

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives

UI Centennial Project

Allen Recordings of Agricultural History (Part 1)

Length: 00:31:14

2/12/1952

Ralph Allen: In recording agricultural history by those who took an active part in making it, four essentials are necessary. Date, place, people, and what happened. The date right now is February 12, 1952. Well, this is Abraham Lincoln's birthday, a very appropriate coincidence and agricultural in nature. A farmer's satisfactory economic and socio-situation is very often the result of the good sense and management of his forefathers. An outstanding example of this during Abraham Lincoln's time is when he signed the legislative enactment which created the land grant colleges which in turn produced a wonderful and valuable estate for succeeding generations to inherit. Part of that estate is right here at this place, Eureka, Woodford County, Illinois. We are in the assembly room of the Woodford County Farm Bureau building, headquarters of the Agricultural Extension Agency of the University of Illinois, a land grant college. People. Before introducing a fair sample of the makers of agricultural history in Woodford County, please allow me to digress briefly. An article in the current issue of the *Farm Journal* states, quote, "7500 years of farm progress in 75 years. Farming in the United States has made more progress during the last 75 years, just one lifetime than in all the world in 75 centuries," end quote. The gentlemen assembled here have enjoyed the span of life covering a large portion of those 75 years and have witnessed and participated in making that progress. They are very happy and willing to further build the estate for future generations by recording here memories of past events as they are able.

As an experiment, when introducing the personnel here and to acquaint listeners with the different voices right at the beginning, I will request each one to probe his memory as far back in his life as possible and describe an incident illustrating his first experience in making his agricultural history. To illustrate, I will describe my own incident. I am Ralph Allen, Junior, 63 years old, born on a farm 4 1/2 miles northwest of Delavan, Tazewell

County, Illinois, and still live adjacent to that farm. At a very early age of three, four, five years, I used to entertain myself playing make-believe farming in the backyard under an old elm tree. I had a farm laid out with sticks and strings for a fence, rocks, broken crockery, various and sundry junk, and utensils snatched from the kitchen to represent animals, buildings, equipment, and so forth. One day I became so intensely interested in my farming business, I failed to come when I was called and consequently got a licking. That was just an old family custom. But it inspired in me considerable resentment at the moment against the government for interfering with my business. However, I was old enough at the time to realize that I would be much worse off without the government, so I must not get too preoccupied with my farming business as to neglect the needs of government. That's my story.

Before introducing the next teller of tall stories, I should explain that so far I have been following a prepared script, which is necessary for me as I am a complete flop as an extemporaneous speaker. These other four fellows on the panel have no prepared script to follow, so they will have to paddle their own canoes. But they are very adept in that art. Sometimes the extemporaneous is more interesting than the prepared. The next speaker is Hugh Brock, the baby of the bunch. He is a present farm advisor in Woodford County, an agricultural extension agent for the University of Illinois. Hugh [Amy?] boy, what was your particular agricultural interest when you was a baby, the fertility of the soil?

Hugh Brock: No, I think it had to do more with livestock. My first recollection of anything agricultural was riding with my grandfather, who was a wool buyer in northern West Virginia and southern Pennsylvania, in a two-wheeled dog cart behind one horse riding over the country, buying up that fine merino wool they used to raise back in that section of the United States.

RA: Next is Lester Davidson, 54 years old, born at Minonk, Woodford County. He is the director of the Illinois Agricultural Association at the present time, and he will now tell about what happened to him when he was a kid.

Lester Davidson: Of the seven of us being interviewed here this evening, you have listed Hugh Brock as the youngest. He and I are the same age part of the year. He was born on the side of a hillside, but I was born on this good flat black land up in the northeast part of the county. I'm really representing my father here this evening, who was original director of the Farm Bureau, and I understand was treasurer for a period of years. I'm sorry he could not be here, but I'm glad to speak for him.

RA: About 1925, there was started in the state of Illinois in general and Woodford County in particular, a scientific system of ascertaining the best methods of farm management, which bid fair if adopted extensively and universally in other fields to bring order out of chaos in the world. This system is known as the Farm Bureau Farm Management Service. You will now hear from the first man in the world to sign up for such a system and service, Frank Felder. 64 years old. He was born four miles east of here on a farm.

Frank Felder: I might add that I was born in the same house and on the same farm where my father was born. I can't say as some of these other men that I, as Mr. Allen did, that I wanted to be a farmer when I was a small boy. My early ambition was to be a railroad engineer and I don't think the train ever went by on the railroad quarters of a mile north of our house that I didn't watch it until it was out of sight. However, I soon forgot that part of my career and now I'm glad that I am a farmer.

