

Teaching in the 1920's
an Oral History

William Lyons, Interviewee
Of Ottawa, Illinois

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Narrator's Name: WILLIAM J. LYONS
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Interviewer's Name: HELEN HAYNER
For: STARVED ROCK LIBRARY SYSTEM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: This is Helen Hayner of the Starved Rock Library System. Today is April 15, 1976, and I'm interviewing Mr. William Lyons of Lostant, Illinois. Mr. Lyons is the present President of the Starved Rock Library System Board of Directors. Mr. Lyons is going to tell us of his experiences in teaching, and we're going to then delve into other areas that are events that occurred during his teaching career. Mr. Lyons, could you first give us some background as to the place and date of your birth and your family per se?

A: Well, I was born on a farm about two miles west of Lostant on December 9, 1899. And I lived around that community most of my life except about two years of it at Normal and four years -- oh, about five years that I taught outside the community.

Q: Now your, excuse me, your parents were. . .

A: My parents were -- my father was born and raised right around Lostant. My mother was -- came from St. Charles, the community of St. Charles, up near Hampshire and Burlington, Illinois. And they -- my grandfather has lived around there ever since he came -- he lived there ever since he came from Ireland. And my grandmother came from Ireland, too, and they bought this farm in 1875 that I live on now. There's been four generations of Lyonses live on that farm. And so that's a brief history, I guess, of my life up until now.

Q: Okay. Now education was then, obviously, in Lostant what would be. . .

A: Yes, I went to country schools out there and graduated from the country school and then also went to high school in Lostant. I think

A: maybe one little thing might be kind of interesting -- I started to school in the second grade.

Q: Now how come did you do that?

A: (laughs) Well, you would have to be -- go way back into the country school days and at that time, of course, the country schoolteacher had all eight classes. And I started to school, why, my mother sent a little note to the teacher teller her that she'd taught me my ABC's. Of course, I can remember that we learned them from the newspapers and from the letters on the grocery boxes, you know, _____ boxes and things of that kind. We didn't know anything about phonics or anything but the ABC's were the thing. If you knew the ABC's and if you could count -- maybe I could to ten or twenty or something like that which she probably told the teacher. Well, now there was two or three boys that had started to school the year before. And of course if you've ever followed yourself as a teacher, why, you'd know that -- you'll know just how poor a teacher you were, and I suppose she was a beginning teacher but she probably knew that these other boys had probably forgot all that they did learn in the first grade. (laughter) So she thought maybe I wouldn't be too far behind them if I knew my ABC's because they'd probably forgot theirs. So she put me in the second grade so that's how that happened. And of course I only -- I went to school -- country school in seven years to graduate from the eighth grade.

Q: Precocious child.

A: Oh, yes. Very precocious.

Q: Kindergartens were unheard of at that time, I'm sure.

A: Kindergartens were unheard of. Yes, that's right. So that kind of

A: makes mine -- I don't know what kind of a childhood you would call that, you know, restricted or something when you didn't get through kindergarten or first grade. I don't know.

Q: I didn't go to kindergarten either. (laughter) I'm a deprived child, I guess. I don't know.

A: Yes. Well, that's how things were, you know. You went to school, you know, more or less the teachers were probably just graduated from high school. They had no training either, you know. They just did the best they can. But they really did very well. I know they -- I had good teachers in the grades, very good.

Q: So then after high school what did you do then?

A: Well, I taught school two years. I graduated from high school in 1917, which was just the year that World War I started. I was a little bit too young. They didn't want anybody to enlist. You could enlist in the Navy but you had to register and, of course, by the time I got out of high school in June, the World War I was over with in November of 1918. And it didn't last too long. I know if it had lasted another month, I would have been in the Army because I had the questionnaires when I was going to be called in another month. But it was after 1918 then -- it would have been 1919 -- that the school director said there was a shortage of teachers because well, it seems like teaching was something that was kind of neglected every year. All the ones that could teach were either probably in the Army or they were working somewhere else. And so they -- there wasn't any applications for our country school. And the directors came to me one day and they said, "Well, you've graduated from high school; you ought to be able to teach high

A: school." I had no idea at that time and so we decided I could teach. My parents kind of encouraged me to try it. So I did. And I had to take an examination here in Ottawa at the county superintendent's office to -- and I passed. Then during -- before school started, why, we had five days of a teacher's institute. We came up here. It just so happened that there was two other boys that graduated from Lostant High School that same -- in 1919. And the three of us started teaching together, all in country schools. We were -- the country schools were all on one road, and the three of us taught country schools. And we came up here to the teacher's institute at the -- altogether. And we came -- now that's something too. We came on the railroad to LaSalle; we got on the train at Lostant, came to LaSalle and got on the Interurban and rode to Ottawa. Then we stayed in Ottawa for five days to that institute.

Q: Where was the institute held? ~~Do~~ you remember the location?

A: It was in one of the schools here in Ottawa.

Q: Oh, I wondered if it was in the old high school or. . .

A: It probably was. It probably was in the school because they had different classes, you know, there was different rooms. We had five days of instruction. Foster, W. R. Foster, he gave us most of the instructions for country schoolteachers, especially the beginning ones. And that's all the training we had. We had five days of training for schools.

Q: And then come home.

A: And then go, yes.

Q: Now this was in 1919?

A: 1919, yes. 1919.

Q: Now, when you did teach, you were in a one room school? Is that correct?

A: In a one room school, yes.

Q: How many students did you have?

A: Well, I had twenty students the first year, and ten of them were from one family.

Q: (laughs) Big families in Lostant.

