

GILBERT C. FITE

Interviewed by Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr.
 Edited by Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr.

My association with Gilbert C. Fite began when I first walked into his office in Gittinger Hall at the University of Oklahoma, in September, 1959. I was a beginning Teaching Assistant, newly arrived from the University of South Dakota where I had completed my M.A. degree the previous summer. Prior to that first meeting, I had no idea that Gil and I had anything in common, but I soon learned that not only did we both have two degrees from South Dakota, we both wrote our M.A. theses under the direction of Herbert S. Schell, he in 1942, and I in 1959. I learned all this in a very short period of time because Gil was not one for long

conversations with graduate students in those days. Still, there was something about him that put me at ease and instilled confidence. I knew that I wanted him to be my mentor. He took me on as his student and under his direction I completed the requirements for the Ph.D. in near record time. Beginning in 1959, I graduated in May, 1962. I felt like I owed Gil an enormous debt of gratitude for guiding me through the mine fields of graduate school then and I feel the same way today. We have always been friends.

Gilbert C. Fite was born in Ohio on May 14, 1918, although his parents, Clyde and Mary, were South Dakota



Gil Fite (in middle) on farm near Wessington Springs, South Dakota in 1930.

farmers and school teachers. They happened to be in Ohio in the spring of 1918 to attend the funeral of Clyde's father. Gil grew up in rural South Dakota spending most of his youth on the farm of his mother's parents in Jerauld County. There he received his early education in a one-room schoolhouse after which he entered the Free Methodist Academy and the Junior College at Wessington Springs. He was inspired at Wessington Springs by a teacher named Clifford Roloff whose influence he remembers vividly to this very day.

After junior college Gil attempted to complete his education at Seattle Pacific College, but became seriously ill and had to return to South Dakota. The nurse who cared for him during his illness and recuperation in Mitchell, South Dakota, was June Goodwin. They became close friends and were married on July 24, 1941. In about a year they will celebrate their Golden Wedding Anniversary.

Unable to return to the West, Gil enrolled in the University of South Dakota, in 1939, as a history major. There he was directed and influenced by Herbert S. Schell and Bert James Lowenberg. It was Lowenberg who secured him an assistantship for Ph.D. work at the University of Missouri in 1942. He completed his degree there in 1945, and went directly to Oklahoma where he was to remain for twenty-six years. In 1971, he resigned to become President of Eastern Illinois University, and in 1976 he returned to the mainstream of academic life at the University of Georgia where he was named Richard B. Russell Professor of History. He retired in 1986, and now lives in Bella Vista, Arkansas.

While teaching at Oklahoma, Gilbert Fite trained thirty-three Ph.D.s, many of whom have gone on to

illustrious careers of their own as classroom teachers, research professors, department chairs, deans and college presidents. To a man, these people recall him as a kindly yet demanding taskmaster who prepared them well to meet the rigorous challenges of a career in higher education. Most also regard him as I do as a friend and have maintained close personal contact over the years. Many were present in Billings, Montana in October, 1986, when we presented him with a *Festschrift* entitled *Agricultural Legacies*. He was President of the Western History Association that year and had just retired at Georgia. It was a fitting time to honor him and we all felt a great sense of pride and pleasure in doing it.

Gilbert C. Fite is the author of eight books, co-author of seven, editor of three and contributing author to thirteen. Even in retirement he is actively writing and is presently putting the finishing touches on his biography of Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia, a work soon to be published by the University of North Carolina Press.

Among his many books, the most important, probably, are *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (University Press of Kentucky, 1984); *American Farmers: The New Minority* (Indiana University Press, 1981); and *The Farmers Frontier, 1865-1900* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966). Any student can obtain a solid grounding in the facts and essential interpretations of American agricultural history from the Civil War to the present by reading these three books.

In addition to his major publications, Gil is also the author of fifty-five articles and essays and an even larger number of book reviews. The interview which follows was conducted in the study of Gil's spacious and comfortable home in Bella Vista,



Gil Fite on "Sammy" (1930s).

you could teach in a rural school in South Dakota, with what they called a first grade certificate which required one year of college. So they both taught school to supplement their farming income. In fact, they taught school in Perkins County when we were on the homestead and my mother and brother and I lived in one of the schoolhouses. My father rode horseback to the school where he taught several miles away. They believed deeply in education. While they did not have a lot of formal education, they were both very literate. They liked literature, they read a good deal and it was just assumed that their children would go to college and go further educationally than they had gone. They were very encouraging and made considerable sacrifices so that my brother, Frank, and I could go to college. So I had strong parental support for anything I wanted to do.

I had assumed very early in life that I would probably not be a farmer, mainly because my grandfather and my parents went broke on the farm. My parents lost the homestead through unpaid taxes, and my grandfather lost

all of his land in the 1920s long before the Great Depression. On top of that, during my early years, I had a lot of ill health and I did not think I would ever be strong enough to farm. I began to have trouble with stomach ulcers when I was in grade school. It was diagnosed when I was in high school, and my condition continued to get worse until finally in January 1939, I was operated on in Mitchell, South Dakota, for stomach ulcers. Dr. C. S. Bobb did the operation and I found out later he had never before performed one of those operations, although he had observed one at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Anyway, it worked out real well. It was in the hospital that I met June Goodwin, my private nurse, who in July 1941, became my wife. She had recently completed her R. N. degree at the Methodist Hospital in Mitchell.

I wanted to go to school and my parents strongly supported that. It was then, after I was operated on for stomach ulcers, that I went to the University of South Dakota to do my junior and senior years and my Masters degree. My father had also gone a year to the University of South Dakota so we had a connection there. Earlier, I had enrolled at Seattle Pacific College, a Free Methodist denominational college in Seattle following my two years of junior college at Wessington Springs. I went to Seattle in the fall of 1937, to start my junior year but soon became ill and went back home. I returned to Seattle in the fall of 1938, to begin my junior year again and finished the first quarter before becoming seriously ill. In January 1939, I went back to South Dakota, and entered the hospital for the operation. By that time I had made trips to Seattle in two succeeding years and my father said that he could not afford to send me that far away from home again. It was then that he said

Arkansas, on Saturday, February 3, 1990. I had arrived the previous day and we played a leisurely round of golf. Golf is now Gil's favorite pastime and he is fond of remarking that if only he had not written his last couple of books he could have taken up the game a lot sooner. Luckily, it rained on Saturday or we would probably have played more golf and would have had difficulty completing the interview. But as it happened, it was cold and wet and so we spent a cozy day in conversation. Here the humor and humanity as well as the professional dedication of Gil Fite show through clearly. If only all academicians were like him the world of higher education would be a much better place.



*Bella Vista, Arkansas (1990).
The Interview*

H: This is a conversation with Gilbert C. Fite in Bella Vista, Arkansas, February 3, 1990.

Tell me about your youth on the farm in South Dakota and how the effect that experience had on your later career.

F: My mother filed on a homestead in Perkins County in northwest South Dakota in 1916 and after my father came back from World War I we lived on the homestead till 1924, then we moved back to a farm near the town of Wessington Springs, and lived with my maternal grandparents. So I had a rural

background. Out on the homestead it was very isolated, and, while I started to school there, my parents decided to move back to eastern South Dakota because of the need for better educational facilities and churches. So I was really raised on the farm in Jerauld County where I did all the normal work farm children did in the 1920s and 1930s. We had a general farm. We raised sheep, cattle, hogs, chickens, grain, and hay. My first job when I was thirteen, was to operate a one-row cultivator in the corn field. Also, I had a lot of experience with livestock. I rode over the pasture to make sure the sheep were all right, and I milked cows. When I went away to college, especially when I went down to the University of South Dakota and talked with Dr. Herbert S. Schell about a Masters thesis, he knew of my farm background. Dr. Schell believed that I might be interested in some kind of a rural topic. By that time, I had studied enough history to know about the Homestead Act and land policy, so my interest in all aspects of rural history was growing.

I think I was definitely influenced by my early life on the farm up through high school, and, as a good many people have said, you simply cannot get away from your background, your own experiences or from your roots. I found that I could not. I was greatly influenced by my parents. My mother was raised on a farm in South Dakota and my father came from Ohio. His parents were not farmers, but they lived in the very small town of Santa Fe, Ohio, which was nothing more than a crossroads. After he went to South Dakota about 1914, and after he and my mother were married in 1917, he lived on a farm for most of the next twenty years.

Both my mother and father were also rural school teachers. At that time

that I should go to the University of South Dakota and finish there. This was one of the good fortunes of my life because there I met some people who had a life-time impact on me and my career.

The University of South Dakota was a very small institution when I enrolled in September 1939. There were about eight hundred students, and only four professors in the history department. Dr. Herbert S. Schell was a specialist in South Dakota history and had written a good deal in the field. Then there was Dr. Carl Christol, who was chairman of the department and taught European history. Besides Dr. Schell, it was Dr. Bert James Lowenberg, who taught everything from ancient history to modern American intellectual history, who influenced me the most. He was a recent Ph.D. from Harvard. He was a brilliant person and I have never forgotten his lectures. Most of the people in his class who came from South Dakota high schools and junior colleges had a hard time understanding him. Bert Lowenberg would use a difficult word when he could have much better used a simple one, and he kept many students guessing what he was talking about a good share of the time. Nevertheless, he was a most stimulating teacher.

