

Transcript with Omer Shawler

Interviewer Maury Miller, September 24, 2014

Transcribed by Donna Hawker Duzan, May 2016

M: So let me ask you, Omer, where and when were you born?

O: I was born in the south eastern corner of Clark County, December 4, 1926. Doctor Silas Weir was the medical doctor that delivered me at home. My father was Lareno known as Reno Shawler and my mother was Stella Thompson. And she was born down by the Zion Bridge down in Wabash Township on what is now the Ross Pine place. I was the last of five children. My dad was born in 1874 and my mother in 1888. My dad was a school teacher and taught at a school called East Liberty in Clarksville in the 1890's. In 1907 he went into the hardware and implement business in West Union in a building that has now been torn down. My first recollection of Marshall was riding my bicycle to Marshall from West Union in about 1937.

M: How old would you have been then?

O: I would have been about ten years old. My first recollection of Marshall was of Route 40 which went right through the middle of town and there were cars parked right in the middle of the street and there was also diagonal parking that went right through the center of town and there was a stop light at routes 1 and 40 which was Archer Avenue. But somebody, I won't say who in particular, ran into the stop light and knocked it down. Charlie Bush was about 50 years old and he was a staunch supporter of Marshall, went to high school in Marshall, played football, and went to Indiana State. He was an inspiration in our young lives and to my brother. He was a paratrooper in World War II. And we became acquainted at Indiana State. My father had been in the hardware and implement business and we sold JI Case farm equipment (some inaudible statements about small businesses at that time). Of course B F Johnson had a store here. It was called the Boston Store. He was a prominent businessman in Marshall at that time. It was a small loan company, it was on the left hand side of the street. The post office before the new one was built was on 6th street where Clark County Title is now. (inaudible about some Cole's who had a business) Sold land much like Marshall Loan Company (inaudible). My mind wanders here just a little bit, I am much like George Mitchell, someone told me one time not to ask him what time it is because he will tell you how a watch is made.

I'll go back to Marshall here, I graduated from grade school in West Union in 1939 and went to Hutsonville to high school the first year. I didn't want to go to Hutsonville to high school but my sister went there. My dad was born a Quaker and my mom a Baptist. My dad thought Marshall was "sin city" and was a bad influence on my sister so he thought it would be a bad influence on me. And there was no bus transportation from West Union to Marshall. And the second year, my sophomore year, I had gotten independent because my dad had been in the hardware and implement business for 27 years, and was a life president of the Western State Bank, he didn't work there but he was one on the board of directors, and the bank failed he had contributions back home (inaudible thoughts about this). He was 59 or 60 years old and took bankruptcy. So I had to work as a child. So we had a team of

horses. We didn't have a car or a tractor by the time I came along. _____ owed money. Then my sophomore year I said I was going to Marshall even if I have to walk. So in spite of these things I (inaudible). I just didn't like Hutsonville, I thought I could get a better education at Marshall. I had never made any friends, well I did have some friends. When I came to Marshall I was amazed at how gracious and kind and friendly all the school administration and students were to me. That was something I never had experienced in Hutsonville. Coming to Marshall was one of the best things I ever did because I have made life long acquaintances and I have practiced law since 1950 and was elected states attorney and served from 1956 to 1976.

I started my office, I rented from John Hollenbeck, in June of 1950. I didn't have a car, I didn't have any way to get to Springfield for swearing in services so a friend from school, John McNamara, and I was sworn in by Judge Dunn, a Supreme Court Justice (inaudible about swearing in). When I started practicing law I think I made \$16 in the first six weeks I practiced. John Hollenbeck was very kind to me and said I could pay rent whenever I had money available. Rent was \$75 a month when I started and I used his secretary also.

Going back to the hospital experience... when I came to Marshall seems like they were friendly and affable (inaudible) dad was a doctor born in about 1850 and he was 50 years old when Sam was born. I was elected president of my junior/senior class. I never planned to become a lawyer of a ??? town. But I still took the bar exam.. if you had equal semester hours to graduate. I took a extra load one summer so I could take the bar exam before I got out of school.

