in the national politics at that time; he frequently was called—every time there was a new farm bureau, or new changes or whatever, there were Congressional hearings, and he had to testify, of course, all the time. He met with the presidents, all of the presidents, at various times, from Truman on. He was very well acquainted with, and met on a—he had many private meetings with Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon. I'm not sure beyond that. But he was very much involved in traveling. In fact, he would always, no matter where he was, he would call home on Wednesday night. And so our phone bill was always interesting. But he I know traveled in every state in the union several times to various Farm Bureau activities.

DePue: Was the American Farm Bureau—I mean, this huge organization, with a million and a half members?

Roney: At least.

DePue: I know it was larger than the Grange or the Farmers Union—

Roney: It was the largest farmers' organization in the country.

DePue: Was there any difference of opinion within the American Farm Bureau?

Roney: Oh, yes. I wasn't intimately involved with knowledge about all of that, but I know that there were—the Farm Bureau wasn't as settled in the direction that my dad led it when he first started. It was sort of in a state of flux. Earl Smith, in Illinois, who had preceded him in Illinois, was very much cooperative, cooperated with the New Deal. At first. But I think he began, he had a transition at some point. Then Allen Kline, who was the preceding president of the American Farm Bureau before my father was very much a free marketer. So Dad kind of stepped right into a direction that the Farm Bureau had already started to go when he became president.

DePue: So most of the friction was with other farmers' organizations and political forces?

Roney: Oh, well, that's the friction I remember most vividly. It was, I think, it's just a nightmare when I think about some of the things that happened from other farm organizations, and it was vicious at times.

DePue: Did you have conversations with your dad about all the negative press he sometimes drew?

Roney: Well, he would bring up some of it, not so much in the family; he'd always come home and teach Sunday School for the high school kids in our church, the Methodist church in Sullivan. And one of those kids would inevitably ask him what did he do that week, and so here he was, standing there in front of the kids, and sometimes he'd tell about some of the conflict. It wasn't so much negative press, I think he kind of expected that, because just like today, editorialists are in their own thing, and you know what they're going to do. I think he was bothered by individuals, more the private man, more than anything.

DePue: Would it be fair to say, though, that he liked to mix it up?

Roney: He never shirked away from it. I think he would have been much happier had people agreed with him, but he probably did like to fight. (laughter) I don't know.

DePue: Do you think he lost a lot of sleep because of these controversies?

Roney: Not a bit, I don't think so.

DePue: Did you?

Roney: After I was older, I worried about it quite a bit. Especially, there was a death threat to my dad at one time. And I don't remember the details of it, but it was in a local county farm bureau that he had spoken to, and their local people told Dad that they had received some threats. So he and my stepmother—Dad remarried, my

wonderful stepmother, Mabel—and she was with him at the time, so the local leaders, and I believe the local sheriff, escorted him out of town. He told us about that, Mabel told us, and from that moment on, I really was uneasy. The feelings were very hot, just very hot.

DePue: Was that in the 1960s by that time?

Roney: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

DePue: Well, why don't you tell us a little bit more about how he met his second wife then? How he met Mabel?

Roney: Oh, Mabel. Bless her heart. She was a legal secretary working in Chicago, and her parents lived at Watseka, or Milford, actually. And she was in the habit of going down from Chicago to see them on the weekend now and then, and it happened to be that he, Dad, was on the Meadowlark, which was the little train that came to Sullivan, and she was. And they were sitting in the dining car, and there was a curve that was kind of rough for the train to get around, and he'd seen people thrown off the stool in the dining car. So he struck up a conversation with her to—she was sitting next to him—to warn her that there might be—she might be in danger coming up. So they met that way, and he asked eventually, ultimately asked her for her phone number. She said, "I don't understand why on earth I ever did that; I never ever did before. But I gave him my phone number." And the next thing we knew, we had a new stepmother in our family, and she was—they were married in 1956, and then they had a child, George, in 1958. Her only child.

DePue: So your half-brother.

Roney: My half-brother.

DePue: Was she quite a bit younger than your father?

Roney: She was about—I think about eleven—let's see, eleven years younger. A beautiful woman.

DePue: How old was he at the time that he remarried?

Roney: He would have married in '56, so he would have been forty-nine, I guess.

DePue: So she had waited quite a long time before your father came along too, then.

