

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH EDGAR C. WILSON

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KURT PIEHLER: This begins an interview with Edgar C. Wilson on June 26th, 2003 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville with Kurt Piehler ...

GREG KUPSKY: ... and Greg Kupsky.

PIEHLER: And you were born in Knox County, near Powell—what is now Powell, Tennessee.

EDGAR C. WILSON: That's right.

PIEHLER: And you were born what year? When were you born?

WILSON: 1914.

PIEHLER: 1914. What date?

WILSON: October the 29th.

PIEHLER: And your parents, they were—what were their names again?

WILSON: Well, my mother was Lucy Loyd from Mountain City. My father was Baxter Wilson—no middle initial—also from Mountain City. We were—well, what else?

PIEHLER: Well, why don't I just ask you to tell us a little bit about your parents? They were married on September 30th, 1900 in Mountain City, Tennessee, but just—why don't you just tell us a little bit about your parents and your recollections of them?

WILSON: Remember that at that time ... that they were born, which was in the 1870s, that was not long after the Civil War ended. Tennessee, statewide, was with the Confederacy. Upper East Tennessee was with the Union and wanted to form a separate state, but were not permitted to. But the effect of the Civil War—and in that area, which was an near the mountains, and about a thousand feet higher than Knox County in elevation, the population was pretty slim. But they were ... both from very well-educated families, and they were interested in the welfare of everybody. I'm real proud of my parents. And my mother was—her mother was of Welsh descent, and I could tell you more. I won't right now. But I met some Welshmen in ... the war, and they were very much like one of my mother's brothers.

PIEHLER: In what way were they very much like your mother's brothers?

WILSON: In appearance and in the way they talked. My mother's—one of her younger brothers, when he talked, his lip sort of winched up in a little peculiar form for me. And when—the one that I talked to in the Conservative Club in a little town in Wales was just the picture of her brother exactly, talked like him, looked like him.

KUPSKY: When did your mother's side of the family immigrate to America?

WILSON: Her father's family came across the mountains of—well, they came to the Pennsylvania area about 1700, somewhere along there. I'm not sure exactly. And her mother's family [came] probably about the same time, I don't know. But her mother came from the—a family in the Bristol, Tennessee area, and her father's ancestor crossed the mountain into Johnson County. I'm not sure the exact date, but it was before the Civil War. He came, they tell us, on a good white horse with a good pair of boots and nothing more. And he didn't talk about his past. But he ... went to—he worked on the farm with the big landholder, and wanted to marry the landholder's daughter, but her father said that that can't be. And so he told the others that, "Well, I'll marry his daughter, and I'll own more property than he does someday." (Laughter) That's enough of that. But it did work out.

PIEHLER: Do you know how your parents met?

WILSON: They—I'm told that they lived about—something like five miles apart. But my father told my older brother that he looked around, and he said to himself that, "If we stay in this area forever, my children will be marrying their relatives, because there's not many people up here." And he looked at the whole county and the area that he knew about, and he wanted to marry one of the Loyd daughters. So that's what he did.

PIEHLER: And your father—both your father and mother started out as elementary teachers, it sounds like.

WILSON: They did. You know, I'm not sure when the first high school was formed in the county. I could look that up, but I didn't get it. The first high school was organized in the Masonic Temple in Mountain City, at least that's their claim. And Mother and Dad were both—they grew up some five to eight miles out in the country.... They did not go to high school, but those folks in that county educated themselves with people that would come in and they—it was more than just elementary education. They learned whatever their teachers were able to give them. And they were both outstanding students. Milligan College, just out of Johnson City, was organized immediately following the Civil War. And his purpose was to help to educate people that needed it in that area. He was a student at Milligan for only one year, but his two—two of his sisters graduated there after 1900, just 1901 and [190]5, I think. But Mother and Dad were to be married by the president of Milligan College, provided he could get there. He didn't know whether he would be able to or not. But anyway, they had bought their license to [marry]. And the record in Mountain City still shows, I'm told, that he married them, but dad's understanding was, "Now, if you can't come, I want the math professor to do it." (Laughter) The math professor did. He made the trip to Mountain City from Johnson City. And later, he came to Johnson Bible College in Knox County, and we went out there in the 1920s, and I met him.

PIEHLER: Your father, he went to Milligan College one year?

WILSON: Yes.

PIEHLER: What—did he want to continue? Would he have liked to have continued, or what ...

WILSON: Well, I'm sure he would have, but I suspect it was a financial situation. I don't know that.

PIEHLER: You ...

WILSON: Now, his brother, his oldest brother, graduated from Milligan in 1887. He came to Knoxville and took a law course. For a short time, he practiced law in Greeneville. His chair that he used is still in the family relic house. But he decided that lawyers had to deal with things that he wasn't interested in. He wound up, I presume—you know, I can't remember whether I was ever told that he graduated from Harvard, but he went to—they lived ... in Worcester, Massachusetts. And he specialized in—his Ph.D. is in psychology. Under one of the—as I remember it, there were three family psychologists in those years. He graduated with a Ph.D. from Harvard, or some school in that area, at least. And he taught—he was the head of the psychology department at Texas Christian University for many years. As he approached old age, he went over to Lynchburg College, which was organized by the same man that organized Milligan, and he taught there for a few years. I remember when he was buried. It was shortly before I went to the Army, so that would have been, probably, in April or May of 1941.

PIEHLER: It sounds like you—growing up, you had a big family. It was both a big family in your immediate family, but in terms of ...

WILSON: In Mother's and Dad's families there were big families. In my family, there were—I had two brothers, two sisters, and then I came along. And I'm the only one left now. Have been for a long time.

KUPSKY: Was your family close to your aunts and uncles and cousins? Did you see them a lot, or were they, kind of, spread out?

WILSON: We always visited with them, yes. It kept them close to us. They have all done quite well. My—during—am I talking too much?

PIEHLER: No, no! Keep going. Oh, no, no. We want you to ...

WILSON: ... In the early 1900s, there was nothing in Mountain City, in that area up there, to do except teaching in the elementary school. Many of their young men got the call to go to the Northwest. Mother had—her older brother, John M. Loyd, had gone to Idaho when Mother was still in her early teens. He married in Idaho and had two daughters and a son, and his wife died. He wrote back to his mother in Mountain City and said, "I've got three babies, and I need—you are going to have to come and help me or one of the girls will have to come." So, they had a family conference, and Mother's sister, who was the next one older than her, decided to go and help him. And she never did get to come back here. We visited her in 1929, but ...

PIEHLER: In Idaho?

WILSON: Yes. Oh, yeah. But John M. Loyd was really a distinguished character in Idaho. And anywhere he went—and I still have had some letters that I’ve kept from him, the most optimistic individual with his feet on the ground. When we went out in 1929, he was in his early eighties, but he still had a cigar store. [He] spent his time in the cigar store. Whenever he wanted to, he’d close the door and go fishing. (Laughter) And he—when we were there, he spent a month with us. And I don’t know if anybody else sold cigars or not, but he didn’t! (Laughter) When Grandmother Wilson died—Grandmother Loyd died, John came in by train for the funeral. That would have been about 1920, maybe 1919, but I think it was 1920. But I remember he had been up to Mountain City for the funeral. He came back to our place, out on what is now Merchants Road, and we were all standing there together, and he gave us his very important speech about Idaho, what a wonderful place it was, and the opportunities. And he said, “These two boys need to come to Idaho.” And he said, “There’s no trouble about getting a job. You can—for sheep, you can get a monthly paycheck, all of your expenses paid, and unless you want to waste your money, you can just stay a year and come back and bring your money.” And Allen, the oldest one of my brothers, was eighteen, and that appealed to him. And he had been very conservative; he had a bank account—wouldn’t have been much, but a bank account. And he said, “Well, I’ll just go back with you right now.” So he rode the train with Uncle John and went back to Idaho with the promise that... Every year, he would say, “I’m coming back next April.” And that’d be the last we’ll ever hear from him for another year. In 1929, when we ... drove to Idaho, which was a remarkable trip in 1929, it was—highways were not supermarkets then.

PIEHLER: Well, since—before you get to Idaho and meet your brother again, tell us about that trip. I mean, that was quite a trip. I mean ...

WILSON: It really was. You know, I’ve already mentioned that many young men from Upper East Tennessee went that way. Some of them didn’t get that far. But my dad had corresponded with people all along the way, and this got pretty boresome to a fourteen-year-old kid. But we—the first night, we spent in Kentucky, and then the next night we spent in Indiana with a Wilson, and one son, their one son, was my age, fourteen. They had about a thousand acres of corn. Corn and hogs was their business. And it was quite interesting. I rode the tractor with the young fellow, plowing the corn. And then they had hundreds and hundreds of hogs. We had been out to see the hogs one day, started back to the door, and Mrs. Wilson opened the door and said, “Don’t you dare come in this house until you get a bath!” (Laughter) None of us could go in until we had a bath. Then the next ones that we found were in Wyoming. They had a 19,000 acre ranch. And they had enough beds for everybody in the family except me. And they said that I would have to stay out in the bunkhouse with the workers. And I stayed in the bunkhouse that night and scratched all night. (Laughter) But it was quite an experience.

PIEHLER: Because these were real—I mean, these were basically cowboys. I mean, you were ...

WILSON: Oh, yeah. But Mildred, my oldest sister, was my eighth grade teacher at Pleasant Ridge School—a two-room school at that time—and I had just finished the eighth grade. But

Mildred was a natural historian, and she mixed with people better than I ever would. And when we go through the State Capitol building—we had to go to the State Capitol building, we got acquainted with the Governor and all of the officials in the Capitol building.

PIEHLER: Which was as you were going west?

WILSON: Yeah. Oh, yeah. And well, Mildred, incidentally, made notes every day and took pictures along the way. And then when she got home, she did that over. And it's quite a book.

PIEHLER: Do you still have it?

WILSON: Well, it was a three-hole notebook, and we'd read it so many times that some of the pages were coming loose, and about 1970, Jerry and I were in Arizona visiting my sister and her family, and we were talking about that book. Margaret brought it up. And I said, "You know, I'm going to see if I can get that copied." And I did. I knew a family that had a printing company. They could do it. They hadn't done it before, but they could do just that. And, now, the photographs were old and faded, but this young fellow would take a sheet of paper the same size as the [old] one, and then he would cut out the sides of the picture, and he could bring that picture out, so that you could see it. And it's a wonderful. The rest is in Mildred's handwriting, and it's well done. I'd be glad to let you have my copy.

PIEHLER: It sounds like something that definitely should be preserved. It sounds like a wonderful ...

WILSON: Well, I had twenty-five copies made. I think I got that done for a little over 1100 dollars. And so, I don't know, relatives received most of them. Mildred, of course, had a few friends that had to have a copy. But I ... I still have my copy and I'd be glad ...

PIEHLER: No, we'd love to put it in our collection if you're willing to part with it or even a copy of it. We'd be happy to make a copy.

WILSON: Well, I'll ... bring it over and let you look at it, and if you want it, well, I'll... You can—I think maybe I had promised that would go to Baxter Wilson, but I'm not sure.

PIEHLER: Well, as I said, we'd be happy with a copy, too, and we're happy you made twenty-five copies, too, so that—but you were saying, you know, this tour, and then when you finally made it to Idaho, what was that like? Because you'd heard about the—you still remember this pitch about Idaho and how great it was.

WILSON: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: So, how great was Idaho?

WILSON: Well, it was great, as it still is, and greater, actually, to me, because I was fourteen years old. (Laughter) But when we got to Boise, Uncle John, Mother's brother,

stayed with us. [He] had taken a clock that was a handmade clock that had been in Mother's family for a century or so—made in Pennsylvania, I believe—but he had taken that to Idaho with him and had—he told us now he gave that to the museum in Boise, the state museum. And we stopped and got to see that clock. Now, the last time that I was in that museum, which was just maybe six years ago, I asked about the clock, and they had the record of it, but it's stored. It's not on display now, but it's still there.

PIEHLER: They still have it in their collection.

WILSON: Yeah. Uh huh. At the State Capitol, we had pictures made. Oregon—not Oregon, but Colorado and Idaho with the governor at the time.

PIEHLER: Well, it's sort of—I think I've heard in some accounts—I mean, it was an easier—you could go to the State Capitol and there was a good chance the Governor would really see you. Is that the impression I get from your ...

WILSON: Well, yes. I think Westerners are different. Northwesterners are especially different. They like people and they ... don't appreciate handouts. They want to earn a living, and they're always—there's always work to be done for people that really want to work. It doesn't matter what it is, just get me a job. That—now, Allen had three daughters after he married, and two boys, and I visited with them over the years many times. And they think I ought to come back now, but I ...

PIEHLER: So did your brother eventually settle? He settled in Idaho, or ...

WILSON: Oh, yes. He was working for somebody, and was—Andy Little, who became the sheep king of the world, actually. But Andy stopped and saw Allen working there—and this is in a book. The author gave me a copy of it, and she signed it for me. But Andy stopped him—he was busy working on a water line. And he [Andy Little] said, “How much are you making?” And he [Allen] said, “Two dollars a day.” “Well, I'll give you twice that.” Well, Andy, at that time, in 1929—and Andy would never let Allen come back to Tennessee. We met him, and he—I heard the conversation when he was talking to Dad, he said, “Now, your two sons were the best help I've ever had. But Homer ...” who had gone a year or two later, “... was the best man with cattle that I've ever seen, but I can't depend on him to be here next year.” But he always made Allen stay with him. And we would get one letter from Allen a year, saying, “I hope to get back next year.” But he never did. And then, just before—a year before, about 1928, Andy had gone to—he was a Scotch sheep man. He went to Idaho from Scotland when he was sixteen. Took two Scotch dogs with him. And he got into the sheep business and had 100,000 ewes, which was—no, he had about 50,000 ewes. His biggest competitor had the same number, Van Deusen. And—I know you're not going to print all this. (Laughing) You made me tell it, didn't you?

PIEHLER: No, keep going.

KUPSKY: Yeah, it's really interesting. Yeah.

WILSON: But Andy went back to Scotland and, from the Scotch government, borrowed three million dollars at two percent interest; came back, and paid Van Deusen a million dollars for his whole business. And he got six percent interest, then, on the other million dollars. And at that time, in 1929, which was his first year, it was said that he had more ewes than even the biggest ones ... down in the Pacific where—I can't think of which islands right now, but the big—he was the biggest sheep man in the world. But Allen had stuck with him and when he died, why, Allen became as big in the sheep business as the government would let him. They limited the—under the Roosevelt Administration, they limited the number of ... Federal pasture land that was under their control. And Allen had that much, and he was influential in all of the livestock business in the state.

