

SPOTSYLVANIA PRESERVATION FOUNDATION, Inc.
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript of Interview with Dr. Altamont Dickerson
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Transcribed: Helen Springer

Mrs. Walsh: I would like to know, and I know our readers would like to know, your background.

Well, I was born in this room that we are recording this in and that was about a little over seventy-five years ago. And my mother's parents, my grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side, lived about a mile from here and my father's parents, grandfather on my father's side came from Ohio in the early 1900's and moved into ... bought this place and began a dairy farm. And my mother's father, George W. Clark, was a veteran of the Civil War and my grandmother, his wife, was about thirteen years old when the battles were fought around here in Spotsylvania, in Bloody Angle and Chancellorsville and these other areas And she lived nearby and during the war their house caught on fire and my grandfather was in battle in Spotsylvania and couldn't get through the lines to see if everyone was

alright, so he didn't know anything about it until later.

My father and his wife moved here in the early 1900's, as I said, and his wife died and my mother ... my natural mother ... nursed her while she was sick. She had cancer. And so, eventually, they got married and of course they had ... he had two children by the previous marriage and then there were three of us that were born in this later marriage. So, I had ... in all there were five in the family ... I had a brother and three sisters and myself And it was a very close-knit community. The Clark side of the family had many relatives. My mother's family, the Clark family, there were six girls and two boys in that family and my mother's cousin, that lived about three miles from here, there were six boys and two girls. So there were sixteen children that grew up together in the neighborhood from two different families of the Clarks.

Then, of course, the Dickerson family was raised here and a cousin also came from Ohio and they divided the property up and he lived at the house not too far away from here. But my dad started a dairy farm and was in the dairy business up until about 1948, I guess. And we ... as I mentioned previously, we had a lot of very close neighbors who would help out at any time. I know that during wood cutting time, when we'd cut wood and bring it up ... we used wood in the house, to heat the house ... and once we would start this old engine ... one horsepower motor up ... the neighbor would come over. Would hear the engine running and would know we were beginning to cut wood, so he would come over and help us to saw wood up. During harvesting time there was a traveling man who had a threshing machine who would travel all through the neighborhood and he would bring his equipment and set it up and then we would bring the wheat in from the fields and go through the threshing machine and thresh the wheat and put the straw in a big pile. And then we would have to dispose of the straw later on.

There was a mill located nearby on the Ni River where we took our grain to be ground for cornmeal, wheat flour and so forth. And that was all done because we had to take it down with a horse and wagon. Didn't have a truck in those days. So, the grain was taken to the mill and was ground up and was brought back home. Some of the best eating that we had was so-called "mush, " which was made out of yellow cornmeal. My mother would cook it up and fry it in strips and then we would put either honey or molasses on top of it for breakfast. It was very delicious. Of course, everything was home cooked We didn't have any prepackaged items, then, to eat. We had a lot of home canned foods. Mother would can the food and so forth.

The house itself, there's a lot of history to it. My grandmother Clark, who was about thirteen years old when the battles were fought around here and she observed a lot of

the battles. And she ... after their house was burned in the early part of the war, she moved in here and they lived here And this house was also used as a hospital during the battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse and she used to talk about the wounded soldiers who were brought here to be taken care of And, of course, the bloodstains on the floor are still visible where the casualties were brought.

When I was growing up, as a boy, I had a bad habit of digging holes. I don't know why I dug holes, but during the time when I was digging holes out in the yard, I would find various items. Like bayonets, buckles, and things like that That was before metal detectors and my dad was always after me, because he was afraid the cows would get in the holes and hurt their legs. But my grandmother told me a lot about the war and about

the hard times they had. I remember she talked about one year that her mother had saved a ham for Christmas and at that particular time, the Yankees came through and went through the house with their bayonets. She had hid it ... sewed it up in a feather tick, a feather mattress, and they stuck the bayonets in the feather mattress and found the ham and went off with it.

Mr. Witt: Was that here at Salem or was it...

Original House at I Salem Farm (pic.img)

It was here. And they had a milk cow, and when they heard that the soldiers were coming, they'd take the cow down into the woods to hide it so they wouldn't take the cow and use it for meat. So it was very rough times as far as food was concerned back in those days.

Some of the neighbors, I think ... that I remember... of course this is only going back seventy-some years, but the Coleman family, which lived across the road from us, raised sheep and was a big farmer and they were very close neighbors, they visited back and forth, particularly at times for canning. They would help each other in the canning process and unfortunately, the Colemans were very open, friendly people and they would have someone come and work for them. And one particular time the two men who were working

for them came back at night and murdered the family and put them down in the well.

The next morning the man who worked for them came over to get my dad and said, "There's

something's happened " So he went over there and they found them in the well. That was a tragedy that really shook the neighborhood up. You can imagine, in a close-knit community.

But eventually, sheriff Blades, who was the sheriff at that time, tracked the people to New York City and he found them in a rooming house. And when he broke into the room

where they were, one of the men was ... Mr. Coleman always wore this big gold watch ... they had his watch and they were picking the jewels out of the watch And he walked into

the room where they were and he arrested them.

They had quite a trial here in Spotsylvania, which was ... made news everywhere.

We had another family, named Scott, that lived ... they actually bought my grandmother's

place when it was for sale. And they lived therefor a number of years until he had a stroke and was notable to work anymore. On across the Ni River was the Colberts and the

Rawlings and Mr. and Mrs Colbert were very fine people. The house that they lived in is still standing. But he was a large farmer and also contractor. He built a lot of the roads, particularly Route 1. And he also was into horses and ... race horses and things like that. And then the Sacras lived in another direction. That was an older family which had been here for many years. These people were cousins of the Clarks.