RA: The next man up is Charlie Smith, 65 years old. He was born on a farm four miles northwest of Eureka. His most notable distinction is being the chipped off the old block W.H. Smith.

Charlie Smith: I think probably one of my earliest recollections pertaining to the farm life was asking my dad to get to ride along to town with him in the wagon. And he'd usually let us go along, but one particular time I heard him tell my mother after we got home that he never saw a kid that could ask more questions. I don't really call me a kid, a boy.

RA: You'll now hear from Lucy Schertz, 73 years old. He was born four miles northeast of town.

Lucy Schertz: One of the things that I remember in particular when I was quite a small boy before my school age is the day when my father came home to the farm with a pony in which I was very much interested. We bred that pony and raised colts. And several years later we had seven or eight ponies because we didn't like to sell any of them. I naturally became interested in ponies and saddle horses. And saddle horses have been my hobby all through my life. I still have several Western saddles and one imported English saddle.

RA: The farmer's well-being and economic standing in organized society is affected by his relationship with other segments of society. Under our present state of civilization, it has a tendency to be a pressure group system, vulgarly known as politics. Professional participants are known as politicians, and some get pretty vulgar or maybe they just seem that way when they don't agree with you. However, a few arise above that category and are known as statesmen Senator Simon Lance has achieved that distinction and is a veteran of many a political battle in behalf of Illinois agriculture. Senator Lance is 75 years old, was born at Carlock, McLean County.

Simon Lance: One of the first things that I remember along the active agriculture was when I was 10 years old, I was sent out and there was a field to plow with a team of horses and a walking plow, which I did every day for a while. But the day I plowed up the bumblebee nest will never be forgotten by me. Since that time I've tried to stay away from the bumblebees.

RA: The last member of the panel to be introduced is young fella, 92 years old. W.H. Smith born at Tuscola, Douglas County, Illinois. His most notable achievement is to be the block off the old chip, Charlie Smith.

W.H. Smith: When I was about four years old, we lived in a log house, two rooms. I recall very visibly that soon after we went there, it was a custom for the ladies to call on the new settlers and there's some ladies calling on my mother for a little visit, get acquainted. And we've always

had a pet pig. Once in a great while, that pig would get in the house. But our bed was a trundle bed. And what should happen while my mother was entertaining these ladies, that this pig crawled out from the trundle bed into the room. My mother said that is the most embarrassing time of her life. And I think if we'd ever let this pig get in the house again, my mother would be killed.

RA: Now Mr. Smith, being the oldest one in the group by a great many years. He's the star of the show. And we've all kind of agreed to gang up on him and milk him dry of all his memories as long as he'll stand for it. Now, if you'll be good enough to give us the best you got, we'll appreciate it very much.

WS: As I said before, I was born in Douglas County, Illinois. And when I was about past four years old, we moved from there into the Deer Creek neighborhood a few miles south of Eureka. And I lived there seven years and went to school and did some farm work, a little farm work, worked some for the neighbors. Got 50 cents a day dropping corn and then later on, we moved to northeast of Eureka, and my father rented a large farm. And we lived there six years, and my folks moved west. I had arranged to come back and get married and start the farming. My father-in-law had come from Virginia and come down the Ohio River and up the Mississippi River and worked for [the muds?], \$13 a month. They had a little money ahead and come down to and bought one of the acres that we own now at \$3 an acre for our land.

That 80 acres is in [Tazewell County?], county seat, there's over [Pickens?] 30 miles away. And he bought two acres and a half across the road in Woodford County as the county seat was closer. He built his house there, and Gilbeth, or until his wife died, left him with one little girl. And as I often say, they took me to raise. At least this little girl I was married when she was about 18 and I was a little bit older. And I started the farm there on this hundred, they had a hundred and ten acres of land. I started the farm and I soon found that the farmland was not being kept up even in that early day. And I had made up my mind that I wanted to turn the land over to the children as good as I got it. If I didn't, I would certainly be robbing the children.

And I begun early to [inaudible] soils, and Tazewell County was organized, as I said where the barn is, was organized in 1913, and I become a member of Tazewell County Farm Bureau. Farm advisor come out and we tested the soil. He thought I'd only need, I needed lime, he said, but it only needed two tons of acre. I tried the sweet clover on the two tons, two tons, and it wasn't enough. I couldn't grow sweet clover. So we put on an extra two tons.

