Interview with Benjamin File

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Interview # 1: March 8, 2008

Interviewer: Philip Pogue

Pogue: This is March 8, 2008. We're in the home of Ben File. This is an Agriculture in Illinois Oral History Project interview through the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. The person doing the interview is Phil Pogue. At this time we'll be reviewing questions related to Mr. File's life on the farm, and we'll start with you giving a little background about your parents.

File: Well, my grandparents came here over two hundred years ago. In fact, all four of my great-grandparents came here, and they hung around Bond County for all their life and all their descendents, and that's why I'm related to so many people here. The roads weren't very good, so everybody married the girl over across the creek. In fact, my father called on my mother the day she was born, November 3, 1884. It so happened it was the same day as Grover Cleveland was elected President of United States. He called on her because his mother was a midwife and she came across the creek to deliver my mother. She brought her little boy with her, who was two years old, so that ended up being my father. So he ran around the house while my mother was being born, but he didn't ask her to marry him for twenty years. Then, she said, she'd be delighted to marry him, but she wasn't going to go to the Philippine Islands where he had a job. He'd been selected to work for William Howard Taft, who later became President of the United States, but at that time was the Governor General of the Philippine Islands. And so he went without her. But after two and a half years he couldn't take it any longer, and so he came back to Bond County and came by way of Japan and bought her some silk material for a wedding dress. He arrived at home here the first of October and she made her wedding dress, and that was a hundred years ago in 19 ought 7. The dress is still hanging down in our closet. So, I've been here ever since. He was quite an adventurer, my father was, and so they first homesteaded in Oregon when they got married. They took the train to Spokane, Washington, and then they took a stagecoach to Bend, Oregon, and then took a covered wagon to Redmond, Oregon. He settled on forty acres of land and, if he stayed and cleared it off for three years, it was his. So, he built himself a house and they stayed there for three years. And he told me, he says, "It was okay. I had to clear it off, and there was plenty of water; it was all irrigated. I had to go out and turn on the water in the morning and then turn off the water at noon, and then I turn on the water, off the water, on the water, and it was so much easier to come back to Illinois and just pray for rain." They returned to Illinois and I was born here ten years later.

Pogue: Have you ever been to that place?

File: Yes.

Pogue: In Oregon?

File: Yes. We, Mary and I, went, and I was there with my folks. And I saw the house that he built. It's ah (laughs) wasn't like this one here. It was more like a chicken house, what I'd call it. It had one or two rooms and the bed went up on the side of the house wall; you pulled the bed down when it came nighttime. He figured that out (chuckles). They were happy there and they didn't have anything, but all the other neighbors didn't have anything either. He told me one time, he said "Well, we had a dime, and we gave it to Mrs. Jerritt for eggs and Mrs. Jerritt would give it to Mrs. Smith for some milk, and then Mrs. Smith would give it to Mrs. Walter's for some meat. The dime just made this whole circle and came back to us eventually for eggs. So that's what—talk about our government giving us some refunds–they expect that money to be circulated around to improve the economy. That's how it works.

Pogue: Do you have other siblings and immediate family?

File: Yes, I have. I'm the last one. My brother, Warren, was the oldest. He's eleven years older then me and then I had a sister, Florence, and she came along a few years later, and a brother, Fred, who was four years older than me. I was the last one and I'm the only one left now. It's good to have them to lead me on, but they're all gone, and I miss them all.

Pogue: When you grew up on the farm, how old were you when you remember doing activities on the farm?

File: Well, the first thing I remember on the farm is when I was chewed up by an old sow; my Dad raised lots of hogs. I was missing one time from the house and my Mother heard a faint little cry. She heard it again and it was out in an old hen house, where an old sow was. So, she ran out there and this old sow had some little pigs. She had rooted them around and had me tossing around in her bed, her nest. And so, my Mother picked me up, and she didn't know whether I was dead or not because I was all dirty and bloody. She carried me to the house and she said she heard the sweetest words that she'd ever heard in her life, "I don't have my shoe," and looked and I had one shoe missing. So, she knew I was still okay, (chuckles) I wasn't dead (laughs) cause she said she didn't know. And so I always wondered how old I was, and I didn't know. I remember certain little things about the old sow and her taking me into the house. A few years ago I had a neighbor call me on the phone and they were cleaning up their kitchen and their linoleum had some old newspapers in it. The headline says, "Man, boy pretty well chewed up by an old sow." It was Benny File and they wanted to know if that was me and I said, "That's me alright." I still have a scar too, to show that I got chewed up, but I wanted to know what the issue of the paper was. He says, "It was September 25, 1925" and I was born on April 29, 1923, so I was two years and five months old. If something really dramatic happens to you, you really know about it. I don't remember other things, but I do remember being chewed up by the old sow.

Pogue: As far as chores when you were in 7th grade through high school, what kind of chores were you doing?

File: Well, when I was little, my folks lived about two miles from the school house and, so, my brothers and sister walked to school everyday. The roads would get muddy and there wasn't such a thing as a snow day; had to get to school everyday. So one day, my brother, Fred, got stuck in the mud coming home and they left him there. That evening, my Mother wanted to know where Freddie was and my brother said, "Well, he's in the mud hole about a mile back." My Dad couldn't take a car to get him because our roads are too muddy, so you got him on horseback. And so when I was six years old then, we didn't have [highway] 140 down here and the roads were muddy and there wasn't any gravel. They bought a house in Greenville, 406 South 5th Street, so we all moved to Greenville when I was in the first grade. I spent six years in the wintertime going to Central School in Greenville. Each class had its own room—holds like thirty or forty in each class—1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade. Then, when they built the highway and we got the roads improved, I spent my last two years in a country school out at Mt. Vernon School. My sister was my teacher, which didn't pan out too well (both laugh). I had six years in the city schools and two years in the country school. As far as chores go, we had one cow and my older brother milked the cow, then he taught my next brother to milk the cow, and then they taught me. I didn't have anybody else to teach, so I always ended up with milking a cow. I burned the barn down when I was little, but they still kept the cow anyway. I had to just milk her out in the pasture and then, as to other chores, I probably milked the cow and gathered the eggs. Everybody had chickens, eggs, and cows, and milk. I remember we had a lot of hogs and, when I was twelve years old, and my cousin was fourteen, we took a load of hogs to the National Stockyards, just the two of us. You didn't have to have any driver's license because there wasn't such a thing in Illinois at that time and we got along real well with it. But, I still remember, he was fourteen and I was twelve. He drove down and I drove back. We stopped to get hamburgers; five hamburgers for a quarter, nickel a piece. So that was our treat.