Roney: Yes. And was a competent legal secretary; she was the secretary for one of Illinois' state senators at the time, with whom Dad was acquainted. So that was another one of their things in common. But one of the things about Mabel, she became, especially after Dad retired, she became sort of not only his wife, but his personal secretary. And Dad, after his retirement, wouldn't have been able to have accomplished near what he did in his retirement without Mabel's able assistance. She would take dictation and type letters and do all sorts of things.

DePue: Now, you were a teenager, about ready to graduate from high school, or just graduated, when they got married again?

Roney: Yes, I was fourteen.

DePue: Okay. So a little bit younger than that. Do you accept her readily as a new mother?

Roney: (laughter) Now, what do you think?

DePue: Well, from everything you've said so far, absolutely.

Roney: I liked her from the moment I saw her, which certainly helped. But what happened was, Dad married her, and then here we were. My brothers were in college, and it was just me and Mabel on the farm for five days a week until Dad got home. So, being a teenager, I was a typical teenager, and quite a little stinker, I'm sure, and so Dad would come home, and if we had had difficulties that week, which we did sometimes, he would patch them up, and everything would be smooth. But when little George was born, she and I had something in common that we both dearly loved, and I treasured having a little brother. And it drew us together very much, and she is the most anyone would ever want in a stepmother. She's a lovely person.

DePue: Can you remember any specific incidents—and when we were off camera here, we were talking about the wheat referendum. And then maybe that's indicative of the kind of struggles your dad was in. Can you talk about that in any detail?

Roney: Well, it seemed to—all of the strife over what direction agriculture would lead seemed to come to a head, and revolved around the wheat referendum, which I believe was during Kennedy's administration. And it was an attempt to increase, I guess, some of the restrictions—I'm not really sure of the details of the wheat referendum. All I know is it became kind of a symbol for farmers to focus on; it was sort of a symbol of what direction the government would take. Farm Bureau came out avidly against it, and several of the other smaller organizations, I think—I was just reading the other day that a ranchers' association came out against it, and a number of other things. But anyway, he was—practicing farmers were given the option to vote on this, what direction. And they defeated the wheat referendum, much to the amazement and shock of the Kennedy administration, and many of the Congressmen supporting it, also many farm organizations. And I would say that after that defeat, that's—well, one of the things it resulted in, I've been holding this magazine copy, Dad's—

DePue: And hold it steady here for just a minute or so.

Roney: Time Magazine did a cover story on Dad, and featured what was going on with the wheat referendum. Not only that, I mean, that was probably one of the things that brought him to the attention of the national media, he had already been very much well known and—see, back in those days, there were many more farmers than there are today. And the farm program, the money spent on the farm program, was a pretty large chunk of the budget, of the national budget. And so today, if a farmer

does something, it doesn't get much notice. But in those days, it was still a huge part of our economy.

DePue: What's the date on that magazine?

Roney: September 3, 1965.

DePue: And so September of 1965, Johnson is president by that time, so you've got his War on Poverty program, which is expensive, very expensive. The war in Vietnam's heating up, and that was very expensive. And these farm programs are very expensive, and I'm sure part of the dialogue at that time was, we can't afford to do all of this stuff.

Roney: Just as it is today.

DePue: Just as it is today. And I'm sure your father had some views about Johnson's War on Poverty program as well. Do you remember him expressing any views on that?

Roney: I remember his comments about Johnson. Of course, I do know what his attitude towards the War on Poverty was also, which, as you may guess, being his nature, he believed that with help, a bit of help, people can get on their feet, and he hoped that our government would support more of an independent spirit. But I do know that he—one of the first meetings he had with Johnson, he said he had never heard a president, any of the presidents he knew, who had such foul language. (laughter) He could hardly utter a sentence without an expletive. So—(laughter)

DePue: Did your dad get the famous Johnson treatment?

Roney: To see his operations car, you mean? Or what?

DePue: Well, where Johnson gets up close, and starts to lean in, and uses every trick he can to kind of use his weight and influence somebody in his direction? The powerful personality that Lyndon Johnson was?

Roney: He may have, but I don't believe it affected Dad much. Johnson was courteous to Dad, don't misunderstand me. He was. As was Kennedy. One of these other memories, and it's probably off the subject, but I remember Dad coming home from his first meeting with Kennedy, and by that time his rocker was quite famous. And they were having their chat, and Kennedy was sitting in the rocker, and they were having a good visit. But Johnson prided himself on being a country boy, a rancher. And so they did have some empathy, I think, some common ground. It wasn't totally—

DePue: But I would suspect that your father would occasionally use words like socialist programs of the—

Roney: I'm not sure that he ever did—

DePue: The association with Lyndon Johnson's program.