Some of the Clark land was in a large operation. Many cousins. And then, below them lived

the Acors, who have been here for a number of years and who also were farmers. And then

... we called it "right through the woods, " lived the Clarks, another Clark family.

One of the Clark boys married my oldest sister So, the Clark family was still reaching out and getting involved with a lot of different people. So, those were some of the earlier families who I think had such an impact on us and we were able to reciprocate with visiting.

It wasn't uncommon at night to ... for my dad to get the lantern and we'd take off through the woods ... through the path ... and visit the neighbors. And that was our entertainment.

Rear View, House at
Salem Farm (pic.img)

After milking those cows, which we had to start at four o'clock in the morning, then I had to ... when I started to school I had to do all the work in the dairy and clean the barn up and then run and jump on the school bus and go to school. They were ... this was at Spotsylvania Courthouse where I went to school ... and started out in a oneroom school where all the classes ... I think it was eight grades ... all met in one room. And when you finished your lessons, you'd go back and sit do" at the back of the room while the next class would have their lessons. So you learned a lot during those days if you listened because you could take advantage of the class you were in, plus the classes at the higher levels that were being taught. So, we had a stove in the middle of the room and some of us boys used to take twenty-two caliber bullets, and when the teacher wasn't looking we 'd drop them down in the stove and they'd go off and create some confusion in the classroom. Nobody got hurt, though.

Mrs. Walsh: Who was your teacher? Do you remember her name, or his name?

One name was Nellie Harris. There was a doctor in the county named Harris, Dr Harris He was the main doctor. And he would ... he did all the berthing and all the caring for people and everything and he ... but, Miss Nellie Harris taught at the school and she was a very caring individual. And I think I only got one or two notes that were sent home from the principal and it didn't happen anymore because the letter went to my dad and one night, we were milking, he said, "I got this letter from the principal and what's going on? " That took care of that! I didn't get any more letters from the principal.

But at that time, the schools were segregated Each little community seemed to have had their

own school And Spotsylvania was the one that served the area immediately around. I think that in 1940... I believe they began to consolidate the schools, and so a new high school was being built I think it was completed in 1941, I believe. I graduated from Spotsylvania High school in 1942. So, you got to know a lot of the people in the county because they consolidated and you went with people you'd probably never meet before.

This was a very interesting experience because the outlying areas of Fredericksburg were still in Spotsylvania, so we got to see some of our city friends for the first time.

We, of course, had played them in basketball and they always beat us pretty badly. They played inside and we played outside on the grass ... sand court ... so when we played them we always suffocated when we got inside the building because we weren't used to that. But I think the schooling was good. You didn't have the problems with drugs,

you weren't allowed to smoke, chew gum ... you had to sit up in your seat. They had paddles.

If you got out of hand, they would use the paddles. Of course, you can't do that today. But the discipline ... there didn't seem to be much of a discipline problem.

Mrs. Walsh: Your teacher, Nellie, Nellie Harris? We know the house is still standing at the Courthouse. Can you tell us a little bit about what she was like?

Miss Harris wore glasses and she kept her hair always looking nice. She was a very stem looking person. But she was very kind and she was a good teacher. Everybody paid attention

to her and you didn't misbehave in her class. She required you to know your lessons and to

be able to recite if you had to. And if you had homework, she expected the homework to be done.

She expected you to make good grades. She would help you if you needed it.

I don't remember if it was 1940 ... last of 1940 or the first of 1941 ... the school we were attending caught on fire and they were trying to get everybody out of the school and I remember I went back in the room and Miss Harris was still there and I said, "Miss Harris,

we've got to get out because it's burning down! " And she was so excited, she said, "Well, you've got to take all that wood out of the wood box! We don't want the wood to burn up!"

I said, "Miss Harris, let's don't worry about the wood Let's get your papers and get out of this burning building! " So, everybody laughed about that for a long time.

Mr. Witt: Where was the one room school at Spotsylvania Courthouse?

"ere the buildings are now, I would have to almost 90 there to show you where it was, but the Crismond house was right beside it. I don't know if the Crismond house is still there or not.

Mr. Witt: Where was it in relation to, say the Brea Church and the Episcopal Church?

It was, I would say, North, Northwest of the Episcopal Church. The road that you turn into to go into the county office, Route 608, ran right up to the school and it's on up past those little office buildings.

Mrs. Walsh: Was his name Cary Crismond?

Cary Crismond was clerk of the court at the time and his house, the school was right beside his.

Mrs. Walsh: Mr. Crismond is still alive.

He is?

Mrs. Walsh: Yes, but not doing too well. I would like to interview him, but he's just not able to. So, the Harris house. Do you remember how it looked then? Was it grand in those days?

Yes. I remember that it had a porch that kind of went around the side and the ... one of the Harris girls had ... I assume she had polio. I'm not sure, but she was disabled And another Harris girl was, of course, the teacher. But Dr. Harris, like I said, took care of all the people and all the ailments and he had an old satchel he carried around with him. I always liked to ... when he opened it up, it smelled so good ... he had all kinds of medicines in there, liniments and things like that that you could smell when he opened his case up. And he smoked a big pipe ... he was a big, tall man. Very domineering looking.

He had served in World War I, I believe, in France, and he had a lot of experiences to talk about ... about his experiences there. I don't remember ... I vaguely remember his wife, Mrs. Harris. We didn't see her very much.

