

Oral History Interview with Walter Truman Spittler

July 19, 1997

Interviewed by Edith Howard

Edith: I am doing this interview for the Marshall Public Library Oral History Project. The purpose is to gather and preserve historical documents. Today is July 19, 1997. The location is the public library on Archer Avenue; and today I am interviewing Truman Spittler.

Truman: I am Truman Spittler, youngest son of David Spittler and Edna Kelly. I have two older sisters, Lillie Davison and Rose Arney, both preceded me in death, and two brothers, Luther Spittler and Kelly, and they are both deceased. I have two sisters who are living, Mary Macke and Margret Rhoads. Being the youngest member of seven and my dad being the youngest member of seven, I really don't know a whole lot of my family history. My mother passed away when I was nine. My grandparents, the Spittlers, came from Germany - the Alsace-Lorraine Area. I came from a long line of draft dodgers. Some people have chicken thieves in their family and other people have draft dodgers and soon and so forth. My grandfather's naturalization papers were signed by Louis the Fourteenth which means that he was a citizen of France when they actually lived in Germany. Great Granddad said he didn't relish the idea of one of his sons shooting at the other. So before they got to be eighteen years old he shipped them to the United States. And he came to the Chicago area where granddad worked as a carpenter and then walked from Chicago to Anderson Township. Why he walked across all that good prairie ground from Chicago to Anderson Township I'm not quite sure. I guess it was because there were trees to make log houses and streams and so on and so forth that he did.

The Kellys, as you might well know, came from Ireland. It had something to do with the potato famine. I can't really discuss that much. I know that two of the boys were the only ones who made it over here. I think one of them was seven and one was nine when they landed on the east coast. I know very, very, very little of the history of it. I have met some of Mother's people years ago in Missouri and that's about it.

My Dad bought a farm in Anderson Township - rather, my Granddad bought a farm in Anderson Township where my dad and his brothers and sisters were born and lived for many, many years. When he and mother were married they moved a half mile west and a mile south of there. The Spittler farm, the original one, was originally sold - has already sold. My wife and I just own a small portion of it.

I went to the Jackson School which was a little less than a half a mile up the road. I was very fortunate that we didn't have far to walk and also we had a good riding horse. All I had to do was ride him up there and jump off of him and he would come home. That's why I rode to school. The first year I went to my brother, Luther, and then I can't recall all of the rest of the teachers. There was George Horner, Rex Cork, a McNair lady, my sister, Mary, and there were probably some others that I don't remember. I went to Martinsville High School. I started in 1936. My sister, Mary, was teaching at the Prairie School at that time. She later on taught at Number One [school] and so that got us pretty close to Martinsville.

There were a group of us, the Kannmacher girls and some others, who went to Martinsville also. We were in a non-high school district so we could go either place that we wanted to, and I used to tell my good friends in Marshall that Dad was firm believer in public education, so he sent me to Martinsville. I would suggest that in doing that we went to Martinsville because we were just a whisker closer and because most of my friends went to school there. After graduating from high school I went to the University of Illinois for about four years. I graduated from the College of Agriculture and was very fortunate in that I was employed in Marshall as the Ag teacher in [19]44 and taught until [19]79. Some people thought that I was here for a hundred years. I told them it just seemed that way. I can't go to a farm meeting or to a meeting where there is anyone related to farmers but what I see a large number of my former students. I have very fond memories of them. We had a very active adult class and we had a very active young farmers' class. It was a very good experience and I had excellent people to work with and excellent work in education. There was very little turn-over in teachers. I've certainly seen a lot of things change.

My wife and I were married 52 years ago and we have two daughters, Kelly Lindley and Shannon Snedeker. They both teach at the North Side School. I am extremely fortunate that we had a very close home. My wife, Wanda, passed away last October the 29th. We lived out on the Clarksville Road. We moved - we built a new house about three years ago just off of the road about half a quarter from where we were. Then Sam built his restaurant across the road from us. I say Sam's Restaurant is across the road from us, not that we're across the road from Sam's.

