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UI Centennial Project

Allen Recordings of Agricultural History (Part 5)

04/29/1949

Length: 00:32:19

Dave Thompson: I am Dave Thompson. At the request of Ralph Allen, Delavan, Illinois, I am recording a few of the things which I remember best of the activities I engaged in as farm advisor in McLean County, Illinois, as executive secretary of the Illinois Agricultural Association, and as an editorial staff member for [a farmer?] WLS. Some days ago, I listened to your message to me, Ralph, on the sound mirror magnetic recording tape. It was good to hear your voice here in New York City, and also to get a word from my good friend Frank Bill, farm editor of the *Daily Pantograph*. In assembling a vocal history of agricultural Illinois, Ralph, you are undertaking an endless task. But in as much as it is a hobby with you, it cannot become a task, rather a joy and a pleasure. I feel complimented by your request that I participate as one who helped in some measure, however small, in the great progress agriculture has made during the last 35 to 40 years. I wish you were here so that you and I might talk together.

But in as much as you are not, I have my good friend, [Phil Lampe?], Radio Farm Director, WJZ, New York's first station, with me here. We are using the facilities of this station for recording the interview. And I am sure that you and I are both duly grateful. We might wish to know something about Phil. Although he was raised on a farm in New Jersey, he might be straight out of the Middle West. He has had 4-H club and future Farmer of America experience and is a graduate of Rutgers University and New Jersey's agricultural college, has been a vocational agriculture teacher, and now operates a large poultry farm in New Jersey. He is known nationally through his activities in the National Association of Radio Farm Directors. That gives you a little idea, Ralph, of the fellow who sits across the mic from me. He will serve in your place and put in the headlines.

[Phil Lampe?]: It'd be a good thing now, Dave, for you to tell Ralph Allen what you're doing here among the New York skyscrapers so far removed from the broad prairies of Illinois.

DT: Now is as good a time as any. I'm an agricultural consultant, which is another title for farm relations man, with the Grocery Manufacturers of America. This is an organization of manufacturers making food and other items sold in the grocery stores. They include the leading meat packers, millers, canners, bakers, dairy industries and so forth. Their products include the nationally advertised brands and farmers supply them with most of their raw materials.

PL: Dave, we had better get back to Illinois. When did you go to McLean County?

DT: Well, I'd been an animal husbandry extension man at Purdue University, Indiana, about four years. When I got an invitation through Edgar L. Bill to come to Bloomington to interview the board of directors of the McLean County Better Farming Association, he was its secretary. The upshot of that was that in February of 1915, I started to work as farm advisor and was there until February 1919. You will be interested, Phil, to know that Ralph Allen is going to include some old time pictures to be used as lantern slides, together with his vocal history of Illinois. I dug around home and have some pictures that I took about 35 years ago. Suppose we look at them while I tell you about some of the things that happened. To start off with, here's what is known in those, was known in those days as the "scared Ford" because it ran that way. What do you think of that?

PL: Well, what do you know? Say, what vintage was this car and what's the reason for the hog crate roped on the right-hand running board?

DT: Well, that's part of two stories, Phil. This was a 1914 Ford, fabric tires guaranteed to run at least 4,000 miles. Prestolite gas headlights, kerosene side lamps, rubber bulb horn, and a two-man top. It started with a crank when it started, and it was a hand-fed.

Eddie Bill, who is now on our radio station WMBD in Peoria, whom you know, Phil, and I tried it out on the only three-mile stretch of hard road. in central Illinois at that time, up in Livingston County. Wide open, she made 43 miles an hour.

PL: You, Eddie Bill, and Barney Oldfield, boy, but that wasn't the story, was it?

DT: No, the story is that when I came to McLean County, the board of directors, who were all substantial farmers operating large farms, gave me just one order. They said, "Dave, with just one rule to lay down. Outside of that, you have a free hand. That rule is you are against hard roads." Well, that's entirely understandable, too, Phil, for the only way of paying for concrete roads at that time was by a property tax against the land adjoining the road, which would have been confiscatory. The other part of the story in this picture, the one about the hog in the crate, is something like this.

