WILBUR RAY

Amthor: This is a portion of the *Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri in the 1940s* program. The Nodaway County Historical Society is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Council, and with support of the National Endowment of the Humanities. Today were here – today's date is March 11, '09, and we're here at the Worth County Senior Center in Worth County, Missouri. We're conducting an interview and the interviewer is Joni Amthor, and assisting is Margaret Kelley. We're interviewing Wilbur Ray, who was born on March 11, 1925, and he lived during the 1940s and this interview is his story of life during this time period including World War II.

Okay, Wilbur, can you tell us a little bit about your background? Can you tell us where and when you were born, some family details about your parents, their occupations, whether you had any brothers and sisters, and if you want to tell us a little bit about your other background that would be great.

Ray: I was born March 11, 1925, about a mile east of Isadora, to James G. Ray and Laura Hall Ray. I was a member of a family of thirteen children. I was the eighth child. My father was from a large family and the youngest of the family; he was born a crippled man and wasn't expected to live until he was some twenty years old. My grandfather died at a fairly early age and they lived on eighty acres of homesteaded land who had been homesteaded from the government by my great-grandparents. Because of Grandpa knew he wasn't going to live long, he distributed his land and wealth in a will to his children, leaving the homesteaded land to his wife and my father, who was crippled, with the idea that he take care – his name was Jimmy – that he take care – they take care of little Jimmy until he died. Well, after Grandpa died, when my father became about 18 or 19 years old he began to gain strength and was able to get up and walk and move around. After that time, he became fairly strong – he lived to raise thirteen children and acquire a large amount of land, in addition to the homesteaded land, in Worth County, Missouri. As I say, I was a member of thirteen children; of two who died – one girl died when she was seven years old with scarlet fever; another girl died when she was five years old with typhoid fever. The rest all survived and married and raised families of their own throughout various parts of the country.

Amthor: You mentioned earlier about your family being here when the Indians were here. Did you want to talk a little bit about it?

Ray: Yes, my great-grandfather and grandmother came to this area from Clark County, Kentucky in a covered wagon. They came with two little boys; one was my grandfather. As I understand, my grandfather was two years old when he came from Kentucky to Missouri. They settled in the area of Isadora, or course, at that time there was no such thing as Isadora, or anything else, only just Indians lived here. They were here about two years and my great-grandfather died and left my great-grandmother with those two little boys. She made friends with the Indians, and the Indians took her in and by their help, she survived the first two winters until she could get on her feet. As she lived in the area, she began to buy and sell land. The records in the courthouse in Grant City will show many of the transactions of land where she bought and sold land in the

area. The records – they state up here, that she was the Elsie Ray, the widow that helped settle Worth County.

Amthor: Could you tell us about life in the 1940s before – first of all – were you in the military?

Ray: No, I was not.

Amthor: Okay. Could you tell us a little bit about life in the 1940s – some of your concerns, your joys, and the reasons why you didn't participate in the military?

