

# Interview with Evelyn Fields

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Interview Date: January 26, 2011

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, January 26, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. This afternoon, I'm with Evelyn Oberg Fields. How are you, Evelyn?

Fields: Oh, I'm just fine.

DePue: I'm looking forward to this. Let me give a very brief introduction. Evelyn, we're in Dixon, Illinois, in your home. Actually, it's the residence of your daughter and son-in-law as well. The reason I found out about you, Evelyn, was that your daughter, Ann Lewis, is in charge of the Reagan Centennial project here in Dixon. Of course this was his boyhood home. So that's pretty exciting stuff as well. But we're not going to talk about Reagan at all today if that's okay with you, Evelyn.

Fields: That's fine. (laughter)

DePue: Okay, I always start off with when and where you were born.

Fields: Oh. Okay, I was born in Cuming County, in Nebraska, on a farm, 160-acre farm. The closest town would have been Bancroft, Nebraska, a distance of seven miles and a population of about three to five hundred.

DePue: You didn't give me your birthday.

Fields: My birthday is March 31, 1923.

DePue: Okay. Those are some interesting times. Did you grow up on the farm?

Fields: I grew up on the farm and left permanently by the time I was eighteen.

DePue: Okay. There's quite a bit of time I want to spend on that, because these are some difficult years when you're growing up. Tell me a little bit about your parents.

Fields: Oh. Go back in history on my parents? Okay. My mother was born on a farm that was very old, established when the nation was first divided into free land. She attended a church school that was German for a period of three years.

DePue: Was this in Nebraska?

Fields: This is in Nebraska, in Cuming County, on a farm. She didn't have a English teacher; she had a preacher who only spoke German. She told me the one thing he taught was that the earth was flat, and he emphasized it by throwing his hand on the desk, saying, "The earth is flat!" That's the education she had.

DePue: What was your mother's name?

Fields: My mother's name was Anna, A-n-n-a, Schmidt, S-c-h-m-i-d-t, Oberg is the last name.

DePue: And your father's name?

Fields: My father is Fred Emanuel Oberg. That's a good Swedish name, from Oakland, Nebraska, which is Swedetown.

DePue: Well, with Germans and Swedes, does that mean—I'm taking a guess here—was the family Lutheran?

Fields: We were—yes, (laughs) we were St. John's Lutheran Church, Evangelical. Incidentally, one of my first relatives who came over to America on my father's side—he would be an Oberg, Hans Oberg—was the one who brought evangelical Lutheranism to this country, and he's honored for this. I really just found that out rather recently when I was informed.

DePue: Well, that is interesting. What was it like growing up on the farm? And this is the late twenties and early thirties.

- Fields: Well, I can remember that we had a telephone. It hung on the wall. It was a wooden phone that had a little mouthpiece that you could push up and down and a receiver that you held to your ear. Now, I remember the phone number; it was 16F-112. Sixteen stands for the sixteenth line in the area, *F* stands for farm, 112 stands for two shorts and a long. Everybody could hear your number. When they called, everybody picked up the receiver. However, if you had a fire at your house, which was quite frequent, or an emergency, you could go to the phone and start ringing without cease, and all the neighbors would run to pick it up. If you announced an emergency, they would come running to your house to help you—the only advantage I can think of a line phone. (laughter)
- DePue: Well, you mentioned you had a telephone. Did you have electricity growing up?
- Fields: No. The REA<sup>1</sup> is the one who brought electricity into the area, which would have been—REA, in the thirties, the forties.
- DePue: How about indoor plumbing?
- Fields: We had water, both hot and cold. Toilets: we had an outdoor, mainly because I grew up during the Depression. There simply wasn't enough money to be able to afford it. We had the room, but not the affordability. But this wasn't an ostracized thing because none of the neighbors had plumbing.
- DePue: Well, tell me a little bit about the farm, then. How would you describe the farm your father had?
- Fields: Quite good. We had rolling hills, we planted alfalfa, we planted corn. Everybody had some beef cattle. They had milk cows, they had pigs, they had ducks, chickens...
- DePue: Did you have any brothers or sisters?
- Fields: I had no brothers or sisters.
- DePue: Well, you've got a 160-acre farm, which at that time was a decent-sized farm. You certainly could—
- Fields: That's all one man could handle, and then he really couldn't. We always had a hired man. Because you only had horses. I remember when the tractor came, we bought the first tractor. It was quite an event. We still needed a hired man. (laughs)
- DePue: Did that mean that you had your fair share of chores around the farm?

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<sup>1</sup> The REA, Rural Electrification Administration, was the program initiated by President F. D. Roosevelt to bring electricity from the Tennessee Valley Authority to rural America.

Fields: No. I wasn't permitted to do anything. I might get hurt. I probably would've, too. No, I didn't gather the eggs because the chickens would chase me; not a figure of speech; they really did. And I might get kicked by a horse, so I wasn't allowed to do anything. No bicycle, no horse riding. I could only do one thing, and that's play the piano, and which I did.

DePue: Whose rules were these? Were they more your mother or your father's?

Fields: No, that was generally understood. These were the rules, and I was quite happy with them.

DePue: I would imagine, though, you knew lots of kids your age, and I would guess that a lot of them had chores around the farm.

Fields: They all had chores. I was the only gifted one.

DePue: Did your parents ever explain to you why you didn't have to do chores?

Fields: No, it's just understood. You'd get hurt. And they only had one child; they couldn't afford... (laughs)

DePue: Okay. What was the main cash crop for the farm?

Fields: I would judge the main—I'm guessing at this. I know I'm right. You sold your corn, what you could spare, and your wheat if you could spare it. If you raised strawberries and you had enough to sell to your neighbors, you did that. You churned the butter for your own use; you sold the cream when you went into town. You sold the surplus eggs. We always probably had a crate of eggs every week, which paid for the groceries. Now, what was the question?

DePue: Well, that pretty much answers it, how he was making money.

Fields: Oh, cash crop. Okay. Cash crop. I must tell you this—cash crop. Everybody sold pigs once a year. They sent them to market. So we watched the market daily. Then they also sold their beef cattle or their steers, which was a big moneymaker, and then you depended on this money to pay the rent, or to pay your mortgage, whichever.

DePue: You're describing, I think, a very typical farm for that area of the country, for the Midwest in general, but also what I think we would consider today to be a subsistence farm. So a lot of the things you need in the farm, you're taking care of yourself.

Fields: We did.

DePue: Okay. Did your father have another job, or your mother?

Fields: Well, my father was also—prior to becoming a father—incidentally, he hated farming. But prior to becoming a farmer he was a contractor, and he was a mason. He laid most of the sidewalks in Pender at that time. He laid people's foundations for their buildings. He laid the sidewalks in the town. He loved his work. My mother convinced him to go to the farm, and he advised me when I got older, "Never make a living where your life depends on the weather." Good advice.

DePue: Well, we're going to get to that in a little bit, because I know that part of the thing that you remember and lived through is the Dust Bowl. But before we get there, I wanted to ask you where you went to school.

Fields: I went to school, as did everyone else in the area who lived in the country, in little farmhouses; I went to District Number Sixty-one, which is a traditional little farmhouse with three windows on each side and about thirty seats in the farmhouse. Teacher stood at the front. In the center of the school stood a potbelly stove fueled with coal or wood. You would come to school in the morning; it was ice-cold, and you kept your coat on. And it wasn't a fun thing. You had a pump to get your water. Now, the toilets were approximately a block away, because you had over an acre of land, and they were far, far away. You had two toilets, and in the middle of winter—this wasn't nice—and the snow was heavy and deep, and it wasn't plowed; you didn't have a pathway to follow. (laughs) That was the school. And now, the teachers. The teachers as a whole, if I had to rate them, a C, give them a C rating, tops. I can remember my first day at school, and when I came home, my mother said, "How was your school." I told her it was quite amazing. We had a teacher named Eileen Kelly, good-looking woman. And I said, "But there's something wrong. She wears a lantern on her head." I had never seen a red-haired person before, (laughter) and I thought it was a lantern.

DePue: How old would she have been?

Fields: How was she? Some teachers had a high school education. Others would have gone two years to what they would refer to as a teaching school. I would say their education was very sparse. They weren't big readers. We didn't have television yet. You weren't acquainted with Europe. The education was not there.

DePue: Did you have a radio in the house growing up?

Fields: That's a very good remembrance. We had what they referred to—one of the first radios—it's called an Atwater Kent, K-e-n-t, Atwater Kent. This is one of the first radios, and it's operated with a battery like they use in a car. Once a week, you carried this battery into your local store, he exchanged it for a new one, recharged your old one, and back and forth each week. Every Saturday night you changed your battery. The only show I can remember was *Jack Armstrong, The All-American Boy*. And also, along came WNAX, Yankton,

South Dakota. Lawrence Welk started in Yankton, South Dakota. Then your big news came from WOW—now, notice that’s only three letters. When you have a three-lettered call letter, that means it’s one of your first ones. So it was WOW, standing for Woodmen of the World,<sup>2</sup> because that was Woodmen of the World building, which was our best—and it still is a big radio station in Omaha.

DePue: Sounds like you didn’t think too highly of the education you got in that school.

Fields: Pathetic.

DePue: I assume you went there for about eight years, the first eight?

Fields: Yeah, I went eight years.

DePue: Did you get to the point when you’re in sixth and seventh and eighth grade where you’re expected to teach the younger kids as much as the teacher was?

Fields: No. Oh, they did ask me to play the piano. I had a natural ability, and when I was about twelve, I found out who the music teacher was in Bancroft. His name was Wollen Waber.

DePue: Willen Waber?

Fields: Wollen, Wollen Waber. Now, that’s a German name, but isn’t that kind of romantic? Wollen Waber. I went to him, and I said, “I want the first-grade music book.” So I took it home and I played it, and later on—I got through the book by myself—and they said, “Well, she’s pretty good, so we’ll take lessons.” The lessons were fifty cents a lesson. That’s for thirty minutes. And he liked me. He’d keep me an hour or a hour and a half.

DePue: I’ve got to believe fifty cents was a lot of money for your parents at the time.

Fields: Oh, (laughs) it was a lot; yes, it was. And so I took lessons. It took me five lessons to complete the first grade of music. That’s really quite unusual. I didn’t know it then. Then I studied, and I moved quickly. Within a year—I only studied one time a week for a year—I was playing fifth-grade music. Now, that’s really quite good. I don’t even play fifth-grade music now. I remember he came to my house and he said, “You should send this girl to the conservatory in Chicago because she’s really good.” That’s like saying, “Do you want to send your kid up to the moon?” because we didn’t have any more money. I had to even quit taking his fifty-cent lessons.

DePue: How old were you when this happened?

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<sup>2</sup> **Woodmen of the World**/Omaha Woodmen Life Insurance Society is a nonprofit, fraternal benefit organization committed to family, community and country.

Fields: About twelve or thirteen.

DePue: So this would have been after the start of the Depression, in the middle of the Depression, then.

Fields: Oh, it's right in the middle.

DePue: What was it like for your father and all of your neighbors during the Depression when it hit?

Fields: Depression. Okay, first you had a big bank failure in the twenties. That started the whole thing. Then we went off the gold standard. That was next. So you were supposed to turn all your gold coins in. You could keep one for a souvenir. Let's see now. That was followed by no rain, so you didn't raise your crops. Then came the Dust Bowl, and people lost their farms around us; people lost their homes around us. You saw cars going down the road from Oklahoma with their goods tied to the roof of their car, and people were going to California. They never went to Florida. Everybody went to California.

DePue: Now, you said they were from Oklahoma. That was quite a way south of you.

Fields: Yeah, but they still had to get there.

DePue: But it sounds like a lot of your neighbors were the ones who had to pack up themselves as well.

Fields: They all did it. Most people lost their farms. We hung onto our farm and didn't lose it. I can remember them making payments on the monthly payments carrying in eggs and cream and using that as part of the down payment—which people were glad to accept.

DePue: So your father did not own that 160 acres outright?

Fields: Not free and clear. He had a mortgage. Yeah. And of course, then, the land price dropped to nothing, so you were still paying—just like now—you're still paying your high price, but it's worth peanuts.

DePue: I know that's one of the reasons why bankers were so unpopular during the mid-thirties.

Fields: Yes. I know one family. They lived in Dothan, Alabama. They sold their farm in about 1922 and took the money and moved to a place in Florida called Wachula, Florida. They put their entire money in the bank, and then they heard all of their relatives were taking their money out of the bank, so they decided, tomorrow morning, we take our cash out of the bank, because that's all we've got. That's our whole life savings. And that morning, the bank was closed. They never got a dime out of it. Then they had to start working again for whatever they could do.

DePue: You were still pretty young at this time. Do you recall some of the emotional toll that that took on your parents and the neighbors?

Fields: Well, I'll tell you what was the worst emotional toll: the dust storm, because that brought in the terrible winds, and all at once. They wrote a song about it called "Tumbling Along with the Tumbling Tumbleweed." The tumbleweeds came down from the north. They covered your land. They covered the roadside. And you would get people and pay them a dollar a day to walk along the roadside, just to cut off the tumbleweeds and put them in a pile so you could burn them. Now, the heat was so horrible and the dust was so horrible. Example: In your house, you put little pieces of paper in the strips of the window, you closed your shades, you closed your curtains—and this is hot; it's 120 outside in the sun—and you stayed inside the house just to try to get away from the dust. When night came, you couldn't sleep, it was so hot.

I remember we had a Model T Ford, because we couldn't afford a Model A. We're up to the Model A's now. We still had a Model T—lucky, though. So we went to Fourth of July [celebration], and it was so dusty coming in the car that we actually closed the windows. The temperature was past a hundred. So we couldn't stand it with the windows open; we couldn't stand it with the windows closed. So we got into Pender, Nebraska, P-e-n-d-e-r, about seven or eight miles away. We were there for a family picnic, and also they had a nice parade. They had covered wagons, and I actually got to see real covered wagons, pulled by horses—not oxen, but horses—and ladies would be dressed up in old-time costumes with churns, the kind where you take a paddle and you pound it up and down on the cream, and it makes butter. I'd heard about this, but I'd never seen it.

This was a peculiar part of time, because they wrote songs about it. Every time you have a season in history that changes, you have songs that go with it. Civil War, World War I, World War II. Well, the Depression had "Every time it rains, it rains pennies from heaven." You had, "Tumbling along with the tumbling tumbleweed." You had, "Rain, when you gonna rain again, rain, for my gal and me again?" People still play these songs, incidentally. You had the one about "We ain't got a barrel of money / Maybe we're ragged and funny / but we'll travel along / singing our song / side by side." And they did, and you couldn't help but think those people traveling in their cars—they're hungry, they're dirty, they got the clothes on their back and a mattress tied to the top, and you know they were singing "Side by Side." And they were also singing "California, Here I Come."

