Interview with Tom McCoy
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Interview #1: February 14, 2012
Interviewer: Sherri Kiefner

Kiefner: Today is February 14th, 2012. This interview is part of the *Will to Farm*, a Will County Farm Bureau Oral History project, in collaboration with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield. My name is Sherri Kiefner and I am in Shorewood, Illinois today at the home of Tom McCoy. It is a pleasure to have an opportunity to talk with you today, Tom.

McCoy: I'm glad you're here.

Kiefner: Tell me a little about yourself and your family, Tom. Let's start with when and where you were born.

McCoy: Well I was born in, I guess, Joliet, Silver Cross Hospital, an old farm boy. Back in about August, 1926, is when that big event happened. I grew up on a farm and just resumed from there. I had a wonderful mother and father (cries). I'm sorry.

Tom McCoy at interview time

Kiefner: Oh no! What can you tell me about your parents, Tom?

McCoy: Well, father of course grew up on a farm himself. My grandfather came over from Ireland and he started farming and then my father farmed with him. They had cattle and hogs, milk cows at that time. Then my father took over the farm after my grandfather retired and moved to town and then our family came along and I was really the only one that stayed there, grew up during the depression.

We were very fortunate. We never went hungry, we always had food; we always had clothes; and my mother was a very generous person. At that time, when I say about the depression, where we lived, why there was a streetcar and train tracks behind us, on the west side of us. People would come out of Chicago that were hungry and looking for a job. They would climb up that big hill and ask for a glass of water or something, but mother was a little bit better than that. She'd say, "Sit down there," and then in a few minutes she came out with some fried eggs and bacon for them, besides a glass of water. And they went on the way; and so that was it of course. At that time, we had a big garden and plenty of milk and so that's what my younger days. And then, of course, in my younger days, I always had a pony and a dog, and so they were my best friends.

Kiefner: Tom, where exactly was the home farm?

McCoy: The home farm was on, like we called it High Road, about a mile south of 135th Street in Romeo. Then we were between the High Road and what we called the Low Road, but in the beginning, it was a streetcar track that came out of Chicago. Then the Gulf Mobil & Ohio Railroad was on the west end of us, too.

Kiefner: And you talk about that streetcar line. The streetcar line was coming from Chicago? And who was using that streetcar line, mostly?

McCoy: Well, there was people that went to Chicago in the morning to work, out of Lockport, I suppose Lemont, and further up north, Sag, and so forth, that went to work. Every so often, it came; I don't know whether it was hourly or what.

Kiefner: Were there people coming from the city down to the Romeo area also?

McCoy: Yes, yes, there was people that were.

Kiefner: And what would draw them down to the Romeo area from the city? Wouldn't they have about everything in the city?

McCoy: Well, it was kind of a visa versa deal. Because coming down this way, there was two refineries, the old Globe Refinery [Globe Oil & Refining Company], and the Texaco Refinery, and then into Lockport; and so various businesses brought some people the other way.

Kiefner: Prohibition was going on at that time as well, wasn't it, during your childhood?

McCoy: Well, no, not so much that I know about that. There was, I guess, maybe a little bit, but, no, at that time, there was taverns running. We had a couple in Romeo there.

Kiefner: OK. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

McCoy: Yeah, I had two brothers and a sister.

Kiefner: Could you tell me a little bit about them as children? What your relationship to each of them were?

McCoy: My older brother, Donald was six years older than I was, and he went through high school, went through college,` then he went into service. Then my sister was three years younger, and she went through the school system there. She did not go on to college, but she got out of school. She went to work, and then, of course, I came along then, and upset the apple cart. My younger brother is four years younger and he went through school and he ended up in the service, as my older brother did.

Kiefner: Now you say you "upset the apple cart". What are you referring to, "upsetting the apple cart?"

McCoy: Well, I was kind of a little, umm, off, a little different than the rest, let's put it that way, a little more mischievous probably. Maybe that would be the word for it. Did things a little different.

Kiefner: Tell me about the house that you grew up in.

McCoy: Well, it was an old farmhouse, about ten rooms, of course, when we first started out. Why, we had an old potbelly stove and an old wooden cook stove. Had to carry in wood every night to keep the stove a-going, and everything. And then, later on—I would say I was probably eight or nine years old—when we finally did get a furnace and put that down in the basement and that was a big room furnace. It just had one radiator, and of course, we all stood around that to keep warm. That was a big godsend you know, then. Then finally we got electricity; and, of course, things just boomed after that and we were right up there with the high class.

Kiefner: (laughs) Now, that one radiator, did that keep the whole house warm?

McCoy: Yeah, the whole house warm. They'd put radiators in the lower ceiling so that the heat went up.

Kiefner: Tell me about the family farm. What did it look like at that time, at your youngest memory? What types of livestock did you have?

McCoy: Well, of course, we had horses, 'cause they did all the work. Dad got a tractor; I don't know when exactly he got the tractor, but horses were a big part of pulling

things. And we had a dairy farm and we milked, oh, I'd say if my memory is right, around twenty cows. Before I went to school, well, I used to milk two or three cows in the morning, got home from school, had to go out to the pasture and bring the cows in so that we could milk them at night, of course. That was it. Then we had a cream separator and we used to separate the milk. The skim milk and one percent that we buy now, we fed to the hogs. And they loved it; the hogs loved that. So that was it. Like I say, everything was done by horse power, just about. My dad loved horses, and of course, I did too and so that was the way we got along.

Kiefner: Well now, you say you milked two or three cows; who was milking the others? Were your siblings?

McCoy: Well, my older brother milked a couple and of course my dad did. He was there supervising and everything, and so yes, that was it then.

Kiefner: Where did the milk go? Obviously, you weren't using all of that for household, for those cows; how did that work?