Roney: Oh, oh. Well, of course. If you ever read any of his editorials through that time period, socialism is one of his biggest causes that he was working against. And, yes, he did view Johnson's programs as socialist.

DePue: And I'm sure Johnson didn't appreciate that.

Roney: I doubt if he did. But I think Johnson was—the nature, as I recall, he was used to the give and take, being the majority leader of the Senate prior to being president. And I think he—that's just part of his day.

DePue: So, continuing on here, what happened to you when you graduated from high school?

Roney: I went to the University of Illinois, and ultimately majored in the teaching of history and social studies.

DePue: Well, you've departed somewhat from the family tradition.

Roney: I also departed in another way. I went on, after I taught school for a short period, I ultimately became an artist, I'm a watercolor artist, which is totally out of character to my family; there's never been too many artists—well, I had a great-aunt Bertha was an artist.

DePue: Did you stay in the local area though?

Roney: Yes. I married my high school classmate, Roger Roney, and we farm north of Sullivan.

DePue: Okay. So I take it back, you didn't get too far away from the family traditions.

Roney: No, I didn't.

DePue: Farming and teaching, from everything you've said.

Roney: That's right.

DePue: Okay. And how many acres does your husband have?

Roney: Well, we farm not quite a thousand. We own some and rent some.

DePue: Anything else that you recall especially vividly about the time frame when your father was really in the limelight as the president of the American Farm Bureau?

Roney: I recall mostly how proud I was of him, and how honored I felt to be his daughter. And that's carried with me through all these years, he's been gone now almost ten years, he died in 1999. He was an example that anyone could look at, and with great not only pride, but respect. The one thing I would never, ever do, as I grew up,

would be to disappoint him. And that, he had—I had seen his suffering, and his—mainly with the grieving over my mother's death, and I would never have done anything to add any more agony to his life. I credit him with my Christian faith, and I credit him with my determination to see our country continue, in my small way that I can, in the right direction. I credit him with my value system. He was a great man.

DePue: And he stepped down from being president, I think, in 1971? But he hardly retired in the classic sense of the term, did he?

Roney: No.

DePue: What did he do after that?

Roney: Well, he started raising hogs. He converted our old chicken house into a hog nursery and a farrowing house, and he and my brother, little brother George, had that as an enterprise. But then he got involved with being on various boards. He was on the Illinois power board; he was on the Illinois Board of Regents, which manages, supervises a group of, at that time, a group of the colleges in the country. He was on the Milliken board of directors. He became very involved in the Methodist church politics, the behind-the-scenes, the conference he attended, a delegate to the general conference. He took very seriously not only in farm politics but in personal life, fighting against things that he thought were destructive of our way of life, and in the Methodist church, he had plenty to be upset about.

DePue: So he was at odds with the general philosophy of some of the Methodist church?

Roney: Yes. The social gospel movement, which was very, very, very prominent, which he believed, as I interpreted, that it led people away from the emphasis on simple faith. And Dad being a practicing Christian, he was, he'd write—oh, he was a thorn in the side of the Methodists. (laughter)

DePue: But proud to be that thorn?

Roney: Oh, letters, I've got a file, I've seen a copy of his agitation letters. He was always fiery, our editorials. He also wrote for our County Sullivan newspaper a series of weekly articles called Way Back When. In fact, I haven’t mentioned what a good writer he was. He wrote editorials every month for his entire life in Farm Bureau, and they were always—I always felt they were very well composed. He was a good writer and speaker.

DePue: And he wrote his memoirs, too, did he not?

Roney: He wrote his memoirs.

DePue: How old was he when he finished those?

Roney: He was probably eighty-nine or ninety, something like that. He'd had a serious health incident, and then, so he really got serious about writing some things down. But his memoirs were not so much about his fights in Farm Bureau as just sort of a general observation. And a lot about family, things that he'd experienced.

DePue: But written in the same very colorful, fluid style that he was known for?

Roney: Mm-hmm. Very much.

DePue: I think he also had a little bit of a controversy when he worked on the Regents, the Board of Regents.

Roney: Probably. As I recall, it was over tenure, probably, teacher tenure. You've done your research, haven't you?

