

# Interview with Roger Brown

# AI-A-L-2007-029

Interview # 1: November 7, 2007

Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: Today is November 6, 2007. We're in rural Fairbury and we're interviewing Roger Brown. This is Philip Pogue who's doing the interviewing. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's Agriculture in Illinois oral history project. We're happy to be here. We'll start with some background information as to the background of your mother and father.

Brown: My father was Ivan Brown. He was born in 1911 in rural Fairbury. He lived here his entire life. I guess we could go back on the farm that we're being interviewed—my great-granddad bought this farm in 1882. He raised a family of which my dad was a part of. It's been in the family since then. He farmed his entire life. My mother lived south of rural Fairbury, where this farm is located north of Fairbury. Her father was also a farmer and came from Kentucky and settled south of Fairbury. His ancestors come from the South, but they settled in Cropsey(??) and then later moved to Fairbury where he farmed until he retired.

Pogue: How many acres was he farming?

Brown: My grandfather on my mother's side was farming about one hundred sixty acres. My grandfather on my dad's side also was farming one hundred sixty acres.

Pogue: Do you know anything about how your family came to settle in Illinois?

Brown: We go back to great-great-grandparents on my father's side. They came from Scotland to New York. Then, from New York, they came west until they settled in Fairbury. I think they just came. They were farmers and found some land and they settled here and liked it. My great-great-grandparents on my mother's side came from Germany. When they came, it was a land of opportunity. I think that's basically why they came and left their countries.

Pogue: Could you give us some background about your other siblings and your immediate family?

Brown: I have three sisters—Delores, Marjorie and Janet. We all grew up in the house that we're sitting in. We all graduated from Forrest Strawn Wing High School which was a consolidated school. But when my oldest sister started, she started in a one-room schoolhouse. In 1946, it was consolidated and became Forrest Strawn Wing where we all graduated from. All four of us graduated from Illinois State University and got degrees in teaching. Marjorie got her degree in physical education. The other two were in elementary education. I got a degree in applied science and technology in vocational agriculture. At that time, Illinois State was only a teaching college. They didn't have agriculture. They didn't offer any other programs other than vocational agriculture.

Pogue: What made you want to go into ag teaching?

Brown: I think I've always had a passion for the farm. I've always had a desire and a love for the land. In high school, we had an extremely good ag teacher that influenced me a lot. He had a big impact on my life as far as going into ag teaching and just dealing with kids in general.

Pogue: Growing up on the farm, what were some of your chores that you were assigned to do?

Brown: From an early age, we can go back. I can remember when I was about four or five years old, chores were limited—maybe feeding some grain to the milk cows. I can remember when Dad started. (I was born in 1946 so this would have been the late forties.) His equipment pretty much consisted of two old black work horses and some horse-drawn equipment. It was not real mechanized. So we did a lot of manual labor. As we grew older, the chores increased. We had some dairy, chickens, sheep and a few pigs.

As I got older, Saturday mornings were always cleaning the barn out—hauling manure. Of course, every night was milking and taking care of the pigs. We had a few sows we farrowed twice a year at that time in the spring and the fall. We'd always be setting up with the pigs because the environment that we farrowed in was not the greatest. We improvised a lot on heat lamps and how we kept the baby pigs warm.

Then as I got old enough to drive, Dad got rid of the horses and got some tractors. Some mechanization changed on the farm equipment. I would run the tractor and help Dad in the field either harvesting hay or crops. As he trusted me, the responsibility became greater. He was very patient with me and I'm grateful for that. He taught me a lot growing up. It afforded a lot of experiences.

Pogue: What schools did you attend prior to college?

Brown: When I started school, Forrest Strawn Wing was already consolidated. It is three towns and is nearby. Wing had a grade school; Forrest had a grade school and a high school; Strawn had a grade school. I attended Wing which was just kind of like a one-room school house. It was a one-through-six. At the time I started,

kindergarten was just getting started and wasn't offered in every town. So I attended Wing grade school for grades one through six. They built a new junior high school in Forrest in 1957. That's where I attended junior high—seventh and eighth grade. Then, from there, Forrest had the high school. We attended high school in the town of Forrest where all the grades from Strawn, Meadowbrook, Forrest and Wing went.

Pogue: When you attended Forrest High School, how big was it?

Brown: At the time we graduated, we were one of the largest classes. We had fifty-six in our graduating class.

Pogue: What do you remember about religious activities and holidays living on the farm?

Brown: Holidays were very special. Being as this is the start of the fall of the year and being close to Thanksgiving coming up, Thanksgiving was always a special time as I remember growing up. It was a time when harvest and fieldwork was complete. My mother and father always had a Thanksgiving dinner. My grandparents were there with my aunts, uncles and family members. It was a time of sharing. It was kind of a ritual. We always had a big family dinner at Thanksgiving. A lot of family time.