A: (laughs) Yes. Big families, I'll say. They were -- this other interview I had back here about two or three months ago when we were talking about oral history, I was practicing these oral history interviews. This one lady asked me -- or told me -- said that must have been an Irish family. I said, "No, it wasn't. It was a German family."

(laughter) You have to get a little ethnic humor in there as long as we're talking about ethnics here on the politics now.

Q: Right. Okay, now you taught -- started teaching in 1919 in a country school and were there for what -- two years?

A: Two years and then I went to Normal, and I was there for two years. And of course each time in the summertime, I came home and helped on the farm during the summer and then went back in the fall.

Q: Now something that's come up all through interviews with -- particularly with rural schoolteachers -- whether or not all of the children attended all of the terms. They keep saying well, none of the boys were around in the spring or fall because of working on the farm. Did you have this problem or. . .

A: No. No, we didn't that time, no. But of course it seems as though -- now this family that I was telling you about that had ten children from

A: the one family, why they kept their children off quite a bit to help on the farm and that, of course, put them back in school. Now there's some of them -- some of those children were sixteen, seventeen years old and still hadn't passed the eighth grade. And that was because they had missed so much school. And then of course when you got to the seventh and eighth grade at that time you had to take a county examination and if they didn't pass, they stayed in the seventh grade. You oftentimes hear these comedians say how many years they spent in the third grade, but in those days they spent those days -- they spent that time in the seventh grade. (laughter) They couldn't pass -- they couldn't pass the county examination in the seventh grade, they took it over again. The same way in the eighth grade. And of course that's one reason why if they missed a lot of school -- but that was before I started teaching when the boys stayed out for farm work like husking and everything. While I was in school and while I was teaching, why there wasn't long absences like that at all.

Q: Now these exams that you mentioned were prepared by the county superintendent?

A: By the county superintendent and we didn't -- they weren't taken in our own school; we had to go to a central place. I remember our school went to the Lostant school, and the high school was dismissed for that day of the seventh and eighth grade examination. The principal of the high school conducted the examination.

Q: And this was a standardized examination?

A: Yes, it was. Yes. Well, we had to write. It wasn't a true and false thing either. We were asked questions and we had to answer them

A: in sentences, too.

Q: What a change!

A: Yes, I'll say it was. It was quite a little job to correct all those papers, too. They had -- a lot of the teachers came in and helped the county superintendent because it was scattered all over the whole county and there were, oh, you know -- well actually there was nine country schools in Hope Township besides the Lostant town school.

Q: So then you -- you then actually as their teacher did not grade their examination papers?

A: No, I didn't. No. No.

Q: How long did it take to get all these back to you then?

A: Well, it usually took a couple of weeks maybe. A couple of weeks.

A: And all the kids were on needles and pins waiting to find out whether or not they passed.

A: Whether or not they passed, that's right.

Q: Did they have a regular graduation ceremony then for the kids?

A: Yes, we did. Yes we did. And we had the same nine schools -- well, in fact the town school also had these same examinations. They were included. The county superintendent passed the seventh and eighth grade in the town school, too. And the seventh and eighth grade graduation exercises were held in Lostant and covered the whole township.

Q: They all gathered in one spot then?

A: Yes, they all gathered in one place for a little graduation ceremony. And the main part of that ceremony was the talk by the county superintendent. And he was a real good speaker and he was quite a politician, too.

Q: Now getting back to this W. R. Foster. He was in office for a length of time. . .

A: Forty years, yes. Forty years. All the while I -- he started in 1906 which was the year I started school, and he was still county superintendent in 1946. When he resigned, he hadn't finished the last term that he was elected. But he was county superintendent for forty years. Now I went to school all during my eight years in grade school, I taught school under him and my two daughters went to the same country school up until about 1946. That's about the time it closed. It was consolidated then with Lostant but they had the same county superintendent I had when I started to school and all the while I went to school.

Q: That is a long, long time.

A: Yes, it is. Yes, it is. It covers quite a -- it covers a long time in education. And Mr. Foster was actually a -- I could say more or less that he was a country school superintendent. That was his main work was superintendent of the country schools. He had very little to do with the village and city schools. And so he was real good. He was just as good a superintendent as he could be at the time but he was over ninety years old, I'm quite sure, when he resigned. It was getting a little bit hard for him to progress from -- hard for him to see just exactly where the schools were going. (laughter) It was hard for him to tell where he was going at that time. (laughter)

A: Right, at that point. Yes, Well, I imagine that it was certainly a change for him to see if the -- well, from the country school to the consolidated was a whole new era that opened up there.

A: At that time there was what they would call a non-high school

~~A: district.~~ And this non-high school district comprised all the areas that did not have high school. Now Lostant had a community high school and that would not have been in the non-high school district. But there was a large amount of territory that was not included in the high school district. The county superintendents supervised all that non-high school district. And then there was a -- any high -- any person, pupil, that came to a high school from a non-high school district, why, the non-high school district paid the tuition in that high school district.

Q: Well then some of these students might have to travel a great distance.

A: Yes, that's true. And then that was -- and that was one of the things that I remember people didn't like about W. R. Foster because see the non-high school district was primarily rural territory, and he took it upon himself not to always pay the full amount of the tuition because that would increase the farm taxes. It was the farmers' vote that always put him in office. And I remember about the last years that I taught school -- I wasn't in this county, though -- in LaSalle County -- but he was -- he still wouldn't allow over ninety dollars a year per pupil for high school, and some of these schools were -- it was costing them then maybe two or three hundred dollars a year. And of course now it costs a thousand or more. But at that time ninety dollars was the limit. That's as far as he would go.