DePue: Was there a particular time of the year that the Dust Bowl was worst? I've read that it was in the springtime.

Fields: Well, the summer was horrible.

DePue: Because of the heat.



Fields: The heat was—I don't remember the spring. But I remember one year—you see, we depended on the crops, to pick the corn that would help pay your mortgage. My father said, "It's time to pick corn," so my mother and father jumped in the Model T, went out to the corn field, and looked, and found one ear of corn. So their whole year of labor was one ear of corn. That's how bad it was.

DePue: But he still managed to pay the mortgage and keep the farm?

Fields: He still paid it. He still paid it.

DePue: Was that from the milk and the eggs?

Fields: Yeah, yeah. We always kept a hired man. And now we're at the times where a dollar a day is what they were paying the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] workers, who were government workers, who built bridges and parks and so forth. Well, we had a man who we used to pay thirty dollars a month. Now we didn't have it anymore. So what we did is, he worked for the CCC at a dollar a day and came home at night. My mother would give him room and board, wash his clothes, iron his clothes, and he's a member of the family. I bet he stayed there ten years. He just stayed there and helped us. He would help with the milking at night and in the morning. It was pretty hard for one man to do 160 acres if you were a good farmer.

DePue: You said he didn't have a tractor during this time period.

Fields: Let's see. I don't remember when the tractor came. It was probably '36.

DePue: I would assume that doesn't happen till after he's got at least one or two crops that he's able to sell to make a little bit of money to do the down payment for the tractor. Does that sound right?

Fields: Well, I have no idea what a tractor would cost; everybody else should know, but I don't. But, no, that would be cash. He never charged everything. We never charged anything, ever. I still don't.

DePue: Did you have enough food growing up? Did the family have enough food?

Fields: Oh, way enough food. We raised strawberries, which I had to stem and clean, and we packed them in pint jars, and we sold them into town when they called and asked for them, and that brought in a little bit of money. How much could it bring in? Not much. But my mother would pick them. I would clean them. I don't like strawberries today—believe me, I won't eat them. (laughs) But we ate good.

Oh, here's the interesting thing. Roosevelt had—what did they call it—New Deal. They called it the New Deal. Now, the New Deal was going to help us get out of the drought and teach us how to handle being a farmer. So

the one thing on his New Deal was you were rationed—he didn't call it rationed, but that's what it was—as to how many livestock you could have. So he rationed the number of cattle that a small quarter of an acre—that's what 160 acres is—I mean, it's a quarter of a section. It's a quarter of a section. You can imagine telling a farmer how many cows he's going to have. You know how that would go over with a farmer who's starving and can't pay his bills? But we took it quite seriously. So—I'm going to have to make this figure up—you're allowed to have six. It was a ridiculous number. You could never raise them and take them to the stockyards and make a profit; it wasn't enough.

So of course, every relative—my mother had several brothers and sisters, and they cooperated one with the other at different seasons of the year, and butchering was one of them, so they quick went against all the rules. You were not supposed to butcher any animal; you were supposed to kill it, bury it. Everybody knew it. That was the set rule. So they told me to just be quiet. I haven't ever told anyone. (laughs) I think it's too late for them to do anything about it. So here came two of the relatives. My father would never kill anything, so they had to kill the animal, they skinned it, they butchered it. My mother and her sisters cooked the meat, packed it in fruit jars, put it in the basement. But we didn't kill an animal. Neither did any of my relatives. They were too hard to raise. If you got one big enough to kill, you didn't have many to start with. The horses died. Oh, I didn't tell you about the gypsies. I must tell you this.

DePue: Yes.

Fields: During a certain season of the year, here came the gypsies. We liked them. They would park on the road around your property someplace and then come to your house. I saw the horse-pulled wagons. I saw the horses tied to the rear of the wagons; these horses tied to the wagons are the ones that they were trading. They would come to you and say, "You don't use that pony anymore; it's hard times. Do you want to trade for a workhorse." And if you said yes, they would take your pony, and of course you'd have to give them a few dollars extra to get a workhorse. Every year, they came and parked at our place. And they'd come for water. They had a girl, and she'd bring her horse down, and we'd play.

Then, one time, it got so bad they couldn't even make a living anymore doing that, so they said to my father and mother, "Would you take our young son"—he's about seven or eight—"and keep him, because we can't afford to feed him." Well, my parents were delighted. They said, "Oh, sure, we'll keep him as long as you want, because we only have one," and that was me. So the little boy came, and he stayed. He was pretty unhappy, because you don't leave a traveling group of people who are your friends and turn around and be stationary in a house with only three other people. That had to be so boring. In about five days they came back and they said, "We can't

stand to be without him.” I was so disappointed. (laughs) But that was interesting, because that little gypsy boy was going to stay; he was beautiful. These were gypsies; they looked like me. They had dark hair, and maybe, maybe, their skin was a little darker. I can’t remember that.

DePue: Did they have any accent?

Fields: No.

DePue: So they’d been in the United States for a while.

Fields: Yeah. But I suspect they couldn’t make a living in town either.

DePue: Was your family a churchgoing family?

Fields: Oh, yeah, we went to church on Sunday.

DePue: How far away was the church?

Fields: The church was also about six miles away.

DePue: So drove the Model T to church, it sounds like.

Fields: We drove the Model T to church. The church. Church was the traditional church that you see on the postcards, built rather like your schoolhouse. But you had steps going into it, and then a little cloakroom on each side. Then you entered the main entrance. There were benches along two sides. Women sat on one side; men sat on the other. Up front, you had an altar where the pastor—remember, Lutheran—pastor walked up to give the talk. Let’s see, we had an organ, a pump organ. My school had a pump organ; they had a pump organ. Oh, no electricity, outdoor toilet, but once a year, we kept the lights on and we had a Christmas program. The lights were a huge chandelier. If you had it today, you could get three thousand dollars for it. It was that beautiful. But it was for candles. You would have a Christmas tree that was donated by your local grocer, and you would buy from him one sack filled with fruit and candy and nuts for every family in the church, which would be given away on Christmas Eve. The church had put bells on the tree, and real candles. Do you think that wasn’t gorgeous? Nothing I’ve seen since can compare to that thrill of real candles on a tree. Of course, now, I wouldn’t do it.

DePue: (laughs) That’d get you in trouble today to do it.

Fields: Oh, God! (laughs)

DePue: What was the language that the sermons were given in?

Fields: Okay, in the beginning, they continued to speak German, and my father religiously fell asleep during every service. He resented people that didn’t

speak English. He would say to me, “If you can’t speak English, why did you move here?” That was his attitude. And he let people know, especially when the war came, you know? Then there’s no German in our house—English! Then they’d speak German. But by then, you see, it wasn’t good German, it was broken German, because they had been here since the early 1800s. They didn’t have a formal education in English, and their German wasn’t formally taught, so it was both... My mother did pretty good, I have to admit it.

DePue: She knew the German?

Fields: Yeah, she did pretty good German. The Germans who came to the country after World War II told her her German was surprisingly good, so she must have been listening in church. But most people, the Germans said, they laughed at because they couldn’t understand their broken English.

DePue: Had your mother grown up in a household where they were speaking German?

Fields: Her grandmother spoke French. Now, her grandmother came here—here’s what happened. Her grandmother, her name was Johanna—her grandmother was Johanna Waldo Von De Puise. Now, that’s a French word. V-o-n D-e-p-u-i-s-e.<sup>3</sup> My mother pronounced it. She said her grandmother pronounced it Von De Puise. Well, the French lady did not read German, and she didn’t even speak German, and she didn’t speak English, so she talked to her child in French. So here’s how she came to be in America at a early date. She married Von Depuise—she must have been pretty, too. I think she was, because all the kids were pretty. So she married Von Depuise in Alsace-Lorraine, France, and he owned a large parcel of land. I have to guess a section—I mean, a quarter of a section is 160 acres—that’s a large parcel.

DePue: Yeah, and when you say a quarter of a section, that’s a quarter of a square mile, basically. A section is a square mile.

Fields: That’s what I meant. One day he and two of his helpers went along the fence line to see if the fence was intact, and someone was waiting and shot him to death. So why did he shoot him? Because he owned a munitions factory worth money and land. So the grandmother Von ~~e~~Depuise, the female, the grandmother, wrote to her daughter, or sent message. She sent a message to her daughter, who was living elsewhere, and said, “I have to leave this farm because I’m next, because they want to take this over.” She said, “I’ve got a little money. I’m moving to America”—by herself—“Do you want to come with me?” The girl, her daughter, had two kids. She said, “I’m coming, and with my two kids. I’m leaving my husband because he came home last night and he’d gambled away his pants. He spends all his money gambling, and I have nothing to live on. I want to leave.”

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<sup>3</sup> Von was a title given to landowners. De Puise is the family name.

They packed up; they crossed the ocean; they got into New York. Now, here you have a woman, her daughter, and their two little children, so you have four females. They met this man named Schmidt. And somehow or other, they decided to go with him to Nebraska. He left Germany because he wanted to be a preacher, but Germany was always conscripting their men. They wanted him to be a soldier, and he didn't want to be killing people, so he came to America. Well, they said, "Yes, we'll go with you to Nebraska." I don't know how they went. I got a hunch there were trains by then, I'm thinking. And don't forget, Omaha—

DePue: Mid-sixties, 1860s, 1870s?

Fields: About.

DePue: Yeah, there certainly would be the railroad by that time.

Fields: I figured it was the Union-Pacific. Anyway, he had brothers already settled in Omaha, so he came, the last one to come, and they came with him. Then when they homesteaded a farm, they got married, so now he's got all that female help. Think about it, that's pretty good. And a few years later, a letter came to the Lutheran church that was next door, and it was addressed to Vondepuise, and she couldn't read it; it was in German. So they took it to the preacher, and he read it, and the letter said, "You now can get married because your husband here is dead." She had been married for years and got a whole houseful of kids! (laughter)

DePue: I was going to ask you about that, because I didn't see where you talked about getting divorced anywhere in there.

Fields: No, no one worried. You know, no one even cared. (laughs) So when they got to this homestead parcel, it was winter, or fall, and he announced, "I'm going to dig a cave, and we will spend the first year in a cave." Now, remember, Nebraska was prairie land, and there were no trees. You know where they had to go for trees? The river edge. There was no river edge where they were. So she announced—the girl he was going to marry—announced, "I'm not going to live in a cave like an animal." So he had to take the wagon and what crates they had and try to make a little covering. And the first winter, they almost all died, (laughs) because she wouldn't live in a cave.

So the next year, they built the house. Now, they had a total of—counting the kids that—the two—a total of six kids to support by then. They were coming along. So my mother is living now in a nice little house, quite a nice little house, room for eight people, bedrooms. And so she's in charge of the kids because the parents went to town. The mother had baked a pie and set it right by the windowsill to cool. Now, there are no screens on the window at this time. My mother's sitting there. She watched a big arm reach in and take that pie away. It was an Indian, and she was so frightened that she took...

That happened to be a path the Indians always used, and they didn't quit because there's a white man there. And they took her pie. She made all the kids—they all jumped under a bed till the parents came home. (laughs)

DePue: How old was she at that time?

Fields: A little girl. A little girl. Not a teenager, a little girl.

DePue: Well, no wonder she was afraid.

Fields: (laughs) Yeah.

DePue: Well, that is quite a story, Evelyn. If you don't mind, let's get back to your growing up. I wanted to ask you if you remember anything more about some of the holiday traditions the family had.

Fields: Birthdays. Now, the holidays in the Midwest at that time were always observed—you had a child who has the first birthday, everybody comes. Neighbors come, relatives come. You always have a lot of relatives, because they all settled in the same area. And you never invited them. They all came, and they brought a plate of something to eat, either cake or sandwiches. Everybody played cards. If they were musical, they had to play music with the people. I had several musical cousins, and they performed professionally too. We all played music, people danced, people sang, people played cards. They played a game called Pitch. And Pinochle. Pinochle was a good game. If you dropped a pin, that meant there was a party, I think. Everybody had parties. So we went to a lot of neighbor parties.

DePue: Well, it sounds like you've got a lot of good memories from this time.

Fields: Those are the highlights.

DePue: Let's talk about finishing up school in that one-room schoolhouse and then going to high school.

Fields: Okay, so I finished the eighth grade, and I was a good student. I had learned how to read, and in back of me stood a bookcase. One day I opened that bookcase, and I found all of Shakespeare's books. I'd never heard of Shakespeare, I didn't know who he was, but I loved his writing. So I'm going to take a huge geography book, put it in the front, put the Shakespeare book back here, and sit there and read, and they'd think I was studying. I didn't study at all; I read those books. I read every book in that library.

DePue: The library is in your home or...?

Fields: No, it's behind me in school. I'm sitting in the last seat. There's a bookcase. It maybe held forty, fifty books, and I read all the good ones, and all the encyclopedias. But that's where I learned, I think—that's where I learned how

to read. It wasn't because they taught me, I assure you. I didn't learn math from those people at all. I had to learn that by myself afterwards, which you can do. You can do it if you have to. So that was the schooling. So now when you're thirteen and you've finished the eighth grade, I was supposed to go to high school. Well, we didn't have the money for me to stay with somebody, and we didn't have the way for me to get there because of the bad roads. In the winter, there's no way my father could have taken me like this and stopped twice a day, go back and forth, when he's a farmer.

DePue: Where was the high school?

Fields: The closest one would have been seven miles away, on dirt roads that when you went through them with a horse and wagon—which I had to do a lot to get to school—your wheels would go down and churn like butter in the mud, in the roads. So this was not an easy way to get to school. So I didn't go to school. I didn't go to high school.

So finally there came a time I came home from school one day, and we always turned on the Atwater Kent—well, by then did we have a real radio? Maybe we did. And we heard that Mussolini<sup>4</sup> had invaded Ethiopia. My father says, "This is the beginning of World War II. And they're going to draft women because we're not ready to fight." He knew we weren't doing anything. We didn't have plants. We weren't making new cars. We weren't making war machinery. Haile Selassie was the head of Ethiopia. They ran him out of Ethiopia. He went to England. And in four years, England went back to Ethiopia and—anyway, they got Haile Selassie back in power, and I guess they fought the Italians to do that? But then, many years later—many years later, like in the sixties—Haile Selassie was deposed. He was kicked out, too, eventually, but it took years to do it.

DePue: What was your feeling about not being able to go to high school?

Fields: I nearly died. I cried; I carried on. But no one knew it, because I knew there was just no point. So a man came by recruiting people to go to a business school into Omaha, so he talked my parents. My father knew the war was going to be on. He says, "Better get some education." So I went to Omaha and signed up for this school, and it was called Commercial Extension. I thought that was a good name. It was a lovely place to go to school.

