



J.R. Wilkie

Interviewed by Anne Kimzey

1. McCormick population (02:13)

Wilkie: The population here in the '20s and '30s was somewhere in the neighborhood of 22, 000 and it has dwindled since then to a population of less- or just slightly over 7,000, uh, the reason was, I guess, we had uh, about 95% of the people that lived here were dependent on row crop farming for a living, uh, they- they cultivated these small farms with mules and when modern farm machinery came into being, uh, the land was just too rough to use the modern farm machinery so farming went out, uh- gradually went out, and up until 1940, World War II, a lot of people took defense jobs, left McCormick and after the war they had nothing but unpleasant memories about McCormick county and a lot of them didn't return to McCormick.

Kimzey: Um-hum.

Wilkie: And uh, since then the population has still dwindled more, I think we've lost the population at the rate of, something like 10%- between 10%-between each census the last 40 years, and we are down now to just slightly over 7,000, but back in the days when there were a lot of people here they- the uh- one of the main entertainments was, that on a Saturday night, everybody would gather, and have square dances. They had country music, string bands that played for the music, someone to call, and everybody had a great time, uh-

Kimzey: Where did they have these dances?

Wilkie: These dances were sponsored by different individuals, mostly in people's homes.

Kimzey: Um-hum.

Wilkie: Uh, community houses and this sort of thing.

2. Instruments played; how learned (01:30)

Wilkie: The instruments that were used were the violin, uh, guitar, banjo, sometimes piano, uh-

Kimzey: What did you play?

Wilkie: I played some mandolin some, and I played a five string banjo some and a guitar. I could play the guitar too.

Kimzey: What- when you play the banjo, what kind of, um, picking style did you use? I mean did you play the claw- ?

Wilkie: Uh, strictly the old fashion-

Kimzey: Claw hammer?

Wilkie: Yeah, yeah, and uh-

Kimzey: And you played with your family?

Wilkie: Yes, my father was quite a musician, he- he played all the instruments and uh, of the nine children that I'm from <Kimzey laughs> the family that I'm from, uh, most of them played a little but they picked it all up from the father, and uh-

Kimzey: What was his name?

Wilkie: Clandy E. Wilkie.

Kimzey: Clandy?

Wilkie: C-L-A-N-D-Y, Clandy E. Wilkie, and uh-

Kimzey: Do you know where he learned it?

Wilkie: Well his- his family before him were- were musicians. His father taught music, uh, he'd get a lot of organized classes teaching singing, in churches and these sorts of places.

3. Fiddler conventions (00:53)

Wilkie: We uh- we played at quite a few of the square dances, and they had uh- they would have fiddler's conventions.

Kimzey: Um-hum.

Wilkie: Where people would go from county to county- I recall going to Laurens County one time. We played at a fiddler's convention.

Kimzey: Do you remember when that was?

Wilkie: When that was?

Kimzey: Or where, where in Laurens County that was?

Wilkie: Um- uh, I couldn't tell you to save my life, uh, <thinking aloud> Laurens, Laurens county might have been near [Greycord [?]], and there I recall they gave- they gave gifts to the ones that played the best, and uh, such gifts as five pounds of sugar and-

Kimzey: Um-hum.

Wilkie: Uh, four pounds of lard, or just things that you would used to eat, you know.

4. Songs he played (00:52)

Kimzey: Do you remember the names of some of the tunes you'd play <laughs>?

Wilkie: Ho ho ho <chuckles> uh, well they were all such things as "Down Yonder," one <pauses>, "Down Yonder," uh, "Turkey in the Straw," "Whistling Whoopus," uh, Oh Lord, I need to think about this, I've forgotten all of them, I haven't thought about them in years <Kimzey laughs>.

Kimzey: What about, um, like "Sally Gooden?"

Wilkie: Yeah, "Sally Gooden- "

Kimzey: Did you play-

Wilkie: Uh-

Kimzey: "Red Wing"

Wilkie: "Red Wing," uh-

Kimzey: "Arkansas Trout"

Wilkie: "Arkansas Trout," <Kimzey laughs,> <Wilkie laughs>, now you're naming them, you did good.

5. Truck farming (01:42)

Wilkie: We did quite a bit of farming, we did some uh- a good bit of truck farming, uh, we first were engaged strictly in cotton and corn, then we started doing some truck farming, growing vegetables, uh, I think we had one of the first tractors on the farm, and we bought an old [Fortune [?]] tractor in 1925. That was a big pile of junk.

Kizmey: What kind of tires did those tractors have?

Wilkie: They had steel wheels.

Kimzey: Ok.

Wilkie: All steel wheels <Kimzey laughs> and that thing had an old coil on it, you had to be a real man to crank one, you had to spin it to make it crank, and you had to be strong to do that, to get the thing started, but then, uh, in 1930- I guess it was '36, Alice Chalmers came out with a smaller tractor that was much more modern and all, and we got one of those, and we- we uh, grew mostly vegetables, uh, grew sweet potatoes, cabbage, tomatoes, and uh, that sort of thing, and there was a pretty good market for it then.

Kimzey: Where did you take them?

Wilkie: We, uh- our market was mostly Abbeville, Greenwood, McCormick.

Kimzey: You would load it on a truck and go?

Wilkie: Yeah, yeah, load it on a pick-up, take it to those places.

6. Farming practices (01:41)

Wilkie: He was inclined to listen- we were getting county agents in then, you know, Clemson graduates, that uh- knew a lot about farming, and he listened to them a lot. One of the things I remember he did. No one had ever used rock lime in McCormick County. It's to- to uh, eliminate the acidity in the soil, and he uh- he ordered lime one time and it came to the- to spur track from Plum Branch in a box car. The only way we had to unload it was to take it with shovels- that stuff is heavy you know.