Christmas—that was very special. We still carry that tradition today. Every year, my aunts, uncles and cousins got together and maintained family tradition. It was special time. Our families were very close. I think, growing up in the rural setting, all of my cousins were close by. We didn't have the mobile society in the forties and fifties and sixties so people didn't go as far from home. All my aunts and uncles were close by. That holiday never went by but what we didn't get together at some point in time.

Easter—that's a very special time. I know it's a religious holiday. My family comes from a background that church was very important. I know growing up that Sundays were always sacred. You didn't work on Sundays. You go to church and you relax. While times have changed, I still try to maintain those values. I feel they're good and they're healthy for society and me.

Pogue: As a student up through high school, what interests, activities or hobbies did you have?

Brown: I enjoyed doing a lot of things with my hands. I was active in FFA (Future Farmers of America). I received a state farmer degree my senior year in high school. FFA taught a lot of leadership skills. I think it influenced me and gave me some confidence. It challenged me to do things in life that I might not otherwise have done like getting up in front of people and speaking, some leadership skills, dealing with different situations, talking to people. I was active for four years in FFA.

I didn't get real involved in sports. It was something I would have liked to have done. My parents grew up in the Depression. Work was very important and their attitude was not quite the same as mine on sports. They felt like I should be home working. At that time, you had to drive when you lived seven miles out of

town. They would have had to pick me up, take me to practice and bring me home. That took time away from them. So I didn't get involved in sports like I might have liked to. But I don't feel bad about that. I think the other values they gave me by staying home were well worthwhile.

Pogue: As you indicated, you went to college at Illinois State. Was that called Normal at the time?

Brown: My oldest sister graduated from Illinois State Normal University. I graduated from Illinois State University.

Pogue: Why did you select that college?

Brown: I think a big influence there was that my dad's brother, Dr. Brown, was a math professor at Illinois State University. He and my dad were very close, so it was just a natural fit. I don't think we had really thought of any other university to go to. He had earned his doctorate degree and went there from Millikin. He started teaching math. He was there until his retirement. He was very influential at Illinois State University in math and continuing ed. He was the leader in a lot of diverse interests at the university. He kept all the stats for the boys' basketball, girls' basketball and girls' volleyball games. I don't think he ever missed a game. Even after retirement, he continued to do that. So our decision to go to Illinois State University was just kind of a given.

Pogue: You graduated and then you went into teaching, is that correct?

Brown: That's correct.

Pogue: Was that at Reddick?

Brown: At Reddick, Illinois.

Pogue: Does Reddick exist as a high school?

Brown: No, it does not. Upon completion of getting my degree in 1969, I taught at Reddick for three years. It remained a unit. It's actually RUCED—a consolidated district. Reddick, Union Hill, Campus and Essex. I taught three years there and retired. I can't say an exact date—but it might have lasted, I don't know, seven or eight years. It disbanded and the district kind of divided between three other districts. But it was a great experience. A great community.

Pogue: What courses did you teach in agriculture?

Brown: At that time, I taught everything. It was the beginning of the changing of the vocational ag and traditional ag one, two, three and four. I believe that was started with the Smith-Hughes Act in the forties. It became more vocational. So I taught Ag One, Ag Two—dealt with a lot of ag production, livestock production and crop production. Junior and senior year was split up into semester courses. We taught

mechanics, welding, masonry, carpentry and small gas engines. Those were chosen as electives.

Pogue: Did you have any other school assignments?

Brown: I had one other one that I had to incorporate. I believe it was the second year I was there. The state mandated that we teach consumer education. That would have been about '71, I believe. I could stand corrected on that. They came to me because they figured that I was the most qualified to teach consumer education. They had no material (pause to turn cell phone off).

Pogue: Get her back on...

Brown: We're talking about the consumer ed. It was a new course. There was no material. I can remember talking to the superintendent and principal, "What do you want me to teach?" They said, "You develop the curriculum for it." I subscribed to the *Consumer* magazine and we took information from it. We covered writing checks, basic life skills and things that people need in life. That was kind of an interesting year for me—developing a curriculum and trying to come up with information that would be meaningful to high school students that they could take on the rest of their life.

Pogue: Now did you have any other coaching or other job duties with the teaching position?

Brown: Being a vocational ag teacher, I had an eleven-month contract. I was the advisor for FFA. We were in charge of helping with fairs and FFA projects. At that time, every student had record books. You kept them as they do today. You had summer visits. You watched how they did their projects and helped them. The FFA was part of it. No, I had no coaching duties.

Pogue: How did you meet your spouse?