I've always farmed a little until recently. A couple of weeks ago I sold the remaining farm equipment. It was difficult to sell because, as all of you know, farm equipment has changed so very, very much. I never... I farmed with horses at home. Dad was forty years old when I was born and he didn't buy a tractor for a few years after that, and so I was brought up in the horse and buggy days. And I was used to farming with horses. Dad had a tractor before I was out of school. We had one hundred and sixty acres of land and a pretty good part of it was rough. One of the assignments we had up at the university was to develop a farm plan. Their idea of a farm plan was a four year rotation - corn, oats, wheat, and hay. You put everything in either corn, oats, wheat, or hay. And if you wanted to pass the course, you put a four year rotation on it, you bulldozed out all of the trees, and you filled in all of the valleys. I took that down home and showed it to Dad and Dad said, "Whose place is this?" He didn't recognize the farm at all, of course. The only thing that was where it was supposed to be was the house. But I passed the course. And maybe that's the only reason I did.

I am very fortunate in being employed here at the Marshall High School from the fall of '44. [I've had] a very enjoyable experience here with good board members, good superintendents, and a good [group] of teachers. Marshall had a history of a good Ag program and I hope that I carried on with it. They have just recently employed a new man. I'm sorry that I can't recall his name, but I certainly hope that you give him the cooperation that you gave to me.

I won't begin to say the changes that we've seen. One of the last land marks down home were two great big oak trees that stood on Hurley Nichol's land. About four or five years

ago Marilyn had them cut because they were shading the ground and you didn't need a place to rest horses and keep them cool any more so she cut them. And I kind of gave her fits about it and she thought I was serious. I said, "Marilyn, the only thing that is stable in that whole half section was those two trees and then you cut them down." I said, "I can't even find my farm down there now." But we laughed some about it, but I couldn't find it just the same. But [there was] no gravel from the York Road out of Martinsville down to what is now Miller's Fertilizer and it was strictly dirt from there on home. There was a little dab of white rock scattered from the Leander Wright place to Marshall. And when I say a little dab, [it was] a very little dab. So travel was by horseback or horse and buggy. My oldest brother, Luther, rode a horse to Martinsville High School all four years. My brother, Kelly, and Mary drove a buggy. My folks and my family had to be firm believers in education because it took a lot of 'I don't know what' to get up bright and early in the morning and harness the horse and drive ten miles and take the horse to the barn and go to school and then come back at noon and feed the horse and so on and so forth. The first year my sister, Mary, taught she taught at America and she got fifty dollars a month. She had all... I don't know whether she had all eight grades or whether she just had seven grades. She did her own janitor work, started her own fires, and so on and so forth. And for fifty dollars a month you couldn't buy a car and you didn't have gas, so she drove a horse and rode horseback. The horse got so it knew the road pretty well and so did she. I think that she came home every night and fixed supper for Dad and I [all] but about three nights. Dad made her promise at that time that she wouldn't come home. But she said only if it wasn't going to be fit to. Our sister Rose only lived a couple of miles up the road from us.

I spent some time in the service in '43, I guess it was. '42 or '43. I can't remember. Nothing spectacular there. I was a victim of an obstacle course in North Dakota. That was my claim to fame.

Edith: Did you say Rose spent some time in the service?

Truman: No. None of the rest of my family were in the service. They were all the wrong age. Dad was too old... he had a family and was farming in World War I and was too old for World War II. I had some nieces and nephews that were in the service but that's it. Neither one of my brothers or my sisters were.

Edith: What was a one room school house like?

Truman: A one room school houses was just a typical - you've all driven past them. There was the Jackson School. You go down the Allright road down past the park. It was about eight miles down there. Just beyond the Anderson Townhouse the first road turns west past the townhouse and then the first road turns south. And I can recall as a kid that we would drive mares and colts and cows and calves and ewes and lambs from our house down to the eighty acres that Dad owned at the townhouse which was almost two miles away. Two of us could take all of the livestock that we had down there. Everything was fenced. The only thing that wasn't fenced was the Jackson School yard. So I had to ride along there and keep them from running in there and had to go up to keep them from running down my uncle's lane. Other than that, to the best of my knowledge now there isn't a piece of wire

fence between the two places now. We drove them down the road in the spring and back every fall because that was basically pasture land.

