

FREMONT SCHOECK

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Interviewer: Damian Macey, Marshall Public Library Oral History Project.

D: I am here today with Fremont Schoeck. He did not grow up in Marshall but he has some interesting stories about his youth, his job and what brought him to Marshall. So with that, Fremont, you are on.

F: I was born and raised on a grain and livestock farm around St Jacob, Illinois which is in Madison County. I went to high school at St. Jacob High School and then I went to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and got my degree in plants and soils. While I was going to college, I got a solar internship with, at that time, the Soil Conservation Service which is a part of the Department of Agriculture and it's now the Natural Resources Conservation Service. I graduated and went to work for them full time in 1958. I started out in Martinsville which was my first permanent location. I was there for several years.

We worked with all of the farmers in Clark County, I worked with Bob Slater who was the technician and I think we made a really good team. And we really had a good time doing our jobs. I never, ever, didn't want to go to work in the morning !!

D: So your work was with all the farmers in Clark County?

F: Yes, we worked with any farmer or landowner or land user. And one of things we did county-wide was to help with the Mill Creek Park which was a flood prevention project. So it protected the bottom lands from flooding and we worked with the county and decided that one of these retention dams would make a nice recreational lake. So we had people come in to tell us what would happen to the county economically and so forth if we had a big lake. And the county then established the County Park Board and that is who financed the local part of the cost of the Mill Creek Watershed Project. And all of the recreational parts were cost shared by the US government.

D: And I think that is a real thing of seeing an idea that has come to pass.

F: And it was hard to believe that that set of people who had worked with type of thing and knew what it would do for the county. And it's hard now to think about all the money that is spent out there now with all the boats and recreational things that use that lake.

D: And a lot of the boats that use that lake are not from Clark County.

F: And they are paying a tax to the county which is good. And it's hard to believe that that was done back in the 1970's. And now look at it. When I left Clark County they were just getting ready to build the big dam in Clarksville. I had decided that I wanted to go into management. I went to Kankakee and I worked for two years and then I worked as an agronomist for seventeen or nineteen counties.

And then I transferred to Indiana as an area conservationist and was then a supervisor over one fifth of

Indiana which was really really interesting and that was a good job and I loved it. We were at Kendalville, IN and then we moved to Huntington, IN and then we moved to Jasper, IN and my last station was at Greencastle, IN. And luckily I had a wife who didn't mind moving. In fact, I came home from work one day and she said when are we going to move again, and I said I don't know and she said the closets were getting full and it's time for move. You know they say the three moves is equal to a fire. I think we lived in fourteen houses in 41 years. But it was fun all the while.

Then when I retired from Greencastle, you wonder why we came to Marshall...our kids were all born and raised in Clark County and they all went to Martinsville High School, the oldest two boys graduating from Martinsville High School and then our third son, graduated from Bradley Bourbonnais High School up by Kankakee, and then our daughter, the youngest graduated from Kendalville High School. Then as the boys started finding girlfriends, and would get married, we would leave them behind. We scattered kids from Columbus, OH to north of Fort Wayne, IN. One of the boys now live in Pennsylvania and our daughter is a nurse in Indianapolis. I had none of the kids with me when I decided I wanted to come back to Marshall. I think it's the best spot in Illinois. I still have a soft spot for Martinsville. But we bought on Marshall because I knew that property probably sold a little better.

D: So what year did you actually come back to Marshall?

F: Gosh, I don't know, it's been 20 years I would guess.

D: So after 20 years, this does feel like "home".

F: Oh, yeah, it is home and I have so many friends here in Marshall and Martinsville and my daughter will be the person who selects the nursing home for me, you know they say be nice to your kids because they are the ones who select your nursing home. But she has said they won't ever move me as long as I have my friends here. I have someone to go to lunch with almost every day of the week. And now I have fulfilled one of the things on my "bucket list" ..I am going to be a driver for the Shriners who take children and their parents to the doctor for treatment.

D: Where will these hospitals be?

F: They have three of them...it depends on what the problem is. They could either go to St. Louis, Cincinnati or Chicago. The burns are in Cincinnati, deformities like feet that are turned in or bone deformities go St. Louis and what goes to Chicago, I don't know. I am just getting started in this, so I don't know all about it. I just think it will give me a warm feeling to see kids being helped.