Kimzey: Um-hum.

Wilkie: You pick it up with shovels and walk to the door and threw it on the wagon <Kimzey laughs> and they would take it out to the fields, and spread it. Far cry from what they have now, it's all done by machinery, then load it up and then take it with a spreader and then it's, uh, truck would hold up- hold about eight tons, and take it right out to the field and just spread it, you know, nothing to it, but we had to spread it by hand, is all, spread it by hand, and he had some theories about growing cover crops early in the spring, well in the fall [he was so fetch for a cover crop [?]], then in the spring he would turn that under for the- for the soil, then-

Kimzey: Uh-huh.

Wilkie: Would produce nitrogen and uh, he would plow that under and plant his crops on that.

7. The potato house (03:05)

Wilkie: He built a potato house out of- out of old, uh, pine slabs that he got from the saw mill, it's where they cut lumber, you know, he built a potato house out of those things. He had the walls filled with dirt. We didn't have the modern building materials that you have now, and he'd fill these walls full of dirt about, uh, a foot thick, and he put those potatoes in there in bushel crates, like bean crates, with one on top of the other, it would go all the way to the top of the thing. He'd put, uh, oh, several hundred bushels of those things in there, and they would keep in there till- till March- the end of March and April of the next year, keep real well, just like [till dried potatoes [?]].

Kimzey: Um-hum.

Wilkie: It's the same- about the same principal. Now, I remember that sometimes when it would get real cold, he'd go out there, put a little fire- put a little stove in there- put a little fire in there to keep it, uh, the temperature from getting down below 40 degrees.

Kimzey: Um-hum, some people have been telling me about sweet potato banks, I guess his house was like a large version of that?

Wilkie: Well, the sweet potato banks, actually, this- I don't know- I don't know what it is, I don't know all the technicalities involved in the storage of foods like that, but you need- there needs to be some humidity there, you can't- if it gets too dry you foul them up, if it gets too wet you foul them up. It's got to be just right. In the same class as, I think the onions, potatoes; the ice potatoes, sweet potatoes- but potato banks were the simple way that people had to storing food- home grown food for the home. They would take potatoes and pile them up in a pile them up in a pile. They would let them cure a few days, uh, I don't- I don't know if they would put just a little something on them so they would cure for several days. Then they would take corn stalks and put over- over that pile of potatoes, mixed with pine straw, and then they would put lots of pine straw on it, and then they would take shovels and put dirt on top of that- fill it up with dirt. Well you can see there would be considerable moisture in there-

Kimzey: Uh-huh.

Wilkie: That arrangement, but those potatoes would keep, unless they- sometimes they would get too cold. You'd find sometimes the potato hill, the north side of it, the more the potato would be rotten than those on the south side.

Kimzey: Oh yeah.

Wilkie: Because they got a little colder on the north side, the north wind got them.

Kimzey: So what do they look like from the outside, were they just mounds- ?

Wilkie: They just a- just a mound, uh- hill like you might say, it would be maybe, uh- it might be six feet high.

8. Hunting rabbits (01:10)

Wilkie: They hunted- a lot of people around here kill food. They kill quail and rabbits. There used to be a lot of rabbits, of course, until [tularemia [?]] came along, and sort of fouled up the rabbit situation.

Kimzey: When was that? Do you remember?

Wilkie: The rabbits- the rabbit- rabbit [tularemia [?]] started in this country in uh- 19-1930-33.

Kimzey: And it just wiped out the rabbits?

Wilkie: Killed a lot of them- [tularemia [?]]- people would take [tularemia [?]] too- you could catch [tularemia [?]] from a rabbit-

Kimzey: From eating rabbit?

Wilkie: Cut the rabbit in half. No, not from eating it. You-you- they caught it from when they would dress the rabbit. It's the something they would catch from the hide of the rabbit.

Kimzey: How did- what happened when you got [tularemia [?]]?

Wilkie: Well, it was something that would go in- in some place where the skin was broken on the hand, or something, and would settle in one of the joints, and- but it would settle in your spine, that's about it.

Kimzey: Would it kill you?

Wilkie: Yeah, it would kill you.

9. First radio (01:48)

Wilkie: I know when it first started- when we first got radios here, I remember there was a farm that lived about a mile from where we lived, and this would have been somewhere around '20, I don't know '27-'28-'29, somewhere along in there. That was the only radio

in that community, and they operated it from batteries and they had to use wet cell batteries in the [thing [?]] to operate it, but later on I think they started operating it with dry cell batteries, but this one we were getting the Grand Ole' Opry.

Kimzey: Um-hum.

Wilkie: And we would have a time getting the Grand Ole' Opry on that thing, and keeping it on there, you know <Kimzey laughs>, everybody would crowd around, 50 people or more, trying to hear that radio.

Kimzey: So his was the only one in the county?

Wilkie: The only one in the community.

Kimzey: Which community was this? Was this part of [Clausen [?]]

Wilkie: It was down below Plum Branch all this- all that- all this country area- there were a lot of people living out there you know, they had 22,000 people spread all over the county, living out on farms and uh, and the communities, there were a good many people living in- within a quarter mile of each other, you know. It would be so hard to uh- to recreate all of those little paths that went from one house to the other <Kimzey laughs>, but that's the way it was. They had a path to everybody's house. Not a road but a path.

Kimzey: Dirt path or- ?

Wilkie: Yeah, dirt path.