Pogue: When you talk about the Mt. Vernon Rural School, tell me a little bit about that particular school. You said it was taught by your sister.

File: Yes. She taught me; I was one of her students. She was eighteen and I was twelve, and so I, you know she's my sister, did some things that normally you wouldn't do, such as try to embarrass her with questions that I knew she didn't know the answer. And I remember one time raising my hand and asking her "What's the capital of Afghanistan?" I asked so everybody could hear, and she had no idea. But I got my answer when I got home, and my father had heard about it. He got a hold of me and told me that since I was a geography nut, I knew all that stuff. He says, "I know you know how long every river is around the world and how high every mountain is, but when you go out to that schoolhouse tomorrow, nobody's going to know that you know the capital of Illinois is Springfield." Now that's been seventy-five years ago, and I remember (both chuckle) being told that and it left a lesson with me. So I shaped up and knew better than to embarrass my sister anymore after that (laughs).

Pogue: How did that rural school compare to what you were doing when you went to schools in Greenville?

File: Well, I don't think the competition is there in a rural school. I went out to the rural school after being six years in a city school, where there are about 40 of us together and we study the same thing. Then I got out to this country school and there I am, by myself, and nobody else is in my grade. There's some in the other 7th grade and there were two in the 8th grade, and then, you know, a lot in the 3rd, 4th, and they're all scattered around. As far as me trying to get ahead or do better because of somebody else, I didn't have any competition in the country school—just go at my own pace—while in the city school I think there are more requirements. Other people were doing the same thing and you want to try to get ahead, if you can, or do a better job not knowing that, like in a country school, there was nobody there, why it wasn't a challenge for you.

Pogue: How did your sister deal with all these grades at one time in a building?

File: Ah, yeah, there was about, I think maybe thirty or forty in the class in a room, and we were about six grades in there, as I recall, and she got the job. Oh, she was happy about the job. She got $55 a month and she was the janitor and made the fire and cleaned the stool and taught the kids and the whole bit. All the teachers did that in all the districts. That was normal for them. And so, that's the way it was there.

Pogue: And how did you get to school?

File: We walked to school. However, by this time in 1936, we had some gravel, and so we could get to school without getting mired up in the mud, and so that's why we moved back to the country. Those six years we lived in the city in Greenville, in the wintertime, and then moved out to the country in the summertime. In fact, we had both houses, so that was our lifestyle for six years.

Pogue: As far as high school goes, could you explain a little bit about it?

File: Well, I went to Greenville High school and there were buses running at that time, and I'd catch the bus on 140, which is just a half mile from my house, and I could do that without worrying about the roads very much. I could walk that and catch the bus, and I spent four years in Greenville High School, but I couldn't play sports very well. It didn't work out because we didn't go to Greenville like you do today; when you've got a car and you run in and out and in and out. You just went in every week or two and got everything. And so there was no way I could participate in sports, but I did play in the band. We had band practice before school and during the school period and noontime and lot of times evenings. We had a very good band. That's what I remember about being in Greenville High School was the band, and I still remember the kids in the band. In fact, their music director married the first clarinetist in the band and it's good memories. We won the first national contest in Elkhart, Indiana, and won another national contest in Little Rock,

Arkansas, and won another one in Kansas City, Missouri. So the highlight of my life in the Greenville High School was being in the band.

Pogue: And then you went to the University of Illinois?

File: Yes. I went there in 1942 and I spent one year there. Then I went back a second year, and the war was on, and I came home the first of October, about the middle of October to see how things were going. I had two brothers, they were both in the military, and the hired man had left the farm for working in the city in the defense plant, and my Dad was here by himself. And though he wasn't sick or anything wrong, I just felt like maybe I was needed on the farm. So I went back to Champaign and got my books and came home. And that was the best move I ever made because later that month, the first of December, my father got sick at the church, and I took him into the hospital. He had a heart attack and died that same week on a Tuesday night. And so I was here by myself with 800 to 1,000 acres of land and 75 to 100 sows to take care of and so I just couldn't do anything else. I just fell heir to doing all the work and that's why I stayed with the farm and ended up looking after the hogs. It just kind of fell in my lap.

Pogue: As far as religious activities, what do you remember growing up about those activities?

File: Well, the first I remember was going to a Sunday school and church in the Mt. Vernon school house. It's just two miles from our house, and that was before this, all this legal separation of school and church and religious things. Nobody ever heard about that. No one knew anything about you're not to have religious things, prayers and all that in the school house. So I remember going out to the Mt. Vernon school house and learning my Sunday school verses and saying my prayers and stuff in the school house rather than in the church. Later on, well I joined the Greenville Methodist Church, because it was the closest church to where we lived. And then, later on, when we moved out to the farm, I joined the Cumberland Presbyterian Church 'cause that's where my parents were members and their parents. I'm still there and I participate in activities there off and on, teaching Sunday school now and then off and on (chuckles) doing that.

Pogue: Now, what kind of history is there with the Cumberland Church?

File: Well, they say that they were organized in 1810 in the Cumberland Gap in Tennessee or North Carolina by a group of three or four guys who felt like they had their own ideas about sacraments and this and that. So they broke away from the regular Presbyterian Church, but I don't pay any attention to all that stuff very much. Church is church to me. I can go to the Presbyterian Church. My wife is a member of the Presbyterian Church in Greenville and I'm a member here, and it doesn't affect us either way.

Pogue: As far as holidays, what were the special holidays that you remember as a youth?