Mrs. Walsh: Do you have good memories of your school days?

Yes. Very much so. Like I said, when we moved into the new school it was quite an

experience, because, you see, the old school did not have indoor plumbing and we had to keep the stove going, so we had to cut kindling wood in the evening before we left school so we'd have firewood in the morning. We'd have to get there early enough to start the fire in the old pot-bellied stove in the middle of the room. We'd have to put the wood in and keep that going. When we moved into the new school, of course it had indoor plumbing and we were amazed because there was no indoor plumbing here at Salem at that time. And it was just amazing to go to the bathroom in those days, I mean, indoor plumbing was not how we had it.

Mrs. Lina Sanger who had been at the old school was Assistant Principal and Melvin Snow was the Principal at that time. And we had an indoor basketball court indoor gymnasium and they began teaching agriculture, which was very good for the farm boys because they taught how to weld and to repair machinery and do a lot of things we'd never had the opportunity for, even though we had done a lot of it on our own. But learning to weld was quite an experience. And playing on the basketball and baseball teams was another experience. We didn't have football at the time, but we did have baseball and basketball. Both girls and boys basketball And we didn't have such a good team, but we had a lot of fun playing.

Mrs. Walsh: That's important!

Mr. Witt: Did you ride to school or did you walk there?

Well, sometimes the bus would run and sometimes it wouldn't. And when it did, we'd go three tenths of a mile ... I think it's two tenths of a mile ... to the road from here. And so, we'd go to the road and get on the bus and the neighbor children would come by here. They had a path through the woods. The Harts, the other people, the Acors, they would all come. They had to leave a lot earlier, of course, but they would all come through here and catch the school bus. If the school bus was broken down, or the road was too bad, we would go to school anyway. We walked approximately three miles to the school. We walked and I remember one day, we were sliding on the ice.

There was an ice slick over there on Route 608, which was a dirt road then. It was not paved
And we were sliding on the ice and I slipped and tore the seat out of my pants and I didn't know what I was going to do, because I didn't want to go home and didn't want to miss the bus, so I got some honeysuckle and sewed up the back end of my pants and so, we got to school and the teacher, she looked at me and said, "Altamont, I see you're a little behind this morning!" I said, "Yes Mam...you wouldn't have if I had another piece of honeysuckle!"

Mrs. Walsh: That's a good story. A very good story. So, from our interviews, the people I've interviewed, it was all dairy farms and people worked so hard. The time that you had for recreation, that was visiting your friends in the area?

Yes, we would ... the Ni River down here used to have fish in it. We'd go fishing on weekends.

I spent a lot of time, when we would plow the fields and get them sowed, we would find Indian arrowheads, mini balls and ammunition used in the Civil War. So I spent a lot of time looking for relics and things like that. To me that was a lot of fun. And of course, my friends, when I got older, and became interested in girls ... I didn't have an automobile, so I couldn't do much dating, but a friend of mine had a car, so we did a lot of double dating. We'd have a lot of recreation opportunities. Going to the movies ... they had one place in Fredericksburg where they would send people out on roller skates to take your order which, we thought was pretty neat. You could order from your car, then. And then, of course, the movies.

Here at the farm we would go to Fredericksburg, maybe once or twice a month to get supplies and items. My mother made butter and, of course, we had chickens. My mother would take the eggs and butter to Fredericksburg where she had customers. She would sell the butter and eggs in Fredericksburg. That was put into a kitty to help take care of expenses. Then, of course, the milking part of it ... we would milk cows and load the milk into a Model T Ford and drive six miles to Summit to catch the train to go to Richmond, where we sold it to the Richmond Dairy, it was called then ... the Virginia Dairy.

Years later a number of the dairy farmers got together and we had a truck, then, that would come by and pick up the milk and take it to Richmond That solved a lot of our problems in getting the milk to the station, the train station. The Model T was a very stable car, but it

was unpredictable sometimes and my dad would bring the Model T .. when we finished and got ready to go to the dairy house, which I believe is still standing out here, he would park it and we would load the milk in the back of the Model T Ford. We'd get the milk out of what we would call "the pit " where we had ice in there to keep the milk cold.

I looked up and I said, "Pop, the car is gone! " We looked and it was going down the field toward where the pond is, and he went out and started running behind the Model T and jumped up on the running board, turned the wheel and brought the car on back around and we loaded it up. Which I thought was funny, I thought it was really funny to see that Model T going down the hill by itself, on through the fence and kept on going.

Mr. Witt: How old were you at the time?

I probably was eight or nine years old, I guess. That was back in the '30s.

Verna Clark that was my mother's name. Verna Clark. My grandmother Clark's name was Esther.

Esther Clark My grandfather George, G W. Clark

Mrs. Walsh: What do you remember of your grandfather?

My grandfather Dickerson, I don't remember him. He died before I was born. My grandfather Clark died the year I was born, in 1925, and I didn't get to know him, either. So, my grandfathers on each side, I did not get to know. My grandfather Dickerson fought for the North during the Civil War and my grandfather Clark fought for the South and I have copy of his discharge and also a signed discharge, signed by Abraham Lincoln, and Stanton, who was Secretary of War. In the account of the battles of my grandfather Dickerson, which ... this happened all the time ... he and my grandfather Clark fought against each other in some of the same battles. But, I mean that happened all the time to a lot of families.

Mrs. Walsh: Yes.

Mr. Witt: Did your grandfather Dickerson fight at the Spotsylvania Courthouse?

Yes. In Chancellorsville also.

