

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives

UI Centennial Project

Allen Recordings of Agricultural History (Part 2)

**Interviewees: Charlie Smith, J. Frank Felter, Louis Schurtz, Lester Davidson, W.H. Smith,
Hugh Brock**

Interviewer: Ralph Allen

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Ralph Allen: Mr. Smith, I'm comparably a youngster here this evening and all I know about the early history of the Woodford County Farm Bureau is what I've been able to dig out of the minutes and out of the very meager early records that are here in the farm bureau office. I understand that you were originally a member of the farm bureau over in Tazewell County before Woodford County had a farm bureau. Is that right?

W.H. Smith: That's correct.

RA: Well, tell us a little bit about what caused you then to start getting the farmers of Woodford County interested in a farm bureau.

WS: Well I become a member of Tazewell County and the other counties joining us had already been organized and as I say, I became a member when they organized and I got in- two years after that I took an active part in organizing the Woodford County Farm Bureau because I got a glimpse by being a member in Tazewell County, I got a glimpse of the possibility of organized farmers. Well as I said, farmer[?] I was mostly interested in, the thing that fascinated me the most was kidding up the soil cause I could see that our soil goes down, churches go down, schools go down, the standard of living goes down and we hadn't done it right and I said to Rob [fifty?] generations, "No matter where the county-"

RA: That was about December 1914, is that right?

WS: Yeah, it was December 1914. And went over the county, Karl summoned key men in the county [to keep?] farmers together, just a few of them. And talked the possibilities of a farm organization and planned committees and these men went out and canvased for members. They signed a pledge for ten dollars a year for three years. And it wasn't but just a short time till we had over the 300 members that was required by the university before they would pay anything towards our expenses of a farm organization. Then we met and as been said here before and organized the farm, our county farm bureau.

RA: You mean towards the salary of a farm advisor, not towards expenses you organization, are you not?

WS: Well, yes. That's what it ought to mean but it's all expenses. I should say right here that this government money to pay part of the salary of the farm advisor that the government had formed these agriculture schools and they was giving a lot of information, was a benefit to farmers. But the farmers were not very much interested, and this information wasn't getting out to farmers. So, the government finally said, "Well if we pay part of the salary of a man that has an agricultural education and put him in the counties or the farmers put him in, if the farmers wouldn't choose him." So that's really the beginning of farm bureaus. Then the northern Illinois counties nearly all organized but the southern IL counties thought the state thought they were too poor. So, the state came in and offered about the same amount towards the farm advisors' salary as the government did. And as far as I know they are still paying it.

RA: About when was the farm bureau then actually organized?

WS: The farm bureau was organized in January 19- uh...

RA: 15?

WS: Yes, 1915 the Woodford County Farm Bureau was organized.

RA: Do you remember who the first officers were?

WS: Yes. Yes, I remember Frank Felter, who was here with us was secretary and Howard [Lenard?] was president and I was vice president. And Lou Schurtz was treasurer.

RA: I believe Mr. Smith was treasurer, wasn't he?

WS: I guess you're right about that. Mr. Schurtz came in later.

RA: Joe D. Joe Smith. J.D. Smith.

WS: Yeah, J.D. Smith, that's right. And then Mr. Schurtz came in later then.

RA: Frank, I think you were the first secretary. What sort of an organization did you have in those days?

Frank Felter: Well, the secretary didn't have very much to do to keep the records for 300 men, 350. We had directors from almost all of the townships in the county, and we met I think every two or three months. I don't believe we met every month at first. Our first job after we organized, after the preliminary organization was made, was to find the farm advisor who was to lead us in the way we were to go. And three officers, Mr. Smith, the vice president, Mr. Lenard, the president, and myself, the secretary were appointed a committee to search for a man who would be our advisor. And we spent most of the first summer in finding the man who was to be our first advisor and finally selected Mr. M.L. Mosher.

RA: When did Mr. Mosher start?

FF: Well, he was hired I think in December of 1915 and began his work January 1st, 1916.

RA: Mr. Schurtz, I believe you were a member of that first board. Were you not?

Louis Schurtz: Yes, I think I was. Not in the first committees but I think I was elected on the first regular board of directors.

RA: How was that board elected? Do you remember?

LS: I think there was one member elected for the board from each township.

RA: By the members in that- [crosstalk]

LS: By the members of the township.

RA: By the members in the township. I didn't know how that was done. Lester, I believe your father was, I know he was one of the first directors representing Clayton Township. Was he not also a early treasurer of the farm bureau here in Woodford County?

Lester Davidson: I have no record here that shows it but from the opinion of the group here he was treasurer for one or two years along in the early history of the farm bureau.

RA: What's the farm bureau history of the rest of your family?

LD: Well, I have a brother who was president of the farm bureau 1925 and 26.

RA: That would be Victor?

