

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE  
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH EDGAR C. WILSON

FOR THE  
VETERAN'S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEWED BY  
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BOULTON: This begins an interview with Mr. Edgar Wilson on September 4, 2005 at the University of Tennessee Center for the Study of War and Society in Knoxville, Tennessee with Mark Boulton and ...

TINKER: Cynthia Tinker ...

BROWN: Cinnamon Brown.

BOULTON: Mr. Wilson before we begin the interview there are some things that you brought in that you would like to share?

WILSON: Well yes. There's the two items ... that Dr. Piehler asked of me in the last one [last interview March 2004] that I ... didn't give him a clear answer. And I ... one was about whether we had, during combat, if we had a shower or a bathtub. Well, no we didn't. But ... I understand that the tankers always had a ... shower available but we didn't. But there's one thing that I do want to make clear. I kept myself clean from top to bottom. (Laughter) And one time during the rainy period when it was just—during the day you couldn't help getting muddy, but I had to go by the artillery headquarters. I went in to see Colonel Browning and when I walked in he said, "Well, well. Willy is not his clean ... self today." And that wasn't funny to me. (Laughter) But I told him we'd be out ... been out in the mud all day. Then ... you can keep yourself clean. You don't have to have a tub full of water, while I would enjoy that, but ... at that time I always kept my hair completely shaved. Just a bald face and head because it was advisable that we might get a head injury which would make it hard to treat. And so most of us on the frontline did keep our hair cut with no hair at all. Later, when I came through Paris and had a little time on my way home, why I decided, "Well, I ought to get trimmed up here so I can start." I walked into the barbershop and I sat down in the chair and the French barber walked around and looked at me and said, "Hmm. Hmm. Monsieur?" And I said, "Well just trim it. I'm going to let my hair grow again, but just trim it so I can get a ... start before I get home." That was sort of funny.

But ... it was no—a shampoo wasn't necessary in combat because it's something you could just do it the way you do anything else. I have a picture here that was sent to me by ... one of the men who was here for our ... our meeting in ... well twice in '92 and '94, '96 I believe it was. And he sent me in his—and he died recently, and his wife sent me another picture of him. And on the back of the picture he had written [reading out loud], "Lieutenant Wilson, artillery observer, washing cloths at Chemnitz, Germany." I don't think that would have been in Chemnitz but .... I have intended to go to Kinko's and see if they could brighten that picture up. I know it could be done.

TINKER: It's some type of bowl or ...

WILSON: Pardon?

TINKER: Some type of bowl you have there that your washing in.

WILSON: A what now?

TINKER: The bowl.

WILSON: Oh.

BOULTON: Is that what you'd use, just a bowl to wash your clothing in?

WILSON: (Laughs) I don't know. (Laughter) There may have been a ... stream there of clear water.

BOULTON: So is that how you'd keep clean? Whenever you just came across some sort of water supply you just wash whenever you could or ...

WILSON: ... Yes, and I never, or we ... we always had ... clean water available. You may have those if you want to ...

TINKER: We will put those in the archives.

BOULTON: Yeah.

TINKER: ... with your things.

WILSON: We always had clean water, but ... never did we have an opportunity until after the war was just about ended. Well, we occasionally would get in a house where there was a ... tub. But ... if you take your helmet and take the ...

TINKER: The netting out.

WILSON: ... in part out ...

BOULTON: Right.

WILSON: And ... then you could put more water in it as you need it. But never during the time that I served in combat did I fail to shave sometime during the day or night and bathe completely. And—so I just wanted to clear that up. (Laughter) But ... that may not answer Dr. Piehler completely.

TINKER: Oh, I'm sure that's fine ...

BOULTON: I think it does thoroughly, so ...

WILSON: (Laughs)

TINKER: I'm sure there was a lot of men that didn't have ... maintain your same level of ...

BROWN: Hygiene.

TINKER: ... self-discipline there. (Laughter) Or hygiene.

WILSON: There was one—when ... we were on a ... were called off then relieved for a few days, there was one company and maybe a whole battalion in ... the 313<sup>th</sup> Battalion that didn't require cleanliness. And they ... would go around not shaved or cleaned or anything. But ... the battalion that I worked with, and I was with the colonel, the battalion commander constantly, but he insisted that if anybody in his battalion came out looking like a tramp he would take care of that. Now, the one thing—this may take me just a few minutes to tell this ...

TINKER: Okay.

BOULTON: No problem.

WILSON: But ... Dr. Piehler had asked me when I ... I said that John McManus—I did not agree with him on his statement that fear was the thing that motivated people.

BOULTON: Right.

WILSON: And I said that ... was not true with me or with the ones that I worked with. And ... it was not true. I had—when ... I became the ... battalion, the liaison officer that served and worked with the staff and the infantry and the battalion commander constantly ... But ... I represented the artillery and I was working with the infantry. And I mentioned somewhere in my previous interviews that ... I was impressed by the statement from the field artillery school, when I earned my gold bars, that the purpose of the infantry is to hold against an enemy or to take from the enemy. That's what they had to do. The purpose of ... or the objective of the field artillery was to support the infantry. Now you don't work with one outfit and represent another. If you gossip or carry on bad comments about either one—and I never did. Colonel Browning of the artillery would never say anything bad about the infantry that I worked with. And the commander that I worked with closely didn't like Colonel Browning and he expressed himself freely about that. (Laughs) But it had nothing to do with the ability of the artillery to serve them. It was a personal feeling.

BOULTON: Right.

WILSON: But ... frequently he'd make some comment about that and I always responded by saying that he has the best artillery battalion in the division, and I think he had. I know he had. And ... so I think that's an important thing to remember after the war when I had responsibilities of my own between main headquarters in Middle Tennessee and ... others in East Tennessee. You just don't carry on bad reports about people that you're working with, and I think that's true in this department right here too.

Now the purpose of going into this was ... Dr. Piehler couldn't understand why fear ... did not occur. Well when I was an observer and working with mainly enlisted men with their rifles and being shot at. They knew that on a minutes notice if I needed artillery I could get it. And the spirit that developed between us is just unbelievable. I have told different people that I think I had the most important job in the Army, because if I fail there are scores of men that knew that I

failed. But if you're successful and try to do the job better—now I didn't mean to take this much time but ...

BOULTON: Well this is your interview. I mean, this is fine.

WILSON: Our family, we lived in a rural community. We had no close neighbors, except we had one house that was a tenant house and they sometimes had big families, but ... but we lived as a family and worked as a family. We were—we ... learned morals from our parents and mother especially ... made us memorize certain verses from the Old Testament and the New Testament both and remember that, but ... otherwise we were not overly religious. My father, who died in 1934, but as long as he lived—and usually we would eat together three meals a day. But he always returned thanks before every meal. Strangely he never did ask the rest of us to learn to do that 'cause that was the father's job.

TINKER: Yeah.