File: I don't remember really celebrating a holiday except to say that, in the summer, we always took a holiday, took a trip, and so I was raised on that. Even when I was in first grade—I mean one year old—I have a picture of me going to Washington, D.C., in a Model T Ford. My dad, like I told you, he'd spent years in the Philippines and he liked to travel and do a lot of things. He'd fill up the hog feeders full of feed and then take off for a couple of weeks. And so, I did the same thing. So Mary and I have been to over sixty, I think I counted lately, it's sixty-eight countries, all the states in the United States, and we still take a trip every summer.

Pogue: As to career aspirations, what kind of career thoughts did you have as a young person?

File: Well, I just felt like I was meant to be right here at home raising the hogs. That was my career. That's what I—I don't know if I looked forward to it—but I was happy doing it. I think when you're happy in your work you do a pretty good job. My Dad was very good. And he had the best, first, of most everything that came out. I remember when I was little, we'd order a load of limestone that came in on a railroad car and we'd have to go in with a wagon and shovel it onto the wagon and come out and then shovel it onto the land with a shovel. There weren't any spreaders or anything like that, to take care of that. He was the first one to get a rubber-tired tractor and I was in the fifth grade in 1935 in Central School in Greenville. I looked out and there went my Dad up the road on a rubber-tired tractor. Nobody could ever take a tractor on the highway in the city until he got the rubber tires 'because all other tractors were steel-wheeled. So that was one of the first things I remember about tractors. When I was little, we used to go to school and argue, which is better, horses or tractors? With tractors, well you had to buy gas, and, with horses, you didn't have to buy gas. You could grow your own feed, but you had to feed them all year, and a tractor you just had to feed it when you used it. So that was a debate that went on during that time when I was little. But my Dad, he was first. I think we also had the first corn-picker, which is a one-row picker that you hooked onto and then it had about a 25-bushel tank up high. And so you'd get to pick about 25 bushel, maybe a half an acre, whatever corn was making, and dump it into your wagon with a little trip once you reached the end of the row. So, I think I was the first corn-picker in the county, and we got the first rubber-tired tractor.

Pogue: How did the farm expand? What did it start with and how big did it get?

File: Well, I got this from Martin Van Buren; that's part of the farm that I still have here. It's signed down there, but I don't know whether he signed it or not. It's got his name on it. My Dad added to that and then I bought some land too. So I have nearly 340 acres or something like that. My Dad had probably 800 or 1,000 acres. That's a lot of acreage in those days; not so much today.

Pogue: How did hog farming become the prevalent type of farming that you did?

File: Well, I always liked hogs, and I didn't care for the confinement of cows. Many farms when I was little consisted of a few cows so they could have a milk check. Most every farmer, a lot of them, had milked cows and would get a check every two weeks, but we never did do that, and it was just hogs for me. And a lot of farms would have chickens, and you'd have to gather the eggs and take the eggs in and exchange that for some groceries and whatnot. But it was all hogs and I never even contemplated anything else. I was more interested in livestock really than in farming the land, but it was conducive here. Around here there are a lot of hills and valleys and it's not good for anything else but hogs. And then we had a creek river bottom down here that was good for raising corn. So they go together, hogs and corn. It's not a very good combination today because the price of corn is too high to make any money raising hogs. (Laughs)

Pogue: Now you talked somewhat about your interests and hobbies. You talked about traveling, and you talked about sixty countries that you've visited?

File: Yes.

Pogue: Where were some of these countries?

File: We've been around the world two or three times. We've made a lot of friends. One of them was in Australia. We made our friend get off the train, the train they call the "Gon." He exchanged names and whatnot and then, later on, six months later, I had a call here in Pocahontas. He says, "Here's Bob Hills. I'm here to see you." He showed up in Pocahontas from Australia and he'd been on a ranch in Australia, on a sheep ranch. So it worked out really well and I went to see him later on and found out he was living on a six thousand acre ranch with six thousand sheep. But he lived in a little chicken house that didn't have any heat in it and we nearly froze to death. Then, one time, he came and looked after the hogs here while Mary and I went to Indianapolis to see her boy, and so we had a good acquaintance with him. I just heard in the past year that he died. A friend came by and told me that Bob was worth millions. (both laugh)

Pogue: What other interests, activities, or hobbies did you have besides traveling?

File: Well, I really don't have any. I like to get a hold of all the different stamps and coins and stuff like that. I really don't do much of it, but I still do that sort of thing, so I do have that to play around with.

Pogue: Who took care of the farm when you were doing your traveling?

File: Well, like, there are no cows to milk, so we could just fill up the hog feeders, get out and take off. And we got water; I've got a lot of ponds built here, and springs. That's plenty of water and the hogs would look after themselves. But usually I'd like to have my brother or my nephew or somebody around just in case the hogs got out. Then sometimes Mary and I, we'd go with our girls and leave our son here. So it's pretty easy to get away.

Pogue: What was the greatest number of hogs you've ever had on the farm?

File: Oh, I've always kept about a hundred sows and they'd average out seven, seven or eight pigs per litter, and I'd most always have a thousand hogs. Maybe I got them where I had two thousand at one time after, when you count the pigs, the littles, and took care of them all myself, with the help of my boy, when he was growing up. And I might mention about him. When he was little, I just figured he would grow up to help me with the hogs like I did my Dad. So when we'd go to St. Louis, why we'd go to a book store. Instead of coming home with a Mad Magazine or a comic book, he'd come home with a heart or something about the body and then maybe at one time he came home with something about blood, about how all the blood works and how all that works. He was interested in your body a lot. I got a Model T and Model A Ford for him to play around with, but he didn't show any interest in it. And so when he went off to school, my mother told him "Allan, now you want to do something to make your life useful and help people out, and one way that you could do that would be to go to medical school." He was interested in medicine and doctoring and body and health, so he worked at that. I always figured he'd probably be back to help me with the hogs though. But, as time went by, I could tell maybe I was losing out, and I wasn't sorry about it. So, in fact, my Mother was 93 years old when she wrote his application to go to Medical School and why he should be accepted. They both waited for it to come back and it was on a Sunday. The mail wasn't delivered on Saturday. On Monday, the mail came through a snow storm, and it was an acceptance to medical school. I sat down and said, "Well, too bad your grandmother died yesterday, and she didn't know that you got this acceptance." And he pointed up toward heaven and said, "She knows." He remembered her when his daughter was born. They named her Anna. Now he's a medical director of a hyperbaric oxygen chamber in Champaign/Urbana at Carle Clinic and he's there taking care of Mary and me, and (chuckles) we're still here thanks to him. That worked out real well. He's not here in the hog pen (laughs).