DePue: What year would that have been?

Fields: Forty.

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<sup>4</sup> Benito Mussolini was an Italian politician who led the [National Fascist Party](#). He is considered to be one of the key figures in the creation of Fascism.

- DePue: Okay, so this is...
- Fields: Yeah, because I'm out of school, it's '36, the war has started, or it's about to.
- DePue: Yeah, '36 is when you heard this report on the radio about Ethiopia.
- Fields: Yeah, but when was the war started?
- DePue: Well, I think the Italians invaded Ethiopia in '35. Thirty-six is probably memorable because Mussolini made a wonderful, glorious speech at that time because they had been successful in defeating the Ethiopians. It could have been either one of those that you heard on the radio. Thirty-nine was the time that Hitler invaded Poland, September '39.
- Fields: Okay, Hitler invaded Poland. Well, that's when it had to be. It was about '39. Because I didn't think I would ever get to leave that miserable spot. (laughs)
- DePue: So you were, what, sixteen at the time?
- Fields: Yeah. I thought I'd never ever, ever get away from there. I hated the country, I hated the heat, I hated the cold. I didn't like anything.
- DePue: What did you do from finishing school to two or three years later when you got to go to this Commercial Extension School?
- Fields: Mostly I played the piano. I got pretty good.
- DePue: Did you have sheet music you played?
- Fields: Oh, of course. I was playing fifth-grade music. That's pretty darn good for someone who took one lesson a week for a year. That's nothing. Most people are still in the first grade.
- DePue: Did you play the popular tunes, play classical music?
- Fields: Oh, yeah. I could play them by ear. When the Hit Parade would come on, I would listen to them and copy the words by hand, then I would rush to the piano and quickly play the tune before I forgot it and write the notes above the words. And so I knew all the popular pieces. I still do that, except we don't have any music now that's worth copying, and I don't listen to any country, so...
- DePue: It sounds like a pretty isolated lifestyle.
- Fields: Oh, it was—
- DePue: Did you have much of a social life at the time, seeing other kids or...?



- Fields: No. Neighbors—no. The neighbors didn't let their kids come over and visit, no. They just didn't. They're pioneer stock; they didn't do that. So I went to Omaha and I went to school long enough to think I knew a little, and then I said, "Well, can I pass the Civil Service test?" Because now they're giving Civil Service tests in a local...
- DePue: How long did you actually attend this Commercial Extension School? Was that a couple years or just a few months?
- Fields: No, months.
- DePue: So this would have been maybe 1940 now.
- Fields: I learned how to type. I knew Gregg shorthand; I learned enough to fake my way. I learned enough about accounting to say, "Oh, yes, I know accounting." I knew there was a right side and a left side, and you knew how to add and subtract. What was there to learn? (laughs) And so that's how I did it. When I thought I knew enough, I took the Civil Service exam. Where it said high school graduate, I didn't say where, because I thought, Oh, they'll write a letter. I said, "Yes." You know, "yes" covers a multitude. So I took the test, and I passed it; I was amazed when I passed it. They hit some subjects I really hated, and that was in spelling I wasn't good because I'd never been taught vowels. That was miserable. It's still miserable. I'm trying to figure it out today. I still do figure on it. But I passed the test, and then I was invited to come to Washington. Now, when I went to Washington—
- DePue: Now, this would have still been 1940?
- Fields: It's in the forties, in 1943.
- DePue: Okay, so what happened between 1940 and 1943? Were you still in Omaha?
- Fields: Well, I wasn't doing anything; I was just sitting at home by my—well, okay, 1942, it was.
- DePue: Okay. I've got one other question I want to ask you before we get to this. Do you remember Pearl Harbor?
- Fields: Well, that comes after.
- DePue: Well, Pearl Harbor was December 7, 1941.
- Fields: Okay. Do you know, that's the one thing that—I remember it, but except for looking at *LIFE* magazine, where I got my information—that was my big information, was *LIFE* magazine. Yeah, I remember that. Oh, I'll tell you why we knew it was coming. My father had said we were going to go to war because there had been big trucks coming to all the farmers. They would say to the farmer, "Do you have any scrap iron you're not using?" All farmers did.

They probably had scrap iron for the past—since the farmer was homesteaded—and they'd say, "Well, take it off and really clean your place up and look nice," and people would sell it. When they came to my father, he told them, "Nope, don't have any scrap iron." Well, we had scrap iron galore. He said, "We're going to need it." So when the war broke out, I remember then the word came out, "We need scrap iron." People were picking up their iron fences around their lovely homes and selling the iron fences, right here in this town. They were all over. So he sold his scrap iron. He said that it was going to Japan. He knew it was Japanese, and I don't know how he knew it was Japanese.

DePue: That was the case. The scrap iron and fuel oil was being sold in Japan, and when we stopped selling it, that's when they decided to—

Fields: And he knew it. He had a very—he only went to the fifth grade in school in the Swede town called Oakland, Nebraska, but they taught English, they didn't teach German, and they had more educated teachers. So he only went to fifth grade, but he was, I have to say, pretty brilliant. He was smart as a whip.

DePue: Had he served in the military during World War I?

Fields: No. He was too—the war prior to that—wasn't that the war—what was that...?

DePue: He was probably too young at that time.

Fields: That one war that—the war that shouldn't have been.

DePue: Do you mean the Spanish-American war?

Fields: Yeah.

DePue: But that was 1898.

Fields: He was too young the first war, and he was so disappointed. Then when World War I came, of course, he was on the farm now, and it was one way to get off the farm. Then he was too old. Then he kept pestering them. So then they said, "Okay, when your crop is in, you're drafted." Then the Armistice came. And my mother was so happy. Because he was going to get off that farm no matter what, but he didn't quite make it.

DePue: Okay, so now that Pearl Harbor has happened, let's get to your next chapter of your story.

Fields: Okay, my first war appointment was August '42. That's my appointment.

DePue: Where did you work?

Fields: The first place I worked was in Washington, DC, the Adjutant General's Department. And it's in Washington, civilian Component branch. And I did decent work. I kept records. I typed. I typed letters. I could do this because I'd had a few months of instruction.

DePue: Working for the Adjutant General's Department, that would suggest that this was in the Army.

Fields: That was the Army. I worked for the Army, yes. Now, I went to Washington and found a place to live in one of the brownstone houses. They were large rooms, so I took a bed in a room with two other girls, which was nice; otherwise I would have been so lonesome. In the house maybe were ten to twelve to fifteen people living, the help and the children who were staying there. And that was easy, to find a place to live, but to get to work was like pulling teeth. You didn't have a car, you didn't have a bus out front, you didn't have a streetcar, no underground, and how do you get to work? It was horrible. I finally found someone that I could ride with sometimes, but it was a far ways away, all the way up to one of the temporary buildings.

DePue: Was it in Washington, DC, or was it—

Fields: Yes.

DePue: Did you have—

Fields: They put up a whole bunch of temporary buildings. They had temporary G; they had temporary N. I think I was in N.

DePue: Was this pretty close to the Potomac?

Fields: Yes.

DePue: Where you were living—your rental place—was that within Washington, DC, as well?

Fields: Yes. It was in a nice, residential section.

DePue: What I know about Washington, DC, at the time was this incredible housing crunch where there wasn't anywhere to live.

Fields: Oh, it was horrible. Well, you know if I was in a room with two other people. Well, it wasn't very—

DePue: It was a good place to be a young man at the time, I think.

Fields: Yeah, that would be true. But, okay, the place is filled with Army men walking around in uniform. There was no shortage of them.

DePue: Well, you're nineteen, twenty years old at the time. Did you get a chance to do a little bit of dating with some of those GIs?

Fields: Oh, yeah. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed that part of it. So these other two girls, they also had the same trouble we did. They said, "Why don't we see if we can get a transfer and try to get into New York?" (laughs) We figured we could find a guy. I don't think New York was any better than Washington. But we got a transfer. They were very nice about it. They'd say, "Why do you want a transfer?" So I went from the general Adjutant Department to the Office of Dependency Benefits—you know, that's where you get your money—in Newark, New Jersey.

I didn't tell you this. I entered the service as a clerk-typist. May I say, never enter any employment as a typist? You're going to be stuck with a typewriter if you work there for thirty years. Always say, "Oh, I'm a clerk only. I can't type." (DePue laughs) Believe me, I learned that. If you're a clerk, you can be head of the division. Now, the typist is going to be a typist. I didn't know these things, but I know them now.

DePue: Evelyn, I'm wondering, you had some time, I guess at Omaha, going to this school, and now you're out in Washington, DC, and then you finally make it to New Jersey, but you had spent all of your time, so much time, on the farm before that. Did you miss your folks? Did you miss back home?

Fields: No, I was too busy. I really worked hard. I was earning 1,440 dollars a year. That's a CAF 2 rating. I don't know what that stands for. (laughs)

DePue: But that was real money back then.

Fields: Well, that's more than I had before. No, I was busy. You did not have time. There were too many people around. I read the newspaper then, too. So then we went to the Army Regional Accounting Office, the Office of Dependency Benefits. So that's in Newark, New Jersey. Prudential Insurance had just built a six-story building. It was gorgeous, brand new. I was from a temporary building made of metal; I'm in a real high-rise building with an elevator and a lobby. It was gorgeous—heated, cooled. But where do you live? So we found a place. The closest thing we could find was a hotel, so we rented one room in a hotel, and there were two huge beds. I had a bed all to myself, and we three stayed—we're the ones who came from Washington—we three stayed at that hotel. And I don't remember where they worked. I don't know if we all went to the same place. But I said one time, "God, I'd like to live in a really nice house," so I found a gorgeous house to live in. The only thing wrong—I moved there. Then I discovered there was no transportation to get back.

So I asked for a transfer. I said the weather was terrible. Well, it was terrible here, too. I said, "I'd like to go closer to home." So they said, "Okay,

how about Chicago?” So I went to the Army Regional Accounting Office in Chicago. Now, that is right across from the big train station.

DePue: The Grand Central Station in downtown Chicago?

Fields: Yeah, in Chicago. So, now, this isn't that bad. I found a place to live in a beautiful girls' home—girls' club. I shared it with one other female. It was located by the Chicago Water Tower, where the Water Tower still stands today. I have many a picture taken on that Water Tower. I loved living with those girls. And to get down to my job, all I had to do was get on the 'L'.<sup>5</sup> Now, I had to get downtown, on State Street. I had to get off, then I had to walk all the way to the Union Station where my building was. So I still had to walk. And I remember getting on the 'L', how cold and windy it was. I was wearing a fur coat, because it belonged to my mother when she was a young girl, and she altered it to fit me. I was the only one wearing a fur coat. (laughter) In fact, people would ask, “Can we borrow your coat?” So then I—should I go on with the, “so then”?

DePue: Yeah.

Fields: Okay. So then I met a lot of people, and time moves on. I got married.

DePue: Well, before you get to the married part, I do want to interject here and ask a few questions. During all of this time, in DC, in New Jersey, and then coming to Chicago, did you and your girlfriends follow the war news pretty closely?

Fields: Oh, I did. I don't know that they did, but I pretty well knew what was going on, because I had been brought up listening—I listened to Admiral Byrd when he was at Little America. Do you remember Little America? Do you know about Little America? You don't remember this.

DePue: No, I don't.

Fields: You don't know about Little America? Really?

DePue: No.

Fields: Oh, my God. I think it was the South Pole. When we still had the Atwater Kent radio. I think on Saturday night you could turn it on, and you could listen to Admiral Byrd broadcasting from the South Pole, Little America. Here's how it would go: “Hello, this is Admiral Byrd talking to you from (makes noise).” That's the static coming in. Those are the icicles breaking, I thought. “And oh, it is so cold here. It was 20 below (makes noise).” There's the static. We listened for about fifteen minutes, with words that were interrupted with static, but it was the most thrilling experience to hear Admiral Byrd talking to you from Little America. He was there a long time.

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<sup>5</sup> The L or EL is the Chicago public elevated train into and out of the downtown Chicago Loop.

DePue: So obviously these are things that connected you to the larger world, like that radio, like *LIFE* magazine, and those encyclopedias, and those books that you found.

Fields: They made a difference.

DePue: Those things were very important to you.

Fields: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I had learned how to join the library in town. I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know how the books were alphabetized; I only knew go up and open it up, see that it looked good. So I can remember when I had to quit school at thirteen, I remember going to the library and finding a book on psychology. You want to tempt your interest, just get a book—tells you—a doctor has written about his psychology and his patients with psychosis. It was so interesting. I read every book I could find on the subject. (laughs) I didn't know anybody who had those problems. People couldn't afford to have a problem where I lived. They really couldn't. If you had a problem, no one knew it. But that's where I began to get books out of the library, and that's what's in place of going to school.

DePue: When you're going from city to city after the war has started, did you occasionally get to go to the movie theaters and watch the newsreels and things like that?

Fields: Oh, that was a treat, the newsreels. They were big, as if you were there. I went at a later date; after that, I was going constantly, like every week, to a movie to see the news. Yes, you're right. That was our news. You saw action.

DePue: Well, what was your favorite kind of movie to go to and some stars that you remember?

Fields: Lana Turner. I'm just saying some names. Tyrone Power. We didn't have movie magazines, and I didn't know people in show business—I knew people in music, but I didn't know show business. I didn't know the names of movie stars. I knew Shirley Temple. I remember seeing her once; in my whole life I've only seen her once. She's fabulous. And I don't remember if that was war or not.

DePue: What was the mood of the country like at that time, at least where you were? What do you recall about that?

Fields: About the country?

DePue: Yeah, the mood of the people you're around. Were they optimistic about our chances in the war?

Fields: Oh. There was no one who even complained about being at war. They all wanted to be at war. We were going to save the world. There is no question,

are we going to. And you remember the lights-out? We carefully turned our lights out. We worried about the Japs sending missiles over to California. Turn your lights out! We did that. We did everything right. We had rationing. We rationed everything. Later on, I'll tell you about rationing.

DePue: Right.

Fields: We knew we were at war. Believe you me, we knew. Oh, hose. Talk about war—hose became hard to get, so you remember—

DePue: Ladies stockings is what you're...

Fields: It was a moneymaker. Nylons were invented. But I don't remember which it was, nylon or the silk ones, before. But they invented a little, looked like a crochet hook, but you threaded it. You took your rip in your hose—they go straight down, one line. You start at the bottom, you hook the bottom up and you went back and forth, and you wove the thread that had broken, you wove it back up and tied a knot, and you had your runner fixed. Now, I bet they're not selling those anymore. Because we bought one. We fixed our hose when we had a runner. Isn't that a good one? (laughs)

DePue: Well, growing up during the Depression and facing some hard times, I know that the mentality was you don't waste anything, you don't throw away anything if you didn't have to.