WILSON: So, coming back to combat, and I mentioned in there—this I think is recorded, that after I became the liaison officer with the battalion, Colonel Browning from the artillery called me three or four days later to see about the ... if I had any comments on the employees that were serving me as part of that new job for me. And I told him that I had just had a conference with the ... buck sergeant, and that he was so overcome with seeing dead people and seeing people get killed and others having to kill. And that he ... was just shocked. And he says, "I just don't understand this." And I let him tell me his feelings. But I said, "Well, I have the same feeling, but we're in a situation where we have to do what has to be done." He couldn't understand that. And I told Colonel Browning that I wouldn't want to do anything to hurt the guy, but that I felt that he ought to be sent back through medical channels and let them decide because he was not capable of handling the job that he had to do. The very next morning I had a brand new crew. And they were tough. They never bothered me. They knew all they had to do was tell me what we had to have tomorrow. They got it there.

But not too long after that, I began to—I had told Dr. Piehler I guess I had to use my limited knowledge of ... psychology. I didn't tell him any more than that. But I knew that I had to make an adjustment, because when I call in a command it means probably that more ... one person is going to be ... knocked out. And it ... is something that worries me. But during the ... at night I—this was the Bible that ... Mother had left with me and she signed me something. It's somewhere. But anyway, she didn't put any message with it just—she says, "Presented to Edgar Wilson September 1, 1934. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He will direct thy path." Well I ... have never attempted to be a Bible scholar, but that was one of the things that she made us memorize when we were young ... when we were kids. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah.

WILSON: And ... of course in the grade school, when I was teaching, we ... read a part of the scripture and repeated the Lord's Prayer, and we saluted the flag. But ... when I was beginning to realize that I had to adjust, why I—during the night I picked this ... I had this in my ... case that went everywhere I went, and I just opened it, not knowing what was there. But I turned, I

opened it to Romans, the Eighth Chapter of Romans, and I read it. It wasn't meaning much to me until I got to the last two versus. And they are this [reading], "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor heights, nor depths, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God." That was a part of the psychology that straightened me out and for ... after that that was ... fresh on my mind and ... I never was afraid. That—now that's a story that I have never told anybody else except you three.

Jack Draper one Sunday had asked us all to write down a ... a favorite chapter ... a favorite quotation. And I ... put that and then I added from the King James Version, the modern version, it's stated a little short, but not that much. But that's where I learned it. It was from the King James Version. And Jack ... looking at all of his and he spoke out to the whole class and said, "Now who is it, if you don't mind telling me, which one prefers the King James Version?" Well I didn't answer him. But ... I—after my wife died, a Doctor Hunter who had attended her service, did such a great job. But ... he had used that in a lot of his sermons ... his funerals. But he always used the one from the modern version. And I had told him several times after Jerry died that I'd like for him to use those same two lines ... those same two verses when he had my service, but he's dead now. (Laughs) That was a long story, and I ...

BROWN: No.

WILSON: I hope it wasn't too long.

TINKER: Appreciate you sharing that. It was very special.

WILSON: Well ... [looking through folder of pictures] I've got some other things I'll show you later.

TINKER: Oh, okay. Well ...

WILSON: Okay now, let's go ahead with your questions.

TINKER: I almost don't know where to start now, Mr. Wilson. That's pretty emotional.

BOULTON: You mentioned that you ... didn't think that fear was a factor, and wasn't for you. What about the rest of the men around you? What ... do you think motivated them?

WILSON: The fact that they were infantrymen. They had been trained as infantrymen. They had a job to do and they felt that I could handle artillery when they needed it. That's—there's no question in my mind about that. ... When—on the sixteenth of September, I had traveled all night to get there because there was no artillery, but ... the infantry was actually whipped ...

TINKER: ... What year?

WILSON: '42, '44.

TINKER: To get where?

WILSON: At Loisy, France.

TINKER: Hmm. Okay.

WILSON: On the Moselle [River]. The artillery infantry ... or the artillery commander, a one star general, one that I felt was a friend of mine. But he had been shot the very ... the day before and the ones on the hill where he was ... it was an attack that they'd come up there. And he ... had picked up a rifle. The general—the division commander says he ... had told him to stay away from the front, 'cause he ... was too valuable. But anyway ... he picked up a rifle and was trying to shoot a German tank commander. You could see his head. And they just riddled him with a machine gun. And ... that was when they still had a few on top of the hill, but here was a broad valley and when I got there—checked in with the company commander and he ... I asked him where he wanted me to go and he said, "Well I've got a ... squad of infantry right out there by the cemetery." When I got there they had already, three of them were dead. They ... two riflemen and their first aid man. I didn't have time to speak to them or they didn't speak to me. When I got my glasses and saw the bushes moving up there. And then I saw this ... tank moving—just barely at the break of day. ... At that time I had got his coordinates and I called off our mission. My radio operator was back at the Jeep and he said, "We can't get through. We can't get ... they're not answering us." And at that I just automatically—there was a hole that probably a German had dug the day before and I started to jump in it, and as I was jumping in it my mother's face with her big brown eyes said, "Get out of that hole and do something." (Laughs) And I immediately got back. I didn't stop down in the hole. But, by the time I got back on my feet ... Corp. Kurz had called and says, "I'm getting through now." So we started to work on that. I don't now why I got into all this. (Laughter)

TINKER: Well we ...

WILSON: But ... at the end of that day after two and a half hours—and if our fire direction center—of course the German infantry were jumping all across the valley and the ... tank had knocked out two of our tanks completely, and the tank commander of one of ours had got right even with us. And as he started to come out a machine gun bullet ripped ... all of his leg from his knee down and left just the flesh. But ... I had used—and they began to get ... more artillery units from corps and army artillery that were farther back. And the fire direction center had told me later that I had directed five thousand three hundred and some artillery rounds that day. That ... was quite an experience.

TINKER: Seems like it. (Laughter) Mr. Wilson ...

WILSON: I ... knew for one thing that ... I said to myself that I ... "They will expect me to do that again." I don't know that .... (Laughter) But I did.

TINKER: ... When—we sort of wanted to pick up a little bit where ... you and Dr. Piehler left off last year.

WILSON: Let's do that then.

TINKER: ... you were talking about the POW camp.

WILSON: I'm sorry I took up so much time.

TINKER: Oh no. That's fine.

BOULTON: Is there anything ... about the war that we didn't get—you've had a chance to read over the first two interviews again. Any memory that we maybe didn't cover before we pick up?

WILSON: Well ...

TINKER: Towards the end.

WILSON: Well I have thought of maybe a few things, but they're not ... right now I don't think anything important.

BOULTON: One question I wanted to ask before we move on. ... I had the pleasure of meeting your friend Mr. Swingen up in Madison, Wisconsin.

WILSON: You did.

BOULTON: You introduced us up there. And he speaks very highly of you and he mentioned that ... he may not even made it through had it not been for your kind of guidance and leadership.

WILSON: (Laughs)

BOULTON: So what memories do you have of him and where—how did the two of you meet?

WILSON: He ... was a wonderful individual and we were friends from the first time we met. He had—part of his college education was in North Dakota at the university. But he ... he did finish he had a ... law degree from Harvard. And ... I had been teaching and my draft number was an early number and I ... was drafted for a week ... two weeks before I had to go. But the superintendent of the schools went to the board and they agreed to let me wait until the next time. Well that made it at the time when an awful lot of college men all ... over and ... it was an interesting experience because Eldred and I both wound up in Fort Sill, Oklahoma in the Field Artillery Replacement Training Center. Not in the same company, or battery, but we met. And then we both went to the field artillery school and were in the same tent so we became good friends and have ever since. Then he stayed on at the field artillery school on the staff for a year. We couldn't—a year was the most that we could, that a new draftee could stay in one place. But eventually we wound up in the same battalion of the Eightieth Division and went to Europe together. But then he was the executive officer of the ... supply company and I was in ...the ...



communications. But we were, we'd see each other even during combat occasionally and at special meetings and things like that.