McLean County had a lot of interest in livestock. And at that time, there was a big boom in purebred livestock. The Better Farming Association organized purebred swine breeders associations: one for Chester Whites, one for Poland Chinas, one for Duroc Jerseys, and one for Hampshires. We held spring and fall sales in Bloomington. Well, it happened that after a Poland China sale, this one bore had not been delivered. So Mrs. Thompson bundled our boy Dave, then a baby, and one of our daughters, Dorothy, up, and we took an afternoon spin out into the country. If I remember rightly, I think we delivered this particular bore at the Ben Rust farm south of Bloomington.

PL: Well McLean County was a big hog county. Did you have anything to do with developing the McLean County system of swine sanitation? Did that happen in your day, Dave?

DT: Well, that was the outgrowth of a hog health program. Alfalfa was just being started in the county by some of the leading farmers. They were using it as hog pasture. There were two threats facing hog growers. One was an epidemic loss by hog cholera. The other was the lack of thrift, costly gains, and just general no-account value of runt pigs. Lyle Johnstone, president of

the McLean County Better Farming Association, was a good hog raiser, but he had runt pigs. Lawrence Funk, Alan Brown, Price Jones, Simon Moon, Frank Stewart, Fred Basting, Fred Bloom, Fred Marberly, or it's Frank Marberly, my memory was slipped on me there, Frank, just to name a few, all had runts in their herds. We prevailed upon USDA to send a veterinarian into McLean County to study the runt pig losses. During the full year in 1918, this veterinarian, Dr. T.M. Baylor, and I drove the county visiting literally hundreds of herds. Through the fine cooperation of owners who knew what we were doing and why we were doing it, we had the privilege of picking up any runt pig in the lot, killing it, and making a postmortem. Every runt pig we posted was heavily infested with worms. Knowing the life history of this hogworm and that during its egg stage it infested ground in which pigs had been kept the previous year, it was easy to devise a plan for raising pigs without there ever being on old infested ground. There's where the alfalfa pasture came in good.

PL: Well, Dave, did you and Dr. Baylor work out the idea then?

DT: Well, together with the hog man whose runt pigs we'd been killing all year, an experiment was planned. And in the year of 1919 on Lyle Johnstone's farm, it was carried out. I was not there at that time, having started as executive secretary of the Illinois Agricultural Association in February of that year. The experiment proved that there were no runt pigs and litters kept on fresh ground all of their lives. And I mean literally all of their lives because there was no worm infestation. Well, so much for that picture, Phil.

By the way, here's a picture of Lyle Johnstone looking over some of his shorthorn steers. He had his farm under a four-year rotation with 140 acres in pasture each year. He raised a bunch of shorthorn cows and raised steers for market. That was a little unusual in as much as most of the cattle feeders there bought Western feeders.

PL: Well, McLean County, and for that matter, all of that area in Illinois is great cattle and hog country because it's great corn country. Isn't that right, Dave?

DT: Well, that's right, Phil. And during the time that I was farm advisor, the Better Farming Association did a number of things with corn. But let's forget that just for a moment. I want to set the stage for one of the most important corn demonstrations held while I was there in Bloomington. The Better Farming Association had offices with the Bloomington Chamber of Commerce. Hebe Hudson, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, and his members were tremendously helpful in starting the work and in carrying it on. And I want to say right here, Phil, that my experience is like that of many other county agents and farm advisors. The value of their work is multiplied many times by the services of their good intelligent secretaries. Well, Bill Bright was my first secretary. He ran one of those stenotypes, Phil. That's the first one I'd ever seen of that. Later on, he got a better job somewhere else and we employed Ethel Shade. I know, I think every farmer in McLean County and every businessman in Bloomington knows Ms. Shade, for she was secretary of the farm advisor for many years and later was secretary of the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, probably still is.

Well, Phil, in the Chamber of Commerce lounge, we held a meeting of the Better Farming Association every Saturday afternoon. These meetings, educational meetings, like all the other work of the association, were fully reported by A.J. Bill, farm editor of the *Daily Pantograph* then. He was the father of Eddie Bill of WMBD and of Frank Bill, who is now the farm editor of the *Pantograph*. There were a couple of other Bill boys too. One year, perhaps in February 1916, I invited every farmer when he came to the meeting, which was to be on the subject of seed corn, to bring with him two of his best ears of seed corn. Well, probably about 65 or 70 brought samples. Jimmy Holbert, you know Phil, Dr. James R. Holbert, one of the most noted plant breeders who did so much to establish hybrid seed corn on a commercial seed basis at Funk Brothers Seed Company.