Fields: All my clothes—I was always the best-dressed person around because my mother's sisters would buy ready-made clothes, and they would give the Sunday clothes that were outdated to my mother. She'd pull them apart, she would wash and iron the pieces, and redo dresses for me. I never had a store-bought dress, even though I begged, but I was the best-dressed person.

DePue: Did some of your friends have... I know that they had bags of seed and things that would come in cloth bags that you could end up making clothes out of.

Fields: Yes, those bags, we made bedspreads out of them. We sewed four of them together, and we had a bedspread. They came with colors and flowers. One came with stripes. It was gorgeous. She made a striped dress for me that would have been good for any fashion — she was a professional seamstress and hat-maker, so she knew how to sew.

DePue: This is your mother.

Fields: She was very talented—not school-taught, but boy, was she talented. So I was well-dressed, I have to say. I didn't get enough shoes, because that was cash on the line. I did not get enough shoes, but boy, did I have the clothes, because it was my relatives' leftovers.

- DePue: Let's get you back to living in Chicago in the middle of the war. I assume you're now wearing store-bought clothes.
- Fields: Oh, yeah. I'm buying real shoes. (laughter) I'll never forget the time: there was a counter, and it had a whole bunch of shoes on it. Shoes were rationed, you know. You had to have a ticket. There were a whole bunch of shoes, three dollars a pair. I'll never forget it. I walked in there, and I found an exotic pair of ladies' snakeskin shoes. Now, you know snakeskin is gorgeous. I bought those shoes. I thought (laughs) I was the best-dressed person in Chicago! I had snakeskin shoes. They were tough to come by.
- DePue: Well, let's move on then to talking about how you end up—a little bit about your social life—and lead that into how you end up meeting your future husband.
- Fields: Well, you know, there are sailors all over the place if you're in Chicago because Great Lakes<sup>6</sup> is right next door. And I met this boy who was a second class radioman at Great Lakes. He'd already been there two years, and they wouldn't ship him out because he's a radioman. I guess he's teaching people. And so after a few months knowing him, we got married.
- DePue: Well, wait a minute. You said you met him at Great Lakes. Did you go up there?
- Fields: In Chicago. No, no, in Chicago, in a restaurant.
- DePue: Oh. Well, tell me about how that happened.
- Fields: Well, back then, you know, people talked to people; they didn't walk by and ignore you. People said hello. People were very friendly. I can walk down the street, and no one's going to say hello to me, a stranger, here, but there, people spoke to you. It was a whole different ballgame. So you met a lot of people.
- DePue: Well, who said hello first? Who approached who?
- Fields: I don't remember. But I do know that after several months, I got married, and it was decent. It was a good move.
- DePue: When did you get married, then?
- Fields: Nineteen forty-four, February first.
- DePue: Was this a church wedding?

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<sup>6</sup> Great Lakes Naval Training Station was on Lake Michigan several miles north of Chicago.



- Fields: Yes, Presbyterian Church, one of the beautiful churches in Chicago, right on, I think, on Sheridan Avenue,<sup>7</sup> close—not far from the Water Tower. It's still there.
- DePue: Does this mean he was from Chicago, his family lives in Chicago?
- Fields: No, he was originally from Wachula, Florida, but the Depression brought him into Chicago. He worked as a reporter for the *Herald-American*.
- DePue: When did he start working for them, do you know?
- Fields: Well, that was '44, and he'd been there at least two years.
- DePue: So the war was going on when he got that job.
- Fields: I think he joined—wait a minute. He joined the war in '42. He joined in '42, so it had to be he was working there in '41 for sure, maybe '40.
- DePue: Did your parents and his parents come out for the wedding, then?
- Fields: Well, my mother came, and she liked him very much. I didn't meet his parents till after the war because they were in Florida.
- DePue: It sounds like a pretty small wedding, then.
- Fields: Oh, yeah. His brother was in the Air Force, he was a pilot, and his wife—they were from Chicago also—and they were the witnesses at the wedding. That's who was at the wedding. In the church—not the vestibule, but the church. It was a nice wedding.
- DePue: Well, you haven't mentioned his name yet.
- Fields: His name is William Clinton, C-l-i-n-t-o-n, Fields. His shipmates and his work association always called him W.C. Everybody called him W.C. He worked there a long time at the newspaper, and he was well liked. I remember when he was out to sea they even sent him a war bond once.
- DePue: What did he do at the newspaper?
- Fields: Reporter.
- DePue: Your standard cub reporter?
- Fields: Yeah, cub reporter. He started out by taking articles that were in the newspaper and rewriting them. Then he'd rewrite them, and then they'd say, "Now, rewrite it again," over and over, and that's how he learned. Oh, his

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<sup>7</sup> The Fourth Presbyterian Church near the Chicago Water Tower is on North Michigan Avenue.

punctuation is divine, if you ever read any of his letters. He knows how to hyphenate. (laughs)

DePue: Well, Evelyn, you got to tell me, what was it about—did you call him William or Bill?

Fields: Bill.

DePue: What was it about Bill that...?

Fields: Well, he was very handsome, decent, didn't get drunk. Did smoke, but... He was just a nice human being, and intelligent, highly intelligent.

DePue: When he was doing the naval training, what was his training in?

Fields: I have a letter here someplace that he wrote to his parents telling him—it took him a month to complete the letter. It's like a reporter's—I got it for you—it's like a reporter's letter written of how the events occur once you join the Navy at Great Lakes. It's very professional.

DePue: This is a letter given to me a little bit earlier today: "Friday, December 3, 1942."

Fields: That's it. He had to sign up, you know, but he joined before he was drafted.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Well, I'll just read a couple of sentences out of here: "Dear Mom and Dad, I'll begin this letter but don't know if I'll finish it today. I never know when I'll have to do something, and so I have to write a little between duties. Now I'll try to tell you what the U.S. Navy is like." And then it goes on for several pages.

Fields: He really tells you.

DePue: And there's a lot here, so—

Fields: You could do a movie script, if you wanted to, dated that period, you could do it—

DePue: What we're going to do with this is, we'll photocopy it—

Fields: You can copy that.

DePue: —and people who want to check it out—

Fields: They will. They will love reading it.

DePue: —they'll have to come to the library and see the archives we have there.

Fields: They will love it. (laughs)

- DePue: He's got diagrams and everything in here.
- Fields: Oh, yeah. He gives you details, because that's how he was taught to do.
- DePue: What specifically were you doing at the time, then? Were you still at the Army Regional Accounting Office?
- Fields: I was at the Army Regional Accounting Office. I was a secretary by then, and I had—
- DePue: Not a typist.
- Fields: No. (laughs) Had probably.... Let's see, what did they call us? Clerk–Stenographer. I'm a Clerk–Stenographer now and my wages are 1,620 dollars, because I'd gotten increases. That was my second increase.
- DePue: Were you making more money at this time than your father was making in a year? Of course, farming by that time was really on the upswing because of the demands of the war.
- Fields: Yeah, it was, wasn't it? I remember sending home some money for them for a present, and they bought a beautiful sofa and chair, so that was enough money to send that home to purchase that, so it was sufficient. I remember going to Marshall Field's<sup>8</sup> and buying a beautiful housecoat for my mother and a shirt for my father with his initials on the sleeve, the cuff. I thought that was wonderful. (laughs) So I was making enough to live on. I remember the first apartment we had. We had a Pullman kitchen<sup>9</sup> and a bed that pulled out of the wall and then tables and chairs, that's it. It was one room, and we paid 7.50 a month.
- DePue: Where was this apartment?
- Fields: This is in Chicago, on Sheridan Avenue. [Sheridan Road]
- DePue: Was he working at the time at the Navy—
- Fields: He was at Great Lakes, but he could come home at night. They let you come home.
- DePue: How did he get to work every day?
- Fields: The 'L' went out there.

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<sup>8</sup> Marshall Field & Co. was a famous department store on State Street in Chicago. At that time it was about 90 years old, a real fixture. Many years later it was bought by Macy's of New York, operating under the Macy's name at the time of this interview.

<sup>9</sup> Named for the Pullman Company's railroad sleeping and dining cars. Space limitations meant the kitchens were very small and well arranged to be useful in a small space.

- DePue: Okay. That's quite a way north from—
- Fields: Oh, yeah. He was probably glad to go to war, huh? (laughter)
- DePue: Well, I know you had mentioned that, so let's talk a little bit about how he ended up going to war.
- Fields: Well, I know how he ended up going. He enlisted because he thought he'd be drafted. What do you mean? Did I know why we went to war? You sure did.
- DePue: No, no, no. Why he ended up going overseas to combat, because you had told me before that—
- Fields: He didn't have to go—he volunteered—because they didn't want him to go. So that means he was doing something that was important, that aided them in training.
- DePue: Do you know what that was?
- Fields: Sure, he was a radioman, and a fast one. He could teach—he taught me. I learned the Morse code. They did Morse code, you know.
- DePue: So is he teaching Morse code to the new recruits?
- Fields: Yeah, he must have been. I don't know what he did. I know he was busy.
- DePue: Was that because he wasn't supposed to tell you, or just...?
- Fields: I just didn't know. I just didn't know. I don't know why I didn't know, I just don't know. He never went on any cruises. His friends were all sent out. The whole battalion he joined with, everybody left but two guys. They took IQ tests, and they kept him and the other guy. Whoever had the highest IQ and could do things, they kept. They wouldn't have sent him away at the war if he hadn't asked for it.
- DePue: Was he very insistent on that?
- Fields: Oh, yeah. He kept putting in applications to go to war.
- DePue: What were you telling him at the time?
- Fields: I said, "Don't do that," but he'd already done it. (laughs) He put it in three or four requests before they finally gave up and sent him.
- DePue: Well, Evelyn, I'll put you on the spot here. Was that something the two of you argued about sometimes?
- Fields: Oh, he wanted to go to do his duty. He's very patriotic. We would have friends that came over who had been in the Navy, on the ships, and they told

me, “It’s like being cradled in a mother’s arms. Nothing happens to you when you go to sea.” (laughter)

DePue: Did you believe that?

Fields: No! (laughs) But that’s what they told me.

DePue: Okay. When did he actually get shipped overseas?

Fields: Well, I wouldn’t know the right date exactly if I—okay. He got shipped overseas...

DePue: Must have been right at the end of ’44 or early ’45.

Fields: Okay. He was shipped to San Francisco. He was initially assigned to the *Twiggs*, and then he found out that if I came out, he could stay one month longer; they’d reassign him. So I quit my job in Chicago and went to San Francisco and spent one month there, and he was reassigned to the *USS Putnam*.

DePue: What was the *USS Twiggs*? Was that another destroyer?

Fields: That was a destroyer, and it went down. It went down, and his ship was even helping the survivors.

DePue: Well, that was a fateful trip out to San Francisco for you.

Fields: They lost a lot of men. I went to ‘Frisco and I sat on the sand, I remember. The sand fleas bit, and I didn’t know what a sand flea was. But they have sand fleas in ‘Frisco, believe me.

DePue: What I’m holding in my hand here are entries from his—was this his journal or letters—that I’m going to be reading from here?

Fields: Well, he was in the Navy. He did keep a journal, but he only wrote them after the battle. He said he would not write anything that couldn’t be written by any reporter. So he would go into a battle, and when it was all over, he would explain the battle. So that’s a record.

DePue: What was he doing on the ship when he was on the *USS Putnam*? What was his job?

Fields: He was a Radioman, still Second Class. You see, once you go to sea, you don’t get any advancements at that time. But he was doing work—he was just it. He was doing hard work on the ship with a lot of people working under him, and he did the speed code.

DePue: Speed code? You mean Morse code?

Fields: Well, yeah, it was all Morse, but you could go slow. For the slow people who couldn't catch it, you'd go dot... dit... dit... dot... dot... But you could go ah-ah-ah-ah with the speed code receiver, and he did that. That's what that little machine is over there.

DePue: Yeah, right behind you. You were showing me before, the—

Fields: And you owned your own.

DePue: You had to buy it yourself?

Fields: Yeah. He took that with him to the ship, and he brought it home.

DePue: Was this a duty he liked to do?

Fields: Oh, he loved it. He had a good time. It was ferocious, you could tell; it was bad, but he liked ship life. He gained weight on it. (laughs)

DePue: What I want to do here, though, is talk about after he ships out. I think this is probably right at the beginning of 1945. But I want to talk about what you did after he shipped out.

Fields: Okay. When he had to ship out, I went back to Pender. Well, I went back to Bancroft, to the farm. And I couldn't sit there and wait for the war to end, to I went in to Pender.

DePue: I was going to say, how can you go back to the farm after you've seen San Francisco?

Fields: Oh, I only (laughs) went back a couple of days, and then I went to the OPA office in Pender. I said, "Do you need help?" Well, they always needed help.

DePue: OPA?

Fields: Office of Price Administration. (pause) I was in charge of a multitude of things. In a big city, you'd have one category, but I remember that I had stoves. You couldn't get a stove without a rationing ticket. That's terrible. You couldn't get a pair of boots, even if you worked in the livestock business, without a rationing ticket. And then we were only issued—that little dinky town—they thought we were out in the boonies so you didn't have to issue many. Probably have two stoves that you could issue. Come on, the stoves are breaking down like flies. We just couldn't issue any because we didn't have any coupons. It was my opinion the government—we really weren't that short on things, but it's my opinion the government did that in case we should ever—worse things could happen—invasion—worse things could have happened and happened in the USA. We were ready to take a hold; we had organizations ready to go. And that's the truth. I always figured that out. Anyway, I had shoes, I had rationing, I had stoves, I had boots. I was

overloaded with work in Pender, Nebraska. My salary was dropped down to like 890 a year because they figured anyone in a small town has no expense. It costs more to live there than it did Chicago! In Chicago I could live for 7.50 a month. It cost more to live in that Pender.

DePue: Was Bill sending some money home to you?

Fields: There was an allotment. I put it in the bank. I saved every dime he sent.

DePue: Any stories you can tell, any anecdotes that illustrate what your job was about?

Fields: Well, I have a scrapbook, and in the scrapbook are pictures and letters that I received in the mail that are interesting. I even have ration books.

DePue: If you don't mind, we're going to pause right now. We'll go get the scrapbook, and I'll read a couple entries from that.

Fields: Okay.

DePue: If that sounds okay.

Fields: Okay.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Evelyn, we took a quick break. I went through this your scrapbook and found a couple things that I'd like to read into the record here. This one's dated February 9, 1944. "Dear Tilly, Albert, and Elmer." Who would they be?

Fields: Oh, that would be Tilly—Elmer is my cousin, and Tilly and Elmer are my aunt and uncle. Tilly's my mother's sister. Nice person.

DePue: Well, you're writing to them.

Fields: Oh.