Pogue: How did you meet Mary?

File: Well, I was going with a girl and she'd gone down to take care of her sister's baby in Arkansas, and I had a roommate coming from Champaign/Urbana to be with me over the weekend. He had a girl here in Pocahontas and he wanted me to find a girl. So I looked around and I found this girl at the Rural Youth Dance. That's where ex-4H Club members would get together and have a little party and dance. And so I got my nerve up and asked this girl, Mary, to marry me, not to marry me (chuckles) but to go with me to the opera. I knew she was interested in music, so we went to the opera and it so happened it was the sixteenth of June in 1945, and that was her twentieth birthday. I was really impressed that she was with me on her twentieth birthday. I took her home that night and she didn't jump out of the car. She just hung around there because we hadn't been together before and we had lots of stuff to talk about. So at one-thirty the lights came on in the house and she stayed right with me. At two o'clock her father started walking back and forth. She didn't jump out (laughs softly). I didn't take her to the door until three o'clock and she kissed me goodnight. I knew then goodbye Helen, hello Mary because that was who I was

going to get. And I had to wait six, eight months before I got my answer. That was in June. I went off to the University of Illinois in September. I bought my books at the Follett Book Store and then went across the street and told them I needed a quality ring to go on a quality finger. I carried that ring in my pocket for six months and I went back and forth between Champaign/Urbana and Decatur. She was at Millikin and it took her six months before she decided that she'd take me and she gave up a music career, which she had planned, against all her parents and her music director. They were all disappointed when she chose me (laughs), but she's always been, she's never dreamed that she ever made a mistake, so it's worked out really good. Sixty-two years ago that was.

Pogue: And, now June sixteenth I think you've listed that as an important day.

File: That's a very good day. June sixteenth was the day that I met Mary. It was the day that Mary and I went to the opera together, the day that I fell in love with Mary, and the day that I got my first kiss from Mary, and it's been sixty-two years ago on the sixteenth of June.

Pogue: As to the farm operations, how did you make a living doing farm operations with hogs?

File: I couldn't do it today, but then it was different than today and I figured with everything you saved, you'd maybe make well sometimes $30 a piece or sometimes $40, sometimes $25, and so there was money in raisin' hogs. My dad had been successful at it. I was successful too, but today hogs don't get up to $50 and $60 like they did for me. I remember getting $63, $64 a hundred and corn was maybe $1.50 a bushel. Look at it today. Corn's $5 a bushel and hogs, I heard the other day, I think were $35 and sometimes they even get down lower than that. It wasn't very long ago they were way down to $20 and so there's no profit in raising hogs here today like I did. But when I did it, it was very successful. I was happy with it. I liked doing it and it paid off well.

Pogue: How has life in agriculture changed over the last few decades? You've been talking about the changes in hog raising, but what were some other changes that you've seen over the last few decades?

File: Well, there are no small farms anymore. They're all larger farms. It used to be the farm would have a few cows and a few chickens and a few sheep, and you don't see that anyplace anymore. [Now] we have bigger tractors, and when my dad was growing up we didn't have any bulldozers to clear off the land. Then we used dynamite and you don't hear about that any more. Nobody's using dynamite on the farm. We picked corn by hand. If a guy got up early in morning, he maybe could get a hundred bushel in a day. This one little picker I got, him and I could get a thousand bushel in a day, so that's changed, and we have thrashing machines. We used to have thrash machines pulled by a steam engine or a tractor. Now it's all combines. When I was little, you couldn't work at night because you didn't have any horses. You didn't have any lights. We got the tractor. I remember the first

tractor we had we geared it up with the generator and put a headlight on it. And, so, we were able to farm at night. That was something new. So, we've gone from the last hundred years when taking hogs down to the stockyards in a wagon to driving them up to Pocahontas and loading them on a train, to putting them in a truck from the farm and taking them straight from the farm to the stockyards. [Trips] take about three hours in and out or maybe two hours. We took a three-day trip. My mother told me a story about [how] her grandfather loaded up a load of hogs and put them in a farm wagon and took them to the East St. Louis Market. And while he was gone, his little daughter was playing around in the yard while his wife was making apple butter, and she slipped and fell into the apple butter and died. There were no telephones or cell phones, no e-mails, no anything like that to let him know about it. So when he came back to Pocahontas, why, she'd died and was buried. Today with cell phones and e-mails and stuff like that, you're in constant contact with everybody when you go someplace. I can't let my wife go out of the house unless she's got the phone so I know were she is every minute. But times have changed, and at that time, a hundred years ago, nobody made contact with someone else.

Pogue: What would you say is the biggest change of experience? You've talked about quite a few. If you had to pick the biggest, what would it be?

File: The biggest change?

Pogue: Uh, huh.

File: Well, I'm like ah, I'm coming home and walk into the house every night, and it's a nice, warm house. Used to be I'd have to go down and get some wood and make a fire, and then I was pretty nutty about news and stuff, and there's the TV. I had the radio first and then the TV. I like all this modern equipment that we got, and I'm comfortable and live in it. And we got all these pills to keep us healthy so we aren't sick (laughs). Lots of good things going on today.

