Ernie Liles Interview
May 12, 2003
Mr. Liles's Home
Sterling Heights, Michigan
Transcribed by Daniel Clark

DC: [banter about testing the battery]

EL: [asks about where we will start] I went to work for the union.

DC: I was going to start with, with where you, where you were born.

EL: Oh, OK. OK.

DC: I like to get a little sense of . . .

EL: I'd like to know what we're going to, you know . . .

DC: What I like to do is talk a little bit about where you were from . . .

EL: Oh, OK. All right.

DC: And get a sense of your life before you started working in the auto industry. And we'll talk more about your experiences when we get there, but one of the things I've found is that I really like to learn more about where people came from, because the people I've talked to have come from all points around the United States and all over the world, really.

EL: Yeah, OK.

DC: It just gives me a little better sense of who these autoworkers were.

EL: Yeah.

DC: So where were you born?

EL: I was born in Arkansas.

DC: OK, where?

EL: Northeast part of Arkansas, in well, Monette.

DC: OK. How do you spell that?

EL: M-O-N-E-T-T-E

DC: And what was it like around there?

EL: Well it's pretty nice. Flat. It's all—it used to be a swamp, but they took all the trees out, drained the swamp, and now it's all farms, nothing but just cotton.

DC: Had your family been there for long?

EL: Well, my family was born in the hills, up around Cave City, but I was born in, they call it swamp country. Uh, swamp turkeys, swamp rats, uh, but it was good country, after we got it cleaned up, you know. And they grow two or three bales of cotton an acre down there now.

DC: When did your family move from the hills to the drained swampland?

EL: Well, Grampa, he moved to the lower country when he was twenty years old, and of course he took his family and all. And my mother was born in 1911, and I was born in '32. So—and my sister was born in '30, '30, no '31, June '31. And [clears throat], we all stayed close, you know. The families back then stayed fairly close. Especially farmers, you know. And—we was eight miles from Monette, eight miles from Caraway, eight miles from Leachville, nine miles from Manila, twenty-two miles to Jonesboro—that's a bigger town.

DC: Bigger town.

EL: Yeah.

DC: OK.

EL: Twenty-three miles to Blytheville. So we were pretty much situated . . .

DC: And so, was it your mother or your father that grew up on that farm?

EL: Uh, my father died in '37. He was only twenty-seven years old. So he didn't live down there very long.

DC: [Fiddling with the microphone] So it sounds like your grandfather started the farm on this property?

EL: Yes, yeah.

DC: Would that be your mother's father, or your father's?

EL: That's my mother's father.

DC: Mother's father, OK. Um, and what did they grow on that land?

EL: Cotton, soybeans, and corn. Of course they farmed it with mules, so they had to have corn for feed. But mostly it was cotton.

DC: OK. Any livestock as well?

EL: Just for personal use. No, none for sale, you know.

DC: So how was it, growing cotton? How did they do?

EL: I don't know what you're talking about.

DC: Well, did they make any money? Were they able to make a living?

EL: Well, now you're getting personal. Uh, they made a living [a bit irritated], yeah. A friend of mine, he's still on the farm. He was raised on the farm, so he stayed with it. And he was making about a hundred twenty thousand dollars a year.

DC: Really.

EL: I mean a person can live on that, you know [chuckling].

DC: Well yeah, sure, but I bet you weren't making a hundred and twenty thousand dollars a year in 1910 or 1930.

EL: Oh, nobody was, hardly.

DC: That's what I was talking about.

EL: That—we'll go up after I was born—1940, now that's something I know about. Cotton was thirty-five cents a pound, ginned cotton. And the last time I heard about it, cotton, ginned cotton was seventy-nine cents a pound, which wasn't hardly doubled, like everything else is. But soybeans, I don't know what they was a bushel, or corn. I was too young back then, but when I farmed, me and my step dad, well I farmed, we farmed two hundred and ten acres. And it's hard work. You know, farming's just like any kind, any kind of work. But we wasn't, we wasn't rich. We wasn't—we always had something to eat, and we always had good houses to live in, and we always had something to do.

DC: Well let's talk a bit more about what you can remember, when you were growing up. You were born in '32, you said?

EL: '32.

DC: So you would have been very young, you know, in those years of the Depression and all, but what can you remember about what you did as a child, what it was like growing up in Arkansas?

EL: On the farm?

DC: Sure.

EL: Uh, it was pretty good. It was pretty good. Except the heat. I didn't like the heat. But the work wasn't too bad.

DC: Did you have just the one sister? Did you have any other siblings?

EL: I had, later on, I had three sisters, three half sisters.

DC: OK, so your Mom remarried.

EL: My mother and my step-dad married, and later on they had three daughters. But, it was pretty nice. I mean we hunted—in the winter, we hunted—not because we had to, just for pleasure. And we fished. We did some—my step-dad decided he'd be a commercial fisherman for awhile, and he did sell some fish, but it didn't pan out.

DC: Is that when you were still living at home?

EL: Yes.

DC: OK, uh huh.

EL: This was when I was about fifteen.

DC: OK.

EL: And, but we loved to fish.

DC: Where would you fish around there?

EL: [doesn't hear the question]

DC: Where would you fish? Where were the places to fish?

EL: Oh why we'd fish on White River, Swan Pond, Buffalo [River]. We'd fish in the drain ditches, and a few small ponds, or lakes then, not too many. There was a lake up around Batesville, but back then, that was the only dam that I know of down in there. So we might go up there and fish sometimes. But later on, well, they built Bull Shoals, Norfork, [Tabor Lock?].

DC: These were dams?

EL: These were dams—power dams. They had to have big lakes, very big lakes. And all three of those lakes—dams—are on White River. Then later on they built some, a dam on Little Red. Little Red River. Lots of rivers are in Arkansas.

DC: I guess so. They all come out of the foothills then?

EL: I—I suppose they come from down that-away, yeah. Arkansas River, uh, lots of rivers. Just, we had plenty of—we never went deer hunting, or boar hunting. We always—we always got small game—rabbits, squirrels, maybe coon hunting once in awhile.

DC: When did you first start going hunting?

EL: When I first started hunting?

DC: Yeah, how old were you?

EL: I started hunting when I was nine years old, probably a little less. In fact I killed my first rabbit [clears throat] when I was—first hunting I went on. I went with my grandfather. And I remember the rabbit sitting there, and you know, it was a little bit of snow on, and he was sitting there in the grass, and I seen the—well, my grandfather walked right by him, see. I see that rabbit sitting there, I says, "Well I'll just shoot that thing." So I stuck my gun right down to him, you know—had a .16 gauge shotgun—and before I pulled the trigger, he jumped up and run. But I held the gun right on him, and he got out there, maybe as far as here to the road, and I pulled the trigger, and whoo—but that was the first rabbit I ever killed. [makes joke about fortunately not shooting his grandfather, but hard to decipher precise words].

DC: [laughs]

EL: But I didn't.

DC: Fortunately he wasn't in the path.

EL: We all, one thing we did, we did things together. You worked together—the family would work together, and they'd learn a whole lot about cooperation with other people. That's one thing we did learn. But there wasn't nobody lazy—I had the—I growed up with my uncles. I had three uncles, and I had a—my step-dad's brother—I called him my uncle—he had three brothers, so they were all my uncles.

DC: Did they all live there right on the same property.

EL: Well no, we farmed—the last two years we farmed, they was pretty close, you know.

DC: When were those last two years?

EL: In 19-and—we moved—we went to farm—me and my step-dad went to farm in '48, '48. And the last year we farmed there was 1950.

DC: OK, but anyways, at that point you had a lot of people working on the land, it sounds like.

EL: Well, we—we hired people to work for us, maybe, maybe a family would move in the extra house that we had, and they would work for us, but that's all, unless you needed some cotton choppers or cotton pickers. You always had to have a lot of cotton pickers and sometimes a lot of cotton choppers to get the weeds and the grass out of the cotton.

DC: Yeah. When did you start doing that?

EL: Oh, about seven years old.

DC: OK.

EL: I was, I was pretty young.

DC: Can you tell me what it was like chopping cotton?

EL: [short pause] What was it like chopping cotton? [laughs] I mean, you got a hoe in your hand, what can you do but cut weeds down? And when you, when you cut it down, that's what you're there fore. So—it was hard work. It was hot. And it depended on how the cotton growed up, how hard it was. Sometimes it got pretty hard, because if it rained, you can't clean it down, and the grass and the weeds, they get growed up in there, and then it's hard to dig out. So it was kind of frustrating sometimes. I remember when I was little, my mother, she was chopping cotton, and I cut my toe. Well, I cut my—I was going barefoot, you know. I loved to go barefoot. And she was always wanting me to wear my shoes in the field, because I'd always cut my feet. Well, she was taking me back and put some alcohol on it—that cut. Ooh it [??] I got to where I didn't tell her nothing about it. I just cut my foot. Usually on your toes, around your toes, and I just dragged my foot in the dirt until it, you know, quit bleeding, and tell my Mom. And then she found out. But that never amounted to nothing.

DC: It didn't get infected or anything.

EL: But there's a lot of things about people being poor on the farm, you know. Johnny Cash, he sang about some poor farmers. Well, he was, he was, he growed up about fifteen miles from where we did. And he sang, he sang a lot of songs about the poor farmer, like, like one time, he lived about a mile down from this neighbor, and his neighbor felt he was, they were rich, because they always come down there borrowing stuff. So they must be—have more than they needed, you know. But that's what it was. Everybody—if you needed a cup of sugar, you went to your neighbor and got a cup of sugar. So that made the neighbor a little bit better off than you was, you know. But we hardly ever borrowed anything. If we run out, we just run out, you know. But not because, not because we couldn't get it. It was because it was about six miles to town, and we couldn't just pull out of the field and go get a cup of sugar, you know.

DC: Did any of the families there work on each other's farms? Would you go and help each other chop cotton?

EL: You mean, you mean like, like a house-raising or something?

DC: Yeah, or hog-killing.

EL: Naw, they didn't do that. Uh uh. They didn't do that, *unless*—unless, just very little of that done, like hay baling. We didn't have but five acres of hay, so we, we didn't do that. But sometimes they would go out and—but it usually wasn't free, you know. They'd bale their hay. Somebody else would bale their hay. And they would pay so much for hauling the hay. But it wasn't just [?], no.

DC: What about school? Did you go to school up there in the . . .

EL: Yeah I went to school. [offended chuckle]

DC: Yeah, but I mean what kind of school, I guess is what I meant to say.

EL: OK. You sure you meant to say that?

DC: I guess I said it the wrong way, but . . .

EL: Yeah, yeah. We often read and write [sarcastic]

DC: That's not what I meant. But my point was, what kind of school would they have up there in the country.

EL: What kind of school.

DC: Yeah.

EL: Educational school. [clearly miffed]

DC: Well, a one-room school? Did it . . .

EL: Well I mean, I remember there was one, one school over there, Rocky #2—sometimes Rocky #1 would get crowded. You know what I mean? You know how kids are. They grow up, and they thin out. But when they got too many people, they would open this other school up to take the overflow, OK? And it was one-room. But they didn't teach everybody in one room. That was just for certain classes. They'd move some of this class over here, and some of the others they—the 4th or 5th or 7th or 8th—but they didn't have a high school in those—you had to go to—well here, it's the same way—elementary, and then you go to the high school, you know. And my mother, she was—she had a good education. My grandfather, he had a real good education. And he also was a music teacher . . .