Brown: That's an interesting story. I was teaching at Reddick. Denise is four years younger than I am. She graduated and she was applying for a job at Saunemin, which is north of us about seven miles. She didn't get that job. But there was an opening at FSW at Wing where I went to grade school. The superintendent from Saunemin called the superintendent from Forrest and said, "I got this candidate who is looking for a job." So consequently, Denise got the job at FSW. She started teaching at Wing. That was the year I resigned from teaching and came back to the home farm. While I was farming, we didn't have a lot of land. I did a lot of subbing. So I was at the high school subbing, not the elementary school. But she knew some of the high school teachers. They told me about her. Consequently, we met, got married and the rest is history.

Pogue: When you returned to the farm, you mentioned that you were supplementing your income by substitute teaching. What was the size of the farm that you were working and what kind of duties did you have?

Brown: At that time, Dad had about three hundred acres. A gentleman was good enough to rent me one hundred sixty. So I had very little but, not being married at the time, didn't think I really needed a lot of money. So I had one hundred sixty. Dad let me use his machinery. At that time, that's how a lot of young people got started. We worked together and it grew. I eventually rented more land. My cousin who owns land gave me...I rented his... Again, together we only had about four or five hundred acres at that time. So I had time.

I had a few hogs. Dad was still actively farming and it was his livestock. He was not ready to retire. I worked at other jobs. Substitute teaching worked quite well. It was in the wintertime when we weren't busy with the crops. So I substituted at Fairbury-Cropsey and at Forrest Strawn Wing.

Talking about schools and consolidations and where we come from... Denise taught at Wing and at Strawn—both of those schools are closed. I subbed at Forrest and at Cropsey—Cropsey is now closed. So we've been in a lot of buildings that were schools that are no longer schools.

Pogue: What is your current farming load?

Brown: Currently, we're farming about one thousand acres. I work with another gentleman who has three hundred acres, which gives us about thirteen hundred. Between the two of us, he is employed at the County Highway Department. Today you can't afford machinery unless you have enough acres to spread the cost over, so we share labor in the spring and fall. I harvest his crop and we plant together. We share the machinery costs to keep our inputs down as low as we can.

Pogue: How has the machinery changed from 1970 to the current time?

Brown: I would say the biggest change is the size and the technology that is used in the equipment. In 1970, my first tractor that I actually bought didn't even have a cab on it. It was just open. From that to today, where they have cabs and all kinds of technology. We have, in our combine, a GPS (global positioning system) and a monitor that gives us yield data, elevation and moisture for every crop. It'll print a map out for us so we can look at different varieties.

It also works in the planter to keep track of where we plant the varieties. The planter that we started with was strictly all mechanical—no electric and no monitors of any kind. Today, this planter won't even work without a monitor. You can't even fold it. We can change the population on the go. It requires electronics to raise, lower it and to fold it. We started out with a four-row planter. I can remember, was it you said '72... I remember the first planter I used, we actually checked corn. You stretched a wire a quarter mile across the field. You would check it and you would drop a plant every forty inches. Rows were forty inches. So instead of putting chemicals on, we cultivated two different directions. Cultivate one direction to get the weeds, cultivate the opposite direction and then your third time you would go the way you were going to harvest it. We go from a four-row planter with all

mechanical cultivation and weed control. Today, we're down to fifteen, twenty or thirty-inch rows and a lot more chemical-dependent on agriculture.

Pogue: You mentioned that you were an ag teacher and started with that. With your contact with agriculture teachers today, how has that changed?

Brown: I think today, the ag teachers of today are much more specific in what they teach. It's much more technical. It's not as broad-based as what it was. I took ag in high school. When I began teaching, we were teaching as if these individuals were returning to the farm. Now, we're teaching as if they were going into agri-business as well as farming. We're preparing them for the different fields that are related to agriculture.

Pogue: You mentioned that you're farming about a thousand acres. Where is all this ground located?

Brown: Unfortunately, it is not located right around our house. My wife has family farm ground at Colfax, which is about twenty miles to the south of us. Quite a bit of it is within ten miles of our family farm. We have farm ground at Dwight, which is twenty five miles to the north of us. So we're spread from one end to the other about fifty miles.

Pogue: You have served in some leadership capacities with the Pork Producers. Could you expand a little bit on that?

Brown: I started out as being on the Livingston County Pork Producer board, where I served as president. I was vice president and the president unfortunately passed away with cancer during my time, so I became president of Livingston County Pork Producers. Then I ran as District Eight Director on the State Board, where I was elected. While on the state board, I served as vice president two years and president two years. That took me to Washington, D.C. quite a few times. The national headquarters was in Des Moines.

Several times I was involved in the Meat Export Federation. At the time I was on there, several issues were happening. Pork Producers was changing. There was a Pork Producer Board and Porkette Board—a men's group and women's group. At the state level there was also a women's board and a men's board who met. The women did a lot of in-store promotion, cooking demonstrations and education. They were very involved with going into schools and telling our story about pork production. This was because we're becoming more urban and less rural in our small communities. People don't understand why we do what we do.