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

File: I don't think I'd say, "Go for it." I don't. I don't believe, if I was young today, I'd do it. It's just I've seen too many disasters. I had a good friend come down from Quebec thirty years ago. I've known him since he was a little boy. He came down here to Bond County in 1976 and he bought—no it was 1966—he bought land and worked. [He] worked for me and my brother and made a little money and bought 20 acres. He bought another 20 acres, and he bought another 20 acres, and then he had 60 acres. Then the bank says "Well, you want to buy some more?" They were liberal with the money and so he got another 60 acres. Now, you want to buy a tractor, and money was no problem. So he ended up having about I think there's some six hundred and some acres. Then interest rates kept going up and the land values collapsed. This is 1980 and he went broke and lost six hundred acres. If he could have held on a little bit longer, he would have made it alright because land came back, but there's too much had to be invested. He was just overextended.

Today land values have gone up a lot. A lot of farmers today maybe are worth, some of them are worth a million dollars, but they don't have any cash. There's a lot of value there but no money to spend. It just takes so much to operate tractors and parts. I don't do much. I've got a tractor up here, and I mow the weeds around here, and I go in and get a little part for a tractor. I'm surprised at how much everything costs. People are really in a big, big expense in farming today. I don't know, I don't think I'd recommend it. (both chuckled).

Pogue: What would you like to be remembered for?

File: Well, maybe like a senator. Paul Douglas said to my mother when he went to knock on her door for a vote. She came to the door and he says, "I'm Paul Douglas. I'm running for United States Senator." And she says, "What does the Lord require of thee?" And he said, "To do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with my God." And she says, "Come on in. You've got my vote." And I think that's what I'd like to be remembered by. That I've done justly, loved kindness, and I've walked humbly with my God.

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

File: Well, I had three kids, and the oldest one died when she was thirty-four years old, and that tore me up. But she said to me before she died–we knew that she wasn't going to live long—she said, "Well, when you get to feeling bad and you begin to cry about me leaving, just thank God that I came to live with you for thirty-four years, and the love and enjoyment we had for all those years. How would you have liked it if I hadn't shown up at all? You'd have missed out on so much. So you can think about that when you get feeling sad." And so I feel like that about my lovely family, and we had a lot of love and enjoyment in our family. It so happens that my other two are married, happily married, and one of theirs is married. Some might not have been as fortunate as we, but we lucked out I guess. I don't know, but anyhow, it's been a lovely time. I didn't realize that it was going to be such a happy experience through my life when I was little growing up, but it has been.

Pogue: Well, would you like to take a break before we go into some of the things about the school board and …

File: Okay.

Pogue: Okay.

File: A break, Mary.

Pogue: Okay. We want to talk a little bit about your role on the school board, and could you explain how many years you were on the board and what years were those?

File: Ah, I think I was elected in 1961, and I was on the school board for twelve years, and three years as the president. The first year was pretty dramatic in the fact that the janitors went on strike. We fired them because it's illegal to strike against a

public operation, the school, but they ignored it. Then they joined the teamsters and I used to be a pretty good labor man and kind of went along with them and the Democrats, but after that strike and what happened that year, I changed my tune. I'd get phone calls that would say, "You'd better watch out your next step. Have you checked your gates on your pigs lately?" I kept a gun behind a door up here. Mary was the one worrying about what I was going to do, but I was worried about it because of what might happen. Here I was all the more determined that that wasn't going to change me, my way of thinking, and that's when I (chuckles) kind of joined the other party (chuckles) and left the Democrats. But, anyway, that was the first thing that came across when I was first year on the board was the strike, and it took a whole year to get that settled. Illinois Supreme Court ruled in our favor eventually in May of that year, but it was a pretty disastrous year in the fact that the schools like Sorento and Pocahontas were heavy union towns. I remember going up to Sorento one night when it was on a weekend and Roger Reidemann, he was on the school board with me, and he was at the Bradford Bank, he made a fire so it would be warm for the next morning at the school. We got ready to go home and some of the people in town came and yelled at us and threw some stuff down at the furnace and said, "You aren't capable about building a fire because you don't understand how the furnace works. You aren't a janitor and, you know, since you don't understand it, this building might just burn up tonight." They made it sound like, you know, it might burn up, so we put the fire out because we were scared that they might do something. Then the next morning it was, oh, fifty degrees in the school and it was cold. The citizens would come down to Greenville at the school board and say, "It's cold. You're having school and it's cold." "Well, we tried to warm it up, but you wouldn't let us." That sort of thing went on for a whole year and the school board members would go up and clean the schools at the end of the day. I remember going in, in Sorento one time, and we cleaned up the schools, three or four of us, after being in Pocahontas cleaning the schools. I went out to get in the car and the people on both sides of the car banging it up and down, about to turn it over. The sheriff was there, and he stood there with his hands in his pockets, and didn't do anything about it. So, later on, I said—I confronted him on the street one time—I said, "Why didn't you arrest those people?" He says, "Well, if I'd tried to, son, there'd been a riot, and things would have gotten worse. I just couldn't do it." And so, that's the way it was for a whole year. So, like I told some people, if you want, I spent twelve years on the board and as time went by, you make enemies if you do anything. If you want to stay on the board forever, don't have any opinions and always vote with the majority, and then you'll never get booted out. But the first people I lost the votes were the labor people, and they were against me forever after that. Then, the next year, I had a big hand in the school taking over the school buses. When I got on the board, the buses were owned by the individual, and then they were assigned a bus route. Eventually, it got to be that the school bus went with the bus route and so, if you owned a bus, you bought the bus from somebody, you bought the route with them. The route went with that school bus, which really had nothing to do with the value of the bus, but some routes were better than other routes. So, if you had a school bus, the same school bus was worth more if it had a certain route with it. We thought we could handle it cheaper by having our own