McCoy: It went into eight-gallon cans; and then, my first recollection is, we used to take it down to Romeo, down to the Santa Fe railroad tracks, and it went into railroad cars and went to Chicago. I don't know how long that lasted. But then after that, why, a truck come around and picked up milk and that went into Weber's Dairy, into Joliet. Why we got away from Weber's, I don't know, but then the milk fella picked up the cans and it went to Dyer, Indiana, and that was all in milk cans.

Kiefner: And you mentioned the hogs. Were most of those for personal use, or did you raise them and sell them at the market?

McCoy: Yeah, we raised them and we butchered, and of course that was a big thing in the wintertime when it got cold; why, we butchered probably five or six hogs at a time. We had to treat the hams and smoke them and do that with them. It was cold; Mother Nature was our refrigerator and that was the thing. And then some of the butchering was done for neighbors; I mean, they wanted a half a hog or something, you know?

Kiefner: Then would that last through the summer? It would stay frozen for the winter, but…?

McCoy: No, it would last pretty much in the summer, especially the smoked and the treated, like the bacon and the hams did. The other, the pork chops and other stuff, loins and that, they went pretty quick.

Kiefner: You mentioned your grandfather. Do you remember your grandparents as a child?

McCoy: Yes, just barely. My grandfather died when I was real, real young. My grandmother: I would say I was about eight, nine years old when she passed away.

Kiefner: Is there anything in particular you remember about them?

McCoy: No, I don't know too much about my grandfather, other than knowing that he was about, since I was so young. My grandmother had quite a bit of humor in her and I remember, mostly on Sunday, we would go into Lockport and see Grandma; and then my Dad's sister, which would be my aunt, lived in Lockport.

Kiefner: You mentioned the garden; whose responsibility was the garden on the farm and how big was it?

McCoy: Well, it was mostly my mother's. And, it was rather large. I mean, we had raspberries and several bushes; and we had peaches; we had pear trees. It was quite a large one. Of course my dad prepared it most all the time, but after he got the seeds planted, why she was the caretaker, and us kids pulling weeds.

Kiefner: What was a typical family dinner like? Did the family eat together all the time?

McCoy: Yes. Yes, pretty much all together, except when my brother and sister got a little bit older, that and various activities that they participated in.

Kiefner: Do you remember any favorite meals that your mother prepared?

McCoy: No, I don't remember any. She was a good cook. Of course, she had to be to be a farmer's wife; and thrashing days, that was a big deal, cooking food. But I do remember this, and I still wonder why it ever happened: my mother was a hard worker; she had arthritis awful bad in her hands, but of course Saturday was bake day and she'd bake several loaves of bread. I and a neighbor boy would be out playing in the yard and mother would come out with fresh slice of bread with butter and sugar on it. She never said, "Tom and George come on over and get some bread," she brought it out in the yard to us. So she had us spoiled pretty good.

Kiefner: It sounds like it. What were your childhood chores? You mentioned milking two or three cows before you went to school. Did you have other chores?

McCoy: Yes, I assumed some sometimes. I fed the hogs; of course, we fed hogs then with troughs. We didn't necessarily have self-feeders. I helped feed the hogs and, of course, taking care of the horses and things like that. And Dad always had something to repair, but I kind of liked to help him repair, prepare the harnesses, and things like that.

Kiefner: Did you have any least favorite chores? Anything you really didn't like doing?

McCoy: Not that I can say off-hand. Nothing, no. I just seemed to like livestock and I knew they had to be fed and taken care of.

Kiefner: Tell me about your first school.

McCoy: First school? Well, first school I went to was Lockport Central. I went there for two years and then the Depression really hit and so they thought that the Central School in Lockport was a better school than going to the regular country school, which was Daley School then. But anyway, I cut down expenses and that. My older brother finished the Central School, but my sister and I was pulled out, so I started in a one room school house at third grade. Our teacher came from the other side of Plainfield, and of course we walked to school then. The first two years we rode a bus to Lockport, but then we walked about a mile and three quarters to the Daley School, which was a one-room schoolhouse. Then we did have chores to do. When it got cool, we had to carry in wood and coal, so the teacher could bank the fire and we'd have it going the next morning. And there was an old hand pump out in the back, a well that was a source of water.

Kiefner: How far away was that school?

McCoy: About a mile and three quarters.

Kiefner: And how old were you when you started that school?

McCoy: Third grade. I was in third grade, so about eight years old.

Kiefner: Who were your friends when you were growing up?

McCoy: Well, like I say, Georgie Zeiger used to come down there and play with me in the yard. Georgie's an old one, and a few from up there in Romeo, which was just a little bit north of our place; they weren't farm boys but they were up there. And there was the Simpsons and the Zeigers, and the Seffners.

Kiefner: What were some of your favorite things to do for fun?

McCoy: Oh, well, in wintertime we had that big hill on the west side of the farm going down to the railroad tracks; that was a good sledding place. And then did a lot of ice skating, and once in awhile we'd get a group together and we'd play a little bit of baseball, but not too much of that. But my favorite thing when I wasn't busy was to be on the pony's back.

Kiefner: And, where did you go on the pony?

McCoy: Oh, I'd go about most anywhere. I mean, as I got older, I go further going, and then I got horse. Oh yes, and on Sunday it would be nothing for me to cover twenty, twenty-five miles.

Kiefner: Where were you headed? Were you going into town with the pony? Were you staying out in the country?

McCoy: Well, mostly out in the country, quite a bit out in Homer, out that way. But, yes, out in the country and all around. The roads were a lot quieter then than they are now, so it was no problem. I used to go and see my future wife on the horse and tie the horse to a cherry tree.

Kiefner: Do you remember what your first pony's name was?

McCoy: Dixie.

Kiefner: Did you ever get in trouble when you were out on your pony or your horse?

McCoy: No, I never got out in trouble. I don't think, out on my pony and horse, because I think I kind of respected it. I don't remember yet what I was reprimanded for, but I remember riding my pony through the house.