My favorite, and the person who had the greatest influence on me was Herbert Schell. The classes were small, usually not more than fifteen or twenty students. We got a lot of personal attention so after I finished my Bachelors degree and started on my Masters, I worked very closely with Dr. Schell who directed my Masters thesis. He suggested that I do something on the farm bloc as a political force in the early 1920s, and that struck a responsive chord with me. This topic really started my interest in the study of farm policy

and farm politics, and all things relating to rural America. I have always been indebted to Dr. Schell for getting me started in an area that I was basically interested in, but perhaps I did not fully realize it at the time. From that time on I guess I can say that I did most of my work in agricultural history.

H: Tell me a little bit about what it was like to be a student at the University of South Dakota in the late thirties and early forties.

F: Vermillion was a town, of about three thousand people. We had about eight hundred students at the University. The fraternity and sorority system was fairly strong. My friend Roscoe Dean, also from Wessington Springs, and I rented a room just off the campus for \$15.00 a month and did light housekeeping. Both Roscoe and I were busy. Since I had been out of school the equivalent of nearly two years, I was very anxious to make up for lost time and so I took a heavy load. From my point of view there wasn't much social life, although the University was a very social place. The sororities and fraternities regularly had big parties. I got a bid to one of the fraternities but of course could not afford it, and really did not have time for it anyway. My two years at the University of South Dakota centered around my room, the library, and the classroom. I must confess I did not make a great many friends at the University of South Dakota, but mostly that was my fault. It was a friendly place. I knew many students in a casual way, but I never got to know very many students well because of my work load.

In my judgment, we had a very good faculty. In fact, as I think back, I believe the University of South Dakota was one of the finest small schools in the country. When I went on for my doctorate, and was in competition with

students from bigger and supposedly better institutions, I did not have any trouble competing. I have always had a very warm spot in my heart for the University of South Dakota and there is nothing I am prouder of than the fact that in later years the University awarded me an honorary doctorate.

H: How did you happen to go on for your doctoral work at the University of Missouri?

F: When I was finishing my Masters, I also earned a certificate to teach in high school. In the spring of 1941, I applied for a number of teaching positions in the area, but I failed to get a teaching job. Teaching positions were hard to get in the spring of 1941. Late in the spring when it was obvious I was not going to get a teaching position, my mother who worked at Wessington Springs College as the secretary to the president, said they were going to need somebody in public relations and to teach debate. I had been active in debate all through college, and so she arranged a job for me at Wessington Springs Junior College for 1941-1942. I had registered for the draft, but because of my past health record I was not called up in the early years of World War II. I travelled a good bit doing public relations for the college and during the fall of 1941 I stopped by the University to see my former professors. One of those with whom I visited was Dr. Bert James Lowenberg. Dr. Lowenberg and I had become good friends by that time, although we were about as different as two people could be. He was an easterner and I was a westerner. He was Harvard, I was South Dakota. He was an agnostic, I was a Christian. We talked about graduate school and I told him that I wanted to go on for a Ph.D. He said, "I can get you a scholarship at two places, either Missouri or Clark University." I knew I did not want to go

back East to Clark and so I said, "Would you help me get an assistantship at the University of Missouri?" He said he would. He took out a half sheet of paper and wrote a longhand note on it and sealed it. This was in late October or November 1941. He said, "When you go down to the University of Missouri, you take this letter and hand it to Tom Brady." Dr. Thomas A. Brady was the chairman of the history department at the University of Missouri and a good friend of Lowenberg's.

During Christmas vacation of 1941, my wife, June and I drove to Kansas to visit her parents, and after Christmas we went to Columbia, Missouri, with this precious note in my pocket. I contacted Dr. Brady. He tore open the note, read it and turned to me and said, "we will have an assistantship for you in the fall." This was the way assistantships were often granted at that time. Teaching jobs were obtained in a like manner. There was no advertising of positions and the difference was whether or not you had an advocate. I had an advocate for which I have been forever grateful because I probably would not have made it without one.

H: What do you think about that system as you look back today? It operated for a long time in higher education, and I guess in some ways it still does.

F: I think it still operates to some extent, but surely not the way it did in the 1930s and the 1940s, and even into the 1950s. It was not a fair system, if you interpret fair as judging people on the basis of ability, or competing for a post. However, while it was not fair in that sense, I don't think the system we have today has improved the quality of graduate students or faculty. The old system has some flaws but I don't think it was all bad. I say this not just because I benefited from it but because

I think a lot of good people benefitted from it. I basically favor the new system but I don't think it has done anything for faculty quality. It is a matter of being fair in giving more people an opportunity. So far as inviting minorities and women candidates and urging them to apply, I think that is all to the good. I remember, when I was chairman of the history department of the University of Oklahoma, we took a very dim view of giving a graduate assistantship to a woman partly because there was a feeling, probably unsubstantiated, that if we granted an assistantship to a young woman she would go a year or two and then get married, and drop out of the program, or if she did finish she would not really devote a career to history but to something else. To break down that mind-set I think has been a good thing.

H: Tell me about your experience as a graduate student at the University of Missouri.

F: I was there during World War II, so we had relatively few graduate students. Most of them in history were older. Some of them were returned high school teachers, and some were trying to get a Ph.D. for a purpose other than making a career in teaching college history. In some ways then I was not in a typical graduate program. We had people like Homer Knight who later became chairman of the history department at Oklahoma State University, William A. Settle who taught at Tulsa University for many years, and Enno Kraehe who studied European history and eventually went to the University of Virginia. It was a small program something like when I was at the University of South Dakota working on my Master's. It was a very personalized program. My major professor was Lewis C. Atherton, a very tough task master. But he had the time to take a kind of raw, country boy, then

24 years old, and try to mold me into something resembling a scholar. He did not spare the rod. When he returned the first chapter of my dissertation, I was about ready to leave the program and go back to farming because that seemed more appropriate in light of my shortcomings. But he spent a lot of time with me and if I learned anything about research and writing, I learned most of it from Lewis Atherton. I did my doctoral dissertation on Peter Norbeck, former Senator from South Dakota. I was able to get access to the Norbeck Papers, ship them from Redfield, South Dakota, to the University of Missouri in about twenty big boxes, and then research them in a separate room allocated to me in the library. The university was very accommodating, which would not have been possible if there had been more students.

H: You finished your doctorate in 1945 and then you went to the University of Oklahoma. How did you happen to go there?

F: You have heard me say that my last book, and some people have said they hoped it would be my last, was going to be "Luck in History." The way I got to the University of Oklahoma would be a good illustration. Near the end of World War II, the Oklahoma legislature passed a law requiring six hours of American History and Government of all students at state institutions in Oklahoma. This law was passed rather late in the session in 1945. While that law was being considered, the University of Oklahoma made an offer to my friend and fellow graduate student Bill Settle. But, the legislature continued in session and it was not certain that the law was going to be passed. So Bill got a little frightened. He was afraid that the legislature might not act on the bill, and when he got an offer from the University of Tulsa, he accepted it.

Some weeks later the legislature did pass the law requiring American History, so they needed to add two or three history professors. By that time it was August.

After I finished my doctorate in June of 1945, I got a job with the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection at the University of Missouri going around the state gathering up manuscript material. I got a call one night from Elmer Ellis when I was in Southwest Missouri. Ellis was also one of my professors and later became President of the University of Missouri. He said that the department at the University of Oklahoma had just called and wanted to know if he had a doctoral candidate who could take a job and teach the American History survey course. Dr. Ellis told me to go to St. Louis, get on the Frisco that night, and go to Oklahoma City and on down to Norman to be interviewed for the job. He said he had it all set up and it was not even necessary for me to call the department or anybody at Oklahoma. I did what Dr. Ellis said.

When I got to Norman I called Dr. Morris Wardell who was then Chairman of the department, and spent the day interviewing. I'll never forget the interview. It was going pretty well and I was telling departmental members about what I was doing that summer in collecting manuscripts. They seemed interested in this because the University of Oklahoma had been thinking about setting up a similar program. A young man came into the interview who I assumed to be some assistant professor that I had not yet met. But a little later they introduced him as the President of the University, Dr. George Lynn Cross. I do not know how many interviews he went to in those days, but at least he went to mine. Before I left that night, Dr. Carl Rister, who was the incoming

chairman, said that they were going to offer me the job, but he was not certain about the salary. They had told Dr. Ellis that the salary would be \$2400.00 a year, but Rister said he believed that if they put as much pressure as possible on the Dean they might be able to offer \$2600.00. He said he would write me about that. I took the train back to St. Louis and went on gathering manuscripts the rest of the summer. Later I heard from Rister and the salary was \$2600.00. We moved to Norman on Labor Day of 1945.

H: At the time you moved to Norman had your dissertation on Peter Norbeck been published?

F: No, my dissertation on Norbeck turned out to be very long, something over five hundred pages. Lewis Atherton had done his best to cut it down, but with only partial success. When I made plans to publish it, the University of Missouri Press said I would have to reduce it. So I spent the first year or so, probably eighteen months after I had arrived at OU, revising and cutting down my dissertation before it was finally published in 1948. My work on Norbeck strengthened my interest in agricultural history because when he was a senator from South Dakota in the 1920s his main interest was agriculture and farm relief.