Q: And no busing or no _____.

A: No. No. Nothing about that at all. And there was no way they could get any more. (coughs) And that was more or less arbitrary on his part because the law didn't say that he -- the law actually said that

A: he was supposed to pay the full amount but that's all that he would allow. So that's the way -- that's the way that. . .

Q: Make some friends and make some enemies at the same time.

A: Yes, he made friends with the voters that put him in office.

Q: But not with the high school, I'm sure.

A: No, not with the high school directors and the high school superintendents and things that needed the money, you know.

Q: Now at this time you mentioned, and it's been mentioned before, particularly with regard to rural schools, the board of directors. Now just how were they -- these people -- selected or whatever for the rural school board of directors?

A: Well, they were -- the school district usually comprised about two square miles, and the school board was selected from the people that lived within that two square miles.

Q: Now were these people elected?

A: They were always elected, yes. They were always elected. They served three year terms and the terms were more or less staggered. So they served three year terms.

Q: Did they have any taxing authority or. . .

A: Yes, they levied. They levied the money that it took to run their school.

Q: So then a -- for instance, a board of directors in a particular school district could -- I'm sure there was a set levy but in effect one school district could have a better school if they levied the limit. Whereas another would not.

A: Oh, yes, and they -- well as a rule they weren't exactly -- they

Answeren't too stingy in trying to help the teachers out. As a rule they tried to do the best they can, especially in our district; I thought they did. Although I've heard other people say that when school started, why they'd tell the teacher that they gave her one box of chalk and they didn't want her to ask for anymore. (laughter) Some places there wasn't just too much money spent, Ill tell you, for education. But I thought we had about as progressive country school as you could ask for.

Q: What was your salary when you began teaching?

A: Well, the year I started was \$75 a month for eight months, and the second year was -- I got \$100 a month. And that was unheard of.

Q: That was a big raise.

A: Yes, it was a big raise.

Q: They liked you.

A: Yes, it was a big raise and it was an unheard of salary at that time, \$100 a month. But that was -- and that was just about the limit of it, too, at that time. Just about what everybody was getting.

Q: Did female teachers usually get the same as a male was always earning?

A: Oh, yes. They usually did. Now when I started teaching and _____ these other two boys that started from Lostant, too, they were -- we both -- all started -- and we all got the same salary and there was other graduates from high school that year, girl students, and they got the same salary. It was about the \$75 a month. That was the year we started, why that was just about what they were all getting. And there wasn't any difference. Of course, you see, there wasn't any grades of teachers. We were all just one room teachers. Nobody was

A: superintendent or principal or anything. We just had our own school and we were the boss. While we were in that school, we were the boss. So the girls had just as much authority in their school as the boys.

Q: Now did the county superintendent exercise any particular control other than in ~~the~~ way of examinations over the . . .

A: Well, they used to come and visit, yes. They had assistant county superintendents and they drove around in horse and buggies. They drove around visiting schools. And they'd spend maybe two or three visits a year. They'd usually come in and spend an hour or so maybe -- and then go on to the next school.

Q: To see that you were doing things in some kind of a proper order or. . .

A: Yes, they'd try to help you out the best they could, you know.

Q: Okay. Now we go to a couple of events, I think, that have ~~great~~ bearing on your educational experiences. (laughter)

A: Yes, I suppose you could say that but it just so happened that I was listening on the TV not too long ago, about a month ago, I was listening on the TV on the "Today" show and Candace Bergen was talking about the Ku Klux Klan in the south, Louisiana in fact, and it just started me thinking about -- I went back to 1923. That was the year I graduated from Normal. And I had some few experiences with the Ku Klux Klan myself and so that's what I would say this interview is about mostly. But in order to try to figure out or to realize just something about how this prejudice and bigotry could ever start, you have to go back a few years before that. Now about 1915 or 1916, there was a movie, "The Birth of a Nation" came out, and that was the story of the Ku Klux Klan in the south. It kind of more or less told about how the

Ku Klux Klan was active and arrested some of the control of the political part of the south from the carpetbaggers that came down from the north. And they -- D. W. Griffith happened to be the director of this picture, and Lillian Gish and her sister were stars in it. It was about the first big epic picture that we ever had in the movies. Most of the time there -- mostly just one reel subjects or two reels. This one lasted a couple of hours.

Q: Was this a silent film?

A: It was a silent film, sure. Yes, it came in about 1915 I would think maybe, 1915 or 1916, because I know I was in high school at the time. And it was -- it was a kind of a picture of -- a good deal like the picture we've got now or that was run quite awhile with the southern pictures, you know. It was the talk of all around the country. Everybody went to see that picture. Somehow or other I didn't get to see it at that time. I did later, but not at that time. But it was the story of the Ku Klux Klan and how they dressed up in their robes and their masks and everything and went around scaring everybody from voting, especially the Negroes that were voting. And then it was the -- that was the story of it. And they had quite a few -- quite a -- some dramatic pictures of the Civil War in that picture, too. That picture is still talked about as being quite a remarkable picture. And of course I think that kind of started -- started Ku Klux Klan business again and also about that time Al Smith became governor of. . .

Q: New York.