Kiefner: (laughs)

McCoy: Went in the front door and out the back door. The front door wasn't too bad. That was only two or three steps to get the pony up, but going out the back door was about five or six, and how I got the pony down them steps, I don't recall. Ah yes, that's brought up to me quite often in my life, of taking the pony through. It wasn't very good on the linoleum floor.

Kiefner: (Kiefner laughs) No. Did you say an aluminum floor?

McCoy: No, linoleum floor.

Kiefner: Linoleum floor. That probably wasn't very good for your mother's kitchen either.

McCoy: No.

Kiefner: What did your family enjoy doing together when you were a child? You and your brothers and sisters and your parents, what were some family things that you recall?

McCoy: Well, I probably would say that what we enjoyed most, of course, during the week it was work, work, work, but come Saturday night, well, mother grabbed me most of the time, when I was big enough, and that was to get up in the chicken house and get a couple chickens, two or three. Then we had to pick them and clean them, because it seemed like we never knew when the cousins were coming from town, out. It seemed like every Sunday we had aunts and uncles from Lockport coming out for Sunday dinner, and of course there was a reason for it, I don't know. They never asked me about that. So that was a big thing. We just had a lot of meals together.

Then Fourth of July was always a traditional thing that's been going on for hundreds of years, I guess. That was held out at our place, and when the relatives and that came from far away—what I mean, like from Chicago and Hinsdale—that was a big bash. We had kept the tables at our house. We had three big tables that were about four feet long and then we had wooden horses and planks for seats. That was a three day deal for my father, to get them down and dust them off and set them up out in the woods, and that was another day that mother killed a lot of chickens. And others brought in food, too. That was a big deal, kind of a family reunion. It was a family reunion, both sides, mother's side and father's side. We just had a big picnic and that was an all day deal.

Kiefner: What did the kids do, other than eating?

McCoy: Oh, well, then we would have a ball game out there or run, whatever, play hide-and-go-seek, kids' stuff; yeah, we were normal kids.

Kiefner: And, tell me a little more about that area where you grew up. You mentioned the streetcars, but what else was in the area?

McCoy: Well, go back to the depression and then there was a CC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp out there, in the area.

Kiefner: The Civilian Conservation Corps camp?

McCoy: Yeah, and we had quite a bit to do with them. We used to get their garbage from them for the hogs; the people got to know us and we got to know quite a few of them and so they would come over and visit.

Kiefner: What was the role of the camp and the campers—you know, the people at the camp—during the depression? What were their jobs? Why was the camp in existence?

McCoy: They were working for the government and they worked at different places, parks. And they did a lot of work along the old I & M[1], and cleaned it up. That was the type of work they did too, kind of beautify the country, I guess you would say.

Kiefner: Okay.

McCoy: Yeah, that was their chore. These were people who were from quite an area. A lot were from out of Chicago and so they were just kind of glad to be able to wander around after they got through with their chores or on the weekend. They had a lot of open spaces, a lot of pasture around them there and then they would wander over by our house.

Kiefner: They were fed at the camp then?

[1] Illinois & Michigan Canal, originally built as a waterway connection between Michigan and the Illinois River, leading to the Mississippi River.

McCoy: Yes.

Kiefner: You had mentioned earlier that your mother would provide for the men at the camp sometimes when you would milk the cows?

McCoy: Oh yes, they'd come over in the evening, and milking time, and they just loved that fresh milk. My father fixed up a ten gallon milk can—not an eight gallon, a ten gallon milk can—and he would pour the milk into that from the cows. Then my mother would be out there, kind of regulating, see that they got clean glasses and that; and they'd just drink milk. They'd line up in our driveway and wait for a chance to get a glass of milk.

Kiefner: And you mentioned that you would take the garbage from the camp for the pigs. How would you get the garbage from there?

McCoy: Well, they put it in big garbage cans, and it was the bones, the food that they threw away, and they set it up on a stand out there. We'd go out there with the horse and wagon and pull up alongside of it and pull the garbage cans off. Some were heavy and some weren't so heavy; and then we'd take them back to the house. We're talking about roughly a good half-mile distance; it wasn't just a short distance.

Kiefner: You hauled it by hand, or the horses hauled it?

McCoy: Yes, the horses hauled the wagon.

Kiefner: What type of crops were grown on the farm at that time?

McCoy: Well, the main one was corn and oats, because that was a big thing for the horses and the cattle—corn, oats, and wheat, and hay, very little soybeans—but that was the main crop, the food for the animals.

Kiefner: Tell me about corn planting when you were a kid? How was the corn planted?

McCoy: Well, at that time, a two-row corn planter was the deal. It was planted with different ways, but the old time way was with a wire that had a button on it every forty inches. You had to string out this wire the whole length of the field and then you hooked it onto the side of the corn planter and as you went down the row, why, it tripped; there is a button on the wire and it tripped the corn planter and it put the seed every forty inches. Then when you got down to the other end of the field, you had to move the wire over another forty inches so you could come back, and hook it into the side of the planter so it would trip and drop the seed again.

Kiefner: So the corn plants were forty inches apart?

McCoy: Yes, two kernels every forty inches apart. That was about the speed.

Kiefner: And then, how would you the harvest this corn when it's forty inches apart?

McCoy: Well, it was forty inches apart, and it was like a square. Then you cultivated it one way, then you cultivated it crossways, to keep the weeds out. We didn't have the sprays and that was it; forty inches was because that was about the width of a horse, so you could walk up and down, between the rows.

Kiefner: So the horses did the cultivating?

McCoy: The horses did the cultivating, yes. Steered the cultivator with your feet as you went down between the rows.

Kiefner: So, you were able to ride then, as you cultivated?

McCoy: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

Kiefner: How was harvest done, for the corn?

McCoy: Well, number one was usually cut silage, put into bundles, and then put into a chopper/blower and blow it up into a silo. But then if they didn't have it, most all of the corn at that time was picked by hand with little bitty nubbins, little bitty ears, and thrown into a wagon by hand and then shoveled off at the corn crib by hand.