Mr. Witt: Do you know his unit?

I meant to bring that stuff. I've got all this stuff here...

Mrs. Walsh: Is there anything you have that we could have copies of?

Sure, yes.

Mr. Witt: Actually, Christine, I think it's worth a trip down to his place, probably!

Mrs. Walsh: Are we invited?

Sure, yes. That would be great.

Mrs. Walsh: So, going back to your education, you feel that ... you were in a one room school, starting out ... but do you feel like you missed out on anything? By starting out like that and not having to move from class to class like they do today?

Well, having been in that situation, you probably ... I probably didn't know much different

... in other words, that's the way it was and you really didn't have much reason to question,

"Well, is there something else out there? " At least until later on, of course. Like I said, when we got into the new consolidated high school, that was a whole new experience because

we met people from different parts of the county we never knew before, people who were ...

lived in areas of Fredericksburg... we'd never seen before.

New teachers coming in with new ideas and new concepts The superintendent was Mr J H. Childs,

who had ... I think it was a new '32 or '33 Chevrolet with a rumble seat in it... and he would

come around and bring the books. He would have the back of his car full of books and would bring

them to the schools. He was a very congenial person and he brought in a lot of new teachers who

had gone to school in different places with different backgrounds and began to expand the

knowledge we had about various things. I remember Mrs Browning, who taught math. She opened

up a whole new world for me because, somehow or another, she and I clicked on math and I was

able to get straight "As " in her class. But she just brought another concept to me.

Just having a one room school, you just have, maybe, one or two teachers, that's all you had.

So maybe you didn't get exposed to.. just what those persons knew and what their backgrounds were.

Teachers would change classes, you see, so you would get a whole new lesson.

Mrs. Walsh: And did you adjust well?

Oh, yes.

Mrs. Walsh: Where did you go to further your education?

Well, I went to Virginia Tech and got a bachelor's degree there. And then I started working in the correction field out in Montgomery County as a juvenile probation officer. And I worked therefor awhile and L.. they had a program called "rehabilitation " which was a program that worked with disabled and handicapped people, trying to get them back into the workforce again once they were able to go back to work The person who represented the agency at that time used to come through Christiansburg, which was in Montgomery County where my office was. We used to meet his clients there.

I saw all these disabled people come in, and then Id see ... maybe they had surgery or they had an arm put on or a leg put on and I saw the results when they went back to work how good it was. They were expanding the program at the time and they got to talking to me about working with rehabilitation. So, in the 1950's I went to work for rehabilitation and moved back down here. So realizing I didn't know a lot about disabilities, particularly about bodily functions and what makes your body work how you need to have aptitudes and skills and eye-hand coordination and all these things.

I realized I needed to learn some more, so I went to ... it was William and Mary at that time... VCU .. and got a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling. That helped me because we took courses in bodily functions and knowing what it takes to do various jobs, this type of thing. So that when I worked with somebody who was disabled that I could figure out ... I would give them some tests ... aptitude tests or whatever to find out what they could do. Say, if you had one arm, what could you do with one hand and then, teaching them how to use an artificial arm. So that was part of it, so then later on I got a doctorate from the

University of Virginia. I was working full time at the time I got that. But I think that was really to help me do a better job with the disabled people and I moved around different places and got promoted up through the ranks until I became head of the agency in 1974 in Richmond. I stayed there until 1989. So I have been retired about eleven or twelve years now. I spent about thirty-five years working with the disabled, handicapped people in the state.

Mrs. Walsh: Do you have children of your own?

I have three We have two girls and a boy We have a two-year old grandson who we baby sit twice a week now, which is a happy life. My wife wanted to come today, but she's baby sitting.

Mrs. Walsh: I ask all the people I interview what they remember of the Old Jail. Do you have any recollections of that being used as a jail?

Yes, I do. As I mentioned earlier, the Coleman family who lived across the road from Salem, they got murdered and they had the trial at Spotsylvania Courthouse. And the two men who murdered them were in the jail at Spotsylvania, the old jail. And they were very concerned because they felt that there was so much sentiment against the two that somebody would break into the jail and get them out. They took them somewhere else.

I do remember the jail and I remember one of our civics classes, when we were at the new school, we'd go to court and sit in on some of the cases. The teacher felt that we needed to know what the civil system ... the court system was like And then, of course, we visited the jail, too. The day of the trial when these two men ... they had to bring the state police and sheriffs from everywhere because we had some local people who knew the Colemans very well They almost got the men when they were bringing them out of the courthouse, which was quite a thing to happen in the county. They wanted to lynch the men.

Mrs. Walsh: What size mob would that have been?

Oh, at that time I imagine there were several hundred people there, which was quite a crowd. So, the old jail and the old courthouse...

Mr. Witt: Do you recall the inside of the jail? The front room, especially, how it was furnished?

Was it an office or was it a cell at the time?

If I remember correctly, there was just a small office and then there were several cells. I don't remember how many cells were in there, now. But it was not very large. And it wasn't plush at all, it was just furnished at the bare minimum. There were bars on the windows, I remember.

Mrs. Walsh: Did they keep the women separate from the men?

If they had any women there ... I'm not sure ... I don't remember there being any women in the jail, but if they did, of course they would be separate. I just don't remember any women being there.

Mr. Witt: One of the mysteries of the jail is ... we know they didn't have the exterior stairs there all the time, at least, not originally, so the interior stair ... inside the jail from the first to the second floor, the upper cells. We haven't been able to figure out just where the stairs were. I just wondered if you had any idea.