DC: Your grandfather was?

EL: Yeah. Grandfather, he could—he never taught music, but he could have.

DC: Uh huh. What did he play? What instruments did he play? Or did he sing?

EL: I never seen an instrument that he couldn't play. I seen him one time with a steel guitar, and I said, "Grampa, can you play it?" And he said, "I don't know. I never played it before." And he laid it across his lap, and hit it a couple of times, then he played the "Steel Guitar Rag," just as good as I ever heard played. He was good. He wasn't real good on piano, but other instruments—if it had a string on it, he could play it, real good.

DC: Did you play music around the house?

EL: All the time. When I was growing up, they would have a—we'd set lines across the yard and we'd have hang up torches, you know, kerosene. We called it [Cora??]. And we'd, we'd put wicks down in there, stuff rags down there, and that would make some light, you know. And they would start making music, and the neighbors would come over, you know. Wasn't any dancing; they just sat around and talked, and they'd play. My uncle played the mandolin. The other one played the guitar. One played the fiddle, and Grampa, he'd play anything else. He'd—they had him usually play a guitar, you know. And I remember, I was just seven years old, and they would just pick and pick. After awhile, they'd make me go to bed, you know, and I'd lay in the bedroom and listen to them in there.

DC: How could you go to sleep when you're listening to all the music! [laughs]

EL: But I never could learn how to play any kind of instrument.

DC: OK.

EL: My mother does. She played—she got where she could play the guitar pretty good.

DC: How often would you have these kinds of gatherings?

EL: Oh, about, I'd say, usually back then, uh, about twice a year, something like that—you know, during harvest time, or after you lay by. You know what laying by means? That means when you, when you're working your cotton or your corn and soybeans, and you plow it for the last time for that year. Then you lay by—that's finished—until harvest. That's what they call "lay by" time. And that's when they would have their—they used—later on they called them, you know, hootenannies. But usually the singers, they got paid for it. But they had all kinds of musicians down there. But later on, when I got older, they didn't—oh the boys, my uncles all growed up, you know, went to war, and one got married, and that kind of, kind of broke that up, you know. Grampa, he sat around, and if I felt bad, he'd sat around and played the guitar and sang, you know, but we didn't have television. You know, I mean, that was a, that was a source of, of entertainment. And we didn't have no televisions.

DC: How about radio?

EL: Yeah, we had, we had radio. First one I know of, Grampa had one, was a battery-operated radio. And you had to watch your battery, because it didn't last that long. Great big battery, about twenty-nine inches long, about ten inches wide. And it was dry cell. And I remember, he liked to listen to fights, so I listened to fights with him. So we listened to Joe Louis and [Jersey Joe] Walcott fight. But it was kind of interesting. I mean, there was a lot of entertainment, you know, like fishing, wrestling, telling—Grampa was a good story-teller. He was a jokester and a prankster. I take after my grandfather. He had a ring—he [?] had a ring of hair around his head, and he was bald-headed. I got a little more hair than he had down around my neck. But he was quite a character. He was scared to death of snakes.

DC: Really.

EL: Snakes, he was scared to death of.

DC: Sounds like a tough situation if you're living in a former swamp.

EL: Yeah, a lot of water moccasins down there, and bull racers, and king snakes. All kinds of snakes down there. I don't know if there are rattlers down there or not, but they was all kind of copperheads. And he was—he was definitely scared of snakes.

DC: Would he still go out in the fields?

EL: Well I seen him plow one time, and he went through—you know, there was—this is a fairly new clearing, you know. It's not rough ground, but it's been burned a few times, but there was still rotten stumps in there, and he plowed through one. And it's early when you start plowing, getting your ground ready to plant corn or cotton. And he plowed this snake up. Well I'm down there watching him, and boy I'm telling you, he's moving. He's just jumping from one side to the other, you know. So I asked him—I went down there to find out what's wrong. And I asked him, I says, "What seems to be your problem?" I says, "What are you jumping around for?" And all he said, "That fool snake is sitting right between my legs." [laughs] Couldn't get away because he had the lines around his shoulder. Like one time I was fishing, and, and—now this river was [Cuckleberr?]. We never caught a fish out of [Cuckleberr?] that I can remember—not one. But we'd go there and go fishing, you know. So we're setting there, and it was kind of growed up, because nobody ever fished down there. And I went down to talk to Grampa, you know, and a little old snake was out there swimming around in the moss, you know, about that long [makes hand gesture]. "How you doing, Grampa?" "Oh," he said, "I'm doing fine." And he said, and he said, "I'll be doing real good if that little thing will stay where he's at, and I'll stay here." "Cuckleberr?]. Well, said, "Well he won't hurt you Grampa." "Well he might make my hurt myself." So I went back down to my fishing spot—I can't se him now, but I hear him. All of a sudden he went *splash,* you know, so I run down there and here Grampa is, out in Cuckleberr? River, you know, up to his waist. And we all made a bit joke out of him being scared of snakes. And I said, "Grampa, I thought you was scared of that snake. Here you are jumping around on top of him." He said, "It's not the snake." What happened, he's sitting on the bank and fishing and he's sitting on a crawdad hole. Now the crawdad, he's come up to come out of his hole, and he was sitting on the crawdad hole, and that crawdad just wanted to remove the obstacle, you know, and he clamped down on him, and, well that's when he jumped in the river. He thought it was that snake that surely done bit him. Well, when they bite down on you, they don't come loose.

DC: [laughs]

EL: So he caught the crawdad—funniest thing. He was a funny man. But a lot of times, he would do things that's serious, and everybody'd still think it was funny. And sometimes he, he, he would just tell jokes and stories, you know. But everything that he told, actually happened. He didn't tell no lies. It actually happened. I mean . . .

DC: He had seen a lot, it sounds like.

EL: Yeah.

DC: You mentioned before that your father died, in what, 1937.

EL: My father died in ’37.

DC: Yeah. If you don’t mind me asking, what happened?

EL: Well, you’re pretty young, you probably haven’t heard of it, but there was a big flood in 1937. That part of Arkansas, the levees was breaking and they thought it was going to get worse, but the [??] whose land was low, and the Coast Guard, they went around moving everybody out. They would, they would move everybody to higher country. And in our case, we went to—you didn’t have much to say about it—Coast Guard come up there and say, “We’re moving you out.” Now there wasn’t no water at our house at all. I mean, it was fairly dry there, but they was going to take us out of there anyway. So they made us, they made us go up to, I call it, oh—what kind of camps do they call them?—anyway, like prisoner camp. And they tucked us in there, and it was February, so it was cold. It was fairly cold. And all the men were out every day, trying to get survivors, you know. They found them on trees, on top of houses, and most of them got overexposed, underfed. We was in a Red Cross camp. And they give us—there was four of us—they give us two bowls of soup a day. I didn’t know it would be the truth, but I talked to some more people that were there. And they, they just got overexposed, and he got the pneumonia. And I did too, but I wasn’t exposed, but I got the pneumonia. And he died, and I didn’t, you know. But it—I guess it was pretty hard. People got lost from their children, because the Red Cross doctors would take them to a hospital—they’d get sick—they’d take the kid to a hospital, and not let the parents know where they’re taking them. No records at all, so a lot of them got lost. My sister was taken to a hospital. And they said I was OK. She was playing on the floor, Mom said, and they took her, took her to the hospital. And I was burning up with fever. And they probably thought I was going to die anyway, yeah. So I got so bad they had to take me to the hospital, and when we went in there, well, my mother asked at the desk if they had a Stella Mae Liles registered there, and they said, “No, no, no name like that.” Because she was, she was six years, or five years old, I guess. She was a year and three months older than me. So my sister was in a room there close to the receptionist. She heard my mother and she run out.

DC: Wow.

EL: If it hadn’t been for that, she would probably have never been found.

DC: Very frightening.

EL: But anyway . . .

DC: So what did your family do then?

EL: Huh?

DC: What did your family do at that point?

EL: Well, before my father died, well my grandfather, he was wanting to know where we were at. And he finally found out that we was in Paragould, on Crawley Ridge—that's a hill. It's a line of hills, reaches for about three or four hundred miles. But anyway, that's where they had the camp set up, and he went up there and picked us up, my grandfather and a friend of his. And of course I was still in the hospital, and my Dad was still in the hospital. It wasn't [?]—they had guards, they had guards out around the camp. You wasn't allowed out of the camp. You actually wasn't supposed to get out of your tent unless you had a pass. But they pulled up there and the guard stopped them, and Grampa said—they asked him what was he doing there, and he said, "Well, I come after my daughter and her family." And, "Well you can't get her. Nobody's allowed to leave this place." So, so he—they just walked on in anyway and got my mother and my sister.

DC: Had your grandfather stayed on the farm?

EL: Yeah, my grandfather was on the farm. He was a farmer.

DC: He was able to stay there while the rest of you were at the camp?

EL: Well they wasn't—he was—he was up in the high country, high ground. Up—not the hills, but up around close to Monette. That's the high, the high country, up on that. And this other fellow, you get this-aways, the lower it gets. And the closer to the levee you are—and so that's the reason. It flooded up in here, and it didn't up where he was.

DC: So he was on different property?

EL: Yeah, it was different property. It was higher ground. So that was the reason. And the water didn't—Mom told me, she said the water never did get even close to the house where we lived, so they should have left us alone, see. But anyway, that was a long time ago.

DC: Right it was, but I mean, that would be a huge event as well—I mean your father died of pneumonia, and how did you get by at that point?

EL: Well, you—how do you usually get by? You know, I mean, you just go *on*, that's all. I mean, it's not that you're desolate. It's not that you couldn't have got by if the Red Cross hadn't picked you up, or the Coast Guard. It—you'd get by anyway. I mean you wasn't, you wasn't dirt poor. I mean you wasn't—you could, you could get by. You had plenty to eat. You had, you had all kinds of clothes, you know, and stuff like that. And like I say, all, like, we could have went to my grandfather's. After that, we spent a lot of time on my

grandfather's—from, I was four years old, almost eleven when my mother got married, so that was almost seven years.

DC: OK. So she remarried about seven years later?

EL: Yeah.

DC: OK, yeah. Hmm. So I guess it was fortunate that you had family around.

EL: Oh yeah, yeah. Back then family stayed on the farm, and we stayed pretty close.

DC: And so did you stay on the same farm then?

EL: No—now Grampa, he didn't own any farm. He rented. So when he went up there, he went and rented land and he farmed it, and paid a portion to the landowner. And he used to tell me, he says, "You know I could have bought this land for fifty cents an acre. Now," he says, "I'm paying a third to rent." But you didn't have nothing in it. Now my father's father, he was, he was a, he was a rich man. They—the whole family had—one of the first Ford dealerships in Arkansas—that was [Case?] City. They owned gins, cotton gins, sawmills, and I don't know how much land. They was—my great-grandfather, he was very well off. Well my father, I mean my grandfather, he, he didn't want to stay with the, within that part. Because his father wanted him to take over and help run the whole business, see. Well he didn't want to. He wanted to go out and search for his own fortune. He said he never did find his fortune, but he had an awful good time looking for it.

DC: That's good.

EL: He was always a worker, though.

DC: You mentioned before that a number of family members, maybe it was uncles, went off to the war.

EL: Yeah.