D: So these won't be emergency cases.

F: No, as I understand it, it is kids who really can't get what they need in Terre Haute or Indianapolis. And I forget how many hospitals the Shriners have all over the United State. And there is absolutely no cost to the parents. We pick them up, take them to their necessary hospital, take them to lunch, they see the doctor and we pick them up and take them home, all at the cost of the Shriners. Anybody who is a Mason can be a Shriner.

D: So how does a child get registered or qualified for this service?

F: Just ask a Shriner. They have a little card that they sign and Glen Jones has been in charge of this and we lost him a couple days ago. But my understanding is that that is all you have to do. And it's not actually true that they don't pay anything...I think the Shrine takes the insurance and pay half, but the parents don't pay anything.

D: Do they have to have some affiliation with a doctor.

F: Now that I don't know...I would assume...it might be that they don't have insurance and can't really go to a doctor. I don't know about that. I still have to learn all the facts and information. But I have always liked kids, I've coached little league for twenty years, even before I had kids. It was kind of interesting...we had a guest minister at church and she married a boy from Martinsville, and when I walked into the church, he saw me and told his wife that I had taught him how to play baseball...and that just warmed my heart.

D: Is there an age range for these children?

F: For the most part, I think they are all fairly young. And I am not sure about that, I still have a lot to find out. But I think that when they are young is when they would need the services.

D: Do you take them in your own vehicle?

F: I can take them in my own, the Shriners have cars or they can rent cars, like from Terre Haute or you can take their own car. They spend millions and millions a day on this and I guess their doctors are the best you can get.

D: It would be nice to know after you get into it how it works and to hear about some of your experiences.

F: Yes, I would be glad to do that, I have had people share their stories with me.

D: So is your commitment for like a year or...

F: I think it's open-ended. When I get to the point when I can't or don't want to drive anymore, people who do this are usually retired people so they are not real young people. And I love to drive...I drive all over the United States to see my kids.

D: Did you have to take some kind of qualifying test...is there some criteria you have to meet?

F: No, but they do a pretty good search somehow, I'm not sure. But I did fill out some forms and gave them driving history and insurance information. I took a whole bunch of papers over to Terre Haute to the temple and I'm curious to hear from them. The first trip I will go with somebody so there is a training period.

D: Now if you take someone to say, St. Louis, is there time frame...do take them and leave them and go back?

F: We usually do it in one day but if they have to stay, we put them and the driver up in a hotel. But I think most of the time, it's a one day trip.

D: Where is the center for the Shriners that takes care of this sort of thing?

F: I don't know, for this area it is East St. Louis. Now there is also a temple in Terre Haute and I think that the Clark County members do some things with the Terre Haute group since we are so close.

D: Chicago isn't close either.

F: We had a meeting the other night and this Clark County Shrine club raised thousands.. at local events, and all that money goes to the hospitals. The Casey group raises thousands of dollars at their fish fry and other events.

D: So many people are probably not aware of how that money is used.

F: And they don't advertise...the other day somebody said, why don't you advertise like they do down at the hospital in Memphis that Danny Thomas started? And I said probably because we have members all over the United States and they are doing it one on one, rather than raising money from a central spot. And you don't have to be rich to be a Shriner if you want to donate \$100, fine but if you can only give \$5. that's fine too.

D: Every dollar counts.

F: That's right.

D: With your background in St. Jacobs, do you still have family in that area?

F: I have a brother that still lives down there. All his boys have moved away but he and his wife are still down there on the farm. I sold my part of the farm to him. This is the closest I've been to him since I graduated from college.

D: What is his name?

F: Norman, he has had some really bad health lately but he seems to be getting along pretty well now. Yeah, St. Jacobs was my home and most of the stuff and all of the schooling was because I had an ag teacher who was a mentor to me. He's the one that talked me into taking agriculture and so I thank Mr. Launius for what I have done.

D: You think he steered you right, then.

F: Yes

D: What was his name?

F: Delmar Launius.

D: Did you keep in touch with him?

F: I did for a long time , of course he has passed away now. He and my dad were good friends. If you remember Paul ...what was the representative from Charleston?.. he ran for president once but anyway, Mr. Launius and this guy were really good friends and my dad got to know him too. This man ran for president.. or maybe in the primaries...my dad had a wheel chair and on the back of it he had "vote for Paul (can't think of his name)" . I can still see my dad going down the hall with that sign on the back of his wheelchair.