At that time, there was talk of merging, because we were really after the same thing. While I was president we merged the women's board, men's board and Wyman (?). We rewrote some of the job descriptions and there was some controversy over that. But it went very smoothly. It proved to be positive because at a lot of times, the pork production was changing from smaller to bigger units.

We were having issues with environmental issues. At that time, we had psuedorabies as a big issue all over this state. We were trying to eradicate it. We wanted to be a state that was psuedorabies-free. Some of the issues in some counties... We had a lot of outside hogs yet and that created a problem. We worked very closely with the state veterinarian and the State Department of Agriculture. Today psuedorabies isn't even a common word.

I felt very fortunate and honored to be a part of the organization and to help shape it into what it is. During my time, we talked a lot. We went to Washington. We met with Vice President Gore at that time. We talked about NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and GAP(??). These were some of the trade issues that we were lobbying for and felt that they would be good for agriculture.

Pogue: What is the population of hogs now in Livingston County compared to where you were as president?

Brown: When we used to have district meetings, we would fill a room up. The number of hogs is probably greater. I cannot give you an exact number now. But the number of pork producers in Livingston County is a very small number. The number of people involved that are actually owners of hogs has diminished substantially. This isn't answering that question directly. When I started as Illinois Pork Producer president, the number of producers in Illinois dropped from like ten thousand to six thousand and continues to drop. I just read an article in the newspaper the other day that twenty pork producers produce half of the hogs in the United States. Or they own the sows that produce half, so...

All of this change started back when I was president. It was a situation. The economy was changing. Economies of scales were changing at that time. Feed costs were high. You had to get bigger. Your margins of profit were less. Your success was in numbers. Now they're specializing. That has helped in disease control also. You have offsite buildings for finishing, offsite for nursery, so you're breaking the cycles of diseases. It's been positive. A lot of the people that were farrowing maybe now... I was farrow-to-finish. I had about a hundred sows.

Now I rent my facilities and contract feed. Somebody else owns the pigs and I care for them, but they pay the feed expense and the bed expense. So the type of hog production has changed over that period of time. The number of actual producers is less, but there are still a lot of people involved. But they're involved in different ways than what they were.

Pogue: Were you also involved in the buying cooperative?

Brown: Yes, I was. I still belong to a buying cooperative. With the size of the operations, they're not probably as effective today. But when I became a member, I had a hundred sows farrow-to-finish. It afforded me the opportunity to buy inputs for my farming and hog production at the same cost as the guy that's maybe had five



hundred or one thousand sows. Everybody was paying the same price because you would pool your purchasing power.

Pogue: How have land prices gone over the last fifty years in Livingston County?

Brown: Up. Up and down, I should say. If you're going back fifty years, I can remember a farm right across the road. It wasn't even fifty years ago you could have bought it for about \$300 to \$400 an acre. Now, land is selling for \$4,000 to \$5,000 an acre. We saw those prices—\$3,000 to \$4,000—back in the late seventies. People bought. Then in the eighties we had droughts, poor production and land prices dropped considerably. But now, in the last three to five years, they've went up. But a lot of that has to do with the people who are involved in the developments in the collar counties of Chicago. They're buying farm land up there and they're paying astronomical prices for it. They're coming down here and reinvesting their money. So it's somewhat inflated because of the reinvestment. But land prices are continually going up.

Pogue: You mentioned the villages and towns of Forrest, Strawn, Wing, Fairbury and Cropsey(??). How has the population of those towns been over the last twenty years?

Brown: Actually, they've been pretty level. They haven't shown a lot of growth. Strawn and Wing—they're small. Wing's basically got an elevator and a few homes. Strawn has an elevator and not really any business, but it seems like the population is pretty flat. Chatsworth—we won't get to Chatsworth yet. You said Forrest, Strawn and Wing. Forrest has been fairly flat with maybe slight growth over the years. With the lack of industry coming to town, there isn't a lot of interest in people moving there. One thing that has probably helped the town, if anything, has been the formation of Prairie Central, because the school districts were... The number of students coming was dwindling. It was getting difficult to maintain a quality education with extracurricular activities. People were going elsewhere. With the formation of Prairie Central, we returned to a quality program of education. I think Fairbury, being a high school, has shown some growth. The most industry is in Fairbury. It's closer to Pontiac and closer to Bloomington, which also helps it. (break in tape)

Pogue: We'll give it a whirl here. We're going to be talking a little bit about school consolidation. You mentioned Prairie Central and the name of the district. You were also a board member for several different times. Could you give me the years that you served as a school board member and why you chose to be one?