I got out of high school when I was 17 and in the summer I started to college, Indiana State Teachers College it was called then. I was working on the railroad for 63 cents an hour which was good pay back then. I made my first \$1000 working on the railroad (inaudible but I think talking about working on the railroad).

Well, I went to Indiana State the first semester and worked three days a week on the railroad, I worked as a section hand for \$5.04 a day. I went to classes Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Its unbelievable now, but it cost per semester was about \$32. By the time I had three of four years in at Indiana State I could transfer to law school. It took me five years to get my Master of Science degree at Indiana State. Then I graduated law school in 1950 with a degree in Doctor of Juris Prudence.

M: Where was the law school?

O: Law school was in _____ Illinois, a school that was established in 1869 and the law school, I'm not for sure why, but the building was called Lofton Hall (inaudible) corner of Light and Green St it had chimes in the top of it.

When I went to Indiana State at the end of the first year, I was going to be 18 in December (1944). I tried to enlist in the Navy the war was still on. I had my physical in Indianapolis and my blood pressure was high so I didn't get in. I was so very disappointed at that time, so many of my friends has enlisted. So I went back to Indiana State in October and in March they had the draft program. I was taken to Chicago, there was a passenger train from Marshall and West Union to Chicago. So I was put in a

hospital there, and I was classified as not able to serve. So I continued at Indiana State. I dropped out of school after two semester and I worked on the railroad (several inaudible thoughts)

Then when I dropped out of school that saved about \$400 and I realized that that wouldn't take me very far in the school year, I knew I wouldn't have enough to finish the school year. But one of the professors I had had for a couple semester recommended me for a job down at the Wabash Valley _____ Center which ran a buses from Terre Haute to Evansville locally owned by B S Sales, a coal broker. And there I made 45 cents an hour, minimum wage. I worked there for fifteen to thirty hours a week. I made twelve to fifteen dollars a week and could almost go to school and pay expenses with that income.

I continued to go to Indiana State until March of 1947. So I was there straight time from 1944 to 1947 and had my 3/4 years in to go to law school at University of Illinois. Fred Kannamacher was had been a classmate of mine and had also gone to school at Indiana State, I rode up to Champaign with him to law school. Also while I was in Indiana State I was a hat and coat check person at the Shriners City Club, for special gatherings and holidays when they had special events for Shriners and their wives. Anyway, I maintained my friendship with the Sam Dodds family. I had gone to high school with him, he had two daughters and a son, so my kids always had a place to stay if they couldn't get home. He got out of the service about 1945.

M: Let me catch up here, were you living in West Union still?

O: Yes

M: So you drove a car to college?

O: No I didn't have a car.

M: So how did you get back and forth to Indiana State?

O: I hitch-hiked or rode a bus. There was a bus, a Robinson bus, in fact the man that owned it was an older man to me, but in 1944 he went into the service, but there was a bus, like a stretch limousine, that had about room for 15 people and that's how I went to high school, it cost about 25 cents to ride the bus, and hitch-hiking was free. At that time students had no bus service in Marshall. You had to get to school the best you could. I know Bill Sax rode a horse to school, some rode bicycles. I never had an automobile until I was practicing law. I finished law school in June and took the bar exam in March. So John Hollenbeck (inaudible) in fact I didn't have the money to take the bar exam I told my dad I would like to borrow \$100, I needed gas to get to Chicago to take the test plus \$25 entrance fee, (inaudible) He signed my bank note. I remember coming to town that night to see my girlfriend, Ginny who is my wife now, we were married in 1951, and we have three children.

M: Okay, you came here to have a law practice in 1950?

O: Yes.

M: And you got married in 1951?

O: Yes.

M: And had you already known this women?

O: She was in high school and was a couple years older than me. She had graduated from St Mary's of the Woods in 1946. My brother had girl friends from there and I went to a party and was introduced to my wife, that was in the fall of 1947. I had completed a year of law school. She and I went together while I continued to go to school in Champaign. While I went to school in Champaign I worked in a sorority house waiting tables. Tuition for law school then was about \$50 per semester, I think its a few thousand now for a semester. I had a couple children go to University of Illinois and my daughter went to St Mary's of the Woods. In 1946 my wife worked in Terre Haute for the telephone company when we started going together. She worked there when we got married in 1951 and when she got pregnant she quit and she never has worked again except in our home.