D: So did you get involved in politics then?

F: No, you know working for the US government you can't. And sometimes that was good because you get a big mouth and criticize and they say. "why don't you run for it then? And they suggested we not get into anything political even like school boards because there is always two sides and it was just recommended that we stay out of political matters. But like the water shed, there were people against that and probably for good reason but the will of the people is what we go by.

D: Now when you were here, were you located in the Martinsville office?

F: Yes, it was in Martinsville, you know Clark County was funny because it had kind of an agricultural battle going on who lives in Martinsville and who lives in Marshall, and then there was Casey out on the edge. But it was mainly Martinsville and Marshall and so Martinsville got the USDA and Marshall got the Extension Office.

D: Who was the Director of the office at that time?

F: I was. Well, we had two agencies, the other agency was the Agricultural Stabilization. And that would have been Bob Seed and Paul Newton. They would have been the heads of that organization and I was head of the Soil Conservation Service or USDA. I got to work with a lot of..Joe Kemp, Lawrence Lycan, George Murphy... the people that were the "movers and shakers" for the county. We worked with the City of Marshall, it was so nice to get to work with all these people. There's a lot of good people in Clark County, that's another reason I came back.

D: Sounds like you contacts were all positive people. And Paul Newton just retired and has moved to Marshall.

F: Lyman Shawler, down at West Union, he was a big influencer, anytime we could go to a meeting and talk about the water shed we did. And I worked with the ag teachers. I'm glad they finally put something up at the park with his name on it because he really worked for that, more than probably anybody I know of.

D: Well, just like you were talking about earlier, it's amazing how these things happen and people are just not aware of all the behind the scenes things that take place to get things done.

F: And that's why when I watch TV I love to watch the programs that have the politics. How you work with things and people.

D: From the Martinsville office, where did you go?

F: I went to Kankakee and worked at the area level there. It was like 18 to 20 counties. And it was like a training thing before I went to be an Area Conservationist where I was running things. And then I did that in three areas of Indiana.

D: Are there particular frustrations as you thing back...and think "oh my gosh I wish I hadn't gotten involved in this or that?".

F: Yeah, when I first started out, in the first twenty years, we worked with farmers and land users because they wanted us to, they would ask me "would you stake off and do a terrace system" and we would say, sure be glad to. And then the USDA got into it and it got to where they were forcing people to do some of these things and it wasn't as much fun because we had to do things that I really didn't like to do but you had no choice.

D: Then you had to be a "Mr. Nice Guy"

F: Right, and we helped people, you know whenever there are rules and regulations and you don't know all of them, that can't be helped. I had one man who was just giving us "heck" and come to find out, what we helped him do solved his whole problem. But you know, he just drove off and never even thanked us. You know that working with the public can be a thankless job.

D: And you can try and try but there is no way you can please everyone.

F: Like even the President of the United States...only 53% of the people like you !! And it's the same for the governor or whoever it is.

D: Knowing what you have done in the past and those wonderful experiences, in today's environment do you think you would like to go back.

F: I don't think I could do as much good as I think I did then, we did a lot of drainage work for the county and nowadays that is not very well looked at by the environmentalists. But we were helping them drain cropland, not swamps or anything that had ecological value really. And that really improved the income for the farmers. We put in like 40 miles of surface ditches in fields for people.

D: So that converted some scrap land to farmland.

F: Yeah or maybe land that was only getting 30 bushels to the acre, and after you drained it you got 60 or more. Back then 100 bushel corn was unheard of.

D: My dad owned a grain elevator in Martinsville.

F: Yeah, we just lived two blocks from him.

D: And I remember...this would have been early 1950's anyway... he came home one day for lunch and someone had brought if 100 bushels to the acre and they said that was just unheard of ... it was a new record and so it was a different environment then.

F: And now it's 200 bushels. They used to have herbicides and pesticides and they were poisonous and they did all kinds of things to the birds...now you can almost drink the stuff !! And all it will kill is a certain weed.

D: But even now there is a lot of controversy.