Brown: We'll go back to when I returned to the farm. I was substitute teaching. It was FSW at that time. I was approached by a board member who was going off of the FSW board wondering if I would be interested. I felt being in the community, growing up in the community, having gone there to school, having taught, I would have information and background that could maybe benefit by being on the board. So I ran. I did get elected. That was in the 1983-84 period.

Soon after I got elected, talks of consolidation started. We were in deficit spending. Our educational programs were dropping. We had to drop programs like higher level math. Kids were just not getting the type of education that was going to be needed to take them into the twenty-first century at that time. We were concerned about that in the rural community. We wanted our children to compete in a world market of work. They're competing with kids coming from schools that offer a lot larger selection of programs and background.

Seriously, our talks initially started with Fairbury-Cropsey, which was a neighboring town five miles away. In these two districts, it was not uncommon to talk. They had talked in the sixties about consolidating. There was talk of consolidation then, so it wasn't new language that the community had never heard of. But both districts at that time were losing enrollment and losing programs. At the same time, the state was looking at rural education and was encouraging consolidations. There were some incentives at that time that really made it worthwhile to pursue. So we started talking.

At the same time, the community of Chatsworth, who had never gone through a consolidation, was also experiencing some of the same problems that the other two were. Fairbury-Cropsey and Forrest-Strawn-Wing had already gone through the consolidation process in the forties. Chatsworth had never gone through that. So the twenty-one board members talked individually and we talked as boards.

I can remember when we decided that we were going to pursue it, twenty-one board members sat down and we functioned as a group during these talks. I can't remember the dates; I don't have the timeline in front of me. We had a meeting at Forrest and we were going to take a vote on whether to do it or not. At that time, all twenty-one of us were there. We all opened the meeting so it was official. Each board voted. Forrest Strawn Wing board voted. "We're going to do it." Fairbury-Cropsey board voted that they were going to do it. Chatsworth, having never gone through this, was apprehensive. They voted not to do it at that time.

At that same meeting, those Forrest and Fairbury boards looked at each other. "Do we want to do it ourselves?" So we decided we were just going to do the two districts. After the meeting, Chatsworth asked if they could have twenty-four hours to reconsider. We allowed that and, consequently, they changed their vote. They became part of the initial group to go along with Prairie Central.

We set up. We had Superintendent Calvin Jackson in Fairbury. Chatsworth had one. Forrest had a superintendent. The three superintendents worked very closely and they put information together. Financial data and educational data. I can remember the month of October before the election in November for consolidation, we probably attended sixty meetings. We all didn't attend every one. Everybody wanted information. It didn't matter what size the group. We talked to organizations and to churches. We tried to give them honest information to the best of our knowledge about what was going to happen and how we were going to set it up.

When November came, it was voted. It was overwhelmingly successful. It has been very successful every since.

Pogue: Now you mentioned some incentives were available for consolidation. What incentives were you talking about?

Brown: The major ones were financial. We had debt and Chatsworth had debt. What made it very successful was Fairbury had just passed a bond. So they showed no debt. The state was going to equalize. If you went through a consolidation, they would equalize the debt so everybody had the same debt. So if one was lower, they would pay the other districts down to what that was. By Fairbury being in the black, it eliminated our debt. So that was a plus.

The other issue that you have in consolidation is teacher salary and contracts. The state would equalize the contract to the best contract. We were working under three different salary schedules and we would have to merge that into one. Naturally, the teachers are going to want the best of the three. The state, by equalizing that for a period of time, removes the financial burden of consolidation. It's not forever, but for a period of time.

Pogue: How did you decide where the schools would be located and what schools had to be closed?

Brown: I think it was probably a natural thing. By the time we were talking consolidation, Wing, Strawn and Cropsey (??) had already been closed. We didn't really close any buildings. Chatsworth High School was in bad need of repair, so it was determined that it would be eliminated. But Chatsworth had a nice grade school. So we maintained the grade school in Chatsworth and the grade school in Forrest. Forrest has just built a new high school and so we adapted it to the junior high. So we had a grade school and a junior high in Forrest. Then Fairbury was a natural place—it was the largest facility—to use as the high school. It was a high school and junior high. By moving the junior high to Forrest out of there, it could accommodate the students for a high school. Westview was the elementary school at Fairbury. Other than Chatsworth High School, which we ultimately tore down, we didn't really close any buildings.

Pogue: The disadvantages that critics might have been arguing at this time when the vote was being held—what were they?

Brown: A couple of them were, "You're losing your name," "You're losing your identity." But other than that, the one biggest concern that we had was bussing children. In Fairbury, Forrest and Chatsworth, you had town kids who always walked to school. Now bussing becomes an issue because every student will be bussed. I remember a lot of phone calls dealing with bussing issues by parents. The distance that you bus them. They were very concerned about the time their child would be on the bus. What time would they be picked up? So transportation was a major issue at that time as well as the school identity. I know there were concerns in every town that if

you don't have the high school, you don't have sporting events there and restaurants. It can have an impact on the town itself.