buses, so we bought all of the buses up from the people who owned the buses. [They] were unhappy about it, which lost me some more votes with the bus people. So now I've lost the union vote and I lost the bus owners vote. Now, my next one was the insurance agents. When I got on the board, I made a discovery that all the insurance was handled by one person. That one person then handled all the types of insurance that we got at the school and then would divvy it out to her friends, her commission to other agents. Not her friends, but her competitors, to keep them quiet. So there wasn't any competition; no competitive bids on the insurance. I was able to have enough support on the board to get rid of that sort of thing. Then all these insurance agents, they didn't like me for that because they've lost their money favors that they'd been receiving through the years. One more thing that cost me lost votes was the tax collectors. I read in the book that all taxes collected are in the state statutes, where all taxes collected in the county were to be handed over in thirty days to the taxing bodies. But, in Bond County, they'd collect the tax in June, and then they would keep it in the banks until December before they would give it out to the schools and other taxing bodies. So, the courthouse and the banks, they divvied-up the profit on the time that the money was in the bank rather than give it out to the schools. With a few threats that I made in the courthouse to the County Treasurer and the people in charge, they said there was a penalty if you didn't give it to the school district within thirty days. That you could go to jail for five years and a $10,000 fine or something like that. It's in the statutes, it says that. Then, I remember the president of the First National Bank went to see the president of our school board complaining that he had to take the money out of his bank and give it to the school. So, eventually, I lost all the votes from the people in the banks and lost insurance agents' votes, lost the bus drivers' votes, and lost the union vote. Eventually, after twelve years, there was enough there to turn me out (both laugh).

Pogue: Now, you were on the school board just shortly after the district consolidated?

File: It was about nine years after.

Pogue: Nine years. What do you remember about the school consolidation in Bond County?

File: I wasn't on the board at that time, but there was quite a fuss about that. Had some elections and they disputed the election, to protest the guy who was voted in. In fact, my wife was called into the courthouse one time to testify about whether there was an illegal election in the township to vote in the district consolidation because the election was held out in the school yard, rather in the school house. She held it in the school yard because they couldn't get the door unlocked at the school house. Just little dinky things like that. They were brought up to protest the vote to consolidation. It was voted in, but there's still a group that was opposed to it.

Pogue: What happened to the country schools like you attended at Mt. Vernon during this consolidation time-period?

File: Most all of them [were] sold at a public sale and some individuals bought the school when they closed the school down. And some communities bought the schools. This one here, where I went to at Mt. Vernon, the community bought it. Half a dozen of us went together and chipped in some money, and we bought it and kept it for a community center for a while. I don't think there's any left like that anymore, but that's the way it went.

Pogue: Why were people in favor of school consolidation at that time?

File: Why were they in favor? Well, I was in favor because I thought it was a better arrangement. I'd attended a city school and a country school and I just thought it would be better, the facilities and stuff. Since we had good roads and you could put them on a bus and take them there, it would be better than having them all scattered around. But other people had different opinions. Just like today, there's a different opinion. Everybody yelling at one another.

Pogue: You said you have a lot of relatives in the immediate area. How did all the relatives feel about consolidation?

File: (Chuckles) Some of them were for and some against. That's the way it is with so many things. Some people got different opinions. One of the things I did at the school, which is after I left and then went back, was to do away with all gambling. I'm an anti-gambler and I don't think it has any business in the school. When I got on the board, you used to vote for a queen, and it was a penny a vote. They had an election down in Pocahontas and they had an alarm clock there and the votes. When the alarm clock went off there, you couldn't put any more money in. Everybody was waiting until the very last minute to put the money in the box for their girl. They had to call the police in because they had a riot the year before. So it was a big thing that raised money for the school to buy things, but it was a poor way of raising it. The other thing they were doing, which I got rid of until I see it in big operation today, was when you go to the basketball games and football games, they call it "Two-for-One" or something or other. You buy a ticket, you pay one dollar for a ticket and the school keeps 50 cents and then they give you 50 cents back. I never get into that sort of thing because it's kind of the way it works. Instead of the boys and the girls cooking popcorn and candy and making things and selling them, when you come in to make for the GAA and the FFA, instead of working to make the money, they found it so much easier to gamble and make money selling those tickets. That's the one thing that we've got in our schools I don't think ought to be there at all, the lottery sort of a thing.

Pogue: When you were on the school board, what were some of the exciting things? You mentioned some of the difficult ones, how about on the other side that you felt pretty good about?

File: Well, I thought it was good that we built some new schools while I was there: the elementary school in Greenville, and the new elementary in Pocahontas, and also the one in Sorento, and they improved the high school. All those things were done

while I was on the school board; very constructive and did it at a good time and got more out of our money than you could get out of it today. I was happy with that sort of thing, an accomplishment I thought.

Pogue: As far as the role of the school board, you were involved in construction, what kind of classes or changes took place at the high school when you were on the school board? Do you remember any of those changes?

File: Oh, I don't know as I could tell you offhand, but ah.

Pogue: What kind of media coverage did you have at board meetings back in the 1960s?

File: Well, there were newspapers then and there were radio stations then too. We had one in Greenville, and they were there and keeping track of us to see what we did, to advertise what took place, which is good. I think the community needs to know what the schools are doing and where they're spending their money. And the paper's there to take care of it. You didn't have any problems (chuckles) with the press at that time at all.

Pogue: Going to the rural electrification of this region, your father, I believe was active in getting rural electrification?

File: Yes.

Pogue: Could you explain a little bit about that?

File: Yes. When I was maybe ten years old, he spent a lot of time going out to work getting easements from people so they could run an electric line over their property. It wasn't until 1935 or '36 when we got our first power in through here and that's when we moved back to the farm. He was the first president of the Southwestern Electric and it was a big thing. In this community, it was the biggest thing I guess that hit here since the telephone, maybe. We didn't have a telephone at that time. We had a party-line phone, but we weren't hooked up with any single-outlet phone. But we did have electricity, so after that, we were able to get all electrical appliances. When I was growing up, we had a DELCO plant, which provided lights. I really didn't grow up with kerosene lamps like so many of my neighbors did. My wife had kerosene lamps. They didn't have a DELCO plant, which had batteries. So they could run a generator and charge up the batteries and have some lights and have a washing machine and that's about the extent of it. But when Southwestern Electric hooked up, we had everything.

Pogue: How long did it take to get electricity throughout the whole county?