Ray: Alright. As I stated before, my father had created a fairly large amount of land and in World War II they needed soldiers, but they also needed food. They had a draft board here in Grant City, and I was signed up along with my other fellow members of the country and each time, my turn would come up to be drafted into the Army, the first thing they said, "We need food as well as we need soldiers," and I was the only one, with my crippled father, operating three hundred and fifty acres of land and producing food, and they said "You go right back out on the farm; that's where you're going to do your good deed for your country is to produce food for the soldiers." I started working at a very early age; I had very little education. I did get to go to grade school. I went eight years to a little one room school house in Isadora, Missouri, with approximately thirty students, more or less during the years, in a one room school house with one teacher. After I graduated from grade school at fourteen years old, my dad said your education is going to be here on the land, so I went home and I went to work. It wasn't long then after that, till the Great Depression came. You people might not know what I'm talking about – in the early thirties. We lived there with a large family and land and we planted and raised what we ate, and we ate what we raised and we did very little traveling or going anywhere, just trying to produce enough for the family. Since I was the only boy at home then, me and my older brother, he had already married and gone to his own. I was very busy trying to help Dad to produce a living for my 11 brothers and sisters, and that's where my effort was. I did very little running around – you people probably don't remember that conditions were hard for the farmer. We couldn't get a car, we couldn't get tires, we couldn't get gasoline. Even food was rationed – you might not remember this, but sugar was rationed; couldn't hardly get any sugar. Many things we couldn't get, so we did what we could with what we had. I lived under those conditions until the Depression was over, till the war was over and in 1944, I was nineteen years old, I married a Martha Laura McCord from Denver [Missouri]. My parents left the homesteaded land, and moved to Grant City with the younger children. Martha and I lived there for 2 years and raised livestock and grain, and then after that the war being over, eventually we bought us a hundred and fifty acres of land south east of Grant City and we moved down there, out on our own, my father and mother living here in town. We lived there, oh, till 1960 on that land and added other land to it. During that time in our life, we had a girl born in 1945 and she died at birth. We had a son born in 1950, and he died at birth, and we had another son born in 1955, and saved him. Today we have him and his wife and their three grown children. Since that time, we moved up into the Grant City area near town and our son, who was six years old, went to school in Grant City and high school and from then on he went farming. He farmed for a few years and picked up a job with an insurance adjuster with an insurance company and he still works for them – the insurance company some, the last twenty years. We live at the west edge of Grant City; we're

considered the old people of the country. I guess from you using us here as the interview, and we are retired, still have the land we've acquired and our son farms it.

Amthor: Was there any other family members who participated in the war?

Ray: I had one brother who went to California; well, actually he went to Oregon first, and he was drafted into the service, and he was in the Navy a while. He had a hearing problem and eventually got a discharge from the Navy, but he stayed in California and worked in the ship yards for a number of years. That's the only one, as far as our immediate family, that was in the service. I had some brothers-in-laws who served a great deal of time in the World War II. I trust you're talking about World War II? Right?

Amthor: Yes. Now I'd like to ask you about propaganda. What did you know about the war in Europe and the war in China?

Ray: I knew very little; very little, because as I say we lived back in the hills on a three hundred and fifty acre farm and it only – about the only access was when we went to town, which was very seldom. We lived there – well, you could say very much like the Indians, because we – as I said, we used what we had, we raised what we ate, and ate what we raised. My mother was an excellent cook and seamstress, and she made nearly all of our clothes for eleven children until they were some sixteen or eighteen years old. She bought material and made many, many clothes.

Amthor: How did the U.S. portray the war and of Japan?

Ray: All I know is the people that I talked to here and what little we could hear over an Atwater camp radio if you know what I'm talking about. It's an old, old radio, one of the first ones that came in and they despised the Japanese people because of the attack they made on us in Pearl Harbor, which was terrible; terrible. I remember well the day that Harry Truman came out over the news – he called the Emperor of Japan and told him, said we have developed a terrible weapon of mass destruction. If you would be willing to surrender to us, it would save hundreds and hundreds of lives. The Emperor laughed in his face, and said "I'm not going to fall for that propaganda," and then Harry Truman sent the bombs- the atomic bombs – and dropped them on Japan, and say, I'll tell you, within three or four days they had changed their notion. They were willing and tickled to surrender or get out of the problems that had come upon them from the atomic bomb. Many of the – as I understood, many of the people who were Japanese who were in our country almost had to leave because of the attack on Pearl Harbor. They weren't safe and it was very – it was chaos in the cities. If you were a Jap, you were in trouble.

Amthor: Could you tell us anything about the internment camps that they had to go to?

Ray: I don't know anything about them, ma'am, only what little I heard, which was very little on the radio.

Amthor: Okay. So tell us about Pearl Harbor; the day that Pearl Harbor was bombed. What were you doing?

Ray: I can't tell you exactly what I was doing. I was on the farm, taking care of the livestock and the grain. I don't know exactly what I was doing, but it was a loud thing on the news. Now understand we didn't have news like we have now, only radios, battery radios that didn't reach out very far. We knew it was going on; we knew what happened, and that's about all I know. We knew there were many Japanese killed.