Pogue: You mentioned as far as advantages getting rid of some of the debt and giving greater opportunity for students. What was some of the greater opportunity?

Brown: Educationally was the big one. We could offer higher level math, higher level science classes and higher level English classes. Some of the industrial arts and ag classes were getting small. We were looking at having to drop some of these programs. Basically we were meeting the needs of a larger group of students. As your numbers dwindle, you still have students with varied needs. You have the ones who need a little extra help and you have those who need to be challenged. You can't afford the staff to deal with that broad range like you can with the larger number of students. You can hire the personnel to deal more specifically with the varied needs of the kids as well as the program.

Football, basketball—some of the higher number sports. In track, we were having higher difficulty getting numbers out to be competitive. Even training the kids, getting them in shape, so there are injuries as a problem.

Pogue: What was the view of the local newspaper or media of the consolidation?

Brown: The power of the pen and print can make or break any issue. From experience with previous talk of consolidation, we had a local newspaper *The Fairbury Blade* in the past that was against it. This time, every article was very positively written. They were supportive of it. I would say that newspaper and radio probably had the largest impact in helping us pass the consolidation.

Pogue: When you had your public meetings to discuss the upcoming vote, how would you describe those public meetings?

Brown: I would say probably 90 percent very positive. We learned some things early on when we had these public meetings. Sometimes there are some negative people who like to dominate meetings and like to become center stage. It takes away from those who really come and want to find the information out and try to understand what exactly is happening. At a lot of these large public meetings, we would meet as a whole. We would go through the scenario of how the consolidation was going to work, the benefits, the pros and the cons.

Every time somebody had an issue, we would try to address it to the best of our knowledge or ability as to how it would work and, while you never know for sure, we were at least honest in our efforts to explain. Then, we would break up into smaller groups where sometimes people feel more comfortable asking questions. In a more one-on-one situation rather than in a group of two hundred, they may ask questions. Our real concern and focal point was to get every person to ask. If they had concerns, we wanted to hear it to make sure we were doing it right.

As I recall, there was one thing, one statement we made—and it turned out to be fine—but we said we would have a K-6 in every town. Before the first year, the numbers had grown and we had three school districts of declining enrollment. The year after we consolidated, the enrollment started increasing. We have no explanation for that, but it happened. So we moved the sixth grade out of Forrest to Chatsworth. We had K-6 at Chatsworth and K-5. But we talked to all the parents and we explained the situation. It was either keep it the way it was and have a very large sixth grade class at one town and a small one at the other or put them together. The parents were very, very good about listening to that and adjusting to that.

Pogue: The election was held in what year?

Brown: 1985.

Pogue: And what happened in 1986?

Brown: Consolidation. The '85-'86 school year was the first full year of consolidation, so I guess the election was in November of... No, it was in October of '84, because it was a November election. That July of '85, it became Prairie Central. Everything was put together and in place. There were a few rough areas with transportation—getting busses and picking kids up. That was all new but we worked through it.

Probably the thing that brought the towns together was that we had a winning football season and our communities are sports-minded. People enjoy sports—football, basketball, baseball and volleyball. They're very supportive of the sports program.

Football is your first sport in the fall of the year and we were very successful. That just seemed to have a calming effect. There were concerns about how all these kids were going to be playing from Fairbury. No Chatsworth or no Forrest kids were going to get on the team. As it worked out, nobody even really paid attention whose kids... If you looked at the roster, there were kids equally pretty much from every town and it just wasn't an issue.

Pogue: Now you mentioned that the sports teams were helped by the consolidation. What other extra-curricular programs benefited by having more students?

Brown: You had FFA. We have a science club, we have a lot of academic clubs within the school that we never had before. I'm trying to think of names now and I'm not coming up with them. But I think the extra curricular programs were expanded. We have speech now. I'm going to stop because I can't think of them.

Pogue: How did the music program deal with this change?

Brown: Music. I probably should have said that that's one program that really blossomed. Now we have jazz band, marching band, choir and vocal. A lot more kids are involved in it. Probably, the numbers were down with the music program. But now we have the numbers that just make the whole program. We have musicals and we

have plays. Well, we are going to have a play this year. We've always had musicals every spring, but now we're trying a play and a musical.

Pogue: The district changed its name. None of the three original districts kept their name. You also changed colors and nicknames. Were there any other things that you did?