Edith: Do you recall how the classes were conducted in a one room school?

Truman: Classes in a one room school were ten minutes long - about ten minutes long. You had almost... well we had seven classes - seven grades. You'd have from one to six or seven - I think there were six in my class, maybe. You had a recitation bench and when they'd call for third grade arithmetic why all of the third graders would get up and go sit on the recitation bench and the rest of them would stay back at their seats. And we had a young man who had never been in a country grade school in his life and he came down there and started teaching. He was totally lost. I think we had spelling three times that year. And I still can't spell. Of course it wouldn't have made any difference because I wouldn't have been able - he probably couldn't have taught me how anyway because that's one of my many short comings. Friday afternoon we had what they called exercises. You divided the student body into two groups. They chose sides. You'd either... Part of it would be math. They would give you math problems. One competitor from each team took part. Or they would give you locations - places in the world - and you had to find it on a map and tell them what country it was in and so on and so forth. And they also had spelling. I had the booby prize for spelling. I suppose that they had one. We did that each Friday.

They had the tradition that, thank goodness, they have abandoned. That was locking the teacher out to make sure that - they did this for orneriness - but it was supposedly so that the teachers would treat all of the kids at Christmas. But all of the teachers always treated us anyway.

Edith: Where did you get your drinking water?

Truman: We had a well. In fact the well is still there. It was dug in the early thirties and then the State came along and said that it wasn't exactly as it should be and they made them dig around it and pour concrete down about eight feet and it... there's a pump there now and it was a good well and it was good water. And we were down the road, as I said, about a half mile and we ran out of water some times so we would haul water from the school house down to our house. And in extremely hot dry weather we would have to take live stock - take the horses up to the school house to drink.

Edith: Did you have a bucket in your school house that you drank from?

Truman: Everyone drank from one bucket and you had one ladle. Some of the more affluent kids had a tin cup out at the pump, but most of us just drank out of the ladle. I think we lived to be reasonably well.

Edith: How was the school heated?

Truman: The school had a great big wood or coal stove in the northwest corner of the building and there was just one - there was no fan. Of course there was no electricity and there was no fan. In extremely cold weather you could move up closer to the stove. It had a

big jacket around it that kept the heat from going right out from the stove, but I've seen that stove cherry red. It's a wonder that we didn't burn the school house down, but we didn't. After burning coal all winter in it the floor and the ceiling were the same color and my eighth grade I was going - no when I was in high school, getting ready to go to college, I didn't have any money, of course. I haven't improved that situation since then. But I got a job because my dad was on the school board, of washing and painting the Jackson School. Well, I washed that thing down and painted it for a buck a day and I thought I was wealthy. 'Course it did beat scooping limestone for Les Maxwell for a dollar and a quarter a day. That was when you hauled limestone on a flat bed truck and you had a lime spreader on the back end and someone attempted to stand up in the back end and scoop limestone in it. I was a sixteen or seventeen year old kid who weighed about ninety pounds soaking wet. Dad very seldom said no to me, but he said, "No, son, you're not going to do that. That just isn't work that you can do." So I didn't do it.

Edith: What about bathroom facilities at the school?

Truman: There were two outside toilets - boys' and girls' - and they weren't the most sanitary in the world. They were downstream from the well. They would mow the school yard with a team of horses and a horse-drawn mower. And if you went barefooted, why, you punctured your feet a number of times every day. Every year the first few days of school you had those stubble cuts when you sat down.

Edith: What about school lunches?

Truman: Mother sent... My oldest brother, Luther, taught my first two years, and she sent his lunch and mine. There was a family of very poor economic straits that lived close to us and Luther came home the first day and said, "Mom, those kids don't have anything to eat." And she said, "Well, we'll take care of that." So, Mother fixed lunches for five kids every day. Most of these children had just exactly the same food that I had. I don't know how they could have made it without her. There were a number of us living within the area that were poor. A man's wife was dead and he was living down there on a little old poor gobbler's-knob farm. It was next to impossible to make any money. I don't know how they did survive. There was nothing for them when their mother had been in the hospital.