TINKER: Do you want to sort of wrap up for us what you did after the POW camp that you were working at?

WILSON: After the POW camp?

TINKER: Yes.

WILSON: Yes. I, of course, that meant that I had a new assignment. And Colonel Browning first made me the battery commander of B Battery which I had been in previously and I spent one day, but then Colonel Browning had helped to get Captain Miller an assignment somewhere else. (Laughs) Miller came back that night and told him that he ... wasn't going to accept that, so then I became the ... battalion headquarters company battery commander. I said at the time that really is not what I want because any, in any battalion whether it's infantry or artillery or what else the headquarters company is made up of staff members, the heads of all the departments and the personnel belong to that ... the head of the department of their .... And so the ... battery commander—it's sort of hard to keep up with them. (Laughs) But anyway, we got along fine. I never had a problem. I was the battery commander for oh a couple of months, or three months, I guess, before we ... before I was eligible to come back home.

TINKER: When did you come back?

WILSON: I ... was released from the Eightieth Division about ... I don't remember the exact date, but it would have been in October, or maybe the later part of September. But then we traveled to Camp Lucky Strike where there were hundred of thousands [soldiers] waiting for a ship back.

TINKER: How long were you there waiting? Do you remember?

WILSON: Three or four weeks. Nothing to do except to get in the Red Cross donut line if you wanted to. (Laughter)

BOULTON: Yeah.

WILSON: And ... no organized effort to keep us together. But ... one of the interesting things to me was the German POWs did all the work, and they were housed in a big building. And at night—now those German POWs were clean. Their uniforms had a POW on it, but they were clean and they're shaved and they were polite if you ever had to speak to one. But the others, the Americans that were waiting to get back and nothing but donuts to ... they were slouchy. Nobody in control of 'em. But at night you could hear those German prisoners singing religious songs all over the camp. It made a ... quite an impression on me.

BOULTON: What was your attitude towards the Germans during combat?

WILSON: Pardon?

BOULTON: What was your attitude towards the Germans during the war and during combat?

WILSON: What was my ...

BOULTON: Your attitude towards the Germans, or your opinion of them.

WILSON: Well I've thought about this many times. I was fortunate. I didn't have to look in the face of the man that I ... knocked out. And I had nothing against them. They had a job to do and we had a job to do. Personally—now occasionally a prisoner ... one time walked up the hill with his hands up. A hole in his head with a little blood and a piece of his brain coming out, but he came up to surrender, didn't have his weapon. I called back and told them to send somebody up to get him. I ... didn't want to stay there with him. (Laughs) But ... I had no ill feelings personally against German prisoners.

BROWN: Did you find that other soldiers who were with you had more animosity towards them, or that they shared your attitude?

WILSON: Occasionally they did, yes. They ... had been hurt personally. In ... fact Bill—the one that sent me that picture. He told of a case one time where some prisoners surrendered and one of his associates who ... he saw one of them, grabbed him and just actually beat the life out of him. And Bill said, "I told him. I said, John, you didn't need to do that. I went to school with that boy when I lived in Austria."

TINKER: Oh.

WILSON: But that ... was unusual.

BOULTON: There's a fascinating photograph in your file of you at Nuremberg in front of the Nazi eagle. [Do] You remember the one? Do you remember that day? I could get it and show it to you if you want, but ...

WILSON: Oh, well ...

BOULTON: You do want to see it?

WILSON: In the big ... in the big ...

TINKER: Arena.

WILSON: Oh I remember that well.

BOULTON: Do you remember when that was and ...

WILSON: I'd have to get the records of when we went in there. I may have mentioned it in that report. ... But that was an interesting experience. I had to come up the street then and get into a certain place. There was a yard fence and a gate and I had to get through that gate. But there was a little boy, probably three or four years old at the most, but he was trying to hold that gate and he was just squalling. (Laughter) And I ... spoke kindly to him, but I said, "I have to go through here." He didn't know what I said, but he couldn't—he didn't have the strength to [hold the gate] ...

TINKER: Right.

BOULTON: Yeah. Was there ever any chance of you and your battalion going to the Pacific before the war ended?

WILSON: Yes. We were scheduled to go, but ... there was a ... delay and, of course,—and the question was we thought the war was going to end over there before we had to go, but ... we were ... scheduled and expected to go. And I remember I told Colonel Browning one day—he was having occasionally to send somebody as an individual and I told him ... I said, "Colonel if you have to send somebody, I would be willing to go." And he said, "Willy, I know how you feel." But he said, "I may have had all I can stand of this."

BROWN: Did you hear a lot about what was happening in the Pacific, or were you know, hard to kind of ...

WILSON: We got some news. Yes, I guess we got as much as—news then was not as extensive as it is now. (Laughter)

BROWN: Sure.

WILSON: And ... this probably should not go in the report but ...

TINKER: You want me to stop?

WILSON: No, no. That's alright.

TINKER: Okay.

WILSON: I personally think the type of war that we fought made more sense than ... what it does now. Now they ... take—we moved together. Of course that—France and Germany were not like where we are fighting now. The people are different. But ... we moved and ... moved slower. By the time we got through the population knew that we were ... in command. Now they get these things that look like a tank ...

TINKER: Humvee.

WILSON: ... that cost a half a million, half a billion dollars and then just go on up there and knock it out. But they haven't changed the population.

TINKER: You think by going slower ...

WILSON: Well ...

TINKER: ... and then they, the ones ahead slowly hear about the Americans and realize that they're not there to ...

WILSON: I think ...

TINKER: You think it gives them more time to get acclimated to the idea of Americans being there ... than to just .... Sort of like a bum rush. (Laughs)

WILSON: Well, wherever you go in combat as you go people want to make you feel welcome. They may not mean it ...

BROWN: Really?

WILSON: ... but that's the impression they want to leave. But when you go busting through there with one of these big things and knock something out completely and knock the statue down and drag it and kick it and so forth, you haven't changed the minds of the people behind you. That's ... my opinion, that, but I'm not ...

TINKER: Sort of starting from the top and going down?

WILSON: Laughs.

TINKER: Well what was you, when you first got to the States when you came back, what was the first thing you did?

WILSON: (Laughs)

BROWN: Took a bath. (Laughter)

TINKER: Do you remember? And how did you feel?

WILSON: Well it was quite a thrill in those days. I made two trips back to sea, though. The one in the middle and then the last one. But when your ship is coming into—and that's another thing. I ... think the transportation is getting better on the water than it is in the air. But you're coming into New York and you see the Statue of Liberty and then when you get there people welcome you.

BOULTON: So you did have the parade and everything when you got back?

WILSON: We didn't ... we did not participate in a parade, no.

TINKER: But you mean just in the general public ...

WILSON: Yeah.

TINKER: ... was welcoming you.

WILSON: Anybody that you would see.

TINKER: Say, "Welcome back soldier."

WILSON: Right.

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WILSON: I ... remember that when we did get settled I was able to get to a telephone and call home. To let them know that I was ...