LD: That's Victor Davidson, that's right. And then going on down the record, I was elected president of the farm bureau in 1939 and served six years until 1944. During that time, we held regular monthly board meetings. Once a month. The first Thursday in the month. And in 1945 I was followed by G.C. Canton who was president then for five years.

RA: I believe it's been said that you're now a director from this district on the IAA board. Is that correct?

LD: That's right. I'm serving my second term as director from this district on the IAA board.

RA: You're also on the present board of directors of the farm bureau?

LD: That's right, I am.

RA: Serve as the company president farm bureau subsidiary?

LD: Yes. Yes, I'm president of the service company.

RA: I was interested in bringing all this up, in fact dragging it out of you to show the influence that one family in the Woodford County has had on the formation and the

carrying on of the Woodford County Farm Bureau from its very start up to the present day. We have had the same thing here in the case of Mr. Smith and his son Charlie Smith. And Charlie, I think at this time you ought to review some of your experiences in connection with the organization of the Woodford County Farm Bureau and the carrying on of it.

CS: Back in the early days of the farm bureau, we had what is known as executive committee. One of the exec committee was a member elected at large. And I happened to be elected to represent this member on the exec committee in 1926. I carried on the exec committee till 1932 when I was chosen as president of the Woodford County Farm Bureau. I acted as president of the Woodford County Farm Bureau until 1938. Then in 1937 it happened to be my good fortune to be chosen as director from the 17th district on the Illinois Association board. Well, this experience will carry with me long as I live. It's an experience that I wish that every farmer might have the opportunity to have because it means a lot to anyone that has that opportunity.

RA: How many years were you a director in the IA board?

CS: I was a director three terms, six years.

RA: I don't think a history of Woodford County Farm Bureau would be very complete without calling attention to the influence that Howard Lenard of Eureka had on the early organization of the county and state organization. Frank, you were a neighbor of Howard Lenards, and I wonder if you wouldn't tell us some of his, the influence that he had on this organization?

FF: Yes, I think Howard deserves a great deal of credit for the present status of the Woodford County Farm Bureau and also for the present worth of the Illinois Agricultural Association. He was our first president here when the farm bureau was organized and I think he was the first treasurer when the Illinois Agricultural Association was organized. He served as treasurer for two or three terms and after that was elected president. And acted as president for a number of years during the growth of when the Illinois Agricultural Association was making a very rapid growth.

RA: He was director of the agriculture of the state of Illinois wasn't he one time?

FF: Yes, after that he was chosen to be director of agriculture of the state in Governor Green's cabinet. I think his life exemplifies what one man can do for the service of agriculture.

RA: Might be interesting to you to know that I have the record made by Dave Thompson and he also speaks very highly of Howard Lenard and maybe some time you'll get an opportunity to hear that record.

FF: In speaking to the men who have had the great influence on our Woodford County Farm Bureau, I think we shouldn't neglect Mr. M.L. Mosher who was our first advisor here and I'd like to ask Mr. Will Smith to tell something of the work of our committee in hiring Mr. Mosher.

WS: As it has been stated before, Frank [unintelligible] a committee to find [unintelligible]. That's a time that we organized the Woodford County Farm Bureau. So, we went down to the university and all they had on the [unintelligible] to recommend to us was three men. We interviewed them and two of them was willing to take a job here, but we didn't think they fit in quite right. The other man didn't care. So, we started out on our own and run along all summer we interviewed. Some men come here to see us and we went up to some men. And let us pass back a vote between others and run on. Couldn't find anyone we thought would fit in here. So finally, we sent word to Mr. Hanson who was supervising farm bureau advisors at that time in some capacity, not sure which. And we told him that he had a good many chances to find a farm advisor. Why we had men out here on the farm who don't have one. And if he didn't get us a farm advisor pretty soon, we was gonna go to pieces.

It wasn't very long after that that he sent word that there was a farm advisor in [Benton?] County Iowa that was quitting and if we wanted to get him and he wanted to come here why they'd okay him. So, we sent for Mr. Mosher and called our directors together and we looked him over. And finally, he was asked, "Mr. Mosher, why are you quitting here?" Or quitting in [unintelligible]? And just as quick as we ask he says, "Because they asked me to." And he went on to say, "That's a livestock county. If you men want a livestock county you don't want me." And he says, "I'm a grain advisor." Well, we were pretty much a grain county at the time, and so we employed Mr. Mosher and we didn't make any mistake. Should I go on a little more?