Kiefner: Was this a job that you and your brothers and your father would do, picking it by hand?

McCoy: Oh yeah, picking it by hand. Oh, I waded in snow a good many winters—we never got done by Thanksgiving a lot of times—and pick it by hand, throw it up into the wagon, and then get on and shovel it off. They had a regular shoveling board that they put on the wagon, so when you pulled up to the corn crib, you dropped the shoveling board back and then you could stand on that, then shovel the corn out of the wagon and put it in.

Kiefner: How high did the corn have to go? Was there any sort of an elevator to get the corn into the . . . ?

McCoy: Well no, not so much. It's just that you were three or four feet off the ground when you were standing, and then you shot it up in the air a little bit, so ten feet was about the utmost height you'd ever go with it.

Kiefner: Tell me about the earliest hay that you remember. How was hay harvested?

McCoy: Well, hay was harvested by cut and then we didn't have a hay conditioner or anything to squeeze at that time; Mother Nature dried it out for us and if it did get rained on, why then, we had to go back out and rake it and turn it over. You let it get dried out and then we either pitched it on or mostly though, we had regular loaders. The hay wagon would straddle the row of hay and then behind was a hay loader, and that worked the hay up into the wagon and then you brought it in.

You had a pitch fork—we called it a fork—that we shoved down into the hay and take the loose hay off of the wagon to put it up in the mow.[2]

Kiefner: So it was all loose hay, put up in the mow?

McCoy: Yes.

Kiefner: What about soybeans: did you have any soybeans planted when you were a kid?

McCoy: Yes, but not too many, and what we did then mostly, we cut them by hand and made cocks and then kind of cured them and fed them, but it was very little soybeans you know? Then, of course, later on, and a little bit later in life, probably when I got into my teens and that, why we raised some and harvested them and sold the beans, but really, the early ones went for feed.

Kiefner: Okay, and the first tractor the family owned. Do you recall what type?

McCoy: Yes, that was an old Fordson tractor, and it was quite a deal. Of course, it had to be cranked to get started, and that was the biggest thing with them old tractors was to get the spark on them to go so it would fire up and go. They consumed a lot of water; they didn't have too good of a cooling system on them. So that was quite a thing, and, of course, there was a very—what should I say—updated outfit, because you didn't have the sweaty horses. You get in a hot day, why you could sit down there and putz along.

Kiefner: Did the tractor have rubber tires at that time, that tractor?

McCoy: No, no they had steel lugs on them, so that they'd bite into the ground, and rough riding. Yes.

Kiefner: Was there still work that the horses were used for at this time? Did the tractor take over all of the horse's duties or…?

McCoy: Well, no, because they didn't have cultivators for the tractors and so the horses had to do the cultivating. They did, though, pension the horses off from pulling the Luders(?) binders; they put a tractor on it then. So that was some of the things they did, but other than that, why, if you could ride the rough tractor, that was it, you know. And it steered like everything, you know. In that day, you had to use the armstrong method to turn it.

Kiefner: (laughs) The arm strong method?

McCoy: Yes.

Kiefner: Meaning having strong arms?

[2] Mow is pronounced like now or plow. Hay mow is a term which has disappeared from modern farming.

McCoy: Yes.

Kiefner: Were there any dangerous jobs on the farm? With the equipment?

McCoy: Well sure, everything is dangerous if you don't use any common sense. And, like with tractors and that, you didn't want to be fueling them up when they were hot, and same way with livestock or the horses. You had to be careful, not that we had mean horses, but, you know, they are like anything else, they have their qualms and so you treated them gently; if you wanted them to work for you, that's what you should do anyway.

Kiefner: Were you or any of your siblings every injured doing farm work?

McCoy: No, not that I know of, but another silly thing that I did: when we had the tractor, of course we used to unload the hay with the hay fork and we used horses for that quite a bit. We had to go down so far and pull that rope up and drop the hay in there and then of course, they turned the horses around and came back. Well then we got a tractor and we hooked the rope onto the front end of the tractor and backed the tractor up; then, of course when they hollered, you stopped, but one time when I was coming back with the tractor, coming up to the barn, I forgot to stop the tractor, and so I put the tractor halfway up the side of the barn.

Kiefner: (laughs) That would be considered dangerous.

McCoy: Yes, I don't think OSHA approved of that at all.

Kiefner: Did you have a favorite farm activity—planting, cultivating, harvesting?

McCoy: Well, I guess you would say harvesting was probably it. We're reaping the harvest and to see what Mother Nature had given us through the year and how good of a job that we'd done helping her.

Kiefner: Were there any other uses that the draft horses were used for other than field work?

McCoy: Well, yes, in wintertime, we had bobsleds and so they'd go hook onto the horse sleigh and they'd take us around and go to town with them even, go to town with the horses.

Kiefner: You had mentioned before that your dad used to help dig foundations for houses and the horses helped with that.

McCoy: Yes, well that was horse power that took out the dirt.

Kiefner: How did that work? Tell me a little about that.

McCoy: Well, they had to loosen up the dirt, usually with a plow. And then they'd come in with what they called a slip scraper that held a few wheelbarrows of dirt and

they'd take and fill that up and then take it outside and go around and make a pile with that dirt. After they got that dumped, they would come around back again and fill the slip scraper up and dump it and when they got all the loose dirt off, they'd unhook from the slip scraper and hooked on the plow and loosen up the ground again.

Kiefner: So, they were taking out only about a couple wheelbarrows at a time; it would take quite a while to dig a house foundation.

McCoy: That's right, yes. Of course, a lot of the houses weren't that big as they are today (laughs).

Kiefner: Yes, that's true, that's true. Tell me about, did you go to any county fairs or plowing matches, anything like that, like farm-related activities?