It seems to me that I remember a stairway when we were touring through there. I don't remember which corner ... is there a cell at each corner?

Mr. Witt: If you are standing, facing into the jail at the door, give me a left or a right,

Seems to me that it was in the right corner. But it's been so long ago. We were scared, I mean we were afraid they were going to lock us in there! We didn't stay very long.

Mrs. Walsh: How old were you then?

I was probably eleven or twelve.

Mrs. Walsh: Did you ever see anyone at the bars or the windows?

Yes, it seems to me that it used to be a habitual offender who used to spend a lot of his time there. I don't remember his name, now. It seems to me that when you'd go by, you'd see his hands up on the bars.

Mrs. Walsh: I understand they got well fed, so maybe he didn't want to leave. He had it made.

He had it made, that's right.

Mr. Witt: Maybe he's the one ... there's sort of a diary up on one of the walls ... one of the cell walls, where he goes through the first offense was like a ten dollar fine and I think he got up to the sixth offense and six months at the state farm, so somebody was there a long time ... at least frequently.

One thing that was interesting was ... we, of course, attended Massaponax Baptist Church and during the years of the Civil War, it was used occasionally by the Union and occasionally by the Confederates. And when I was eleven or twelve years old, they decided to do some cleaning of the church. So they took ... a lot of the old paint was peeling and everything, so they scraped it off .. and began to find all these writings on the wall down there You could take a lead bullet ... the Union would come through and they'd say something about "Johnny Reb," " not very nice things ... we had to cover some of them up ... when the Confederates would come by, they'd reply to the Union's marks on the wall. We devised ... from the front end of the church... there's a balcony there, you go up steps ... we put curtains all the way across one end of it. You can pull the curtains and still see the writings on the wall. We preserved a lot of the writings that were done during the Civil War.

Mrs. Walsh: That's interesting.

So you are do" there sometimes, go in the front door and up to the balcony and the curtains should be there with all these writings on the wall.

Mrs. Walsh: So, tell us what defined Salem, what you found in the digs.

When dad came down here in the early 1900s there were six, I believe, six slave cabins on the property and they were not in very good repair. My grandmother used to keep me informed about what happened during the Civil War and about the slave cabins and so forth. And I guess, probably, the

hard work that it took to keep a farm going ... I remember dad, he never walked anywhere, he was always in a trot. Because he didn't want to get behind. And he sang a lot. At three thirty or four in the morning, you hear him out in the barn singing. And he had one song, "Get 'em while they're hot, boys, they're here today and somewhere else tomorrow! " I don't know what he meant by that!
I think he was trying to wake me up to get me to help him, probably.

We would get up and milk the cows. That was before we had electricity. We had milking machines, but it was operated by what we called a vacuum pump and a little, half horsepower gasoline motor. They are relics now. But anyway, we would start that up and it would ... the pipe would run to the machine and it would create suction and you'd put the milking machines on the cows and milk them, and so forth. And then we had to have some way of cooling the milk And so he devised a cam-like piece of equipment on the pump, on the rod that went down to pump the water, and it would pump the water up into a barrel The barrel would run down through where the milk came out ... run through that and cool the milk. So when we put the milk down where the ice was, it would keep cool.

All this required maintenance. You had to wash up all of these things when you finished milking.

You had an inspector that came around every so often ... and if this wasn't right, he would write you up, so you had to be sure that everything was clean. The barns had to be cleaned

Anything that had to do with cattle, that you can understand, wasn't a very pleasant chore.

But I had that chore, to clean the barn up before I went to school in the morning. Then, we didn't have a tractor, or anything, so we did our work with horses.

Mr. Witt: How many cows did you milk, by the way?

Oh, twenty-five or thirty, something like that. Of course, the horses, we used them to plow with and to cultivate with and to do the crops, And then when we got ready to harvest the hay, for example, we had a mowing machine pulled by two horses. It had a blade on it ... had a gear box on it and the blades would go like this .. it had fingers on it and it would cut the hay. If you ran into a hornet's nest ... I mean a yellow jacket's nest ... while you were mowing

and the horses would get stung, they'd take off running. You, more than likely, would get stung too, but there was nothing you could do about it because you were holding onto the horses!
So I had a lot of experiences like that happen. Yellow jackets getting down my shirt, and so forth.

Then, getting the hay up, we had what you called a "hook rake " that had a bunch of tines on the back and you'd go down the field, get a bunch of hay and then you'd push a little lever... it would come up and it would leave what we would call a "wind row. " Then you would have to get out there with a pitchfork and pile all this up into what we would call "shocks " of hay.

In the barn out here, the tractor is still in there I guess. We had a device that we'd lay on the wagon and you could put a half load of hay on it and then you'd put another of one of these slings on top of that. You'd put hay on it and we'd get to the barn and pull that ... we had a rope on this tractor ... we'd pull it down and hook on each end of that sling and take a horse an hook onto a pulley and the horse would walk down the road and pull this hay up into the top of the mound, would hit that trigger, go back in the back and put the hay in the barn. All that took a lot of work because you had to put the hay on the wagon by hand.

And corn, of course, we had a silo. In the evenings after we finished milking the cattle Id go out and cut enough corn so my dad could use that the next day to fill the silo. We had to get up in the silo as the silage was coming down. We had a machine that blew it down inside and you'd have to go around and pack it down in the silo. We never heard about the danger in silage until later on ... the danger of suffocating. But anyway, that was another hard day's work because you had to put corn on the wagon, run it up and come to this machine to blow it into the silo to make silage. That's what we fed the cows.

