

**An autobiography and the Illinois Mississippi Canal**  
*an Oral History*

Edward Bryant, Interviewee  
Of Tiskilwa, Illinois

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Narrator's Name : EDWARD R. BRYANT  
Tape Number: 1  
Date of Interview: APRIL 20, 1975  
Place of Interview: NARRATOR'S HOME  
Interviewer's Name: GWEN PEARSON  
For: STARVED ROCK LIBRARY SYSTEM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: This is an Oral History interview with Mr. Eddie Bryant in his home that's about five miles east of Tiskilwa near the canal. The interviewer is Gwen Pearson of Tiskilwa. Mr. Bryant is 78 years old and still farms and writes a column in our local paper, the Tiskilwa Weekly, and calls himself the Tiskilwa Plow Boy. The column is full of reminiscences of bygone days and comments and opinions on the modern day events and affairs. Mr. Bryant, I think first we'll start with your family. Can you tell me something of your family background. . .your mother and your father?

A: Yes, I was born in Arispie Township at the top of the MacMahon Hill. My father was James M. Bryant. He was a mail clerk on the Rock Island for a good many years. And my mother was Fanny Dexter. She taught school at Providence. Her folk's, the Dexter's, were from Providence, Rhode Island vicinity, Pawtucket, Rhode Island, to be exact. And I had two sisters, one of them living now in La Mesa, California--my sister, Eleanor. And my older, elder sister, Frances, died a few years back. And we were raised, Frances and I, by Grandmother Bryant, at the old brick house that's on the Tiskilwa Crossroads that's south of Princeton--built by my great-grandfather--along about 1835 I guess. And my mother. . . I lived there at the MacMahon hilltop for about ten days when my mother died that February 1896. And our Grandmother Bryant took my sister Frances and I to raise and my sister Eleanor went back to Rhode Island with the Dexters.



A: And I never saw her until she was about twelve years old. And they came out to Princeton then and had Cairo Trimble fix up guardianship papers and Grandfather Dexter built a new house in 1909 on south Main Street in Princeton and in 1910 he took all three of us kids to California, to La Mesa, California.

Q: Your grandfather Dexter took you to California?

A: Yes, yes. Incidentally, that was a very severe winter according to old Charlie Oman, he. . .not Charlie. . .Al Oman, his brother--he knew more about my family I guess than I did. And he said that the snowdrifts were so severe that winter that they had four horses on the bobsled to bring my mother's casket out to Princeton. Of course, then, it was kept . . . they used to keep them in a vault there at Oakland Cemetery until the weather moderated enough.

Q: Where did you go to school? And where did . . .

A: I went to the Bryant School there at the end of Lover's Lane. And I went there the first year that the brick building was built. The old . . .

Q: Now that school is where the Schwartzendruber's live now?

A: Yes.

Q: That's the old Bryant School?

A: Yes. And the wooden school is still standing just to the north of it . . . the first year that I went to school. And the kids used to have to walk in those days--they didn't get any . . . in fact none of them that I remember even came with horse and buggy unless the weather was severely inclement.

Q: How far did you have to walk to school?

A: Well, it was about perhaps two miles--a mile and a half, two miles--something like that around. But there was Henry Ricker, and then the Erickson girls, almost down there to the MacMahon Hill--they walked,



A: And the Nelson kids, where what's his name lived--I can't think of his name now and . . .

Q: How many children were there in your school at that time?

A: Oh, there were probably 40.

Q: Forty children and they just had one teacher?

A: Yes, ah no, different grades up to the eighth grade. And then when we moved to Princeton I went to the Lincoln School a year. Let me go back . . . the first teacher we had there at the school was Olive Downing.

Q: Was she a Princeton girl?

A: Yes, and the next teacher we had was Winifred Canovan. She was attorney Jo Skinner's first wife. And then there was a time there was a Miss Langford. I don't remember her very distinctly.

Q: Did you go--you finished--how many grades did you go to school out there then?

A: Oh, up until--I went to the--I think it was the sixth grade I was in.

Q: And then you went to California?