In fact, he died with a heart attack one morning when the temperature was below zero here, and also below zero there, but we were able to get out to the funeral, Jerry and I, and Homer, and Mildred, and her husband, and then Margaret came up from Arizona. And the temperature was about eight below zero that day. And the funeral home called while we were there that morning—the funeral was to be at eleven o'clock, but about nine-thirty or ten, the funeral home called and said that the Cattleman's Association was meeting in Boise and wanted to know if they could delay the funeral 'til they could get there. So we had the funeral at two o'clock. And it was interesting, the family was here, the casket was right over here in the auditorium (gesturing), and it was interesting just to watch those cattlemen come by and they'd wave at the casket as they walked by.

But Jerry and I went on one trip there. Our schedules were both pretty tight at the time, and we sometimes would make up our minds on the spur of the moment and we'd go. We got to Boise and called their home. And it was in Emmett, Idaho that they lived. And Allen's wife said, "Well, now, he's in a meeting." We'd already checked into the hotel in Boise. Said, "He's in a meeting just down the street from you." And so we got together right quick and then went home. I don't want to go into all these stories.

PIEHLER: ... You can tell whatever stories you want. It's your interview.

WILSON: (Laughing) Well, at that time, he was still in the sheep business. And he said, "I've got to see some people about buying hay for next year. I've just got to go in the morning." And he said, "You can do whatever you want to." I said, "Well, could I go with you?" Well, haystacks are all alpha-alpha. And they will be maybe 200 feet or more long and wide. It was interesting to me, and when we would get there, why, he'd speak to the fellow; they'd have a little conversation; then he would just go and never look at a bale. But he would just stick his hand back in there, go all around and come back. And he knew what the going price was, and he would pay the price that it was supposed to be if the hay was alright. But we came to one fellow, and this fellow was just a big talker. And he and I sat down there and we just had a—he had a big conversation. We just talked about everything. Allen made his trip around the big stacks, came back, and [said], "Well, what do you think, Al?" He said, "I can't take your hay this year." "What do you mean?" he said, "You've bought my hay for years." "Well," he [Allen] said, "I've been telling you that if you didn't clean it up—if you'd stay here instead of going south on vacation all winter, all summer, I'd take it again," but he said, "you didn't, and you've got spurs in there that damage the sheep's

feet.” The fella said, “Well, what can I do?” Allen said, “I don’t know what you can do, but I can’t take your hay at that rate.” [The man said], “Well, give me a price and take it.” So, he agreed to come down on his price by so much, and Allen took his hay. But he said, “Now, this is the last year that you’re—you’re a playboy and I’m not going to fool with you again.”

PIEHLER: So, it sounds like your brother ... was a tough businessman.

WILSON: Well, he evidently was. After the Korean War, he had the best wool crop that he’d ever had. And it was divvied up to ninety-six cents a pound. And he said, “No, I won’t—I’ll take a dollar for it.” They wouldn’t come up, so he kept it, and three years later he sold it for about fifty cents a pound. (Laughter) But then he—as the sheep business was going down, just before that, while it was still up, why, Margaret went to see him, and she said, “Well, what all have you got and how much is it worth?” And he said, “Well, I was offered three and a half million dollars in cash the other day, and I didn’t take it.” And that’s a Johnson County boy that was born in Mountain City.

PIEHLER: I know. So that pitch you remember very well really was true about Idaho?

WILSON: Oh, yeah. And it still is. It’s a wonderful country.

KUPSKY: Had you ever thought about moving out there as well? Like, were you tempted at the time to move out there, too?

WILSON: No, my situation was different. I couldn’t do that.

PIEHLER: You didn’t want to be a rancher, or a have a ...

WILSON: Well, it’s thrilling to see it, but—well, I was involved in other things by that time and I couldn’t do it.

PIEHLER: I’m curious—going back to your father, because once he—it sounds like once he married your mother, he decided—how did he acquire the dairy farm in Knox County?

WILSON: They stayed in Johnson County until the two sons ... were born. And he developed typhoid fever, and he was at the point of death. The doctor was there one day, and he said, “Now, he can’t last during the night.” He said there was one thing that—he said, “If he would take just a little bit of whiskey, I believe we could break his temperature.” And Mother said, “Well, now, you ask him.” She said, “I don’t think he will, but you ask him.” And she said that he was so far gone that he heard the doctor, but said he just sort of shook his head. So, he took her out of the room and said, “Now, I can give you some whiskey and if you will put it in some hot water and bathe his feet, it might work.” So, they did that, and the next morning, his fever was breaking. He’d lost all of his hair on the top. I never saw him with hair, except a little around ... (gesturing). And then they were told that he was so weak that he needed to go to a drier climate for a while. They went to Oklahoma—were there six months, and during the time, he was getting stronger, and he worked ... as a laborer,

unloading packages in the rail line. And he was getting better when Oklahoma became a state. They were there when Oklahoma did become a state.

And they came back to Mountain City and Mildred was born there. And then one of Dad's teachers was W.L. Smith, who had settled in Knoxville, and W.L. said, "Why don't you come down here?" So, they sold what he had in Mountain City and Johnson County and came down and bought ... about a fifty acre farm out near Powell, Bell's Campground. They had a little Presbyterian church there, which was in a big argument ... [with] Cumberland Presbyterian, or the other kind of Presbyterian. And Dad talked with them, and we all attended that little church, about the size of this room. And he said, "It doesn't matter what your denomination is, bring your people together and work together. It doesn't matter if you call yourself Cumberland or with something else." And he was in charge of the Sunday school. They took his advice. They did go to the Cumberland, and now it's a great big church. But I remember attending there when I was just a little kid and the war [WWI] had just ended. And they put me—Mother had me memorize a poem, and I stood—when I was barely five years old, I stood on the platform with the flag, holding the flag, and I recited the poem, "This Is My Country's Flag." I don't the remember the rest ...

PIEHLER: The rest of the line.

WILSON: But the old people said—[they] told Mother and, of course, Mother told me this many times—the old established families in that area said, "We've already had one President Wilson, and there'll be another." (Laughter)

KUPSKY: Oh, wow. They were rooting for you.

WILSON: We'll change the subject. That's a little of my background.

PIEHLER: But how did your father—he, you know, ... he acquired the dairy farm, how was he able to do that?

WILSON: Oh, um, he did that ...

PIEHLER: Because, it was around that ...

WILSON: Over there, before we bought on Merchant Road ...

PIEHLER: Because he came down ...

WILSON: He made butter. Mother made the butter and the buttermilk, and that was their business. And then W.L. Smith, again, Dad's teacher in Mountain City, said, "There's another place over here for sale." At that time, he was the county surveyor in Knox County. "And you ought to buy that." So, he borrowed the 10,000 dollars and sold what he had and bought the place with 250 acres on Merchant Road, and enlarged the dairy business. So, much of the produce came to this area ... right around here. There was one store there, and little stores out ... near where Knoxville College is now. And we used to deliver butter and

buttermilk to that [store], just across from the main buildings and Knoxville College. And those professors and president and others liked to come out and see our farm. So, it was a pretty good business until when the Depression hit, why, there was—we had paid off the debt, Mother and Dad had.

PIEHLER: So they owned the farm clear. I mean, they ...

WILSON: And had a little bit of money in savings accounts in two banks downtown, Holston Union and the ... other one, I forget now. But when the banks went broke—we had plenty to eat. We didn't have money to spend, but we were in the clear.

PIEHLER: But you were—it sounds like your family was able to hold on to the farm.

WILSON: Oh, yes.

PIEHLER: Because it was paid off.

WILSON: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

PIEHLER: But they lost their money in the bank, the savings?

WILSON: After World War II, Mother—some two or three years after the war ended, around about '48, she got the last check, the final settlement, which was just a little bit.

PIEHLER: Oh, from the banks.

WILSON: Yeah, they cleared that ...

PIEHLER: It sounds like you grew up on a farm. Did you grow up on the dairy farm itself?

WILSON: Oh, yes. We milked cows like this (gesturing).

PIEHLER: You milked it without a machine.

WILSON: Right.

PIEHLER: Did a machine ever come to ... your father's dairy farm?

WILSON: Not while I was there.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WILSON: But my brother and brother-in-law ...

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PIEHLER: So, you were saying that your brother and brother-in-law continued the farm.

WILSON: Yes. Now, when World War II started—was about to start, my father had died when he was only fifty-nine years old with a cerebral hemorrhage—I think they call it something else now, but at that time it was cerebral hemorrhage. Mother finally sold to Mildred her part of the land. Dad had already made out five different plots to divide, and I had thirty acres of prime land. And Mother sold the house, which was hers, and the hillside, to Mildred and Wayne, and Wayne developed it then. And he was an engineer. He had a fine milking parlor built with grain upstairs, the feed upstairs, and everything was automatic. And he didn't work in it, but he managed it until the whole area was sold later.

PIEHLER: Growing up, it sounds like ... both your brothers and sister worked on the farm. ... You have memories of milking the cows, any other things you have memories of doing on the farm?

WILSON: Well, I had to plow corn sometimes with one mule. (Laughter) And I never did get along too well with that mule.

PIEHLER: ... When did your family acquire a tractor? Do you remember? Or did you ever?

WILSON: Not as long as I was there, no.

PIEHLER: Not until you went off to war they ...

WILSON: Wayne Smith's half-brother is still in charge of the engineering business. I went out to visit him in the office the other day. And we talked about somebody—I think he was telling me about this fellow that had—does all of his work on the farm. He's got several hundred acres of hay and corn and everything, and he was telling how he put up—he had raked and baled, oh, big numbers all in one day and put it in the barn. And I grinned on that way. I said, "Wade, when I put up hay, we had to put it on the wagon, haul it across the road up to the barn, and then we had a fork that came down and picked it up and put it in the barn loft. That's—we've seen lots of changes nowadays. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Did you have any farmhands that worked on the dairy farm, besides the family?

WILSON: Yeah, we always had one family.

PIEHLER: Did they live on the farm, too, or ...

WILSON: Yeah. And incidentally, we sold what was left of that place, just about two years ago now, to the Girl Scouts. And they were going to develop the big barn into a place where they'd have big buildings, big meetings, and so on, and the hillside, up on.... They still plan that, but they decided to tear the milking parlor down. The tenant house was torn down, and then they took the barn apart piece by piece. And Wade doesn't know, and I don't either, but they ... probably are putting that up somewhere else.

PIEHLER: So the farm—part of the farm survived until very, very recently. I mean, two years ago, you said.

WILSON: In the 1950s, we sold the crop land. The hillside, with a barn, and a lot of pasture, and the home place, the house, was still there. And the house is still, still ...

PIEHLER: Still there. Growing up, when did ... you always have electricity?

WILSON: No.

PIEHLER: When did you ...

WILSON: We didn't have electricity until I was a freshman ... in high school. Yeah.

PIEHLER: And was it TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] that finally ...

WILSON: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: So it's a very distinct memory, it sounds like, when electric power came.

WILSON: Uh huh.

PIEHLER: What do you remember about having electric power come?

WILSON: (Laughing) Well, it was interesting.

PIEHLER: Well, could I—Dr. Pointer said, you know, when you didn't have electric power, you really went to bed with the sun. You know, if the sun went down, that was ... time to go to bed.

WILSON: We always had kerosene lamps. We stayed up late sometimes. And we had had radio since, oh, since about 1925. We had a little radio. We got one station from somewhere away from here. But we didn't have any power. It was a battery radio.

PIEHLER: ... You mention this great trip to Idaho. Was that your first trip, really, outside of Tennessee, or did you travel much before that great 1929 trip?

WILSON: We had never made a major trip out of the state. I don't remember that we ever went out of the state until that year. But that was quite an interesting. We were going through Wartburg the first day, five of us in the car ...

PIEHLER: And was it a Model A or T?

WILSON: No, it was—we traded the Model A—Model T, on a Dodge touring car—not a touring car, it was the Dodge standard six, the last model that was built by the Dodge brothers. And we had a tent on the top of the car. We had to get in the car from one side,

because the running board had things on it. And going through Wartburg, Dad wanted to be sure we were on the right road. There were three old men whittling in front of the store there. So we pulled up and said—started to ask a question and one of them, said, “Where you going?” (Laughter.) So we gave a name of a place in Kentucky. “Well, keep going.” That’s in the book. I remember it distinctly, but it also is in the book that Mildred kept.

PIEHLER: ... So your family had a car pretty early. Did you always have a car as long as you can remember, or ...

WILSON: In 1924, Dad traded the two mules to the Ford dealer in Clinton. The T Model touring car was 400 and something dollars. For two dollars more, he could have got a bumper on it, but he didn’t see any need of having a bumper. (Laughter.) But that was the first one that we had owned. And then we decided we could go to Idaho, because the car was paid off, out of debt. And he bought the ... Dodge standard for a 1000 and fifty dollars from the Kerr Motor Company on Gay Street.

KUPSKY: Was that a pretty reliable car, especially on this very long trip?

WILSON: Oh, yeah.

KUPSKY: You didn’t have any problems or anything?

WILSON: We didn’t have car trouble except tires. Tires in those days were not like they are now. They—you wouldn’t expect to last over 2000 miles, anything like that. We had to buy new tires on the way to Idaho. And on the way back, I think we had to get another set. It’s been an interesting period. I didn’t think I was coming here to talk about ...

PIEHLER: Well, this is one of the things we like. You’ve got such great stories, ... we really like this material.

WILSON: Now, when I was in the seventh grade at Pleasant Ridge, a lady in our community—which was not a big community in those days; it had a few farms—but one lady had to have an appendectomy. Doctor L.A. Hall gave her an appendectomy. Well, that was just exciting news. We’d never heard of an appendectomy. And then, shortly after that, on a Sunday, I had terrible pains in my abdomen. And we had to get Doctor Parker to come down. And Doctor Parker, incidentally, had delivered me, and he came back for this. Homer tells the story that when Allen was born in Mountain City, in Johnson County, the doctor charged five dollars. Three years later, Homer was born, he charged ten dollars. And Mildred cost fifteen dollars. But Edgar cost twenty-five dollars! After we came down here. Now (To Piehler) —you’ve got a class coming up, haven’t you?

PIEHLER: No, no. I don’t.

WILSON: Well, I was coming to the fact that after the lady in the neighborhood had [her appendectomy], I had these terrible pains, and Doctor Parker came down and he said, “Well, he’s got appendicitis, and we’ll have to get him to the hospital right quick.” And, you know,

the pain left me when I thought about that! This is going to be exciting! Fort Sanders had just merged with ... another little hospital, and it was now—Riverside merged with Fort Sanders. Well, I went to Fort Sanders, and I think it cost—the hospital bill was three or four dollars a day, something like that. But Doctor Hall operated on me, and I had a ruptured appendix. And I was in the hospital ten days with a drain tube there.