McCoy: Oh yeah, they used to have the Wheatland Plowing Match, which was over near Plainfield. And that was every fall. They would do a little threshing the grain over there and a few things and so yes, we always went over there and saw that. Of course, that was a neighborhood deal; we met all the old neighbors and so that was a few of them and they went to county fairs. I never did show, but always was interested in going.

Kiefner: Was crime much of a concern back in that day, with the farm and the crops, or anything?

McCoy: No, I don't think it was. Yeah, of course, there was a few happenings, but everybody kind of trusted and took for granted. And like I told you earlier about the people coming down from Chicago and various places, Argo, and that, but they just seemed to keep moving on. Of course, the old railroad trains were quite a way of transportation for them people, because they would ride down in old empty box cars. That was their way of transportation, but people were somewhat leery of them, you know, those kind of people, but it wasn't a problem. There was a few stealings and that, but not like there is now.

Kiefner: Where did you go to high school? You said you went to high school in Lockport.

McCoy: I went to Lockport High School.

Kiefner: Did you play in any sports?

McCoy: Yes, I played a little baseball, played some football, but I didn't get in too much, because that was when the war was on and so my mode of transportation getting back home—the bus used to bring us to school and of course would pick us up—but then if I stayed for sports with it, well then I had no mode of transportation of getting home. But we were fortunate that the coach lived out our way, and so could ride back and forth—three or four of us fellows rode back and forth with the coach and to football.

Kiefner: How did you meet your future wife at that time?

McCoy: Well, in high school. Met her, she was just a little bit behind me. A half a year then, and so that's when I met Phyllis and we dated. I never did take her to the prom. I went to the prom first year, junior year, with a—she wasn't really a farm girl—but a Homer girl. Got out there and it was a rainy night and I even got stuck, and I had to walk back about a half a mile and get Ralph Ryder to pull me out of the mud.

Kiefner: So you had a car at that time?

McCoy: Yes, I had a car, yes.

Kiefner: You mentioned riding your horse at that time to visit Phyllis and tying him to the cherry tree.

McCoy: Yes.

Kiefner: What would you do on dates?

McCoy: Well, my first date with her, we went to the Peotone Fair. It was in the afternoon. One afternoon, I didn't have any baling or any work to do. I suppose I was a junior then, and so I just said to Mother and Dad that I was taking off. I says, "We got nothing going," and they said, "Go." So I picked her up and we went to the Will County Fair. And then, other than that, we had the Rialto Theatre, which had movies going all the time and there were certain activities going on at the school that we would attend. And then we ended up in Chicago once in a while, the Aragon and Trianon Ballrooms.

Kiefner: You were fifteen when Pearl Harbor was bombed; what do you remember about that?

McCoy: Well, that was a Sunday, and what I remember about that, Grandma wasn't alive then, but we were at my aunt's for some reason, and there was an air show over at Lewis School. I guess it was part of Lewis School, which was small then. While we were over there, why, we heard that the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor.

Kiefner: Did you hear it from other people or on the radio, do you recall?

McCoy: Well, no, you say heard it from other people I mean, somebody had the announcement with the crowd there.

Kiefner: You weren't drafted into the Army?

McCoy: No, no, I wasn't drafted, I had no problem evading it. What I mean is I didn't try to evade it, but my older brother went and I stayed out for a while, then I finally said one day to Mother and Dad that I wanted to go up and enlist. The Navy had a kind of a special program, I guess you would call it. I think they called it the E8,

if my memory is right. I went up there and took the physical and the written thing and they said I made it, I was alright, went through okay, then, of course, they questioned me about my life and background and of course I told them I was a farmer and proud of it and they said, "We ain't gonna take ya." Of course, I told them that my older brother was in and so they said, "You go back home."

Kiefner: Needing you to keep producing food at that time?

McCoy: Beg your pardon?

Kiefner: They needed you to keep producing food at that time?

McCoy: Yes.

Kiefner: Did you have friends other than your brother that were there, that went into the service?

McCoy: I can't quite hear you, Sherri.

Kiefner: Did you have friends, other than your brother, that went in the military also?

McCoy: Oh yes, yes, of course. There were several from the school itself that went, and certainly, I even lost a few buddies, good friends, that were in service.

Kiefner: You mentioned your car. Tell me about your first car.

McCoy: Well, I don't know whether I can tell you. Of course, you know I was driving a car or truck ever since I was able enough to get underneath the steering wheel and reach the pedals. And, so that was it, but, oh if my recollection is right, I think my sister and I bought a car together. We bought a new car. She was working and so we bought a car together and I can't tell you the name of it now, but that was the first car.

Kiefner: What about work off the farm? When did you start working off the farm? How old were you?

McCoy: Well, I suppose I was out of school. And, wintertime, there wasn't too much going on, so I got a job up just a little bit north of us there at the side of the Pure Oil Company, or Globe Oil Company then. It was a 3M Company that made the undercoating for automobiles. So I worked there all one winter with them. And then another winter later, I went to work for an outfit in Joliet. They were a manufacturing outfit. I did maintenance work for them.

Kiefner: During these high school days, what were some of the things you did for recreation? Did you go places with friends?

McCoy: Yes, we did, and we kind of had a clique or group that hung together; in fact, there's still a few of us who do, what's left of us. We kind of keep in contact.

They would come out to the farm or we'd go in or I'd go into town and we'd do some different things. That's how I got in the cooking business. When they'd come out, why, that's how I started cooking for other people. Why, we'd cook steaks. We'd go down to the pasture and they'd come out and they thought that was a big deal, you know, that I would do all the cooking and get the things ready and we'd have steak sandwiches and things like that.

Kiefner: How did you learn to cook?

McCoy: Well, I can't tell you. I guess watching my mother. I guess that was the thing. She'd always be ready to show me something or anything, you know. I watched her and so that was how I learned.

Kiefner: What about in the area, what else was there to do? Romeoville: was there a beach or a quarry?