Edith: Did they have a grade school graduation at that time?

Truman: We had to...no, I don't believe... I'm not sure... We had to go to town and take an examination and I was never so scared in my life. I, in the first place, wasn't used to going to the city of Martinsville. We went to the Martinsville study hall. That was the biggest room I was ever in in my life. They gave us that test and I was just sure that I had failed it, but I made it through.

There was a lot of difference in families and family relationships then. You've all heard this before, but I'll say it one more time. Usually the family all sat down together for breakfast, for dinner, and for supper. And at our home we always said grace. And at our home no one... you didn't sing at the table unless Dad was working down at the townhouse, and if he was working there it was too far to drive the horses home for noon. Then we kids would

sing. And I can remember mother saying, "Now what would your dad think if he came in the door?" Well, we knew what Dad would think if he came in the door. But Mother was more tolerant and as long as we didn't get too loud we could sing our own little church songs while we were eating.

Another thing that I remember that people find is quite strange is whenever any of us left the house we told whoever was there where we were going. If Dad was going up to Cap Jackson's to buy groceries he said he was going to Jackson's or going to Kannmacher's to buy groceries. If he was going up to help my uncle do something he'd tell him... he'd say, "I'll be back at such and such a time." And if Sis was going to town to a movie or what-have-you she'd say, "I'm going to Martinsville for a movie." and if I was going someplace I always told Dad where I was going. And we went where we were supposed to go and we got home when we were supposed to. I'd been in college first semester and I was just about as sharp as a senior could get. There just wasn't a whole lot that I didn't think I knew. And I approved of the method. Dad didn't ask us where we were going. We just volunteered. And I don't recall Dad ever saying, "No, you can't go." I don't recall Dad ever saying that. But we just volunteered the information. Sis was married and was away from home at that time. She and Arnold were married - Arnold Macke. And Dad and I had supper. We sat down and had supper and he could tell that I had cleaned up from doing farm work that day and was getting ready to go someplace. But I hadn't thought the whole thing through. I said, "Well, for eighteen years I've told Dad every time I walked out that kitchen door where I was going. I just don't believe that I'll tell him tonight." So, I won't forget this if I live to be a hundred. I got up from the table. Dad and I had a nice visit at the supper table. And I walked over and I took a hold of that door knob and I opened the door and started to step out. He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "Well, since you don't know where you're going, you won't know when you get there so you may go upstairs and go to bed." And an eighteen year old boy turned around very graciously and very quietly and walked up the stairs and went to bed.

One other thing that I remember was that Dad was very firm and he was very, very fair. He was a fine person. One New Year's Eve when I was home from college and Dad hadn't been feeling well - he really wasn't feeling well - so I had worked extremely hard that day. I was (?) and I was tired that night and sitting at the supper table. The telephone rang and a friend of mine from Martinsville called. He had a date that night with a girl in Marshall if he could find someone to come along for another girl. So he wanted me to go. I said, "No. I'm not driving to Martinsville to drive to Marshall to drive to Terre Haute." And he said, "I'll meet you in Marshall." And I said, "No. That sounds better, but it doesn't sound too good." He conned me in to it. And we had a clock at home that chimed on the hour and on the half hour. How dad could always tell whether it was twelve thirty, one, or one thirty, I don't know, but it had better not be one thirty. I walked in the house that night. The next morning I said... Well, when I walked through Dad's bedroom. That was back before it was a mortal sin to walk through someone else's bedroom. Parents and children shared bedrooms and brothers and sister and so on and so forth. Brothers shared bedrooms and sisters shared bedrooms and everyone shared the bath which was a half a block away. I knew that Dad was awake because he was always awake when I came up. When I got to the top of the stairs I said, "Well, Dad, it's forty two." And he said, "I believe that it is." And that's all that he said. He didn't say, "You were out a little late tonight." or anything else,