H: During the early years of your career at OU did you ever worry much about whether you were going to get tenure?

F: I never worried about getting ahead in the profession or getting tenure at OU. I think the thing that some of us younger professors at OU thought or wondered about was, if we got to the top, would we be anywhere? The salaries were low and the workloads were heavy even for the full professors. We all taught twelve hours a week and

had big classes. I used to have one hundred sixty to two hundred students each semester and I graded all my own papers and reports. I never really worried about tenure because Carl Rister who became a close friend, liked me. I think it was not so much because of my talents in history as the fact that I didn't smoke or drink. That was an important criterion with him. I had not been there two weeks before he called me into his office and we had a very frank talk. He did the talking. He said, "Gilbert, do you want to get ahead in this department?" I assured him that I did, and he then said, "Well, this is what it is going to take. We expect you to publish, we expect you to teach well and if you do these things, there isn't going to be any question about your progress here." He was then a research professor and he made \$4500.00 per year, which is what research professors made at that time. I dreamed that someday I might become a research professor and, if I did, I believed it would be something near Heaven. So, with that example before me, and with that very stern lecture as to what was expected, I did not worry about tenure, or getting promoted, although I did not get promoted with any great rapidity. All promotions at Oklahoma were slow at that time. It took me ten years and three books to become a full professor. I became a full professor in 1955. I published *Peter Norbeck, Prairie Statesman, Mount Rushmore, George Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* and I don't know how many articles during the period and had the *Agricultural Regions of the United States* almost ready to go to press. So I was promoted to Professor on four books and a score or so of articles. I think Rister's lecture had probably done some good.

H: During that period did very many people come and go in the department

at OU?

F: Not many. I think there were only two that we did not keep on and during that period we hired only a few new people, John Ezell came in about 1948, I think, and we hired one or two others, but the faculty was fairly stable. Also, the department was small for the number of students we had. There was no question about that. I always said in the years that I was at the University of Oklahoma that Oklahoma got more for its educational dollar than any place I know about. Faculty members had heavy student loads and by and large did a good job at whatever they were doing. The department was very productive in those years. Carl Rister was there for a few years after I arrived and then he went out to Texas Tech. Of course Dr. Edward Everett Dale was there. He retired a few years after I arrived but still continued to teach now and then. And of course Dale and Rister had been the backbone of the department so far as American History and Western History were concerned. Dale was a Turner student and had a strong reputation. Then the younger group that came in. W. E. Hollon was a Webb student from Texas and interested in the Southwest. He was publishing regularly. Max Moorehead in Latin American history was a Bolton student. He was also a consistent publisher. I was publishing steadily, and so we had a group of very productive people even though they were all teaching heavy loads. By the 1950s the department began to be recognized more than it had been earlier and there were some observers who thought the University of Oklahoma was as good, or perhaps better, than any other institution in the country in Western history.

Also, by the early 1950s, we were beginning to attract graduate students,

that is, Ph.D. students. The department had a few Ph.D. students prior to 1945 but not many, and we had few the first five years I was there. More began to come in the 1950s and one of the things I tried to do when I was chairman of the department from 1955 to 1958 was to build up the Ph.D. program. We already had a good undergraduate program, a strong group of teachers, and I thought it was time to do something for the graduate program, especially if we were going to develop the Western History field. We needed advanced students and people who would go out to other institutions and make their mark. We were able to get some graduate assistantships during that period, and that helped. One of our most distinguished students from the early 1950s was Arrell M. Gibson. I had my first Ph.D. student in 1953 and then Gibson finished with me in 1954. He had started with Dr. Dale who retired before he finished.* Then in the late 1950s we began to attract quite a number of students because we had more financial aid and contacts with institutions that did not have Ph.D. programs. We had quite a few students enroll from the University of South Dakota, including Kenneth Hendrickson, Peter Risuben, Duane Leach, and a number of others.* We were getting students from quite a few of the universities and colleges, especially in the plains states. They were coming to us partly I think because we had financial aid, and partly because we were concerned about students, and we tried our best to help them. That was always my goal anyway, and I guess I had taken that from Herbert Schell at the University of South Dakota and Lewis Atherton at Missouri because they had been so considerate of me and my needs. I thought it was my job to try to do that for the next generation of

students. The department at the University of Oklahoma did change some in that first fifteen years I was there, say from 1945 to 1960, because the younger professors tended to make the department more productive from the viewpoint of publishing and that was fortunate because the two biggest publishers in American History from the earlier period were gone. Dr. Dale had retired and Dr. Rister had gone on to Texas Tech. So, it was left to a newer generation.

H: Those of us who were trained at OU in the 1950s felt that we were being trained by a group that either had already achieved greatness in the field or was right on the verge. Did the faculty have that view of themselves?

F: I think we did, partly because most of us were being recognized in the profession nationwide. That is, we were beginning to hold offices in the main associations, and publish in the best journals and book presses. I published an article in the *American Historical Review* in 1960, and Max Moorehead had published in the best journal in his field and so had Gene Hollon. So I think we recognized, as we looked around the Great Plains, the Midwest and the Rocky Mountain areas, that we were emerging as a very strong department. As we got more good graduate students that feeling strengthened. None of us is very good at self judgment but I think we recognized that we were fairly good and we talked from time to time how we compared with departments at other universities in the area.

H: We also felt that we were being trained by people who took an interest in us and were conscious of the needs and feelings of students whereas doctoral candidates during that period at some other universities didn't have that feeling at all. They felt they were

often abused and not treated very well by the faculty. Did you have a conscious sense that you were attempting to deal with your students in that way?

F: I think we did and I think that was partly due to the fact that several of us had gotten our doctorates at a time when there weren't that many graduate students where we were working and our professors had spent a lot of time with us. I think there is a tendency on our part to try to emulate our best professors. Nobody teaches us how to teach or how to do research, really. We are in seminars and all but most of us emulate our best teachers. I think back fifty years or more, I can name all of the teachers in my lifetime from grade school through the Ph.D. who really influenced me. When I was a high school and junior college student I had a professor by the name of Clifford Roloff. He was a great teacher for young people at that level. He just made history so fascinating to me that he led me into the field. And then there were Herbert Schell and Lewis Atherton. Those were the three. When you have had great mentors, I think, when you get your own students, trying to do the best for them just comes naturally. While all of us at Oklahoma were very busy, I don't think our students felt that there was any time they could not come in to talk if they had a problem or needed help. We gave them the time. I don't think we spent a lot of time talking about the weather or wasting time, but still, I think our students sensed that while we were busy, we always had time for them.

H: In 1971 you left OU to become President of Eastern Illinois University. What motivated you to do that?

F: Well, I think maybe the devil made me do it. By way of background, we were in India in 1969-1970, where I was director of the American Studies

Research Center in Hyderabad and I got a letter from a former OU graduate student, Jimmy Franklin, who was on the faculty at Eastern Illinois University. He said they were looking for a new president and asked if I would be interested. He would like to put my name in the list of candidates. I wrote back and said, "Jimmy, you know they are not going to hire anybody who hasn't been a dean or vice president. But, you can put my name in if you want to." So Jimmy submitted my name to the search committee. It happened that the chairman of the search committee was a history professor by the name of Donald Tingley. Don Tingley had not been too happy with the previous president. Faculty members are frequently unhappy with their president. But anyway, the president who was retiring had been a great campus builder, having built a beautiful plant. He had been president about fifteen years, during a period when there was a lot of money for higher education in Illinois. Many of the faculty felt, however, that he had not spent as much time as he should encouraging scholarship. So the committee was convinced that it wanted a strong scholar as president. When I got home from India in the spring of 1970, I had a letter from Jimmy saying that he had submitted my name. The next thing I knew, I was among the top twenty candidates, and they wanted to know if I wanted to be considered further. I took this letter home to June and said, "I think I will just write them a letter and tell them yes, I will go one more round." I had no idea I would be selected. I said I was sure they would not select a person from the faculty who had not at least been a dean. So I sat down during my office hour and banged out a letter. It was sort of with tongue-in-cheek. They had a set of questions

they wanted me to answer. One of those was, "What makes you think you are qualified?" Well, what was I going to say? I had been a professor a long time but I hadn't had much administrative experience. So, I wrote something like, "The fact that I haven't been a dean or a vice-president is a marked advantage for me because I think our administrators have become too far removed from the faculty and the students in recent years." Of course, this was at the end of the 1960s when there had been vigorous student discontent. I said, "Really, I think my experience as a faculty member having done about everything there was to do on campus would qualify me." I thought that would be the end of it. But before long I got a letter saying that I was among the final five candidates and they wanted me to come for an interview. I went to Charleston and met the search committee and later visited with the Board of Governors in Chicago. By that time I was at the place where there was a possibility I might get the job. I had to make up my mind whether I would take it if it were offered. There was another factor that was lurking in the back of my mind. By 1971, it was very difficult to place graduate students and I had one or two very good students who finished in 1970 and 1971 for whom we just could not find a job. I was getting sort of discouraged about placement and graduate work.