DC: What do you remember about the war years? You would have still been quite young at that point.

EL: My first uncle went in the war when I was—I guess I was—I was probably eight, or almost nine. And he was in the, he was in the war. But my youngest uncle, he went in, and he was on his way to Japan, and they surrendered. So he didn't see no battle.

DC: Yeah.

EL: My oldest uncle, he didn't, he didn't go in the war. He was a farmer, up until the last few years, you know. And then, they all come out of the war. Nobody in our family got killed that I know of. And my, my step-dad's brother, he seen some very bad fighting. He was in bad shape when he got out. But he, he finally come out of it, you know. He'd wake up there at night screaming and a-running. "The Heinies are coming! The Heinies are coming!"

DC: So he was in Europe?

EL: Well yeah, he was in Germany. But you didn't have to be in Germany to have Germans around you, you know what I say. They took—but yeah, he was in Germany.

DC: Was your step-dad from around Arkansas, or the same part of Arkansas?

EL: No, he was born and raised in the Ozark Mountains.

DC: OK.

EL: Mtn. Home That's a very well-known name, Mtn. Home. You might know about Mtn. Home and the Ozarks.

DC: I know about the Ozarks, yeah.

EL: Beautiful mountains.

DC: How did he meet your mother?

EL: I don't know.

DC: Oh, OK.

EL: I really didn't see him until one day they said they was going to get married—that's when I seen him.

DC: Really. For the first time?

EL: Yeah, she had been going with him, oh, I don't know, maybe three or four months, you know, so they decided to get married. He was younger than she was, but well they decided to get married, and I was happy. You know, I would have a—of course, we moved away from my grandparents.

DC: So you moved away, then, at that point?

EL: Well we, we moved away from—not a long way away, but we moved away from our grandparents. But you know, we [?]

DC: OK, so you had been living with your grandparents.

EL: Yeah, we had been—for seven years we had been living with our grandparents.

DC: OK, so where did you go?

EL: Well, we—I remember it was bout a half a mile over there to where my step-dad worked, about a half mile.

DC: OK, what did he do?

EL: He worked on a plantation.

DC: OK.

EL: Bryant's Plantation, they called it.

DC: What was he doing? Was he farming?

EL: Oh he was farming. Muleskinner.

DC: Muleskinner.

EL: They [??] at the end of the mules. A couple of years later, they went to all tractors, but back then they . . .

DC: And what was your mother doing at that time?

EL: She wasn't doing nothing—just taking care of the house and kids.

DC: That can keep you busy.

EL: She didn't work much after that. I mean, except at chopping cotton. Sometimes she'd get out there and chop cotton.

DC: Did you have a garden for your food, or anything like that?

EL: Oh, we always had gardens, yeah.

DC: Did she work with that?

EL: Ah, she worked at that. That was her thing—canning and stuff like that, you know. She canned a lot, and it takes a lot of work in the garden.

DC: Did you preserve any meat as well, smoking or anything like that?

EL: Naw, we cured—we'd raise a hog, and we'd salt-cure it out. We wouldn't put it in freezers. We just—we'd cure it out with salt—or sugar—and it kept better that way.

DC: Did your Mom work with that too?

EL: Not too much.

DC: OK.

EL: Not too much, because we didn't can no meat or nothing. So no, she didn't, she didn't work with that, except when she's cooking [chuckles].

DC: You said there were some big changes then—um, you say tractors started coming in?

EL: Oh yeah. Big change.

DC: Did—let's see, that affected your step-dad's plantation, it sounds like. How about your Grampa—did he ever get a tractor?

EL: Oh yeah, yeah. He got a tractor in '49. Yeah, he got a, he got a tractor, in '48 he got a tractor. We got a tractor in '49. And yeah, he had two tractors, maybe three, I don't know. He farmed out, he farmed out two hundred acres, and he never hired nobody to work for him except my uncles, who were very young. My two uncles. And he didn't want nothing—[?] uncle got married, he stayed on, and worked. But, you know, then my older uncle, he helped too.

DC: You would have been getting, you know, significantly older there. You would have been a teenager. What all were you doing at that point?

EL: Working.

DC: You were sixteen.

EL: Working. Plowing, driving a tractor, chopping cotton, picking cotton. Now picking cotton, I could make some money picking cotton.

DC: So would you hire yourself out around the area picking cotton?

EL: Well, I picked a lot of cotton for a lot of people, you know. You'd get paid by the hundred—you'd get, you'd get three dollars a hundred. And I could get three hundred and fifty pounds, so that, that wasn't too bad. That was a little better than ten dollars a day.

DC: That's a day's work? That's good

EL: Yeah, and I could quit at about three o'clock.

DC: What time did you start?

EL: Well I liked to get—you know, an early start, when the dew was kind of heavy, you know, and the cotton was heavy [twinkle in his eye]

DC: Ah [laughs].

EL: Yeah, I could get four hundred pounds of cotton, but I tried for five hundred—a friend of mine come over and said, let's go to town, and away we went. And I never tried it again. And I had three hundred pounds at lunchtime.

DC: Really.

EL: Picking cotton. You could make some money picking, you know—but being, you worked for four dollars a day, four dollars a day—it didn't go up very, very much. I remember even after [sounds like he went back there long after] they're still paying four dollars and a half a day. A friend of mine, he's got—well they was farming last time—when he retired they was farming over two thousand acres, and—but a few years before that, quite a few, well, he said he couldn't keep hands. I said, "Well what do you pay for them people?" He told me. I said, "No wonder you can't keep no hands. You don't pay them enough to stay! Hey, if I'm working for somebody making three dollars a day, or three dollars an hour, if I can find something paying fifty cents more, I'm going to go." And he said, "Well," he said, "I don't know how I could pay more." Now he's making a lot of money. He's making good money. And his subsidy from the government was running about twenty thousand dollars a year.

DC: Oh really.

EL: On corn and wheat. And, well he went up—so he, he, he says, he says, "I'll give them six dollars a day, a house to live in." "And," he said, "I'll pay them straight through winter." They don't do much in the wintertime.

DC: Right.

EL: But he said, "I'll pay them straight through winter," and well that wasn't bad, you know. And they could go out and go to work somewhere else in the wintertime, and still get six hundred dollars [sic?] a month. But, uh, but you had to, to keep the people working for you. But they were hard—they were hardheaded farmers, you know, and all of them Republicans.

DC: OK.

EL: Republicans will take everything away from them, but still yet, they'll vote Republican.

DC: That's kind of a rare breed in Arkansas, isn't it? Republicans?

EL: Ah, well, I don't know.

DC: At that point in time?

EL: My Grampa always called himself Republican, but he always went Democrat. He just didn't like to be called Democrat. But *yeah*, they will do that. My brother-in-law, he, he was half owner of a dairy, and well, Reagan was going to run for President then. He told them what he was going to do, take the subsidies away and all that. He voted for him. And I told him, I—[??] because he took the subsidies away. I said, "Well he didn't do anything that he didn't say he was going to do." And the second time he voted for him, you know, and that time he lost his shirt. But anyway, that, that's the way it is. Shouldn't be talking about politics.

DC: You can be a Republican out in Arkansas in the late '40s, it sounds like.

EL: [laughs]

DC: Right?

EL: Yeah.

DC: You said that your last years of farming were, what, '48 to '50, in that range? Is that right?

EL: '50's the last year.

DC: '50 was the last year of farming. What, what, what caused the end of that era?

EL: Moved to another job. Got old enough to get out of the heat.

DC: OK [laughs].

EL: You know the old saying, 'If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen"?

DC: You got 'out of the kitchen.'

EL: That's right. I got 'out of the kitchen.'

DC: Well where did you go?

EL: I went to the Ozarks.

DC: OK.

EL: [laughs]

DC: That's when you were about eighteen or so? Seventeen? Eighteen?

EL: I became a dam worker. [pun intended]

DC: OK. All right. Well what did you do in the Ozarks?

EL: Build a dam!

DC: You did?

EL: You didn't think I was talking bad, did you?

DC: [laughs]

EL: I was a dam worker. I worked on a *dam*! [laughs]

DC: [laughs] That was good. Oh, all right. What dam did you work on?

EL: Uh, Bull Shoal.

DC: Was that Bull Shoal, did you say?

EL: Bull. B-U-L-L.

DC: Yeah.

EL: Bull, then Shoal.

DC: And how did you find out about that job?

EL: Well my step-dad went up there, and I was—and all of his folks lived up there, and they worked on the dam. They just, they just got through finished with Norfolk Dam, so everybody went over to Bull Shoal. Well I went up there, and it was pretty—it had been along, you know, they had been working on it awhile. It was about, it was over two hundred feet high, from the base of it. So I hired in. Now what I did, I was on cleanup crew, and we had to get the [?] ready for pouring cement. No, no union here. It paid a dollar an hour. Dollar an hour. [mumbles] And the guy gave me—you know, you know what your [brass?] is,

don't you, your tools? Brass? Well these little things like them, if you want a tool, you take one of them off.

DC: OK.

EL: It's got your number on it, your work number. And you get your tool. Well, I wanted to know where I was supposed to go to work. He said, "You see that ladder there?" I said, "Yeah, I see that ladder." Well, it goes up like this, then it goes straight up—two hundred—I think the first time I climbed it, it was two hundred and ten [?], ladder about that wide. Fastened right on the side of the dam. I made it.

DC: Did you look down?

EL: I probably did, but not too much. They told me just to look into the dam.

DC: That's right.

EL: And I got up there, and "Cowboy" [name of worker], called "Cowboy" then. They called me "Peanut." I was probably about a hundred and fifteen pounds, a hundred and twenty pounds. I was real young. I was seventeen years old.

DC: OK. No I was eight—no, I was seventeen when I hired in. Had to get a minor's release to go to work.

End of Tape I, Side A

Begin Tape I, Side B

EL: . . . go downstairs. He told me to get chisels, chisels [sort of singing sound]. Now one [??] That's a great big hose here, and then another hose here. That was a [?]. He told me to get I don't know how many hammers, two buckets, and I forgot what else. Hey that's a *whole lot* to carry up that ladder.

DC: You carried all that up that whole ladder?

EL: *Yeah*! He thought I'd carry it up, but I went down there, and I didn't have enough brass to get it all out, but the guy let me have it anyway, and he looked at me and he said, "How you going to get that up there?" Now ordinarily, they'd just put it in a [skill?], and have the crane set it up. See I don't know, but I'm—I don't know. I'm just doing what I'm told. He said, "How you going to get that up there?" I said, "I'm going to *carry* it up there." He said, "How many trips you going to make?" I said, "I'm only going to make one trip." I put them hammers and stuff there around my belt. I put all the little stuff in the buckets, and I tied

the [?] around, right around my shoulder, and I carried it up there. I got up there and I dumped it all over the floor. And after awhile, my foreman come up, he says, "Say did you get that stuff?" I said, "Yeah, there it is." He said, "You mean you brought it up all at once?" [laughs] They never did tell me—they never used it either.

DC: Oh no! They never used it?

EL: They didn't use it.

DC: Ooh.

EL: He was just joking with me.

DC: Ooh. That's quite a joke.

EL: Quite a joke. They got me on bull hoses too.

DC: On what now?

EL: Bull hoses. They had bull hoses with air, and they had bull hoses with water.

DC: OK.