DePue: "Just a few lines to inform you of my latest movements. Effective February first, I became Mrs. W.C. Fields, William Clinton, to be exact. Billy is a Radioman, Second Class at Great Lakes, so he can live on shore. We have an apartment on the North Side of Chicago. George, Billy's brother, who is a lieutenant in the Army Air Corps,<sup>10</sup> and his wife were our witnesses. I wore a blue dress with pink hat and long pink gloves and an orchid corsage. Everything went beautifully, and I'm now very happy. If Billy gets leave before shipping out, we can come home and you can meet the latest addition

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<sup>10</sup> During World War II there was no integrated U. S. Air Force. Each service had its own planes; the Army had the largest number of planes and pilots all through the war.

to the relation. This about covers the news for us right now. Write soon. Love, Evelyn.”

Fields: Yes. Everybody sent money. Everybody sent me ten dollars, which was a lot of money.

DePue: Mm-hmm. I'm going to flip through this. It'll take a little bit of time as I do this, but there's a couple things that I wanted just to read. Some of this is talking about now your job working with the Office of Price Administration and having to do with things like rationing and who gets—

Fields: What.

DePue: —how much supplies and things like that. “Dear Sir: Would you send me a ration certificate to fill out for a new oil stove, an oil stove for the kitchen to cook on. Thank you, Jess W. Young, Walthill, Nebraska.” Here's one that's very brief. This is dated February 4, 1945: “Gas, gas, gas. I must have gas.” (laughter)

Fields: One coupon is all they needed, and we had gas at that time, because look at the date.

DePue: Yeah, again, February 1945.

Fields: Yeah, and we had gas.

DePue: Here's another one, April 16, 1945: “Please rush”—and that “rush” is underlined like three times—“Please rush this permit; my feet are on the ground.” (laughter)

Fields: He wanted shoes.

DePue: Okay. Now, flipping through some other things here... There are some wonderful things that I'll have to include for the record with some photos done, because your husband apparently was something of an artist as well as being a journalist. I'm going to flip to the one here towards the back. Oh, sorry. He's got some pictures of you it looks like he drew as well. Oh, here's one: “Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye. This is nineteen hundred and forty-four in the year of our Lord, proclamation.” So this was done before you were married. “Proclamation: Be it known by all men present that this is to affirm that the undersigned, one William Clinton Fields, in the service of his country's Navy is in love with, the husband of, and wedded to, and the angel blessed stinky of one Evelyn Oberg Fields, whereas and to wit he's going to keep her, whereas and to wit she's going to keep him, under penalty of spitting toothies. Be it (laughs) further known that the aforementioned Evelyn Oberg Fields is the blessed little beanpole of the aforementioned William Clinton Fields.” Do you remember that?



Fields: Yeah, it's in there. (laughs)

DePue: Toothies?

Fields: Toothies, teeth. (laughs)

DePue: And the "blessed stinky of" one Evelyn Oberg Fields. Now, was that the slang of the day?

Fields: Yeah, stinky. I don't know, remember the—it rings a bell, but I don't remember that. (laughs)

DePue: I'm sure it meant a lot then. There are pictures of Marlene Dietrich. I saw a picture in here signed by the other W.C. Fields.<sup>11</sup>

Fields: That's right.

DePue: <oving along, here's one sugar rationing, Memphis, Tennessee: "Dear friend, I am writing you a few lines about some sugar. Santa Claus and I had a talk the other day about my Christmas, and I told him I would not have even a cup of sweetener coffee for my Christmas because I had used all my sugar and had divided what I had with my stepchildren until I would not have a cake this year, or anything. And he told me to write to the OPA office and they would send me some sugar stamps. I hope Santa told me the truth. I would appreciate just one if I could get it, or whatever you could spare me. Please let me hear from you. Yours truly, Mrs. Ollie Bates of Centerview, Tennessee."

Fields: Wasn't that a sad letter? You know, I could have clipped a coupon out of my book, because I didn't use sugar, didn't can. It never occurred to me at that time of my life to send her a coupon. We didn't mail coupons to people. We were rationing them.

DePue: So the answer had to be no?

Fields: Yeah, the answer was no. On all those requests you read, the answer was always no, because we were allotted so much that we could ration; when it was gone, it was gone, especially in little towns. Like this was Memphis, Tennessee; however, in Pender, Nebraska, population five hundred, you're not issued anything to speak of, so if you get over two requests, you're out of luck.

DePue: Was there a shortage of sugar at the time?

Fields: Not really. Not really. There was not a shortage. But had the war gotten worse, had our shores been hit, we were ready to go for the worst of times.

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<sup>11</sup> Marlene Dietrich was a famous dramatic actress. W. C. Fields was a comedian/actor.

That's all the OPA was for—I always figured this out by myself—it was for in case we really got hit.

DePue: Thinking back on it now, what things truly were really scarce and needed to be rationed?

Fields: Well, you know, even meat was rationed. We'd just finished killing all our cows due to meet Roosevelt's expectations of fair play. What was really rationed. Well, people had an A book, automatic, for gas. If you drove further than that to get to work—pretend you worked in Washington but you had to come in from the outlying cities—you're going to have to give that person more gas; he got a B book. You could get it if you could tell us. Then we brought it up to the rationing board. There was like three men, or three women. You'd say, "Here's Mr. Jones. He's fifty miles every day, and that little A book is not enough for him; he needs more." They'd say, "Okay, here's an approval"; we'd send him the next book so he'd have enough. People, if they did it right, would get what they needed, except when they wanted the stove and you only had two to issue, or if they wanted rubber boots because they worked in the livestock, and you only had so many to issue. Then the one who didn't get it was very angry at you.

DePue: When you said you're suggesting that the Office of Price Administration [OPA] was actually the agency that issued them to—

Fields: Yes.

DePue: —individuals or to...?

Fields: No, no, to us. They would send us so many allotted coupons per month to issue on the things that they considered, like the stoves.

DePue: So all you're—

Fields: Nothing else.

DePue: —distributing is the coupons themselves, and then they could go find one.

Fields: Yeah, a permit to get another stove.

DePue: Was there a black market for some of this?

Fields: I never heard of it, but, you know, I was stuck in an office. What did I know? Surely there had to be one. Surely someone had an extra stove in the back room. I don't know. But in those days, in the country, heating was sometimes done with stoves, and those stoves wore out. You went to the city and it was a furnace, though—that's another stove—and that furnace wears out. So they did wear out. But they wanted those factories that made those things to make war equipment, and I'm assuming that's what they did.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Now, you had mentioned last time we met about actually going out to some grocery stores as well.

Fields: Oh, yeah. In the grocery store in Pender—when I later moved to Memphis and I worked the OPA, we didn't have to do that—but in Pender, I got the notice that I had to go to the grocery store and say to the man, "Mr. Jones, do you sell these peaches by the pound?" "Of course I don't sell them by the pound; I sell them by the dozen." And then I was to add, "Don't you know the OPA tells you that you have to sell them by the pound?" And then he says to me, "I don't listen to any OPA; I'll sell them like I want." (laughs) I only went to one store; that's all it took me. To heck with that rule! (laughter)

DePue: You were how old at the time, twenty-two?

Fields: Well, I was just married. Twenty-one. I was twenty-one. I wasn't going to argue with a man who knew more than I did, which was embarrassing. You know, I was the sort of person if the rule said you should do so-and-so, I would do that. But that was a stupid rule in the country.

DePue: Well, it gives you an indication of how the public felt about that particular rule, at least.

Fields: (laughs) Yeah.

DePue: Okay. Any other stories or memories you have about working with OPA, especially during the war itself? Did you enjoy the work?

Fields: Yeah, I liked working in Pender, a small town, because you had people walking in the door and sitting beside you and asking for things. When you were in Washington or the regional accounting office, you never saw a soldier come in and ask for anything. So this was different, this was working with the public, which was much nicer.

DePue: How big a town is Pender?

Fields: Oh, five, six hundred. Maybe eight hundred now if we're lucky.

DePue: As far as you know, did every town of that size or larger have a branch office?

Fields: The county seat would have it.

DePue: And Pender's the county seat?

Fields: Yes. Pender's the county seat of Thurston County, Nebraska.

DePue: In other words, there's thousands of these county offices for the Office of Price Administration.

Fields: That is correct. Each one had—it was all volunteer work except for about—we had three people in our office. Each one is devoted to a different section of price administration. And we were very busy. (laughs) It was all work that in reality—well, except for the stoves, except for the rubber boots—I felt so bad when I couldn't issue a stove and a rubber boot. I knew those farmers weren't asking for something they didn't need.

DePue: Did you say part of the things that you rationed personally was gasoline?

Fields: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Did the farmers get a larger allotment?

Fields: Oh, absolutely. Those who lived seven miles from town, they were given a book—it would be the bigger book. And if you lived thirty miles from town or fifty miles from town, you would get more gas rationing because you'd have to go into town, because people had to go into town. There's no way you can live on the country... My father once, before he had a car, it was winter. He had a wagon and horses. He drove seven miles to go to town. He took off his brand-new sheepskin coat and laid it on the wagon bench. He went in a store, and when he came out from the store, his brand new sheepskin coat in the dead of winter was missing, and left there was an Indian blanket. An Indian who lived there came along and needed that coat more than he needed that blanket, so he left his colorful, holey, dirty blanket. So my father drove home without his coat in middle of winter. My mother washed that Indian blanket and kept it for the next fifty years, and she said that coat wouldn't have lasted that long. (laughter)

DePue: Any other stories or anecdotes that you can recall?

Fields: Well, when I lived in Wachula, Florida—after the war—there was one person who had been scalped by an Indian. That's kind of a good—that's kind of a story. (laughs)

DePue: Do you know any more about that story, or just that?

Fields: No, that's the last I know about that one. I suppose there are a lot if I would just think hard. That one came to mind pretty easy.

DePue: But most of your job, except for this one excursion out to check the grocery store, was pretty much working in the office and people coming there?

Fields: In the office. Oh, absolutely. And they came in a lot, because you had the whole county. You didn't just have your little town, you had the whole county to work with. It would be a far distance for some to come.

DePue: Now, I'm speculating here, but you're a young lady, you're not large, you're very slight, I would have to say. Did you have people come in and try to intimidate you?

Fields: No. Never did. Never did. Never felt afraid one time in all the years I lived by myself or with girls. Never had that happen to me. I was always conscious of the fact you had to be careful. Never once.

DePue: Did you live in Pender itself?

Fields: I had to live in Pender; we didn't have the gas to go every day into town. (laughter) You had to live in town. And the pay was only like 850 a year because it went down because I was living in a small town. They figured it was cheap. It wasn't cheaper. I spent more there and had less left over at the end of the month. You didn't save anything, in other words.

DePue: Were you able to see your parents quite a bit?

Fields: Every weekend they came into town, picked me up, took me home. So I spent every weekend at home. Yes, that was nice.

DePue: Did the government see fit to see the farmers had enough gas so they can get to church on Sunday as well?

Fields: The rationing board would be your local people, so everybody knew. Fred Oberg comes into town and he tells them, "From my county seat, I live fifteen miles." They're going to base it on fifteen miles round-trip minimum once a week, maybe twice a week, go to church once a week, maybe twice a week, go to a party at a relative's house. They're going to base it logically; you don't get to run over with mileage, but you have enough.

DePue: You mentioned the ration board. Was there a group of private citizens who had to make these crucial decisions then?

Fields: Usually it was three people. Let's say Thursday's my day for the stoves and the rubber boots. I mention that because that bothered me the most, was the stove and the rubber boots. (dog barking) That's my dog—the stove and the rubber boots. So I had three people. You had three men, sometimes three ladies, but they were all people who knew half the people requesting these things. And everybody wanted to give everybody everything—they wanted to—but if it wasn't issued to you... You had to keep a line on a tablet of who you gave these things to. I mean, they were really set up for a big war that came to your shores.

DePue: Were the members of the ration board paid to do that job?

Fields: No, that was free. We were paid very small salaries in a small town. Eight hundred dollars was big money.

DePue: Do you know if people then were trying to put pressure on the members of the ration board to influence their decisions?

Fields: No, because I'm sure they would be barked at and said, "We only are issued two a month or three a month; what do you want us to do?" You would have a district. Let's pretend Thurston County was in district number nine. Everybody in district nine had ration office. You just couldn't get anything out of them. (laughter) Those coupon books had two coupons in them. But they didn't have rubber boots in there, the kind you wear in the stockyards. No, those were special.

DePue: It sounds like you issued those individually, then.

Fields: As I recall, those big, heavy things were issued separate. I remember they used to galvanize them when they wore out—that means add a new sheet on—till they couldn't add another sheet. That's when they asked for a new pair, and that's when you told them no and they got mad. One did get mad. I remember now. One did get mad on his boots. I was embarrassed because I couldn't give him a pair of boots because I didn't have a coupon. Yet the boots would have been in the store and he could see them as he walked by. I never heard of anybody ever getting a thing without a coupon, although they certainly wouldn't come in and tell me.

DePue: Now, you mentioned for you yourself, you were doing gas, fuel oil, stoves, shoes, especially rubber shoes, other kinds of footwear. What were some of the other things that were rationed that your office would have to issue stamps or coupons for?

Fields: I got a list here someplace actually listing everything we did. You want me to look for it?

DePue: No, that's okay, just kind of off the top of your head. I'll ask you if you—

Fields: I can't remember any more, but those were the useful things.

DePue: Meat?

Fields: Meat was rationed. That came in your book. In your book were so many coupons for shoes, so many coupons for meat, so many coupons for sugar, and for the ordinary person, it was really quite enough.

DePue: How about tobacco products?

Fields: They weren't rationed. (laughter) They could go to the drugstore—if they had it. They sometimes didn't have it, I understand. But no, they weren't rationed.

DePue: Coffee?

Fields: Coffee—you know, I can't remember coffee. I don't remember. If I looked over my list, I'd probably remember, but I can't remember that coffee was ever rationed. Probably if they didn't have it at the store, you didn't get it. And coffee coming from another country, it's logical they didn't always have it. Cocoa wasn't rationed, so that means if it wasn't on the shelf, you didn't buy it.

DePue: How about tires?

Fields: Tires were rationed. Oh, yes. Yes, they were. Ordinary farmers who just had a couple hundred acres probably wouldn't be bothered with this, but someone who had a lot of acres, a thousand acres, five hundred acres, they would have to work to get it. That was a whole new ballgame, and I didn't ever get involved with anything like that.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Okay, if you don't mind, can we transition over to what William was doing, what Bill was up to?

Fields: Well, let's do.

DePue: Okay. What I'm going to do here—maybe between the two of us, if you'd be willing to read a couple of these and I'll read some of these as well.

Fields: Want Ann to read some? She's a good reader.

DePue: Well, I suppose we could do that.