TINKER: Did you stay at a hotel when you got there to New York?

WILSON: I don't know that we went to a hotel. The Army camp is ...

TINKER: Oh okay. And you called your mother?

WILSON: Oh yes, yes. And that was a welcome call. (Laughs)

TINKER: Do you remember what she said?

WILSON: No. (Laughter)

TINKER: Okay, so then how long did it take you to get back to ...

WILSON: Well we went ... first to Camp Atterbury and ... had to get checked out. Had to have a physical examination and ... I remember the one that was trying to get my blood sample. He had to make about six or eight different tries and I ... didn't let, I pretended that that wasn't bothering me. (Laughter) And I had the opportunity to join the reserves if I wanted to, which I did. And ... when I got back to Knoxville they were organizing an artillery battery and had one ... gun right up on the second floor of I think it's 202 Gay Street. And ... later—well, we had a monthly meeting up there. No pay, but we met because we ... were all artillery, we had memories. We would have a program but ... for two hours, but we didn't get any pay for it. We went because we liked it. We didn't want to get out.

... There about eighty or a hundred enlisted men and ... I was the battery commander and Lloyd Downen, who was working on his Ph.D. at ... in Indiana, he was the executive officer. And we had a second lieutenant. I don't remember his name, but—this went on for a couple of years and we really enjoyed it and we made—with Dr. Downen and his wife and Jerry and I made a trip back to Fort Campbell ... on two occasions ... which we all enjoyed. But then the government

decided to start the—anybody was ... eligible to become a ... could stay in and in twenty years get a pay raise. This should be confidential, but that brought in a lot of people who were there only to earn ...

TINKER: Their business.

WILSON: They didn't have the same interest that we had. And Dr. Downen then ... was in the Department of Agriculture and he, we crossed paths many times after that. He became the head of the department and I asked him—I saw him later at a funeral and I said, "Did you stay in the reserves?" And he said, "No, I didn't." And he said, "Well I didn't because I ... would like to have kept up with what was being done, and changes and so forth, but I got too busy in other things."

TINKER: You said Dr. Downen?

WILSON: Yeah.

TINKER: Is that how you—he became head of the department of ... what department?

WILSON: He was the head of all of the ... of Agriculture [Department].

TINKER: Here at UT?

WILSON: Yeah.

TINKER: Oh, he was head of the Agriculture [Department], okay.

WILSON: He and his wife had no children, but they wanted children, and they had applied ... they had applied for some that they could adopt.

TINKER: Oh yeah.

WILSON: And it went on for two years and his wife got just aggravated and they went to the headquarters and asked why and they said, "Well, frankly your IQ is higher and we're not going to place any, we want to place somebody with an IQ of ..."

TINKER: Are you kidding?

WILSON: Yeah, but then they ... did get two beautiful girls.

TINKER: Well when you ... came home did you already have in your mind what you wanted to do for ...

WILSON: I had in my mind that if I make a sudden decision it'll be wrong. (Laughter) It may be wrong. And that was true of a lot of people that made a sudden decision. I did check with the superintendent of the schools and he said, "We're glad that you're back and we want you to go to

Powell High School as an English ...the English teacher.” And I ... told him that I didn’t think I was ready for that because I had been with adults on the outside and to be closed up in a room this size with students I didn’t think I was ready for it. I was released from active duty about the first of November, but I had two or nearly three months pay coming from vacations that I hadn’t had.

BOULTON: Did you use the unemployment insurance from the GI Bill during that time?

WILSON: Unemployment ...

BOULTON: Yeah, from the GI Bill?

WILSON: Oh, if I had—yes, very little. But ... I applied, or I wrote to several universities about coming there. The same was true for all of them. That ... housing was going to be a problem that I would have to find a place to live. And the more I thought about taking that at my age—my father died at a month less than sixty, and I didn’t ... know that I wanted to go anymore.

BOULTON: Yeah.

WILSON: But I did ... I signed for—well first, when I got home early, middle or last of October I believe. I ... my sister had a business right next to the A&P store and Christmas was coming on so I went there and told them that I would like to work just in the grocery business until Christmas, through the Christmas rush. And they were glad to have me. And I enjoyed it, but at the end of time they wanted me to take ... a course, for a management course for them, and no, I knew I wasn’t suited for that. But ... our pastor had ideas and he ... wanted me—he would be a silent partner for a sporting goods store. And ... he’d been such a help to the family always and one of the best pastors that any church ever had. I did that and for a year and a half I enjoyed it and we did okay, but I realized that you have rush periods and then you have periods when people are doing nothing. And the dull time bothered me. (Laughter) So I was ... I told the pastor that I was, I thought I would better get out of there, and I did. But the ... farm training program was getting started and the ... veterans that wanted to enter the farm-training program—there was a teaching opportunity for me there.

TINKER: Was that a state sponsored program?

WILSON: Federal.

BOULTON: Through the Veterans Administration, is that right?

WILSON: Well yes. The Veterans Administration was a part of it ... and ...

TINKER: Do you remember how you heard about it?

WILSON: Yes. I talked to the instructor at ... Powell High School .... And he told me that there was ... an opening at Gibbs High School.

TINKER: Oh okay.

WILSON: And ... he recommended me highly. He was a World War I veteran and he had had trouble with finances after the war. But ... that sort of appealed to me. I took some special courses that I wanted at UT.

TINKER: To prepare?

WILSON: Yeah. I had a month, and I got ... I think \$90.00 a month to pay for that. I had ... one month's—just to describe the program. And it ... was an interesting program and I had plenty of students of really good sound men and most of them had been in combat. They'd all had military service and many of them had been in combat. And ... later—I worked that five years, and then I was active on the Board of the Farm Bureau and on the Board of the Knox County Farmers Cooperative.

TINKER: The farm-training program that the veterans ran. The purpose of that was to help them establish their own ...

WILSON: To help them to get established ...

TINKER: ... private farms?

WILSON: Yes. If they owned a farm, that's good. If they had to rent a farm I helped them to get a ... contract with the owner.

TINKER: And did some of them get loans from the VA to start a farm?

WILSON: Not from the VA. I don't, I'm not quite sure, but they didn't get a loan from the VA, but they could get one from Farm Services ...

TINKER: Okay.

WILSON: ... [they] had loans.

BOULTON: Did you use any other benefits? Did you get a VA ... loan for a house or anything when you came back?

WILSON: I did not. I could have, of course, but ... when Jerry and I were married we found the house that we wanted. I still live in it. (Laughs)

BROWN: Oh you still live there?

TINKER: So you did the farm-training program from what year to what year?

WILSON: From '46 to '51.



BROWN: So, when you came home, did you find it was hard to readjust to just normal civilian life? I mean, today they talk so much about reintegration classes and things like that. Did you find that difficult or, I mean, it seems like you moved right into a job?

WILSON: The ... I expected it to be hard to adjust because nothing was going to be like what I had been through. (Laughs)

BROWN: Sure.

WILSON: I made it a point—I had dated some of the teachers and I made it a point to see each one of them one time, but I never asked to come back. They didn't understand that I'm sure. But ... I had a feeling that we would not ... that it just couldn't work out. Maybe I was wrong, but ...