Furthermore, I was getting a little burned out with my own work. I don't remember how many books I had published by that time but I had done five or six.

I was finding that when one of my new books came out, I hardly opened it. I seemed to be losing a little of my enthusiasm. So I thought, "Well, I'll pursue this." I still wasn't convinced that I would be offered the job but June

and I had to seriously discuss what we would do if they did offer it to me. Suddenly, we learned I was among the final three candidates. In the spring of 1971 June and I were invited to Charleston, Illinois, for the final interview. We went to the campus where we visited with several of the administrators and attended a big faculty reception. We were there on display. The Board of Governors was meeting at Springfield so after our day on campus was over we drove to Springfield for the final interview.

Meanwhile, I did not know a lot of things that had been going on. Ben Morton, the executive secretary of the Board of Governors for Eastern Illinois and four other institutions in Illinois, was a great admirer of Elmer Ellis at the University of Missouri. I don't know what their past connections had been, but Ellis apparently had helped him either get his current job or some other position. Ellis was one of the people who had written for me and when Morton saw Ellis's signature on this letter of recommendation he probably thought, "Well, we had better look at this guy." Again, this was an aspect of the old boy system, but more than anything else it brought me to the attention of the executive secretary who was guiding the board as well as the committee in the search. Moreover, none of the other candidates had a strong scholarly background and the committee wanted a scholar, or so the members said.

After arriving in Springfield we had dinner with the Board of Governors. Following dinner, June and I were interviewed together. At the close of the interview the chairman of the board said, "don't go to bed because we are going to make our decision tonight and we will let you know one way or another." I guess they told that

to the other two candidates as well. So we went back to the motel room. It was about 9:30, and we watched television for a while. Finally it got to be about 11:00 PM and we hadn't heard anything, so I said to June, "You know, I'm going to bed. To heck with these guys. I really don't need this job." And so, we went to bed. We barely got in bed when there was a knock on the door, and someone said, "This is Mr. Phelan and Mr. Stipes." Mr. Phelan was the chairman of the board. He said, "We've got to talk with you." I replied, "We're in bed." "Well," he said, "You've got to get up." So I got up and pulled on my trousers and my shirt. I had a cuff-link shirt and I didn't have time to get the cuffs folded or buttoned and the sleeves hung down over my hands, and I was barefooted. I opened the door and they came in. June was in bed with the blanket pulled up to her shoulders. They said, "Well, we've just decided that we want you to be our next president." By that time June was laughing at the whole scene; me about half-dressed and these two leaders in their business suits talking to me about the presidency. She said, "Well, if he takes this presidency he is going in bare-footed." I hope he doesn't leave it the same way." They had a good laugh, but anyway, they made me the offer and said, "We've got an appointment set up in the morning for a news conference." That is how it came about.

H: You were President of Eastern Illinois for five years. Tell me about that experience.

F: I think I had a very good experience. I soon found that many faculty members really did not want a scholar for a president as much as they thought. One of the things I set out to do was to upgrade the scholarship on campus. I think we had a very good teaching faculty at Eastern Illinois. It

was a former teacher's college, and I wanted to transform it into a real university. I told the faculty that I hoped to make the institution a university in fact as well as in name. This sort of frightened quite a few people, especially when they found out how much publishing I had done. There were certain reactions on the part of the faculty that sort of surprised me at first. I had been a faculty member longer than most people on the faculty there and I still viewed myself as a faculty member. They did not view me in that light, of course. You are always the enemy in that job. But overall, things went very well. We had a strong democratic operation on campus. I had a faculty budget committee and we had other committees and groups that were advising the president and the other administrative officers. We had something of a problem with affirmative action because we were not getting many minority students. I hardly knew what the term affirmative action meant before I went to Eastern Illinois University and we had to work hard on that. We improved the academic level of our student body, although, by and large, we already had very good students. We had a fairly large faculty. When I went to Eastern we had a little over eight thousand students and about five hundred faculty members.

I did not have to work on physical facilities because my predecessor had done a very good job at that. We concentrated mainly on academics, and also tried to get the university into the community in a more direct and creative way than it had been. And then, as I said, we were trying to raise the level of faculty performance in the area of research. I think we made some real progress there. I gave support to a number of younger faculty who had come out of graduate school recently

and wanted to do research. I managed to get some special raises for people in that group. I met with some of our best researchers from time to time to encourage them and support them the best I could. So, from that point of view, it was an interesting experience.

We did have some racial problems. Of course there were no blacks to speak of in the Charleston, Illinois, area but we had quite a few students from Chicago. The black students felt as though they were not getting all they should from the university. I had several sit-ins in my office, which scared some people. However, I never found it very threatening. In fact, one day the office was jammed with students. They were sitting on the floor and everywhere. I always kept a jar of candy on my desk, and so I passed the candy around and they talked and got whatever it was off their chest and left.

I think the most annoying things were the lawsuits. We were very careful in our procedures but we had a number of lawsuits that defied all common sense - crazy, I said. For example, we had a man in the library who said he was ill. Since we had a sick leave policy, I directed that he be put on sick leave. Three or four weeks later the rumor came to campus that he was working in Decatur's public library while enjoying our sick leave pay. We could not understand that, so the vice president actually went up to the library in Decatur and asked the librarian if they had employed this person. "Yes, he is working here." So we wanted to recover what we had paid him. We believed that he had been dishonest with us. Then he turned around and sued the university for discrimination. He happened to be Jewish. Our lawyer said that we ought to settle out of court, and get rid of the problem. I objected, but the attorney finally convinced me that it would be

best for the institution. We settled, but I always felt it was one of my worst mistakes at the university. Another time we had a Chinese woman take us before the FEPC because she did not get to teach the courses she thought she ought to teach, and charged the university with racial discrimination. It was one thing after another like that. Those were contentious times, but on a whole I think we had good relations with the faculty and staff, and many of them are still our friends.

The presidency was a good experience but I felt that I did not want to do that for the rest of my working life. I felt that if I was going to get back into history that I must do so soon. At about the third and fourth year, June and I talked a little about my going back to teaching and writing. June did not like her role as the president's wife at all, and so we decided to begin looking for another position.

The opportunity to leave Illinois and go to the University of Georgia was again something of a stroke of luck. I was invited to China in 1975 on an educational mission. Shortly after I got back there was a meeting in Washington at which I was asked to give the luncheon talk on China. After the talk A. C. Land, who was in the department of history at the University of Georgia, came up to me and said he wanted to visit a little bit. He explained that they were looking for a person to fill a new post—that of the Richard B. Russell Professor of History. The chair had been funded he said, and they were looking for the first person to fill the position. I had had a letter from the Chairman of the search committee earlier, asking if I had anyone to recommend and I had recommended a couple of individuals, but the Georgia department members could not agree on anyone. Chris Land said, "Would you

consider it at all?" My quick reply was, "I surely would." He explained, "that we had not contacted you earlier because we did not think you would leave the presidency to go back to being a professor." I replied, "Well, why don't you try me?" As I left for the airport, Chris said, "Well, you will hear from us shortly." Within a few weeks, I received a letter from the search committee wanting to know, if I would be interested. I wrote back that I would, but I had to keep this matter very secret so that it did not get back to my campus. Then early in 1976 they asked me down for an interview. The department recommended me and the Dean made me the offer, but it would take some time to make it official because the appointment had to be cleared with the regents. It was April before the official offer came, after which I announced my resignation as president. I had my letter of resignation all drawn up and ready to send to the press and to the Board of Governors. It was nice leaving, because I left under very good circumstances. The faculty, as a going away present, took my books and had them bound in red buckram, and presented them to me at an official occasion. The students presented me a clock and all kinds of things happened that gave me a good feeling as I left. I guess I can put it this way, I would not care to be president again, but I would not have wanted to miss it. It helped me see the other side of university life. As I told the faculty at Eastern in my first talk, "The president is not smarter than the faculty. The only advantage the president has is that he sees the total university and the faculty, generally, only sees one small part of it and so the perspectives are considerably different." I always tried to keep that in mind, realizing that when somebody came in with a complaint that they were seeing

a problem from one viewpoint and I was seeing it from another.

H: You left Eastern and went to the University of Georgia as a research professor and you spent ten years there. How would you compare that experience with your career in teaching and research earlier?

F: My experience at the University of Georgia was one of the happiest and best times in my career. I was treated extremely well there. President Fred C. Davison was very interested in the Russell Chair. It was one of the most prestigious chairs at the University.



Professor of History at the University of Georgia (1983)

Friends of Senator Russell had raised about \$1.5 million to support it. The Russell Chair brought a good deal of recognition on the campus. It carried a lot of "perks," especially in the early years. I had two research assistants for several years. I always had a personal secretary. There wasn't anything really that I could want that I did not have. I was free to do about what I wanted to. If I wanted to teach I could teach, and if I did not want to teach I did not have to. Usually I taught a graduate seminar in the fall and then in the spring I would teach something else usually a large survey course. They had never had large classes in history at

Georgia. Many of the classes were taught by graduate assistants when they had a big Ph.D. program, but the Ph.D. program declined in the mid-1970s, so they did not have that labor force. Hence we had to go to large classes. My colleagues at first resisted teaching large classes and were opposed to them. So I said, "Well, I will teach one." We had a big auditorium that would seat about three hundred students, so in the spring quarter I would teach one of those classes. But I had graders and my main responsibility was to give the lectures.