Fields: Call her.

DePue: Well, let's—no, I think it's probably better to do this, just to keep it simple in terms of the transcription when we get to that point.

Fields: Okay.

DePue: You're talking about Ann, your daughter.

Fields: Yeah.

DePue: I'm going to be reading some log entries to his journal, I believe. I'll let you read a couple of the shorter ones, if you don't mind.

Fields: Let me see it so you can start at the right place.

DePue: Well, I've got them checked off here, the ones that I want to read.

Fields: Okay, good.

DePue: Because I don't think we want to read all of it.

Fields: Good, good.

DePue: As good as it is. Okay. And this is— now he's heading to the Pacific. Do you know at the time when he deploys where exactly he's going and what ship he's going to be assigned to?

Fields: Well, I knew he was on the *USS Putnam*, number 757, a destroyer. I knew he was staying in the Pacific. He never went to the Atlantic. There was aplenty to do in the Pacific. And they were the lead ship many times. For an example, Admiral Nimitz<sup>12</sup> was on his destroyer, as well as other people, which was amazing to me. Admiral Nimitz shouldn't have had to ride on a destroyer. It bumps all the way, you know. There's no stability in the waves. But they were the lead ship many times into battles.

DePue: Okay. This is January 27, 1945. "We crossed the 180<sup>th</sup> meridian."<sup>13</sup> These are traditions in the Navy. You'd cross one of these lines, like the equator or something like this, there's normally some kind of tradition or ceremony that goes along with that. "I became a member of the Royal Order of Purple Dragon. At Eniwetok, Marshall Islands—"

Fields: Eniwetok?

DePue: How do you—

Fields: Eniwetok.

DePue: Eniwetok?

Fields: Uh-huh.

DePue: "...Marshall Islands, we found low-lying islands with white breakers between each, showing that there is a shallow coral reef connecting all of them. The land is so low that the high tide covers most of them. It was a natural harbor, and it was hot as hell. On some of the Marshall Islands, there are still enemy pockets of resistance. No supplies can reach them, so there's no rush about cleaning them out." Now, you can tell that he had that reporter background, can't you? The next entry here I'm going to read is February 6, 1945. "We left Eniwetok, destination Saipan, Marianas. There are fifty ships in the convoy:

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<sup>12</sup> Admiral Chester W. Nimitz is a legend in the annals of naval warfare. In June 1942, he commanded the U.S. forces assigned to block a Japanese invasion of Midway where U.S. fighter-bombers caught off guard the Japanese fleet that had led the attack on Pearl Harbor. Midway broke the back of Japanese naval power and was among the most decisive battles in all of history.

<sup>13</sup> The Prime Meridian of the World, zero degrees longitude, is at Greenwich, England. The 180<sup>th</sup> meridian is therefore half way around the world from the prime meridian as the starting point.



about thirty transport, twenty minelayers, minesweepers, and DEs<sup>14</sup>. It's rumored that this is one-eighth the size of the task force we'll join in Saipan in five days. Our destination is closely-guarded secret. My guess is Iwo Jima, 750 miles from Japan or the China coast." Now, I got to believe at that time, Iwo Jima would have been a phrase, a word, that wouldn't have come to mind for anybody. "Iwo Jima," you'd say, "where's that?" for the folks back home. Anyway. "We'll join the battleships, carriers, and cruisers, so the outcome, wherever we strike, is certain. Manila is once more in American hands. The Russians are thirty-two miles from Berlin. FDR, Stalin, and Churchill are together in the Black Sea, mapping out a strategy. Today we were told that no mail will come or leave the ship. I painted Lyn Fields, my wife, on a five-inch shell. That may be the shell that knocks down a Jap Zero. I have great hopes for it.

Fields: (laughs) Yeah.

DePue: Now, I assume he's writing letters home. I don't know how often you were receiving letters.

Fields: A long time between letters, yes.

DePue: How often did you write him?

Fields: I sent a letter every day, and I numbered them on the back. So he might get twenty letters at one time. God, I don't know what I said, one a day. Must have said something (laughs) interesting.

DePue: Were you able to send anything other than just letters?

Fields: I don't remember if I ever sent a package. I can't remember that. Packages would take weeks to get there. I don't think I ever sent a package.

DePue: Did you get bunches of letters at a time when you did get them?

Fields: He got them. I'd get a couple sometimes.

DePue: So he was a little bit busier in terms of being able to write home?

Fields: Yeah, you didn't have mail delivery there.

DePue: Okay. The next entry here is February 18, 1945. "Today in Saipan Harbor we saw the hulks of three Japanese transports. Two were wooden ships. It was easy to see the kind of junk their shipyards turned out."

Fields: Oh. (laughs)

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<sup>14</sup> Destroyer escorts

- DePue: “This journal won’t be read by anyone, so I can say that we are on our way from Guam to Iwo Jima. The invasion begins at 10:00 am Monday. Radio Tokyo reported this morning that an invasion of Iwo Jima is remote possibility. We got a big laugh out of that. Over Fox the other night came a message originating from NAJ Great Lakes”—Naval Air...J. I’m trying to figure out the *J. NAJ*.
- Fields: That’s their radio call letters.
- DePue: Okay. “...from NAJ Great Lakes. It made me homesick. Wish I was getting off duty now, catching a North Shore train, hurrying home. I haven’t been off the ship since Pearl Harbor. It will be a matter of months before I get off again.” And I’ll let you read the next couple here that I checked, 20 February and 21 February.
- Fields: “The invasion of Iwo Jima seems to be going well, although casualties for the Fourth and Fifth Marine assault troops are 60 percent.” On February 21, ’45: “Iwo is still largely Jap-held, but progress continues. The enemy will do everything in their power to hold Iwo, as it is their front door. They’ve jammed nearly every message being sent, but it was not effective. It’s been cloudy, windy, and chilly. The main deck is awash as the ship rolls and tosses. Haven’t had my clothes off for four days. We are in the last line of reinforcement. Looks like we will rot here.”
- DePue: Okay. Were you paying very close attention now to what was going on in the Pacific?
- Fields: Oh, every day! Radio. I’d sit up—no TV—so I’d sit up very late at night listening to WOW out of Omaha, where I felt was the biggest place to get your news. First thing in the morning, you would turn it on; last thing at night, you’d turn it off. Go to the movies at minimum once a week to catch up on the films they’ve made. You kept good—well, some people probably didn’t.
- DePue: What was Bill telling you about how close, how much he was in the action?
- Fields: After it was over, he could tell in a letter that he sent home. Then he could tell.
- DePue: Was he telling you things like, “Oh, don’t worry, I’m not really in the heat of things”?
- Fields: No, I knew better than that.
- DePue: So what are your emotions, listening to the radio and reading these things?
- Fields: Well, you really are scared, you know, because you know something can happen. Those ships were going down so fast, and his ship went through the whole war without going down. They went down all around him. I don’t know—they were lucky.

- DePue: Did you know at the time, when you're hearing about what's going on in Iwo Jima, very fierce combat at Iwo Jima, did you know that he was there?
- Fields: No. You could figure it out, though. You knew he was in the Pacific, you knew he was a war ship; it was logical that's where he was. It was just common sense.
- DePue: I got to believe, then, your heart's in your throat a lot of times listening to that.
- Fields: Oh, you worry. Every day you worry, "Will this be the last day?" Yeah.
- DePue: Were your parents trying to reassure you, or were they as worried as well?
- Fields: Oh, everybody was. The whole town had the same worry. Everybody.
- DePue: Were there people in Pender who had lost loved ones?
- Fields: There were people who were engaged to be married; the boys died. Yes. And loved ones. And some came home injured, yes.
- DePue: What happens when they got news? How did that happen, that the families were informed that they had lost a loved on?
- Fields: Well, if they lost someone, that was devastating. If they were injured and they were in the U.S., the government would say, "Come now to the hospital in Memphis" or wherever he was, and "We need your help"—psychological help, not medical. But it did the patient good to have a relative there, many, many times. Many people were asked to come to the hospital, yes.
- DePue: Now, I know that they hung stars in the windows. Did you have one for your husband?
- Fields: No. My home was out in the country still. Who's going to see my little star? I never even thought to hang a star. (laughs)
- DePue: What were the color of stars if you just had a husband or a relative in—
- Fields: I think it was a gold star.
- DePue: I thought that was for the ones who had lost.
- Fields: That was the lost ones, wasn't it? I don't know. Maybe it was white. Logical.
- DePue: Okay. I think what I'd like to do here is have you read the next two entries as well. They're both short. Twenty-seven February and one March.
- Fields: Twenty-seven and March... "We are on a high-speed run to Guam carrying Secretary of the Navy [James] Forrestal on the destroyer—what an honor—and a party of seven admirals and correspondents to meet Admiral Nimitz."

That was quite an honor for that ship. That ship must have been special. “I’ve never seen a rougher sea. There is a storm brewing.” “March one,” a couple of days later: “Back at two. Used a thousand round and blocked out pillboxes and field pieces. Never had so little land—eight square miles—taken so much hell.” The next day was the ninth of March, and he says, “Guam. We’ve lost two thousand, to the Japs’ thirteen thousand. A three-day battle is nearing the twentieth day. That’s a big loss for the Japs to take. That’s a big loss for us, two thousand; we don’t like that.” Here’s Iwo Jima, March thirty—gee, we jump from March one to March thirty. “Iwo Jima was a tea party compared to our next operation, Okinawa. We formed into task groups at Leyte. We are one of forty-five ships. D-Day falls April one. Iwo was to last three days and stretched into twenty-six. Okinawa is to last 120 days. Wonder what it will stretch into.” On the next day it says, “Invasion of Okinawa, Operation Iceberg, began at 8:00 a.m.” The next day, April two: “Two Jap bombers made runs on us. Shore batteries got one, maybe both.” April twelve—that’s almost two weeks later: “This is Black Friday. One hour ago we heard the saddest news of the decade, the death of President Roosevelt. Liberty has lost its champion. The world will never forget him. The *USS Wilson*, part of our convoy, was hit by a Jap bomb. Damage was slight. They were only a mile behind us.”

DePue: Okay. I’ve got the next portion there. Do you remember yourself when you heard the news about President Roosevelt?

Fields: Oh, yes, (laughs) I do remember. And do you remember where he was when it happened?

DePue: I think he was at Hot Springs.

Fields: He was taking his bath at Hot Springs with his friend. He had a friend, you know. Every time Eleanor went to Europe to help, and she did—Eleanor was a wonderful helpmate. She did many things to make us look good all over Europe. She was well-respected in Europe. Every time she went to Europe, he had a helpmate, so it was okay with him. (laughs)

DePue: How much did you know about...

Fields: Well, I only figured it out after his death because the paper said, “A friend, so-and-so, was with him.” Well, who has a friend taking the hot springs? You know, his bones hurt. He was a cripple, he was in a chair, and he couldn’t stand very well. He did well, he did good, but Eleanor carried a big brunt of his duties, believe me.

DePue: I have always heard that the news media was very careful of how they portrayed the man and how they portrayed—

Fields: No one knew that.

- DePue: You did not know that he was crippled?
- Fields: Oh, knew that, because why would he go to Hot Springs See, that—Arkansas. That's where you'd go when your bones hurt. I think—what did he have that crippled him? Polio. He had polio. That's what crippled him.
- DePue: Was it Arkansas, or was it Georgia that he went?
- Fields: Well, I don't know.
- DePue: Okay, we can check that out.<sup>15</sup>
- Fields: Yeah, let's check that out.
- DePue: So you knew that he had some handicap, but...
- Fields: I knew the handicap, but I didn't know the girlfriend.
- DePue: What was the response, as you recall?
- Fields: About the girlfriend? No one talked about it.
- DePue: No, about his death.
- Fields: Oh, people were very sad. When he was on the train in the coffin going from place to place en route to the burial ground, people stood at attention all along the tracks, every town he went through. They were very, very sad. You see what W.C. Fields said in his notes: "We lost a champion." Because when he was at his best, Roosevelt was very good at communication. By the time you had the Yalta meeting in Europe—Churchill was there, Roosevelt was there, and Moscow's Stalin was there. Stalin could walk all over him, because Roosevelt shouldn't have been there. He should have sent someone else, but he didn't want to. He was a proud person. But for sure, the way they divided up Berlin, that was decided then at that time how to do it: You take one half, we'll take the other. We shouldn't have given them any half. In fact, it's just recently Michael Reagan, the son of [President] Ronald Reagan, is frequently going to Germany, where the line was they couldn't cross over between East and West Berlin. There's a library there, and he's welcome there because they really liked his father. His father there, one time, he put his hand on the wall and he said, "Take down this wall, Mr. Khrushchev."
- DePue: I think it was Mr. Gorbachev at that time.
- Fields: Oh, it was Gorbachev. "Take down this wall, Mr. Gorbachev." Michael Reagan said the other day he was shocked to learn that the children in school thought the Russians took the wall down, that we had nothing to do with it,

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<sup>15</sup> There is a Hot Springs, Arkansas, but President Roosevelt was at Warm Springs, Georgia when he died.

even though we'd been supplying their food for how long, a couple years, by airplane. We kept them alive in Berlin. But he's setting them straight. Can I say that?

DePue: Absolutely.

Fields: Michael Reagan made sure that they changed that and got the kids to know who did it. It was his father! (laughter)

DePue: Okay. Well, we're a little bit ahead of the story in terms of World War II, but it's important to understand all of that aspect as well. In your understanding of Yalta, was that something that you felt at the time or you just came to understand much later?

Fields: Oh, I knew about it. Everybody knew. Don't forget, you had *LIFE* magazine, you had your newspapers, the *Omaha World Herald*, you had the radio, you had your Kaltenborn<sup>16</sup> was one of the announcers who came on, Walter Winchell broadcasting to all the ships at sea during the war. We listened to all the main reporters on radio. If you had any brains, you listened.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Well, let's pick up the narrative here from your husband as well. Again, we're reading journal entries. I'll read a couple and then let you read some here as well. This is 19 April 1945: "We are on picket duty at Okinawa. Today we heard the report that Ernie Pyle, the most famous correspondent of this war, was killed a few miles from here. Naval losses so far at Okinawa exceed Army and Marine casualties." Were you hearing about that time about the kamikaze pilots?

Fields: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We all knew about the kamikaze.

DePue: Was that your main concern, then?

Fields: I didn't have any respect for those Japanese when they were willing to strap a man into an airplane. I don't think he could have abandoned his airplane if he'd have tried to. They had to give up their life. And at the end, they knew the end was there, but still they were told to continue.

DePue: Was there any doubt in your mind at this time how the war was going to end?

Fields: Well, I knew we'd fight forever because we didn't want them over here, and they did start it, whether or not they had a reason to. They claimed they did, but I doubt it—not a reason that could not have been fixed by talk or bargaining.

