

**University of Illinois Student Life, 1928 - 38:  
Oral History Project  
Sidney Dilks - '28  
Paxton, Illinois  
October 16, 2000**

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

**Ellen Swain: This is an oral history interview for the University of Illinois archives. The interviewer is Ellen Swain, the narrator is Sidney Dilks, a U of I Alumnus from the class of 1928. We're at Mr. Dilks residence, the Heartland Health Care Center in Paxton Illinois and the date is October 16, 2000.**

**Okay. Mr. Dilks could you state your full name and birth date for the record?**

Sidney Dilks: Sidney Barr, B-A-R-R, Dilks, D-I-L-K-S and born June 28<sup>th</sup> 1906 at Geneva, Illinois.

**ES: Geneva, Illinois. And where did you grow up? Where did you spend your earlier--.**

SD: Most of my childhood was spent in Roberts, Illinois. Prior to that time I had lived in Geneva and Luddington, Michigan. But my folks came down to Roberts and when I was 7 years old.

**ES: What did they do? What did your folks--**

SD: They ran a hotel there, in Roberts, Illinois.

**ES: I see, I see. So the majority of your childhood was spent in and around that area in Roberts.**

SD: Yes. My entire, well up until 1933, yes.

**ES: Did you have brothers and sisters?**

SD: Yes I did. I had 2 brothers and 2 sisters. They're all deceased except me.

**ES: Where did you go to high school?**

SD: At Roberts, Illinois.

**ES: Were you, Did you live in town there?**

SD: Yes, we lived right in town. My folks ran a hotel there.

**ES: So you lived in the hotel?**

SD: Yes.

**ES: What were your earliest memories of the University of Illinois? Before you enrolled do you remember anything about it, or wanting to go there, or—**

SD: Well my mother primarily was the one who got me interested in it, going down there. I didn't have too much, we didn't have too much money, so I went down prior to enrolling down there and went to several fraternities, tried to get a job working in the kitchen or waiting on tables for my meals. The first one I went to was the Delta Phi fraternity and I met the cook who was there and her husband who was the caretaker for the house, Mr. and Mrs. Joe, what was their last name? Well, I don't remember their last name. Vipoler was their last name. And they told me sure I could work there and I worked there for 4 years.

**ES: So you had your job lined up before you enrolled?**

SD: Had it all lined up, that's right.

**ES: Did you consider any other schools? Or was your mother partial to—**

SD: No I didn't. No I didn't consider any other schools at that time, no.

**ES: Was it because it was close by?**

SD: Well it was close by and I hadn't heard of many other ones around, at that time there weren't much. I don't remember the student enrollment, but I think it was around 8 or 9,000, I'm just estimating that now, down there.

**ES: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Had any other family members attended the University?**

SD: No. No they have not.

**ES: They didn't. Tell me about your first day. What do you remember, what were your first impressions of school when you moved down here?**

SD: Well I had to get a room to stay of course, and I got a room out on Coler Avenue, quite a ways from the campus. I found out later that was a mistake, being out there so far, because it's a long walk to get where I always had classes. But it was very impressive, I mean I enjoyed it, but it was a long walk from out there when I had to go to classes.

**ES: Now you say you worked in, what was the fraternities name?**

SD: Delta Phi.

**ES: Delta Phi.**

SD: Still down there, it's on forth street.

**ES: Forth street. And what did you do?**

SD: Pardon?

**ES: What did you do?**

SD: I washed dishes and also waited on tables.

**ES: Okay. What, I understand you belonged to another fraternity? Called Gamma Eta Gamma?**

SD: Yes that was a law school fraternity later on when I went to St. Louis University.

**ES: Oh I see, I see. So did you belong to a fraternity at the University?**

SD: No.

**ES: You didn't. That was there, Well I have a picture of you from the 1930 *Illio* (see attached) in the Gamma Eta Gamma-**

SD: Fraternity house?

**ES: On their page, right. A fraternity house on 504 East John Street?**

SD: Yes that's right.

**ES: Okay. You're sitting on the front row and several of you are holding canes.**

SD: Well that we,If you got into law school, why, they always had to, they gave you a cane to use. To donate that you was going to be a lawyer.