Mr. Witt: How tall was the silo?

Thirty-fivejeet. It was probably twenty feet around, I don't know.

Mr. Witt: We have the base here still. The diameter is about nineteen feet.

Old Silo at Salem Farm (pic.img)

I remember one day we were filling the silo and the pipe got stopped up. I stuck my hand down thereto get the silage out of the pipe so it would keep blowing and the blade hit these

two fingers, I believe. And cut them open and everything So my dad had to stop the machine and went looking for Dr Harris. We didn't know where he -was. You just had to keep going until you found him. We did find him and he fixed my fingers. It kind of excited me because I was taking typing in high school and I didn't have to take any typing for awhile because I couldn't use my fingers. And I took off the bandages when I had to do the milking and everything and when I went to school, I'd put the bandages back on!

Mrs. Walsh: A good excuse. And you used that for how long?

I don't know. Until the teacher got onto me!

Mrs. Walsh: Was Dr. Harris the only doctor in the area?

There was another doctor, called Dr. Flagenhammer, who lived in Guinea, his office was down at Guinea His office was in his house and we started going to him after Dr. Harris passed away. He was a very interesting person. He had an accent and moustache and white hair.

Mrs. Walsh: What kind of accent?

Oh, probably German, I reckon. But the way I remember him, if you see a picture of Einstein, he reminded me a lot of Einstein. His white hair and his moustache and everything. He was really a good doctor. You drive up his driveway ... he had a round driveway up to the front of his house and pull up behind the car in front of you. And when those people came out, you were behind them, then you knew you were next. So you'd go to the doctor's office and he'd do whatever he was supposed to do and you take out your wallet and ask, "Well, how much do I owe you?" And if he saw a five dollar bill in your wallet, he'd say, "Five dollars." He did a lot of Free work, too, because a lot of people didn't have any money at all. They'd bring him chickens and things like that to pay for the visits. His wife helped him out and he had a high-pitched voice and I thought he was really hilarious. He was a good doctor.

Mrs. Walsh: And Dr. Harris was a good doctor?

Yes. He was. I remember we went to the World's Fair in New York City, in 1939, I believe it was ... I had hardly ever even been out of the county. I had been to Fredericksburg. My older sister and a neighbor lady by the name of Mrs. Hess, who is long gone, invited us to go to New York City to the World's Fair. And Dr. Harris was in the group that went. He sort of took over the train, himself, he thought it was really interesting. And myself, I got so sore looking up ... I had never seen buildings like that before, and all the traffic and everything.

All the features they had in 1939 were about the future. There was a building devoted to the future, like future automobiles, planes and things like that. It was very fascinating. That was one of the highlights of my life, going to New York City.

Dr. Harris was on the train and he was entertaining everybody. He had a few cocktails, I think, and he was the life of the party!.

Mr. Witt: This may not be a good segway, but we have a cemetery here at Salem. Do you know anyone who is buried in the graves there or the history of the cemetery?

Over the years I've tried to find out about that cemetery, but nobody seems to remember too much about it. My grandmother... of course, back then I was a small boy and not too interested in it. I knew there was a cemetery there, but I don't remember if my grandmother said anything about it ... whether there were any casualties from the Civil War who were buried there, I don't know. There used to be some indentations where you could tell where the graves had been, but I doubt if they're there now. I'm not sure if there was any registry kept of the burial grounds back then or not ... whether there is any information at the court house that would give you any information about the graveyard. But I never heard my grandmother say anything about that that I can remember. I'm sure she knew who was buried there, but there were no gravestones that I can remember.

There were stones there, but never any marker that I can remember that would give you any indication of names or dates or anything like that.

The Billingsleys lived here at one time and it could have been some of the Billingsley family that were buried there. They were an older family that lived here at this place at one time. I don't remember the years.

Mr. Witt: The cemetery shows up in the title sometime between, I think, 1855 and 1858. The land was sold in 1858 ... I'm not exactly sure of that date ... and that's when the cemetery shows up for the first time and it's carried through in the titles ever since then. So the Billingsleys might have established it.

They might have, yes. I don't have much on the Billingsleys through the records that I have.

Their names are mentioned as having lived here, but I vaguely remember something about the Billingsleys' names... some of them might have been buried out there. I just don't know.

Mrs. Walsh: Dr. Dickerson was telling me that he was born with club feet. You spent a lot of time in Richmond.

Yes, at what was called the Crippled Childrens' Hospital. My mother used to go down ... when we took the milk to Summit ... she used to take me, of course, and we took the train to the hospital. I guess I was ten months old when I had my series of operations and, of course, I had to stay down there. I was, I guess, five or six, when I had my last series of operations. I had casts on up to my hips and she would bring me home. I was so active that, by the time I got home, I had banged up my casts so bad that they came loose. The next morning, she'd have to take me back to Richmond to get recasted.

Mrs. Walsh: How long did it take to get to Richmond?

Probably about two hours, by the time you got to the hospital. The train was a local that stopped at every little crossroads and you had to get from the station to the Crippled Childrens' Hospital. I guess I didn't act very nice at the hospital because she would come down to the hospital to see me and she couldn't find me. She'd ask the head nurse where I was and the head nurse would say, "Well, I'm sorry. Altamont has been a bad boy and he's in isolation. "

So, I spent a lot of time in isolation because they didn't want me upon my feet. They'd tie mein bed and I would untie all the knots that they had and get up and jump around in the bed and create havoc for the nurses and worry the people in the bed next to me, so they'd put me in isolation. They'd try to discipline me, I guess. I was always glad to see her when she came.