Soon after that, Mr. Hopkins from the university was preaching the necessity, of course, keeping up the soil, and he advises to put on phosphate. I started and then put on phosphate. I remember very distinctly the first phosphate I put on. I covered 20 acres of a 40 acre field in the fall. And the phosphate, next year I had it in corn and husk back several rows from the center. And where I had phosphate made 13 more bush bakers than where I didn't have phosphate. The next year I put it in [notes?] and I made 20, I made 10 bushel more to the acre. Phosphate at that time cost \$10 a ton. When the first [war?] was on, I was wanting to cover more land with phosphate. I'd ordered the car and waited and waited and waited and didn't come and I thought I'd order another one. It took that long to come and it finally. When we span corn the next spring, two carloads come, one one day and one the other. 99 tons of phosphate on our hands. So I've continued preaching the necessity of keeping up the soil.

RA: Sorry to interrupt you at this point, Mr. Smith, but it just occurred to me that Senator Lance has to leave and before he leaves, we want to hear more from him. And so I'd like to bring up the subject of a very important event, and I'll read the script that I have in connection with it. In the course of human activities portentous events at the time of their making are not considered of much importance and it takes many years to prove their impact on history Such an event took place in Peoria, January 21st and 22nd, 1919, 33 years ago when the Illinois Agricultural Association was reorganized. There are a few still living who were delegates and observers at that meeting. So it seems advisable to record their memories of it to be added to the estate being left to future generations. Woodford County was well represented as we soon shall hear. The ones present here who attended that meeting, in addition to Senator Lance with Frank Felder and Mr. Smith, W.H. Smith. Now gentlemen, let's think about the conditions and the reasons why that meeting was called.

It seems to me that prior to that meeting, the Illinois Agricultural Association consisted of a federation of a few county farm bureaus rather loosely connected and not very active, not very effective, I might say, in promoting the agricultural interest in the state. And I presume there was a feeling that there should be something more done to promote the agricultural interest by a better or an improved type of organization. Mr. Smith you was there and took the very important part in it and really assisted in underwriting the new or the rejuvenated organization. Will you please tell us now what you can about the events as they took place there at that meeting?

[Inaudible]

RA: You were a delegate?

WS: Well, I don't know if there's any delegates really. As far as I remember now, the call was sent out to all farm board members in all of the counties that have organizations. And I think that any of them had a vote, had a vote. I don't think it was really a delegate meeting, although I might, there's a possibility I might have been mistaken but I don't think so.

And after they decided to reorganize and ask each farm bureau member for an extra [three?], I should say before that, there was a hundred dollars asked from each county of its members at that time. Well, it didn't go off very well. Not many counties took a hold of it. So this time, there was going to ask for this one-dollar fee. Well, good many of them thought that wasn't enough. And there was quite a dispute over it. And uh it was finally put off that evening until the next morning and those in favor with the five-dollar fee got busy and the vote finally come up the next day after considerable debate and the speeches from Mr. Gregory and B.O. Thompson, Bo Thompson, yes and uh, Mr. Dean Frank, Mr. Dean Frank and we took a vote by the five dollars [inaudible].

And that was the beginning when we elected president, Mr. Scotts. I should say though before that, Mr. Kirkland had been president of two years. And just before that, Mr. Danforth was president and he had to, he resigned to become president of the federal land bank of St. Louis.

RA: Thank you, Mr. Smith. I was at the meeting myself as an observer only. I went along with my father. But I remember very distinctly one young man that got up and spoke his piece, and everybody listened. He commanded their attention. And he's right here now, Frank Felder, and he's going to, I hope, tell us about what he remembers of that meeting.

FF: That meeting's been so long ago that my recollection is a little hazy. In fact, I didn't even remember that I had spoken myself. I remember very distinctly one thing that Dean Davenport said in his speech, speaking of the uses of this new association and what it could accomplish in the way of legislation and helping the farmers, he said, "But every farmer knows that in many a good monkey wrench has been spoiled by using it as a hammer."

RA: Do you remember any of the other speakers in particular that impressed you, Frank? I remember Dave Thompson, but he was supposed to give the keynote speech. There's one expression that he used, he was arguing in favor of a \$15 fee. And he used this expression, he said, "Gee God, if this organization isn't worth \$15, it isn't worth anything." Well, Senator Lance, now let's hear from you and then when we've got everything we can get out of you, we'll let you go to your next appointment.