A: No. Then I went to Princeton and I went a year at the Lincoln School. And I was in the seventh grade at the Lincoln School and then we went to California--I had the eighth grade out there. And then I went to Russ High School in San Diego. We went on a steam train 11 miles, the kids got cut rates . . . for the school kids.

Q: You mean you rode to school on the steam train?

A: Yes.

Q: In California?



A: Every morning and night, eleven miles . . . the San Diego, Cuyamaca and Eastern Railroad.

Q: That was a different thing for children to do. Well, did you finish high school out there then?

A: Oh, no. I stumbled through algebra and when I came to geometry I said this is far enough(laughs).

Q: And that was far enough?

A: Yes.

Q: Well, I think . . .

A: And I ran away from home.

Q: Oh! Well, at that time when you ran away from home then was when you told me you went down to Texas?

A: No, Imperial Valley, in Southern California on the Mexican border.

Q: Well, you have an interesting name, the Bryant name, and when I was talking to you before you told me you are a descendant of William Cullen Bryant. I think everyone that has gone through a literature class in high school has had to read poems by William Cullen Bryant. And your family, I understand, your father was cousins or how was it? How was that?

A: My great-grandfather, Colonel Austin Bryant, was a brother of William Cullen Bryant. So, that would make me a great-grandnephew.

Q: A great-grandnephew ?

A: Yes. There's no money in it(laughs).

Q: Well, then you told me you were in World War I, in the cavalry--calvary?



A: Yes, A Troop. . .

Q: Calvary?

A: Cavalry, yes(laughs), A Troop, First Washington Cavalry. Out of, most all of them, enlisted men from Ellensburg, Washington. And then in 1917, April, when war broke out we were mustered into Federal Service and were shipped across the country to Charlotte, North Carolina and then Camp Mills and then overseas. I spent seventeen months in France. And it was a wonderful experience.

Q: When did you come back to Illinois then?

A: After I got out of the service I homesteaded in the state of Washington, on the Columbia River slopes. And my Grandmother Bryant kept writing to me, wanted me to come back. She wanted to see me before she died. And that was in 1925--the winter of 1925. And she died the following year at the age of 96 years. She was very proud of her Scottish ancestry. We had a Mrs. Hilliard there to take care of her in the house and she . . . Dr. Barrett had treated her. She'd had a cold and congestion. And he told me one morning, he said, Edward he said, it's remarkable how your grandmother has recovered. All that congestion has cleared up but she's exhausted. And she sat in the rocking chair all the time, a padded rocking chair. And she told us, she says . . . her maiden name was McDuffy . . . and she said, I'm descended from a long line of Scottish kings and I die hard. And finally she said, Mrs. Hilliard and I, you may put me on the bed. And she resisted our effort to put both of her feet up on the bed. And finally she did and she said there's nothing more to live for, I've lived long enough.

Q: Well, that was a long time, 96 years.

A: And then she was gone. A wonderful woman, a mother and a grandmother to me,



Q: From what you've said about your grandmother I know you loved her very much. Well, you were telling me then when you came back here you were married and then you went to a printing school to learn to be a printer.

A: No, linotype operator.

Q: Linotype operator.

A: In Maumee, Ohio, out of Toledo. And then I came back and I set type on that old linograph machine down there at Tiskilwa on the Tiskilwa Chief.

Q: About what time then, what year then were you down in the Tiskilwa area?

A: Well, during the, let's see, in 1931. And no . . . 1932. And then Reverend Daddy Grosse, as they called him, was the publisher of the Wyanet Record and he wanted to go back to Ohio for some reason or another for rest I guess and extended stay and they prevailed on me to take over the Wyanet Record.

Q: Well, you've had a lot of experience and then what other papers did you work on around in this area?

A: Well, I set type for the Sheffield Times. And then when Mr. Richardson had it for the Bureau County Tribune--I set all their type at one time.

Q: That was in Princeton?

A: In Princeton, yes. And then George Hoffman, during the Roosevelt Administration decided that Democrat newspaper . . . George L. Hoffman that was, would be the thing to start and he started one from scratch. He came over and wanted me to operate his linotype machine . . .