DePue: (laughter) We try to. Where did—I think I can guess what side he came down on the teacher tenure issue.

Roney: (laughter) Yeah, you can. Once again, believing that if people are left to their own devices, they are competent, and that you shouldn't have extra help that becomes a crutch. And it kind of follows through, if you recall. I have one funny experience about that. I have some very friends who are artists at the Eastern Illinois University, and one day, one of them was moaning and groaning about this super-conservative member of the Illinois Regents. And I said, "Oh, what's his name?" And he says, "Charles Shuman." And I said, "Well, he's my father." (laughter)

DePue: The conversation took a dramatic turn after that?

Roney: He didn't talk about it anymore.

DePue: About that. Well, let's just kind of ask some general questions. Looking back, and you've already expressed how proud you were about your dad's career, what do you think his greatest accomplishment was?

Roney: Being a dad. That's my attitude. He was tops.

DePue: You think he left a legacy in the Farm Bureau as well?

Roney: Oh, yeah. But I'm afraid they are—it's not as—oh, my goodness, it's been, since the farm program has started, it has been seventy years, and we are still not where Dad would have liked.

DePue: He didn't pass away that long ago. What year was it?

Roney: No. '99.

DePue: What would he say today?

Roney: I think he would continue—he got a glimmer of hope back—oh, I forget which farm bill it was. Changed the emphasis, and maybe my brother can speak more to that, but he had a little hope, but you know what, he always knew that politicians were going to mess things up. He had a very low opinion of politicians. And I think he was the kind of guy, "Well, I'll believe it when I see it," and it hasn't happened yet.

DePue: But just these last few years, there's been such incredible changes in agriculture in the United States. And much of it is driven by market forces. We've got ethanol productions, which is really putting—you would think, if ever there was a time that free market might be able to work, this would be the time. And ethanol production, what's going on in China, in India, and the rest of the developing world—

Roney: Yeah, things are really changing, and a person might point out that ethanol, though, still has a major support system from the government.

DePue: Subsidies. Absolutely.

Roney: But, yes, there are some possibilities, but I don't know. I have—my husband and I have talked about this a lot, I don't know how pertinent this is, but even today, what I think is—what we see happening are larger farmers cash renting large blocks of land in central Illinois. I have not seen this until the last ten years or so, to this extent. I'm talking about 20,000, 30,000 acres that some of these people farm. They pay huge high cash rents. Now, why are they able to do that? They have the security of the insurance programs. They know that they're not going to get caught out on a limb. And the government is, in a way, I know that many other factors have led to the diminution of the numbers of farms. But these large landowners are going to push out all of the more—the smaller farmers. Now, today, a small farm is 1,000 acres. And it provides competition—they're just protected.

DePue: Well, you've just touched on a little bit about it, but what do you see is the future of what we used to know as the classic family farm?

Roney: Well, a lot of these large farmers are still family farms. I mean, they have their whole family involved in the farming, so it's kind of hard to know—I mean, an argument could be made that it's still a family farm. There are farms that are corporations, simply because the entity works better for their management or for tax purposes. But, unlike California, where you really do see a lot of corporate farming. But, I frankly don't know, and one of the things where my husband and I talk about it a lot, I'm very happy to see that my two nephews, my brother Paul's two sons are back, both farming here, the family farm. And I really believe that farmers who are about to pass on into the happy land of retirement should really help young farmers get a hold. But it's so different, even from when we started farming. I'm not a fortune teller; I don't know.

DePue: Well, gosh. I was just going to ask you one more question, and you say that. My last question was going to be, what do you—are you optimistic about the future for farming? Do you think your dad would be?

Roney: Yeah. I am very optimistic; it's hard to mess up the best ground on the face of the earth. Unless we do some really stupid things, in the interest of more energy use. The thing that I am really concerned about, my husband and I especially, are—the Midwest, this area of the Midwest, this area of Illinois, does have the richest soil on the earth, the glacier made it rich. Underneath is coal, and the modern method of coal mining is called the long wall method. And it comes through, and they take the coal out, and then the soil collapses above it. And it's, to me, a danger of what might happen with this productive farmland. I hope we'll have the sense to take care of it, because as long as that ground is out there, it'll provide for us if we take care of it.

DePue: Thanks very much, Janet. This has been a wonderful interview, and I love to hear the stories about—that goes back almost two centuries.

Roney: Thank you. It's been a pleasure too.

DePue: Thank you.

(end of interview)