TINKER: Until you met your wife? (Laughter)

WILSON: Well, I met her just days after I came home. I went over to see my sister who was a widow. Her husband had died and she had been, she was a registered nurse, but she had been ... working at the Children's Hospital at that time, which was right back of Fort Sanders. And their surgery had—if they had a surgical case they had to go across the street into Fort Sanders for their surgery. And she was impressed by this little lady giving anesthesia. The most efficient person she'd ever seen in a hospital. And so they became quite acquainted and ... then when Margaret came back to Knoxville after she finished her anesthesia training, Jerry was over to see her. When I walked in unexpectedly and that was the beginning. (Laughter) Of a very happy ...

TINKER: Did you all hit it off right away?

WILSON: Well I had to prove myself. (Laughter)

BROWN: How long did that take?

WILSON: Well that took two years. (Laughter) But ... it was one of the best decisions I ever made. (Laughter)

TINKER: And was she—where was your wife from originally?

WILSON: From the Morristown area ...

TINKER: Morristown.

WILSON ... Hamblen County. She still has one sister living. And I ... try to talk to her every day. She's in a nursing home now.

TINKER: Oh, okay. What year did your wife pass away?

WILSON: '91. One of the things I wanted to show you that we were in Idaho six days before. A year after minus six days she died. And I've got things I can show you sometime.

BROWN: What year were you married?

WILSON: We were married on September 2, 1948.

BROWN: Hey your anniversary was this week then.

WILSON: You're right. I celebrated ... at home that day.

BROWN: How many years? My math is really bad. How many years would that be?

WILSON: We were married forty-three years and so now it would be ....

TINKER: Is there anything you'd like to say about your wife before this interview is over? If you want your family to know ... 'cause their going to get copies of this.

WILSON: Oh. Jerry and I helped each other in everything we did. When I was teaching veterans she would ... once or twice a year insist on taking food. We'd have a get together one night with my students and they ... knew her as well as they knew me or anybody else. She was ... not employed by a group like most of them are now. She was a—she took care of her own business. And had her own insurance and everything. She never ... I'd say she had more business than any other ... anesthesiologist in Knoxville, but she had an individual card on every one. And where there was a question ... I would ... notify the patient what they wanted to know with a letter ... that was courteous and not disrespectful.

TINKER: Yeah.

WILSON: One lady went to a ... young doctor and Jerry had taken care of her anesthesia previously, once or maybe twice, but she called Jerry and said, "Now I have to have some surgery again and the young doctor that I went to I'd never seen him before, but he told me that doctor so-and-so would give the anesthetic." And she said, "No. I want B.J. Wilson." Well we worked together and she said, "Well, I'll have to get another doctor then because I wouldn't let anybody else put that ..." (Laughter) He agreed, and ... Jerry said that when she went in the two doctors in the room—this she didn't publicize. She told things like this to me. But she said that the patient got along fine of course, and when she finished she folded her equipment and as she started out she said, "Doctor was your anesthesia satisfactory?" [He said], "Oh yes." But ... Dr. Emmy Lou Hefley had most of the deliveries during the baby boom period here in Knoxville. Some at Saint Mary's, Baptist, Fort Sanders, and occasionally at UT, but she would never have anybody else except Jerry. There were two or three anesthesiologists that always used her if they couldn't do a case. There's no question that she had, she was the most efficient one. Dr.—one of the doctors I better not mention his name, but he always had wonderful patients, and he called her for a case and she said she looked at it. She studied the records and the physical condition, the heart and everything, and she said, "I want you to get somebody else to do this. I ... don't want to do it." He said, "I wouldn't trust this patient to anybody but you." And she said, "I've

never lost—the patient is going to die. I’ve never lost a patient and I don’t want one.” And he sat down and lectured to her. (Laughs) He said, “Yes. The patient is going to die. That’s almost certain, but we’ve got to do what we can.” And she relaxed a little bit and agreed to go ahead and the patient got along fine, got well ... thanked her.

But ... whatever I did, she was a part of it. She didn’t tell me what to do, but she—and when I was ... the manager of a fertilizer plant she supported me as much as she could and ... when we had to have flu shots, by the Tennessee Farmer’s Approval and one of her favorite doctor’s approval, she would go out and do the ... the work and ...

TINKER: You mean there’s the plant and she would ...

BOULTON: Yeah.

TINKER: ... come and give everybody their flu shot.

WILSON: Right.

TINKER: Whatever you wanted to share about her.

BROWN: Did you and your wife like to travel a lot? At—one thing I noticed about a lot of our veterans is they take big trips.

WILSON: Well, we made some excellent trips after we both retired especially. One or two we made ... before she retired. But ... we—one of the most interesting experiences was a ... week in France and Germany followed by a week in Switzerland. No we went to Switzerland a different time, but ... Egypt. That was in the summertime when it was hot. (Laughter)

BROWN: I bet.

WILSON: But the prices were less.

BOULTON: When was this? Do you remember?

WILSON: Well I guess the exact date would have been about ‘78 or ‘79.

BOULTON: Did you revisit a lot of the places where you’d been in World War II when you were in France and Germany?

WILSON: Some, but they don’t look like they did then.

BOULTON: Yeah, I’m sure. (Laughter)

WILSON: The trees had grown up. (Laughter) The one place that I would like to have gone would have been back to Loisy where I—supposedly my, the artillery that I saved that bridgehead. But my first radio operator as a ... did get to see that. He went with the division

when they made the trip and they went back up there and went right to Loisy. Then Dr. Hefley had had a ... stroke. And she ... had moved to Hawaii and she was the head of the anesthesia of the ... one part in the hospital. But she had a stroke and after that we had to go to see her. We made five trips to Hawaii.

WILSON: And ... Dr. Hefley is ninety-three ... is still living.

TINKER: Really. What was the doctor's full name?

WILSON: Emmy Lou Hefley.

TINKER: How do you spell the last name?

WILSON: H-e-f-l-e-y.

TINKER: Okay.

WILSON: Her first husband died. She remarried ... and I'll tell you her name after while.  
(Laughter)

BROWN: You said you ... you'd been to Hawaii five times. Have you seen the Pearl Harbor memorial there?

WILSON: Oh yes. We did see it.

BROWN: What did you think of it?

WILSON: Well, it's amazing. We were out on the tour on the ship ...

BROWN: Right, the platform.

WILSON: ... that's still there with all of them buried in it.

BOULTON: The [USS] *Arizona*?

BROWN: Yeah. You can still see the oil in the water.

WILSON: Yeah. And we—Dr. Hefley's husband was in charge of the hospitals on the big island so we spent most of the week with him. He had had five hospitals and he had a room at each one, which we stayed in. (Laughter) And we saw that whole island and it's wonderful.

BOULTON: Had you considered going to Korea when that war started up? 'Cause you were still in the reserves at that point, I guess.

WILSON: I was teaching veterans and I could have been called.

WILSON: I was .... When I quit working with the group uptown as a retired reserve, I was still on the reserve list and I still have a card, but they didn't call me. And one of our instructors that worked with me—he was still working on his master's and he was getting so worried about it that he ... couldn't hear whether they were going to call him or not and he didn't want to go, so he went to Washington and investigated. (Laughs) Well they hadn't had him on the list, but they put him on the list right after that they called him. Too much of what I'm telling you is of no benefit, I'm going to ...

TINKER: No. So after ... you left the teaching job you went to the fertilizer plant?