Q: Where was this now?

A: Spring Valley,



Q: Oh, Spring Valley. Is that Spring Valley newspaper still . . .

A: No.

Q: What was the name of it then?

A: Bureau County Democrat. And we also published the Putnam County Record for a while.

Q: Well, you've had a wide experience all around with all these papers. When you worked in Tiskilwa can you remember what Main Street of Tiskilwa looked about in 1930?

A: Well . . .

Q: ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ How many grocery stores were there in the town, and . . .

A: There are a few more buildings and many of the old ones are just the same there. And . . .

Q: Do you remember the old blacksmith's shop that used to be there?

A: Well, that was Bill Slygh's blacksmith shop wasn't it? Seemed to me it was.

Q: There was a Bill Slygh. Where was that at?

A: Up at this end of town, I believe.

Q: That's right.

A: I don't remember . . .

Q: And then there was the Sheldon, Mr. Sheldon, didn't he have a blacksmith shop?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember anything else about Tiskilwa, the buildings that they might have torn down that you remember that would have been of interest? Would you have remembered when you were a small boy about the Hotel Utopia?



A: No, I don't. But I remember, wasn't it Maggie MacMahon that used to have an eatery in Tiskilwa and all the travelling salesmen from out of the state and all around would make a point to stop in Tiskilwa for her speldid meals.

Q: Did she . . . she was at this Hotel Utopia?

A: Yes, I think it was. I wouldn't be too sure about it.

Q: About when did that hotel burn down?

A: I couldn't say to that. You see, I left in 1910 you know from Princeton and was gone for quite a while--until 1925. . .

Q: You were gone and wouldn't know. About how many people lived in Tiskilwa then? Was it the same size as it is now or were there more

people that lived there?

A: I think there were more people then, seems to be there were, I haven't any record right at hand to know the exact number but it could

be checked on easily enough.

Q: Well now, the railroad, the Rock Island Railroad, was built in 1854 and now I'm wondering why they built the canal, the Hennepin Canal. You live by the canal and I know that you've seen a lot of things happen in connection with the canal and have heard a lot of things. Why did they build the canal?

A: Well, it was a politician's dream to begin with. A Colonel Henderson used that as a vehicle to get to Washington. He made it. And the thing was pushed through and in 1891 they had sent out the first surveyors to survey the 72 miles of canal with five aqueducts in it and at that time for just a few thousand dollars more they could have made larger locks. They began to see after they had started construction that it wasn't gonna



A: as the barge lines were building bigger barges and were getting ahead of them. But rather than to halt the construction with the chance of losing support for it they went ahead and built these smaller size locks and they were soon outmoded.

Q: How many locks did they build in this canal?

A: Well, there were, I can't say exactly, but they 'd approximate about a mile apart, or a little more and . . .

Q: And you said the canal is 47 miles long?

A: No.

Q: I thought it was longer than that?

A: No, 72.

Q: And they would have built 72 locks?

A: Well, I don't think that there were that many. There couldn't have been that many. Lock 21 is quite a ways up the line, there, the other side of Sheffield, I think..

Q: Are there more locks from Tiskilwa going to Bureau? Is it Bureau where the canal ends?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: There are quite a few locks?

A: Yes, there are . . .

Q: Because of the . . .

Q: Yes, there are some longer stretches where they didn't have to have them lifted so much but here there was the most fall, I think that . . . I did know the exact number of feet but from . . . well, I can't say now. They started down there in Bureau and Lock 3 is down there and was completed in 1894. And the first boat to go through the canal was, went.



A: through in 1907. It was called the Marian and Mrs. Laura Drake Kimberly has a picture of that boat. And she says she remembers as a little girl when that went through it was quite an occasion. It was almost comparable to the first Transcontinental Railroad(laughs).

Q: Was this a passenger boat for people or were they hauling things on this boat? Or was it just a sightseeing boat? for the first big occasion?