PL: Sure, everyone knows about Holbert's work, Dave.

DT: Well, this afternoon, Jimmy was sitting at the back end of the room, and when I had finished the labeling of the ears of corn, he came to me and proposed that he make germination tests and studies of the ears of corn and work with me in planting them in ear-to-row tests.

He tested every year. and made extended notes about the character of the sprout, the freedom from disease, or type of disease which appeared. Jimmy was especially concerned at that time about southern root rot and diplodia. Then we planted this seed on a field at Lyle Johnson's farm. One row to each ear and two ears of each grower in rows side by side. The planting was done by hand.

PL: Well, that was quite a job of planting, Dave. What else did you do?

DT: Well, all summer long, Jimmy spent days out in that cornfield making observations of the character of growth, the attacks of smut, root rot, strength of stalk, character of leaf. He had a whole schedule of things, which he noted.

PL: And I presume, Dave, this picture is of the day the harvesting was done, is that right?

DT: Yes, it is, Phil. That is some day, too. There are two pictures, in fact. One of the- with three persons. On the flat top rack there, this one with three persons in it, weighing the crate of corn, that's Jimmy Holbert. Recording the weight is [De Los?] Funk, and I'm coming up with another crate to be weighed. How do you like that turtleneck sweater I got?

PL: It tells you, that tells me back in those days.

DT: The other picture shows growers in action. We had every man husk out his own rows and pile the corn together at the end of each row. It was all weighed up then and later moisture tests were made and comparisons were done on a scientific way by Jimmy Holbert.

PL: Well, I imagine that was quite an object lesson, Dave. Was there much difference apparent?

DT: Well, there was, and some of the growers were happy if their stuff looked pretty good. Others were quite downcast over the poor showing their corn made in comparison with that with their neighbors.

PL: Was there anything outstanding?

DT: Yes, there was. The deep kernelled, starchy, large cob show type of corn lost out badly to the shorter kernelled, smaller cob, smaller eared, harder corn with less indentation. In other words, the utility type corn won out over the show type. You remember, Phil, this was in the days before hybrid corn is a commercial proposition.

PL: Did this have any effect on corn growing in McLean County, Dave?

DT: Well, about the same time, M.L. Moser, the farm advisor in Woodford County, which lies just to the north, was finding much the same thing in his corn demonstrations. And the accumulation of events like this changed the type of corn from what was known as the show type to the utility type. I was interested in this. It was shortly after this demonstration that Eugene Funk, noted corn breeder at Shirley, Illinois, invited me and a number of other Illinois corn growers to his home. There he showed us samples of his best producing corn over a period of 14 previous years. And Phil, believe it or not, every sample was a utility type year.

PL: How about that? On those early days, the farm advisor's or the county agent's work was primarily demonstration work, wasn't it?

DT: Yes, it was. You must realize, Phil, that corn and oats were the two grain crops and hogs and cattle were the livestock crops produced in McLean County farms. Ralph Allen can tell you that outside of a few little experiment plots at the University of Illinois and perhaps a small field on the Funk Brothers Seed Company farm, there were absolutely no soybeans grown as a field crop in central Illinois or in Illinois. Well, I'll take that back. As part of his rotation system, Lyle Johnstone was growing 20 acres each year for hay and seed. They were a black beam known as the ebony. We got quite a number of demonstration fields started. Dave Schertz up in Normal Township near Hudson had 12 to 15 acres. And by the way, Phil, Mrs. Thompson inoculated the seed for this field using the dirt and glue method. I don't know if you know anything about that or not.

PL: Yes, I heard my dad talk about that.

DT: Billy Sayers put out 20 acres along the road on the farm he rented just east of Bloomington. Here and there, others started. We made a trip each summer, too, to the University of Illinois, primarily to visit the Morrow Plots. These are the oldest experimental soil plots in the United States. I have here a number of pictures of them, which I will send to Ralph Allen. Primarily, they demonstrated the truth of Dr. Cyril G. Hopkins' Illinois System of Permanent Soil Fertility, which was based on the use of limestone, legumes, and raw rock phosphate in rotation.