WILSON: Uh, yes.

TINKER: How did you make that transition? Did somebody come and offer you a job, or you just didn't want to teach anymore?

WILSON: I had been on the Farm Bureau Board for five years and the cooperative was formed during that time—a statewide organization. And ... I worked closely with the—when I was working with the students I worked closely with the department and the College of Agriculture. I was well known to them. And ... my brother-in-law, Wayne Smith, had helped with the ... construction of some of the cooperative businesses. Somehow or other I was approached as a possibility to manage that plant. And it ...

TINKER: Where's the plant at? Where was the plant?

WILSON: On the Old Maryville Pike. Which is ... what is it now? Well, Old Maryville Pike.

TINKER: Oh okay. (Laughs)

WILSON: Just in Blount County. And I was the first manager. I was able to hire all of the employees and that makes it much different. If you take over somebody else's employees they ...

TINKER: Right.

WILSON: But ... the employees that I hired—and some of them are—two or three of them are still living. (Laughs)

TINKER: Oh really? And you started there in '51 straight from the school?

WILSON: Actually it was ... it was '52 actually.

TINKER: Okay.

WILSON: I went straight from teaching ... farming ... to that, but it was in May of '52 instead of '51.

BOULTON: Did you notice that Knoxville had changed much during the war in the time that you'd been away?

WILSON: During that time when I was away, I don't think it had changed much then. It's changed an awful lot now, of course.

BROWN: I bet.

WILSON: Yeah. Everything has changed now.

BOULTON: How do you think the war changed you, personally?

WILSON: So many lessons that I learned. Well, in education as well as in combat have changed me completely. There's ... no doubt about it. During combat I was an artillery observer. I learned people from the privates up. Then as the liaison officer, I was with the battalion commander. We had to have group meetings every night with the company's ... officers and everybody in charge. That was an every night meeting. We learned how to keep everybody together. That transferred when I came back with the Tennessee Farmers Cooperative. I was in charge of the plant and personnel. Many of them, most of them laboring men, like infantrymen. You ... have to learn who you're working with. Once a month at least—well I was on the phone almost every day with managers all over East Tennessee. But once a month we would have a meeting. Those companies were just starting. They were building. So, from the infantry and artillery organizations to that organization, very similar. Sometimes our meetings lasted too long at night because there were problems that everybody had to help straighten out. But we'd become the biggest business in the state.

BOULTON: You went to UT when you came back. What kind of impact did the veterans have on campus here? Do you remember?

WILSON: Well, it made a great deal of difference because they didn't have housing for all the ... students. Temporary housing had to be used in a lot of cases.

BOULTON: Where did they put that?

WILSON: Oh I can't tell you all of that now. But there was some temporary housing on the hill as I remember.

TINKER: I think there actually, I believe I've heard another veteran say there actually was even some temporary [housing] on the football field? Is that right?

WILSON: In that area, but not on the field.

TINKER: Yeah. It was in that, it was like right around that area or something.

WILSON: Right. That would have—you wouldn't see it from going down the street here, but behind Ayres Hall and back in there, there were temporary ...

TINKER: Okay. That's probably what it was. Well ... we could go ahead and—unless there's anything you want to tell us about your sixteen years at the plant or your twelve years as a field rep ... I'd really like to ask you about ... how you first met Dr. [Charles W.] Johnson and became acquainted with the Center [for the Study of War and Society]. Unless there's something important you need to tell us about your career ...

WILSON: Well I don't think ... I don't have anything else on my mind right now ...

TINKER: Okay. (Laughter)

WILSON: ... but ... incidentally two of the men that had been students of mine—and they had their own farm business. But I hired them to work in the plant and they worked in the plant until they retired. ... There were some eighteen-year-old students in high school that I worked some. They were in Gibbs High School. But the ... employees of the fertilizer plant were an inspiration statewide because we never had a labor problem. If we had a question I took care of it. I knew ... how to keep the kind of medicine and things on hand for just simple things. This one needed to ... the emergency room and I got him there. I took the same kind of care of employees there that I would have taken in ... the Army.

TINKER: And your loyalty to them was returned.

WILSON: Pardon?

TINKER: Your loyalty towards them they returned to you.

WILSON: Yes. And the ones that are still living are my best friends.

TINKER: It's too bad that more managers don't do that today. (Laughter)

WILSON: You know it took the Great War to teach me a lot of those things. It really did.

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

BOULTON: This continues an interview with Mr. Edgar Wilson on September 4, 2005 at the Center for the Study of War and Society at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville with Mark Boulton and ...

TINKER: Cynthia Tinker.

BOULTON: And ...

BROWN: Cinnamon Brown.

BOULTON: And before the tape cut off there ... you were just telling us about your years as a field rep and your stories there.

WILSON: Yes. I had sixteen years as ... the manager of the fertilizer plant. And I had worked with managers of county cooperatives in all of East Tennessee. And then, I was getting just a little bit older and I became the ... field representative in, from Knox County to Mountain City. I worked with the managers at whatever ... what they wanted me to do, which was a lot of work. (Laughs) But it was most enjoyable.

One thing—if I talk too much let me know now. (Laughter) One thing that I ... use as an example. I was to ... spend quite a bit of time in Greene County. Greene is ... big county, big ... agriculture county. And ... so they gave me an office that I could use up there at the cooperative and they ... had some people that had had accounts—it was one of the biggest cooperatives in the state at that time. Still is I'm sure. But ... they had ... several people that had traded a lot and then they just quit. And they wanted me to find out why. Three Graham brothers in Greene County lived in a very, well they were, it was not a mile apart. But I went to the first one and—now this was in 19 ... well the mid 1970s I guess, maybe early 1970s. But the first one I went to was a very elderly man. He told me after we got acquainted that he was eighty-three years old. He had no children. His wife had died and he said that ... he had about 300 acres that he was not doing anything with it and he didn't need to. He said, "I've got enough money in the bank down there. The interest is all I need." And he went into detail—I just made this a visit just for .... And ... I didn't go to sell anything. I just went to get acquainted with him. (Laughter) And he said that, "I married a girl that was a little bit ahead of me financially. But ... we fell in love and we wanted to get married and we did." And he said, "I wanted to take us to Ashville for a honeymoon." And he made arrangements for the tickets and when they got on the train found out that he hadn't bought a roundtrip ticket just a one way. (Laughter) But he ... said that he couldn't do anything with his farm. It's just here.

TINKER: Right.

WILSON: I went to the second one who was only seventy-nine, and had a good visit with him. (Laughter) He's—and I told him I'd met his brother. And he said, "Well, we're not doing anything with our farm and he's not either." He said, "You can't get people to work anymore. I used to get young people to do a lot of things on my farm. But now they put these plants in here and they can sit down, these young people, can sit down in an air-conditioned room, twist little wires together and get \$2 an hour. They're not going to do anything for me."

Well the third one had a fine, one of those fine old brick houses and it was a cool, cool day when I went to visit. I went—all three of these I saw in the same day. And I knocked on the door and ... he was eighty-five, but he came to the door and he said, "Well come on in." Well they had a potbelly stove and some pieces of coal in a pot there. We talked—his wife was obviously his age or a little older maybe. But we talked awhile and she reached over and started to open the door and I said, "Let me do that for you. I'll get that." (Laughs) She just looked mad. She opened the door and she threw a piece of coal in there. Well, we just talked and had a good conversation. And I told them that I guess I must go and ... when we, the old gentleman, the eighty-five year old gentlemen walked out with me and he said, "What ... what is it you're running for?" (Laughter) And I said .... But he went on to tell me, he said, "Nobody ever stops here except somebody that is running for office." But ... we stood out there and looked over his farm.