A: . . . New York City. And back in 1923 there was talk that he might be nominated on the Democratic ticket for President. And so --

A: everything -- also in 19 -- during World War I of course quite a few of the Negro people, Blacks, moved north to Chicago and Detroit and some of these other large cities. And they worked in some of these munitions factories for the war effort, all kinds. They ~~worked~~ got quite a few jobs in Chicago and some of these other large cities. And after the war then, why, these White people wanted their jobs back, and the Negroes, the Black people, were employed and of course that added a little bit to this Ku Klux Klan thing, too. So that's more or less how that began. Well then in 1923 -- by 1923 then after Al Smith had been governor for maybe two terms -- he'd probably been elected the third term -- by that time the Ku Klux Klan was beginning to be scattered throughout the country, you know. They were having Ku Klux Klan meetings all around through the country, everywhere, you know. There'd be big meetings and they'd burn a big cross and they would have a large following and they would have their big meetings, and they'd always be held in a field out in the country.

Q: Now who were the targets basically of the Ku Klux Klan?

A: Well, of course earlier the Ku Klux Klan started mostly against the Blacks but then in order, I guess, to broaden their whatever you might call their field, why they included the Catholics and Jews. The Blacks and the Catholics and the Jews were included in their meetings that they'd have. And so that's what they -- they added that much to it. But it started just mostly for Blacks. Anyway there was a Ku Klux Klan meeting in Iostant that happened to be just about a mile from where I live which is on ~~the same~~ road that I live. If I could picture the place where it was on the highway and just back of the highway and north where the

A: meeting was held was on a kind of a hill. My brother and I and another family that lived practically next door to us -- we were good neighbors and friends; we still are. They live still in the same community here. And they came up to visit at our place and we of course kind of talked about that we'd like to go to that meeting. And we knew we wouldn't be allowed inside but we went up -- we got in our cars -- we had Ford Model T's at that time. The only reason I would bring that in about Model T's is that (coughs) if you didn't remember the Model T's there was only two speeds forward on a Model T. When you started out, especially when you had a cutout, which most people did, _____ cutout muffler made a lot of noise. And in order to get up speed to get into high -- from low to high -- you had to be going pretty fast. And so these cars made a lot of noise. The reason I mentioned that is because as this meeting progresses, why that noise from the Model T has something to do with this meeting. (laughter) And you were -- you know if you were in riding especially in a coupe or a sedan, why you probably couldn't hear yourself inside or you couldn't hear what was going on on the outside. Well we -- this other family and my brother and I -- we drove to town and turned around and came back so we'd be more or less headed home because we didn't know -- we probably didn't want to stay there for the whole meeting but we just thought we'd stop and listen for awhile if they didn't chase us away; we didn't know for sure just what was going to happen. So we stopped along the road. And the meeting started; the cross was -- it was just about dusk about that time -- they just slipped the big cross up on the hill. There were cars lined up in circles around, and these circles -- the outside concentric circle would

A: be pointed out and then the inside circle would be pointed the other way and so on all the way through as many circles as they had. And that was so if they needed lights or anything and there's always a little bit of excitement -- they always thought there was going to be -- the meeting was going to be broke up. Somebody was going to break up the meeting. That heightened the interest a little bit -- by knowing that the meeting was going to be broke up. They would tell these people that if there was anything like that, anything happened, to be sure and turn their lights on in the cars, see. Well then the lights would show -- the outside would show a ring of cars would show the lights that way; the inside rings would light up the inside.

Q: Warning system.

A: Yes, really very efficiently organized. Well, anyway we parked there along side of the road and there was -- of course they had people on horseback, too. There were guards on horseback. The man on horseback had a big white robe, white sheet over the horse. . .

Q: The horse, too?

A: The horse, too. Yes, the horse was. . .

Q: Couldn't recognize the horse through the horse -- through the. . .

(laughter)

A: Well, my brother did. My brother did recognize the horse. I didn't but I'd been away to school a couple of years, but he recognized the horse.

Q: May I just break in here and ask a question? How long had the Klan been active in the Lostant area up to this point or do you know?

A: Well, I wouldn't exactly know how long. I just wouldn't exactly know

A: because I was away at school at the time, see. I don't know. But it was active enough so that there were other meetings around -- around through the country, not around Lostant, but I think probably in some of the other towns. It always had to be held out in the country. And it was always held more or less in a pasture or in a wheat field that had been thrashed so that there -- this happened to be in August. It'd have to be held on a warm evening you know or it would -- and it had to be held when the weather was kind of dry so they wouldn't get stuck in the field, things of that kind. But it was more or less a spontaneous meeting like.

Q: This could have been quoted members from a large, large area that just happened to come to this place to meet.

A: Yes, that's right. And at that time there were cars -- almost everybody had a car and the cars came from quite a ways. And there was always a lot of interest, especially people were curious and a lot of people went out of curiosity. You know that afterwards I -- after this meeting that I'm mentioning -- I've never exactly found out anybody from Lostant that were there dressed up in their robes or their masks but there was a lot of people that said they were there just out of curiosity. But that's why I was there too; we were curious. We were down there -- we were down there by along the road. Well, now while this meeting was going on then, we were of course listening to all the terrible things that were going on in the convents and everything. And there was another car -- another Model T drove up behind us. Now this Model T that drove up behind us, they stayed for just a few minutes. And I heard -- we heard the two of the, two boys, two young men, they were talking and they said, "Well, let's go on in," and so they turned their