Also, I became quite involved in broader university affairs. For instance when the university had a hundred million dollar drive for private funds, I was co-chairman of the effort to raise money among the faculty. One of our goals was to get faculty members to make a \$10,000 gift to the university and some seventy-five to one hundred made that kind of commitment. Altogether from the faculty in our drive we raised something over five million dollars. One year they asked me to give the university's Founders' Day address which annually commemorated the founding of the university. I was involved with the university as a whole more than I had ever been, except possibly when I was president.

The university gave me, as I indicated, strong support for my research. During the time I was at Georgia I revised and added about one hundred pages to my book on *Farmland Industries*, which was a business history of a big cooperative. Then I did *American Farmers, The New Minority* and my book on the history of southern agriculture, *Cottonfields No More*. I wrote most of my biography of Senator Richard B. Russell, too. I did a number of articles during the period, and I lectured quite a lot. There was a great

contrast between Georgia and Oklahoma. I was at Georgia at a time when they had a lot of money for higher education and faculty salaries were raised in a very dramatic fashion. We had fairly liberal budgets, at least during the first five or six or seven years I was there. Compared to Oklahoma and Eastern Illinois University, where it seemed we were always fighting for a dollar to keep things going, Georgia was quite different. And, Athens, Georgia, is a very nice place to live. So, overall I would say that our experience at the University of Georgia from 1976 to 1986 when I retired was one of the most happy and fulfilling periods of my career.

H: Let's turn now more specifically to the history of agriculture. In the last three quarters of a century or so, let's say in the twentieth century, what have you seen as the major changes in American agriculture?

F: Well, I think the main changes have been the decline in the farm population, the increase in size of farms, and much greater specialization in agriculture. There have also been dramatic changes in labor requirements. Efficiency has increased much faster than in industry in the last seventy-five years mainly due to the tractor. Improvements in tractors and the increase in size and power of tractors, and all of the machinery that tractors pull or power have made a tremendous difference. Then you've had the chemical revolution and the use of fertilizers. When I was a boy on the farm in the 1920s nobody used commercial fertilizer. Farmers used manure from their barns. Commercial fertilizer, which began to be used in a big way in the 1940s, and has become essential now in the view of most farmers. The other side of the chemical revolution is the use of insecticides to

kill insects and herbicides to destroy weeds. And then, of course, there have been tremendous improvements in the breeding of livestock and crops. The greatest revolution in crops, I guess, was hybrid corn which came in during the 1930s. The increase in efficiency of breeding and feeding in the poultry industry is perhaps the best example of a revolution in the livestock industry. Efficiency in conversion of feed to meat has greatly improved, and much of that revolutionary activity has come out of our agricultural colleges that have had very good scientists, whether it is in the poultry industry or in the raising of wheat or corn. Those are the things that I think have greatly changed farming since I was a boy on the farm in the 1920s and the 1930s. At that time we were just beginning to see the start of the agricultural revolution. We were not seeing it in our part of South Dakota but in the better areas of the Midwest it was beginning.

II: When you were a boy in the 1920s on the farm did you have electricity?

F: No.

II: When did electricity come to your family's farm?

F: We did not get electricity on our family farm until the 1940s. I'm not sure just when it was, but South Dakota did not move as fast with electric co-ops as some of the other states. There were a lot of farms in South Dakota that did not have electricity until after World War II. This was a part of the revolutionary activity on the farm, of course, because with the coming of the REA and electricity farmers could now have a modern home. You had power to pump water and you could have hot water and all of the conveniences so far as farm living was concerned. A moment ago I was speaking of only what was happening in the barnyard and the fields, but as far as the farm home

is concerned, probably electricity was the most important thing that happened to rural America. As I have written many times, it literally took farmers out of the dark. While the kerosene or gas mantle lamps gave you some light it was not anything like what you see in the movies! Electricity was very important.

H: Some people have said that a number of the trends that you mentioned a moment ago are leading inevitably towards the decline or maybe the disappearance of the family farm. What do you think?

F: The family farm has been an institution that has stimulated a lot of emotions in many Americans, of whom I am one. I think I am what you would call a true Jeffersonian. I have many of those views that Jefferson expressed when he was writing about farmers as the most democratic, the purest, the finest and most independent people in our society. A great many people still think that. Perhaps farmers themselves do not view it that way as much as people who have left the farm and who are looking back at how they think it was, or how they wish it was, sometime in the distant past. But, the family farm has been on its way out for many years. For instance, in the 1950s, we lost more than a hundred thousand farms a year. We lost over a million farms in the 1950s alone and that trend has continued. It has slowed up now simply because when you get to a certain size consolidation tends to slow up. The farms that "disappeared" were simply incorporated into other farms. I still own our old family farm in South Dakota. I have 720 acres, which is more than most people tried to own or lease when I was a boy. But now anyone would starve to death in about ninety days on that farm if it were not consolidated with additional land. I would say that in our area now you

need about three thousand acres to make a modern living. Another reason the family farm has been disappearing is simply because people have not been able to make a satisfactory living there, that is, a satisfactory modern living. And farmers have wanted to live in a modern way with modern conveniences and life style. Small farms by and large will not produce enough income to provide electricity, an automobile and all of the things that modern Americans have come to expect. So the (small) family farm is going to fade out. We will continue to have family farms, but they (will be) much, much larger. They are a business more than they are a way of life. Of course, farming was always a business, but it was not a very good business, and in my research I found that people have always left the farm simply because the opportunities for a satisfactory living were not there. This is particularly true for young people. I have explained this in an article published in the fall, 1989, issue of *South Dakota History*. I show that as many as forty to fifty per cent of the young people on farms in some South Dakota counties left in the period after World War II. The family farm is a nostalgic thing which has been propagated more by non-farmers than by farmers, and this has been true at the highest levels. People like Theodore Roosevelt were always talking about the value of the family farm and the rural environment, Roosevelt spent a little time on his North Dakota ranch, but he really did not know anything about farming, and he did not have to make a living at it.

H: What would you say have been among the most positive and on the other hand the most negative features of government policy toward agriculture since the 1930s?

F: I think government policy has

slowed down the elimination of farmers. That is, price supports have kept people farming who would have gone out of business much earlier without government help. So government policy in one way has been a factor in keeping people in agriculture longer than they would have been otherwise. They would have simply gone broke and would have had to do something else, or gone on welfare. Now that has happened anyway, but, I think at a slower rate than would otherwise have been the case. We know that the majority of the government farm payments go to the bigger, more prosperous farmers. But there was a trickle down effect and if you look at the statistics by county, you will find that the smaller farmers got important benefits. This was nothing compared to what the big cotton grower in West Texas got, but still, it was enough to help him get by and stay in business. I would call that a positive factor because I think if we had had people leaving the farm at a faster rate we would have had more unemployment and more urban problems than we already have. I do not think it was either wise or possible to keep the great majority of farmers on the farm that lived there in the 1920s and 1930s. Particularly that was true in the South where there was a very heavy out-migration of blacks. There were simply more people on the farms than the land could support. Even as late as the 1920s and the 1930s there were many farmers in the South, sharecroppers, who had only 20 to 40 acres of land. Some of it was pretty productive; it was not enough to provide a decent standard of living. So it is not surprising that during World War II and, afterwards millions of farmers, both black and white, left the South and migrated to the northern cities. In the South I don't think the payments made much difference in

slowing this trend towards the city, but in the Middle West and the Great Plains states it had that positive impact. It had the influence of giving people money that they would not have otherwise had. I consider this a benefit.

On the other hand, a good share of the money went to the bigger farmers who then were able to take it and buy the machinery, fertilizer and other inputs they needed to completely modernize. This made them much more productive and greatly increased total agricultural output. Now there would have been change without the government funding, but price supports and payments to take land out of production placed money in the hands of people who could buy the latest equipment and use the most modern techniques. They could buy the best machinery, the best seed and all of these things that made agriculture so successful. This steady flow of money from government to farmers was a kind of transfer program, in economic terms, from government to millions of individuals. Some of them used it productively; some were able only to just get by.

Being a kind Jeffersonian, I have always believed that farmers were on the short end of the economic double-tree, as they used to put it. They were more than pulling their load, they were in an unfavorable economic situation in that they have no control over the price they have to pay for non-farm goods. So they are often in a cost-price squeeze and I think that one of the positive factors of the government programs, has been to even that up a little bit. Price supports have tended to be geared to some kind of parity relationship between farm and non-farm prices.

I think some of the worst results of the government programs have been that they tended to freeze agriculture in

stable patterns. That is, if you are going to support corn and bean prices, the farmers in those programs are not going to think much about raising anything else. Price supports for wheat or corn, or any crop, tend to freeze the productive system into that mold and it is very hard to get out of it because farmers are afraid to lose the advantage that they have from their wheat or corn allotment. Now this has to do mainly with crops and not with livestock because since the 1930s, we have never had a real support program for livestock although the government has helped support prices by buying chicken to distribute to the poor or buying pork or beef products from time to time to strengthen the market.