I remember that when I finally finished up everything and came home, I had my sisters, who wasn't allowed to go into the hospital and I didn't even know them. So, the first time I came home for good, I said to my mother, "These girls are bothering me all the time. They won't let me alone. They keep hugging me and everything! " She said, "Why, they are your sisters! " Of course, I didn't know my sisters because I hadn't seen them. They were

glad to see me come home. It was really hard on my parents, particularly my mother, because they had to sacrifice a lot to do this, you know. It was hard on her to go down there, to leave the girls here with my dad, who took care of them

Mr. Witt: Were you the youngest in the family?

Yes.

Mrs. Walsh: Is everything o.k. with your feet now?

Pretty good I still have some problems. I later on went into the service and spent some time in the infantry. They transferred me out to the artillery.

Mr. Witt: Was that during the Korean War?

Yes. I didn't have ... it was kinda hard when you had a pack on ... trying to trudge along. I had to wear my shoes built up for a long time because of the way my feet were. Now they don't ... club feet are nearly a thing of the past. Although you see a lot of it, modern treatment now...

Dr. Graham, the orthopedic surgeon, was one of the pioneers in repairing club feet and after I came home, he used to conduct clinic around different places ... at health departments.

He used to come to Fredericksburg and I would have to go therefor along time for follow-up care.

At that time, we had a lot of cats here on the farm. I loved cats and so, one of the kittens here was born with a crooked tail. We were going to see Dr. Graham one day and I got that little kitten and put it down in my shirt. My mother didn't know it until we got into the clinic and I turned to see Dr. Graham and pulled the little kitten out and said, "Dr. Graham, do you think you can do anything for this kitten's tail? " My mother nearly had a fit!

Mrs. Walsh: Oh, that's adorable!

Anyway, I never took the cat back anymore.

Mr. Witt: I recall that you told me that story ... speaking of characters ... when your cousins came to visit and you gave them a ride in the barn. Do you care to repeat that?

Oh, my goodness, you may not want to put this in the record! Anyway, down at the barn ...

I don't know if the track is still there in the middle. But the cows face one way and the gutter is the other way. If you know anything about animals, you know that you have to have

a gutter if you have a barn So, my job was to clean the gutter out. We had this manure carrier on a track You pulled on a chain and this big bucket would come down. It was probably as big as this table. You'd move it over by the gutter and you'd shovel manure in there. When you got it full, you'd pull on this chain and it'd go up, go on the track; and go outside the barn down the hill to where the dump was.

This cousin was always giving me a hard time, so I told him, one morning... I said, "You want to go for a ride?" And he said, "Yeah, where are we going?" So I said "As soon as I get this thing full, I'll let you get on it." So, I got it full and took it outside the barn where it got away from me because it was sloping. That thing, it was speeding down the track and he was holding on for dear life and at the end of the track it had a big thing on it to stop the bucket to keep it from running off the track. When it hit that, it went over and he went down into the big pile of manure.

He come out of it groaning! There was a creek down at the bottom of the hill and he ran down there, pulling all his clothes off and jumped in the creek Last I saw him, he was going ... he was visiting down here at this next house ... he was going around the corner of the yard grabbing his clothes! They called Mama up and said, "What is going on? Robert came down here all dirty. What did Altamont do to him?" Of course, she didn't know. She called me and said, "What did you do?" I said, "I gave him a ride!"

Then we tied him to a tree one day and forgot about him.

Mrs. Walsh: Tied him to a tree?

We were playing something and he was giving us a hard time and we tied him to a tree We went on doing something else and we heard him hollering. People at home asked us, "Where is Robert?" I said, "Oh, my goodness!" And went back and untied him.

Mr. Witt: How about some of the kids in the neighborhood? I know you knew Caroline, Rich Lee, Carroll Hayden is a little younger than you by a few years.

Oh, yes. The Haydens ... there was a family by the name of Cropp that owned that big house, there. I can't think of .. well, it was Carroll's ... his mother ... that was his grandfather, Cropp. They were the original owners of the plantation. I guess it was originally over a thousand acres. And they were big farmers and they had a daughter that married a man named Hayden. And of course,

Carroll is ... I can't think of the girl's name There was a boy and a girl. They were younger but they were all part of a close-knit community. And the Ridgleys came and bought the Coleman property, which had been owned by George Rawlings Jr. Well, not George ... I can't think of Dick Rawlings' brother ... but anyway, they bought the property over there which originally belonged to the Colemans. He had a dairy farm and moved his dairy operation down here. I didn't get to know them very well because I was gone by then, probably. But Carroll married the Ridgley girl. We all went to church together.

The Nussey, family, which I said he was from England, he used to come to visit and he'd come in his one horse buggy and I used to like to get him to talk because he talked so funny! His British accent. His children ... one of his sons married one of my mother's sisters, Bessie.

And they moved to Colonial Heights and had a family. Then the McWhirts ... Mrs Mc Whirt was another daughter of the Nusseys, and she married a man named Me Whirt and they had three children, Arthur, Marvin and Walter Reed. And they were in the community They were just a little older than I was. And then, the Davenports, who ... his father worked for Mr Colbert Eventually his son James married my next to oldest sister, Alice. They built a house on the road out here.

The second house down on the right going out of the driveway. He had a sister named Edith.

They had a little camp down on the Ni River and my sisters and she and the other neighborgirls, the Acors and so forth, they all had some children and they all played together. They were all older than I was.