A car around. And the gate to the meeting was only maybe a couple hundred feet from where we were but they turned this car around, and of course as I mentioned before it was a Model T and made a lot of noise. They went up to this gate to turn in and they were still wide open as they could go on low with a cutout going and people were hollering, "Halt," and they started shooting and everything and the car just went right on through. The people that were in the meeting -- the meeting where the speakers were -- why they kind of got a little bit excited when they heard the guns going off down at the entrance. And all of a sudden why there was people running every direction and lights all went up -- lit up again and the people came on horseback down to where the gate was -- down where we were. And this man on horseback that was down where we were when the meeting started, why he left; he had gone away, but they had another -- just a person on foot and he stayed with us all the time. He was dressed in a robe and a mask. I never knew who he was, but he stayed with us all the time. Well, after this car started going in to this meeting, why of course the excitement kind of broke out all up on the hill and everybody started milling around. And people came down to the fence there. There was one man that I did know; he didn't have any mask or robe on. And they all had guns; they had revolvers. Some of them of course they had their mask and robes so you wouldn't know who they were. We happened to be parked there -- this other family that was with us, when all this started going on, they got in their car and left. They had a girlfriend that was kind of visiting with them and somehow or other she got left. They jumped in their car and gone but they didn't wait to pick her up so she was with us. She was a girl from Ottawa,

A: Mary Klein. And she more or less got -- waited with us. We didn't get in our car quick enough and by that time they were right across the fence from us with their revolvers and rifles and things of that kind. Right now you wouldn't think we were scared, but we were.

Q: I can imagine.

A: We were kind of frightened because you take these trigger-happy people with -- they come about that time and you not knowing what they would do but we remember we always joked about it and laughed; we've talked about this a good many times this family, this other family, friends of ours. This girl, Mary Klein, was standing there by the fence and she had a big wad of gum in her mouth and she was chewing gum about as fast and as loud as anybody I ever heard. (laughter) I don't think if we'd a had any gum in our mouths, we'd probably be doing the same thing. But then we went on home then.

Q: They didn't -- did they question you or anything?

A: Well, no they didn't. This man that was standing there, he happened to tell the people that came down, he said, "What in the world's the matter with you anyway. There's nothing wrong here. Are you afraid of your shadow or something?" He says, "Go on back." Well -- and then of course they decided they'd go on back. And then we went on home. At that time we'd had about enough of it. So we went on home, which -- and when we got to where we -- where I lived, why this other family, the Wolfs -- the Lyonses and the Wolfs lived on the road there. (laughter)

Q: Where's the bears?

A: (laughs) Yes. So they stopped at our home. They knew we'd be along pretty soon. And so we stopped there and they stopped and we were

A: visiting there talking about the meeting and what had happened. We were just about beginning to get over the fright that we'd had and then the cars started going by, one right after the other, almost bumper to bumper. And they kept on going by and going by for an hour or more. Then the next morning one of our neighbors came in -- he lived right close by -- and he asked my brother and I, "Do you suppose you boys would be able to -- would be willing to loan some of your tools to a Ku Kluxer this morning?" (laughter) Then he told us what happened on the inside. So when we got the full story from the inside. We knew what happened on the outside, but he told us what happened on the inside. He said that they had told them that there was going to be trouble. And that -- of course, he said, most of the people were there didn't want any trouble. He said they were just there out of curiosity. And so they -- they -- as soon as they found out there was going to be trouble and as soon as they heard those shots down there at the gate. . .

Q: They assumed that was. . .

A: Yes, they assumed that was the trouble. And there wasn't -- they didn't want to be around if there was going to be any shooting. So they -- he says, "We all left," and the whole meeting then broke up. And we often joked about that -- the Wolf family and us -- how we broke up the Ku Klux Klan meeting. And all we did was stand by the road there listening to the proceedings.

Q: Now if. . . (PAUSE) Could you tell us if you were able to understand or hear any of the speeches or any of the proceedings that did occur?

A: No, we really didn't hear any of the speeches because actually the meeting had just -- was just getting under way. I would say it was just

A: about dusk; they had just lit the big cross; the fiery cross was burning. And this other people that came behind us in this other car and that tried to get in, they had come to the meeting and of course the meeting hadn't started yet. So the meeting actually broke up before it had really got under way. So we didn't hear very much.

Q: So you didn't know all the bad things they might have talked about because they didn't. (laughs)

A: No, because they didn't get to talk about them, no. That's right. Well, now that would be the story of the Ku Klux Klan as far as I know it in Loshant. Now this was in August of 1923. Now in June of 1923, I had graduated from Normal and I was seeking a teaching position -- started like all college people at that time _____ you know that you look on the board and find out all the schools that are looking for teachers. And I would -- sent out applications to any of the ones that I thought were appropriate. And so the summer was going on and getting over with and I hadn't secured any job of any kind. Most of the time -- most of the letters that I had sent out I hadn't heard from. But during the summer I got two letters from boards of education where -- schools where I had applied. The gist of that was that they weren't hiring Catholics. The Catholics weren't being hired at all. That question had not been asked. In the application that I had given them, I had never mentioned my religion.

Q: Had they asked it?

A: They hadn't asked it. But somehow or other they found out. You see more or less at that time why I think you were kind of blacklisted. So the summer was going on. Well, now one little incident happened in town

A: about that time we were talking about Al Smith running on the Democratic -- as the Democratic candidate for President. Of course the convention wouldn't have been until 1924 but there was still quite a bit of talk that he might be the candidate. One time we happened to be in town on the streets of Iostant, and one old lady came up to us and she said -- she shook her finger in our face and said, "God help this country if Al Smith ever gets to be President," (laughs) and I'll tell you, subsequent history I think would show that maybe she was a hundred percent right but maybe for the wrong reasons.

Q: Wrong reason.