McCoy: Well, yeah, there was the Romeo Beach; that was about the only thing down there. Of course, in the wintertime, I used to go east and go ice skating, did a lot of ice skating. But then in the summertime we had Romeo Beach down there and that was an old quarry hole. They had a regular life guard and everything and a beach house down there, so I was fortunate. Mr. Bruce asked my Dad, with the team of horses and the mower, to come down and cut the parking lot and so then my dad sent me down there. So I got to cut the parking lot and got to swim all summer for nothing. So I took the old team, the old five foot mower and went down there and cut the parking lot and cut all the weeds out.

Kiefner: Was that like during your high school years, or younger?

McCoy: My high school years, yes. Yes, I would say, probably eighth grade and on up.

Kiefner: And any other summer jobs in the area that you did?

McCoy: No . . . well, we had a neighbor up there that we used to sell our milk to sometimes. They ran a dairy and he bottled milk and sold it in Lemont, and I used to help him out quite a bit. I used to peddle milk in Lemont. I'd go around, putting bottles on the doorstep.

Kiefner: So, when and where did you get married?

McCoy: I got married in Lockport, and that would be back about what, 1953 I guess.

Kiefner: And, how did you wind up in Minooka, from the old home farm in Romeoville, or should I say Shorewood? How did you get from . . .

McCoy: Get from there to here?

Kiefner: Yes, how did you get from there to here.

McCoy: Well, Commonwealth Edison, or whatever you want to call them now, wanted to put two high-powered lines through our farm up there, and my Dad said, "Well, why don't you buy the farm?" And so they did. They bought the farm and we heard about this one down here; so we came down and it looked good and we bought it. The fella that had it was trying pretty hard to get rid of it; he was by himself and he was struggling along, so we got the farm then and came down here.

Kiefner: So you got married after you had moved?

McCoy: Yes, we were down here one year, and then I got married after that, yes.

Kiefner: So what did your wife think of moving?

McCoy: Well, she was strictly all out of order, because she was a town girl to begin with, but she came down here very good. Mother and father just fell in love with her, but they did that with the other in-laws and then the family, so it was nothing new. But she grabbed a hold of things when she came down here and went to work. In the fall she helped us harvest. I picked the corn and she hauled the wagons in and Dad dumped them in the elevator and put them up in the crib. She was the errand girl; she did run all the errands. Then later life, when my mother and dad had to go visit doctors like old people have to do nowadays, why, she was the chief chauffeur. So that was top on her list to take care of Mother and Dad.

Kiefner: What about your children? When did your children come along?

McCoy: Well, I guess my daughter came along about three years later, after we got married, and then Scott, and then Gordon.

Kiefner: What was your daughter's name?

McCoy: Christine

Kiefner: Christine and Scott and Gordon. Did the kids like to help out on the farm?

McCoy: Well, I think so, they all got in 4-H; well, Scott didn't get into 4-H, but Gordon and Christine did. But, Scott got into scouts and that, and he just had a little set-off, but there was nothing wrong with either one, Scouts or 4-H.

Kiefner: Were you involved a lot with the kids' activities then, when they were younger?

McCoy: Yes, somewhat. I was Cub Scout leader for five years. I was youth leader in our church for, I don't know how many years, down there. But of course I ran around and did various things with the FFA[3] people, I mean, different activities and that.

Kiefner: Did the kids have chores they had to do when they were young?

[3] FFA: Future Farmers of America, a youth group.

McCoy: Yes, they had some chores; everybody needs responsibility.

Kiefner: What did the farm operation look like after you moved from Romeo to Shorewood? How did the operation change?

McCoy: Well, quite a little different. Things changed all along. When we started down here, of course, we brought the dairy cows down here. But then that changed differently on handling the milk and everything, went to bulk tanks for the milk and so we decided not to go that route, because our barn was old. We'd have to do quite a bit of rejuvenating it and getting it up to specifications and so we decided not, and we went to feeding cattle then. When we got down here we started raising hogs; we got a little bit bigger in capacity. And then, of course we had to do some work to feed cattle. We put them on a concrete slab and every year, we made it a little bit bigger and so we'd get more cattle, and so that's how it changed. Of course the harvesting equipment changed; it got better and bigger and so that made a big improvement. And same way with the tractors: they got nicer, easier to ride on, rubber tires, and so it was just big improvement.

Kiefner: What about the soil, was there a difference in the soil when you moved from Romeo out to Shorewood?

McCoy: Oh, yes, this is a different type soil. That was a clay soil up there, brown clay soil. This is a little bit lighter, quite a difference, but then of course, we changed our system. Up there we grew a lot of hay because we had the horses and the cows and so that was good. And like I said earlier, we grew a lot of oats, and that was a big thing to keep the cattle and horses going. But then when we got down here, we only kept the horses. We brought a team of horses down here with us, but that was only a two or three year deal I think. My father decided to get rid of them. So then, we didn't need the demands for oats for so much, so we had to change our operation around and to go with what we had and then of course we increased with soybeans.

Kiefner: What other changes were taking place? You had mentioned how you harvested hay back then when you were a kid with the wagon and by hand. Did you progress to balers at what point? What was the first baler like?

McCoy: Yeah, baled hay. Well, the first baler that I had—but there was some earlier—it took four men to operate it: one to drive the tractor and two men, one on each side of it to tie the wire—mostly all the wire bales then—one on one side to push the wires through, and the other one to tie them, and then one fellow had to stand up on a deck like, as the hay came up and push it down in to the chamber as it packed it and pushed it out. But then they got so the balers were automatic, so it just flowed the hay right in and you didn't have to push it in. And then they made balers self-tying, and then they came out with string balers, and so that was a whole different deal too.

Kiefner: You mentioned adding beef cattle to the operation after you moved to Shorewood. How did that change as far as crops? Did you increase hay production for them?