Now I suppose from the consumer point of view this made prices higher than they would otherwise have been. However, we all know that the price the farmer gets, is a very small percentage of the price the consumer pays for a finished product like cereal. The farmer gets a bigger slice of the price of meat and some other things, but consumers have probably paid more than would otherwise have been the case. I've always believed that we ought to pay enough for food to give the basic producer a decent wage and I think many farmers have not had a fair return on their labor and investment for years. I do think that many farmers brought problems on themselves in the 1970s by buying land at ridiculously high prices when there was no way it could pay for itself. By and large, I think farmers have worked hard and been very efficient producers and in many cases have not been adequately rewarded even with government price supports.

H: Some people are saying that perhaps we cannot afford government price supports any more and think they should be phased out. That would leave

farmers at the mercy of the unchecked forces of the marketplace as they were before the 1930s. What do you think would happen if that should occur in our society today?

F: I think we would see more rapid consolidation of farms because more of the medium size and small farmers would go out of business before long. A few of them would adjust if they were near a city where they could do some direct marketing, but the average small farmer in the Midwest with 320 acres or maybe 500 acres, would have a very tough time operating. Without price supports, prices of those supported commodities would be much lower. Farmers cannot control production which has been one of their great problems over the years. We see on every hand that industries with surpluses reduce or quit producing. Farmers tend to produce more if prices drop so that they have more units to sell at the lower price. They increase production so they can still maintain their income. The problem for farmers is that because of weather and other factors, they cannot produce a precise amount of a commodity. Moreover, farmers have tried to get together and produce what the market will absorb at fair prices but they have not succeeded. They have not been successful in controlling production.

H: How do you account for that?

F: I interviewed a lot of farmers and had a survey that I handed to many operators when I was working on my book *American Farmers, The New Minority*, the results showed that most farmers are just too independent minded. One of my questions was, "Do you think farmers ought to try to get together to control their prices?", and I got such replies as, "I don't think we ought to try," or "I don't even believe in the principle." I cannot really

understand that except to say that farmers have a long tradition of individualism and independence, and a lot of them are sort of curmudgeons who do not want other people telling them what to do. And when you think of it, farming is somewhat isolated even in the modern age. If you are in a farm community you tend not to see the whole picture clearly. Their fathers and their grandfathers operated in this same fashion and so they just do not seem to believe in that kind of group activity. Furthermore, there is a lot of conflict of interest within agriculture. Poultry producers, for instance, want cheap grain prices, while grain producers want high prices. To get them together in the same organization is almost impossible. That is also true of other crops and livestock producers. There is a conflict-of-interest there. What is good for one is not necessarily good for the other. It is hard to get farmers together. Farmers have in recent years tended to organize in crop and livestock associations rather than in overall groups. You have the wheat growers association, the corn growers association, livestock associations, etc. But I think the lack of more effective farm organizations is basically due to a kind of innate individualism and independence the farmers in this country have had from the beginning, and that many still have. You see it best, I think, in western ranches. I do not think this is going to change a great deal. Farmers have this feeling that, "I don't want people telling me what to do." They are willing to accept government help but they say: "once we get it we want to determine what we are going to do on our own."

H: Recently two scholars, Frank J. Popper and Deborah Epstein Popper, at Rutgers University, published an article in which they proposed the idea that conditions are such today that the

Great Plains will probably, in the next half century or so, revert to nature, to the buffalo. What do you think of that? F: I have read the Popper thesis with some interest and it is, as you expressed it, the idea that the Great Plains from about the hundredth meridian, west to the base of the Rocky Mountains is an area that is going to be gradually deserted and that it ought to be returned to the government. It could become a huge federal grassland where the buffalo could roam as they did 125 years ago. Some people have humorously referred to the Popper thesis as the Buffalo Commons, or restoring the Buffalo Commons. Now, without any positive action by government, I agree that much of the area will be abandoned in time. It will be a region where very few people will be living. In fact, the population has been declining since the 1920s in much of the area. This does not apply to the eastern edge of the Plains. But in areas like western South Dakota, west of the Missouri River, and eastern Wyoming, eastern Montana, and western North Dakota the population has been declining for many years, and will continue to do so. I think the High Plains from the Canadian border to West Texas in the next twenty-five to fifty years will look something like this: There will be a few central towns that will supply the needs of the people in a relatively large area. These trading centers will have medical care and enough businesses to meet the needs of the few farmers and ranchers that remain in the area as the process of depopulation accelerates. I do not think we will see it as a buffalo commons in our time but there will be a vast geographic area with a very sparse population with many economic and social problems. Many of the small towns will cease to exist. Many of them

already have except for a filling station and some kind of a bar or restaurant. These towns are going to vanish simply because there is no business in the area to support them. When the region was originally settled, it had towns about every eight to fifteen miles. That was a distance you could travel with a team of horses and go to town and get back in a day. But with trucks and automobiles and rubber-tired tractors, the mobility of farmers and ranchers has greatly increased. We just do not need those small towns anymore. I think there are a lot of crocodile tears being shed over the small town as it disappears. And they are disappearing, all you have to do to see this is to drive through one after another as you head north, let's say from Texas to North Dakota. You go through scores of these little towns that have storefronts all boarded up. Many of them may yet have a post office but they will not have even that indefinitely. There is going to be nothing to keep them going and as the farm population forsakes the region, nothing will take its place. Frankly, I do not have much hope for those little Chambers of Commerce who think they are going to bring in some industry to save the community. The statistics show that even the county seat towns in most of the Great Plains counties have been losing population. There was a time when I first began studying this situation around 1960, that I thought the county seat towns would hold their own, but in looking at the two Dakotas, I found back in the 1960s that about half of the county seat towns were losing population even that early and that is going to continue. My hometown of Wessington Springs, South Dakota, and many others, have suffered sharp declines. They are barely holding on. And so I think the high plains region does not have much future as a

population base. But we are not going to turn it back to the federal government, in my judgment, not for a long, long while anyway.

H: In your study of this region, have you given much thought to the consequences that would accrue if, particularly in the semi-arid regions west of the 98th meridian, water should approach its true market value?

F: I do not think there is any doubt that you would change the face of agriculture in the region if water brought what it cost to produce it. Where people have drilled their own wells, as in West Texas and western Nebraska and western Kansas, they probably are paying the true cost because it belongs to the owner. About all the costs a farmer has are the drilling of the wells, pumping the power to run the pumps and a distribution system. But we are going to run out of underground water, I don't think there is any question about that. All of the studies that I have seen show that the water level has been falling dramatically from West Texas up into western Nebraska where some of the heaviest irrigation is going on. And that area will revert, I think, within the next half century or so, to dry land agriculture. This means it will, for the most part, revert back to grazing. Now, there may be some exceptions to this in various parts of the high plains, but, in general, I think that's going to be the pattern. And I think we are making a sad mistake as a nation to waste water, as I see it anyway, growing corn in western Nebraska. You can succeed under irrigated conditions but we do not need more corn for one thing, and we do not need to support the price of corn in an environment like that. It is not a natural environment for corn growing. So, I think we are misusing our underground water to a considerable extent and I

believe we could say the same thing on the high plains of West Texas where they are raising cotton under irrigated conditions.

Where the cost of water really enters into the picture is when you get to New Mexico or Arizona or California. In those areas farmers benefit from expensive dams and conduits paid for by the federal government. If it were not for the politics of water we would never have provided such cheap water to large cotton growers and others in Arizona or in the San Joaquin Valley of California. I think that is not good national policy, but the realities are that the people who benefit from cheap water have a lot of political clout. So the farmers have done very well on the water situation up to now. I believe the long range trend will change because the demands for water by urban areas are going to increase and when you get right down to it, political power is going to decide how water is allocated. City people are going to get far more of it and farmers will get less even if they are willing to pay for it. If you paid the full value of water in the San Joaquin Valley of California, I think farmers would be out of the cotton growing business in a hurry. And, so we have got different problems with water in the West but in the Great Plains area the question of exhausting the underground water supply is the most serious problem. Where we are using it to grow crops that we do not need and crops that are often in surplus seems unwise from a national viewpoint. But we are a country of individualists who say to ourselves, we ought to be able to use our property any way we want to and so if we waste water growing corn that we do not need, that is our own business. So I do not see us tightening up on the use of pump irrigation water in the near future, I

although I do think we will see some changes where water is being supplied from the dams built with tax money and then distributed at very cheap rates to the farm users.

H: As you look at New Deal agencies like REA and some others that you might think of, do you think there are any which have outlived their usefulness and ought to be abolished?