One of the funny things that happened to McWhirt, who married my next to oldest sister ...

they used to do a lot of fishing down at the Ni River at the bridge down there. It was deep.

The water was deep there at that time. Probably ten or twelve feet deep. They used to catch

what they called "carp " and one night they went fishing down there and my ... Jim slipped

into the water. I hollered at him and said, "Jim, are you wet? " And he said, "Who? Me? "

We kidded him all his life about that.

We had a lot of experiences down there on the river. We called it a river then, but it's really a creek. We called it a river. The girls had a camp down there and they'd bake pies and go down there. All the boys in the neighborhood would hide in the woods, and when they got ready to cut the pies, we'd all come out of the woods and get some pie.

Mrs. Walsh: Do you remember the Inn at the courthouse? Do you have any stories about that?

Not really. I'm trying to remember if it was being used as a hotel then. It was some kind of inn. If I recall correctly, they called it an inn, I believe. But I don't know too much about that.

Mr. Witt: How did your father end up here in Spotsylvania from Ohio?

Well, they ... his wife got cancer and was real sick. Apparently whoever the doctor was there told him he needed to get immediately out of Ohio. That he needed to go somewhere else for his wife's health. I think there were five hundred and some acres for sale that they heard about in this area. So they came down, looked at it, and bought it. She didn't live too long after they moved down here. My brother and my sister, they were young children when they came here. And, as I said earlier, my mother nursed his wife until she died, and they, of course, got married later on.

He heard about other dairy farms in the area and he was interested in the dairy business, so he came down. There were a number of Dickenson people here in the county ... in fact, there were three types of Dickerson. D-I-C-K-E-R-S-O-N, D-I-C-K-I-N-S-O-N, and D-I-C-K-E-N-S-O-N. Most of them did have dairy farms We moved into sort of a dairy community.

Mrs. Walsh: That must have gotten confusing!

It is. Delegate Dickinson, Earl Dickinson ... who represents Spotsylvania County ... and his brother, Ezra, we boys went to school together. And the Commissioner of the Revenue, whose name was Dickenson, E-N-S-O-N, and then, of course, we were E-R-S-O-N. And I married a Dickinson!

Mrs. Walsh: To confuse matters more!

I found out later on that some of the Dickensons' that my wife' father was related to was also in Spotsylvania County. So it goes on and on.

Mrs. Walsh: So, when your father came from Ohio, did he fall in love with this area?

He loved this place, he really did.

Mr. Witt: What part of Ohio was he from?

Cadiz, which is in Harrison County, which I think is near the ... sort of toward the West Virginia line. It was a farming community. I remember we went up there one time to see his brother.

There were several other children, and I think Orville was the last one. He stayed at the home

and we went up there one time to visit him. He was a bachelor. We had breakfast one morning

and he did the cooking. He came in to eat and he looked kind of strange. And my father said,

"Well, what's wrong? " He said, "I can't find my teeth! " He chewed tobacco and apparently had

gotten up early that morning and he threw his chewing tobacco out and apparently threw his teeth

out as well! My sisters and I were small, so he sent us outside to look for his teeth.

We finally found them, so he was able to eat breakfast.

Mrs. Walsh: How did the locals here treat your father when he came in from Ohio?

He was a Yankee. After he married my mother, I think things kind of got better, but for awhile there it was kind of testy because I think he had trouble buying things and dealing with people because they were suspicious of him. He was a Yankee and his father had fought

against all of these Southerners down here. After he married my mother, I think he got accepted pretty good.

Mrs, Walsh: Did he meet her pretty soon after he got here?

She nursed his first wife, She had cancer and was terminally ill. That was how they met.

Mr. Witt: Does the name Francis Holloway ring a bell to you? They bought the land where your grandparents lived.

Yes. He built my house down here. I built a house... My dad gave each of the children five acres of land on the road. I was the first one to build a house on it. Right down at the curve, almost opposite where you go into the Holloway's. He built my house. He was a contractor. I don't know whether any of the Holloways are still around or not.

He had a son and a daughter.

Mr. Witt: His son, Bill Holloway, and his wife, live there now and I guess their mother is still alive. Well, I'm not sure about that ... the Holloways never sold the property. There is the story of the Union soldier that was coming up the lane. Would you repeat that for the record? And where did that first come from? Was it that your grandmother remembered that, or ... ?

Yes. She talked a lot about the different battles and where the camps were, and things like that.

About this particular person, I think it was ... if I remember correctly, he had been wounded,

I believe. If I remember correctly. Well, I don't know ... I'm really vague on that.

But I don't think they ever knew where he was buried, did they? I thought he might be buried

out here in the cemetery. I vaguely remember something about that.

Mrs. Walsh: It would be interesting to find out about that.

But, when my grandmother was living over at their place, they raised chickens and everything.

The minister, at that time, rode around on horseback and he liked fried chicken. So it got so that whenever his horse and buggy would turn in the lane to go up to the house ... they had a dog there who would go out and catch a chicken because he knew that whenever he came,

they'd catch a chicken. That was one of the stories she used to tell. That the dog knew the minister so well that he'd go catch a chicken.

Another story that she used to tell was that her mother was planting peas one day and she got

to the end of the row and she looked up and this big old rooster was going down the row, picking

up the peas and eating them. So she grabbed the rooster, cut his crop open and got all the peas

out and sewed him back up and went back to planting the peas again. Seeds were very scarce then.

That's another story.

Mrs. Walsh: This has been very interesting and I think we've talked your head off.

And thank you so much for granting us this interview.

Glad to be here.

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