F: Yes, and there always will be, agriculture in my lifetime .. you know soybeans have gone from 30 bushels an acre to 80 or 90 bushels. I can't believe it.

D: And at that time no one had heard of something called GPS in a tractor.

F: Yeah, and that blows my mind, how they can do that. And you drive down the road and look at those corn rows.

D: Also you have seen a tremendous difference in the cost of the farm equipment and expense.

F: Oh yeah, \$500,000 for a piece of equipment is nothing. I can remember when I was little, my dad was a mail carrier and my brother and I did all the disking and dad would do all the planting when he got done with the mail route and he would use a 2 bottom plow. That would have been when I was 9 or 10. Then when we got a three bottom plow we really thought we were "it". Now they do 35 feet at a time.

D: The price of the land has gone up a little too, hasn't it?

F: Yeah, went from \$200 an acre to whatever you want to give. I guess there is some acreage that has gone for \$8000 or \$9000 an acre. But like somebody said...they ain't gonna make no more land.

D: Some of those fields that I can think of as a youngster, are kind of clay soil and you get a little warm weather and that corn would just fire. And now, you can get some pretty good corn off that.

F: And most of that is due to their tillage. They plow that all up and put the residue down underneath and the residue is mixed up through all of it and it keeps the moisture in there. Clark County will always do better in a dry year than a wet year because we have predominately clay soils. If you go between here and Paris, and when you get to the hill, that is where the glacier stopped.

D: And that soil is dark.

F: Then you have a better soil that grows more crops.

D: I am always amazing that when you go up around Arthur, and you see the Amish with their horses, and their fields just look horrible.

F: Yeah, one of the areas I worked in was in the northeastern part of Indiana and about a third of that county was Amish and we worked with those people. We helped them go to no-till planters and we would take them out on trips to Pennsylvania where they would see inventive type things. That was another thing in Clark County, we knew who the inventive farmers were, the Arnett Wrights, George Murphy, Lawrence Lycan, those kind of people would always try something, might just be 10 acres but

they would be willing to try something. And Mack Strohm, David Schiver, they are all over the county.

D: Did you have a particular project that you liked to work on, you mentioned drainage and tiling. Was there something that you really wanted to do more than anything else?

F: The least likable thing I did was be on TV. And being close to Terre Haute, the area I was in went all the way over to Vandalia, so if somebody over there had an appointment to ...we had a spot with Wayne Jenkins and if somebody was sick or something, they would call me and ask me to do it. And I got to where I could do it but, I always said I must have a good heart because I could get through that without falling over dead. And Wayne Jenkins had a favorite thing.. he would set you down and visit with you and you would tell him about what you were going to talk about and then he would go upstairs and do the weather and he would say that if he didn't get back down, just go ahead and start on your own. That just made me really nervous but I never had to start on my own.

But I don't know if there was anything that I really did like especially, like I said I was just always ready to go to work and do my job. There was always something new, Bob Slater was a gem to work with and very smart and very likable. It was funny...one day we had a man come in and it was my turn to help out and Bob had loud voice and I asked the man if I could help him and he said "No, I want the other man, I can hear him." I think that was the only time someone didn't want me to help them. I always wished I had a better speaking voice. One of the things I did when I became an area conservationist in Indiana was that I taught how to do public speaking to all our employees, probably 150 of them. I had classes all over Indiana on how to do public speaking and that helped but I have never really had a good public speaking voice. And to this day, when I answer the phone the person will say, "Is your husband there?"

D: In your schooling did you have some public speaking classes?

F: No, not really, and I'm not sure how I got into that job but I think teaching others helped me to be a better speaker. I have never liked speaking in front of a lot of people. When we moved back to Marshall, I told the preacher that we had, that I would not do any public speaking. It wasn't fun when I had to do it and I didn't want to do it again.

D: In all your jobs that you have had during your career, is there a particular person who really influenced you...I know you mentioned your ag teacher.