Beautiful big area all grown up in weeds and bushes, and here's the house and grounds and then, below there is a creek. And I saw some sheep coming by there and I said, "How many sheep do you have?" Oh, he says ... he told me they didn't have an awful lot. But his lambs were getting to be a pretty good size. And I said, "Well now wait. When I grew up we always ... had about twenty sheep, but we always cut the lambs tails off." [He said], "I did too, and I ought to now, but I can't do it and you can't get anybody to work for you or to help you." That's just the way it is. The ... industrial plants came in there and of course the farmers didn't realize—the elderly ones that you had to pay a little bit more now. Which they could have done, but they all ... said that they were living off of their income from ... the bank.

TINKER: Well they were pretty well off. They just didn't want to pay a higher wage?

WILSON: Yeah, they could have. In my report, I described in detail what I had learned and I forwarded this to Nashville. But those three men had a total of about a 1,000 arable acres. And one ... young fellow with finances could run all that and make a fortune for all three of them. But ... and I learned now, as you get old you're not going to except what younger people do. (Laughter) I mow my own grass because I like the way I do it. (Laughter)

BROWN: You can come do mine too.

WILSON: That's the type of thing that I've learned. That's just one example. On down the river from Greeneville there were younger ... some pretty capable people that had their different reasons why they don't go to ... Greeneville anymore. [They say], "Greeneville is too far away. I buy things in Morristown because I'm closer to it and the road is better. "But I go to Greeneville because I have to pay my taxes in Greeneville so I go to the courthouse."

TINKER: And just like in the military you—when you're traveling around meeting these people you're still learning about people.

WILSON: Right. That's right.

TINKER: Was there anything new that you, that stood out to you that you learned about people during that time?

WILSON: Well, I learned a lot about ... people. One day I ... was to see a fellow who had a big farm and a big lot of cattle, but he was not buying anything for his cattle anymore. I found the road up to his business and here came this huge tractor and I stopped and the tractor stopped and he turned his engine off so he could hear me and I told him I was representing ... the cooperative at Greeneville and just wanted to get acquainted. He said, "Well I can tell you one thing. I can get a discount from somebody else." And for some reason they say the cooperative can't discount. And he explained that in ... in detail, and of course, I had already known about the problem, but I told him that I was glad to see him and that the report would go in immediately. Well I wrote ... that up and sent it, but the—at that time or shortly after that, we can discount if we get a package for the whole farm. I don't remember now how ... it works. Anyway as a result of that, my report on this man and some others ... they did make a change in the way for the total crop concepts.

TINKER: Right.

WILSON: Seed, fertilizer, chemicals, everything.

TINKER: And they would give them a discount.

WILSON: We can give you a ... discount regardless of what size your farm is. If it's a big farm or a little farm we can give you a discount. That ... was done. And the next year business all over the state jumped immediately. (Laughs) I ... could give you a copy of a speech that I had to make at a statewide managers meeting which is quite interesting. West Tennessee was all those big plantations.

TINKER: Yeah.

WILSON: (Laughs) The field ... representative in ... that area I think it was something over five million that he had .... In my case, we had had most of the good business already. We got an earlier start. But I had about \$600,000 increase that year. But I made my talk in our statewide managers meeting. I had been told that each of us ... the three representatives would make whatever ... whatever comments we wanted to make. But ... I was hoping—well the West Tennessee rep made his talk and boy that really set everybody off. And I was to follow it. And I'll have to give you a copy of that. (Laughs) But I got a laugh out of everybody and I think I got the respect of everybody. I said—this is the way I started my speech, “There's an old saying that East is east and West is west and never the two shall meet. (Laughter) But I will give you this Mr. Mitchell,” the head of the .... [I said], “if you ever have any”—now just a little background to this. The West Tennessee man—this was during the phase ... period when they forced busing being done and I knew how that fellow felt about it. He would not let his kids move across counties to school. I said, “East is east and West is west Mr. Mitchell, if you ever have any idea of forcing, of a forced busing program between East and West there will be some hell raised.” (Laughter) There's a little more to it, but it—I knew what to expect and I had that prepared.

TINKER: Well I'm sure you made some fans that day.

WILSON: And I think I sent every manager in the state a copy of my speech. (Laughter)

TINKER: When ... did you—oh I'm sorry.

WILSON: I ... went on to say that if the other assistants would say one with me and so forth. But I said, “We in East Tennessee have some counties that maybe we don't have big acreages like you have in the west. Some of the hill sides and so forth. But ... a little tobacco patch, a few rows of rhubarb, but we still have well ...

TINKER: Still have what? You can finish your thought.

WILSON: “Total crops concept is good here too.”

TINKER: Oh okay.

WILSON: I'm sorry ... I'm running out of steam.

TINKER: I was just going to ask when you ... retired and we're going to ask about ... did you start getting more active in the veterans organizations after you retired?

WILSON: When I was forty-nine years old, I realized that someday I might have to retire. And my business has been a twenty-four hour business. No such thing as an eight-hour day. But ... I decided I better start thinking about what I'm going to do if I ever quit.

Six of the men that I had hired in the ... in the fertilizer plant I knew that they were very much interested in the Masonic fraternity. And they were good men, were good workers, morally top notch. My neighbor was a member of the Scottish Rite. But I talked to him about things and I got a little better acquainted with the six men that worked with me that I had hired and I thought, well, that's worth looking into. So I was approved for a membership in Master's Lodge .... I was ... actually sixty-two years old.

TINKER: And did you already belong to other organizations before you joined the Masons?

WILSON: I had belonged to ... I had membership in veterans' organizations ...

TINKER: Like American Legion?

WILSON: ... but I never ... I was not active.

TINKER: Right. Okay.

WILSON: But I got their literature and still do. But ... when I finished the Scottish Rite in 19 ... the spring of 1962 I was so impressed with the meaning and the people that I had practically lived there since, and it's amazing the friends that I have now. The people that I had worked with all across the state couldn't be .... But in the Scottish Rite, and the York Rite too, I have good friends.

TINKER: Was it through that that you met Dr. Johnson?

WILSON: Yes. And the ... National Sojourners are retired military officers who are also Masons and we had organized a chapter which he attended.

TINKER: Okay.

WILSON: But ... when—I don't remember exactly what year, but ... [Dr.] Bob Demott [Retired, UT Food Technology] said that Dr. Johnson could make a good speech to our Sojourners group, which he did and I thought well now that is a wonderful thing but I ... don't have time for that. One of the young men—I can't think of his name right now, but he checked

... he rode up a little scooter and checked the money [in the] ... parking meters. But he told Dr. Johnson that he ought to get better acquainted with me, that I could make a talk for him.

TINKER: Oh, because he knew about your wartime experiences.

WILSON: So ... Dr. Johnson wrote me a note, a letter and would like to talk to me. Well I had to reply to that so I talked to him and he put me on the list to make a talk at the historical society, which I did. I think I have a copy of that still too.