DePue: April 26, 1945: "*The Shea*"—and I assume that's another ship, probably a destroyer—"The Shea shot down six Jap planes in ten minutes. Hot times

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<sup>16</sup> H. V. Kaltenborn, a well known radio commentator of the day

lately. A Jap suicide plane started a run on us from nine thousand feet, fell in the water in flames two thousand yards aft. Two of our DDs are on the bottom, another wounded.” I’m not sure what a DD is.

Fields: Destroyer.

DePue: Probably so. “The Japs bombed a hospital ship.”

Fields: Yeah, they didn’t care.

DePue: I’ll let you read the next three entries, May eleventh, May twenty-first, May twenty-seventh.

Fields: May eleventh: “We got another Jap plane, but it cost ten thousand in ammo, 109 rounds from ten guns in less than one minute. Now that Germany is beaten, maybe some much-needed aid will come this way.” They’re short on help. Next paragraph, May twenty-one: “We are at GQ.<sup>17</sup> I’m sick in my bunk with a fouled-up liver. Haven’t eaten a square meal in eight days. I lost ten pounds. My morale is sky-high, even if I am sick. Stories continue the rounds on the *Hadley*. They’ve twenty-three Japanese planes to their credit. Nineteen in one night, the *Hadley* shot down.” That’s good. Okay, next, May twenty-seven, May 1945: “Fifty raids smashed Okinawa. Sixty planes shot down, ten ships hit. Another of our squadron was hit thirty-seven hours after the ride. Does the *Putnam* lead a charmed life?” They’re not hit yet. “Either before we arrive or after we depart, all hell breaks loose. I’m still confined. There’s talk about transferring me to a hospital ship, but I’d rather not go. They need these ships for more serious cases than mine.”

DePue: Did you know—however long after he had this illness did you find out he was sick?

Fields: I didn’t know it right away. Usually you got—it was like a case of hepatitis—usually you got it from—it was a liver ailment due to the lack of fresh foods like fruit.

DePue: He mentioned here about Germany being defeated. Tell me about what the reaction back in Pender was when you heard the news about Germany’s surrender.

Fields: You know, you have a lot of people in the Midwest who are German ancestry. You had a lot of people when the war first broke out who came from Germany as housekeepers and so forth. Like my mother, I think she paid the fare for a lady to come over who wanted to come and live here, a beautiful, beautiful young girl. She came and lived with my mother, and then she married my mother’s oldest brother. She was gorgeous, and her name was Helen. Well,

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<sup>17</sup> General Quarters (GQ) is the call for the crew to prepare the ship to join battle. Off-duty or sleeping crewmembers report to their stations.

Helen never found it necessary to go be a citizen. So now when the war broke out, they said anybody of German ancestry who's not a citizen, out they go. She was worried sick. So she got a book, and my mother helped teach her the book, and she passed for her citizenship. But you found that many people (coughs) needed help. What was the question?

DePue: Well, I was asking about the news about Germany's defeat, the surrender.

Fields: Oh, God, we were excited. It was like a miracle, it was over. Then the news came out about the concentration camps, and the pictures. We didn't know it. A lot of people who are of German ancestry came over after the war always say they didn't know it either, but I don't know how come they didn't know. How could you keep it a secret like that? But I know people who say no, they didn't know that the concentration camps were going on.

DePue: So many of these people that you knew, you grew up with, your own relatives, who are of German descent, were they embarrassed about that?

Fields: Well, my father told them to quit talking German. Even though it was broken German, he didn't approve of that. Of course, he didn't approve of that when there—he was Swede—he didn't approve of that when there was no war. (laughs)

DePue: So as far as your father and most of these people who had obviously been here for several generations by that time—

Fields: Well, no, not long. My mother's mother and her grandmother just came. My father's mother was born in Sweden, so you see, they were new citizens.

DePue: But did they identify themselves and proudly identify themselves as Americans?

Fields: Oh, I'd say so. Oh, yes indeed. Oh, yes. No one wanted to go back from whence they came.

DePue: Okay. You want to go ahead and pick up the next couple readings, then?

Fields: All righty. Now, this is June sixteenth. "Right after sundown, a torpedo dropped from a low -flying Japanese plane. It struck"—oh, here's a big one—"the *USS Twiggs* to port and exploded her number two engine. The *Putnam*, my ship, quickly closed [on] the stricken ship. Exploding ammunition made rescue operation hazardous, but of the 188 *Twiggs* survivors snatched from the flaming, oily sea, the *Putnam* succeeded in rescuing 114 of them." The sailors jumped off the ship and sailed to their rescue; that's how they saved them. "A god-awful sight." Now he says, "One year ago, June twenty-fifth, I left Chicago. Now my temporary home is the waters around Okinawa. We just rescued two fliers who were forced down in enemy territory."



- DePue: He certainly writes like the journalist he is, doesn't he?
- Fields: Yeah. The *Herald-American* in Chicago kept track of him all the time. They sent him presents. They sent him newspapers so he'd know what was going on. When he got out of the Navy he went there to talk to them, because you always were offered your old job back, and they said, "Yes, come to work." And for some reason, he elected—which I definitely would have taken the job—no place to go but up—and he said, "No, I'm not going to do it." You want to know what his reason was? He says, "Because they drink too much, and you have to be one of the good fellows. After work, you got to go in the tavern and you got to drink, and you drink too much." And that is his reason not to stay.
- DePue: Well, that was in the days when you had this whole image of the hardboiled reporter.
- Fields: Yeah, and he didn't. He was good, though. He should have stayed and just not drank. But everybody drank, and I knew everybody did drink. The artist on the... They all did. Everybody drank. Okay, want to hear more?
- DePue: You bet.
- Fields: August eleven. Oh, this is nice. "The war nears the end. Last night at 9:30 we learned the good news. The atomic bomb and Russia's entry really speeded up the Japanese surrender offer now under consideration by the Allies." Yeah, the Russians came in right at the end of the war, after it was over. Next day, the twelfth. "Peace talk fills the air. Tonight, a Jap dropped a torpedo, blasting a hole twenty feet across the *Pennsylvania*. We stood by them all night." August 15, '45: "This morning we heard that Japan had accepted unconditional surrender. Whoopee. Hirohito gave a radio address announcing to the Japanese people the surrender of Japan. The occupation of the Japanese homelands has become the immediate concern. The *Putnam* will serve as a guide and rescue destroyer for Tokyo-bound transport planes." September 2, 1945: "Japanese formally surrendered aboard the *USS Missouri*." September third: "We escorted the battleship *New Jersey* into Tokyo Bay. Tokyo Bay is nothing but a lot of ship masts coming up from the bottom—nothing floating, and the city is burning. I'll never forget the smell. The locals cleared a beach, and we had limited liberty."
- DePue: He does a good job of painting a very vivid picture in these, doesn't he?
- Fields: Yeah, he does a good job painting a good picture.
- DePue: What did you think when you heard the news about dropping the atomic bomb?
- Fields: Oh, again, *LIFE* magazine came to the rescue. They explained what it was. I wrote him a letter telling him all about the atomic bomb, (laughs) He probably

knew more about it by then than I did. Yeah, I thought, what an invention. Then we read about all the scientists having worked on it secretly all these years. We read about Einstein assisting—a German! We read about all the German scientists who were helping us, from Germany, who were good. Had we not done it here, they would have done it there, believe me. We would have been hit. They were working for it very hard, and they would have made it, given enough time. It just wasn't in the cards.

DePue: Was there any doubt in your mind or anybody you knew in Pender at that time that this was the right thing to do in dropping the atomic bomb?

Fields: Oh, everybody thought it was the right thing to do, because war is hell. In these articles I read, we haven't talked about the people killed on the beaches, but you remember they were mowing our Marines down, mowing them down as they came out of the waters, trying to secure an island like Iwo Jima or Okinawa. Whoa, we were glad. It was a ferocious war.

DePue: By the time we got to Okinawa—and I know I had read it in one of these passages we haven't read—that he's talking about the Okinawa civilians committing suicide rather than surrendering.

Fields: Yes, they did. And one of the islands—I remember this—about ten years later, on one of the small islands, there was one holdout Japanese who had been holed out in a cave. They discovered him about ten years later and told him the war was over and he could go home. And they sent him home after ten years hiding in a cave. They would hide in those caves and shoot from those caves, and you couldn't hit a cave from a ship.

DePue: Did your husband win any awards, any medals?

Fields: Well, he had the usual ones of combat duty. He didn't save any lives, heroic-wise. He was just glad to get out alive.

DePue: Did he have any intentions of staying in the Navy after the war?

Fields: No, he'd really had his fill of it. I'm not sure that later on he didn't wish he had stayed, because he really liked it. He liked doing his job. He had a good job, and he liked it, and he would have worked his way up the ranks, no question. He could have been an officer, and I'm sure that a lot of people were promoted from non—

DePue: Noncommissioned officer positions?

Fields: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Well, I want you to tell me about his return back to the States and your reunion.

Fields: Well, let's see. He came back—okay, they sent him to a little island. Let's see, what was the island called that he went to? I don't remember, but it was an island that had been fought and captured. There were two men who could come off the ship when surrender was announced. I wrote to Washington and told them how to do their system for giving the guys credit (laughs) for discharge. They said, "Thank you very much. We've got a system figured out." (laughs)

DePue: Well, they had the points. It was all based on points.

Fields: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So there were only two guys on the ship who had enough points, and he was one of them. So those two guys, the ship picked them up, took them to a little island that they'd been fighting on. In fact, I have got books that he picked up on the island from some of the destroyed schools, which are rather interesting. But he still hadn't been over that liver problem for very long, and what do you think he found on the island? A fruit loaded with trees, (surely she meant trees loaded with fruit) and all the people on the island who were waiting for a ship to take them home wouldn't touch those fruit because they never heard of it and thought it would be poison. He was from Florida. He'd lived his whole life in Florida till he'd moved to Chicago. They were guavas, and he ate guavas till he couldn't hold it anymore, and he finally got enough vitamin C. They refused to eat it.

So he was on that island two, three months. Then a ship came to take him home. It was a big ship, one of the big ones. They went home by way of the Panama Canal, then they went around New York, and they docked someplace in that area. Then he finally got dismissed. I have his dismissal papers from—it tells his entry at Great Lakes. It wasn't very long before the state of Illinois decided to give each veteran a gift, and they sent him several hundred dollars for having served, which I thought was just superb. To my memory, I remember like three hundred. Maybe it was more, maybe it was less, but it was generous, I thought. That was very nice of them.

DePue: How about the reunion between the two of you?

Fields: Well, that was a nice day. (laughs)

DePue: Well, you've got to paint us a picture of that as well.

Fields: Okay, let me think, let me think. He came in from a discharge (pause)—maybe they even sent him to Chicago for his discharge—and then he came in by train. The trains were then running to every small town in the whole USA. Those are the days we had trains. Came into our local train station, which was West Point, Nebraska. He stepped off the train, he took off those Navy clothes, and he never put them on again. It was a nice day, because I had relatives who were badly injured in fighting. It was a good thing to get through without a scratch.

DePue: You remember meeting him at the train station?

Fields: Do you know, I can't? I can't put myself at that spot. I just can't. I just can't do it. I can't remember that day. I had already quit the OPA because he was coming home. I quit. In about a week, I quit, after he got home, I quit. He got home in about October, and we stayed, like, through November, and then we were in Florida with his parents by Christmas.

DePue: Do you recall him having any difficulty in adjusting back to civilian life?

Fields: No, he had no problems. He was a well-adjusted person, though. He didn't have any problems at all—no trouble sleeping, no trouble talking. No.

DePue: Was he willing to tell you stories about his experiences?

Fields: I never asked, because I'd been watching the news so closely. I knew his diary was written. And you know when I read it? About a year ago. I never—I just couldn't open that thing up. So I finally read it. That's a long time ago. That's over fifty years.

DePue: Why couldn't you read his diary?

Fields: I just couldn't do it.

DePue: Was he telling you not to read it?

Fields: No. That's why he brought it home, so I could read it. But it was really hard. It was a hard time.

DePue: Now, we've been reading his entries here today.

Fields: Yeah.

DePue: He wasn't telling you about his combat experiences at that time?

Fields: Did he talk much about it? I didn't find that any of the boys coming home discussed with you their experiences, either from coming home from Europe—they might have even had some things they brought home from a house that they'd pilfered. I didn't get to hear any details. He didn't get to pilfer anything. (laughs)

DePue: Now, you've had a lot of time to reflect on this. A couple questions, then: Why weren't you interested in hearing at that time?

Fields: I'd been reading the paper so closely I knew every battle that took place. I knew the ships that were involved.

DePue: So it was a matter of already knowing, or was it just too painful for you to—

Fields: I knew. No, it really was. I knew I would see details about being scared or—he didn't really say he was scared, but, you know, you have to be when you're down on the bottom deck because you got a liver infection and the bombs are going off around you and you can't get out. (laughs) So that wasn't a very pleasant experience. I just didn't want to do it. So I did lately. I did it since I've moved up to Illinois, rather recently.

DePue: Why do you think the soldiers and the sailors weren't talking about their experiences much?

Fields: Those I knew who came back never gave you details of bad things that happened, they just didn't. I don't know why. I didn't hear a lot of people who had bad things to say, say them. I just didn't. Maybe in some places they did. They didn't brood about it. I never knew people who brooded about it or had psychological problems, but I'm sure they could have. I just didn't know it.

DePue: At that point in your lives, what did you plan to do with the rest of the lives that you had?

Fields: With the rest of the world? Well, then the government was very generous; they offered to send you to school. He was smart, his high IQ, or they wouldn't have kept him at Great Lakes when everybody else ships out. I tried to talk him into going to college. But he was a big reader, and I think he had a superiority complex; he already knew everything because he read so much. (laughs) He was a big reader. If he'd have gone to school and they'd have tried to teach him history or English as a freshman, I don't know, he wouldn't put up with that. So he didn't want to go to college. But he did like to take clocks apart. He was a real mechanic. So we went to Memphis, Tennessee, the College of Watchmaking in Memphis, Tennessee. He became a first-class watchmaker. He could take watches apart, repair them. He was a watchmaker. He could make parts. He could do all the repairs. They taught some jewelry, so he could do some jewelry work, which was wonderful. That's just a matter of aptitude, of being a good jeweler.

We went to school a year. We went back to Florida, went to Lakeland, Florida, and he got a job the same day we got there. We put a down payment on a house. The next day, he went to work as a watchmaker in the best jewelry store in town. We were so happy. (laughs) The man killed himself over the weekend, so that was the end of that. That was kind of disillusioning, because we'd even bought a house. And lost all the money, the down payment; they wouldn't give it back. So time passed, and he worked for someone else for about a year, which was good experience. I worked in the store learning retail, which was good. I learned retail, and I learned how to order jewelry; I learned how to pay for it.