EL: Well, this old man—I called him old—he's probably about fifty years old back in them days—I called him the "Old Man." He was sandblasting in a pour, and it had all the arms, reinforcement steel already in it. And he was down there under the steel. My job—the sandblasting hose is about like this [makes hand gesture], and it comes out of a hole in the nozzle about like your finger. And it will rip you up. I mean, whoa, well you know, you could take a sandblasting hose and clean brick up, stuff like that. But this was over two thousand-pound pressure coming out of there. But I'm on top of the reinforcement steel up there. If he backs up [noise interruption], I have to feed him hose. What I did, I almost fell through and dropped—I almost dropped the hose. I did a little bit, and boy he was rassling around with that hose down there. Oh, he was rassling around with that hose. I was scared. I thought he was going to drop it. Finally he got it under control—he said, "Peanut, when I get out of here, I'm going to kill you." Of course I didn't figure he would. But I made sure that I held that thing, boy—a few weeks later, well, they had us meet, he says, "Hey Peanut, you think you can handle that bull hose, with water?" There was an open pour, but it had steel around it, like a cage, a great big cage. Well, you can't get out of it, but there's a catwalk on the outside. Of course it's well-guarded too, you know, but the water will go over there. And this old man is on this—where you turn the water on. And the foreman told him, "Just give him half the pressure." You think he did? He opened that thing up. Uhhh. The nozzle is only this long, and it come out less than your finger. And I knew how to hold the thing. I doubled that thing up

around my chest, that threw me against the reinforcement steel, and I give all them—a couple of big shots walking, inspectors is what they was. And I give them a good bath.

DC: Oh hoh hoh hoh.

EL: But after that, I started walking forwards, and I washed her down, and he was laughing. Boy he was laughing.

DC: How long did it take to, to be able to handle that thing?

EL: Oh, well, that was the first time I ever had it full blast.

DC: Yeah.

EL: But I did—it didn't matter. You know, I *knew how* to handle the thing. I'll tell you what, I see a hose, it got loose. Like I say, the nozzle's this long and it's brass. And it—did you ever see a air hose or something, it just . . .

DC: Yeah, yeah.

EL: . . . whipped around. Well, that's the way these bull hoses do. They'll just—they look like they're after—there was a guy at Norfork, he lost one. He was, he was scared and he threw it down. Well that thing almost killed him. They said it looked like that hose was purposefully trying to hurt him. [laughs]

DC: Wow. Whipping around. How did he get it under control? You had to turn it off?

EL: Somebody turned it off.

DC: Yeah, right, yeah.

EL: But it took awhile for somebody to think about that. [laughs] That was hairy.

DC: How long were you a dam worker anyway?

EL: Well, I worked on the dam until they just about got finished with it. This is about seven or eight months. I got the tail end of it.

DC: Where were you living at that time?

EL: Ozarks. [laughs] Lakeview.

DC: But I mean—I figured as much as that. Were you, like, in an apartment, or were you living with some of your family . . .

EL: We was in a cabin. They had—they rented cabins. They had one bedroom, two bedrooms, three bedrooms, and you know, whatever you needed.

DC: Yeah.

EL: Usually three bedrooms. And Bull Shoals is pretty close to a town called Bull Shoals. I never was in the town. Lakeview was north, kind of northeast of Bull Shoals. It was about two miles from the Shoals. And after that, I went to work on the clear-up. I was clearing, we was clearing the lakeshore up.

DC: Around the backwater of the dam?

EL: You know, where the lake was going to be.

DC: Right.

EL: They cut all the timber down, moved all the graveyards. I didn't do any of that work. I—what I was doing was mostly, uh, hooking cables to trees and uh, hauling brush, and then I hurt my foot. And I had to work on the side of the mountains. So I did that and not too long.

DC: How badly did you hurt your foot?

EL: Well I just sprained it, you know how you do. We were playing ball or something—didn't hurt it on the job. I hurt it playing ball. Stepped on a rock and sprained it.

DC: So you were clearing up around there. Did any of your friends go with you up there, or were you on your own?

EL: No, no, no. My step-dad worked there.

DC: OK, so he worked there as well.

EL: Yeah, he worked.

DC: Where was your Mom at this time?

EL: She was home. Like I said, she didn't—she didn't go out. She didn't work out. [outside the home]

DC: Was anyone working the land at that point in time then?

EL: Well I suppose there was. Grampa was still farming. Every cotton-picking time, I'd go down there and pick cotton. Because later on, after the lake got up, I went to the, I went to guiding fishermen on the lake.

DC: OK.

EL: Because I knew the lake, because I worked on it.

DC: You saw the lake grow. You created it.

EL: Yeah well—and you'd make pretty good money. Fifteen dollars a trip.

DC: So you were a guide, then, at that point?

EL: Yeah, I was a guide. And the last—the last season I worked there was '52.

DC: OK. And then what did you do after that?

EL: Come to Detroit.

DC: That's when you came, OK.

EL: Come up here in September the 5th, hired in at Chevrolet Gear and Axle—to be a *press* operator.

DC: So how did you decide to come to Detroit?

EL: Everybody else coming up here. I might as well do it too. So—except my Mom and step-dad.

DC: So who all did come? You said everybody else did.

EL: Goodness, a whole bunch of them.

DC: Oh yeah.

EL: Well, my grandfather, he—the boys all moved up here—see my uncles, they moved up here, went to work for Chevrolet. Then my grandfather, he come up here and went to work for Hudson. And uh, well, I come up here and went to work for Chevrolet Gear and Axle. And that's the first union job I worked at.

DC: That was the first job you got, Chevrolet Gear and Axle?

EL: Yeah.

DC: OK. So anyway, a lot of people in your family . . .

EL: In my family, uh, had, I had three uncles work for Chevrolet. They worked in forge there at Gear and Axle. I had, I had a cousin who worked at the same place. Mary Ann's uncle, he married my cousin, so that made him my second cousin by marriage—he worked there. That's five people.

DC: Why did they want to leave Arkansas?

EL: Work. There was no work down there.

DC: OK.

EL: There just wasn't any work down there. And . . .

DC: They didn't want to stay and grow cotton?

EL: They didn't want to be farmers no more.

DC: OK.

EL: So, I mean you can go up to town, get a job pumping gas back in them days, for little or nothing, you know. Well, they figured that it's time to move on, I guess. So—I was making pretty much good money guiding, but it was seasonal. But later on, just like everything else, later on, well, last time I heard they was getting a hundred dollars a trip. You know, and a lot of these guys, my cousins, they bought, they bought a big river boat, and they went on a river. That's about a hundred fifty dollars a day. And it could be more than that if, if you get a party that wants to camp on the river, spend a week on a river. Then they have to pay you for cooking—[??].

DC: Was that a tough decision for you to leave the fishing guide job to go to Detroit?

EL: What was that?

DC: Was it a tough decision for you to leave the fishing guide . . .

EL: No it wasn't, it wasn't, it wasn't.

DC: You were ready to go?

EL: I was—I was aiming to come up here earlier, but we didn't do it.

DC: Well tell me what it was like when you got here. What exactly . . .

EL: I didn't think much about it. Everybody lived in apartments, you know.

DC: Where was your first apartment?

EL: On Hudson—no wait a minute. Yeah, it was on Hudson.

DC: On Hudson. In the city?

EL: Oh yeah, yeah, right beside of [I-]94. And then we moved—we moved down—me and Mary Ann, we got married in '55, so we rented an apartment, and then we bought a place in '58.

DC: OK, lets' move up slowly here. I gotta figure out exactly what you did—you said you had a stamping job when you first started out?

EL: Yeah, running a press.

DC: Running a press, OK, at Chevrolet Gear and Axle.

EL: At Chevrolet Gear and Axle.

DC: So tell me about the process of hiring in, how you got that job, and all that stuff. How did you end up in the stamping job?

EL: Well, like I say, I had uncles over there, and they said they were hiring, so I went over there, me and my youngest uncle. Well we went over there and sure enough, he hired in at Ford's, and I hired in at Plant 3. And well, we went over there, filled out applications, took our physical that day, went to—I went to work that night.

DC: Really, that fast.

EL: Yeah. Yeah, uh huh. Of course they needed people. Back then, you could either join the union or you could, or you didn't have to.

DC: What did you do?

EL: Oh, I wanted the union.

DC: OK.

EL: Yeah. Didn't know much about it, but I wanted the union.

DC: Had you ever come across a union in Arkansas?

EL: Not—there wasn't very many unions in Arkansas.

DC: Uh huh.

EL: Not at that time. Not too many now. So I hired in running a press, great big old press, for making spring houses. And well, like I say, this is the first time that I ever worked in a place where they had a union. So I was always a fast worker, and I always believed in giving a person a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, and probably a little extra. Well they put me on that press back there, one at a time, you know, one at a time, for about a week. Then I got—I was running the whole line, four presses, because sooner or later I'm going to have to do it anyway, you know. But I thought, oh man, this is, this is really something. This is easy! And after awhile, they come over and say, "Hey, Ernie. What's going on? We're on break." "Break?" I never was used to a break.

DC: Yeah, take time out in the cotton field.

EL: Well I worked on the dam, we just took our own break. And well I fell off the dam too. I slid off the spillway.

DC: The chute?

EL: Whooooosh.

DC: Did you come out all . . .

EL: I hit the catwalk down there. And the only thing I was thinking about then was how's it going to feel when I hit them rocks.

DC: Oh man!

EL: But I fell, but afterwards I got very nervous about it. But anyway, they said, "We're going to take a break." Hey, that's all right. And we had thirty minutes off for lunch, and that's not bad. And if you had to use, if you had to use the john, you know, they'd have somebody to come over and relieve you, and then you could go take care of your body. And they had a twelve-minute break. That's what we had—a twelve-minute break. That's why, you're supposed to service your body then, but as you know, if the need arises, you gotta go. You gotta go. And, and so, I worked on them presses, and when I was on the Number Two press, there was somebody started coming over here and running Number One press on automatic. He just covered me up. And while they were on break, I tried to catch up. I didn't have to. I could go on break too. But then, when I'd get up there, there'd be another guy take this, and he'd come up here, and then I'd go—we'd clear the whole line up. But pretty soon, they put me on that Number One press, and that same guy up there, I'd cover him up. I'd tell the foreman to crank it up a little bit, you know. We'll teach him a lesson. [laughs] Because I was fast, and I was really accurate.

DC: How long did it take you to learn how to do that?

EL: It, it, it took me two weeks. Everyday, you know. And they had me doing, sometimes, drill press or something. That wasn't no sweat. But then, I got a little letter from my government, and they had a job opening for me. So you know . . .

DC: You got drafted?

EL: "Dear Ernie Liles, You are invited . . . . " I thought that was very impressive. The President of the United States inviting me to come join his Army. So I went.

DC: How long had you been working on the stamping job before you . . .

EL: I hired in on September the 5th, and I went in the Army February the 18th.

DC: Not very long at all.

EL: Uh uh. But the Union had negotiated that my seniority would go ahead, because I'm in the service.

DC: Right, right.

EL: And I think they kind of cheated me out of something, because I had a full ten years, counting that two years I was gone. But they said I wasn't eligible for it. But anyway, I went to Fort Hood for two years.

DC: For two years?

EL: Oh yeah.

DC: So you had just gotten started.

EL: Yep.

DC: And then you were off to Fort Hood.