We didn't make a mistake because Mr. Mosher put us on the map in selecting corn. One [what did we?] directors sat down to talk over some of the things we want to plan for the next year, and we got to talking about corn. All kinds of corn are being raised. Yellow corn, white corn, red corn, and big ears and little ears. Couldn't all be best. [Certainly?] to some one kind. So Mr. Mosher worked out a plan to find the best yielding corn in the county. And after three years, well he got corn from 120 men and that year raised them two places in the county. And the next year had those same men to bring corn back and he went through the same process. And the third year, at the end of the third year, they fairly [smoothed?] 18 to 20 row corn stood at the top. That's the [type]. And the one that [stood at?] the type was Mr. [Crew?]. And we call that [unintelligible] the utility corn. And that's spread all over the state and I'd like to say right here that this Mr. Lester [Fiester?] who has, everybody knows as farm corn expert, helped Mr. Mosher do this work. He got a glimpse of the [unintelligible] leading corn and that's really what started Mr. [Fiester?] out in corn.

Unknown: [Unintelligible] Go ahead and talk.

RA: I don't want to take up too much time here on this panel but one of the other things for which Woodford County is noted is the farm bureau farm management service or system of farm accounting that was originated in this county and is now been carried out all over the state and has been copied in other states in the United States. Early in the, besides the corn work which Mr. Mosher did, in 1916 he and Professor Case started the

farm accounting project in Woodford County and I've heard Profess Case say that they rode over mud roads in wintertime on horseback to visit those early account keepers. A large number of our cooperators in the present-day farm bureau farm management service started out as farm record keepers back there in those early days in 1916. The project was expanded and in 1925 was organized into the first farm bureau farm management service and as was said here a little earlier this evening, Frank Felter was the first signer on the farm bureau farm management contract. For a four-year period was elected to its first board of directors, was its first and only secretary-treasurer and has been since 1925 and is at the present time. And Frank, I'd like you to say a few words about those early experiences in farm accounting.

FF: Well, I remember very distinctly that I came into the farm bureau office one afternoon Mr. Mosher was there and was getting ready to sign up fellas and said, "You'd be a good prospect so you can just sign now." That's how I happened to be the first signer. Then Mr. Mosher and I together went out to see several other men that afternoon. I think Charlie Smith is one we saw. I believe [Ella Sharpe?], Mr. Will Smith's son-in-law was one man we saw and John [Borese?] was one of the early signers. I don't recall other men that we went to that afternoon. But that is the way the farm management service started in Woodford County and a short time after it started here it was started in Livingston, Tazewell, and McClain Counties which afterward became the pioneer Farm Bureau Farm Management Association.

Unknown: Can we explain, Frank, about how it was financed at the beginning? Very cheap costs at the beginning. \$5 I think and that was due to the fact it was an experiment and the state college paid most of the expense. Is that correct?

FF: I don't remember about the amount that the college paid toward the salary of the men who supervised the account keeping. Some of the farm bureau's paid part of the expense for each man and each man who signed up agreed to pay a certain amount I think depending on the acreage he was farming to support the field man who was to supervise his account keeping.

RA[?]: Who was your first field manager. Frank, do you remember?

FF: Mr. Mosher himself became the first field man and supervised the accounts. He really was the pioneer in this movement.

RA[?]: How many account keepers do we have in the county today?

FF: There is somewhere around 100 I think in this county. And in the pioneer area which now contains Woodford, Tazewell, Livingston, McClain, and also Ford County, there are about 600. A little over 600. And we, the 600, support three field men now who devote their whole time to looking after the farm records of the men who are account keepers.

RA[?]: Can you name the field men succeeding Mosher. Jerry Anderews I think was the second one, wasn't he?

FF: Jerry Andrews succeed Mosher and Mr. Harrington who is still in McClain County was one of the early field men.

Unknown: [Murray Madison?]

FF: [Murray Madison?] came in later.

Unknown: The number of cooperators increased so they had to divide it up amongst more field men I think.

FF: Yes. About 200 to 225 men is all one field man can take care of and make the four visits a year and do the other work which is required in this service.

RA[?]: We've already said that M.L. Mosher was the first farm advisor. I believe he served from January 1, 1916, to December 31, 1922. Did he not, Charlie? Who's the rest of your farm advisors been in this county?

CS: Well following Mr. Mosher, Paul Johnson was our second farm advisor, and he served from January 1, '23 to December 31, '24. And following him [unintelligible] came to Woodford County from Franklin County, commencing her March 1925 and he served as farm advisor here till March '37. Then following Mr. [Douwerf?] why our present farm advisor, Hugh Brock, came to work for county April 1, 1937, and he's still with us and I think he'll be here [laughs].

Hugh Brock: Well when did this come up that M.L. had another [relative?] on the university staff and because of that, he couldn't be given an appointment at the university and for quite a number of years he [beat the devil around a stump?] about the Farm Bureau Farm Management Association paying his entire salary and then there was some other means by way the university made up for that and the services they rendered, wasn't that?

FF: No, I don't. I think you're wrong, Hugh. I think he served part time down there and they paid half his salary and we paid half. And that's the way they got around it because he wasn't a full time employee.