F: As you know, we have long subsidized agencies like the REA, the Rural Telephone system and others. Originally, this was something that was a great public service by the federal government. It served a great many people but in all honesty I do not see that there is continued need for subsidies to permit local REAs to expand today where the private utilities could fill the bill without any taxpayer support. Consumers are not getting cheaper rates from REA anymore, and it is a matter of supplying a service that people need. In many cases, it is a clear duplication of services and it has become a political battle between the cooperatives, which have become very strong in Washington, and in state legislatures, and the private utilities. To talk against the REA is like talking against motherhood and apple pie. It is very difficult to get political support for reducing the subsidies, mainly very cheap interest rates. But I really think that the time has passed for special low interest loans to REA cooperatives. The same service could be provided by other utilities, and I do not see that the cooperatives, now that they have established their service among the farmers, have any real excuse for further subsidies. But, once an agency is established it is almost impossible to change its direction. The administrators want to keep expanding and keep growing. That is a mark of their success and so it is very difficult to change. I

think it ought to be changed, and some political leaders have suggested putting the Rural Electrification Administration on its own, but I do not see that coming soon because of politics. Eventually, it will probably come because there will be more urban influence than there is rural.

While we are talking about this I would just like to say that I think one of the most remarkable developments in the twentieth century has been the strength of the rural influence in our political life. I mean, we have two percent of the American people who now actually live on farms and less than that who make a living from the farm. It is true that we have a lot of people who own farmland and do not live on the land and they are still sympathetic to these agricultural issues. But, with such a large percent of our population living in urban areas, it is remarkable how long the rural influence has perpetuated a kind of mystique that is very difficult to explain rationally, except to say that people are motivated by certain myths and ideas. A lot of Americans hold the Jeffersonian view that the farmer is the salt of the earth, the best citizen, and we ought to do something for him. So federal support for agriculture continues. By any logical reason you would think that in a democratic society the great majority of non-farmers would demand reductions of federal aid to farmers. To the contrary, this mystique and myth of the importance of the farmer in American life has held on firmly. Rural agencies have a great pull on the political heartstrings of the nation, there is no question about it. How long it is going to take to cut that heartstring I do not know. However, it seems to me that we are in the last generation when agricultural influences will be strong in American society. Most people in the

United States under forty have never had any connection with the farm or ranch. They do not know anything about farm life, and so I think they are going to see things from a little different viewpoint than the present generation.

H: Let us turn our attention now to the historical profession. Have you given much thought to the changes that seem to be occurring in our profession with respect to such things as research topics and research techniques? There seems, for example, to be a trend toward sociological or sociologically-oriented studies in history. What are your views on that?

F: Well, certainly the research and writing of history has changed over the last forty or forty-five years. It has been influenced not only by sociological concepts but by economics and a lot of other areas of study. But I really think that two things have happened that are not in the best interest of history. In recent years we have seen more historians writing history to prove what they already believed before they did their research. There has always been some of that in history and I am not saying that historians can be completely objective, but I think we have gone too far away from objectivity or even attempting to be objective. This is damaging, I believe, to the best kind of history. Secondly, I think we have gone way overboard in dealing with history as though it did not amount to anything if it does not have some connection with class, race, sex, or ethnicity. Perhaps we went too long without giving enough attention to the role of women in history, although really it has never been ignored. Women probably were not given the place they deserved in many cases, but some of us, in our younger days as historians, long before this present emphasis came along, were writing about the role of women in

pioneer life, working on the farm, or in other ways. I think we have seen some historians in the 1970s and the 1980s who acted as though nothing had ever been done in this area; that women and minorities had been completely ignored. This was not the case. Today I think there is an overemphasis on class, race, sex and ethnicity, and I think we'll see, before too long, a change from this emphasis. It seems to me that it has become almost a fad. If you look at the programs of some of the historical associations you find they have nothing to do with many broad and important topics in American history but are all dealing with some form of class, race, sex and ethnicity. I think there will be a reaction against that which is already becoming apparent. We are beginning to see a number of outstanding women historians who are dealing with other topics and I think this is a healthy sign. So these are two things that I do not think have been particularly healthy in the profession. I think we have lost our objectivity, and we have tried to use history to try to prove some political or social point. We get away from our best historical writing when we do that.

Now the profession has changed in a lot of other ways. There are many more people in it than there used to be. Departments are larger. They are much more diverse. They are much more specialized. In fact, I think we have over-specialized. Much of history has become so specialized that often historians do not have the broader outlook that I think they should. In the 1940s and 1950s people taught in more than one field. When I started teaching at the University of Oklahoma I taught modern European history from 1500 up to the present. Our training was somewhat broader in earlier days both in history and related fields. So we have more specialization and concentration

on small research topics; one wonders how important many topics are, or whether they ought to be researched at all. But on the other hand, I would say that in this generation of historians, we have some of the most brilliant historians and some of the finest scholars that we have ever had in the history of American historiography. I think the profession is strong, despite the fact that we had about twenty years of very discouraging times so far as job opportunities were concerned.

H: You mentioned over-specialization and I know there has been some concern among historians about the fact that much of the literature these days seems to be aimed only at other historians. We seem to be getting away from the old narrative style of historical writing. Have you been concerned about that?

F: I have always said that there is not much use writing history if nobody reads it, and I think there has been some decline in the quality of writing and in laying out broad and meaningful themes. But you can do that with a fairly narrow subject, I think, if it is done right. There is no doubt but that we have had a lot of quantitative history. Historians have developed models and all kinds of mathematical formulas to prove this or that and I think some good has come out of this. The trouble is no one can read it except other historians and in many cases even they cannot grasp it unless they have had a proper mathematical and computer background. I guess we can subsidize enough works of that nature so they get some circulation, but I think one of the tasks we have as historians is to write something that a broader public is going to read. I think we ought to go back to more narrative history. Of course, that is all I know how to write and that is all that I have ever written, so I am

probably prejudiced.

H: There is much concern these days about the quality of education in general, not only at the college and university level but down to the level of high school and grammar school. If you had an opportunity to revise or reform our educational system to make it more effective, what would you do?

F: I think that education, to a large extent, begins in the home and I think what has happened to the family in the last generation has done a great deal to lower the quality of education. We tend to generalize from our own experience and I know that is not right, but when I was young, parents seemed much more interested in education. The old country school was pretty well structured and it had parental support. The children did not go home to empty houses after school and if we had homework to do at night our parents made us do it. So it seems to me that our problems are not just in education, they are in society at large. We have seen the disintegration of the family as one factor. I think, too, that our worst schools are in areas of poverty and concentrated populations. That combination of numbers and poverty cannot provide very good support for education. Consequently, we have a great deal of delinquency. In some of the urban schools twenty percent of the pupils are absent every day. You can have the best teachers in the world, but they cannot deal with that problem. The teacher cannot make students come to school. So we've got these broad social problems that affect education. On the other hand, students in a school comprised of middle or upper-class people, where the families are fairly stable, are getting a very good education. They are getting a lot better education in high school than I did in my little high school where there were

only thirteen in our graduating class. Our problems are generally in our big cities where we have a lot of poverty and a poor tax base. The conditions, it seems to me, are just not very good for a first class education in that kind of environment.

Now we have tried everything from magnet schools to two tiered systems, but what happens within the school itself can only partially solve the problem. I think that if we paid teachers more that we would attract better people into education, but I am not sure that paying current teachers more is going to help because if you doubled their salary they probably would teach about the same as they did before receiving the raise. I have said this repeatedly in my own case. When I was teaching freshmen and sophomores in the survey courses in American History at the University of Oklahoma in 1946, if they would have tripled my salary I would probably have taught pretty much the same the next day and the next year. What higher pay will do will be to draw better people into education in the first place, but it is not going to have much effect on changing people who are already there. It will make them more comfortable but it is not going to improve their teaching a great deal, in my judgment. I remember President George L. Cross at the University of Oklahoma once told me, "I think about half our faculty are underpaid and about half of them are overpaid." I got to thinking about that later and think he was right.

Years ago, about 1960, I was on the American Historical Association's Teaching Committee. We visited high schools with the idea of finding ways to help high school teachers do a better job. We found some excellent teaching going on, and in some cases it seemed better than in the colleges and

universities. But in some of the schools we visited, like a technical high school in Oakland, California, the students were asleep, lethargic, indifferent and could have cared less. I could not figure out what the teacher could have done to do a better a job than he was already doing. So I think we have got to have more societal and family support for education, and we have got to look at a great many things that are standing in the way of student performance. For example, they must at least be able to read when they finish high school. I think we have got some real problems, but I also think there are some signs around the country that we are doing better. Down in Georgia the past president of the University of Georgia now heads a program funded by a group of businessmen to train teachers in science and math. So, I think we are seeing some good things, but we have a long way to go.

Back in the 1950s and maybe in the early 1960s, we had a two tier system in a lot of the high schools but it was thrown out in most places because it was considered undemocratic and it hurt students' and parents' feelings. But I strongly favored this. Every student in America does not need to know advanced math and science, but we certainly need a lot of people who do and I think we ought to separate these so that they are not held back by students who have no interest in these subjects and keep the classes from really doing much of anything. I have always favored a two tier system where the students that really want to learn and are bright and want to go ahead can be given the opportunity. Out of that group then, I think we will get your leaders and enough math and science people to meet the needs of the nation. If this sounds elitist, it comes from a one time poor farm boy who

arrived at that conclusion many years ago.

H: President Bush in his State of the Union message, mentioned his desire that by the year 2000 we have got to be the best in the world in science and math and all adult Americans must be literate. Those are certainly laudable goals but in view of the problems we face in education, how optimistic are you that that can be done? And what about the humanities? I do not recall that he mentioned the need for emphasis on the humanities in his speech.