EL: But February the 17th, 1955, I got out.

DC: OK.

EL: I didn't go nowhere but Fort Hood.

DC: Really. What was it like at Fort Hood?

EL: Oh it was hot.

DC: Yeah. That's right back in Arkansas, isn't it? Where is Fort Hood? [confusing Fort Hood, Texas with Fort Smith, Arkansas]

EL: Oh, Fort Hood is south of Arkansas.

DC: South of Arkansas, OK.

EL: The hottest I seen it down there was 116. But it wasn't like that all the time. But it was hot, hot and dry. I couldn't get used to the dryness. Of course they said I was from Michigan, you know. And when I went in, I had a Michigan address, so that's what I was, a Michigander. So sweat would just pour off of me. [?] was hot: "Hey Liles, what you sweating about." You're not supposed to say that to a soldier; you just let it slide." "Hey Liles, what you sweating about?" "Well, I ain't noticed it." One day the sergeant say, "Hey Liles, where'd all that sweat go to?" Then I noticed, "Hey, I'm not sweating."

DC: You got used to it.

EL: Yeah. I dried out.

DC: You got out of the kitchen because it was too hot, then they threw you right back in.

EL: Right back in.

DC: So were you training for anything in particular in the Army? Did they have you in any particular unit?

EL: Yeah I trained—I went to school, uh, I trained to kill people. I learned how to kill a person with a clipboard, with a pencil. Oh, that's a good weapon.

DC: Yeah, I imagine, yeah.

EL: And mostly with a rifle, as long as you had it loaded, you know. [laughs] But I was very light. I was a hundred forty-five pounds when I went in the infantry. A hundred and forty-five pounds. And before I went in, I would have rassled anybody that was bigger than me. I rassled a hundred eight pounds, didn't bother me one bit.

DC: You mentioned that you did some wrestling back in Arkansas.

EL: Oh yeah, I done a lot of rassling. A little guy my size, I busted his appendix, and almost broke his leg. But when I got in the Army, I see it—a lot of people was goofing off during training. I said, "If I'm going over to Korea, and them guys, if they're the way they say they are, I'm going to have to learn how to handle myself." And I learned judo, and I could handle myself pretty good. Didn't have

no—what was that, kung fu? I didn't take none of that, but I did, I taught myself judo. And that, that helped me. It would have helped me if I had went in battle, let's put it that way. But I would take on three people my size, so usually, sometimes they'd get me. Most of the time I would get them down, all three of them. But then I got out—well I went to NCO Academy.

DC: OK. Where was that?

EL: That was in Fort Hood.

DC: At Fort Hood, OK.

EL: NCO Academy. Leadership school. So I liked that pretty good. I graduated about the middle of the class. That wasn't too bad. There was people on both sides of me, you know.

DC: This would have been an era when the Army was becoming desegregated. Do you remember . . .

EL: Oh no, it was way past that.

DC: Well, I mean, the order had been given, but the Korean War was, as I understand it, kind of when things actually . . .

EL: I guess the Korean War was when they began to [de]segregate. There were no such things as separate barracks, separate [pitches?], separate johns. And I don't think there oughta been. Hey, a man's going in there to die for his country, he's got as much right as anybody else.

DC: So when you were there, there wasn't segregation.

EL: No, no.

DC: OK.

EL: We had black First Sergeants, we had black commanders, we had [hesitates]—you were in the same barracks. In fact, when we'd go on maneuvers, these two big black guys, they thought they had to take care of me, you know. So they made sure I had plenty to wear, to keep me warm all the time.

DC: Poor Michigan guy, huh?

EL: Yeah, poor Michigan guy.

DC: Well, that's a pretty big change then, it seems to me, for the military to be that far out front on desegregation, especially in the South.

EL: Oh yeah, it moved fast.

DC: Were there many blacks in the part of Arkansas where you grew up?

EL: Ah there were—most of—not in the rural area. But later on, when people would go to town, say Blytheville, or Jonesboro, we'd haul white people out there to chop cotton, or pick cotton.

DC: You say later on, when was that?

EL: Right around '46. Because back then, people was getting—they didn't want to hire out. Well I did one time—me and my uncle, we hired out to chop cotton. We wanted a couple of dollars. And we worked maybe three hours, and a friend of ours, my middle uncle's father-in-law, he was, he was the head honcho there. And—well, we chopped out, you know, we run over and got us a drink of water, and he come over told us that we was [?] to chop cotton. I sat around and drank water, and he told us to get back to work. So I just handed him my hoe, and said, "You chop it. I's going home." That was what my uncle did. [laughs]

DC: It sounds like when you were growing up, you didn't have any black workers out in the fields.

EL: No, not with us. I remember one time, Bryant Plantation, they had a lot of black people working, chopping cotton. When I—I'm sitting on a bridge—I'm pretty small there, and I'm sitting on a bridge, and was fishing, but then I got tired of fishing. And those people that came up there, they stopped. They wouldn't cross that bridge when I'm on it. And, well I went over there and started to talk to them. And I told them to go ahead, and they said, "No, we won't go across when you're on it." It's like meeting you on the sidewalk, you know. They was taught not to do that, and it didn't make me no difference. I [???]. So that's the only encounter that we had with black people.

DC: OK, that particular plantation was the Bryant Plantation?

EL: That was Bryant's Plantation. They had—well, there's six hundred acres, there's six hundred acres in a section, and they had about ten sections.

DC: Oh wow.

EL: They had a lot of land. They had a big plantation.

DC: So anyways, you got out of the military February 17, 1955.

EL: Yeah.

DC: I read my notes here. Did you go back to Detroit?

EL: Yeah, I come back to work.

DC: Yeah, OK.

EL: I come back to work.

DC: And were you still at Chevrolet Gear and Axle?

EL: Yeah, yeah, I went back there. I had my job as soon as I got back.

DC: Did you stay on the same job at that point?

EL: Nope, they put me on the line, assembly line.

DC: OK. What exactly did you do there?

EL: Uh, what was it? Putting brake shoes on.

DC: Oh yeah

EL: The flange.

DC: How did you like that?

EL: I didn't like it much.

DC: Why is that?

EL: Well I didn't know the *job*.

DC: OK.

EL: All jobs are hard when you're working on the line and don't know it. But you get the hang of it after awhile.

DC: How long did it take you to get the hang of it?

EL: Oh, a couple of weeks, maybe a week. I mean, it's *fast*. That thing never stops, you know. Well I was, uh, uh—a union man was a good friend of mine. And he come out and taught me, said, "Take your time. Just take your time. You'll get the hang of it. Just take your time." And my foreman, he says, "You'll get the hang of it."

DC: Was the union guy a committeeman, or just a regular worker.

EL: A committeeman, committeeman. Oh no, he was an alternate committeeman.

DC: OK, he as still looking out for you.

EL: Yeah, yeah. They, they was pretty good. They wouldn't let the company get much—not if they could, not if it was in the contract. If it was twelve minutes, it was—you got two breaks, one in the morning, one afternoon. That's all you got, unless emergency arise. And this old man—he was about 55 years old—this old man, he's telling me, he said, "Ernie," he said, "you know," he said, "I've been here a long time." And he said, "Back in the Depression days, we had a union, but it wasn't as strong as it is now, you know, and a lot of things wasn't worked out." And he says, "There's a guy down the line there, he had to go to the bathroom. And the foreman said, 'I can't get nobody to relieve you.' And," he said, "that guy just went in his pants." And I said, "Well I wouldn't have done it. I would have walked off." He said, "If you would have walked off, it would have been your job. And," he said, "that guy had a family, and there's no jobs in town. That's during the Depression." And they had a union, but you know, it was just a young union back in them days. And, but, he did that, and I said, "Nah, I would never do that. But I put brake shoes on for quite awhile.

DC: How long?

EL: Oh maybe six months. It wasn't very long. But, my friend, that was Art, the committeeman, he told me, he said, "Why don't you put in for inspection or something like that?" So I did. I got the inspection job. And, and it was a good job.

DC: What were you inspecting?

EL: Brake drums, mostly. Later on I inspected wheels, rims.

DC: OK. How—I mean, was there much competition for this inspector job? How did you get it?

EL: Well I had seniority.

DC: You did. OK.

EL: I had—in fact one guy, after I got on that—it's a heavy job.

DC: The inspector job is heavy?

EL: I had shoulders like a weightlifter, you know.

DC: OK, so you actually lifted them up and looking them over?

EL: Yeah, each, turn them. Made you flip them over, and look inside of them. If it's OK, hang them on the line, or push then down. That's what we did.

DC: So you looked at each one.

EL: Yeah.

DC: OK. Oh boy. How much did they weigh?

EL: Well, a regular brake drum, with a hub in it now—I don't know how much it weighs, but it's pretty heavy.

DC: Pretty heavy. What, ten pounds? Twenty pounds?

EL: It would probably go fifteen pounds.

DC: Fifteen?

EL: Yeah.

DC: OK.

EL: And, and a Corvette drum, it had flanges all the way around, and it would go, easy, twenty pounds. That was real heavy.

DC: And how many of those would you inspect in a shift?

EL: In a shift? Maybe a hundred.

DC: OK.

EL: Yeah. But otherwise, you was running—there were two of us, back to back, and we was running drums for the line, and there were three hundred—there were two sides to the line, see? I mean, we had to have a drum here, a drum here. And that three hundred something, that's six hundred drums an hour.

DC: An hour? Or a shift?

EL: No, hour.

DC: Hour. Oh man. That's a lot.

EL: Yeah, that's a lot, and I picked up half of them.

DC: OK.

EL: So you can tell why I had shoulders like a weightlifter.

DC: No kidding, yeah. That's a lot of repetitions.

EL: Yeah, but you get used to it. You just [??] and just slam them things around and just, one hand . . .

DC: What was the quality of these drums, in general?

EL: Very good.

DC: Yeah.

EL: We allowed so much out of round.

DC: What does "round" mean?

EL: Well, you pout in on a gauge, and that's how round it is. In other words, if off round, you might get twenty, fifteen, or as low as, some of them was even low as five and six, but not very many of them. But that's how round they are. You get a low side or a high side, but we was allowed thirty.

DC: OK, that's a, that's a measurement of just how far out of round it is.

EL: Yeah. If we got a thirty, well, they could repair that. But some of them's just—that was too far out, so, so they wasn't repairable. That's what . . .

DC: What did you do with those?

EL: You just throw them down, and scrap them. And then you had the top of the flange. It couldn't [drag?] that much either, you know. So, you'd check the flange—a lot of things about the drum. But it was—and then . . .

DC: Did you ever have anybody question your judgment?

EL: [chuckles] Production always questioned your judgment.

DC: Yeah?

EL: Especially when you'd get a stack of rejects. [laughs]

DC: Yeah, yeah, would it be the workers, or would it be the foremen?

EL: No, no, it'd be the foremen.

DC: Yeah, OK. Well what do you do if he questions your judgment?

EL: Just rant and rave.

DC: And what would you do?

EL: I talked to my foreman.

DC: Talked to *your* foreman, OK. So you had the production foreman and the inspector foreman?

EL: Oh yeah.

DC: OK. And what was that showdown like?

EL: Well, it's a lot [??]. I'd send the utility hand to get my foreman. He'd come back over and he'd get mad.

DC: Your foreman?

EL: My foreman. *Not at me*! He'd get mad at that, that production foreman.