**ES: What was the significance of that?**

SD: I have no idea but that's what they did, they always had them.

**ES: What was fraternity life like at the U of I during the 1920's. Since you didn't belong to a fraternity did you feel, did the independents feel...did they hang out together and fraternity people...**

SD: Yes kind it was kind of that way. We were next to what they called the Granada Club. Do you know where that is?

**ES: No.**

SD: That was right next door to the Delta Phi fraternity there and they, that was kind of an independent group of people. But life there was about the same as it was in a fraternity house.

**ES: Did you belong to that group?**

SD: No.

**ES: No.**

SD: No.

**ES: What did you do for fun?**

SD: Well I went to the first football game they had down there after the stadium was built.

**ES: Did you?**

SD: Yes I did. And that was when Red Grange was there. I'll never forget it rained so much before and when they opened the stadium they had not cleared away all the dirt and there no grass around there. It rained and people was getting stuck in the mud in their shoes and leaving their overshoes there at that time. And I can remember the first, just hardly got set down in there when Red Grange made his first touchdown.

**ES: I see.**

SD: Of course, they were supposed to get beat, but they didn't. University of Michigan was the contender and they was supposed to have a good team but Illinois really beat them. He made four touchdowns in a row and then I think they took him out for a while.

**ES: Was there a large crowd?**

SD: Oh there was a large crowd there because that was just the opening of the stadium at that time, first game played there.

**ES: So did you continue to go to football games?**

SD: Oh yes, yes I did.

[Interruption]

**ES: Let's see.**

SD: Then in order to make ends meet, I always had to mail, I mailed my laundry home and that's what you done in those days. I sent it back to Roberts and then they'd mail it back to me.

**ES: Oh yeah?**

SD: Yep.

**ES: Did you send some of the money that you made at the fraternity house back home or was that for your living expenses.**

SD: Oh I didn't make any money there, I just got my meals.

**ES: You got your room and board.**

SD: No. No room, just my meals.

**ES: Just your meals. So where did you live.**

SD: I lived out and Coler Avenue, Mr. and Mrs. Erikson's the first year I was there. Later on I moved in closer because that was too far to walk from out there.

**ES: Where were your favorite hangouts? Where did you go to study, or where did you go—**

SD: I used to go to the library to study. Of course we had our rooms in our home where we was living and could study there. At that time Prehn's on Green was a place where a lot of students would hang out there. Of course I didn't have much money so I wasn't doing much hanging out.

**ES: Did you go to movies?**

SD: Yeah some. They used to have, I went to a dance or two, I'm trying to think of the name of the place, it was Roof...let's see...Robeson's Roof Gardens. That's what it was.

**ES: What was that like?**

SD: Pardon?

**ES: What was that like?**

SD: Oh, very nice, it was open. You'd go down there and go up there and dance and you'd meet a girl, you know, sometimes. I didn't date much. I didn't have any money to do it with, to be honest.

**ES: Uh-huh. What classes did you take, what was your major?**

SD: It was a general Liberal Arts course, that's what I was taking.

**ES: Okay. Did you have any favorite professors.**

SD: Not that I can recall?

**ES: Where did most of your classes meet? Where you on the Quad?**

SD: Yes, quite a bit there. And of course, I don't know if they still have to do that or not, but I had to take ROTC and they had that over at Huff Gym, I mean out at the Armory. I can remember that I also took swimming lessons down there, and then when I left there I had to get out to the Armory, and it sure hustled me to get out on time out there because they're such a far distance apart.

**ES: Right.**

SD: Then I took that ROTC course and they had those ( ) and when you get out of the water you'd have to rap all those, you know, and it took you quite a while. I sometimes arrived, fairly, just about on time all the time, but not always, out at the Armory.

**ES: How often did you meet? What time commitment was ROTC?**

SD: Well I don't remember, it was regular classes. You had to take it for two years.

**ES: So it was like a class?**

SD: Yeah, oh yes. It was a required classes, in those days. I don't know if it is now or not, is it?

**ES: No.**

SD: At that time you had to take 2 years of ROTC.

**ES: Now what did they teach you? What did you do?**

SD: Well that was all military training, that's what that was.