But I found out—somebody was telling me that to be a doctor, you have to know Latin. Well, I was determined that I was going to have Latin. And I did. I had four years of Latin in high school, four years of mathematics, two years of history, and two years of science, and I made pretty good grades. Algebra was no problem to me. Geometry and trigonometry, I could make a top grade on it, but it meant nothing to me. I didn't get any sense out of it, but I could still make it. I thought of that later after I got to Fort Sill and the field artillery school, and it made sense!

PIEHLER: You could see the application for ...

WILSON: Yeah. But Miss Hassie Gresham, the famous principal of Central High School, she ran things and everybody liked it. Discipline was no problem in the school, because she was the law, and everybody knew that. If you got out of line, she'd know about it. But then we had 127, I believe, in my class to graduate from high school. And senior English—she had two days a week with the seniors. She taught literature, but she was really teaching character and things with it. And then, just before graduation, she'd have a private conference with each graduate. And when I went in, she looked over my records, and she said, "Sonny, there's not a college or university in the United States that wouldn't be glad to have you." Well, out of the 127 there were just—I did know the exact number, but I think there were seventeen that did go on to college. I was one of the ones that did. And I went to Milligan because of the family connection.

PIEHLER: And you entered Milligan in 1933?

WILSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And you stayed there for two years?

WILSON: I was there two years. My dad died without any warning. I didn't know it until he had already died that he struggled—they struggled with him for about two days. And that was in the spring of 1934.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

WILSON: I went to Milligan the fall of '33, right after I finished high school. And then I was able to go back for one more year and get a teacher's certificate.

PIEHLER: The 1933-34 [school year], you finished?

WILSON: Well, I was there '33-'34 and then '34-'35.

PIEHLER: ... And you were able to get a teacher's certificate.

WILSON: Right. And the teacher's certificate said that I was qualified to teach English, history, Latin, and chemistry. (Laughter) I still have a copy of that somewhere.

PIEHLER: I want—before we talk about college and teaching—because I want to ask you a lot about teaching, just a few more things about growing up. One of the things [is], what did you do for fun? I mean, this trip was obviously a lot of fun, but ...

WILSON: Well, it's a good question. Actually, we didn't have that many kids that lived close together. We did play some ball, but not too much. We just couldn't get together in a crowd. We went to Sunday School and church, but family affairs were just about it.

PIEHLER: What about the movies? How often did you get to a movie, growing up?

WILSON: Very rare, but it was an exciting experience when you did get to go to a movie.

PIEHLER: Any movies that stick out that you remember? Particularly silent movies, and then—because you see the talkies come, I mean, in your life. I mean, you ...

WILSON: I remember seeing a few silents, and then when we got a little older, why, sound came. I remember that was pretty exciting. But, you know, movies, in those days, were different from what they are now, I hear. I don't go anymore, but ...

PIEHLER: Well, did you ... go to any of the serials, like Tom Mix and others?

WILSON: I remember hearing [about them]. I don't remember much experience with them. I don't remember that that ...

PIEHLER: So movies, you didn't—I mean, a lot of people I've interviewed say they remember going to Saturday matinees every week for a nickel. You didn't have that kind of movie-going [experience].

WILSON: I don't remember. Of course—well, there are several that if I could scratch my head over and over I could tell them to you.

KUPSKY: Where did you go ... to the movies? Was there a theater relatively close?

WILSON: On Gay Street.

PIEHLER: You would go to the ... Tennessee Theater, or ...

WILSON: The Tennessee, and the other one up the street.

PIEHLER: The Bijou? Or is it one that's no longer there?

WILSON: The Bijou I didn't go to at that time, but the other movie [theater]—oh, I know it, but the name of it doesn't come right to me. But it was a fine movie [theater]. It was older than the Tennessee.

PIEHLER: Were you ever a Boy Scout?

WILSON: No. No, I didn't have that opportunity.

PIEHLER: What about the YMCA? Did you ever belong to that, growing up?

WILSON: Not growing up, no. I was there a time or two after I was a teacher, but I didn't ever belong.

KUPSKY: We had talked about the long distance trip and trips outside of Tennessee, but did you travel much within the state, growing up?

WILSON: We would—our main trip would be to Mountain City to see the relatives in that county up there. And into the—when the [Great Smoky Mountains National] Park was built, of course, that was pretty exciting, and we'd go up on the mountain. And Gatlinburg wasn't the big place that was there. It was there. And Pigeon Forge wasn't there.

PIEHLER: [Laughing:] Yeah, Pigeon Forge wasn't really even there twenty years ago.

WILSON: You know, it's hard to imagine now, but when I was working for the Crops Division, Tennessee Farmer's [Cooperative], I was in some farms right where most of those buildings are in Pigeon Forge now.

PIEHLER: ... You have distinct memories of reciting the poem after Armistice Day. Do you remember anything else about ... the Armistice Day? Because that sounds like that was one of your earliest memories.

WILSON: I certainly do. It's very distinct in my mind. We were—see, my two older brothers were teenagers, but not quite old enough. They would liked to have joined the Army, but they weren't quite ready. And I didn't ... know anything until one morning, the whole family was together in the yard when there was all sorts of noise going on, guns being fired, and somebody said, "Well, what's all that about?" And Allen said, "Well, the war must be over." And he and Homer run into the house to get their guns and they came out, started shooting. (Laughter) They had participated. But I understood that they had really all had dreams, both had had dreams, of joining the Army as soon as the Army would take them.

KUPSKY: What about—as far as your parents went, do you recall them having any sort of opinions about the politics, at the end of the war, or the war itself, or anything like that?

WILSON: No, not particularly. I wasn't old enough, I guess, to think about that, but.... My Dad was not a radical, but he was a conservative, and the Republican Party was his party,

although he didn't rule out voting for somebody else that he felt was a better candidate. And when Roosevelt was elected the first time, we had a radio, and Dad was hoping that [Herbert] Hoover would win that election.

PIEHLER: The '32 election.

WILSON: Yeah. And even—usually he was up by four-thirty to go to work, but we stayed, and I sat with him until three o'clock, and the reports were coming in pretty bad. And he never quite recovered from that.

PIEHLER: So ... he was pretty Republican to be for Hoover in '32.

WILSON: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

PIEHLER: ... You mentioned the Depression. I've read [that] in a lot of places in the country ... by late '32, early '33, the price of milk—it was almost more expensive to take it to market, that farmers were starting to dump milk. Did you ever have to get to that point, where you were just dumping the milk because ...

WILSON: Well, we had to. Usually—not everyday, but by that time, we were selling the whole milk to a distributor.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

WILSON: But sometimes they just wouldn't need it.

PIEHLER: So you just dumped it, then.

WILSON: Uh huh.

PIEHLER: ... You remember that first Armistice Day very vividly. What about Armistice Day celebrations ... [or] commemorations, as you were growing up? Does that stick in your mind, or any World War I veterans that you encountered, growing up?

WILSON: No. I just remember that day that all the noise was on, and then Homer and Allen got their guns and joined. That's about all I remember of that.

PIEHLER: ... You talked a little bit about Central High School, but I just want to back up, just to Pleasant Ridge, your first—your elementary school. What do you remember about that? And you mentioned earlier that your sister was one of your teachers. It was a two-room schoolhouse, and ...

WILSON: Yes. Mildred. Well, I had gone through the first grade through the seventh before Mildred—she had been one of the teachers in the lower grades while I was in the fifth, sixth, and seventh, and then she became the principal. Mildred was an outstanding

individual. I think, as I see German people and others, Mildred had a lot of the German characteristics. But she was an outstanding principal. She weighed ninety-five pounds.

But in that school—the older kids that couldn't go to high school would still come to school, and they had been running, before I got started. The teachers, men, mostly, just couldn't live with them, couldn't handle them. And Mildred started teaching in the lower grades, and then she advanced to the principal. She knew how to use a hickory switch. And she never lost a battle. (Laughter) She kept a paddle in the cloakroom, and if she needed switches, she would tell one of the boys to go out and cut some switches.

One day, five of the older boys had gone out in Aut Keith's cornfield to smoke during lunch. We had an hour for lunch and playing baseball and so forth. So, she knew what had happened. She called them up to the front. She had the ability to explain the problem, whether it was a serious problem or a good one. But she called five boys, stood [them] there. She talked to all of us about what we do and what we don't do, and she—when she would finish then, and get through with the last boy, why, she would cry a spell. She just got everybody's attention. Now, she got to the last boy of the five, and he said, "Miss Mildred, you're not going to whip me!" So she stood there and watched him and let him finish his speech, and when he finished, she reached for the switch, and she wore it out on him! Wore it out, actually. She threw the pieces away and got another one, and she said, "Now, this is for telling me that I can't do it."

KUPSKY: Oh, man.

WILSON: And she wore it out on him. And then she cried and made another speech and so forth. But the funniest one was this: she had—there was a rule that you don't bring fireworks to school. And well, this young fellow had—he wasn't a big fellow, but he was in the eighth grade, still, and he needed to be disciplined. And she took him, made her speech to him personally, and then, BAM, BAM! (Laughs) He said, "Oh, Miss Mildred, I had nine torpedoes in my hip pocket." And they blew the seat of his pants out!

PIEHLER: Quite literally.

WILSON: Absolutely! Now let me tell you the rest of that. About five years ago, a member of the old families in the county had died. They were receiving friends down at Weaver Funeral Home, and I got there. And one of them saw me. A good occasion, because you see people that you haven't seen in years. But one the men that was almost my age said, "Do you know who that fellow is?" Didn't look familiar to me, that old man. So, he brought him over and he said, "This is Edgar Wilson. This is so-and-so. Edgar was Mildred's brother." "Oh, well," he said, "I'll say one thing. She's the best teacher I ever had." And he went ahead and made the prettiest—he said, "She straightened me out, and I've not been the same since." (Laughter) But he was real serious about it. And he was the one that ...

PIEHLER: [With the] firecrackers.

WILSON: Torpedoes.

PIEHLER: Well, he's lucky! I mean, he's also lucky he didn't get seriously injured. That could've ...

WILSON: Well, yeah. (Laughter)

KUPSKY: Did you ever have any run-ins, in terms of discipline, with your sister while you were at the school?

WILSON: No, I knew better than to disagree with her. (Laughter) You never could disagree with her.

PIEHLER: You also mentioned, I think, indirectly, but I just want to—your experience of being operated on and going to a hospital. You had thought of becoming a physician? Is that—because you mentioned taking Latin....

WILSON: That's the reason I took Latin. I thought I might want to be a doctor someday.

PIEHLER: What changed? I mean, when did you, sort of, give up that idea, or did it last?

WILSON: Well, it changed because I got interested in history and English. English was a subject that meant a lot to me. I think I got this from my mother's side of the family. But—and then the history department at Milligan had been excellent, but when I got here [to the University of Tennessee], it meant even more to me. The professors in the history department were outstanding.

PIEHLER: Your love of English, does that come from high school, or was it later? I mean, when you started college, did you think you were going to try to become a physician, or at that point, the history? When did you discover this love of history and English?

WILSON: I had always had an interest in, and some ability in, English. I've lost a lot of it now, I'll admit. But my teacher in English as a freshman at Central High School, was an excellent teacher, and I never did forget her. I learned how, in English courses in high school, including Miss Gresham and at UT, that I was able to write things in pretty good order, I think. And it's amazing, when I taught English in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, my students turned out well, too.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

WILSON: They really did. I've seen a few of them before they died. But when I was in the Army, even in combat, if I had a report that had to go in writing, it was well done and well respected, and I was notified of that.

PIEHLER: So, those skills really served you well, the ability to write.

WILSON: Yes, and working with Tennessee Farmer's Cooperative, I was in charge of a new plant. I had to put things in writing. And the headquarters in the Nashville area recognized the fact that I did some things better than ordinary, interviewing farmers in the latter year on problems that they encountered with the company. I was able to listen, assure them that their word would get through. And when I did write it down, I made sure that it explained their feelings and what I thought of them. Coming back to four years of Latin and the history courses that I had had—going through combat, names were familiar.

PIEHLER: Well, you mentioned in your memoir that in many ways, even though it was the way to see Europe, you really got a lot out of going through Europe.

WILSON: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Going through France, it sort of relaxes you to think, "Well, we're out here, we're shooting people, but here's something." Your mind goes back through what the Romans did here, even before the birth of Christ. And I'm talking too much.

PIEHLER: No, no, no. But I wanted to—what was your favorite author, growing up, when you were reading? Do you remember what [were] some of the favorite authors and titles? ... Also, in history, what did you read? Anything that sticks out?

WILSON: Well, of course, history was developing while I was studying history, and it was an interesting subject. I can't answer your question directly.... But Ruth Stevens was an interesting teacher, and her lectures were all fascinating. But now, she not only knew the history, she knew what's going to happen next. Now, the head of the department—his name doesn't come right to me, but I can see his face, he was the best historian that I've ever encountered. But if you asked him a question, "Well, what's going to happen?" he'll tell you the history right up through today, but he didn't know what's going to happen. Push him a little farther, and he'd say, "Well, *if* so-and-so happens, that might happen, but you don't know."

PIEHLER: Uh huh. I just want to—going away to Milligan, I mean, that was very much going away to college, because even though now the distance wouldn't be so great, the roads weren't as good and ...

WILSON: It was a long trip up there.

PIEHLER: Yeah. What was it like to go away to college and really [to] live away from home for the first time?

WILSON: Well, it was an interesting experience. They have an excellent faculty, and the group was small enough that, growing up in the country, it was pretty good. I got a great deal of good out of my two years at Milligan. I'm glad I changed when I did, but Milligan had an excellent program for a small school. And I hope they still do. But anyway, everything that has happened to me in the last eighty-eight years, almost eighty-nine, things seem to fall into place, and I'm real happy with that over the years. But to be away from

home, among people from other states and other counties and areas, was pretty good education for a country boy.

PIEHLER: ... How much of leaving Milligan was financial? ... Because you mentioned that while the farm had been paid off, the money in savings had been lost, basically, in the bank had been lost, and prices weren't great for milk.

WILSON: Now ...

PIEHLER: I mean, did you have to leave Milligan because of a shortage of money?

WILSON: Oh. Well, yes.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WILSON: Yes. Really. And it was interesting that ... some of the—most of the students had the same problem. Now, the cost of going to Milligan was double what it would have been at UT. To stay at home, I could have gone over here [to UT]. But I missed a lot in the way of being away from home. But the students at Milligan never knew, when spring came, whether they could come back this fall or not. There were a few that had money and all, but I worked. I had a work scholarship, which took care of half of my fees.