DC: What would he say?

EL: He said, "Don't pass nothing." [chuckles] So instead of having two hundred over here, we're going to have five hundred here. We stopped the whole line. Wasn't nothing they could do about it. We just stopped the whole—we'd get nitpicking and just, we'd stop the whole line.

DC: So would you do that, would you actually be throwing out pieces that you otherwise would have passed along?

EL: [mumble laughing] You can be lenient, or you can be nitpicky.

DC: So if they pick on you, you pick back?

EL: Uh huh. After awhile, the foreman—the production foreman—come over and apologized to us, and we'd put them back on the line.

DC: [laughs] And your foreman participated in that?

EL: Oh yeah, yeah. He'd have us put them back on the line. [laughs]

DC: Wow. All right.

EL: Yeah, he was a pretty good guy. And then, then the union had a deal worked out, if a worker wanted to work—say they was low man over in Plant 1, Plant 2, well, now Plant 1 was mostly machining, so was Plant 2. So if they needed a lathe operator over there, or any, you know, a [borer?], lathe, well that paid more than the inspector. And they might need an inspector over there. And it paid more than our inspector. So I told them—overtime too, you know—so I told them, you could agree to do that, go to another place. And if a guy was short over there, and you went over there, and if you went over there—you didn't have to go over, just go over there—and the guy come in, they'd sent you back, but you get that pay all day—whatever you start out with. The Union got that. And—but just think of the things that the Union worked out for the worker. And—like twelve-minute breaks. And if they caught you up there with your pants up, they could fire you. That's when—before we got it all worked out, you know. You couldn't go get any coffee during work hours. You could go get a drink of water, but you couldn't buy pop, you couldn't buy potato chips, and at that, we had very little, we had coffee machines, a soup machine at the cafeteria—you know, not the cafeteria, but the lunch room. And they wasn't very clean, but later on, well, we got eighteen-minute break, and it didn't matter, you could sit up there and read if you wanted to. And during this time—back a long time ago, when there was really, we was having a time out in Dearborn—uh, they hired these tough guys, you know, to, to watch the workers. Well this guy from Tennessee, he went to the john. He was on his break—twelve-minute break—he went to the john, and he done his thing. They said he's just [filled that bowl up?] And this tough guy come in there—he's still setting there, you know—tough guy come in there and told him to get up. "I want to see if you've done anything" Well he got up, grabbed that guy, and stuck his guy head down in the commode—almost drowned that fella. But they were mean. They were real mean.

DC: Was that someone you knew? The guy from Tennessee?

EL: No, I don't know him. That was a long time before, but anyway, it's gone a long way from that day.

DC: When you were working, you know, those first couple of jobs after you got back from the service, were you working with people who had been there a long time, or were they mostly young people like you?

EL: Mostly young people. There was a lot of young people. Oh hell, there was, there was a lot of young people.

DC: Did you talk to too many, or did you talk to very many of these people who had been there back in the '30s?

EL: Oh yeah. That old man . . .

DC: Yeah the one you were talking about.

EL: Oh yeah.

DC: But were there many of them around still?

EL: Oh, there was quite a few of them around. Some of them, they didn't want to talk to the young whippersnappers, you know. I mean, "Them guys don't know nothing!"

DC: Yeah, yeah.

EL: Stupid people. [laughs]

DC: [laughs]

EL: But they went through a whole lot. I guess it's kind of like we was [?]. You know these guys hire in, you know, and they're getting all kinds of pay, and they're getting I don't know how many holiday pays, and Ford's doing that. You know, Ford is good to them. "We don't need the union!" Well they don't know, because they just hired in.

DC: Yeah, yeah. Don't know how it came to be.

EL: They—one guy said he didn't even need his vacation pay. I said, "Well give it to me! I'll take it."

DC: [laughs]

EL: But that's the way it is. I guess it was like that when I was young, but I was always, I was always union. I, I don't care. I worked in the—I left Chevrolet. I quit the Chevrolet.

DC: When did you quit Chevrolet?

EL: 1962.

DC: OK.

EL: October. And I went into full-time ministry.

DC: Oh really.

EL: And moved to Arkansas. At Conway, Arkansas. And, well I mean, I was in a church, but it didn't—it was a small church, so I went to work for [Custom-Made?] There wasn't a union there. [I probably mis-heard, because below he says there was a union here.]

DC: Custom-Made? What did they make?

EL: They made ice chests, ice boxes, deep freezes.

DC: So you were a minister and you were also working at Custom-Made.

EL: Yeah, yeah.

DC: OK. There are a few gaps I want to fill in, but I want to ask right away, what moved you to join the ministry?

EL: Well, that's just what I guess I wanted to do, you know. And . . .

DC: Had you been involved in a church growing up?

EL: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

DC: What church were you in?

EL: Pentecostal Church. Assembly of God, or Church of God. But later, I was a non-denominational. There was an assembly, the same, about the same as Assembly of God.

DC: Was that were you were a minister?

EL: Yeah.

DC: OK. All right. So you had it in your mind to do this, apparently for some time.

EL: Well yeah, for, for awhile.

DC: What prompted you to make that decision in 1962?

EL: 1952?

DC: '62. You said you quit Chevrolet in '62.

EL: The times, I guess.

DC: Just the times.

EL: Yeah, just the times.

DC: There wasn't a particular thing, or anything?

EL: Huh?

DC: There wasn't any particular event or any . . .

EL: Oh you mean something that happened to [?] . . .

DC: I mean why did you choose 1962, you know?

EL: You had to choose sometime.

DC: OK.

EL: There you go.

DC: That's a good enough answer for me. I just wondered, you know. You know, sometimes people make the decision when they get laid off, or . . .

EL: No, no, no. I wasn't laid off. I had [pause] September to February, September and October—well it was a little over ten years. But—it just didn't—but anyway, I was working for a company. There was a union.

DC: There was a union?

EL: Yeah, there was a union in Arkansas—a pretty good union.

DC: What union was it?

EL: I don't even remember now. It—I think it was CIO.

DC: OK.

EL: Of course it wasn't—I don't think—CIO, I know. Back then, Chevrolet was UF, [pause] CIO. I forgot when they . . .

DC: I wanted to sneak up on your experiences back in Arkansas again, but I wanted to make sure I knew a bit more about what you did in the meantime. Did you stay in that inspector job all the way through until you . . .

EL: I was an inspector when I quit.

DC: OK, when you quit, you were an inspector still.

EL: Yeah.

DC: Did anything change in that inspector job?

EL: Yeah, it moved to 9-Mile and Mound Road. That's one thing that changed.

DC: Did that happen back in the '50s? Or did that happen . . .

EL: That happened in the '50s.

DC: Yeah, OK. When did the job move?

EL: Fifty—I tell you it moved in '59.

DC: OK. Did they build a new plant? Or was there already a plant up there?

EL: They built a plant, I'm sure, over there by the Plymouth plant. I think they built that plant there—and one thing changed in the inspection department. They made all the inspectors—what's the name? What did they call them? But anyway, it wasn't inspectors. They used these people for spot-checking, but they didn't us. We still did the same thing.

DC: You still inspected every part?

EL: Yeah. They cut our pay. They cut our pay five cents.

DC: They cut your pay?

EL: They cut our pay five cents because we didn't have the classification. They cut our classification into—I can't think of the name of what they called it. Yeah, he just goes around and spot-checks, you know.

DC: OK, so they had some kind of lesser classification and reduced your pay.

EL: Yeah.

DC: Were you still Chevrolet then at Mound Road?

EL: Yeah, it was Chevrolet.

DC: Still Chevrolet.

EL: Gear and Axle.

DC: OK, um, let me think. There was a big recession in 1958. I don't know if you remember that at all, or if it affected you.

EL: Well, it didn't affect me. '58, no. There was a recession, but it didn't affect me.

DC: Did you ever have any layoffs in that period?

EL: Yeah, we had layoffs.

DC: Yeah.

EL: And we had strikes.

DC: OK.

EL: The longest strike I was ever on was six weeks.

DC: Six weeks, OK.

EL: Six week strike.

DC: That was a strike. Do you remember when that was?

EL: [thinking] I think that was ’56.

DC: ’56? What did you do during that strike? Do you have any idea?

EL: Well, me and my wife, we went to the berry fields.

DC: The berry fields, OK.

EL: And we picked berries—blueberries.

DC: On the west side of the state? Or where did you go?

EL: No, it was over on the Lake Michigan side—Watervliet.

DC: Yeah, sure.

End of Tape I, Side B

Begin Tape II, Side A

EL: . . . picking. Yeah, we were picking. You couldn’t ever make no money berry picking.

DC: But what about during some of your layoffs. What did you do during those periods?

EL: Some of the layoffs we went to the berry fields.

DC: You went to the berry fields, OK.

EL: Uh huh.

DC: So they were in the summer?

EL: We had—I never taken a vacation, because [clears throat] we always had changeover.

DC: Yeah.

EL: And that was usually three weeks.

DC: Model changeover.

EL: Two to three weeks. It never was under two weeks—for model changeover. So we just used that for vacation.

DC: Sure.

EL: And sometimes we'd go to the berry fields; sometimes we'd just go on vacation.

DC: Where would you go if you went on vacation?

EL: Well here and there.

DC: Uh, anywhere in particular?

EL: Well we went all over the world.

DC: Really.

EL: As far as Texas.

DC: How about in the 1950s, where would you go?

EL: In the 1950s—well a lot of times we'd go back to Arkansas, see everybody, you know. Sometimes we'd even go down there and pick a little bit of cotton.

DC: Yeah, for old time's sake?

EL: Old time's sake. Hadn't picked cotton years and years, went down there, and my—that guy that farmed [??], he's retired now, but they farm over two thousand acres. They're still farming. He leased his land to his son-in-law and his

grandson. So he was farming then—[??]—he might have had eighty acres of that. So me, him, my wife, two cousins, we got into a race, race picking cotton.

DC: Oh really?

EL: Yeah.

DC: How many pounds in a day, or what?

EL: No—well, just from that time 'til quitting time. Well it was, it was at morning. It was in the morning when we decided to do it, and well, Mary Ann's two cousins, we started-and my friend, Max—we started—and I hadn't picked cotton in awhile. I mean, I hadn't picked cotton hardly at all in quite a while. And we started. And my friend beat me fifty pounds that day.

DC: Really. Yeah. You were out of practice.

EL: Out of—but I beat the other two guys. [laughs]

DC: [laughs] Well what was harder, working on the stamping job, or picking cotton?

EL: I'd rather pick cotton. I mean, if, you know, of course the worst thing on a stamping machine, or big presses, it's so boring. It's very boring. And all that noise. It just [?] [you to sleep?] [?].

DC: Was it dangerous?

EL: Oh, if you get your hand under that press, it's very dangerous.

DC: Did you ever see anyone have an accident?

EL: No. Uh uh. There was a guy over in the [??] plant, where they have them long tongs—their hammer—that's a hammer shop—but they have these tongs. And he was kind of a new man. He really wasn't ready to do it himself. He was trying to learn how to—he'd stop the machine, the hammer, and put his part in there. And then he had to hammer, you know. Well, he was putting this piece in there and it run it. Now an old-timer, they would do it—they'd kick one out, they'd put one in and never stopped. But he was going to do that, and it hit the end of the tongs like that, and it bounced back, went right through him. Don't know if it killed him or not. But that's the only . . .