**ES: Did they have you on horses? Is that something different? The cavalry, was that something completely different?**

SD: Oh yes.

**ES: Okay. ( ) ROTC.**

SD: Foot soldiers I guess.

**ES: Do you remember Thomas Arkle Clark? The Dean of Men.**

SD: Yes he was Dean of Men when I was there. Yes.

**ES: Did you ever meet him? Did he ever have you in his office?**

SD: No. I don't think he had me in his office, ( ) never did. I met him, but not necessarily in his office.

[Interruption]

**ES: . What were your impressions of him.**

SD: Well I think he was a pretty nice fellow. That was my idea of him anyhow. And Paul Prehn's he was the wrestling coach down there, I met him. Then he had place down on Green Street there, Green and Sixth, where he had a little hang out for people there, you know. (Pause) Then after that he retired as coach and Heck (Harold) Kenney from Lowdale Illinois became the head wrestling coach at that time.

**ES: Did you play sports at all? Intramural sports?**

SD: No I did not, I didn't.

**ES: What were the rules like at school? Did you have strict rules? I know there was Pete the Policeman...**

SD: A what?

**ES: Was Pete the Policeman there when you were? Someone named Pete who was kind of the campus security.**

SD: I don't recall that. I don't know, it could have been.

**ES: How would you describe the physical surroundings of the U of I at that time, how did they differ from the way they are today?**

SD: Well of course there are so many more today than there were at that time, because they've built new buildings and things like that. I know out where the baseball park area was they've got a big building out in that area now. I don't remember the name of it now, but that wasn't there. They've added Assembly Hall, that wasn't there. We used to, all the stuff, like basketball stuff, was down at Huff Gym at that time.

**ES: I see.**

SD: They didn't have any women's, much of women's sports either at that time, like they do now.

**ES: There is something else that I understand happened, that freshmen wore caps. Is that right?**

SD: Not that I recall.

**ES: You didn't wear a beanie of any kind.**

SD: No. I didn't. I think some of the fraternities might have made them do that, I don't know.

**ES: How did people dress? What did they wear? What did you wear to class?**

SD: Well just regular casual clothes. You didn't have neckties or anything like that on all the time at that time.

**ES: Just jeans or what did the women wear?**

SD: (laughing)

**ES: Did they wear skirts to class?**

SD: Oh yes, most of them did. They don't know I don't think, do they?

**ES: No. (Laughter.) So, you graduated in 1928.**

SD: That's right.

**ES: Did you go through a commencement ceremony?**

SD: No I didn't go.

**ES: What did you do after your graduated?**

SD: Well I went back to Roberts, Illinois. Each summer I'd go back there and work and make enough pay, money to pay for tuition, which wasn't very large at that time, I don't remember what it was, but it wasn't too much tuition at that time. But I used to go back there and get a job during the summer and work.

**ES: What did you do after you graduated from school?**

SD: Later on I graduated out of St. Louis University, out of the law school down there.

**ES: How did that come about? Why did you go to St. Louis?**

SD: Well I just decided to finish up down there. And I did.



**ES: Did you start at Illinois?**

SD: Yes. I graduated there and took the bar exam in Missouri first and come up and took the bar examination in Illinois and passed that on. That was in 1931. Couldn't find a job any place at that time. So I was out buying chickens and eggs and cream, at that time, to make a living. Then across the street from where I was living in Roberts was the Chairman of the Ford County Democratic Center Committee, and he come to me one day and they were looking for candidates to run on the ticket. My folks were Republicans at the time and they said, asked me if I wanted to run for the States Attorney on the Democratic ticket and they said you probably couldn't get elected because it's about 4 to 1, Ford county was at that time. But they said if you ever get enough money you can open an office, why these people know who you are. So I said, "yeah, I'll run." So all the time I was out buying chickens and eggs and cream out in the country I was campaigning and I got elected. That's how I got an office opened up because I had gone to all the law offices around in the county and close by and they said, "We can't afford to pay you anything, but if you want to come in a work and get a little bit of experience we'll let you do that." So that's how I got in, that's how I got an office opened up.

**ES: What year was that?**

SD: 1932.