A: Anyway there was a lot of prejudice at that time. And anyway as I was saying, I didn't have a school. I got those two answers from my various applications. I went down to Normal to talk to the man that was in charge of placements and showed him these letters. He said that he knew that there was such a -- that there was that kind of prejudice around through the country. But he said that there really isn't anything we can do about it. So there wasn't. Well, that kind of -- I just kind of decided maybe I was in the wrong procession -- profession. And I -- in June -- well, of course September and October came along, and I was still helping on a farm there and I did have another job, but not in teaching, that was going to start in December. In October then -- in October of 1923 I got a telephone call from Normal that there was a teaching position open in Stark County which is about maybe fifty miles west of where I live. I was to go -- I was to go over and talk to the county superintendent over there. Well, we were husking corn. My mother came out to the field; my brother and I were both husking corn.

A: She came out and told me and so we decided we'd go over and see the county superintendent and I would put in my application over there. So we did. We drove around over there in our Model T Ford and talked to the county superintendent and he said he'd take me out there to the district which was quite a ways away and my brother went on home. Because the situation in this school was that they had a man teacher there and that he had applied for a teaching job on some Indian reservation. And he -- that was sort of a civil service job, and he had just received notice that he could have that position that he had applied for. So he was resigning his position at school. He resigned on a Friday which was about the day that I -- I think it was Saturday that we were going out there. It was on a Saturday. And so they -- I was with the county superintendent, and my brother went on home. Then he took me out, and I interviewed these three directors, not in a meeting together, but we just went around and interviewed them separately because they -- this was in a very small town. There was two teachers in this school and one teacher taught the four upper grades and another teacher taught the four lower grades. It was just a little crossroads community and so that -- I just interviewed these directors. I talked to the county superintendent and I told him about my letters I had got that they wouldn't hire any Catholics. And he says, "Well," he said, "Those situations do arise," and he said that we just have to just forget about it. So I -- in interviewing these three directors, they had never asked my religion. They never asked at all, and I never volunteered it. Never mentioned it at all. And so. . .

Q: Could you tell me the name of the town?

A: Yes, it's Osceola is the name of the town in Stark County. It's south of Neponset. And now this -- they thought well, that I was qualified to teach and the county superintendent of course thought I was too. He recommended me; I remember his name too. His name was Griffith. I don't remember his first name but his name was Griffith. And he -- he -- finally I got the position. They decided to hire me and I think the wages then were \$135. Can you imagine that?

Q: That is _____. Goodness gracious, yes.

A: Moving up the ladder (laughs). Moving up the ladder. I was getting \$135 a month. Well, now the -- one of the directors _____ of course I had to find a place to stay, but one of these directors -- the last one that I went to interview told me that I could stay there at night -- this was Saturday -- and until I could find a place to stay. I had to find a room -- a place to room and board so he said I could stay there during the evening and stay there that first night. Well, this of course was -- this was out in the country more or less and husking time out / there was the same as husking time at home. People worked late you know and they -- and so I was -- ~~talking to~~ _____ talking to the two people and they had kind of a late evening meal. We talked about different things. I can remember one of the things that was new at that time we discussed quite a little bit was the insulin. Insulin had been just discovered for diabetes. And I had read something about it and they had heard so we discussed quite a little about that. And then finally they. . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

A: Now this late evening meal we were talking about different things that was happening in the community and things of that kind. One of the things that they were kind of interested in and that I had been too was -- we discussed insulin. Insulin had been the new drug just discovered about that time and it was quite widely publicized. We talked about that, and then they began talking about the community. And this community _____ this lady told us, "Now we've got two nice churches in this community." She told me about the Baptist Church; she told me about the Methodist Church and told me the names of the ministers and the name of the -- and the different activities that they had and she mentioned how nice they were and all their different things which was very nice. She hadn't asked me -- well, she after a while then, she did ask me what my religion was. And I was sitting I think -- the man, I believe, was at the head of the table, and this woman was at the corner and I was opposite her. I was sitting in a position where I could see both of them. And when they asked me my religion, I knew just about what was going to happen. And I was -- kind of kept my head down and I just kind of raised up my eyes so I could see both of them when I told them that I was a Catholic. I never saw such an expression on two people's faces in all my life. I just kept on going ahead eating and one thing or another.

Q: Shock or dismay or surprise?

A: Well, surprise and dismay and probably wondered, my lands, what have we got into? What have we got. . . But they were a nice old couple. Their name was Mr. and Mrs. Blevelt and they were quite elderly, but they were a very nice couple. And I got to know them real well. But

As anyway they -- I knew they were very surprised. I think they were really shocked but they really didn't say anything. But anyway the supper -- the evening meal concluded right away. And we were talking of course after we had kind of got through eating and the lady started clearing up the table and one thing or another and there was nothing more to discuss. So I stayed there that night, and then I went to the village the next day and he helped me find a place to stay. I roomed with a family that lived right across the street from the schoolhouse and also right across the street from the Baptist Church. And the school -- in fact the school was next to the Baptist Church -- and then north of the school -- on the north side of the school was quite a pasture. It seems, if I can remember rightly, there was a kind of a little creek or a draw down at the bottom and there was a kind of a hill came toward the -- toward the school. Well, I started teaching there and got along real well. Been teaching there a couple of weeks and I used to go as long as I was so close to the school right across the street -- I would go over there about every evening. I'd get ready for the lessons the next day and read and spend my time over there getting in preparation for the next day and things of that kind. Well, one night then about -- this was -- this would still be in October of 1923 I -- there was a Ku Klux Klan meeting right out here in this pasture right beside the school. Another big cross burning. And I stood up there; I stood in the window there and I watched it and I just begin to _____ -- I might say that in this first one that I mentioned when they came down to the fence where where we were standing with their guns and revolvers and everything, I know we were frightened. I'm sure of that, but now when

A: I was standing there and looking out this window knowing just exactly what was going on at that meeting, I can't remember now whether I was frightened or not but I just didn't exactly know what had happened. I thought maybe I'd -- they'd ride me out of town on a rail or I'd be tarred and feathered or what. I just didn't know.