A: It was just a small boat, kinda like a patrol boat according to the pictures. It wasn't very large.

Q: Now I understand that this canal was built between the Illinois River and the Mississippi River because this was the shortest distance between the two rivers as that boats could come down from Chicago?

A: Yes.

Q: And go through this to make a short cut over to the Mississippi River? And of course, like you said the canal really didn't prove out to be too good.

A: No, it didn't. At every lock of course, they had a lock tender. They had a telephone, a concrete telephone pole and a line and they'd telephone ahead when there was a boat coming. And they'd get the locks ready. Well, that job as locktender--he had a house, and a barn and a place for a garden. He generally had a cow, maybe a couple of cows. And he got, to start with, he got forty five dollars a month. And then Mrs. Ruth Jones tells me that they got a little raise every year according to how long they stayed.



Q: Then the people who had a job as a lock tender really had a pretty good job there with their . . .

A: Oh, yes.

Q: . . . house . . .

A: And in those days . . .

Q: . . . and a place of a garden?

A: . . . that was pretty good money and they had their coal hauled to them of course. And then they had plenty of grazing pasture for their cows and a horse.

Q: I'm wondering, I'm wondering about the boats that went down this canal. Did they go by their own power or were they pulled on the edge, on the canal bank by a horse?

A: Oh, no. Most of them went their own power or were towed and I don't remember seeing any that were . . .

Q: What did they tow them with?

A: A power barge similar to the method employed on the Illinois River.

Q: Well, what did they haul in these barges when they went down the canal:

A: Coal, grain and ore--about the same that they haul now on the Illinois River in these barges.

Q: And when did it cease or did it stop so that there wasn't too much traffic on it or how long did the canal traffic come, how long was it?

A: Oh, let see, in, I know in 1925 when I came back from the West there was just an occasional boat went through. And then for a while they thought of letting pleasure boats go through and they did for a while but it was causing so much trouble opening up those locks all the time for them they discontinued that. And now most the lock houses are torn down. Those lock tenders didn't have too easy a job. They had to get

the locks and mow weeds and grass. they generally



A: had a crew that would help them sometimes. But they were . . . they couldn't sit there idly and (laugh) wait for boats.

Q: When they opened these locks, that all had to done by hand?

A: Oh, yes. They had those wheel controls there, turn them by hand to open the gates.

Q: Well now, what do you think of what's going to happen to the canal. We're going to make it into a big long park across the State of Illinois. What do you think of that?

A: Oh, (laughs) if we leave it to the Conservation Department of the Corps of Engineers it'll never happen. (laughs) We've had a horrible mess made out of the end of the canal east of Tiskilwa. It used to be a beautiful parkway. Different ones along the bank rented the north. the opposite side from the patrol road, for grazing and they kept it up and mowed it. And I, we, rented it for 10 or 12 years I guess. I used to mow it twice a year with a tractor and mower and had it looking like a park and people picnicked there and people came from all over to fish. There were pike and bass.

Q: Well, maybe someday if, when and if, they get the canal fixed on the end towards Bureau maybe someday again we'll have people coming to fish and have picnics . . .

A: I don't . . .

Q: . . . and enjoy it like it was.

A: I don't think in our lifetime.

Q: Well, we'll just have to hope. Mr. Bryant, we'll switch the subject now. I was just wondering if you've met any famous people in your life?



A: Oh (laughs). Oh, that's . . .

Q: You've traveled quite a bit and been around with your newspaper work. Have you ever met any presidents?

A: Oh, no, I never have.

Q: Any senators?

A: Ah, no . . .

Q: Or seen any presidents we've had when they've gone through here?

A: No, I can't recall offhand that I have. I never used to think that it was too important to meet them.

Q: Well, it's something kind of part of our history.

A: Not that I was so important certainly, but I don't know, I never was much of a hero-worshipper.

Q: I wonder if you would care to tell us about the big flood we had on Big Bureau in the spring of 1974 last year when you almost lost your life. Do you care to talk about it?