**ES: In Paxton.**

SD: In Paxton. That's where I opened my office. And the salary at that time was \$150 a month, for the States Attorney. You had to pay, you had to get your office, and the county didn't pay for it then, like they do now. So I went out and rented an office for \$20 a month. Same way for hiring help. For my secretary, I had to pay for that out of my \$150, so I didn't have much left. So I just run for 4 years and then I started into law practice and I was in it for 58 years. I finally lost my eye sight and then I had to retire.

**ES: And what year was that?**

SD: 1990.

**ES: 1990.**

SD: Of course in the meantime, for two and a half years I was in the military service. In 1942, I saw the South Pacific, served out there, military signal corp. Come back and opened my office when the War was over.

**ES: And you married here in town?**

SD: Yeah, I was married in Noah. I got married in 1933. My wife passed away February 15<sup>th</sup> of 1997. I remember, she had to come out here to this nursing home, she had a heart condition, she

came out here on October 21, so I came out here with her because I couldn't stay at home, I couldn't see anything, so I just come out with her and I've been here ever since.

**ES: What was her name?**

SD: Pardon?

**ES: What was her name?**

SD: Ruby Dilks.

**ES: And she was from Paxton?**

SD: Yes. Ruby Ramshaw was her name before she was married to me.

**ES: Did she attend the University?**

SD: No. She did not.

**ES: How did you meet her?**

SD: I met her in a dance one night up in Piper City Illinois. Got to dancing, and finally I got to going with her. She had been here in Paxton, she was a technician in a doctor's office here and he died and she didn't know what she was going to do for a job. Well I said, "If I get elected to States Attorney I'll let you work for me then." And that's what happened, and I married her.

**ES: And do you have children?**

SD: We have one, son. The fact is that he's, he went into military service in the Viet Nam War, and he was over there. He's living in Virginia right now, the end of Virginia, and he works for IBM. After he got back from Viet Nam why they were looking for people who had their military service in and knew something about computers and he was in the signal corp and he got used to using computers and he's been with IBM ever since then. Still is with them.

**ES: Did he attend the University of Illinois?**

SD: No, he went to Knox College in Galesburg.

**ES: How did your family feel when you graduated? Were you the first person to graduate in your family?**

SD: That's right. I was the only one in our family.

**ES: The only one? How did that?**

SD: Well, I don't know. We all got along pretty well, I had a brother who was going to go there but then he got killed in a construction accident out in Ohio, so he didn't go. My other brother, when he was up at Palatine Illinois and then he moved to Arkansas and lived down there ever since, but he passed away about a year ago. He was 96 years old. My sister passed away, she was 80 years old. I had another sister who died at 13. So I'm the only remaining member of our family. I mean of brother and sisters.

[Interruption]

**ES: I'm kind of jumping around here.**

SD: That's alright, that's alright.

**ES: When you went to college, growing up in Roberts, did you know anyone from other racial groups or other religions, in Roberts?**

SD: Well of course they had the Methodist Church and the Congregational Church and the Lutheran Church and Catholic Church, and that was the only religious groups that was there in Roberts, and I belonged to the Methodist Church, and have ever since. No I belonged to the Congregationalist Church, when I got married my wife was a member of the Methodist Church, so after I moved to Paxton why I went to the Methodists Church in Paxton, transferred my membership over there

**ES: What did, when you went to the U of I did you attend church there?**

SD: Some. Yes, I did.

**ES: Where did you go?**

SD: Over, oh, I'm trying to think of the name of the place, Wesley Foundation.

**ES: Oh, okay.**

SD: Pardon?

**ES: Wesley, sure. How big did you find the community there?**

SD: No I didn't go too much. I went several times but never joined them or anything.

**ES: When you went to the University did you meet different...did you have friends who were Black or did you know Jewish people?**

SD: Well of course I did meet a bunch of people who were of all different races, particular at this Granada Club. They had no sense of keeping people out, you know, if they wanted to live there they could, it was kind of like a fraternity, similar to that. I met all sorts of people. I had no

prejudice against any of them. We actually had one Negro fellow who used to take care of the house there where I was working. He was a great guy too, everybody liked him. But he didn't go to college, he just worked there.

**ES: What was it like for Black students. Did you have a sense of what...do you feel they were restricted?**

SD: I don't think anybody had any prejudice against them, no.