Q: Oh, Lord.

A: I didn't know what was going to happen. (laughs) But the people that lived in that town -- the ones that I had got acquainted with -- were very nice people and -- like the people in Lostant. I think that there has always cooler heads around. Some of these people that get excited about things like that probably could make quite a little bit out of it. But I'm sure that the p- probably the two preachers in this town and even this Mr. and Mrs. Blevelt and also I know this teacher that taught in the lower room, Mrs. Spencer, I know that she was a very nice person. I know she would be the kind of a person that wouldn't want to have anything happen that would reflect on the community at all. And as I say, cooler heads prevailed there as they probably did in Lostant at the time. I know that a lot of people didn't like the fact that they had a Ku Klux Klan meeting so close to town and even in the community. And I suppose the same thing was there. But still on the other hand I was up there -- I was in the upstairs room of the school and I was standing in the window watching the Ku Klux Klan meeting going on. So nothing came of it at all and I kept on teaching.

Q: Was this meeting for your benefit or was this just a normal meeting?

A: Well, that I don't know. I think probably the fact that I had arrived in town probably might have triggered it a little bit. I don't

A: know; I always thought so. But I just never knew for sure.

Q: Pure tactic or something on that line.

A: Yes, just wondered what they could do about it. But anyway that's -- so anyway the school progressed and I got along fine and they were just real nice people. In every way you could say they were just as nice as they could be. And now the -- it's hard to -- nowadays it's hard to see how isolated you can be out in the country, you know. Especially now you can be isolated from being in the country and you can also be isolated with mud roads. Now this town had no gravel roads out from it and so whenever it rained -- whenever the rains came -- I don't know whether they were in December or whether they were in January, February, or March -- the roads were impassable. They were really mired down. And so now the family I lived with, Mr. and Mrs. Ford, they had a boy in school -- not in my room but they lived right across the street, too. That's where I stayed. Whenever the roads were fit to go to church, I used to go to church whenever the roads were passable, and they had loaned me their car. You'd be surprised now -- the make of this car was the Maxwell. I drove a Maxwell to church on Sunday. (Laughter)

Q: Where was the closest point for you to go to church then?

A: Kewanee. Yes, I was in Kewanee. I went to Kewanee to church quite often whenever the roads were passable. Well, as I mentioned how isolated you can be on the mud roads and being in the country and things of that kind, why I'll just -- these churches, they had Sunday services and they had Sunday evening services and they had Wednesday evening prayer meetings. And of course there wasn't anything for me to do so I attended -- I went to their prayer meetings.

Q: (laughs) Why not?

A: Yes, why not? I'll say. I went to their prayer meetings; I went to Sunday services; I went to Sunday evening prayer meetings and whenever I just didn't get to church myself. Whenever I could go, I went but I -- they had a two weeks' revival in the Baptist Church, and I went every single day. During their Sunday services, I used to be there. I was with the men, and we discussed religion. I discussed my religion with them, and they discussed theirs. And they were real nice. I think we profited from each other's company.

Q: I would say early ecumenical movement.

A: That's what I was going to say, too. Yes. But anyway we -- I must say I was only there about six months, and I didn't make any converts.

(laughter)

Q: Did they? (laughs)

A: No. But it was quite a little experience. I went to all these meetings. The thing I remember most -- I think I'll always remember is this Mr. Blevelt. Now he was -- I know he must have been nearly seventy years old, maybe more than seventy, but he never missed a prayer meeting. If the roads were too muddy to walk, he rode horseback, on some old horse that he had that was just swayback as could be and he just sort of -- he didn't have a saddle even. He just threw a blanket on the horse and rode. And he was just so happy when he was in church and when they were discussing religion or just fellowship and the prayers that he would lead and other things. It just seemed that he was just so happy he was in his religion that I can just remember how happy he was -- how happy he seemed. And so all through this six months that I was there, why I

A: attended all the services and I really enjoyed them. And I must say another thing, too, the minister was there and I used to have a lot of long talks with him. He took me to a movie one time. He told me he had a movie he'd like to have me see, so I went with him to see "The Birth of a Nation." (laughter) "The Birth of a Nation!"

Q: You finally saw it!

A: Yes, I finally saw it.

Q: Very good. (laughs)

A: He asked me about it afterwards on the way home. He asked me what I thought of it, things of that kind. So I saw "The Birth of a Nation." In 1924 that would have been.

Q: After your experiences with this problem.

A: Yes.

PAUSE

Q: Mr. Lyons, could you tell us about conditions in the town, some of the other good or bad times you had experiences with at school and just what did go on in the town?

A: Well, actually they were all good experiences that I had at school. There was -- I thought I got along real well. And the man -- Mr. and Mrs. Ford -- the person -- the people that I stayed with -- Mr. Ford was a barber. I can remember some very humorous little things that happened there. This little town happens to be located on the Spoon River. And the Spoon River divides another town right across the river -- I can't just remember the name of that town now -- but anyway along this river, there was -- Elmira is the name of that town. Osceola and Elmira. And along this Spoon River at that time there used to be cabins here and

A: there and some of these people -- men -- used to live out there all winter long. And they trapped and hunt maybe and spend their time out there. Then in the spring when the weather started getting warm, they'd come up to Mr. Ford, who was the barber, for a haircut.