File: Well, I think it was a process of maybe two or three years. I mean everybody didn't get it all at once. It just came on gradually, maybe two years to get it all from 1935 to '36, '37. Probably everybody in the county had it in '37 or '38. I wasn't too old to know about all that. I was twelve years old, maybe thirteen.

Pogue: Now you talked about the road conditions that somewhat limited operations, whether it was in farming or going to school. How did road development take place in Bond County?

File: I remember to tear up a bridge, a community would get together and they would get their team of horses and a wagon and go down to somebody's branch where they had a lot of gravel and sand. That's the way they traveled the first roads Everybody pitched in and took their wagons down and got a load of rock and gravel then took it up and spread it out on the road. It was a community affair. The township didn't have any trucks or any money to gravel the roads with. The community took it upon themselves to do it, and eventually, why I guess when tax money came in to get that sort of thing, they'd get a truck to spread it. Originally, it was just done by each individual that took care of their own little property, corner of it, service (laughs).

Pogue: The book that you wrote that we have, could you kind of tell us how that came about?

File: Well, I was in a writing class, and I had to write a story or two every other week about myself, and so I maybe was in there for a year. I wrote all these stories - I think there's a hundred of them. Then, about October last year, I got the idea that I'd put them together and make a Christmas card out of it. So I put them all together and stapled them. Really, some of those stories I wouldn't have written if I'd known the whole world was going to read them. I just kind of wrote it for myself and for my kids. But I found out that people were interested in that sort of thing and, so everybody knows more about me now than I know about myself, some of it. But it's all true stories. I didn't make anything up like some people said. "Well, you couldn't have lived through there. You made all of that up (laughs). But those are honest-to-goodness names."

Pogue: Now, I wanted to talk a little bit about some of these stories, and the first one deals with the 1991 wetlands.

File: Oh.

Pogue: Could you tell me a little bit about that?

File: Yes. Well, this is back in 1991. I disked up the land and was ready to plant corn, when I got a letter from the United States Department of Agriculture telling me that I had twenty acres in a hundred acre field that was wetlands. I'd have to disk it up. And so, I didn't know what a wetland was. My grandfather had cleared and tiled this land about 1916. The Soil Conservation Service showed me a map in which he had marked out six areas totaling twenty acres of wetlands, and this determination was made in his office. So I had the land all disked up and ready to plant. It had all been tiled seventy-five years ago and I thought all the farm would be classified as prior converted, which is okay to plant. Then I received a letter which said that if I planted the corn in the field, I would have to pay a fine of close to $50,000 because of the money that they'd given me for the past ten years. I'd have to return it to

them. So I appealed this case and I spent the whole year working on it. By the time it was over with, I got letters from Senator Watson and Paul Simon and a few others, and I went to one appeal to another. I was able to get it down to one-tenth of an acre and so, I could plant everything except one-tenth of an acre, if I agreed to that. I agreed to that, and then eventually they threw that out and so it's all cleared off now, but it was a pretty rough time for a whole year. It was in April of 1991 and had quite a lot of newspaper articles. I appeared in the Farm Journal, which had quite an article that tells about it. In fact Senator Durbin knew about it. He came to Pocahontas one time. He says, "Yes, I've heard about you. You're the wetlands man." But Paul Simon was very helpful. I'd taken the time to add up how much time that the government spent. I estimated the cost for determining one-tenth of an acre as a wetland, which they finally determined that I had. Don Brett was the county executive director. He spent three hours. Roger Staff had spent ten hours out on the field. Jerry Burning, soil conservationist, spent four hours. Roy Bailey, resource conservationist, spent four hours. I totaled up the number of miles that they spent and it ended up that they'd spent over forty hours of time. I figured, at $10 an hour, the 40 hours plus the 250 miles at 25 cents a mile, another 462 dollars, and all this time to get me to agree to one-tenth of an acre that I couldn't plant classified as a wetland. Even to this day I don't know what a wetland is (both chuckle).

Pogue: Now you also in your booklet talked about a three-dipper (laughs). What is a three-dipper?

File: Well, when you're little, you don't have much money, but whenever you get a nickel, we'd go down to Pocahontas to DeLaurenti's Confectionary. He kind of had a little store there—this is Judge DeLaurenti's grandfather—and so he ran the store with his daughter, Lena. So we kids would go in with a nickel to get an ice cream cone and we always would want to go to DeLaurenti because he'd give us a big helping. One time we went into the store and he was busy and Lena says, "What can I do for you boys"? And we said, "Oh, we just were standing around. We don't want anything." Then when Mr. DeLaurenti wasn't busy, we said, "Oh. I think we do, I think we need an ice cream cone." So he put on one dip, and then he'd look at us and see how big our eyes were getting, and he'd put on another dip. Then he put on a third dip and he got more enjoyment out of it than we did. All the time Lena was back there scowling because we knew she was only a one-dipper (both laugh). I later told the Judge that I always voted for him because of his grandpa, and the three-dippers, but really I didn't need to because Judge DeLaurenti was one of the best judges we've ever had.

Pogue: You also talked about raising wild turkeys.

File: Yeah. You might, when you go out the door here, you might even see them. It's about twenty years ago, the conservationist people asked me if they could turn some turkeys loose here. I thought, well, that sounds interesting, why not? So, I agreed to that, not knowing what I was doing, because eventually they would come around when I'd take a load of corn out to the hogs. Here they'd come, like a bunch of chickens running to you, and then they'd mess up the hog feeders and use the hog

feeders for their bathroom. And then, one time, I came over the hill and I had one old sow having a bunch of pigs. I looked and a whole bunch of turkeys were hanging around the sow and when they saw me they ran away. I went over and the sow had eleven pigs and seven of them were dead. They'd been picked like an ice pick around their necks and they bled to death. Two of them were still alive, but they'd been picked on, and she had two that were still nursing. She just was farrowing these pigs and, as they came out, these turkeys would either pick them with their beak or their spur. I don't know how they did it, but I know they did it, because I'd raised hogs for fifty years and I never seen anything like it. Then I saw all the turkeys hanging around when I came over the hill, and they were there. So I went in to the Soil Conservationist, and I said, "Those turkeys you turned loose killed a litter of hogs," and to this day they can't believe it. "No, that didn't happen" (laughs). Well, it happened alright, but it didn't happen to me anymore. I don't know why, maybe they just stumbled onto it for orneriness or what they were doing, but they did kill a litter of pigs. Today they have turkey season and people are anxious to come out and they want to traipse all over your farm and get turkeys, and I want them to get rid of them too. I don't want have any hogs left anymore, but they left a bad taste in my mouth, this turkey situation. A lot of people are going to spend money to get a permit to go out early in the morning and hunt a turkey like they do the deer around. So turkeys, and they aren't wild, they come up to the door. They peck on my sliding doors. My wife thought the washing machine was out of whack when she heard knock, knock, knock, knock, knock (makes knocking sound) like that. There's a turkey pecking on the door trying to get in (laughs).