And then we decided you never get anywhere working for someone else, so we got in the car and started driving. We got into West Palm Beach.

They call it West Palm Beach because Palm Beach is across the river, the inlet. It's not a river, it's an inlet. We parked in front of a place that said "Jewelry Store for Sale." (laughs) And the guy wanted out so bad. His wife had already left it. She hated it. It was a section of town that was just lovely. It wasn't downtown, but there were about a hundred stores—I counted them one time—there were about a hundred stores of different categories—the dime store, a hardware store, a theater, a bowling alley, two expensive car places with Rolls Royces and things, restaurants, and we found a jewelry store for sale. Next door to us was a barbershop. The Kennedys in Palm Beach used to bring their little girl, Caroline, over to that barber shop. There was a lady beautician in there; they'd let her cut her hair. We never got to meet the Kennedys, because it would be a servant. So it wasn't a bad location. And we were there. At the end of fifty years, we had a good reputation, because there aren't too many good watchmakers. Today there are none. You go a long ways to find one. At that time, you could take a watch apart and clean it and have to guarantee it. It cost seven dollars and fifty cents. I remember that.

DePue: When we had talked earlier, before this interview, you had mentioned that you continued to work with the Office of Price Administration even while you were in Memphis.

Fields: Well, when he went to school in Memphis, Tennessee, the first thing I did was walk up to the Sears store, and I thought, I'm bright; I can get a good job at Sears. So they gave me a good job, but they didn't pay me anything. What it was—(laughs) my God, it was little. You couldn't pay for your food out of that! It was in the will-call department, which is fun. The phone rings, you put things on layaway for them. You know, it was neat.

DePue: The will-call, meaning that you will call somebody when it arrives?

Fields: Or they'd come to you and they'd want to lay something away. So it was a fun job, but they didn't pay anything, so I said, Golly, I can't do this. They still had the OPA going on. I went to the Office of Price Administration. I went down to their office in Memphis, which was right downtown, in a gorgeous location, close to the Mississippi, and got a job immediately. I did more work there than I ever did in my life. But again, the war was over. Was there a need for the entire office? Not unless they were going to break into another war. But we kept the offices going. The only thing I could think of is they didn't want to dump all those people on the market, because you already had all the veterans coming home with no jobs except maybe they could get a job at their old place. So they hired me, and I stayed there till he got through school.

DePue: When you say they didn't want to dump all those people on the market, you're talking about they didn't want to turn loose all the people who were working for OPA?

- Fields: And then have unemployment in addition. That's the only reason I could think.
- DePue: Were you still issuing the ration coupons and...?
- Fields: Absolutely.
- DePue: What was the attitude at that time? The war's over. I would think people are a lot more impatient now.
- Fields: Oh, yeah. That's where most of those letters that you read came from. They came from Memphis. No one ever came in the office and became angry. It was a really big and fancy office. From this little tiny town in the courthouse where I used to be in Pender, I'm in this big, huge building—lovely. I don't know, fifty employees, with a boss who's running it. It's nothing to run anymore. There really wasn't. It was over. But I had paperwork galore, and I had to do it. I mailed out things, saying different things about prices. Mail out was heavy. They kept me busy with mail out.
- DePue: Okay. I've got just a couple more questions, and then we'll wrap up with some general questions. Somewhere along this way, while you're down in Florida, I would assume, Ann was born.
- Fields: Ann was born after we left Memphis. Yes, she was born just before we bought the jewelry store. So she grew up in West Palm Beach, was a good student her whole life, got all kinds of awards, worked on the newspaper, was one of the smartest kids in school... (laughter)
- DePue: You're not proud about this, are you?
- Fields: (laughs) I'm not bashful either. (laughter) And then she decided she wanted to be a teacher, because she really loved those teachers. So she was in college, getting her Master's, and the county hired her to teach the children. She was on contract to the county—permanent contract, I might add—to teach children in hospitals or at home who couldn't attend. She taught dying children who were... She taught every subject. So you had to be smart to teach every subject. Foreign languages, chemistry. Some children were quite bright; you had to keep up with them. She did that for a long time.
- DePue: Well, let's talk a little bit more about school, because you never did get a chance to go to high school, did you?
- Fields: No, so I haven't been to high school yet, but I've been faking my way good. (laughs)
- DePue: Did you think about going back to school, then, when you were down in Florida?

Fields: All the time, all the time. But I'm reading constantly. I'm in the library, and to this day, I get the *Wall Street Journal*, I get *Barrons*, I get every business magazine there is. I don't read any frivolous stuff. I don't have time at eighty-eight. You know, life is short; you don't read frivolous stuff. So—what were we talking about?

DePue: Going back to school.

Fields: Oh, so one day, Ann is gone, so I decided that I had to go back to school. So I said to my husband, "Wouldn't you like to go back to school with me?" He says, "Of course not, I already know that." I have to tell you, he knew it. He wouldn't have liked it at all. I liked it, but he wouldn't have liked it. Because I got to meet people who were interested in doing what they were doing. This is my first shot at this. And it was fun to go to school. Everybody liked me. After school, they'd say, "Let's go to the Pizza Hut," and four or five or six would go there. I had a good time.

DePue: How old were you at this time?

Fields: I'm in my—oh God, I'm pretty old. (laughter) I know I'm way past fifty, okay?

DePue: Were you actually going to a high school with kids in their teens?

Fields: Okay, to get into high school—I was talking about college—I skipped high school completely—they gave a high school equivalency test. There were about a hundred students in that class, and they all went to school prior to that for several months to catch up on questions they might ask, because I didn't know what they were going to ask. Everybody had taken prior tests, and they worked so hard. And came test day, and I walked in and they said, "Where have you been? You haven't been here." And I was ashamed because I was so old. I was the oldest person there. So I took the test—two days. The test covered two days.

Here's how they did tests in Palm Beach County. This educated person wrote out all the tests, covering two days of subjects, this one did. Now, some of the people were showoffs, and they really—some wrote easier tests than others. I drew a test, and I was always the last one to finish the paper. Finally I said to her one day, I said, "This is ridiculous. Some of these questions are ambiguous. There's no one—that's why it's taking me so long." She says, "Well, let me see whose tests you've got." She says, "No one passes this test. Just know you're going to have to take it over, and you won't have her next time, her test." Then when I got my results I was scared to death to open it, and I was in the top ten percent of the people. That gave me a superiority complex right there; I never was inferior to anybody again.

DePue: So you passed the test, I take it.



Fields: I did, and I passed science, I passed—well, English and history, you know I had to make it good. Okay. You know I had to be good in certain subjects, because I'd had a jewelry store. I knew how to write a letter. I knew how to read English composition. I could read something and tell you about it, which is part of your questions.

DePue: Somewhere along the line, you had to learn lots of math, I'm sure.

Fields: I got an algebra book and taught myself very elementary algebra, just barely broke it, because I really couldn't understand what the teachers were being asked. I just didn't understand it. But I did read it enough to pass it. That's what shocked me. Now, here's a question on taking a test. When—this is for everybody who reads this—when you take a test and there are three answers, you have no idea what the answer is. Look for the answer that has the most words in it and check that. There's logic behind it because, number one, you didn't know it. It's such a difficult question that they've had to lengthen the answer because they already got in trouble because some people said they didn't answer it good enough. So the one with the most words in is the one you check. And I did it, don't think I didn't! (laughter) Well, in history, English—who couldn't pass that? There were subjects that you just had to learn because you lived.

DePue: Where did you go to college, then, because you mentioned you went to college.

Fields: Oh, and then I went to college. It was a Palm Beach junior college. It's called Palm Beach College. That's what it's called, Palm Beach College, in West Palm Beach, Florida. It was a huge school. It's still a huge school. They still send me books inviting me back. Isn't that nice? So I studied for two years at night and got my certificate.

And I said, "Well, I can go on and go to Florida Atlantic in Boca Raton, but what would I want to study?" Well, I didn't want to study anything in jewelry because I knew the jewelry industry inside-out. In fact, people had asked me to manage their stores, so I knew I knew jewelry. How are you going to tell me how to run a business, I figure. So someone said, "You'd make a good real estate employee," so I took real estate. I passed that test. Very difficult in Palm Beach County to pass it. It was not an easy test like they were doing in New York. They passed everybody who could sign their name in New York.

I passed it, then I worked two years selling. And I did okay. I liked it. I worked in timesharing, which is an education. I worked in selling apartments, which is an education. Then I worked in selling just houses, which I didn't care much about because that's strictly women, and women look at everything and complain a lot. This is the truth; you have to be ready for this. And a man came in and said to me, "I would like to list with you my office building." I

says, “Good, let me get my license.” All I had to do was get my license, apply. I was in. I had all the credits. I go down, I get the state, I got me a name. It’s called Fields Real Estate Office. That’s a good name. And opened an office in his building. It was absolutely a gorgeous building—new. And the first guy who walked through, I sold him the building, (laughter) because I—that’s not to my credit, because I’d been selling now for years. You have to know how to sell. Do you know who makes the best salespeople? Used car people. They’re wonderful. They are wonderful. They know how to close. I love it. “Well, which one do you want, blue or white?”

DePue: Well, they don’t necessarily have the best reputation.

Fields: No, we don’t count that. (laughs) But they do know, and I did always listen to them sell in timesharing. I was very careful to listen how they did it. I learned a lot from them. So then I opened my office, and I sold things like funeral homes, concrete plants—you hear that *S* on it; that’s a plural—and different things. I made my money off of commercial, land particularly. I was good at selling industrial land and commercial stores.

DePue: Evelyn, you’ve lived a pretty interesting and eventful life.

Fields: It was a lot of fun, too. Then one day, Ann and Don, her husband, who’s a doctor, moved up to Illinois in a small town. Now, the one place I never, ever, ever wanted to do was live in the snow again, because by now I’d lived fifty years, more than fifty years I’ve already lived it in the sunshine of Florida. And then the phone rang and he said, “Why don’t you come up here? It’s so much fun.” (laughter) So I sold a gorgeous house. I built a couple of houses for myself, and each one I sold, and then I’d build another one. (dog barks) Here, Jake. Ann went out and left him. Okay, where was I?

DePue: Well, I think you’re moving up to Dixon.

Fields: And then I said okay. So I put my house on the market, and the first guy who came through, I sold it to him. I was good at that. First-time sales are the easiest. And he bought it, I got paid, I moved up here, got an apartment, built a house on the Rock, the beautiful Rock River. We have wild turkeys, deer, geese. (dog barks) I saw a flock of fifty or a hundred robins. They must have been flying south. What they were doing here, I don’t know. That’s how I got into Illinois. And I really like it except for the snow.

DePue: Well, and we’re looking outside now—there’s plenty of snow, isn’t there?

Fields: I can’t wait for spring. (laughs)

DePue: Let’s just close, then, with a few general questions, and we’ll go back to thinking especially about the war years and your marriage and Bill being over in the Pacific. From that perspective, do you think the sacrifices that you made, especially the sacrifices that Bill was making, were it worth it?

Fields: Oh, yeah. You had to win the war. That sacrifice, you had to do, but no question about it, your life was on the line. That war had to be fought. I'm not saying that about some wars, okay? That one had to be fought. It had to be fought in Europe; it had to be fought in the East. Yes, and we all knew it. No one resented that.

DePue: You had quite an experience working in the Office of Price Administration, living on your own, moving around the country and doing that from various government service positions, and Bill as well, being in the Pacific. How did all that experience change you?

Fields: It didn't change me; it just made me smarter. All the time I'm reading, I'm learning. I'm still reading and learning, you know? Life doesn't stop. I enjoyed it, every minute. I've enjoyed my whole life, the good, the bad when you got sick and broke your hip. That too will pass. (laughs)

DePue: Well, what words of wisdom would you like to leave as we close this up?

Fields: Well, the old adage, all things come to people who wait—good things—is probably true. What you do is you make an aim for those things to come, and they do come if you assist them along the way.

DePue: Well, here's one I think we missed, almost overlooked. You had mentioned that you wanted to talk a little bit about the Dionne quintts?

Fields: Oh. During the years of my life—talking here made me think of the important events in my lifetime, like the *Hindenburg*. I was listening to the radio when the *Hindenburg* fell and was burning. I can hear the people screaming for help. Had we not had the *Hindenburg* fall when it did, when it was landing, you know that we probably would have lighter-than-air transportation. I'm sure we would have if that hadn't occurred. I remember that day distinctly.

Another day that I remember distinctly—wait a minute, let me think. I know, the day the Dionne quintuplets were born in Ontario, Canada, quintuplets, the first five children ever born to a human being that's recorded that lived. The *Omaha World-Herald*—this is when I was still in grade school—the *Omaha World-Herald* had their headlines, three inches like, "Five Children Born." And I saved their pictures for years because I was so intrigued by this. So I sort of kept up with them. Their doctor was named Dionne, something like this, a French word, and he did deliver them and kept them alive in the kitchen on the oven door. Then he notified Ontario, they took a collection, (laughs) they built a big building with a glass window and put those babies in there, and they would put them on display. Those babies lived in that room in that building for many, many years. They earned millions of dollars. Then their parents, who were people still having children, sued to get them back, and, by golly, they got them back. Well, Ontario built them a house. The children didn't have that good a life after they left the closed

building where they were schooled, where they were clothed, where they were—they didn't know people were looking at them. They knew when they were interviewed, though. It wasn't all bad, but it probably was after they went home. But that was the first five that I can remember that lived—that was a big event. That was another big event.

DePue: Well, we've been at it for right at three hours here.

Fields: Well, that's our limit, three hours.

DePue: Well, that's kind of what I suggested, but—

Fields: We drained—that's all my memory held.

DePue: How would you like to close it up then, Evelyn?

Fields: All righty.

DePue: How would you like to close it?

Fields: How would I like to close it up? Well, the next time 'round, I want to move to Springfield. I hear the best things about the city of Springfield, the capital of Illinois. I hear it's simply beautiful, everyone's educated. It's further south; (laughter) it's not quite as cold. And I really enjoy living here. I got a good daughter. I got a good granddaughter who lives in New York, and she's a photographer. Everything has been good. I can't say that anything bad ever happened in my life. Everything I did was a step going in the right direction. In fact, I play the piano for people today on my one lesson a week for a year education, and I do a pretty good job.

DePue: Well, this has been a very interesting and an exciting interview for me, hearing the stories about growing up in the Dust Bowl in Nebraska and Office of Price Administration—that was an aspect of World War II I hadn't heard before that it was good to hear. It's an important aspect of our history, so I'm glad we had a chance to add that. So thank you very much, Evelyn.

Fields: My pleasure.

DePue: And mine as well.

(end of interview)