You know, Phil, about all the equipment a farm advisor had in those days was a Ford car, a soil auger, and a bottle of blue litmus paper. Also a wire hoop about two feet across for throwing out in the oat field and surrounding oat plants for checking on the percentage of oat plants infested with smut. It wasn't really quite that simple, of course, but county agents' work today is much more complicated and complex than it was 35 years ago.

PL: Yes, with all the government work tied to it.

DT: Yes.

PL: Now, what else was particularly interesting in connection with corn, Dave?

DT: Well, it was in 1917 when we were in the World War I. I was food administrator for McLean County for the Illinois State Council for Defense. Ralph Allen will remember, Phil, that was a soft corn year in the Corn Belt. Became a matter of national importance at seed corn for planting the next year's crop be secured. The seed corn administration was organized with headquarters in Chicago with Bill Eckhart, DeKalb County Farm Advisor, as administrator. McLean County offered my services to this work as did a number of other counties with their farm advisors. That's a long story in itself, but we got seed corn which would grow and the next year's crop was assured. But as an outgrowth of it, however, I made one of the most satisfying experiences. I had one of the most satisfying experiences of my life.

Barney Heide, manager of the International Livestock Exposition for many years and one of the greatest friends a man ever had, invited me to plan and stage a corn show at the International in celebration of this seed corn supply victory and in celebration of the part that corn had played in winning the war. A number of the farm advisors, particularly M.L. Moser of Woodford County, Ed Heaton of DuPage County and others rallied to help me. We put on the first corn show ever held at the International. It was not a 10-year show, but an exhibit of hundreds of bushels of seed corn, which is supplied free of charge and without premium awards by corn growers in Illinois. Well, the following year, this became the International Hay and Grain Exposition and has been held ever since. I like best what Frank I. Mann, a grand old devotee of better farming in Illinois, said in his story about it in *Prairie Farmer*. Frank said, "This was no corn show in the accepted sense of the word. It was the realization of conception of a man with the soul of an artist. Its details telling the story of corn, its value to the state of Illinois, telling it in the glowing colors of the red, white, and yellow corn."

PL: Well, Dave, that certainly must have made you pretty happy.

DT: It did indeed. We had a lot of big shows in McLean County, horse shows, cattle shows, hog shows, everything. We were all show-minded down there. But perhaps the ones which would seem the strangest today were the two big tractor demonstrations which we held on succeeding years. I might have to tell you, Phil, about some of the early problems of using tractors on farms in the heavy prairie soils of Illinois, but Ralph Allen knows about them because he lived through that time and for all I know, he may have driven a tractor into a fence corner someday in disgust, just let it stand there until the junk mine came and took it away. Some of them were pretty poor machines, but by trying and testing, they pointed the way to what has become a standard model of tractor. Something like automobiles, they all look alike now, or very nearly alike. But in those days, boy, they were certainly different. We had about 40 different makes in these plowing contests. I think there's eight or 10 probably now. Everything from the two-wheel Moline Universal, which was driven by lines like a team of horses, and which had the machinery attached, up to the big heart par, the Avery and the Caterpillar, designed to pull 12 bottom plows.

I wish I had time to tell you a few good stories about the time that Mr. Bartholomew, then president of Avery, was insulted by the representative Caterpillar when they offered to pull his great big tractor out of a mud hole. Or about the time the Wallace Cub, which was the fastest tractor on wheels in those days, made a spectacular race across the field and threw a number of furrows around a fire which had been started on the far side of Charlie Brokaw's 80 acres. I always suspected, you know, Phil, that somebody in that outfit started that fire in the old stubble, but I never could prove it. Well, that was just the time we were ready to drop the flag and start the flying contest or about the field in which there was mammoth clover on the far side, and most of the plow operators were not aware of it. Well, when these plows hit that three-foot front of mammoth clover, everything clogged up. But that isn't part of the history. That's just some of the fun we had as we went along.