but he said, "I believe that it is." And I'd swear that I didn't have that bed warm - I went on down the hall and I got in my bed - and I didn't have that bed warm. Dad came in and said, "Truman, Uncle Henry is butchering today." And he wasn't my favorite uncle, anyway. And Dad said, "I don't feel like going. So you will have to go." And I said, "Dad, I don't feel very good either." And he said, "Well, the difference is that I'm not going and you are." And he wasn't out of the room until I was up and had my clothes on. I never put in such a miserable day in my life. And Scrap Spittler was there and Scrap and Uncle Henry fought the whole blessed day. It's a day that I will remember, and I will never forget Dad - at least I don't think that I will - saying that the difference is that you are going and I'm not. Now, if Dad had felt well he would have gone. Dad wasn't the kind of a person to send the boys out to do work. He sent the boys out and he went out with the boys to do the work. But I made my uncle suffer. I didn't go to his funeral. I saw Dad after the funeral and Dad said, "I didn't see you at Henry's funeral." And I said, "Well that's strange, 'cause I wasn't there." But all those are just...

My wife and I were married fifty-two years ago. We lived down on Dad's farm - Dad and Mother's farm - for two summers and we lived with Mattie Edens' one winter and then the Montgomery house on the corner of (?) and something. And we lived in the house next to Foster Blizzard's grocery on east Archer. We didn't move just because we couldn't pay the rent. We just moved to a better place or some reason. And we moved to a farm in the country. And we moved from the farm in the country and we moved back to a house in the city. Which seems kind of foolish now, but we did. We lived out north of where the book store is now. Ben Setzer's dad owned a place out there cat-a-cornered across from the English School. We lived out there one year.

When Wanda and I were married we moved to Anderson Township. My brother, Kelly, said that most of the months out of the year she wouldn't stay down there with you. 'Cause if you missed the mailman you missed the traffic of the day. The mail man was the only person. We were at the end of the road. Well, the road made a turn, but no one went straight on past there. If you missed John Richart - John was the mailman - if you missed him you missed the traffic for the day. And of course we only had one car, and I didn't really feel that I could walk to town on my feet. So I drove the car and Wanda sat at home all day by herself until I got home. And she didn't complain at all. She never did suggest that we move down there on a permanent basis. When Kelly and Shannon were both small, we were down past that house and I was telling them both the history and I said, "Wouldn't that be a beautiful place for a house back there?" and one of the girls spoke up and said, "Yes, but not for Mom." And I said, "Well, I'm not going to build one." Folks wouldn't have moved down here. Not that I could afford to do that, but I wanted to. Wouldn't that be a beautiful place? Yes, but not for my mom. And so that was... I had no idea that she was... And then we moved out here in I believe it was '48 and lived in that (?) place until '93. And then we built a new house. The girls were both away from home and Wanda didn't need the upstairs to take care of. We had modernized the house some. Someone said what did you do with all that stuff that you took out of that great big house now that you got the little house? I said well, the stuff that we moved into the big house forty-eight years ago that we hadn't unpacked we took directly to the dump. That wasn't true. But it wasn't a bad story. And I said that most of the rest of the stuff Wanda took to Casey to the auction. She would now have taken it to Jim Knowles'. One of the things that

she took to Casey to the auction was an exercise bike that she or the daughters bought for me. I said, "You sold my exercise bike?" She said, "When did you last ride that?" I paused for a minute and I said, "I think it was two years ago Christmas vacation." She said, "Now you know why I sold it." I said, "I kind of understand now why you sold the bike." But we had some wonderful memories out there. The two little girls were born there and grew up there. So when we got the other place it was hard to move. Six months ago or less I caught myself turning in to the wrong driveway. We sold the place to some very, very fine people - Carolyn and Charlie Tingley. They've kept the place up so very, very nice. Wanda was a lover of flowers in the ground and she took everything with good feelings. Everything that Carolyn has done to change the house is so nice on the inside. We couldn't be happier with our neighbors. They are excellent neighbors. And it's a little bit selfish, but, at the time, all I sold was the yard and the house. I said now I'm not going to sell five acres so that someone can pull seven to ten cars and an old beat up John Deere tractor and two or three hundred horses and four or five hundred hound dogs in the yard. I'm not going to drive past it. 'Cause I had seen that happen to too many people who had a nice home in the country and then sell it to someone and six months later... (End of side one)