Pogue: You also talked a little bit about Shoal Creek. Tell us a little bit about Shoal Creek.

File: Well, I grew up along Shoal Creek, and like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn around the Mississippi, and I learned to swim and boat down Shoal Creek. One time I took a boat trip down Shoal Creek when the water was out and I told my mother-in-law, I said, "I'm going down Shoal Creek in a boat." So I told Mary, my wife, what to do with the hogs on the south forty, just in case I didn't get back. She thought I was really serious about it, thinking that it was dangerous to do that. It really wasn't but, well it was, in fact, you did have to watch your step. I mean, watch the trees, because the water was out and you could get going pretty good clip. I lost my cap; I could've gotten knocked off with a limb on the trees. So, as I went down Shoal Creek, there were places that were familiar to me. First there was a shop hole right north of 140, which I hear there's a lot of gold buried up there. Eventually, maybe sometime, I might go check that out. Then I went on down the creek and I went by where my Dad rescued my cousin from a creek at that spot. We were down there playing one time and my cousin, Elizabeth, fell off in a hole and we kids were screaming for help. My Dad was planting corn up on a hill and he jumped in the creek. He heard us and he ran down to the creek and pulled her out, and then he says, "Now, when you go home, don't say anything to anybody about this because if you do, your Auntie won't let you come down to the creek anymore." I'm five years old and I went home and I said "Pop got his feet wet," and my Mom didn't pay any attention to me. She's busy making supper. So I said he got his pants wet. She kind of slowed down a little bit and took a little more interest in

it. She said, "Well you got all wet!" Then the jig was up, and so they all knew that we'd gone in and rescued her. But we got to go back because we all had to learn to swim, so I went down to the Boyer hole to learn to swim. So, we all learned to swim. That's where I learned and then I taught all my kids to swim in the Boyer hole in the Shoal Creek as they came along..

Pogue: The last question that I wanted to talk about from the book would be the information you talked about dealing with your experiences with St. Louis. What can you tell us about that?

File: Oh. Do you mean when I lost the boy in St. Louis?

Pogue: Um-hm. (both laugh)

File: Well, let's see. When Alan was little, I took two girls and my son, Alan, and we went to St. Louis one time to see the sights, when he was about ten years old, and some sights it turned out to be. So we parked in the Stix, Baer & Fuller parking garage, and we all walked down to Famous Barr to do a little shopping before we went to a show. We were to meet in the lobby of the store on the first floor at five o'clock. So the girls went to the clothes department and Alan and I went into a book store. Alan rode the escalator for entertainment while I checked on a few things. He'd come and check on me between rides so I wasn't concerned about him, since it was a rule to stay in the store. So at five o'clock we met in the lobby, but there was no Alan. After waiting around a while, we all fanned out covering all eight floors, and we still couldn't find any Alan. So at 5:20, and the lights began going out reminding everyone that the store is to close in ten minutes, we reported to the management that we couldn't find our boy. An alarm went out all over the departments, but to no avail. They couldn't find Alan. The manager checked all the eight floors. There was no one in the store, so they all locked the doors. We called the police, and while Mary and Donna and Carla walked the streets of St. Louis, which is full of people because it's closing time, I rode in the police car with the radio burping out to all the police to be on the lookout for a ten year old boy wearing blue trousers and gray sweater. We were devastated, and we were never so worried in our lives thinking we might not see Alan again ever. We covered the area from Sixth Street to Tenth Street and no results, so I gave the police my name, address, and where to reach me. As Mary and I were standing there hugging one another, we looked up Seventh Street and there came Alan with his sister, Donna. She found him in the Stix, Baer parking garage about three blocks away. Talk about jubilation. We all got our appetites back and went to the Forum for dinner. Then Alan he explained it this way to us. He says, "I was watching the animals in the Pet Department, and the lights begin to flicker on and off. The escalator stopped and one elevator, it took me down and let me off in the street next to the lobby and I got lost. So this couple offered to help me out, so eventually we looked for the car." That's where Donna had found him. Then Alan added to his Mom (laughs), "Don't tell Helen Paine." Mary and Helen had talked to everybody about all the events of the day on the phone every evening, and to this day, Helen died without hearing of the big event of the year, of the lost boy in St. Louis (laughs).

Pogue: As kind of a final question about the farm operations, what decade do you feel was the most enjoyable for you in farming?

File: Well, I guess when my kids were little and my boy was here helping me. We loved to do it together, probably in the 1970's. I just figured he'd be here to take over when I was finished. So it was an enjoyable time together.

Pogue: Now where would the hogs be shipped to?

File: To East St. Louis, the stockyards of East St. Louis. Had a commission company that would take care of them for us. Would sell maybe a couple hundred at a time, a big double-trailer truck that'd come up the road, and we'd sort them out at night, have them ready to go. I think they take them into Greenville today, but at that time East St. Louis was a big place. They even butchered them down there and had some packing plants all around, a hundred packing plants. Swift had one. Armour had one too. That was an enjoyable time at that time.

Pogue: Well, this would conclude our interview with Ben File, and again, we want to thank him for the cooperation that he's provided for our interview. Thank you.

File: Thank you.