**ES: So you didn't experience that. How much aware were you of the outside world? What was going on nationally, when you were a student?**

SD: Well not as much as you do now, because at that time we didn't have Tv's and stuff, you know, that you get all the news on anymore. I didn't keep up on that too much.

**ES: Were you involved in political activities?**

SD: Yes, I'll tell you the first vote I cast was down at Illinois, down when I was a student there, and my folks had belonged to the Republican party, and that's the way I was brought up. But Al Smith was running for President at that time, he used to be Governor of New York, and he was Catholic and he was on the Democratic ticket and the other people there on the other side was telling about if he ever got in he'd have the Pope over here running the country. Well I thought if he could be that silly that I was just going to vote for him, and I did, and I voted for Al Smith that time, and it was the first vote I ever cast. It was just the remarks about it—

**ES: Were there debates on campus or were they talking about it?**

SD: No, not like they do now.

**ES: So you weren't involved in the student government activities.**

SD: No, no I was not. Actually I was, I didn't have any money to participate in much of anything when I was down there, so I was kind of confined to what I was able to do.

**ES: Now how did you come up with money to take care of board. You said you're meals were taken care of.**

SD: Well the rooms were only \$20 a month, I had a room, and I paid \$20 a month for it.

**ES: So your parents helped you with that?**

SD: Well I earned enough to pay for that during the summertime when I was at home. Yeah, I used to work at home, I'd paint in the summer time for a fellow and I also sold ice around, they had ice boxes in those days, instead of refrigerators like they have now. I used to deliver ice in the summer time too.

**ES: How much did that make for you?**

SD: Oh I don't know how much it made, just enough to get along on.

**ES: Just to get along on.**

SD: Yep. Saturday nights in those days when you was home was big because they had outdoor movies and they didn't charge anything for them over at our town. Every Saturday night, that's what they did.

**ES: In Roberts?**

SD: Yep. There's a fellow from Piper City that used to go around and he'd have movies that they used to show on different nights you know in different towns.

[Tape 1, Side 2]

**ES: Okay, we're ready for side two.**

SD: In that year that I was at that fraternity--

**ES: Gamma Eta Gamma?**

SD: Yes. There was some pretty good fellows there. Russ Errington was one of them that graduated there and he was one of the big wheels in the Republican party here in Illinois. And there's Paul Lynn in there too, and I can remember him, and when I had an education later on I would go up state and they had their offices in Chicago and anything up in there why I'd send it up to them. They were pretty good lawyers.

[Interruption]

**ES: So you were saying that you started law school at Illinois and you transferred to Washington University.**

SD: Yes that's right. No, St. Louis University.

**ES: St. Louis University, I'm sorry. When did you graduated from St. Louis?**

SD: 1931.

**ES: 1931. Okay. So you, did you live a year in the Gamma Eta Gamma fraternity house?**

SD: Yes, yes.

**ES: Okay. What–**

SD: But I still worked at my job as a dish washer and so forth at the other fraternity.

**ES: At the other fraternity.**

SD: The other fraternity. That's right. Yeah.

**ES: So you didn't get your meals here.**

SD: In those days...Huh?

**ES: You didn't take your meals there.**

SD: Oh no no no no no, never did. All the time I was down there I worked at the same place, the Delta Phi fraternity, still down there.

[Interruption]

SD: The thing I liked working about that, working there, the cook always saw that you got the best food there was there.

**ES: Is that right?**

SD: (Laughter) She was great, Mrs. Vipond. They were from Streator Illinois. Joe was a maintenance man, her husband Joe. They were there all the time I was down there.

**ES: So you just washed dished, you didn't serve the boys?**

SD: Sometimes.

**ES: Did you?**

SD: If one of them wasn't able to come then you'd take one out of the kitchen and they'd wait on tables.

**ES: I see.**

SD: Yep.

**ES: So in this, in the Gamma Eta Gamma, the year that you lived there–**

SD: Ever what?

**ES: When you lived the first year at Gamma Eta Gamma...**

SD: Yeah, we slept outside.

**ES: You slept outside?**

SD: Yeah, they had, well they didn't have any windows on, they just had the screens over, and sometimes you'd wake up in the wintertime and have a little snow on the top of you.