DC: So you heard about it, this accident.

EL: I heard about it, yeah. Of course there was one guy out in Dearborn, he got under a press—he was a machine repair, or a die man, probably—and he was grinding some rough places and didn't have it blocked up, and the brake failed. Well he

just got squeezed out the sides, you know. That would be terrible. Why, why do they do it? But they will.

DC: That's grizzly.

EL: But the Union's come a long way. We talk more about me than we have the union.

DC: Well, tell me about your experiences with the union.

EL: Well, I've had—I never had no trouble.

DC: OK.

EL: But I have, I have wrote people up, foremans up, for the Union.

DC: So you actually had to file some grievances?

EL: On yeah, yeah.

DC: When did you file your first grievance.

EL: Oh man, I don't know. Probably in '55.

DC: OK, and what happened then?

EL: OK, I remember now. I remember. They had these people coming in, we called them bird dogs.

DC: OK.

EL: He'd stand on the other side of the line and watch me, just staring.

DC: A supervisor?

EL: No, I don't know what he was.

DC: OK.

EL: But they was looking at people. I never did like nobody to do that. I asked him to leave, and he just done a big, mad look on his face. Well I got tired of it, and I just quit work. I went and looked for my—they stopped the line [chuckles]. And—well I found my committeeman, and my foreman found me, told me to come back on the job. And my foreman was trying to get me to go back to work. I told him, I said, "I'm going to settle this think now. These people come in here and they just bird-dog people." And so, he was still over there. And my foreman,

he said, "Well go back to work, and I'll take care of it." So I wrote a grievance up on that, not my foreman, but that guy for bird-dogging. And I'm still standing there, and my foreman said, "Go back to work, Ernie." I said, "Well I tell you what. You get him out of here, get him out of my face, and I'll go to work." So he did. He went over there and got him out. Well, I wrote a lot of grievances, you know, for pay, and overtime grievances. A lot of them. It worked out.

DC: Did it? How did it work out?

EL: Oh, because I was right. Yeah. And when you're right, you're right. And when you ain't, you ain't, you know.

DC: Well how did the process work for you? Did the committeeman work well for you and all that? How did it work out?

EL: Oh yeah, everything worked good, yeah.

DC: Yeah? How long would it take to get these things settled?

EL: Not too long usually. But sometimes, it depend on what stage they're going to. There's a first stage, second stage, third stage—then they had to go to the arbitrator.

DC: Did you ever have a case go to the arbitrator?

EL: No, uh uh.

DC: OK. Yours were all settled sooner.

EL: Yeah. First stage.

DC: Hmm.

EL: They were all settled first stage.

DC: Did you have problems with supervisors then?

EL: Two supervisors had problems. Two.

DC: When did you have those supervisors? What years are we talking about?

EL: 19, 1970.

DC: OK.

EL: I was a repairman, a mechanic, and this one guy named Dennis Farmer—he wasn't a farmer. He was a jerk—but anyway, somehow or another he got to disliking me very much. And everyday I'd go in there, and he'd put me on the line. He'd loan me out. Well I wasn't low seniority. Well, I'd get the committeeman, and they'd bring me back on the job. And we got into it quite a bit, and he—like one Saturday, we was in there, and they were, they had days—let's see, [whispers] one, two, three, four—four days, and then all these here repairmen over here too. We had about twelve repairmen in there one Saturday. Well I'm right here in this bay here. You take whatever they pull into you, you know. Well, we call it "selling" to the inspector. We had a final [buy-off?] inspector; he'd buy it. He would get another one. There would be another one come right in behind it. And I, I got that one—now this is in the morning. And then, I—what we did, when we'd get a tractor, that would have a car, we'd stamp it in. That's what you started on. And then when you sold it, finished it up, you wrote what you did on it, and stamp it out. I had two tractors stamped out, then I pulled another one up there, and I finished it, then that foreman, he'd always [snarling voice] "Yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh." Did you ever have anybody do you that way? "Yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh." You want to hit him so bad, you know, but you know you can't hit him. But you want to real bad. I don't know which is worse. [laughs] But I said, "Farmer," I said, "I don't know what you want me to do, but," I said, "I've got, I've got—this will be my third tractor, and it's not lunchtime yet. I'll probably get four tractors this morning, and maybe more!" "Yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh," he said. "How do you think, how do you, how do you think you got three tractors?" I took him over there, show him the card. And there was only one card in the box beside mine. I said, "Now you're screaming about me not having more tractors out; I've got two right here and one ready"—well, he was buying it then—"and soon I'll have three." I said, "Where are the rest of the guys?" I said, I said, "I know they're not goofing off. They're working!" And he just got mad and walked off. But I got the committeeman on that.

DC: Uh huh. Did you have to file anything, or was that it at that point?

EL: Ah, that was it. You can't reason—I don't care what you do—you can't reason with a man like that.

DC: But you stood up to him, and he backed off.

EL: Yeah. Like one time—he was always doing something to me. Got a hold of my coat like that, twisted it. Well I just reached, got his—anybody pick on me, I'm going to pick on back. I wasn't mad at him. I just doing him what he did. So he told me, "Don't you ever get a hold of my clothes no more."

DC: What did you say to him?

EL: I said, "Well," I said, "I didn't mean nothing by it. No more than you did when you got hold of my clothes." So that was the end of that.

DC: This guy had it . . .

EL: Oh he was, he was something else. Well, he got his later on—they got him for—what do they call it when you mess around with a woman, picking on her?

DC: Oh, sexual harassment?

EL: Sexual harassment. And he lost his job, lost his wife. And I don't know what he went to doing then, but he lost his job.

DC: So he had larger problems.

EL: Yeah, then he got some real good problems. His wife divorced him, and—but anyway, the Union, I think it—the Union has helped more people than the people that's working with the Union.

DC: Uh huh.

EL: The Union got the people together at the factories. I mean, it got most of them out voting. They do not press anybody to vote any other way. They will ask you to support what they're supporting, but they do not do any pressing.

DC: Sure.

EL: I mean, that's your, that's your problem. Whatever you want to vote for, you can.

DC: Did you see the Union doing that back in the '50s when you first started hiring in?

EL: Oh yeah, they, they, they was doing it—see the Union will back a certain man. One time I remember they backed a Republican, and I don't know why.

DC: Must have been desperate.

EL: But I guess it was who was running against him. But still yet, the guy running against him was better than the guy that got in, as far as I'm concerned. In fact, I would vote for a guy just off of skid row before I would a Republican. So you know where I stand now.

DC: Your family's Republican heritage in Arkansas didn't rub off on you anyway. [laughs]

EL: But the Union, they helped. Like the United Foundation. They encourage that very much. They encourage—people give what they can to the United Foundation. And they encourage a lot of things like that. And they get families together. They got people there in the factories now, that's all they do is work

with people that's got problems. And that's all they do. A friend of mine, he went to school, and he does that. You got a problem, he's there, he's there to help you, talk to you.

DC: Is that a different level of service from what you saw, in, say 1955?

EL: Oh they didn't have no such thing back then. No. Uh uh.

DC: So they expanded their services.

EL: Yeah.

DC: Yeah.

EL: Oh yeah. I'd say, I'd say ninety percent of the things that you've got now, the Union is backing right now, you didn't have back in the early '50s.

DC: OK, yeah.

EL: Now, I was on inspection at Ford too. Road test and inspection.

DC: When was that?

EL: Well, I got on that after I got fed up with Farmer, and that was in '69, I went on inspection. And I got to inspecting the tractors that they wanted me to buy real good. Ordinarily I didn't make that much difference. I figured if they was ready to buy, I'd buy them anyway.

DC: When you say "buy them," what do you mean?

EL: I'm talking about buying the repairs that's done on them.

DC: Gotcha, OK.

EL: OK them. We called it "buying," OK?

DC: I remember you said that once before, but for a moment there I thought you had shifted . . .

EL: Thought I was buying all them tractors?!

DC: I thought you were going back to the cotton fields or something?

EL: [laughs] No.

DC: You'd have yourself an army of tractors.

EL: [laughs]

DC: Um, I've got to alert you that I'm going to have to go in about twenty minutes or so, but we may have to talk again another, because there's a whole lot that we're not going to get to in twenty minutes, but I have a son who needs to get to an appointment back in Ann Arbor, so . . . I'm just letting you know in advance, so that I don't abruptly jump up or anything. A couple of things I wanted to ask about, um, and Mary Ann, you can listen in here as well, but you got married in 1955, is that right?

EL: Yeah.

DC: Yeah. I was kind of wondering, what was it like—you obviously started a family at some point. Otherwise . . .

EL: '56.

DC: '56. OK, yeah. What was it like raising a family, raising kids, back at that point. I mean . . .

EL: Working at a factory?

DC: Working at a factory, I mean, were you able to support your family OK? I mean, how was it, how did it work out back then?

EL: [laughing]

DC: A big question.

EL: Well that, you see this question here is—we always, we always made a living, and we always had plenty, and we always managed somehow to have the money. [Mary Ann laughing lightly in the background.]

DC: Did you feel like you were living comfortably? Did you . . .

EL: I thought we was, because I was raised where, where there wasn't that much extra. You know . . .

DC: Compared to where you had been, yeah.

EL: I bought a new car in '59. I bought a new car in 1960. We bought a new home in 1958. Uh, paid $11,250 for it.

DC: Where was that home?

EL: Madison Heights.

DC: OK, uh huh.

EL: And bought another home, ’67, two-family.

DC: Where was the second home, in ‘67?

EL: Hazel Park.

DC: Hazel Park, OK.

EL: I bought another home in . . .

MAL: We bought two in Hazel Park.

EL: We bought two in Hazel Park.

DC: OK. Did you rent one out then?

EL: Yeah.

MAL: We had an income.

DC: [to Mary Ann] You keep him honest here. Where did you two meet?

MAL: Well, we always had an apartment building there, [on Hudson?], and his grandparents lived there, so when he come up, he stayed with them. And my parents had an apartment there. So we met there.

EL: I remember when she was born.

DC: Pardon me.

EL: I remember when she was born.

DC: Oh you do?

MAL: In Arkansas.

DC: So are you from Arkansas as well?

MAL: Yeah.

DC: Ooh, OK. So did you know each other in Arkansas?

EL: No, not back then. I knew her Dad. I knew him when I see him. I knew who he was. But we wasn't really acquainted.

DC: So were you from around the same part of Arkansas, or somewhere else?

EL: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

MAL: Same part, yeah. My uncle [?] knowed his uncle, and his Grampa and all of them. They knowed them.

DC: OK. So there were some connections, but you just didn't happen to meet.

MAL: No, no. Until we got up here. [laughs]

DC: OK, all right. Was it coincidence that you met there, or did some of those connections result in people being in the same neighborhood?

EL: Probably just being in the same neighborhood.

MAL: I think probably, living right there in the apartment, I think—his grandfather and his grandmother with my grandparents took the whole neighborhood in the apartment, you know. They were just that kind of people, you know.

DC: Was this the same grandfather that you stayed with?

EL: Yeah.

DC: I wanted to make sure we hadn't shifted . . .

EL: Yeah, [?].

DC: Grandfather [?].

MAL: That's where they were. They just—they liked to be grandparents.

EL: We got married—she was very young when we got married.

DC: OK.

EL: OK.