Brown: Colors, mascot and name. We allowed the community to be a part of this. We had a little contest. Students and parents could submit them. The board, of course, would have to approve them. There were a lot of Prairie Centrals. There's Prairie Central Co-Op. It was questionable but it just seemed natural living out here on the prairie that, you know, "Prairie Central." The concern that people had—"Prairie Central" doesn't tell you where anything was at. But it was. Unit Eight was just a district that the original superintendent... They give you the number. Colors, we let them pick it. Mascot, they chose the hawk.

There were a lot of different things. If I could go through my notes, I could probably find all of them. The hawk. Then there was the question then whether it's the "hawkeye." They didn't want to be exactly like the Hawkeyes of Iowa. I can remember a lot of those discussions dealing with the colors. I know one board member really liked Columbia blue and some of them liked navy. So we chose Columbia, navy and white as our colors. As you know today, for the first several years, that hawkeye was kind of like a redbird. We called him Huey the Hawk at that time. But now as time goes, a lot of those initial discussions are kind of diluted. Coaches have their own ideas, so we have a lot of different variations of the Prairie Central hawk right now. The official one is Huey the Hawk.

Pogue: You talked about the twenty-one board members that had to make the decision for the three districts. How did you decide? Were there any unique situations to go to a new seven-member board?

Brown: Actually, there was a lot of discussion on how do you do that. Representation is an important issue. The twenty-one of us looked at the size of the district and where the representation should come from. Fairbury being the largest town, we thought they'd have three. Then Forrest and Chatsworth would each have two. While we are an election at large, there are no guarantees. For that first board, each board slated the board members they would like to run. While anyone could pick a petition up, the twenty-one board members slated the ones that they were going to run on the ballot for the new Prairie Central board. There was some competition and there were others. But we were up front with the public and the slated board did get elected on that first election.

Pogue: Today is that the same practice?

Brown: You mean slating the board? It's still an election at large. We'll step forward. Maybe that's a future question. Four years ago now, Chenoa also was looking at doing something. Their enrollment was dropping, their programs were dropping and they didn't have enough students. They had classes with three or four kids in them, and

they went through a lot of different scenarios of what to do. Ultimately, we went through an annexation with Chenoa. Once again, there was a school board election. Right now we have two board members from Chenoa. It's not an issue at this time. The community has accepted the fact that it's better to have seven good board members as to worrying where they're from.

Pogue: What were the big issues as a member of the board of education for that first year of consolidation?

Brown: The issues that we had, I would say, was first organization. The flow of students, what academics and hiring the staff that we needed. When we did this, there was naturally a reduction in staff. We didn't need a number of teachers, so if there's a downside to that... But that's also where your greatest savings is, in salaries. So reorganizing teachers and trying to put teachers in areas that they're comfortable with without disrupting their lives too much. But as you know, we go on seniority and on what their credentials are. Some of them had to go to a different town from where they were at. So you had voluntary and involuntary transfers. Custodial staff—you dealt with it.

Chatsworth—when we tore the high school down, they didn't have a cafeteria in their grade school. So we had to put a cafeteria kitchen in Chatsworth Elementary. We were dealing with that. Those were some of the functional or day-to-day things we were dealing with on the way to the start of the school year. Once the school year started, probably the first few days were getting kids on the busses and picking up and transporting kids from school to school with bus drivers. Developing bus routes was a whole new issue. We were combining different towns and bringing Fairbury students to the junior high at Forrest and Forrest and Chatsworth high school students to Fairbury. For our transportation director, that was quite a challenge.

Pogue: How did you handle three different sets of board policies and salary schedules?

Brown: Salary schedules were probably predetermined by Fairbury which had a four-by-four, which was better than—and a higher starting salary—than what Chatsworth or Forrest had. From a negotiating standpoint, we didn't really have a lot to negotiate because the state was going to make that equal. So that was given. Now we had the language. Our superintendents worked very well. We went through the bargaining process and developed a language looking at all three. Then it was adopted.

Between the time of the vote that we would consolidate and the actual... We voted in October but there wouldn't be another board election. The new district would be formed July 1. You couldn't have a board election at the same time that you had the consolidation election, so there was a period of time we functioned as a twenty-one member board. If it dealt with Prairie Central, twenty-one board members would meet. If it dealt with our individual districts, then we met as individual districts. We'd each go to the same location; we would open up our individual meetings and call the meetings to order. If it dealt with Prairie Central,

we all twenty-one would meet and discuss that issue. Then we'd vote on it as individual board members of our districts.

Pogue: Did the consolidation answer the questions of the advantages that were being proposed?

Brown: Yes.

Pogue: And you seem to indicate that transportation seemed to be the biggest challenge of the early stages of the consolidation.

Brown: It was and at this point in time, people have accepted it and it just isn't. We don't hear a lot of issues about consolidation. At the time of this consolidation, our district was about a twenty-mile square of about four hundred square miles. You had people in the far corners of the district that might be driving twenty-five miles to Fairbury to a sporting event. But while it was discussed during that consolidation process, now it's not an issue.