McCoy: Yeah, we probably did, because we had more beef cattle than we'd had milk cows. We grew a little bit more corn; it was a big thing too, because we were fattening the cattle with our own corn. Like I say, we had some soybeans, but they were on a minor side then.

Kiefner: How did your acreage change when you moved? Did you farm more acreage when you moved down here?

McCoy: Oh yes, we farmed more acreage, we got a bigger farm, but well, a lot of things changed. Dad was getting older and when we bought this farm; my dad and I and mother bought it together then. Up there, they were the whole owners, and so things changed around with time.

Kiefner: With the beef cattle, where did you market them? Obviously, they weren't all for your own use, so where did the cattle go?

McCoy: Well, the cattle went to the Chicago Stockyards, which was operating then, and then of course when they closed down and moved down here into the Channahon area, or Wilmington area, why then we hauled them down there, and the hogs, too.

Kiefner: How did you haul the cattle to the stockyards?

McCoy: I trucked. I bought a truck. I had a truck before I moved down here. And, well, the same time, really, and so we trucked them back and forth, then I bought a lot of cattle locally, and then I had a fella out down by, oh the other side of Peoria that was a buyer and he bought a lot of cattle for me out in Missouri and out west there.

Kiefner: So, did you do a lot of hauling to the Chicago Stockyards?

McCoy: Well, quite a bit, yeah. Of course that's where everything that we had went, and then I hauled in for the neighbors here and all the hogs and cattle.

Kiefner: Were there any challenges in hauling into the city?

McCoy: Well, yeah, just going to Chicago's a challenge (laughs).

Kiefner: Tell me a little about some of your trips.

McCoy: But, of course, back then too, wasn't like now. I mean, the traffic isn't so bad, you know. In fact, when I was hauling up there, I-55 wasn't even in existence,

and then the I-55[4] got built, why of course different, and then the traffic grew better, but yeah, you had a challenge with the Chicago policemen. But you kind of learned to put up with them, and you had to be about as ornery as they were.

Kiefner: Well, tell me a little about some of those experiences.

McCoy: Well, before 55 was built, we used to have to go through Summit and Cicero, and Cicero, I believe it was, why there was a kind of a downhill, and then flat street was down there and then an uphill and of course, down at the bottom of the hill was a stop sign. And so I stopped down there one morning and I was going up the hill and I got up on top of the hill and I had a friendly policeman behind me. He told me I didn't stop at the stop sign, and I said, "I'm sorry sir, but I did." Well then he got talking about things and the tailgate and the metal of my truck was kind of open, you know, it had bars on it, and he kind of mentioned that I had some sheep on there. And I said, "Yeah." And he did everything but ask me outright for one of the sheep. He said, "Would you go to the police station?" and I said, "No, I won't go to the police station. I'm going to the stockyards," and so he hemmed and hawed a little, so finally I said, "Do you want one of them lambs?" and he said, "Yes." I said, "Okay, I'll open the gate and you take the lamb and put it in the police car." Well he wouldn't do that. (Kiefner laughs) He finally told me to go on my way.

Kiefner: So, was it mostly your own livestock that you were hauling.

McCoy: Oh no, I hauled a lot for different people and for different things. Like that was a mixed load, you know. I probably had cattle on the front and had to put a partition in there to keep the sheep separated so they didn't get injured going to Chicago.

Kiefner: Have you got any other stories about going to the stockyards? Hauling livestock?

McCoy: Oh, if I could get a-thinking, I probably would have a lot of them, but offhand, I can't.

Kiefner: Did you ever lose a load?

McCoy: No, well I lost… well, I tipped over a load, yeah, I tipped…

Kiefner: Well, that would count. (Kiefner laughs)

McCoy: Coming back home, I had some feeder calves on, and up there at the back end of Cicero, and coming down went very slow and going around the curve, I didn't have a full load and they shifted and we went over. Nobody got hurt, the cattle didn't get hurt, he just laid it down on its side. But it wasn't too long and it was near a gas station and pretty soon a fella came along with a wrecker. They called

[4] Interstate 55 basically followed the old U. S. 66, famous in song and movie, as far as Chicago to St. Louis. U.S. 66 went west from St. Louis to Los Angeles, CA, while I-55 continued to New Orleans.

a wrecker out and we got the truck up and went around and herded the cattle and put them in a fella's backyard there and we got a couple old oil drums and made a temporary ramp and jumped them back in the truck and come home.

Kiefner: (Kiefner laughs) No harm, no foul.

McCoy: No, nothing, no broken legs or anything.

Kiefner: What other custom work did you do? It sounds like you did a lot of work for other people.

McCoy: Yeah, well I did custom baling and custom combining. Kept the baler going most all summer long and then in the fall, custom combining. I had an old gentleman that worked for me in the fall. I put him on a combine and he just was tickled pink to be there and he did most all the harvesting. Then when we were here I took the grain away, but I put him out working for others; of course I had cattle and hogs to take care of here while he was doing that for me. But he enjoyed the jobs so I covered a lot of territory and custom work.

Kiefner: What have been some of your greatest challenges in farming?

McCoy: Well, probably the wintertime is the biggest challenge. The weather, and this will be a snap this winter, taking care of livestock, but when we got up in the morning, if the water was running, well we had the day made. You could always throw a little hay or grain on the frozen ground, they'd eat it, but it was pretty hard to get water when it was hard. So that was the one of the biggest challenges, I would say, the weather in the winter.

Kiefner: What was the most acreage you ever farmed, as far as crops?

McCoy: Was the most what?

Kiefner: The most acreage?

McCoy: Oh, well, we had some rented ground, probably 300 plus would probably be the most. I rented a little ground, but mostly took up the slack with custom work.

Kiefner: And the livestock: how involved were you with the beef cattle, after you got them?

McCoy: Well, we finished them out, and then there was a time there that we sold quite a few beef cattle for locker. People that wanted a quarter or half a beef and we would get some slaughtered for them and sell them and did them few hogs, not too much hogs.