PIEHLER: Where did you work?

WILSON: I worked in the kitchen. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I had that experience my first year of college. I can definitely relate to that.

WILSON: I washed pitchers and bowls.

KUPSKY: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, or what were—was it all three meals?

WILSON: Oh, yeah.

KUPSKY: Or just part-time?

WILSON: Well, let me say one thing. When I was being interviewed for Officer Candidate School, they had five officers that were interviewing, and, of course, I was a little tense, I'm sure, but I went into the room and made my salutes and answered questions. Finally, one of them said, "You didn't have any ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] training. Why?" You know, I hadn't thought about that coming up, and I—but I'm thinking quite faster then than I am now, but I said, "My first two years were at a small college where ROTC was not offered. I did all of my junior year of work in the summers, in three summers. Then I took a leave of absence from teaching, and I came back. ROTC was not mentioned." He said, "Well, it shouldn't have been. It wouldn't have been mentioned at that time." That relieved me of it.

PIEHLER: Because if you had gone to UT in the beginning, you would've had ROTC, but Milligan didn't ...

WILSON: Sure. Yeah. There's one other thing that I would like to say if it's all right.

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah. No, no, as I said, it's your interview.

WILSON: The commandant of the artillery school was a major, and he was six foot seven. He was a big man overall, slender, but he was a big man. His legs were half as long as his six foot seven. And when you could see him walk, he was just—his steps were twice as long as anybody else's, but he moved slowly. But he was one that we never had any reason to disrespect. But now, we started with a 125 candidates, and every week, they would eliminate some. We had gone through several different courses ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Edgar Wilson on June 26th, 2003, at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville with Kurt Piehler ...

KUPSKY: ... and Greg Kupsky.

PIEHLER: And you were starting—we're sorry the tape cut you off in mid-thought.

WILSON: Okay. Well, in the artillery school, of course, you had to learn how to work with other people. You had to learn the law and the regulations. You had to know the material, the guns and whatever you're going to be working with. You had to learn, mainly, how to fire artillery. My only problem, when we came to material—that's out of my line, and it still is. I could make a grade, but my interest was not in how to do the mechanical things. And so, at the end of one period—every week, some students would be called in, and some of them would come back to us and some wouldn't. But there were three of us that had to report to the Commandant one morning, and they—I was the third one. The first one went in, and he was just in there a minute or two. He came back out, and he said, "Well, goodbye, boys. I'm going back home." The second one went in, and he came out with the same answer. And here I am by myself, and I have to go in, salute, and give my name and hear their message.

Now, when I was first—first got the word that I was to go to artillery school, that was published in the Knoxville Journal. The very first day they got that word there, and it was published that, 'Edgar Wilson, from so-and-so, will be a lieutenant.' And here I stood, going in to give my report, and I thought, "Now, how am I going to face the people back home?" Well, the Commandant turns some pages. He looked, and then he looked at another page, and then he came, [and] closed it, and he said, "You're a little weak on material, but I want you to go back and try to improve on the material." Now, in my case, my feeling is this—and I nearly fainted, I didn't think I would get out on foot when he said that. But I did. But it's another one of the things that came—everything's that's happened to me, ever, was the

right thing. Had I been a specialist in material, I probably would've wound up here as the officer that's in charge of a gun crew. That's hard work and terrible. But still, I guess, that the Commandant was thinking that, "he'll probably make a pretty good observer." And to me, the best position in the Army is just what I wound up doing.

If you're in a war, and you know what's going on, the background is fed to you and then you ... see how men react, you're right out with the action, and you're a part of it. And when you read the newspaper, you don't hear a lot of those things. That's—I still feel that I had the best job in the Army, and the most important. The infantry has a job to do, and it's not an easy job. They can't do it without the artillery. Look back at your stories on the Revolutionary War and every one since then. The artillery is an important part of combat. And in my—I had my first experience—I fired the first round from my battalion from the church steeple. I got—everybody heard about that. Within the hour, they heard about it. When we crossed the Moselle, I fired—I was a part of it, and that's what the General, the commander never forgot. He had come himself, personally, that day, and my radio operator, who was back at the company while I was out here, he stayed with them until he came up after and talked to me after it was over. And he said, "You know what? You're a so-and-so hero." I said, "Sure I am." I heard the General. He told the Captain. Somebody turned in a report. And that word spread, and they never forgot that.

And then, when I wound up a month or so later, and the liaison officer with the second battalion was replaced—and I never asked why he was replaced, and I never commented when somebody tried to tell me, but apparently, they thought that he wasn't fit. He was a fine person and he came to see me after the war was over, after we were married, for about an hour. I still didn't ask him any questions, but apparently they reduced him to a first lieutenant and let him stay somewhere. But working with the battalion commander, and getting in on the—being a part of the discussion before the move was made, and then working with people that had to do the job, it—well, I can't ever forget that.

I told the Colonel and the artillery battalion commander that, when the war was over, I said, "Colonel Browning, if you have a request for somebody to go to the war in the Pacific for an artillery unit, I'd be glad to go." And he said, "Willie, I know how you feel." But he said, "I don't feel that way." He was a West Point man and one of the finest in the business, but as soon as he could get out of the Army, he did. He'd done a wonderful job, but to me, to do what I did was more important than anything else that could be done. You don't want to print that, but that's the way I felt about it.

[TAPE STOPPED]

PIEHLER: Based on [our] conversations at lunch—and usually I like to keep interviews in rough chronological order, but you said something to me, very interesting, about your experiences, you know, why you joined the Masons. And it had a lot to do with your anticipation of retirement, because you said you were about forty-nine when you joined.

WILSON: I was. And at that time, I realized that I was forty-nine years old, and my only interests were with Tennessee Farmers' Cooperative statewide, plus the employees that I had

hired. And it occurred to me that I might retire someday, and I needed some other contacts that I could meet with. And it's been the most wonderful thing that's happened to me. There were five, six employees in the fertilizer plant that were members of them [the Masons], and they were fine people. And it made me wonder why they were so interested in what they were doing. And then I found that my neighbor across the street, an Italian, was a member of the Rite—the Fraternity and the Scottish Rite [Temple]. He had been for a long time. And there were several people that I visited with at church that I didn't know they were Masons. But I just decided to look into that, and it turned out to be a very profitable thing for me. I've made friends there that I would never see anywhere else, including Dr. Pointer and Dr. Demott, and many others. So that's ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, I just was very struck that you were somewhat anticipating retirement and still a relatively—I mean, you were older, but at still a relatively young age. It also struck me, because, I think—I wish my father, my stepfather, had anticipated retirement, because all that he really knew was work and family and he didn't have networks outside of his family.

WILSON: I've known many friends like that. And when they did retire, sixty-five or whatever time, they didn't live but just a few weeks, months. They had nothing else ... to do. Of course, at forty-nine, I was looking ahead, all right. I agree with you. But I think it was a good time ... in my life, that I made that change. T.L. Young, who was the architect that completed the Church Street Methodist Church building, originally born in Italy and all, but he was very enthusiastic about it. And he was a northern European, a northern Italian. And you can find out from T.L., northern Italians look down on the ones down in the south.

PIEHLER: You're not—that's not the first time I've heard that.

WILSON: We asked him—Jerry and I asked him one time about Mary, “Now, was she ...” she was born in Italy, but well, “where—did you know her?” [T.L. replied] “Oh no, she was from way down in the boot.”

PIEHLER: I want to go back now to—you mentioned going to UT, the University of Tennessee, and you mentioned that you got your teaching certificate in 1935.

WILSON: Right.

PIEHLER: And you started teaching school. Where did you start teaching?

WILSON: At Inskip School.

PIEHLER: And where was Inskip?

WILSON: In Knox County. Inskip is just down from Fountain City, about a couple of miles.

PIEHLER: And how big of a school was it?

WILSON: We had eight teachers at that time. So far as I can find out now, I'm the only one still living. There was one or two that we don't have a record of, but we had—they had a reunion for pre-1960 [teachers and students] a couple or three years ago. [They] invited me to come, and I thought, well, I'd like to see.... Frankly, there were several that had been students of mine, but I didn't—I hadn't heard of them since then. There was one girl—at that time, during the Depression, Inskip was divided. Over here, across Central Avenue Pike, was what we called bog land, it was built on a swamp. And people that were completely destitute had little shacks that they had put up, just to live in.... Then the ones over here, many of them were railroad employees, [which] were considered very good jobs in those days, automobile salesmen and things like that. Their children were mixed in the same classroom, and it was a very difficult situation. Those that had nothing, and those that still had money to buy new clothes and eat lunch.

There was one girl that I taught for three different years, that was a very intelligent girl, obviously very capable. I had not heard what happened to her, and I had wondered, because she would take on any kind of a project that you would offer to the class. She could do it well, perfectly relaxed. And her parents were completely destitute. But when I got there on the day of this reunion three years ago, I asked at the desk if they knew anything about a Sally Graves. "She'll be here. She has been ..." She finished in the same class that the teacher in the sixth grade was still working on. They graduated in the same class. And she has been a teacher in Georgia, in the Atlanta area, until she retired. She has been an active leader in her church and in everything she does. And she has a fine husband. And when Sally came and she found out who I was, she said, "Stand still. I want your picture." So she took my picture, and I took her picture. But many of those kids from destitute families turned out exceptionally well. That's part of teaching that you appreciate, too, when you see what happens to them.

PIEHLER: ... You mentioned earlier all the subjects you were certified to do after two years of college. What subjects did you actually teach?

WILSON: I taught English, [and] I taught American history and geography.

PIEHLER: No Latin. You didn't teach Latin.

WILSON: No, I never did. We didn't teach Latin in the grade school. I just went through the eighth grade.

PIEHLER: So, which grades in grade school did you teach?

WILSON: I taught some in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth.

PIEHLER: You had your hands full.

WILSON: Absolutely. And in those days, you couldn't have an assistant. You did it all. But it was a wonderful profession, and I enjoyed it, and enjoyed the people that I worked with.

KUPSKY: Did your sister give you any pointers, by chance?

WILSON: Pardon?

KUPSKY: Did your sister give you any pointers, or did you guys, sort of, talk shop about ... being educators? Anything like that?

WILSON: Well, I don't know about that. (Laughter)

KUPSKY: Oh, Okay.

PIEHLER: I think you once mentioned, and I can't remember when, but I think you mentioned the pay wasn't very good for teachers then. I think you once mentioned that. I can't ...

WILSON: It was not good. It was not considered good at that time.... But to tell you what we made, to tell you today what we made then, you'd never understand it.

PIEHLER: Well, I think I would. I don't know if the people reading the transcripts often understand. But how much was it a month? I think you once said to me what it was a month, and ...

WILSON: The first year that I taught, there was one opening in the county for a new teacher. They gave me and Kerr Wolfenbarger half-time jobs, forty-five dollars a month. But it was a job.... And, you know, it's important that you have something to do, a responsibility. Then the next year, my pay was—it had gone up to about sixty, I think. And the last year that I taught, after I had my university degree, for twelve months in the year, it was seventy-one dollars per month.

PIEHLER: Which even then wasn't very good money.

WILSON: But when I came back from the Army, almost five years later, they wanted to send me to Powell High School as the English teacher. And I wasn't sure that I could settle down after working mostly outside with adults, to get closed up in a room like this, I wasn't sure about that. But the pay, do you have any idea what it would've been in 1945, '46? 175 dollars a month. The pay wasn't the reason that I changed. I felt that I wanted to get with adults again, because I had enjoyed success, satisfaction, appreciation from adults for five years in the Army. And so that's the reason I left the teaching field.

PIEHLER: You also mentioned while you were teaching, you're also—for three summers, you went to UT.

WILSON: Yeah, for three summers I was full-time.

PIEHLER: Full-time over the summer.

WILSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And you mentioned you had a lot of—none of the buildings were air-conditioned then, so it was ...

WILSON: There was no air-conditioning. Air-conditioning in the rooms had not been heard of in those days, and it was pretty hot in there sometimes.

KUPSKY: We can imagine. Yeah.

PIEHLER: Now, the last year you went [full-time], you did leave teaching for a year. Did you ...

WILSON: I took a leave of absence so that I could finish in the spring of '40, which was very fortunate for me. The fact that I had a degree from a university when I was drafted a year later meant something. I probably—if I had not had had, I might not have been able to go to OCS [Officer Candidate School].

PIEHLER: You also mentioned, when we were discussing, sort of, places in Tennessee and figures, Cordell Hull. You were very impressed with Cordell Hull in the late '30s, and you talked about how, you know, he even affected how you ended up voting in the 1940 election.

WILSON: I was very impressed with Cordell Hull's policy in Central and South America. And my family members, generally, not always, but generally, would vote the conservative, Republican ticket. But I had just finished classes in history, and had done some reading, and I decided that Cordell Hull's program was worth voting for, even if the president was not a Republican. Some time later, my brother, Homer Wilson, and I were talking about things, and that came up, and I said, "Well, that's the reason I voted for Roosevelt in 1940." He screamed at me, he said, "You what?!" (Laughter) But anyway, I did. And, I guess, it was for the best. However, in reading—I'm reading Thomas Fleming's book, FDR – well, The New Dealers' War: FDR and the War Within World War II.

PIEHLER: I've seen it. I have not had a chance to read it.

WILSON: Well, it's interesting. (Laughter.)

PIEHLER: I'll recommend—you should also read, if you have never read it, is a book that Greg's reading that would complement that different view is John Morton Blum's V Was For Victory. I think you would enjoy that book a lot. It's a very well written book.

WILSON: And what is the name?

PIEHLER: It's called V Was For Victory. You may have to order it or check it out of the library, because.... But it's V Was For Victory, is the title. V Was For Victory.

WILSON: B was ...

PIEHLER: V.

WILSON: V! Oh, sorry.

PIEHLER: V.

WILSON: [Writing down information:] OK.

PIEHLER: And it's by John Morton Blum. And the last name is B-L- ...

KUPSKY: B-L-U-M.

PIEHLER: B-L-U-M.

WILSON: B-L-U-M?

PIEHLER: Yes. [To Kupsky] You would agree?

KUPSKY: I would recommend it. I like it a lot.

PIEHLER: Yeah. It's very, highly readable.

WILSON: Well, I bought The New Dealers' War by Fleming, because I just recently—because I had heard him interviewed just before it was available, a couple of years or so ago, and had made a few notes, which I think I still have in my billfold.

KUPSKY: Well, having voted for ... the Democratic ticket because of Hull, how did you feel about the rest of the Administration at that time?

WILSON: Well, I didn't agree with many things they did, but they also did a number that have been good.