Pogue: Because of the success of Prairie Central consolidating, a number of other schools looked at how it was done as a model. Were you involved in any of that?

Brown: At the time, I was on the school board yet. There were several districts that would call or we could go visit. I wasn't personally involved. Art Lehman (??) was board president. I can remember at the school board convention, he and Dr. Jackson were part of a seminar on school board consolidation. I might add that we were unique. Our community is very educationally minded and very supportive of education. I don't think every district maybe has the same population that has the same attitude that we had. I guess I feel very fortunate to live in a community where people put education high.

Pogue: Coming up to final thoughts, how has your life in agriculture changed over the last few decades?

Brown: I think, unless it's just my age, I feel that farming is a lot more stressful today than it was in 1972. I think the cost of machinery, the cost of inputs and the risk that's involved is much greater today. When I started, probably 90 percent of the land was crop share where somebody owns it and you farm it. You split the input and you split the costs.

Today, we have a large movement to cash rents where the risk is all shifted to the farmer. You pay all the inputs, you pay the landlord a set amount of cash rent. As corn prices go up or land values go up, they can raise that cash rent. There's competition for land today because of the number of acres you need to spread the cost over. Consequently, some farmers are more willing to pay more than others. So a lot of young people or middle aged people might be getting pushed out because of the higher cash rents. They just don't have the acres that they can spread that cost and risk over. I think a lot of farmers are being challenged by the cash rent. Landlords don't like to pay the bills. They want a set income.



I think that aspect of agriculture has really changed the attitudes of a lot of farmers. I think the younger ones going into it maybe have not gone through the eighties when we had the droughts and stuff. They feel confident and think they're moving ahead. I think some of us, like my father who went through the Depression, got reserved. When you went through some hard times, you're not as aggressive as the younger ones. I think that's a major change in the way we rent farm land.

The other thing, I think, is the size of the machinery and the technology that's involved in the machinery today. It's electronics. It's still the typical mechanical way it turns the wheels and the engine starts, but everything that controls the way that tractor or that combine operates is all electronics, computer-generated and much more technical than it was even ten years ago.

Pogue: What advice would you give someone thinking of pursuing a career in agriculture today?

Brown: I think there are a lot of opportunities. When you say, "pursue a career in agriculture," there are many, many different avenues you can take. Getting into farming—unless you have the land base or have access to where you can grow into it, it would be very difficult for a young man to just go out and get started. You're going to have to have the land base and you're going to buy the machinery. So unless your father or some family member is in it and can pass it on and you can grow with it, it would be difficult.

But with all the specialty crops, the different corns, the non-GMO, the GMO, genetically altered plants that we have; you can get into the many agribusiness-related types of agriculture. When you're in high school, you need to be thinking about that. It's so specialized that you need to be thinking about the career that you would like in agriculture and start taking classes that would lend itself to that, to get into the university of your choice that would specialize in these areas. I would think if you want to return to agri-business or agriculture and have an impact into the future, you're going to have the knowledge base and have the background.

I think growing up on a farm, if you live on a farm, and don't want to return to the farm but stay in agriculture, you have a definite advantage over someone who maybe grew up in the city wanting to get into ag-related business. You have that background of knowledge of where you came from and some of the basis for what's happening today in agriculture.

Pogue: What would you like to be remembered for?

Brown: I'd like to be remembered, I guess, I hope someday that I'd made an impact on society for the better. I'd like to be remembered for my honesty and caring for students, society and community—not for my work achievements but more for what I left as an individual, as an example.

Pogue: What advice would you give to your children or grandchildren in general?

Brown: I think I have given them this. I would say, grandchildren and children: pursue a career that you're happy with, but what you do for a living helps you pay the bills. It's what you do for your fellow man that really counts. Find a career in an area that you're interested in and that you enjoy doing. Then take that home with you and be a part of your community and share that enthusiasm. Help one another.

Pogue: You mentioned one other thing about the consolidation and that dealt with some transportation changes that you as a board considered. What were those?

Brown: One of them was with extracurricular activities. As you recall, each town had a high school. When they had sporting events and practices every night, parents could just run into town, pick them up and bring them home. When activities were shifted to other towns, the distance became further. As a compromise, we agreed to a shuttle bus that would run after practices. Practices would have to be over at a certain time. Busses would take those athletes back to their respective towns so parents didn't have to drive that extra distance on a daily basis.

Pogue: Thank you very much for the interview and for giving us some information dealing with agriculture in Illinois and in Livingston County, your work with the Pork Producers as well as the Prairie Central Board of Education and its consolidation.

Brown: Thank you very much. I enjoyed it.

(End of interview)