HB: Oh, that was the way. [Crosstalk] I remember there was something in there that because of his having a relation over in the engineering department [crosstalk]. He couldn't be employed by the university full time.

Unknown: Is that a part of the university?

HB: At one time it was. I don't believe it is now.

FF: I think I heard [unintelligible] came up and said that President Gaines, the president down there, he had his higher education over in Germany. In fact, his wife is a German girl, and he married her when he was over there in school. And he said that in many of the German universities it was almost a family affair. And the president of the university or the high man

there would put in some of his sons-in-law and cousins in various positions. And that became so bad over there that he was determined it shouldn't happen in the University of Illinois.

Unknown: Where was that Frank? What country?

FF: Over in Germany. He was educated over there and he went over after [unintelligible] had a doctorate degree. That's what I've been told that he [unintelligible] but he had that rule in the past that no two people should serve in the university who are related.

HB[?]: I know there was quite an argument when I was in Ford and Chrisitan County in 1922, I had a brother who was on the staff in the horticulture department and there was quite an argument to whether the assistant farm advisor in Christian County was a staff member of the University of Illinois and thereby violated that regulation. They finally decided that farm advisors in this instance were not staff members of the college of agriculture. And it took us 30 years to get recognized as staff members down there but we're recognized now.

Unknown: [I have a question?]. What's that about Daniel [Woodford?]. Someone down there [unintelligible].

FF: Yes. A cousin of his, I think it was a cousin, was in the engineering department. And on account of this ruling that no two related people could be on the faculty down there, they wouldn't take him in on as a faculty member but they would take him on as half-pay. And then the association here paid the other half. And that went on for about as long as I [know?]. It worked for us.

HB[?]: Was going on after I came here for a little while.

Unknown: Well M.L. will be interested to hear this because it's being recorded [laughter]. Now Mr. Smith, I interrupted you right at the beginning. Now I'd like to have you finish up this tape and tell more about your early life. You no doubt went through all the ordeals of walking miles and following behind the [hare?] on foot and dropping corn by hand. How were the roads in those days?

WS: Good as anyone [unintelligible]. Mud roads all through there. Now of course we have gravel roads [to the farm?] and hard roads.

Unknown: I imagine you remember when there were things like the telephone first came in [unintelligible] delivery.

WS: The first telephone line was from my home to the [unintelligible]. I tried for years to get some of the neighbors to go in with me and build a line into town. Finally, one man said he'd do it with me if I paid three-fourths of the cost of it. So I said, "Alright." So we went to the timber and bought poles fifteen cents apiece. Brought them home and took the bark off. We built a line in town. A metallic system. At that time, we thought, oh, we needed the doctor's office and the

veterinary's office and the elevator. And there was a little office in the drugstore and one day they got folks called in but from then on, it spread like wildfire all over the country.

Unknown: When did the mail carrier first come?

WS: I can't remember just the first mail carriers but it was after, well it was long about that time, just before or just after that time the mail carriers come in and of course that was quite a help to the farmers to get the mail every day.

Unknown: Do you remember any railroads being in the town?

WS: No. Yes. The [unintelligible] was built about 1850. Sometime after that the Chicago branch [unintelligible] was built running up the [street there?].

Unknown: You was born about the time the Civil War started. You remember hearing anything about those days?

WS: I remember very distinctly that when I was about four years old seeing the Illinois Central Railroad pass east of our house about a quarter mile. I saw a lot of men on boxcars going south and I asked my mother, "Where are they going?" She said they were going to the army. Later I can remember very distinctly when the news come that Lincoln was killed and the effect it had on the neighbors that time.

Unknown: Who did you vote for the first time for president? This is an election year [WS laughs] and it could be interesting to know who you are going to vote for this year [all laugh].

WS: [I forgot who I?] voted for president. I like just [inaudible]. So I didn't get to vote for Garfield. Who succeeded Garfield? You know he got- I almost forgot who did- but anyhow I voted for the next president.

Unknown: What year was it?

WS: Well, it was four years after- '84.

Unknown: Was he Democrat or Republican? That's all that matters [laughter].

WS: Well sometimes it's either a Democrat or Republican, I just don't remember the politics of some of those men [inaudible]. I'd like to say right here after I voted my first year for president for the first time, after that I voted to [progress and picket?] [inaudible] for a good many years. And since that I've voted for the men and have not been tied by any party.

Unknown: What do you think of the young people today? They as good as it was in your day?

WS: I think they're better. I really think the young people are better.

Unknown: [Crosstalk] help them out some, don't you think?

WS: Yes, the farm bureau's helped out and the 4H work and getting boys interested along such lines as that. I think we've got a better class of young people. I'd hate to state to the contrary because I raised some children. I ought to feel they're better- [tape ends].