PIEHLER: And you mentioned the [Great Smoky Mountains National] Park. That was something your family really welcomed, seeing the Great Smoky [Mountains] National Park.

WILSON: Yeah. We made frequent trips into the Smokies. I considered joining a hiking club, but I never did. I wanted to, but I just never did get it done before the war started. And the park has meant a great deal to our whole area, as well as the Tennessee Valley Authority's work in the area. So I'm not totally opposed to the government at that time, but ...

PIEHLER: ... Had you voted in the '36 election? Had you voted for—was that your first election you voted in?

WILSON: No. Let's see. I believe—well, '36, yes. I voted in '36.

PIEHLER: So, were you for Landon or for Roosevelt in that? Do you remember offhand?

WILSON: I was not for Roosevelt.

PIEHLER: So—okay. ... You mentioned Ruth Stevens, which other people have mentioned Ruth Stevens. I'm curious, Bernadotte-Schmidt, was he here when you were here?

WILSON: Schmidt?

PIEHLER: Schmidt. Yeah. Bernadotte. I'm not sure what years ...

WILSON: I don't remember.

PIEHLER: Yeah. I don't—I know he was a very famous. I'm just trying to ...

WILSON: The other lady in the history department that I admired greatly—I can't tell you her name right at this minute, but I can see her face. Her—she was divorced from her husband, who was ... in charge of the library, the Congressional Library in Washington.

PIEHLER: I've heard about the scandal indirectly.

WILSON: But she was good.

PIEHLER: Well, no, it didn't involve her. I think it involved the person who became—it wasn't the Library of Congress, it was the National Archives.

WILSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Yeah, I've heard. I ...

WILSON: But she ... would assign—if she assigned you a subject to explore and then write a paper on it, all you had to do was to go to her to talk about it, and she'd give you the answer. But she really appreciated the fact that you'd come to her and talked to her, and she was really interesting.

PIEHLER: Before we, sort of, move off of the University of Tennessee [and] your education, is there any other professors that stick out? Not necessarily in history, but in other departments?

WILSON: Several of them, yes, but Dr. Parker, Rosco Parker, was in the education department. Of course, my degree was a B.S. in education with a minor—with a major in ... English, and a minor in history. But Dr. Parker was my guidance [counselor], and he was a wonderful individual, calm and thoughtful. But one thing I remember that he mentioned to me, and some others one time, was that when you work with people, you're working with an

individual. Now, don't look at them like they're kids, they're individuals. He said that he—his grandson, five years old, came to see him and visit with him and he said, "I put him on my knee," and he said, "I guess I was talking something like baby talk to him." He said, "He looked up and he says, 'Ross, talk sense.'" (Laughter) And he encouraged me and three others to start working on a Ph.D. in education, which I did after I had graduated that summer. And he was heading up the Southern Studies group in the ... Southeast. So, we had good response from him during that time. I had been asked to come over to somewhere in Virginia to interview, but I didn't have time to go. The war changed everything.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, in the 1940 election, I mean, you'd obviously felt Cordell Hull's policies—there was a big debate over what we should do, regarding the war. What do you remember about those debates?

WILSON: Well, I remember quite a bit about it. And I felt that we should not and would not go to war. I was sincere in that, and a lot of important people felt the same way. It could've been settled diplomatically. Hitler had made some terrible mistakes, no question about it. But in the beginning, he stimulated the economy when our economy could have been stimulated, too, by getting highways built and by doing various other things, plus military, preparing for a war. But Hitler had done some outstanding work, and that should not be forgotten. His mistakes cost him his life and then the lives of millions, I guess, of German people. The German people are one of the finest races of people on the globe, the most capable. And I've got some relatives that were ... Germans. But I still think it would've been possible for diplomacy to settle that problem without a war.

KUPSKY: Had you, during the late '30s, followed the politics, as far as Chamberlain and ... the talks that did take place with Germany? Had you been pretty closely following that?

WILSON: Well, I wasn't at the time. But I still—well, the night of December 6th [1941], in the barracks, we had a big argument. More than half in the group said, "Well, we're going to get in this war, no question about it." And I argued and argued strongly that we had no business in the war. It ought to be settled out of war. And then the very next day, went to church in Walton, Oklahoma—the future football coach at UT and I went together.

PIEHLER: Who is that future [coach]?

WILSON: Um. My computer slows down some.

PIEHLER: No, I just ...

WILSON: Oh, I'll tell you in a few minutes. But we were drafted at the same time. He was the coach at Central High School and I was a teacher at Inskip School, and at the end of the school year, there were lots of men who had been in the school business and delayed until the day after they were drafted. It made a wonderful experience when I went to Fort Sill. There were so many teachers, college professors, university graduates that were drafted at the same time, and it was just an interesting experience. But we went to the First Methodist Church in Walton, and when we got out—then we were walking down the street to go to a cafeteria,

and the line was all the way around the building already, but we were in line when the carpenter from my battery, who was a Pollock, came running. He saw us, he came running, and he says, “Hey, they’re fighting over there.” “Oh, they’re not.” “Yeah, they are. It just came out on the radio.” That was about noon, and just after twelve o’clock on the 7th of December, [1941].

KUPSKY: What was your first reaction? What was going through your head when you heard about it?

WILSON: Well, that changed your opinion of everything. If we’re in it, you’re a part of it. [You don’t] argue the past anymore, and you support it all the way through, of course.

PIEHLER: What did you think of aid to Britain before ... before Pearl Harbor?

WILSON: I had serious questions about overdoing that.

PIEHLER: ... What about the peacetime draft? I mean, ... how did you feel when they were debating this? Because you were a prime target for it.

WILSON: We really thought it was a good idea.

PIEHLER: So you ...

WILSON: It would’ve been a good idea if it had been continued.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

WILSON: It could be a good idea now, if it hadn’t been dropped when it was. Some military training for kids just out of high school is invaluable, in my opinion.

KUPSKY: At the time, either in history classes or in just news, had you heard anything about the Pacific or Japan prior to December 7th?

WILSON: Oh, yes. We’d heard plenty about it.

KUPSKY: Oh, okay.

WILSON: Yeah. We were ... studying history. We were all, I think, prepared. But we didn’t expect Japan to do what they did, because they weren’t big enough to do that, we thought.

PIEHLER: ... Before we go to the war itself, is there anything else about the 1930s that, you know, growing up—or just growing up in general, that—particularly [for] students reading this interview, ... because in some ways, you lived in a very different—students reading these interviews don’t always realize how much has changed.

WILSON: I surely couldn't describe the change. It was a different world completely in those days, and young people now wouldn't understand it if you told them the difference. But the population was, what? Just about a third what it is now, wasn't it?

PIEHLER: Not quite a third, but it was, I think ...

WILSON: Maybe close to half, but ...

PIEHLER: Yeah. I think it's soon going to be half, but—yeah.

WILSON: And the people that we grew up with, we were with—they were Anglo-Saxon, German, Northern Europeans, all of us. Now, with the incoming of so many different nationalities ...

PIEHLER: I'm curious, one movie I am curious if you ever saw—did you ever see All Quiet on the Western Front back when it came out? Does that movie strike a bell?

WILSON: Yes, I did. I can't remember right now too much about it.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but you did see that before you—in the 1930s?

WILSON: Yeah. I had been a member of the Book of the Month Club for a few years, too, and I remember when I got into France—this occurred to me, I read the book about All Quiet on the Western Front.

PIEHLER: When you actually were in France and you realized ...

WILSON: Yeah. I mean, it came home to me again. The fact that I had had a pretty thorough indoctrination in history and in Latin meant a great deal to me.

PIEHLER: ... When you'd given a talk several years ago to the East Tennessee Historical Society forum, you'd mentioned that ... there was a lot you would, kind of, identify with from history, from literature, from your Latin.

WILSON: Do you have a copy of that over there?

PIEHLER: Yes, yes.

WILSON: I brought one of my own.

PIEHLER: We have a copy.

KUPSKY: Well, I was just going to ask—you were drafted, I guess, six months to the day before Pearl Harbor. Is that right? June 7th?

WILSON: Yes. I actually should've been drafted two weeks before I was, but the superintendent of schools raised Cain with the board and they agreed to let me stay out 'til the last day of school. And the next call after school was out, I had to go, which was fine with me.

KUPSKY: And what was your—how did your family react to your being drafted?

WILSON: They took it—it wasn't too bad, because the war wasn't going on, and we didn't think there would be a war.

PIEHLER: So you really did think ... it would be a year, and then you'd be coming home.

WILSON: Yeah, that's right. That was the—it says no more than a year. But then that law was changed on the 8th or 9th of December. I guess, the family had thoughts that they didn't talk to me about, but when we got down to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, for induction, why, the coach and I were both held over. The rest had been going out almost every day. But we were held over for about ten days before they.... And then they sent us off to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. We had a weekend there, and he told me, he said, "Let's fly home." So we made the arrangements to get a flight to Knoxville, and didn't have much time to notify anybody, but I called and told them that we were going to be at the airport about a certain time. Well, I thought maybe they'd come out to get me, but they figured we were on the way somewhere to fight, so all the family came and met us at the airport, and it was an exciting weekend we had, but we had to go back the next day.

PIEHLER: What was the problem? You had not had ROTC training, you'd mentioned earlier. What was it like to report at Fort Oglethorpe, and that, sort of, initial few days in the Army? Because that's—for a lot of people, it struck me how much of an impression that leaves on people, long after a lot of other things they can't remember.

WILSON: It was an interesting experience. It was altogether new. Now, we had to report to the board at Knoxville, at town, at 6.30 or 7.00 a.m.—before 7 a.m.. And we had some procedure to go through there, and then we got on the train and went to Fort Oglethorpe in the afternoon. And then we were escorted over to a certain office and then we—they had to get our shoe size and all that, and they—but it was after midnight. That was on the 6th of December. It was after midnight. I mean—no, in June.

PIEHLER: In June. June 6th.

WILSON: It was after midnight before they swore us in, so we lost a day at seventy cents a day, because we lost that day. When they measured me for shoes, well, this sergeant said—measured, and he said, "9-B" or "C" or something. Anyway, I said, "That's too wide for me." Well, he convinced me with one short sentence that that's what I was going to get.

PIEHLER: And I'm thinking there were some four-letter words in that one sentence.
(Laughter)

WILSON: But anyway, it turned out he was right.

PIEHLER: He was?

WILSON: The wider shoe was better for me.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

WILSON: I think a D is what he gave me, and I thought I ought to have a B at the widest. “No,” he said, “that’s not right.” Then everything was new, but it was interesting and exciting. And one of the first jobs that I had to do was to mash potatoes in the kitchen with a big thing ...

PIEHLER: Mechanical masher?

WILSON: Yes. Learning to make the bed and things like that are still worth something to me. I had something else on my mind, but I ...

PIEHLER: Well, one of the things you also said, just—I mean, a lot of people reporting with you in June were people like you. They had college degrees, they were teachers, a lot of them were university [graduates].

WILSON: Yeah, especially after we got settled in the unit. I was assigned to a communication unit. They were going from Knoxville, meeting here, and going to down there. Some of the crudest men that I’ve ever met, very uneducated and poor people.

PIEHLER: When you were going to ...

WILSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: From Knoxville to Fort Oglethorpe.

WILSON: But then finally, as they interviewed us in special units, it was a little bit different. Eldred Swingen, who you know about, was—had just graduated from Harvard in law. And there were many others that I worked with that were college graduates, and some of them had been working, some were just out [of college]. But it was an interesting experience.

-----END TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE-----

PIEHLER: How long were you in ... Fort Oglethorpe?

WILSON: At Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, we were there ten days.

PIEHLER: Ten days.

WILSON: And then they put us on a train, and we didn't know where we were going, but it took us two days to get to Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

WILSON: But at Oglethorpe, they kept us busy doing ...

PIEHLER: A lot of KP?

WILSON: KP duty or something all the time. No training, but they were working us all the time.

PIEHLER: And so you were sent to Fort Sill, then.

WILSON: To the field artillery replacement center for ninety days.

PIEHLER: Ninety days. And that's when you did your basic [training]?

WILSON: That's where I did my basic [training]. And that was with interesting people, all of them, every one of them.

PIEHLER: Well, why don't you talk a little bit about either the unit you trained with and your sergeant? Do you have any memories of your first sergeant that you had?

WILSON: Well, now if you stop to think about it, the men in the Army at that time were men that were in destitute circumstances at home, financially. They had gone to the Army where the Army paid twenty-one or twenty cents a day and gave them their food, but some of those men were—they were pretty dogmatic, and not—they used whatever language came to their heads. (Laughter) And the interesting thing to me was that we had a corporal, he would get right up in your nose and almost rub his nose on your nose and call you the most ungodly names you've ever heard! I'd never heard of them. But it was so amusing that I wanted to laugh at him. (Laughter) It never did bother me. Then the sergeant in charge of our platoon was a very capable fellow. He didn't have much education either, but he was sensible, and he tried to work us hard. And he came in the tent one day and told us one night that we just surprised him, because he said, "You guys know your right foot from your left. And we'd not been used to that." And he was so appreciative of the fact that we responded to him all right. Then we heard a few days after that, that he had been reprimanded severely and threatened [for] something that he did that didn't seem like it was very wrong to us. And I said, "Well, he shouldn't do that to you." "Oh, yes, he should. That's his job." He said, "I made a mistake. I need to be reprimanded."

PIEHLER: So he was reprimanded for ... what, specifically?

WILSON: I don't remember what he did, but it was some simple something. But it wasn't ...

PIEHLER: Not keeping the separation between officer and enlisted?

WILSON: No.

PIEHLER: No.

WILSON: It wasn't that. It was some simple thing that didn't seem wrong to me or anybody else, but it was not in regulations.

PIEHLER: Now, in your basic unit, basic training unit, how many people were from colleges? How many had college educations versus how many didn't have college educations? How many had high school educations and?

WILSON: The ones that—after we got settled in my communication battery, I would say that almost 100 percent of us ... were high school graduates at least. And probably a fourth of them were college or university [educated].

PIEHLER: Was this unit—the unit you got settled, is this different from your basic training group? Your ...

WILSON: Say that again?

PIEHLER: Because you were initially in basic training for ninety days. That group of men, that wasn't the communications unit.

WILSON: Right.

PIEHLER: ... Of that group, though, roughly how many would you think had high school diplomas? I know it's a long ...

WILSON: It would be a wild guess, but I would think that half or more had a high school education.

PIEHLER: Could everyone in that basic training unit, could they all read and write, that you knew of?

WILSON: Yes.

PIEHLER: You didn't have anyone [who couldn't]. What else do you remember about—I mean, what did you like—quote-unquote, “like” about basic training? What did you dislike? I mean, what skills were particularly useful and not so useful?