**ES: Oh no.**

SD: Yeah, that's right.

**ES: How many people lived in that house? Did you share a room or when you slept with the windows open.**

SD: Oh yeah, with the windows opened. We always slept with the windows open. Well I can't tell you exactly how many was there. Probably 25. Small group.

**ES: And were they all graduate students then? This was a law fraternity?**

SD: That's a law fraternity. No they were still going to school there. Then the Army got a couple of them after they were there and took them in.

**ES: Well I guess I'd like to conclude or ask you how you think the U of I has influenced your later life or you feelings.**

SD: Well, of course in those days, I'm not sure how many people were there at that time, there were about eight or 9,000 in the student population, or course now it's grown so large...I don't know...it's a great university, there's no question about that. I think that places like that, oh what is it, they've got the biggest....oh what am I trying to say, they've developed things down there a great deal helps mankind I think too. It has a great Engineering school down there, I think, that's my opinion. Of course it's grown so big I don't know how people get around on campus if they've got their classes spread out any.

**ES: Well thank you.**

SD: You're welcome, you're welcome.

[Tape cuts off.]

[Tape starts again.]

**ES: Ok.**

SD: Well any how when I got out of school I passed the barr exam both in Missouri and Illinois. And when I come back here I went to all the law offices in the area trying to get a job. They said, "No we can't afford to hire anybody or pay anybody but if you want to work for nothing, you can come in and get a little experience." Well instead of doing that I went out and I bought a little truck for about \$25 and I went out and bought chickens and eggs and cream in the country. And when 1932 rolled around, well why, the chairman of the Ford County Democratic Center Committee was living, well was working right across the street from where my folks lived in the hotel there where I lived. Well he come over to me one day and he says to me, "We're looking for a candidate to run for States Attorney on the Democratic ticket." He said, "Would you be interested." I said, "Oh, I don't know." Well, he says, "I understand why you're not working at any place in an office because there are none available." He said, "If you did you probably wouldn't get elected anyhow, because it's about 4-1 Republican here, you know this county." But he said, "If you ever got an office opened up at least people would know who you are anyhow, advertising." I decided I'd run, so I said, "Sure I'll run." All the time then, after that, I was out campaigning while I was buying chicken and eggs in the country, and I got elected in 1932 then. So that's how I got my starts, a big salary of \$150 a month, that's what it was at that time. Then I, after 4 years, I didn't run anymore. I was making enough money at that time to get along and got married in 1933 and moved to Paxton after that and been here ever since. I lost my eyesight in 1990 and had to stop practicing law then. Except for one period of time when I was in military service, I was in the Army Signal Corp during the War for two and a half years and they send me out to the South Pacific out to Guadalcanal, and New Caledonia, and Caugulene, down in that area. That's about it. I got out then in September in 1945 and I was prior to that time, I had been up to Officer Candidate School up at the University of Michigan.

[Interruption]

SD: There were 600 of use up there by the time the War was over. We had just a week to go to graduate and we had out uniforms all made up and everything. The War was over and there's 200 of us who went in and resigned from the school that day. I know that they wouldn't be sending me back to my company, they were sitting down in the Philippines where I left them. So I was unattached and I was out in five days after that.

**ES: Then you came back here and practiced law?**

SD: Then I came back here and practiced law ever since up until 1990 when I lost my eyesight and had to quit, and that's about it.

**ES: Do you have any memorable court cases?**

SD: Yes, I had a murder case that I tried in 1933. Fellow was killed over at Gibson City, at a place they call Lover's Lane over there. It was kind of a land running along side of a rail road track out there and no houses out there, along that strip. This lady that was in with this man that got killed was, she had been married to a fellow down in Oklahoma. He was an oil-well driller down there and he was suspicious of her so he came up here. Her folks lived in ( ) at that time so he come up here, one night drove up, and he followed them, this couple, out to this lane.



They were parked out there and he sneaked up on them with a shot gun and killed him, killed the man. He took his wife back to town then and let her out. He went on back down to Oklahoma then. We finally tracked him down, tried him and he died in the penitentiary. That's about it. It's the only real murder case I ever had when I practiced law.

[End of interview]