I went off the record here, I am kind of long-winded. Anyway, back to Marshall, I had been here about a year and I didn't have a car so I rode a bus from West Union every morning to come to work. I would get into Marshall about 7:30 and went back about 4:00 so I've been here ever since.

I was elected States Attorney after I had practiced about six years and served there for 20 years. Now the States Attorney makes about \$120,000 to \$130,00 a year however you can't practice law while in office. I had a secretary that the county paid but I had no assistant or anything like that. I made about \$5200. a year, \$100 a week, of course I could buy a lot more back then. You couldn't live on it very well but you could buy bread with it. Then on the second term they raised to salary to \$7500 per year. I served eight years for that amount then. Then the salary was raised to about \$12,000 per year. Then my fifth term in office the salary was raised to \$20,000 of \$21,000. I didn't have opponents because most couldn't live on that salary but I could practice law.

We got married in 1951 and bought a house on North Seventh St., bought it before we were married. I told my wife, this was before we were married, I had bought a house and she said, "You mean you bought it without asking me?" I said, "Well I already bought it. Its not too far from where your parents live." I bought it for \$3,200 and I had paid \$1,000 down on it. I had it paid off in two years. So the practice of law I've had hasn't been just general law. When you are States Attorney you can practice law but you can't do divorces or custody matters. The States Attorney in Illinois is the county attorney. In Indiana the county attorney is not the prosecutor, they are separate offices. They give legal advice for all the county officials. And you have to prosecute the crimes an misdemeanors. The states attorney also prosecuted traffic matters.

The house we bought up there on 7th St had built by Velsicol about 1936 and we lived there until about 1994 when we built the house where we are now about three houses north of the post office.

The judges in Marshall.. we didn't have an integrated court system, back when I started practicing law, we had a county judge in each county. Illinois had 102 counties and each county had their judge. The

county judge had probate jurisdiction and jurisdiction over small law suits. We also had a Justice of the Peace system. The Justice of the Peace was a fee system which had its problems because they always said that was a "plaintiffs court" because all you had to do was file a suit and serve a notice of summons on the defendant (inaudible). And there also used to be traffic cases in Clark County where you paid a fine there was 5,000 of those. There have been changes in the job in my lifetime. In 1969 or 1970 we had a traffic death that we had to have a coroner's inquest over. It was on Route 70 between Indiana state line and the Effingham county line. (inaudible about traffic accidents).

M: Let me ask just a couple general questions, as you think back on your whole history now, what historical events most stand out in your mind?

O: Well, historical events that stand out, well about the first grade my dad took bankruptcy and I remember the deprivation of childhood. We did not have a car, we had a team of horses, and my grandmother Shawler died owning a 75 acre farm at the edge of town and about 20 of that acreage was a pond. There was a small cemetery there on the acreage and in my lifetime its been called the Shawler Cemetery. However, the proper name of it is the ____ Burying Ground which was the first land settled in the West Union area. The first white settlers in Clark County were the Handy family south of West Union. One of those settlers I think was my great great great grandfather. They came here about 1816 and built a log cabin with a log fence around it.

The other historical event I remember is World War II. At that time I was a student in Marshall High School. And on Sunday, December 7th, Pearl Harbor was attacked and we had rationing of sugar. My dad had a sorghum patch, so sorghum took the place of sugar, and we had sugar cane, you had to cut the tops off of it. You would take the tops of the sorghum to Clark Center and there was a man named _____. There were several sorghum mills around the country that made sugar from sorghum. They would also make liquor from sorghum molasses and sell it. There were a places, like in Melrose, Anderson and Wabash Townships in Clark County, that would do that.

The other thing I remember is coming to Marshall, this was actually a turning point in my life, because before I came to Marshall, all the nice people that I had met had moved away, I graduated from high school in 1944. But Marshall is a fine little community. My father was a Quaker and my mother was a Baptist. I went to a Baptist church when I was little, the Quaker church in West Union closed. It was called Friends Church and was across from the funeral home. And the house that is now used as a funeral home, that is where the school was. The school I went to in West Union was a 2 story brick building. And there was also a number 6 school, and a Black School. There were probably around a 100 country schools in Clark County until there was consolidation sometime in the 1950's. I represented alot of schools during that time when they were being sold. My moving to Marshall was like the start of my life. I thought before I came to Marshall I was an outstanding student. I had some teachers who were very encouraging, Miss Hargrove and _____. But by the time I got to Indiana State I made very good grades, I never made a C in undergraduate school.