Kiefner: What kind of organizations have you belonged to over the years?

McCoy: Well, of course, like I said earlier, I was boy scouts, was in the FFA or anything like that, I helped with them, somewhat, not really, Farm Bureau, of course. When we had the beef cattle, I went in the Kankakee-Will County Livestock Feeders, and I was with the Pork Producers a little bit.

Kiefner: What sort of activities did you participate in with the Kankakee – Will County Livestock Feeders?

McCoy: Well, I ended up president for ten years. We used to participate in different places; we'd take cattle and put on meat cutting demonstrations and we'd take a live steer right into the shopping mall. Meat cutting, and we worked with the Chicago Meat Board; they'd send down a representative, get us a representative.

Kiefner: What about, you mentioned something about doing something with Wendy's, back many years ago, with the beef?

McCoy: Well, Wendy's bought the grand-champion steer down at Springfield, the Ilinois State Fair, and they donated it to the Cancer Society. After they got rid of it, they wanted to get it up here to Chicago to switch it over to the Cancer Society, give it to them. And they were trying to find a home for it up here, and I guess they were having a little problem. Someone said to get a hold of McCoy up here and they did and so Wendy's sent a man here and we had a little pow-wow about what we were going to do and not do, and so forth. Do they brought the steer up to me and I had to show it around at a few places here and then take it up to Chicago so that they could present it to the Cancer Society. So I had to haul the steer to Chicago and build a pen in downtown Chicago, and they put on the program transferring the animal over to the Cancer Society.

Kiefner: So where in downtown Chicago did you put up a pen for a cow?

McCoy: Right next to the Picasso in Daley Plaza, I can't tell you the street (laughs), but right next to the Picasso [on Washington Street], I put up a pen.

Kiefner: A beef cow

McCoy: A beef steer, yeah.

Kiefner: In a pen, under the Picasso.

McCoy: An eleven hundred pound animal is pretty big.

Kiefner: And then, did you bring him back home with you after the presentation?

McCoy: Oh yeah, I brought him back here for a week or so and then I had to take him back down to University of Illinois where they butchered him.

Kiefner: Okay, what about the Pork Producers? You said you did some things with the Pork Producers.

McCoy: Well, I didn't participate too much with them, but, you know what I mean, I attended the meetings and went to things like that, but other than that, I didn't.

And they kind of phased out kind of quick anyway; they didn't last as long as the Beef Producers.

Kiefner: You mentioned when you were younger, doing a lot of cooking with your friends. Have you continued to put your cooking skills to use?

McCoy: Yeah, we kind of kept that a going; that's been going for thirty plus years or better, I guess.

Kiefner: Tell me a little about what kind of cooking you do.

McCoy: Well, we cook a lot of pork chops, but cook most anything. Cooked a lot of beef roasts and different things for various things. We did a lot a while back. We used to do a lot for the seed corn companies. Well, then they kind of changed their programs too, and we didn't do so much of that. But we do a lot for the Farm Bureau and their big deal. Then in the fall, Thanksgiving time, why, Gordon and I cook turkeys for the Minooka Methodist Church and for the Channahon Church down there. Two weekends, why, we probably cook close to a hundred turkeys.

Kiefner: A hundred turkeys? That's a lot of turkeys.

McCoy: Well, yeah, it's quite a bit (McCoy laughs). As long as I didn't have to kill 'em and clean 'em, why it's not so bad.

Kiefner: About, if you had to take a guess, how many pork chops would you say you have cooked in your life?

McCoy: Oh golly, I don't know. Not so many now, but when we first started, why we cooked quite a few, in fact, I have no idea. What do you think, Gordon? I know a couple of years there when we really were going and we were getting pretty close to ten thousand a year.

Kiefner: That's a lot of pork chops.

McCoy: So, we've been at it for over thirty years, so it's hard to say. I don't want to lie.

Kiefner: (Kiefner laughs) But it's been well into the thousands.

McCoy: Yeah, well into the thousands, yeah, I'm quite sure of that.

Kiefner: What other things have you been involved in? The Livestock Producers, the Pork Producers, a little bit of Farm Bureau.

McCoy: Well, ain't that enough? (Kiefner and McCoy laugh) Well, I am very active in the church, and I've donated eight and a half acres of ground here for putting a new

church on, and the church that we go to in Minooka, they're figuring on moving out of town and I've been working with them for a while. A couple years, four or five years ago, when Greensburg, Kansas blew away, if you recall that, I said to our men's group down at church, "Well, let's take up a collection and send them down some money. And, so we did, we collected money all summer and of course, I said, there's only one person qualified to take it down there, and so my wife and I took a nice big check down there to the Methodist Church in Greensburg and presented it to them, and we're still in contact with them.

Kiefner: What were they going to use that money for?

McCoy: To build. They were blown right off the map, you know. And, so they built a new church.

Kiefner: And how did you guys go about raising the money that you donated.

McCoy: We just said, "People, give. We're gonna go down to Greensburg in the fall with some money, and get pulling it in here." You just don't pull no punches, tell 'em what we're gonna do.

Kiefner: Okay, I didn't know if you were cooking pork chops and turkeys for that, too.

McCoy: No, but we have, Gordon and I, have gone to, where have we gone up to? Where Ed was at, what was the name of that place? Yeah, we went up there, been up there, cooking pork chops for a church up in…

Kiefner: Up in Lombard. What else do you do to keep busy?

McCoy: Not very much, no. I don't create much dust no more.

Kiefner: Are you still riding ponies?

McCoy: Well, I sneak a ride in once in a while, I ride a pony. But no, I help them over there at Strides, and lead horses for people that have disabilities, and help them out. But yeah, once in a while I sneak up on a horse's back. (McCoy laughs)

Kiefner: Thank you so much for sharing all of your stories. You have done so much, and I know that you have only told me about a small fraction, but thank you for sharing your stories with us today.

(end of interview)