Being from the Marshall area and Wanda being from the Marshall area - she went to Clarksville to school - I was extremely fortunate to get the job here in Marshall and I have had a lot of good luck. I've had a lot of luck, all of it good. The teacher before me had been caught hanky-panky-ing with a freshman girl which didn't go well. I couldn't quite understand that, but it didn't, and he also called the president of the board of education 'weasel face'. And that got back to the president of the board of education. And besides that, I had been in service and had medical discharge and was going to be called back in and was still reasonably warm, so they had no choice but to hire me. And then I say that I got my brother-in-law on the school board and got on tenure and so that's the reason that I stayed thirty-five years. I stayed thirty-five years because I wanted to and I hope that I (?) but I did have a lot of good luck.

Edith: What kind of projects did your Ag boys have?

Truman: The second daughter, Shannon, graduated mid-term and didn't get a teaching job mid-term, so she substitute taught. She would teach anything that they would ask her to and they could call at five minutes to eight and she'd be there at eight o'clock. Mr. Thompson, the high school principal called Shannon and said, "Shannon, can you come over and teach?" And she said, "Yes." He said, "How soon?" and she said, "Well, it would probably take me five minutes to walk over there." She got over there and he said, "You didn't ask what you were going to teach." She said, "It really didn't make a difference. That was what was available." He said, "You're going to teach Ag." So, I had been away from school five or six years and agriculture had changed quite a lot. She came home and she said, "Dad, it isn't like it used to be." I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Well, no one was building a hog house, and no one was building a wagon bed, no one was building a gate or feeders." I said, "What were they doing?" And she said, "Well, four boys were washing and waxing their truck and two boys were building a bluebird house." And I said, "I'm glad I'm not teaching." Now don't misunderstand me, Vocational Ag needed a change and it has changed and it's changed for the better. I would be totally lost in Vo Ag right now.

I don't remember the exact number of students in school - about a few over three hundred, I think, when I started to [teaching at Marshall] high school. Some people know more about that than I do. There were thirty-seven, I believe, in my high school graduation class. In Martinsville there was about a hundred and twenty-five or fifty that would be graduating. We had a lot of new subjects that you people here would know about. I went out to school the year after I quit teaching and I asked where the library was and some young smart-aleck teacher said, "You mean the learning media center." I said, "No, I mean the library." And we had that straightened up real quick. I found out that there was no longer a library; it was a learning media center. I believe that's the term that he used. [Hard to understand] It's just changed a lot - a lot of new teachers. I don't remember how many teachers we had on the staff at that time. I should have [Hard to understand] Mr. Hornbrook and Mr. Holler, and let's see - the Industrial Arts teacher, Mr. Findley, and there was Mrs. Quincely (?), the English teacher. Wilma Geisert was the speech teacher at that time. I believe that Mrs. Ralston was the Home Ec teacher. I'm not sure. Virginia Claypool also came, I believe, maybe the year that I did. Mrs. Hutchens was there. These people are going to say that they are much younger than me, but they're not. They were there when I came. They'd only been there one year. I don't remember that we had a staff [Hard to understand] There were big study halls and somewhat smaller classes. I was teaching there when the tornado went through and tore down the school. We were very, very fortunate that it happened on Saturday because it blew a portion of the back wall of the study hall in on the seats and people would have been seriously hurt.

Edith: Do you remember what year that was?

Truman: Along about 1948 - '46, '7, '8. I can't remember when they built the first.. it might have been in '48, but it was in the mid to late forties. [Hard to understand] Some people who were in school at that time will know more about this than I do.

I've enjoyed visiting with you people. I hope that when the time I'll have a chance to see it and add a little bit to this. Marshall has been very, very good to me. I've had no desire to leave Marshall for any place else. Part of the time [Hard to understand] It's been nice talking to you.