WILSON: I enjoyed the physical part and what we learned about telephones and radio communications and the flags, whatever that word is.

PIEHLER: Semaphore?

WILSON: Yeah. It was all interesting. And it was new to us, and then many of the courses were interesting, too. But there again, where we had class, we were in a barracks. There was no air conditioning in those days and it was sometimes pretty hot and humid.

PIEHLER: Well, ... Oklahoma gets really hot.

WILSON: Yeah. That's right. We had a first lieutenant that I thought a lot of. But when we would have to have a class in the barracks on those hot days, it was just hard for all of us to stay awake. Later, after I had finished OCS and gone to Fort—in California, he came there and he told me—I'm jumping the gun, but this is short—he said, "I went up to the Colonel, the regimental Colonel, to report." Now, the Colonel was a World War I man who had been a ... second lieutenant for about twenty years, and they finally made him a colonel and put him in charge of a regiment. He said, "I went in, saluted, reported to him, and he sat there a minute looking at his papers. He looked up at me and said, 'Are you a specialist in communications?'" And he said, "Well, that sort of shocked me, and I said, 'Well, I wouldn't say that I am a specialist, but I had ...' At that the colonel jumped up, and jumped up and down, and whooped and hollered, and he said, 'I told them to send me a specialist and they've sent you here!'" (Laughter) And he never did forgive the Colonel for that. I could tell you more about the Colonel, but let's go on.

PIEHLER: Oh, no, actually, I am curious [to know] a little bit more about the Colonel, since it sounds like you have some good [stories]. Because ... he had, sort of, been one of these World War I veterans who were sort of—with so few promotions and ...

WILSON: Well, I guess the Army had to do things like that. They had too many people coming in that had to be trained. The thing about it ... [To Piehler:] You told me to go ahead, didn't you?

PIEHLER: Yeah. No, no, please.

WILSON: ... They put me, first of all, as the executive officer in a firing battery—not a firing battery, but a communications battery. And [they] also put me on the officers' mess council. And the council met with this same colonel, and there were about five of us in there. He would open the meeting in a good humor and tell us about what he wanted done and how it ought to be done, and then when he would get through talking, why, somebody would have to vote to approve that. Whatever he said was what was done. And I had pretty good communication with him. I had become the executive officer of the battery and had certain responsibilities. We finished one term, one three-months term, and he promoted me to a first lieutenant only four and a half months after my [promotion to] second lieutenant. And then we finished that term and had such an outstanding group. And I worked hard on things. I try to work hard on anything I do. But there was to be, we thought, a week between—before the next group would come in. In the whole regiment there were 20,000. And so we had a weekend there, and I applied, along with two or three others, for a trip to San Francisco. We went up on Saturday morning and came back Sunday night and found that about ten o'clock Saturday night, 20,000 new people were unloaded from the train and 200 of them went to my

battery. And the beds were—not even a mattress on the beds, because they were making a change. (Laughing) Well, the Colonel sent for me and he lectured to me and he said, “Do you want to demand a court martial or do you want me to solve it?” And I almost laughed in his face and I said, “Well, your decision is all right with me.” So, he restricted me to quarters for one week and ordered that the guard would check me every hour to see if I was in bed. Well, I really—I thought it was funny until I walked out and the lieutenant colonel of the adjoining battalion met me and he said, “What’s this all about?” and I told him. He said, “Well, that’s crazy.” He said, “If you’ll go back in there and tell him that you want a court martial, I’ll defend you, because,” he said, “the same thing happened in my battalion and every other here.”

PIEHLER: People were on leave. They didn’t—there were no warnings that ...

WILSON: And then the Colonel—I said, “Well, I don’t think so.” Well, I talked to my battery commander. He and his wife lived in town, so he was living in town. But he, sort of, grinned and he said, “Well, now, if you want to demand a court martial, why, go ahead.” He said, “Actually, it’ll never go on your record and you might as well let him have his way.” But I never quite got over that. The war ended in Europe; I went back to the artillery corps, and I was the battery commander of headquarters battery. And one of the valuable men in the battery had a party of all battery officers and non-coms [noncommissioned officers]. He got mad at one of the officers and just—they almost got in a fight. But he’d been a valuable man in combat, and that worried me considerably. And I knew that if I didn’t do something quick, somebody else might bring charges against him. And so I called him and talked to him about it. And I told him it was pretty serious. And I asked him if he wanted to demand a court martial or if he wanted to take my—well, he had to think that over. He said, “Well, I’ll lose my stripes no matter.” He said, “Sergeant ...” I said, “Well, that’s one possibility.” “Well, I’ll take your opinion.” I gave him one week’s restriction. The guard would check him every hour at night to see if he was there. (Laughter) And I’ve felt better ever since, because that cleared his record. He had been tried and ...

PIEHLER: And he kept his stripes.

WILSON: No, he did. Yes, he kept his stripes. And I intended for him to keep his stripes. But after I realized why I did it that way; it was because I was trying to protect him. He had a record that he had made through combat for almost a year, so ... (to Piehler) Don’t let me throw you off track.

PIEHLER: Oh, no, no, no. Some of these stories you should just tell them when they come to you.

KUPSKY: Very much so.

PIEHLER: In terms of basic training, anything else that you remember about basic training? And, I guess, also—because my wife grew up and went to high school out in Oklahoma, and college, so I’ve been to Oklahoma a number of times—what about Oklahoma versus East Tennessee? They’re very different places.

WILSON: Very different places.

PIEHLER: And they're very different from Idaho. I mean, they're, they're ...

WILSON: I enjoyed everything out in Oklahoma, basic training and OCS and later when I went back for additional officer communications courses and pilot training. But you had to get used to the weather and used to the sand blowing in your face when you're out, things like that. But the training was superb, and it benefited me. I looked back [in] combat at many things—lessons that I had learned there, especially at OCS.

PIEHLER: Now, when did you apply for OCS?

WILSON: Well, I was drafted on June 7th, I finished basic training some three and a half months later, and I was a corporal in the training battery for about three months when I was approached with the opportunity of applying for OCS, which I did. So, that would have been around—well, January.

PIEHLER: '42.

WILSON: Of '42.

PIEHLER: And that was after Pearl Harbor, then.

WILSON: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WILSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: I've been told that [in] the pre-Pearl Harbor Army, there was definitely a different pace to it, that it was—I wouldn't quite say it was a nine-to-five Army, but that, in fact, most of the training did take place during the week, and that—it may have applied more to officers, but the weekends were often—particularly officers went off on their own.

WILSON: Yeah, well, we had Saturday and Sunday, unless you were on guard duty or something.

PIEHLER: Yeah. Yeah, guard duty or—yeah.

WILSON: But that's true. We generally had some free time on Saturday and Sunday.

PIEHLER: And I've been told it was—now, this may have applied more to the officers, but the officers I've interviewed in the ... '39-'40 period said it was a very ritualistic—in other words, officers—and this may have applied more to the officers—this one officer described how when he got to base he had to pass out the cards to everyone, and it was a very formal

experience. He said a lot of this went out the window with Pearl Harbor. What about from an enlisted man's perspective?

WILSON: Well, Pearl Harbor certainly changed the entire procedure. And specifically, I can't think of anything right now, but it was a different world after Pearl Harbor.

PIEHLER: Well, I get a sense that the pre-Pearl Harbor, you weren't in that much of a rush. Things were not as hurried. I mean, there was a real sense that you did have more time. Is that an accurate, sort of—my looking back on what people have told me?

WILSON: The training program was very concise and perfect, I'd say. But then, at night, especially on Saturday and Sunday, we were at liberty to do about as we pleased.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm. Now, you liked your—you mentioned you really liked the people you served with in your communications battery.

WILSON: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: And you stayed in Oklahoma at Fort—with that battery, right? Communications.

WILSON: Yes. Of course, as soon as I finished OCS, which was on May the 26th, '42 ...

PIEHLER: Yeah. But this was before. This was when you're still a corporal in the communications battery that you—after basic training?

WILSON: Yeah. I stayed in the same basic training battery as a corporal in charge of a platoon.

PIEHLER: Oh. So, you remained in, sort of, a training [capacity]. Now you were corporal of a—so, what was it like now to train men so quickly after you had been trained?

WILSON: Well, I think it was a pretty enjoyable experience. I remember one day that there was one young man, a trainee, who didn't get out of bed one morning. And when the roll was called, why, the Sergeant, the First Sergeant, was taking the roll. And one platoon commander said, "One man hadn't ..." "What's wrong with him?" "He's not up yet." The First Sergeant gave us 'at ease' to stand there. He went in there, picked the bed up and turned it upside down, dropped the man on the floor, and said, "Get in your clothes and get out here!" And when the boy came out in his uniform, we had 100 percent attendance that day. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: ... You had mentioned ... the night before Pearl Harbor and Pearl Harbor. What happened initially ... after December seventh? And I guess, if you can recall any rumors, because I imagine after you heard about the attack and you knew it was for real, there must have been a lot of rumors about what was going to happen next to your unit and, you know, to different people.

WILSON: The very next morning when we had the roll call and everybody [was] out. The battery commander, who was a Texan, he appeared [and said], “In case you all don’t know it, there’s a Goddamn war going on! If you don’t know it already, get your paper and read it!” So he gave us a speech, which we heard. (Laughter) Nobody cheered him, but that was his reaction, anyway. But I remember that they had given an order just shortly before that, that all men over twenty-eight years old could go home. And Harvey Robinson, the coach that I had been with all the time, was just a little over twenty-eight years old. I was a little bit younger, not much. But he got to go home. But a month later, he was back. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So he—Robinson was the person you’d gone on Pearl Harbor [Day] to church with? You had mentioned it earlier.

WILSON: Yeah. He was a very fine person, and he always attended church here and there. And he had read a lot. He was an intelligent individual. He told me about one book and had me get it and read it, written by—well, he originally was from North Carolina, and this author of this book was from there, too. I can’t tell you anymore about it right this minute. It would take me a while to get organized. But I can’t remember what your question was now.

PIEHLER: I asked you about some of the rumors after Pearl Harbor initially. I mean, you told us about the Texan’s speech, about your battery commander’s [speech], but were there any rumors about where you might—particularly, where you might go? And you mentioned ... the order going out that people over twenty-eight could go home.

WILSON: Yeah. Well, of course, everybody knew that we were going to stay—that we were not going home at the end of the year.

PIEHLER: And no one had to ...

WILSON: We had no idea what was going to happen in the Pacific or in Europe, either. But it was a good subject for intelligent people to discuss.

KUPSKY: As far as opinions go on that matter, did the people you were with—did a lot of people have opinions as to what they thought should happen? You know, kind of a policy-making from the bottom, sort of?

WILSON: I think we all understood the fact that the—we’d been there long enough that we knew that when you’re in the Army, whatever it is, you’re going to do it.

PIEHLER: Now, you applied for OCS and you told a great story about when they asked you about the ROTC here. Anything else you remember about, sort of, being interviewed by the officers?

WILSON: I don’t remember exactly what all their questions were, but it was a pretty thorough discussion that went on for half an hour or more. And when I left, I didn’t know whether they would say yes or no, but I felt like it had been a pretty successful discussion.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

WILSON: I was in class fourteen. They had started fourteen weeks before that with one class each week of about a 125. Shortly after we finished, they already more than doubled that. They were taking 250 a week, but weeding them out pretty heavy from the start. We thought that was sort of cruel in a way, but still, it was the way it should have been done, I think. And now, Eldred Swingen stayed on the staff for a year. A year was the most anybody could stay in one position at a time. And he told me later that they had education specialists from Columbia University, Chicago, and one or two others to come out and inspect their training program. And he said they were there for quite a while, and they made a thorough study, and when they left they couldn't suggest any changes.

But of course, money was scarce then, as it is now. But, I guess, the Army could get whatever they said that they had to have. And the program—OCS was remarkable. They planned it so that you didn't go and have meetings of half a day or a day in one building. You had a class starting at seven o'clock here; you had a ten-minute break between classes, but the next one was about a mile away. Sometimes you had to run to get there. You didn't have time to stop in the bathroom. And they—we understood later that they had shortened—made some changes in that way, because there were too many people that couldn't make it.

PIEHLER: I understood—now, you did yours in Lawton, in Oklahoma, your officer—where? At Fort Sill? Your officer candidate's ...

WILSON: Yes, it was at the artillery school in on the Fort.

PIEHLER: Yeah. At Fort Sill.

WILSON: At Fort Sill. Yes. Now, but now, Lawton was the closest ...

PIEHLER: The closest town. Yeah. I ...

WILSON: It wasn't a big town, but of course, with all the servicemen in training and in the school, it was a busy place.

PIEHLER: I've gotten the sense that it was rigorous for people. I think you're the first artillery officer I've interviewed who went through OCS artillery, but I've interviewed a number who went for infantry. But it was rigorous not only in terms of the subject, you know, like, in your case ... the mechanics and all the, sort of—how to target weaponry and all that, but also just in terms of the military discipline and decorum. Or did you have a lot of that, in terms of decorum, in terms of dress, and your shoes being polished, and your bunks being made a certain way? How much of that ...

WILSON: Well, it was just routine. You learn it in basic training, that you're going to polish your shoes everyday, and you're going to stay all night, if necessary, before coming to the next class. We had already learned to follow instructions. And we were told exactly what to do, and we did it without any argument.

PIEHLER: So people weren't being washed out for not making their beds properly, or not shining their shoes, or that ...

WILSON: No.

PIEHLER: The officers didn't ...

WILSON: No. They just did that automatically. They wouldn't get out without their shoes shined. I'm sure you couldn't manage a school like that nowadays. Maybe you can in the service, but ...

PIEHLER: Well, ... I have gotten the impression it's a lot of training very quickly.

WILSON: Well, that's right.

PIEHLER: And you even mentioned earlier, you know, the mechanical part was not your—that wasn't for you. That wasn't for you. Or you had a harder time with it than—well, you did mention that the firing of the weapon, the training—I mean, you could see the reason for trigonometry, you said earlier.

WILSON: I managed to locate a target and fire on it without any problem. I was nervous, I'm sure, but I didn't have any problem with it. The mathematics professor from the University of Georgia couldn't do it. He could go to the blackboard and fire a mission. On the range he could not. He'd just freeze.

PIEHLER: Really.