If I had time, Phil, I'd like to tell our friend Ralph Allen, who was engaged in this interesting hobby of making a vocal history of agricultural Illinois, how HCM Case, then starting out in farm management work at the University of Illinois, came to McLean County with some newly designed farm account books. And how on several cold January days, we drove the prairies in horse and buggy, going from farm to farm and inducing farmers to start keeping farm accounts. Chase took the pains to remind me sometime back, Phil, that we put out on that trip about 200 books of which six were finally completed so that there was something like a record which he could analyze at the close of the year. It's a lot different these days. Or I might tell you about the day we dedicated the great boulder in Funk's Grove on the site of the original cabin of Isaac Funk, who had settled there with his wife back in 1828, founding there the Funk family, laying the foundation for a great livestock and corn growing business in central Illinois. This is getting pretty long and I imagine our space is pretty well run out by now.

PL: Yes, Dave, well just one more thing. I believe McLean County has the largest membership of any county farm bureau in the United States now. Is that right?

DT: Well, that was, may be so today, Phil. I know it was quite recently.

However, in those days we had about 311 and 11 members in the McLean County Better Farming Association, which today is the McLean County Farm Bureau.

PL: Well, it was about this time, I believe, that the state association was organized.

DT: That's right, Phil. Through the work which farm advisors and county agents had to do together in the food producing program in World War I, farmers became acquainted with other farmers in all parts of the state. They found that their county organizations did things similar to those of other counties. Many questions were common to all of them. The Illinois Agricultural Association was formed with Herman Danforth of Tazewell County as its first president. If I remember right, Earl Robbins was farm advisor there and so he was made the secretary. Later, John Kirkton, president of the Woodford County Association was president during the war years. Howard Leonard of Woodford County, Lyle Johnstone of McLean County, Cliff Gregory of DuPage County and numerous other county leaders became inspired with the idea of having an aggressive, well-organized, and soundly financed state organization which could do for the state what a good county organization was doing in its respective county.

PL: Well, what did they do about it, Dave?

DT: After a good deal of preliminary talking and visiting and making plans, the annual meeting of 1919 was called to be held in Peoria, and county delegates were invited to attend from all organized counties. That was an historical meeting, Phil, which will be discussed, I presume, frequently in this vocal history of agricultural Illinois. It was my privilege to make what was called on that day the keynote talk or speech, outlining things which the organization of our dreams could do. Well, when the meeting was over with, it lasted two or three days, two things had been accomplished. A membership in the county and in the state organization was inseparable. The county dues were placed at \$10 per member or less at the discretion of the county, but the state dues were an additional \$5 per member. 30 delegates had made their personal pledge of \$100 a year for three years of called upon in case funds should not be raised by membership dues.

Harvey Sconce of Seidel was elected president and Howard Leonard of Eureka, treasurer. The board of directors was elected one from each of the 17 downstate legislative districts in Illinois and I was hired as executive secretary. Following this meeting, there was to be a meeting of county farm advisors at the University of Illinois. And there, Phil, one of the finest things that ever happened in my life occurred during that meeting. In a closed session, every farm advisor in the room rose to his feet and pledged himself and his efforts in support of the work which I was undertaking, and he pledged it to me personally. And Ralph Allen knows that during the three years that I served as executive secretary of the Illinois Agricultural Association, those men lived up to every part of their pledge and inspired the farm people in their counties to devotion toward the development of the Illinois Agricultural Association.

PL: Boy, Dave, that must have given you a pretty good warm feeling around your heart.

DT: Well, it did. And more than that, Phil, it gave me a lot of fire with which to undertake building the kind of an organization we'd been talking about during the meeting at Peoria and other places. Sometime after that, the McLean County Better Farming Association had a big dinner that I'll never forget, giving me a beautiful watch with suitable engraving, which I still have. And they bid me Godspeed in the work as secretary of the IAA.

Lyle Johnstone, who was one of the directors as long as I was secretary, and I always found his counsel honest and his judgment good. Howard Leonard succeeded Harvey Sconce in the second year as president. And I think that Howard's contribution to agriculture in Illinois is second to that of no man who ever served agriculturally in that state. I had opportunity to know it too, better than most people.

PL: Was this an organization of extension workers or an organization of farmers, Dave?