SL: Well, I was at that meeting a very interested spectator, and I was on the platform. And that was a very crucial time with the Illinois Agricultural Association. No one knew at that time what benefit the agricultural association might be to the farmers outside of agricultural pursuits. But my time in the state senate of Illinois, I've observed that there's no organization that comes down there to present themselves to us with as much effect in the program of preventing unnecessary taxation and harmful taxation as the Illinois Agricultural Association. If they didn't do anything else but for the farmers in the state of Illinois except that one thing before the legislature, every Illinois member of the of the Agricultural Association would have his

membership free and paid for from that result only. Everyone that has a farm. And that's one thing I think that most people don't appreciate. I've observed that for a good many years now.

One thing they don't do, they do not enter into anything at all that doesn't affect the Farm Bureau and the farmers of Illinois. They keep their hands over their affairs entirely. And I think it's very commendable in the way that the Illinois Agricultural Association conducts itself before the legislature of Illinois, and they have the respect of the legislature. Their force in passing legislation is very great. I don't know of any organization that comes down there, labor or anything else that has the influence that the Illinois Agriculture Association does. And as I say again that if they did nothing else for the farmers of Illinois except what they do down there, they would well earn their \$15 that they pay them.

RA: Well, Senator, I see you have two notes there. It may not be on the subject, but as you have to leave, I wish you would continue on and give us some more of your recollections of your past agricultural history of the state.

SL: The agricultural history of the state of Illinois is one to be commended. It's been very forceful for influence on legislation for other states because I know by personal experience that there's many committees, some from other states, to see what Illinois is doing along certain lines, especially agriculture. So the Illinois Agricultural Association does have an influence that reaches into other states. In fact, it reaches all over the United States.

I'm a livestock farmer. I'm one who has considerable pasture ground, rolling pasture ground, and I believe too as some of the others do here that the benefits that you can put into your pasture ground is very essential. All my pastures are terraced. They've all had all the lime and phosphate that they need according to analysis. But it would be soon time to go over them again.

I very well remember, in hustling out for members when we first started, we had a few people in our community who said that growing clover would ruin the soil. And it goes without saying that they did not join the Farm Bureau at that time. In fact, the case are we only got 13 after a

strenuous several weeks work to get members, only 13. I don't know how many we have now, but I guess most every farmer down there belongs to the Farm Bureau, don't they, Mr. Brock?

HB: Over 100 in Montgomery.

SL: Over 100 in Montgomery township. We had a whale of a time getting 13.

RA: He was the chairman of the organization committee, wasn't he?

SL: Oh, I don't know, I don't recall. [Crosstalk: Yes]. Yes, yeah, I was first chairman yeah. And I look upon that as a good deal of pride too [crosstalk] because I am a farm bureau [fellow in believing].

RA: Well, that's the feature established there in Peoria at that reorganization meeting of combining the three memberships, the County Farm Bureau, the state organization, and the national organization, really was the thing that could organize agricultural to the front, not only locally, but nationally.

SL: I think it couldn't have reached the place it occupies today without it.

RA: And at that meeting, the debate was pro and con. And for a while it was probably in a balance. And maybe some little thing or some person shoved it in the right direction. And that was one instance that showed...

SL: Well, there was a good many people shoving at that meeting. I don't know who it just might have been.

RA: Well, John Stout, you know, John, he was at the meeting. He told me one time that his delegation from Springfield were favoring the lower fee of \$5. And they had pressure put on them to reconsider.

SL: One dollar.

RA: Or \$1, is that it? And they gave in. And Sam Thompson, the old farm bureau veteran, you all know, has given Sangamon County credit for putting Farm Bureau on the map.

SL: Well, it might have been the balance, but of course, I live in Sangamon County about six months a year, and I know they're not Farm Bureau minded. They weren't like they were in Woodford County. They're [every day?] by any means.

RA: Well, that's what we get when we record history. We get different points of view, and it's advisable to get those in order to-

SL: I've had an unusual opportunity to see how the various counties stand up.

RA: Well, we're very glad to get your, your experience along that line. [Crosstalk]. Mr. Smith here, he wants to put a handle on it.

WS: What's the county, they're one of the living counties that they loved the county farm advisors that we've had by all these years.

RA: Well, I see the tape on this reel's about run out, so we'll just let him finish it. How'll that be?

Unknown: Will you summarize this?

RA: Well, in summary on this tape, it seems to me that this is-