MAL: [laughing]

EL: She was fifteen years old. OK. And so her Mother and Dad was good friends with my oldest uncle, my Mother's brother. And when she was born, well that was during the time of the war-it was the beginning of the war. And some things

was kind of rationed then, so my uncle, he went over to see Mary Ann when she was born, him and his wife went to see [?], they just had a baby. Well when they come back over to Grampa and Grandma's, he was singing a song. They was saving up coupons to get one of those.

DC: OK. [chuckles all around]

EL: I was too young—I was, I guess I was too young to know what he was talking about. [chuckles all around]

DC: Hard to ration certain things, huh? [more laughs]

EL: Sugar was rationed, and you had to have sugar for babies, you know. [more laughs]

DC: Trade in your gasoline coupons . . .

MAL: Gasoline coupons.

EL: I still have some coupons

DC: You still have some?

EL: I have some coupons that my step-dad had—gasoline coupons.

DC: [To Mary Ann] What were you doing when the two of you got married? You were fifteen years old, so . . .

EL: Going to school.

DC: In school?

MAL: Yeah.

DC: OK.

MAL: I was in the tenth grade.

DC: Uh huh, OK. And did you stay on in school?

MAL: No, no.

EL: She was supposed to, but she didn't.

MAL: [laughs]

EL: She wasn't pregnant when we got married either.

MAL: [laughs]

DC: My next question.

MAL and EL: [loud laughs]

DC: Oh my.

EL: Didn't have a baby until '56.

DC: '56. OK, how many children did you have?

MAL: Two.

DC: Two, OK. And when was the second?

EL: '62.

MAL: '62.

DC: '62. OK. Was that before or after you decided to head back to Arkansas.

EL: That was just before.

MAL: Teresa was born here, so she was about seven months old when we went back.

EL: Yeah, she was just a baby when we went back down there, yeah.

MAL: So both of them was born here.

DC: [to Mary Ann] How did you feel about going back to Arkansas?

MAL: It was OK, but it was hard to leave here, because my family and everything was here. I was very close to my parents.

DC: So they had made the move as well [meaning to Detroit].

MAL: No, they were still here [meaning Detroit].

DC: I meant the move from Arkansas to Detroit.

MAL: Oh yeah.

DC: So all of a sudden things are shifted, families are all in this area.

MAL: Yeah, they were—they had been up there since ’48. They had been up here—Dad and Mother had moved up here to make a better living for us.

DC: What had they done in Arkansas?

EL: Farming.

MAL: They farmed by the day.

DC: OK, all right. So they didn’t own any land.

MAL: No, no, no. Didn’t own anything down there.

EL: Most of the farmers down there, they rented, they leased land, or rented, you know. And paid a third. Some of them paid cash rent, but mostly it was a third.

DC: It sounds like your Dad was hired by the day.

MAL: Yeah, he did. [lots of “yeahs” back and forth] They didn’t have anything or nothing. They just hired him to work for them.

DC: Where did he hire in when he came to Detroit?

MAL: He hired right into Chevrolet.

DC: He did, OK.

MAL: Yeah. His uncle was working, and he got him in.

DC: At the same Gear and Axle plant?

MAL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DC: OK, so there’s an Arkansas connection.

MAL: Yeah, in there. They needed somebody, so they had him in.

EL: We used to go to the park, on a holiday or a weekend or something. There would be enough people out there for two softball teams.

DC: Just your family?

EL: There would be about fifty or sixty people, family and friends.

DC: Yeah, yeah, extended family and friends from Arkansas.

EL: Everybody from Arkansas.

DC: Really. Where would you have those gatherings?

MAL: River Rouge?

EL: Oh, River Rouge Park.

MAL: River Rouge Park.

EL: [talking over MAL] Usually out there. They had a lot of ball diamonds down there. People were closer then. Well, I guess, [?] have to be close. But when you live closer, you stay closer. And they begin to—by Dearborn, Romulus . . .

DC: They'd go off to different areas. Yeah. So how long were you able to keep that closeness? How long were you able to have those big gatherings?

EL: I don't know.

MAL: I think it was around '72, '73 before they broke up.

EL: Yeah, because we went to [Blooming Willows?]

MAL: Yeah, about that time, before it began to break up.

EL: Then we went out here to [??].

MAL: [speaking softly] Got busy with everything else, and everything, when the children get older and everything, got caught up. The mens were working, not only during the week, they was working Saturday and Sunday, you know.

DC: Did the children think of themselves as having Arkansas roots, or did they think of themselves as being more from Michigan?

EL: Your roots are wherever you're at. If your roots is not where your at, you're going to die.

MAL: [laughs] I think they both consider themselves from Michigan

EL: Yeah, from Arkansas.

MAL: No, from Michigan, I think [laughs]

EL: It's good to know where you're at.

MAL: I think both the girls consider them being from Michigan. They were from Michigan.

DC: I was just thinking that might explain why some of those traditions, or some of those gatherings, might have fizzled a little bit, because they didn't feel the same kind of connection.

MAL: [??] Yeah, yeah.

DC: Well, in the last couple minutes before I make my hasty exit . . .

MAL: OK, OK.

DC: What sorts of things did you want to tell me that I haven't asked you—that I haven't given you a chance to tell me yet.

EL: I don't know, there's a lot of . . .

MAL: He likes to talk.

DC: Well it's been great talking to you. I've learned a lot.

MAL: He likes to talk.

EL: I hoped you learned something.

DC: And there's still a whole lot of questions I have, especially about your trip back to Arkansas and your career as a, as a minister, and how you moved back. I still have to learn a lot more about that, but I know I don't have time to ask all the questions I want to right now. So maybe if you'll let me come back sometime.

MAL: Anytime. Anytime.

DC: But I mean, give you a chance to tell me the things I'm not asking you that you wanted me to know about. Do you have anything in mind?

EL: Well, just off hand, it's strange what people think about the Union. You know down South, they even got the old saying, to unionize is to be Communist.

DC: Oh yeah.

EL: Really! To be Communist. But you can't find a Communist country where they have negotiations by a Union to negotiate a better deal. No way. They'd put him in jail real quick.

DC: That's pretty ironic, isn't it?

EL: Yeah. And that's what they do. They got them people so brainwashed, that it's Communist.

DC: Did you ever come across any Communists here in Detroit?

EL: [shakes head no]

DC: No?

EL: I'm sure there is, people, they lean that way. I don't know. The word Communist, if it worked out like they, like it's supposed to, I guess it would be OK. I'm talking about everything in common, you know. But they don't do that. And they don't want it to. Khrushchev, why somebody go in there with a union [laughs]. Same way down in Arkansas. Somebody come in there with a union, they'd shut the plant down. They'd burn the building down.

MAL: I think all the new plants down there now, they got unions in there.

EL: Yeah, they do now.

DC: Which plants?

EL: Um . . .

MAL: That [?], and that shoe plant.

EL: Yeah, there's a lot of work down there now. Yeah, there is.

MAL: And that new [?] . . .

EL: See, a long time ago—they have a right-to-work law, and that weakens the union, because if you go out on strike, they'll just go out and get everybody they can, bring them in, and keep the plant running. You can't negotiate, unless you have something to give you power, and the only way that is, is to interfere with their production. But they have a right-to-work, and it's getting close to that here.

DC: Well a lot of folks out there think that if you came from the South—you know, Arkansas, North Carolina, wherever—that when you came—when folks like that came to Detroit, they would have been opposed to unions and unionization because . . .

EL: What do you think they come up here for?

DC: For work.

EL: Yeah, to work, yeah. And they knew about the union. See . . .

MAL: [tries to chip in but can't break through]

DC: But there's a stereotype that people from the South would be opposed to unions, but when I talk to you . . .

EL: Yeah, a lot of them do. But they're not up here.

DC: They're not up here, OK. That was my question. You know, you have a lot of family members and friends from Arkansas, and you probably talk to other people from other parts of the South, was it your sense that those folks were hostile to the union, or were supportive of the union?

EL: Some of them are.

DC: Some were. OK.

EL: Some of them are. They don't understand. They don't understand it. And I don't know what they don't understand about it, but if it was left up to Ford Motor Company, they'd still be working for five dollars a day. And Ford gets the credit for that five dollars a day, but it wasn't his idea.

DC: Whose idea was it?

EL: Union's. Five dollar a day. Instead of working ten hours a day, eight hours a day. Hey, it wasn't Ford's idea. That was union's idea. Uh, instead of having a fifteen-minute lunch, have a thirty-minute lunch. That wasn't Ford's idea. That was the Union's idea. Hey, they get—in nineteen and, nineteen and fifty-seven, I believe it was, the Union and the Company negotiated profit-sharing. But at the same time, the Company had dropped the cost of living, so the Union was wanting the cost of living back. So the Company said no, but we could have got profit-sharing back in '56 or '57, I forgot when. But the Union said, "OK, we'll drop the profit-sharing if you'll give us the cost of living back." The profit-sharing thing didn't go on the table anymore until just a few years ago. At Chevrolet, the guy over at Chevrolet said he wasn't about to pay profit-sharing to a guy working on the assembly line. And he didn't for years. We was getting a thousand, twelve hundred dollars—Chevrolet wasn't getting nothing. She worked at Pontiac, and didn't get a penny, did you. Because, they found a loophole. You know what they did—the loophole was?

DC: What was it?

EL: The head over at General Motors, he just give all the extra money to his, his uh big shots.

DC: Oh really.

EL: Oh yeah. Six million dollars, seven millions dollars. Don't you remember that?

DC: I guess I didn't follow that. Apparently not, that's for sure.

EL: That's why. And then they said they didn't have that much profit.

DC: Well, no wonder.

EL: Some of this year's—General Motor—Chrysler was pretty good—this year at General Motor, they said they didn't make enough profit to pay the profit-sharing. He said himself, he ain't about to give that money to the people working on the assembly line.

DC: So we're right back to Henry Ford there.

EL: And the year before last, people at Ford Motor Company *averaged* four thousand dollars in profit-sharing. That's pretty good. But to pay that money out, they had to do pretty good.

DC: Yeah they had to make the money, yeah.

EL: The Union is got our wage up, and it got our insurance paid, life insurance and everything else, dental, eyes, and we're still making money.

DC: Yeah, oh yeah.

EL: And they claim that the biggest cost to build a car is the workers. I disagree with that because if you, if you check into it, they can afford labor, they can almost make a car as cheap as they did back in '56. They really can. Now out there at Romeo—back in '56, they had to have a man for each machine. One machine, one man. After that, every six machines they had to have a chipper, to haul that stuff away.

DC: Oh, OK. All right.

EL: And for that—for every sixth man, they had to have a relief man, because they didn't stop the machines then. But, out in Romeo, they put the head, they put the head in the machine—it runs like ten or eleven machines. One man. No chipper. No set-up man. Now there's another thing that they have in the machines. They had to have a set-up man.

DC: Now has that just been automated away?

EL: *Yeah*!

DC: So there's not as much labor cost, because they don't have as many laborers.

EL: Labor, labor—how much would it cost eleven people running them machines? Now one man runs it. Plus, he does his own clean-up; he does his own set-up. So you're talking about a lot of money there.

DC: Yeah, and a lot less jobs. Well I'm going to have to go. I'm sorry. Well I've got to get many son to that appointment, and that means I have to get back to Ann Arbor.

End of Interview