A: Well, yes, I don't mind going over it, sketchily. My wife and I were living at the farm there. We have, we bought 36 acres there between the canal and the railroad. We lived there for 22 years and never got hurt by a flood. Although in 1960 the canal broke through at the railroad bridge and the Corps of Engineers fixed it immediately, and it withstood this flood. And we never had any more trouble. This came so sudden I'd . . . the Conversation Department had chisled down the banks to let the creek in and then built a dam right about Lock 6 across the canal. And they didn't have it quite completed when the flood came and it broke and all that water came down--took it--wiped out the lock and came through the underpass under the railroad on to us. But what really



A: hurt us the most was below our house, a quarter of a mile, there's a big underpass flume that's supposed to drain surface water off of the hills, a stream that comes down through there, but it has been plugged up for years and it was impossible to unplug it, the Corps of Engineers told me. And so they said they'd put me in a steel pipe, a twenty-inch steel pipe and they did and that handled it for a number of years--surface water. And that, in 1973--the varmits, groundhogs, had got under that pipe and undermined it, washed through. Well, I notified the department. They didn't do anything about it and finally they came in and dumped a load of rock over the roots and everything and well when the big flood came that just cut clear through about 12 feet wide and straight down to the canal. Well all that water flooded our both pastures and came up against this water that was coming in from the west. And it was up to a table top in our house. My wife lost her car. We lost, in fact, we lost practically all our furniture, our rugs and all, most all of my books and records were destroyed and our floor furnace and . . .

Q: Well that was a pretty terrible experience you had to go through.

I see now you're living up high and dry where you won't have to be worried about . . .

A: I didn't want to get this high.

Q: Well, thank you, Mr. Bryant for talking to us.

A: Not at all.

Q: Mr. Bryant, I forgot to ask you the main thing. Why do they call you the Tiskilwa Plow Boy?



A: (laughs) Well, that's quite a--quite a story--amusing incident in fact. The time that I went over to Spring Valley to work for George L. Hoffman I found quite a rivalry there between George and Pat Mahoney that published the Spring Valley Gazette which was a Republican paper. And certainly this was a Democratic newspaper that George published and they were continually harpooning each other on their editorial pages and in face they were calling each other all the libelous words that you could think of back and forth. And one thing that burned George, I'll put it, because Pat Mahoney was getting a check for two hundred and fifty dollars a month from the state without doing anything, just for representing the party at, in his newspaper. That's what George claimed at any rate. And under Governor Horner's administration, Democratic administration, George got the job as a sales tax investigator and I remember going with him in a car down to Tiskilwa one day to investigate a coal mine that was operating there in what they call Rocky Run. I guess, I remember that when I was a kid St. Jude's Episcopal Sunday School that I used to go to there had a picnic up there at one time. There was an old mine shaft. Well, George, I went there with George down there to find out why they weren't paying their sales tax and George told me on the way back, he says, this is the last call I'm going to make. They can just take that job and do what they want to with it. He said, I don't want it any more--I'm only getting one hundred twenty five dollars and have to use my own car and (laughs) run all over the country, I don't want it any more. Well, the lampooning kept up between George Hoffman and Pat Mahoney, calling each other every thing and one editorial Pat says Hoffman's shop is a scab shop, they haven't got the



A: union label and he says his linotype operator there is nothing but a Tiskilwa plow boy. So (laughs) I took that line and put it under my column here below that I ran over there on the newspaper for 15 years or more I guess. The Tiskilwa Plow Boy--that's how it happened.

Q: Well you still have a good column as I said that we enjoy your comments and opinions on things that are happening today and it bears and I ~~was~~ reading your last one about the snipe hunting.<sup>ERS</sup>

A: Oh (laughs), I want to put a by-line under that, all that. You' remember Will Rogers used to say all I know is what I read in the newspaper. I'd like to put a by-line under that, all I know is what I find out (laughs).

Q: Very good!

END OF TAPE



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PLACE Tishkewa Illinois

DATE April 21, 1975

Edw. R. Bryant

(Interviewee)

Mrs. Gwen Pearson  
(for \_\_\_\_\_)