F: I am not optimistic that we will reach such goals by 2000. A decade goes by pretty fast and nothing is more difficult to change in our society than education. You do not have to have been a university president to know that. You do not even have to be a department chairman to know that it is hard to get changes at the college level where it is easy compared to the secondary schools. But I think if we keep talking about the need to attack the problems wherever we can that we will make some progress. We did it back in the late 1950s and 1960s when we emphasized science and math and foreign language and some other things that the government supported. At that time we gave special training to teachers and I think we can do these things again. We may not do it on that broad a basis, but I think if we indicate that these are our goals and we want to achieve them, we will have some impact. We will make some progress. I would not think we would do it in a decade, but we are turning out some very good high school students, and I think that this will continue although it seems that there is scarcely a school district in the United States that is not in some financial trouble. But if we get the leadership at the top to set goals, and if

we get administrators and teachers who say this is what we have got to do, and if we get parents and communities to support it, I think we will make some real gains. But I do not believe we will do it by the year 2000.

H: Let's turn our attention to your writings. Let's talk first about *The Farmer's Frontier*. When you were researching that book and when you wrote it, did you think of yourself as being influenced in any way by Frederick Jackson Turner?

F: I do not think so. I have never had any great theories of history or any great philosophical or interpretative models. My view of history is a lot less grand than that. Most of us go along from day to day trying to make a living, to raise a family and participate in community affairs. We help build communities and these somehow all come together as a nation. I do not have any grand theory to tie this process of nation-building all together. So far as Turner's thesis is concerned, when I was writing *The Farmer's Frontier* I might have been influenced to some degree as a result of my earlier studies, but I did not try to fit what I was doing into Turner's ideas. I was concerned about how and why people moved into the West, how they saw the conditions they faced, how they met these conditions, and how they adjusted to the environment when they arrived on the High Plains or when they got to the Rocky Mountain area. I was concerned about things like the development of irrigation, for example. I tried to take more of a people or grass-roots approach than anything else. I wanted to write about the rush of people in the 1880s into the Dakotas, for example, and what they found there and whether or not they succeeded. I wanted to deal in the same way with the rest of the West, with the Kansas and Nebraska

frontiers and West Texas and western Oklahoma and then on to the Pacific coast. It was the farmers who actually settled the western lands of this country. The fur traders, cowboys, miners and others had been there earlier but they hadn't really settled the country. It was the farmers who did that. They were the people who I wanted to write about and I found, of course, that they brought their institutions with them which were not much different than in the states further east. They did undergo some modification as a result of the environment, space and lack of rainfall and things like that, but in general I did not see a lot of difference between a community let's say in Central Kansas and one in Central Indiana except for the difference in the environment. Of course I was concentrating on the farm communities and only that.

H: How did you develop the idea for the book, *American Farmers: The New Minority*? What were you attempting to accomplish when you wrote it?

F: *The American Farmers* book was published in the early 1980s after I had been working in agricultural history and farm policy for more than thirty years. It was an outgrowth of a lot of other things I had done. My book on *George Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* had gone into the agricultural problems of the 1920s. I had done a number of articles on different agricultural matters and then in the 1950s I had written *The Agricultural Regions of the United States* in which I looked at farming as it was at that time in the United States, and the revolution that was taking place in agriculture. Then I did *The Farmer's Frontier* and also a book on *Farmland Industries*, the big farmers' cooperative in Kansas City, and had looked at farming from a business point of view. These studies had convinced me that it

was time to do an overview book that would deal with the changes that had taken place in American agriculture, and what had been responsible for those changes in the twentieth century. The increased productivity of American farmers and the decline in the farm population is, I believe, one of the most important things that has happened in American history. That is, the shift from a rural America to an urban America, and all that implies is of tremendous long-term importance to the nation. When I conceptualized "American Farmers," which is all I called it at first, I wanted to show what the farm problems had been, how they had developed in the 1920s and 1930s particularly, how the government had entered the picture, what changes were brought about, particularly after the 1930s, the mechanical and chemical revolutions and so forth. Then I wanted to see what this all added up to and what had happened to farmers. I found, of course, that agriculture had been declining in relation to the rest of the economy practically every year since the 1920s. In the 1950s particularly there was a great decline in the number of farmers and that continued at a somewhat slower pace in successive decades. I wanted to analyze why that happened, and then try to conclude where agriculture stood near the end of the century. The more work I did, the more obvious it was that this group was becoming one of the great minorities in American history even though people do not normally think of farmers as a minority. Thus I came with that title *The New Minority*.

H: As that idea developed in your mind did you come to think of the farmers as a minority suffering from discrimination or were you not thinking of them in those terms?

F: I do not know that I was thinking

of it in those terms, but I had always believed that farmers were discriminated against in the sense that they were one of the few major businesses in the American economy that had no control over the prices they had for commodities and no control over the prices they received for their products. Now, that was no big problem for farmers as long as they were self-sufficient, but as they were drawn more and more into the commercial economy, and as they sought to raise their living standards, this became extremely important, even crucial. Before 1920 farmers did not have a large cash outlay. They raised much of their own food. A midwestern farmer, for example, had livestock for meat, milk, butter, and chickens for eggs, as well as a vegetable garden. He usually had something to sell and got along pretty well. He had few if any regular bills. But when farmers began to modernize they found themselves in the same position as the people in town. After the REA went in they had a light bill every month. When they used tractors they had a gasoline bill. Earlier they did not have any fuel bills because they fed their horses the oats they raised. When farmers had to sell crops and livestock to get money to buy electricity or gasoline, they found themselves in an unfair bargaining position. Farmers complained about this even as early as before the Civil War, although the problem did not become really serious until the 1920s and the 1930s. Then farmers began to buy gasoline and other cash items that they had to have to operate. I had always believed that farmers should have a standard of living equal to that of people in town. But if they were going to have all of the modern conveniences, they had to have a steady cash flow to pay for them. So I became convinced early, and I think

correctly, as the statistics show, that farmers were paying more than they should have for things that they had to buy and receiving less than they should have from the things they sold. This occurred mainly because they had no control over overall production. Prices are determined by several factors, but control over production is very important in determining the price of a commodity. As I went through this study, it seemed to me that this disparity between farmers and the non-farmers was becoming greater. Exceptions to this situation were during World War II, and the Korean War when prices went very high for farmers and in the 1970s when there were unusual demands overseas for American food. If you look back to the 1920s, these were the only three periods when farmers were genuinely prosperous from then until now.

H: You have also written on the changes in southern agriculture over the last decade in *Cotton Fields No More*. As you look at southern agriculture and the changes it experienced as compared to Great Plains agriculture, what are the main differences that you see?

F: People on the Plains and in the Midwest were never as poor as they were in the South, except in the depths of the Great Depression in the 1930s when farmers everywhere had extremely low incomes. But overall there was a considerable difference in income because the Plains farmers had larger operations and produced more. The South was a peculiar situation, of course, because of the former slave population. The whites by and large owned the land and blacks had to adjust to whatever the owners demanded. In most cases the landowners required a black family to farm about 20 to 40 acres of owners land. Those operations were too small to produce a decent

living in most parts of the South. Also the landlords insisted that share croppers grow cotton because it was always a saleable crop. The sharecropper could not steal it because there was only one or two places where it could be sold and he could not eat it as he could corn or some other grain or vegetable crop. And so, the landowners wanted all of their tenants and sharecroppers to raise cotton. This situation continued down to the eve of World War II. But during World War II literally thousands of people left southern farms for jobs in industry. With a scarcity of labor, southern landowners consolidated their holdings, bought machinery, hired tractor drivers and other operators and farmed the land themselves. So there was a big movement starting on the eve of World War II of consolidation of farms in the South, mechanization, and before very long, the introduction of new crops, particularly soybeans. The great change that took place after World War II in southern agriculture was two-fold. One was the increase in livestock production because of development of new grasses for the South, and the other was the introduction of soybeans which took the place of cotton on many farms. By the 1970s there was relatively little cotton grown in the Southeast's old cotton belt, except in the Mississippi delta. In the uplands of Alabama and Mississippi and Georgia, once a giant cotton area, very little cotton was being produced. Those farms had switched over to cattle, and other crops. What brought about this

change in southern agriculture was the loss of cheap labor as whites and blacks both left the farms, during and after World War II, and the development of modern farming methods. So you had the development of larger farms in the South just like you did in the Midwest and the Great Plains. By the 1960s and 1970s there were more similarities in the major farming regions of the country because the same forces were at work all over the nation in mechanization, the use of chemicals, improved crop and livestock breeding, and better management. Also with the increase of poultry and cattle production the livestock economy was more significant than ever before in the South, at least since colonial times. The South was brought into the national mainstream in agriculture.

H: As you look back from the viewpoint of more than forty years, how do you view your career in agricultural history?

F: We know that agricultural and rural history is not a field that attracted many scholars. However, for me the study of agricultural history has been most interesting and rewarding. Indeed, I have had something of a love affair with the history of American agriculture. Farmers have historically played a very important role in American society - in the economy, in national values, and in many other ways. I think that urban Americans need to understand this better. I hope my books and articles have in some small way contributed to this needed understanding.