WILSON: He couldn't do anything. And they dropped him back, and I suppose he finished sometime, but he didn't finish in our class. The mechanical things, about taking good mechanical work on the truck or on the howitzer or any equipment, was just, sort of, out of my mind. But I've got to admit that I was never even accused—in combat, I directed an awful lot of fire, as much as anybody else ever did, I think. Nobody ever accused me of misfiring. I've had infantrymen that you work with directly appreciate the artillery. And they liked to tell you if they see a target that needs to be hit. And at least once, one wanted me to fire on just a whole group down here, right in front of us, and I took time to look at them, and the unit on our right had come up farther than they expected to, but on a foggy morning, all they could see was uniformed men down here. And so I just handed my binoculars to them and told them, and they understood that.

In one of the articles in this book, Captain Harmon, who was the Headquarters Company Commander and an excellent writer, disagreed with his close, personal friend—at that time—Captain John Leake in regard to our 2nd Battalion Commander. As Battalion S-3, Captain Leake worked very closely with Colonel Bandy in planning and checking every item in every combat mission. Captain Leake insisted that the Battalion Commander was an excellent planner and that he was not a coward. And, as Artillery Liaison Officer, I was constantly

with both the S-3 and the Battalion Commander. I had no reason ever to feel that fear had overcome Colonel Bandy.

PIEHLER: And this is the same colonel that you had known since you were a private? Is that the same colonel?

WILSON: He was—when I went to the [artillery] battalion, ... he had ... just replaced the colonel that I first met ...

PIEHLER: Yes, the first ...

WILSON: ... on desert maneuvers, and that one was one that everybody liked. He, maybe—his capability was of a different kind, but everybody—all the men, liked him. He had been in the Army since several years, and had been down on the Mexican border. And he could talk pretty rough, but they say that his wife was a perfect lady, and when he was with her, he was a perfect gentleman. But when he was with the troops, he was a little different. I first met him in desert maneuvers. I went up to report to him at 6 a.m. and he was ready to walk up to the mountain, and we walked up together, and it was interesting experience. He was an interesting person. But he was shot by a German machine gun and killed, and then Colonel Bandy replaced him. And I worked closely with Bandy and with John Leake. John Leake was the S-3, and [he] has been here.

PIEHLER: The colonel that was killed by German machine gun fire, do you remember his name offhand?

WILSON: Oh, I'd have to think.

PIEHLER: Yeah, and you also, when you get the transcript, you ... could always add the name later.

WILSON: Okay.

PIEHLER: So you don't need to ...

WILSON: Douglas. Colonel Douglas. Colonel Douglas. And his daughter met with our group in Carolina a few years ago, and she wanted to know what happened to him, but nobody had the heart to tell her what happened to him. He was where he really shouldn't have been. He was just crawling up there to see for himself what was going on, and this machine gunner just riddled him. And Sergeant Coleman—you know, that came to our last meeting, he told me that Douglas was so riddled—and they gave him orders to go up and get him. He was a sergeant in charge of taking care of something in the office. He went up to get him to take him and not leave him there, but to take him back to registration, and he said, Coleman said, "I hadn't liked him before then," but said, "when I picked that body up and put it on the Jeep, I had to change my opinion."

PIEHLER: Going ... back to OCS, you know, finishing OCS—after you finished OCS, they put you back—that’s when you took over the communications?

WILSON: Oh, no.

PIEHLER: What happened after finishing OCS?

WILSON: When I finished OCS, I had a ten days leave and came back to Tennessee with orders to go up to Camp Robertson, California. And so I was a first lieutenant—I mean, a second lieutenant, there for four and a half months and had a wonderful experience.

PIEHLER: What was so wonderful?

WILSON: And there again, and there again, we had a group of officers that were just—from Utah, University of Utah, and another state there close. I don’t remember which one now. But those fellows had just earned their second lieutenant bars at OCS and in ROTC, and they were interesting fellows, enthusiastic. I had an order to go up to see the official in the camp. But he was to give me an order to take a trainload of those that were just finishing their three months up to San Francisco. I would take them to San Francisco and I could not tell them what was going to happen, where they were going to go, or anything, but I was to take them to report up there, and they would be transferred somewhere else. Well, all they knew was that they were to get on a train and wherever the train takes them. But they were discussing—most of them were from the Northwest. “Boy, I bet we’re going to such-and-such.” Just having a good time. They got there, they got off the train and got in the big trucks where they had no windows. Didn’t know what was going to happen, but, “Boy, I can’t wait to get back home.” Well, the truck stopped, and they didn’t open it so we could see out. We sat there for some long time. And when they did open it and let us out, we were in the harbor, and they just got quiet. They had not one word. Of course, I didn’t know any more than they did. And finally, we stood there and one of them jumped up and he said, “Mail call!” Well, then they all laughed a little bit. And they got on the boat that took them out in the harbor, in San Francisco Harbor, to a camp on the other side of the water. And I heard later that they were afraid they were going overseas in the Pacific, but they were not. They sent them somewhere else.

KUPSKY: Well, I had heard on the other interview you did about another time you escorted some people to Baltimore and it sounded like kind of an interesting trip. Would you like to ... explain what happened on that?

WILSON: It’s an interesting trip. I don’t know whether you want to hear all the details or not, but this was an order—when I asked to go back to the artillery to get away from the ... pilot program, why, I had a delay of several days in Fort Sill again. And they called me up and wanted me to take eighty men—they were going to form a new division. These were all enlisted men that were going to form—they were to be the cadre for a new unit. Now, we were at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and I was to take them by train to Fort Mead, Maryland. The ... printed order, gave their names and their rank, and they were to be delivered to Fort Mead, Maryland to report to so-and-so, and it was to be a first-class train that would go direct.

Well, trains didn't go direct during the war, but that's what the order said. And I was told that I could not let them get out of the train. We would be on that train, and on the way, that I would interview each one of them individually and get their personal opinion of officers and units that they had worked with at Fort Sill and make a detailed report. Well, my copy of that report is in my file here, or it should be. I did interview each one of them. Some of the times, why, they would rather not answer questions like that, but I made it just—it was what I was told to do, and it wouldn't be held against anybody, but ...

-----END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO-----

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Edgar Wilson on June 26th, 2003 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, [Tennessee] with Kurt Piehler ...

KUPSKY: ... and Greg Kupsky.

PIEHLER: And you were just saying you had to interview them, and you've written this report. And some of the men you weren't—it sounds like some of the men you weren't impressed with, or they were not impressed with some of the ...

WILSON: They had not been favorably impressed, some of them, with their officers in the unit that they'd been in there. I made careful notes on each one, giving his name and what he told me. Then I came back and used the typewriter and typed it myself with carbon paper, of course. And you've probably got a copy in my file here. But that was a pretty interesting experience. However, when we got to the railroad, and they were putting us in the train, a steam engine, two cars we had, with wicker-backed chairs. And you've never seen one.

PIEHLER: Oh, I've seen them. I used to ride those trains in New Jersey.

WILSON: And you couldn't—it was a straight-up chair. No place to sleep except in that straight-backed, wicker-backed chair.

KUPSKY: Ouch.

WILSON: And with cracks around the glass on the windows, soot from the steam engine going in there. But I told them that we—and I showed them the order that we're supposed to have a first-class train. And the officer said, "This is the only train available to take you. And you either take it or you just don't go." So we had to go. After two days, we were in Kansas City right at the station, dirty and messy and awful. And I got the group [to] where they could all hear me and told them that I had strict orders not to let them out of the train. But I said, "... We're going to be here for about two hours, and I'm going to let you get out of the train, but just watch what you do and be back here on time." Well, most of them were back. There were two young fellows that I had their names called out. They were not there yet, and I had it over the loudspeaker, and they came just as innocent as two young kids could. They apologized. They said, "We didn't—we asked you before we left, and you said the train was supposed to leave in about two and a half hours." Well, anyway, they all—we

all got—I had the roll perfect then. But in addition to the eighty men that showed up, there were about seventy-five women hanging on to them, trying to keep them off the train. (Laughter) And they'd all had a beer or two, I guess, but anyway, we finally got them inside and I got them where they could hear me and I gave them a lecture. And there was one first sergeant that jumped up, and he took over. And he took up for me, and he saw that they straightened up. So that was an experience.

But when we finally did, after four days on that dirty train, we got to Fort Meade, and I went in and got them all accounted for, and I told the officer that was in charge that I had to have somebody's signature on the form saying they were here and that their equipment was all accounted for. But he said, "We've got 'em here all right, but we can't verify that their equipment's all right. We don't care whether it is or not." And I said, "Well, I have to have a signature, because I was told that the last one that didn't get that signature was sent home and reclassified, reduced in rank." "Well," he said, "We can't do that. We just can't check all that equipment." And I said, "Well, I'm going to take a seat over here and I'll just wait 'til we get that signed, because I can't go back to Fort Sill without it." So he went ahead with his books. (Laughter) In about thirty minutes he looked up and said, "Let me have that thing and I'll sign it." So he signed it, and that's all I had to get done there. And I asked him where the railroad station is, and he said, "It's just two or three buildings right down the street here." And when I got to the railroad, I asked the counter when I could get a train back to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He said, "There's a first class train that's due to go out right now. If you'll run, you might get on it." And it *was* a first class train with—not box, but compartments.

PIEHLER: Oh, those are—yeah.

WILSON: And, boy, it was a wonderful thing. And I looked and there was even a shower in it.

KUPSKY: Oh, wow.

WILSON: And the train stopped in the Washington station just briefly, and before I got settled, why, a gentleman came in to take the compartment right beside me, [a] very nice person. And he said, "Lieutenant, when you get sort of straightened out, come over and we'll talk." He—of course, I didn't feel like talking, but I went over and listened, and he told me who he was. It didn't register. However, he proceeded to tell me that he was on his way to Kansas to inspect a new plane, which is supposed to be ready to get in the air now. And he gave me the description of the plane, what it would—the distance it could fly without refueling, the wingspan, everything about it, and the bombs that it could carry. So, when I got back to Fort Sill, I told some of my friends and they laughed at me; said, "He strung you a line, didn't he?" About three days later, the description of the B-21 (probably means B-29) was printed in the paper, the exact figures that I had given them. And I learned later that Senator [Harry S.] Truman was—would have been the one to go out and inspect that. He was the head of the committee that inspected. But he was a very nice guy.

PIEHLER: And you—he just wanted to chat, you know, with you?

WILSON: Yeah. Just as interesting as anybody could be. He was a perfect gentleman.

KUPSKY: I thought that was kind of an interesting story. I'd heard—I think you told part of the story on the tape, and I just thought it was kind of an interesting way to go about meeting Senator Truman.

WILSON: Senator Truman made a good president, too.

PIEHLER: So in California, ... what other duties—I mean, you've mentioned some of these—two of these trips, very interesting trips. What else did you—what other duties did you have?

WILSON: When I finally got my word to report to the 80th Division, which had just come—they were in Kansas or Missouri, one—Kansas, I believe. But anyway, I was assigned to the 80th Infantry Division. They had just come from Tennessee maneuvers and were reorganizing. And when we arrived in the station, we were escorted—there were about seven of us, I believe, and we were escorted into the office of the division artillery commander, [Brigadier] General [Edmund W.] Searby—tall, slender, with bushy eyebrows that came down over his eyes. But he was a wonderful person. He had us come into his office, and sitting around him just like this, he made a statement that stuck with me, and ten years later, I think, I used it with the new employees: “You are coming into a new unit. You may wonder what your future is.” But he said, “There's always a place for a man that can do his job and does it well.” That stuck with me forever.

And I then went on to my battery, and in addition, I was to be the division artillery officers' mess officer, in addition to other duties. They had just come off of maneuvers. They were in the process of having a week off to go home, and the officers' mess sometimes would have waiters, and sometimes we wouldn't. But I had to be in charge of—we had a mess sergeant that ... would plan the meals. And I could draw what I could—what we needed for the meal out of the division office, or I could go into town and buy. And then the officer paid twenty dollars a month, I think, extra, for eating in there. That was quite an interesting experience, too, and I understand the division artillery—General Searby's aide told me that he had given me a mighty good write-up on my record.

But one day, this—the mess sergeant was a Chinaman. And he told me that he originally came from Baghdad, but he was an American citizen, an American soldier. And [I] walked in one day, he said, “The general came by.” And, boy, he was fighting mad. (Laughing) He said, “The general came by and he tried to tell me that I should do something different.” And he said, “I told him that that's not the way you do it. It's got to be done ...” He argued with me.” And he said, “I could have just started pulling my hair out.” I said, “Doggone it, General!” And the general left him. I didn't quote him exactly, but he used some mighty bad words. (Laughter) But General McBride treated me all right after he saw my ability on firing.

PIEHLER: So, ... the unit joined you in California?

WILSON: Do what, now?

PIEHLER: The 80th Division. Just so I have it straight. The unit joined you. In other words, the unit was coming from the Tennessee maneuvers when you joined up with the unit?

WILSON: No, the 80th Division had just been formed a few months before and had been on Tennessee ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, Tennessee maneuvers. And then when you joined the unit, where did you actually physically meet them?

WILSON: In Kansas.

PIEHLER: Okay. Okay, Kansas.

WILSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Okay.

WILSON: And then, after I had been there for about two months, I went back to Fort Sill for a three-month course on the officer communications. And while I was there, they moved to the desert, Arizona desert, for maneuvers. When I returned, along with another lieutenant that was in the same class with me, we got back to the maneuver just before—the day before the maneuver started. Went up into the desert area, the high ground, after dark. And the next morning, I was to meet the second battalion commander, who was General Douglas, who was later killed. And so I walked with him up to the observation post. Got good instructions, good information, but by the time we got up there, they were telling us to, “Get off this mountain quick! We’re already overcome.” So that was just the beginning of the maneuver, but that maneuver was such a hard fought thing that that was the best training I had in the Army. You never knew one minute what happened—what might happen the next. And things like that are necessary to prepare you for what you’re going to see later.

PIEHLER: What had you heard? What had you heard from your fellow officers who had been at the Tennessee maneuvers, how they went? Because it’s somewhat ironic that you joined the unit after their Tennessee maneuvers.

WILSON: These fellows that we’d been meeting together, all of them except Hicks, I think—I think Hicks came to them a little bit later, but the others were in the Tennessee maneuver.

PIEHLER: Did they have any words about it, and how it—particularly, how it might’ve compared with the desert maneuvers?

WILSON: They had some interesting reports on the Tennessee maneuver, but it was not anything like the desert. No.

PIEHLER: (Laughing) How hot was the desert?

WILSON: Let's see. We were there through February.

PIEHLER: So, you were in the cool time of year.

WILSON: Yeah. The weather was not all that bad. And then we moved. When the maneuver was over, why, we moved over—the artillery did—to another valley, and at night it was just freezing. It was terribly cold at night. But the desert maneuver was an experience. Rough and awful.

PIEHLER: What was the rough and awful parts about it? ... Any specific incidents that you remember?