BOULTON: When was this? Do you remember?

WILSON: About '85, '84 maybe. Probably '85.

TINKER: Did you and Dr. Johnson get along really well?

WILSON: Oh yes. I don't know why but I—when I get involved in something I either push myself or else.

TINKER: Well did you know right away that, I mean by the way Dr. Johnson described the Center and his vision for the Center, did you know right away you wanted to support it? To become involved in ...

WILSON: Yes I did.

TINKER ... what he was doing?

WILSON: No question. He ... explained things so thoroughly and I had him make a speech to the Exchange Club up town. One of his early speeches.

BOULTON: How have you seen the Center change over time?

WILSON: What'd you say?

BOULTON: How have you seen the Center change over time? What was it like in those early years and what kind of things were they doing compared to what we're trying to do now?

WILSON: Well, of course, as it grew in importance why it's obvious that it's doing a better job. I think the historical society [East Tennessee Historical Society] asked him to prepare this meeting on .... And incidentally my niece from Arizona was younger then, but her mother had just died and she happened to come to visit us at the time and she attended that meeting. She and my brother-in-law, Wayne Smith, attended that meeting of the historical society which was Dr. ... Johnson's program ... and it was an excellent program.

TINKER: Well what was it about Dr. Johnson's ideas and his visions of the Center—what part of that clicked for you the most?

WILSON: The fact that he was helping to develop, in the history department, something relative to military people and working with graduate students. You know many of our associations like to give a scholarship to a high school graduate, but when you stop to think about that, somebody in the ... that is looking to the future and developing work and studies that will affect students coming on later—our lawyers or other people. It's a better investment there than it is in ... freshman in college, I think.

BROWN: Yeah.

WILSON: The Scottish Rite, for several years now, has given one \$1,000 scholarships to students, but they must be ... they must have had two years of college successfully already. I think we approve thirty ... scholarships of one \$1,000. But your investment that a group makes in graduate students is a better investment, unless you just want to appeal to the younger people.

BROWN: Well let me ask you a question about the Center. What ... do you think it means to you, as a veteran, and your friends to have an oral history project like this out there?

WILSON: What does it mean to me?

BROWN: Yeah.

WILSON: Well it means the world to me. (Laughs) And ... the men that I have brought here have been inspired by it. The veterans that I have brought here have all been inspired by the work that Johnson started and it has grown and I hope ... that it will be a permanent thing now and ...

BROWN: Well do you ... find that it's inspiring to them because it's therapeutic to talk about it, or it's a good way to ... I don't know, pass on your legacy? I ... find that, you know, some veterans tell us things that they haven't ever told their families and so I think a lot of them use it in different ways, so ...

WILSON: I don't know how to answer that question exactly, but .... I think it is very important that the public learn some of the things that ... wars do for the whole society. War and society ... society changes because of wars and the things that are affected by the wars would be medical and business. Everything is affected by the—I gave Dr. Piehler a copy of a little map showing how different wars ...

TINKER: Oh yeah. We have that.

WILSON: You have that. That tells you an awful good story. The stories that veterans can tell about their experiences are maybe interesting but that's ... changes in society are more important. McHale, one of my World War II men, he was very much opposed to ... he thought the World War II Memorial in Washington [D.C.] was a good thing, but he couldn't see why we should ... include society on that ... because he faced the guns of the enemy. But I strongly—he had written all his congressmen and everybody and he ... fought it off to be a military thing. But I

... told him that I disagreed with him. I think the whole story—the backing that we had from people and groups and businesses and family members should be recognized too.

TINKER: They do have those Bronze [plaques] ... that show a bit of the pattern of somebody leaving the farm ... and going in the military.

WILSON: Yeah.

BOULTON: You visited that, didn't you, recently, quite recently? You've been up in the memorial in Washington D.C.?

WILSON: Yes.

BOULTON: What did you think of it?

WILSON: Well I think it's remarkable and it's wonderful. I ... was so tired and worn out by the time we got there that I just couldn't walk around anymore, but the size of it is—the pictures are good. But when you actually see it it's much bigger than it looks on ... in pictures. I was scheduled to go the first week in October. We went back to Washington but we're going to fly this time if I go. I don't know whether I should or not, but they tell me I almost have to for the Scottish Rite ... biannual meeting.

TINKER: Okay.

BOULTON: You're still very active ... or you were very active with the reunions for the Eightieth Division as well? How often ...

WILSON: I ... the division reunion—of course most of the people anywhere near my age are long gone.

BOULTON: Right. Right.

WILSON: And I have been not going back to an annual reunion since 1950, '51 I think maybe I did. No '50 ... 1990. (Laughter) Nineteen-ninety ...

BOULTON: 1990, okay.

WILSON: ... was the last one that I attended.

TINKER: Did they start having reunions in the '50s?

WILSON: They still have it. I think it's going to be ... I forget where it is.

TINKER: I mean did they start when they first started having reunions. Was it in the 1950s?

WILSON: It ... started ... before that.

TINKER: Oh really, right after the war ...

WILSON: Yeah.

BOULTON: Are you still in contact with many of the people that you fought alongside?

WILSON: There's not many of us left.

BOULTON: Right. Right. (Laughter)

WILSON: But ... McHale I'm in contact with, and one in the Saint Louis area is still alive, but not very well. And the three of us are the only ones left that we know that we worked with. Now, I ... think that my first—when I was a forward observer, Bill Zwick is probably still living, but his wife was killed in a Veteran's Hospital vehicle accident. Several others were seriously injured. He was very active with the veterans' hospitals. And a bus was provided by the ... hospital—had an accident and she was killed in it. And you know, I sent Dr. Piehler a copy of his letter and Dr. Piehler offered to stop and see him in ... Pennsylvania—I forget the name of the city right now. But I don't guess that ever worked out. I think Dale was just so upset that ... he couldn't go through it anymore. He had been very active, had some leadership ability too.

TINKER: Well ... I think we're about to wrap up. Is there anything ...

WILSON: I'll think of lots of things later. (Laughter)

TINKER: Well ... thank you for doing this.

BOULTON: Yeah, I know I've been a recipient of your generosity with the ... Wilson Fellowship. That's meant a lot to me and I really do appreciate that money. All of us think the world of you and what you've done for the Center and with everything else.

TINKER: We do. I just want to say again for the record that I ... personally don't believe the Center would still be here if it wasn't for you.

WILSON: It's been a pleasure for me and an inspiration. And I appreciate your relationship with Swingen too.

BOULTON: Yeah he is a good man.

WILSON: And he is a great fellow. I wish he could get down ... down here again, but his last letter said that they might come to Tennessee, but their adopted daughter is in ... Cookeville at the University.

BOULTON: Yes, she's at the school there isn't she.

WILSON: And I doubt that they'll get to Knoxville.

BOULTON: Right. Well let us know certainly if he does come 'cause we'd travel there and maybe do a second part of the interview if ever he's in the Tennessee area. 'Cause we'd like to finish that up certainly.

WILSON: Okay.

TINKER: Thank you.

BOULTON: Well thanks again.

WILSON: Well thank you all.

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

Reviewed Abby Thompson 12/01/06

Reviewed Cinnamon Brown 4/27/07

Reviewed by Kurt Piehler 6/06/07