DT: Well, the directors were all active farmers, that was one of the requirements. We employed J.C. Saylor as head of the membership committee and he was a farmer. He was a stem winder too. He worked day and night. I went into county after county and got things organized for

membership drives with the result that at the end of the second year, there's a membership of 110,000 farmers each paying \$5 a year dues. That put us in position with an annual income better than \$500,000 with which to do business. We organized a number of departments. Livestock with Herbert Mumford, later dean of the College of Agriculture at Illinois as director. Grain with Bill Eckhart, director. Limestone and phosphate, J.C. Bent, director. Chris Larson, later dean of the South Dakota College of Agriculture, was director of the Dairy Department. We had others in fruits, vegetables, seeds, finances, and poultry. And publicity was in charge of Eddie Bill, who had been secretary of McLean County Better Farming Association when I was employed there. As beginners would, we undertook a lot of things.

You know, Phil, a lot of things are taken for granted today, either did not exist or were forbidden by law at that time. For example, the Chicago milk producers directors were being tried in federal court for conspiracy to break the antitrust laws because they were trying to sell their milk together. Farmers weren't permitted to sell their products collectively. One of the first things we did as an association was to write a short, permissive, cooperative law for Illinois. Frank O. Loudon was governor of Illinois then when this law was passed and it came to his desk for signature. I called at his office to see if he intended to sign it. Well, he strode up and down the room a few times. He was a great friend of farming and a great farmer himself. Then he sat on the corner of his desk and said, "Dave, I'm going to sign this bill, but I've got to tell the public why it is good public policy for farmers to be permitted to do business cooperatively. I'll sign the bill Monday if you stay over the weekend in Springfield, write a statement which I can give to the public and to the press supporting my signature." Well, I did that and he signed the bill after he had read the statement on Monday. That was followed by cooperative laws in some other Corn Belt states and finally Senator Capper sponsored in Congress a cooperative law which made this kind of business organization permissible on a national basis.

PL: How about that? Now was the American Farm Bureau Federation active at that time, Dave?

DT: That was in 1922 and the AFBF was well underway. That is when the national law was organized or was passed. I think in concluding our talk, Bill, and this record for Ralph Allen, I

might barely mention the part that the IAA played in organizing the American Farm Bureau Federation on a sound financial basis at a meeting in Chicago. The controversy there was whether a farmer should have a personal individual membership in the AFBF or whether his membership should be through the state being a member in the AFBF and part of his and whether or not part of his dues should go to the National Association. There was a lot of difference of opinion. It was not as big a battle as we had at the IAA at Peoria, but it did have its moments.

When that meeting closed, Illinois and some other Corn Belt states had gained their points that the individual farmer should be a personal member in the national organization just as they held personal membership in the state organization and that fifty cents of the dues which went to the state organization should be personal, be his personal membership in the national organization. That may sound like a small matter now, but it was basic at that time in my opinion still is. But the story of the AFDF is something, Phil, in which I had but little part beyond helping to get it organized and raising a lot of pertinent and sometimes impertinent questions at its early meetings.

PL: Well, it seems to me, Dave, that your part of an Illinois agricultural history went beyond the days of your work with the McLean Better Farming Association and the IAA. After all, you were for a long time with *Prairie Farmer* and WLS, weren't you?

DT: Yes, I was. I was on the editorial staff of *Prairie Farmer* 19 years working in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. I got to know that area like the palm of my hand and thousands of individual farmers in all those states. But it's utterly impossible, Phil, to try to condense that period into sort of tail-end comments here on what we've already said. I was entirely happy all the time. *Prairie Farmer's* a farm paper and WLS as a radio station were great tools with which to work for agriculture. But I can't go into that now. And I feel that you, Ralph Allen, have not expected me to do so because in your message to me, you stressed early Farm Bureau and the farm advances, and it has given me a great deal of nostalgic joy to talk with Phil Lampe about those times.

I'm getting along to the late afternoon of life and still cannot find often a reason to sit down and review the days that are past. I do thank you, Ralph Allen, for giving me a very delightful afternoon in getting these memories in shape and another very happy half hour while Phil Lampe has listened patiently while I have talked on and on. I wish you, Ralph, much joy in your hobby. I hope that sometime when I, like you, have retired and have time on my hands. I may spend the day listening to the parts of history which others have contributed. And to you, Phil Lampe, I want to give my thanks, and I know that Ralph would like to have me give thanks for him too, for the facilities of your radio station, WJZ New York, and for your personal contribution to this interview.

PL: Thanks very much, Dave Thompson. Now we return you back to Ralph Allen.