WILSON: Well, I felt like I was lost from the rest for a time, part of the day.

PIEHLER: When you say lost, [were you] just by yourself?

WILSON: (Laughing) No, I still ...

PIEHLER: How much of the unit did you have?

WILSON: I had only two others with me, really, and a chief. But then at the end of the maneuvers, we were all supposed to get together, all the units in the division, scattered in various and sundry places. But here there was a road map that we were all to stand in a certain order to a certain area, and Colonel Browning put me in charge of that. I mean, of our part of it. But nobody had—was listening on his radio. I had no other way to contact them. And I met with the group, then when we got together. Colonel Browning was in charge, of course, and I was just a nervous wreck. I had to—so-and-so wouldn't answer his—I don't know where he is. And finally Browning said, "At ease, Willie. We'll all get there sometime." And we did. (Laughter) I had my wife tell you to push me into talking like this. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I'm curious, among your fellow officers, how many—what was the, sort of, percentage of—had anyone seen combat in the 80th when you were in the California maneuvers? Had anyone been cadred out of a ... combat?

WILSON: None that I knew of.

PIEHLER: Yeah. ... You mentioned a West Pointer at one point, I think, one of your colonels. How many West Pointers were among you? Do you remember?

WILSON: Well, Colonel Browning was a West Pointer ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, you mentioned [that].

WILSON: And he had been through West Point by four or five years before he came to us.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

WILSON: And he was an excellent commander, I thought. Then—well, let's see. Excuse me. I know this one other, and I can't think who it was, who was a West Pointer.

PIEHLER: A West Pointer. How many were—how many had been in the regular Army before Pearl Harbor? Did you have any, sort of, career officers or guardsmen?

WILSON: Very few. The commander of the 314th artillery was a West Pointer and still is active. And he's as old as I am or maybe a little older, but he still, I think, goes to meetings. When the war ended, Colonel Browning, our artillery commander—I think I told you, but he told me that he had had all he wanted of it. And he—the 314th commander had some information from him. I think he sent maybe 100 dollars and some information that they ask him for one time. But he has told me that they never hear from Browning anymore.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

WILSON: That Browning just—he would not go back to the West Point meeting or answer correspondence. But in 19 and the early—well, about 1971, I wrote to Colonel Browning. The other colonel from the 314th gave me his address in Texas. I wrote it, and I said, “You may not remember me.” I still have that letter. I could give it to you if you want it.

PIEHLER: Well, we could—did he reply to you? Did Colonel Browning write back?

WILSON: He wrote me a good one. Yeah.

PIEHLER: Yeah, we would love to have that copied that letter.

WILSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: What did he say to you, because he had been so out of touch?

WILSON: He was glad to know what I had done. And he said, “I tried for a while. I had an office, and we didn't do too well, and I just decided I better spend my time with my wife and my daughters.” But I hate to see him go down like that. I mean, he really did. In fact, when I was the ... headquarters battery commander—after the war ended, he ... would ... let his driver take him out, and they'd have a real good time at night together, which wasn't like him.

PIEHLER: It sounds like the war really affected him.

WILSON: It had. Yes.

PIEHLER: That he really, never really got over it.

WILSON: He admitted that it had bothered him. Yeah. But in this letter, a four page, typewritten letter.... And I had told him that—I said, “You may not remember me,” but he said, “I certainly remember you.” He said, “I was not permitted to make any kind of notes, for good reason, but,” he said, “on the 16th of November, I did put in my report, ‘Wilson distinguished himself today.’” Yeah, I’ll get that letter.

PIEHLER: Yeah, I would be curious. We’d love to have a copy of that.

KUPSKY: Let’s see. Just to clarify, desert training—that was ’43, wasn’t it?

WILSON: That was ’43. Wait a minute. Yeah.

KUPSKY: Or would that have still been ’42?

PIEHLER: December of ’43.

WILSON: It was ...

PIEHLER: And then it was March that you moved to Fort Dix? March of 1944.

WILSON: ’44, yeah.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WILSON: Yeah. It was ’44.

KUPSKY: Oh, okay.

PIEHLER: And you were at Fort Dix for, it sounds like, a little over a month.

WILSON: That probably is right. I don’t remember right now exactly how long it was.

PIEHLER: But you were very much—the division was very much in transit at that point. Or did you do any training at Fort Dix?

WILSON: No. And then we had an interesting trip by train from the desert to Fort Dix. And I remember at night—I had some responsibility on the train trip, too. But I remember at night that the officers in one car would do a little singing or something, and somebody starts singing, let’s see, one of the familiar songs that you would know, and.... Well, it was an interesting trip. Nobody knew—we had a good idea of where we were going, but ...

PIEHLER: But you weren’t 100 percent positive.

WILSON: Not—that's right.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, before we [cover] the staging at Fort Kilmer, what did you think of California?

WILSON: It's—I'm sure it's different now.

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah. It's certainly different now [from] the California of ... World War II.

WILSON: Oh, it ... was wonderful. (Laughter) After—when I first got there, why, I was in charge. I was one of the officers in charge of a—they expected fully that the Japanese would drop some incendiary bombs, and we had to—those of us on that committee had to sleep with our pistol belts on us. We could unbuckle them, but we had to be right there so we could get up and go. And on the Fourth of July, we were sent to a forest fire, and it covered several—oh, many thousands of acres. But we were in charge of the men that we took, but we were not in charge of the fighting of the fire. The men, we were responsible for, but they had experts tell them what to do. And during those fires, on the ... reservation, the wind changed and it killed two men, burned them up right quick.

PIEHLER: Where was the fire again? You mentioned it.

WILSON: It would be in the central part of California.

PIEHLER: California.

WILSON: And near the coast, but not on the coast.

PIEHLER: And was there any suspicion that this was from Japanese incendiary bombs?

WILSON: They never did say that, and in fact, I think the opinion was that it was not. But they expected things like that to happen.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, why sleep with your [gun]? I mean, there may be an obvious reason, which I'm not sure [of], but why sleep with your pistols?

WILSON: So that all you had to do was buckle it and run. You had to stay in your uniform with your pistol right there [gesturing], either around you or ...

PIEHLER: Yeah. And if there had been incendiary bombs, then what was the protocol? What were you going to do?

WILSON: I don't remember. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Okay. No, no, no. I mean, it's been a while.

KUPSKY: As far as, I guess, the civilian population in California, did you have any sense of the extent to which they were afraid of incendiary bombs or any sort of attacks?

WILSON: We didn't have much opportunity to deal with the public. And when you get to San Francisco—I was there two, on two occasions, but San Francisco was a place of its own, and everybody was having a good time.

PIEHLER: ... In the States, when you did get ... a pass or have leave, what would you do in these different communities? You mentioned going to church in Oklahoma. Would you head to, sort of, a local bar, or would you walk around town, or ...

WILSON: We might get a beer, yeah.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WILSON: But the PXs on the posts had three percent beer. And I know Harvey Robinson and I, when we first went in together in Fort Sill in basic training, why, we would go to the—he couldn't—he was not a drinker, and neither was I. We'd never been able to afford it. But Harvey told me, the first time we went to the P.X., he said, "Now, we're both in the teaching profession and some of these men are not, but if they're having a beer, we better have one with them." And so I know one time that I had six or seven before the others would quit, and I think Harvey had about the same, but it didn't do much for you.

PIEHLER: So you hadn't ... drunk before the war? You mentioned you couldn't really afford [it]. It sounds like—how much was—because to drink alcohol was expensive, and how much was it that you come from a dry tradition?

WILSON: Well, we didn't, anywhere in Tennessee, have access for anything except moonshine. And I just never had had the habit of it, and my father never talked about it. It was never seen in the family. We just didn't ... have a problem with it.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WILSON: On the last day of the war—am I going too far?

PIEHLER: No, no, no. Take whatever ...

WILSON: We were so exhausted trying to get to the river in Austria before the Russians did. We knew that it had to be over because the Germans were coming toward us and surrendering, three and a half million, so they said. But we hadn't got any official word except that we had to ... keep going, don't stop until we get to that spot. And we were so exhausted that when the day came, and the battalion officers were called to this certain building for a meeting, and the colonel read the report to us, that the war would be officially over by midnight, and that we could tell the troops that. One of the company commanders knew what was coming up, or thought he did. He suspected he did. He pulled out a bottle of some special booze. I don't remember what it was, but he said, "I carried this from such-

and-such a place in France so that we could have it when this day comes.” And he passed it around, and every one of us just did about like that (gesturing) and probably not much more than just smelling it, because nobody was in the humor right then. And my radio operator, who is pictured here (gesturing), he was so worn out, too. And he had told me, “If this thing ever does end, I’m going to get drunk.” But when we got through there, why, the colonel told us to go out and tell our people the news, and when I walked in their door, one of them says, “Is it over?” I said, “Yes, it’s over.” He said, “Well, we’d already got that from the switchboard operator.” (Laughter) But Murphy said he was going to get drunk, but I don’t think he really did.

PIEHLER: What was it like to—I’m always amused when people state [that they came] from Camp Kilmer—In a strange way, I’m amused because that’s now a branch of Rutgers [University], and some of the old buildings are still being used by Rutgers for, now, offices.

WILSON: Oh, is that right?

PIEHLER: How was that, sort of, as the unit is getting ready to go?

WILSON: I don’t remember that we saw it. I don’t remember a thing, except that that’s where we were.

PIEHLER: What about the journey overseas? What do you remember about that?

WILSON: We were on the Queen Mary. The entire division, plus attached troops, 18,000 on the Queen Mary. Many of them had to sleep on the top deck. And it was not a bad ride. But I had been told that it’s important to keep something in your stomach and to keep walking and get fresh air. I had done that and had got along fine. I was feeling woozy, but I got it managed. And on the last night before we got into Edinburgh, [Scotland], why, the ship was just—it felt like it would go up here and then stay up there and then go halfway.... (Laughter) And I went down to breakfast; I didn’t know whether I could or not, but I went down to breakfast, one floor below, and everywhere you stepped on the steps going down the steps, you had to watch for a place to put your foot.

KUPSKY: Eww.

WILSON: It was worse than that, and when I got into the dining room, there were two other men, and I sat down at the first table I could get hold of, and the waiter came over and said—had a covered thing—he said, “Sir, this morning, we have stewed lamb’s kidneys.” And I ...

KUPSKY: Wow. (Laughter)

WILSON: I jumped up and I ran. I didn’t eat a thing that morning, but ...

PIEHLER: Oh! (Laughter)

KUPSKY: Was there a sense of apprehension on the way over? Were you worried about, as far as like, the zigzagging and the ...

WILSON: I don't think so. But the last night, when it was so rough, the waves were higher and there had been a German sub after us, so they said. And they had gone in everchanging directions. (Tape paused) Um, you never asked me any questions about what happened. You know, the one thing that bothered me most, I had valuable men in the—I depended on. They knew what to do, and they did it because they wanted to do it. Corporal Kurz was in charge of the telephone lines and the radio and everything, and [Corporal William J.] Zwick looked after the Jeep, and they could interchange. But if I had lost one of them in the middle of trouble, I always told them to give my—if anything happened to me, to take my university ring and keep it.

But there were two times when Corporal Kurz—he had been raised by his father during Prohibition, prior to the war. And he said that he was just a little kid when his father was looking after a gaming table in the basement of a hotel in Atlantic City, a big long table, and they always had a bowl of booze in the center. And he would get up on that table and crawl around and hear all the conversation, which wasn't all good. And he learned words that would just amuse you. But the company commanders—I mean, the battery commanders had disciplined him lots of times and told him, "You stop that or else!" But during combat, it would just come out and it was funny to hear him say things.

One day, we'd had some pretty rough going, and didn't know what was going to happen. And at the end of the day, we began to solve some of those problems. And I said, "Kurz, I hadn't heard any cuss words from you." "I know it," he said, "I've been praying all day." And Zwick said, "Me, too." He said, "Every sin I ever committed was right before my eyes!" (Laughter) But on two occasions, I just knew that Kurz was gone. One was when we had a tank coming here at the Moselle right beside of me, one of our own attached tanks. And he said, "I'm coming up, lieutenant. I'll be with you in a minute." And at that, the German tank put that tank out of business completely. Silence for, it seemed like, five minutes. He came back on his walkie-talkie and says, "They got our tank!" (Laughter)

Then on a hill overlooking Normandy, we were in a spot where there was an American tank that had been knocked out, but they were still shooting at it, getting pretty close. And we were about fifty yards away, but those rounds sometimes hit pretty.... And we—our telephone line was obviously broken, because a lot of rounds had been going just behind us, just over the hill a little bit. And so he said, "I'm going back there and fix—find that break in the line." Of course, we could use radio, the walkie-talkie, but it's better if you have phones. So, he made his way back there and by the time he got where they'd been dropping a lot of rounds, why, they put a half a dozen in there. And I thought, "Well, he's gone for sure." Because that's where he was going. Seemed like another five minutes when he called me. He said, "I haven't found that break in the line yet. I've been pinned down in the mud up to my ass!" (Laughter) In training, you couldn't use any kind of bad language on the radio. It was against the law; it was Federal communications. You couldn't use any swear words or anything. The modern generation won't believe that, but that was a fact, and we observed it.

PIEHLER: Uh huh. But in combat, that sort of ...

WILSON: Yeah. It would just come out of him, and so it's interesting. Then when I got Murphy, who was the radio operator with my liaison crew, he was a nervous sort, and I had to hold him once in a while. I'd have to shake him just a little bit, and he'd always come out of it, and he appreciates it to this day, even though he is now in a nursing facility. And he's advanced me to a colonel, so they tell me! (Laughter) But the important thing about being an artilleryman with the infantry was something that you just can't explain to other people that don't know. You know what's going on. You don't read it in the paper, because it's not published in the paper. But the people that have to face the enemy on the front line are a special kind of people. You never forget them.

PIEHLER: Well, I think we probably need to end for today, but that's ... a good place to end for today, because I need to make a few calls before I leave and—but we'd like to resume this, maybe after the Fourth of July, if that's okay with you?

KUPSKY: Yeah, we've got—there's plenty more to talk about.

PIEHLER: There's plenty more to ask, because we've barely gotten you into—we haven't even gotten you really to England yet. And I want to ask you about the Conservative Club you ended up in.

WILSON: The what?

PIEHLER: The Conservative Club you ended—you said you ...

WILSON: Oh, yeah. In ...

PIEHLER: In England. You said you met people that reminded you of your uncle.

WILSON: Yeah. That was an interesting experience. Well, I've enjoyed it.

PIEHLER: Well, thanks. We really enjoyed it, too.

WILSON: I never expected to be here more than an hour. (Laughter)

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

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