Q: After their long winter. (laughs)

A: After their long winter. (laughs) They would have a beard and a head of hair that would credit the hippies nowadays and a beard, too. I know I've see them come into town and I know he mentioned it -- sometimes I'd be up there after school and when he came home. He used to call them "river rats." He'd say, "Well, one of the river rats is im town again." He said, "I had to work on him an hour before I could tell who it was."

(laughter) He said when they came in, why he said that his head wouldn't fit in a bushel basket. (laughter) That was kind of -- that was something that went on during the spring and that was -- I thought that was always kind of funny when he'd come home and he'd talk about it and mention. . .

Q: Sort of like a new kind of a spring cleaning.

A: Yes. Spring cleaning is right. And another little thing that I remember very well when I talk about the isolation of the mud, mud roads, why there was a grocery store in this town and they used to use a truck. They had a little one ton Ford truck or a Chevy -- some little truck they used to go to town and get groceries. They used to carry mostly just the staples in a little store like that. But mud roads -- I think it was about a mile, I believe, to the nearest gravel. They had to go to Neponset. The gravel didn't reach this town. And they were just about out of everything. They just had to get to town to get some groceries somehow or other. And so all the men and this man that owned the store

A: and had the truck -- we all got behind this truck and pushed it up to the gravel. I'll tell you we were all muddy. We were behind that truck you know and splashing mud. I remembered we pushed that truck up to the gravel road so he could get to town to get a supply of groceries. I think that he had -- he knew that the road was going to freeze during the night, and this was sometime in the afternoon. And so he would -- I think he went to Kewanee. I'm not sure. Either Kewanee or Sheffield, and he went there to get his stock of groceries and he knew the road was going to freeze during the night and he could get back with the load. (laughter) So -- but when you think of those days now when you have gravel and blacktop everywhere and you've got concrete and things of that kind, it's hard to realize just what that meant to people, you know, all winter long. They were more or less in _____. They depended on. . .

Q: That's where they were. They depended upon themselves only.

A: Yes. They depended upon themselves. And they depended on themselves for entertainment. Now they would have -- now another thing about these religious people -- they didn't play cards. That was another thing. But they played dominoes. (laughter) Everybody had a -- everybody had a pack of dominoes. And so whenever there was any kind of party, why like you'd have a little party around where you invite your neighbors in. Well, we didn't play cards but we played dominoes. So I learned how to play dominoes. (laughs) I always thought that was a kind of a funny little thing. Now those pupils -- I think I had about fourteen or fifteen in that room, I believe. Not too many. I can't remember the names of very many. I remember Bertha and William Kreasy and Tracy and

A: Everett Ford -- I can't remember too many of them but I do remember them. Some of those people still live around there. I used to go there and visit. I had visited there two or three times after I quit teaching over there. But I'm going to go over again. It just seems like going west is just not the way I go. My wife comes from east of Streator. We most always go east. It takes a special event to take us west. But I'm going to go out there and visit over there again sometime, which I'd like to do. I know about the last day of school of course in those days, why we had kind of a picnic and I know that all the parents came to me and told me how they thought their pupils did real well during the year and they all wanted me to come back. And I had kind of prepared myself to teach in high school and when I had -- when I had this trouble getting a job there in 1923, why I'd more or less decided probably I wouldn't teach school and try to exchange. I was halfway planning on going back to college again and I was -- I enjoyed chemistry, and I was going to study more chemistry. Matter of fact if I intended to teach, I intended to go on and get a degree. But anyway I got another job teaching school east of Streator in a little town called Kinsman, Illinois. And I taught in high school there. I started the high school there in fact. There was a little town -- Kinsman was a very small little village -- and all they had before -- they had maybe ninth grade. The eighth grade teacher would teach a few subjects of the ninth grade. And then most of the time they didn't go anywhere else to school. But the county superintendent _____ decided that Kinsman was big enough and they should have a high school. So he wanted a two year high school. It started out as a two year high school and I was the first teacher in the two year

A: high school. I was the only teacher in the two year high school.

Q: Would that be perhaps approximately when you met your wife?

A: Yes. That was right. (laughs) I was there four years, yes. And she's from Kinsman. Yes, that's true. And there was a lot of interesting things that has happened there, too. That would have to be another tape because this -- this is a different thing entirely. But I remember that last day of school. A few days before that I had read in a paper a _____ account of a bank robbery that had happened in a town I didn't remember at the time. I didn't remember the name of the town. We talked about it there. I think it was in the "Kewanee News" or something of that kind about a town where bank robbers had come in during the night and loaded the safe up and took it away. The safe out of the bank. The headline was "Robbers Carry Away Safe While Town's Sleeping." And when I got to Kinsman, that was the name of the town. That was the town.

Q: That had been robbed.

A: That had been robbed. (laughter)

Q: They must not have had muddy roads that night.

A: No, they tracked -- it happened in the wintertime and they tracked the robbers in the snow and everything like that but they had backed up to the bank, and they had loaded the safe up and carried it away.

Q: So that you were getting an introduction to Kinsman before you really got there. (laughter)

A: So I didn't notice -- I didn't really realize that until I had been there quite a little while. They were still talking about it when I got there in 1924. So in 1924 I started teaching there. But that's really the -- that was my last place of teaching then because it so happened

A: that about that time I kind of became interested in farming. My father died and my uncles and one thing or another. I moved to the farm that I'm living on now. And that would have been in 1928 and I've been there ever since.

Q: Mr. Lyons will tell us of his further adventures on another tape, and some of them having to do with his experiences in Kinsman, Illinois, and further. Thank you, Mr. Lyons.

Janet Kankaala
Transcriptionist