M: Omer, I have one more question and that is: If you were to talk to a stranger about Marshall, what would you say was the reason you live here and why is it a good place to live?

O: It's a nice place to live. Houses are more valuable here than anyplace else in the county, Casey has not kept up with the comps and neither has Martinsville. Velsicol has certainly been an important economic factor. You could always tell when you were in Marshall because it smelled like chlordane and chemicals in the air. And Mill Creek, used to swim in Mill Creek, it's a few miles from here. (Inaudible) When I started practicing law in Marshall, if you advertised as a lawyer, you had to do it on a sign. If you advertised in a newspaper, you would be disbarred. Also doctors who did abortions could be prosecuted and lose their license and go to prison. Also I remember before I was states attorney the current states attorney filed a law suit against a filling station because they sold condoms.

Marshall, in terms of wealth (inaudible) When I was young, wealth was land, stocks and bonds (inaudible) People were considered wealthy because they owned land (inaudible about prices of eggs, etc when he was young) The Ohio Oil Co had families that owned land with oil. There was oil in Westfield Twp., Parker Twp., Wabash Twp. The first oil wells in Illinois were dug about 1898. In law school you were taught that land was a big bundle of sticks and each one of those sticks represents a right (inaudible about rights & Indians).

_____ was a power in the community, in some communities and towns they didn't sell liquor. They didn't sell liquor in Martinsville. They did sell it in Hutsonville, you could always get a bottle of beer or whiskey from bootleggers. There were two taverns in York that sold liquor after prohibition. They would sell it until after the Volstead Act was repealed. In Marshall, for social or religious purposes, (inaudible about drinking laws in Marshall). As I said, my dad was a Quaker, my mom was a Baptist, before I married my wife I became interested in the Catholic Church and I took instructions to become catholic. I felt I had been discriminated against because of my religious beliefs or my social habits in Marshall.

I started to ride a bike to work in 1952, a guy who worked at one of the factories called me the "bicycle riding lawyer". Then when I was states attorney I rode it to the courthouse every day. (inaudible about owning land in Clark County) If a person had 2-400,000 dollars they could buy land before inflation hit in the 1970's. In the 1970's there was a lot of money and federal and state tax exemptions was \$60,000. There was a Illinois inheritance tax and since then they have gone back to (inaudible about taxes) The tax rate has accelerated so that if you have over \$5,000,000 you have to pay state tax (inaudible about state tax)

The work I have done here in town, I have not been a divorce lawyer. When I was states attorney I couldn't do divorces and I have done very little criminal work. I was states attorney for twenty years. There has always been east/west competition between the Farm Bureau, social organizations and political parties. Marshall has progressed much more than Casey has. Casey has lost population. Casey did have some wealth that Marshall didn't have because oil was discovered in the western part of the county. There were 40 to 100 oil wells there. And then they extended toward Casey and by the time they got to Johnson Twp, there were some of the most prolific wells in Illinois. And by the time the Casey sand and Crawford county, Crawford county had over 10,000 producing oil wells at one time and that put a lot of wealth in Robinson. (inaudible) And became Marathon Oil probably in the 1960's.

Another thing I observed in Marshall, and I'm sure its true in alot of places, the wealth in Marshall, alot of families have stocks, you know in corporations, particularly Marathon, Chevron, others, local telephone company (inaudible) All the banks started paying interest and people had CD's, they were a safe investment because they are insured. But I remember a Martinsville Bank failed, a bank in Marshall would have failed if it hadn't been for Dulaney Bank. There was a bank of Casey that failed. (inaudible)

M: Well, Omer, I am going to thank you for all your stories. Usually when I do these interviews, I have questions that I ask, but I think you have covered all those questions and answers. I appreciate your time this afternoon.