F: When I left Clark County and went up to Kankakee and the guys' name was Bob Smith and he was the Area Conservation list there and Bob was a mentor of mine. To the point that he worked with my wife and I and I remember that he must of thought we would be moving a lot because he told us to always buy our appliances at Sears ...little things like that he helped us with. And then I tried to get an Area Conservation list job in Illinois and you have to vie for those and write essays and stuff. And I couldn't get on in Illinois and Bob was gone and this job opened up and they sent out bids in Indiana and I filled the application out and darned if I didn't get chosen. And the guy that chose me was an old Navy veteran, Buell Evans, and he was a very strict, and his personality was to be very demanding. And everybody in the state office was afraid of him. And they told me just be very careful about what I did,

do things by the book, but he and I got along great. I had a lady that worked for me and she was just mean and she said to me one day... if you don't get me some help, I am going to quit. Well, there was no way I could give her any help so I just handed her the resignation form, and I told Buell that, and he laughed and thought that was the funniest thing. He said she had run over so many people, it was kind of a training area. But she just put the form in her drawer, I knew she wasn't going to leave.

And at the same time, I had an engineer from North Carolina and he was the nicest man that you could ever find, he did stuff in slow motion. I had engineers and agronomists on my staff, maybe as high as 20 people working out of my office.

D: Going back and looking over your experience, is there a particular event in United States or World history that has made an indelible impact on you?

F: I think one of the things ...the Soil Conservation Service, the head of the Soil Conservation Service, was always a person who came up through the ranks and then when President Ronald Reagan was in, they changed it to where that position was an appointed position, and I think that was probably one of the biggest changes that affected us. Because we had to please that person and we were being guided by that person who had been put in by that administration.

D: Would those people be more theoretical rather than practical ...maybe they really didn't know what was taking place.

F: Yeah...they would think this is what we want done but they didn't really know how to do it. And sometimes they weren't good administrators. One of the people we had came in to Fort Wayne, I had to go pick him up, and he had just gotten the job, he was from Texas and he was a cowboy...I think his mommy and daddy probably put a lot of money in...that is how they could do it... and he had bought two new suits and he had never had them on, and one of them, the cuffs, were like six inches deep...he just was not something for the public but he ended up being the nicest guy. He stuck around a long time, even after they changed politics. So that was a big change where before we all did our own thing. And it did probably influence who in our department went on up, although they did suggest that you not get involved in political things.

D: You have seen a lot of things change over the years in terms of inventions, what would you say is the most significant invention that you could say that you just couldn't live without?

F: Well, I think in farming it would be the no-till planting system. I live out by the golf course and they will hit it once with a disk and then plant it and in one day all those fields are done. And the GPS and being able to plant 36 rows at a time, monitored by a computer. I don't remember when the John Deere dealer, Flowers, and we came out with a chisel plow and we were promoting keeping some of the residue on the top of the soil. And I asked Bob Flowers if I could come to one of their meetings and explain the chisel plow, and he said no, we have a disk and plow that works, we don't want the chisel plow. But it wasn't more than 2 or 3 years that we were seeing chisel plows. And Bob was very progressive, it wasn't that he was against that, it was just John Deere that said we want to sell plows.

D: What invention in your home?

F: I think the TV. These days you can watch them do anything, being a Cardinal fan, I can watch the Cardinals. You know, the kids have grown up watching TV, maybe too much sometimes. But I have had a really fun life, I have enjoyed everything I did.

D: If you were in a foreign country, what would you say about Marshall as far as why it is a good place to live?

F: Well, first I would tell them there is about 4000 people here, we elect our own people who make decisions for the citizens, we know the manager and the people who run our stores and businesses, I personally like knowing most of the people in my town. The traffic isn't bad, you don't have to lock your car when you are shopping, etc., you develop so many friendships which last a lifetime. I don't know how different these things would be in Europe. I have been to Germany and I loved the day when they put all their wares out on the street to sell, and you can barter too.

D: Well, Fremont, it's been delightful talking to you, I'm glad you had the time to spend with me and tell about all the jobs and changes that you have seen in your life.

F: I have a little grandson who asked me to send him a letter with what it was like when I was in the fourth grade. And I went to a one room school at the time. And I thought of all the things that happened that year, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, so many things, we got AM and FM radio, later we went to the moon, we won't see that many changes in his lifetime, at least I don't think we will.

D: I remember my mother taught primarily in a one room school for many years and then other school, and she told the kids one time about space and planets, and said how it would be impossible to ever get to the moon. And then much later, she said she told her students that she had told them untruths because we did get to the moon.

Well, I have really enjoyed talking to you, Fremont, and we are so glad to have you as a part of the Marshall community.