Amthor: Other than the radio, was there any other way that you learned about the progress of the war?

Ray: Well, only what one person said to another, which is propaganda among the country, which is some official, and some unofficial, so I don't know – we didn't know much about it, only that it was going on.

Amthor: Did you get letters from your brother that was involved? Did he ever try to send letters?

Ray: Not that I remember of. He was not in the – he was in the Navy, and he was not in the service very long. They drafted him, but for some unknown reason, they hadn't caught his hearing problem, which he was very – he had a very bad hearing problem, and after he got in there and they started taking his training, they seen they didn't – they just couldn't use him, so they gave him a medical discharge. So very little we heard from him; or he knew about – he went to work for Douglas Aircraft in California.

Amthor: Could you tell us more about life on the home front during the war? More about the economy, what activities did people do while they were here; how did they support the war effort in Europe, that type of thing?

Ray: About all I can say is how the people survived here – we had a ration board, if you know what I'm talking about. They were three men in Worth County which most things were rationed: gasoline, tires, many foods. It was just like today, which isn't good to say, but it was true. If you were a good friend to one of those people on the ration board, you got some stuff. If you weren't, you did not. And we were not good friends. You were limited – Dad had an old Dodge car that would run. We were limited to three gallon of gas per week, and that car was to Dad and his family, my older brother and his wife, and what little running around that I was allowed to do, so you can know about how much we traveled, and we lived some ten miles from Grant City.

Amthor: How about the – did you go to any movies, for entertainment. What did you do at home? Did you play cards during that time period?

Ray: We did very little movies, there were a few. The number one thing in my dad and his family was we went to church every Sunday; never missed. We usually rode a horse or walked to church. My wife and I attended many evangelistic meetings. We had a pair of saddle horses and rode them back and forth to church. That was the number one thing and we studied from the Bible and from things that were offered there for us to read. That was the number one things, and that was basically all the entertainment. Now we did have some amongst our own family.

One of the things that my father learned about his children at an early age, is they were musically inclined, but they didn't have much of a chance to get a musical education. I know when I was a real tiny boy I can just barely remember when Dad saw that he never had any money to amount to anything, but he had animals and food all produced off the farm. He loved horses and of course in that day and age, horses were important, because they were your power. Dad raised up four horses and broke them to work and got them real nice and he took those four horses and I don't remember if he sold them and took the money, or if he traded the four horses for a new player piano. Something that was out of this world. I had a group of sisters- seven sisters that all learned to play piano, and play it well, and none of them had a music lesson except the youngest one. The youngest one had some music lessons after Dad and Mom were died. We loved to sit around that piano and sing. We were naturally inclined that way – we could sing the different parts, the bass, the tenor, and the alto, along with playing the piano. It got to be the place where people learned that we could do that, and people began to request to come and entertain at various places. I had a sister – a pair of sisters that played a guitar and a mandolin, and they sang and they entertained around at the various rodeos and school houses and places like that. Talking about entertainment – that's the entertainment that we had. As we grew old enough, we learned from our older siblings, our older sisters and brothers, how to sing this and how to do that and there's been much music in our family.

Martha: You sing with the band up at Bedford and go to the Center to sing.

Ray: Yes, I'm still singing with about three bands in the musical jams around over say here in Grant City and Bedford, Iowa, and Maryville, and Darlington. I still sing with some of those bands when we go.

Amthor: Talking about the bands – what about the music during that time period? What was popular? What were people singing? What were the big bands that were out there?

Ray: Oh, let's see. We weren't so familiar with the big bands – we kind of music of our own. Of course it started with religious music; singing at church was where it started, and then other songs as they were requested were learned among the children. Let's see, I can't hardly think of any of the big bands, really. They were not big bands that we were familiar with, they were just little groups of singers that went to school houses, and we had suppers – box suppers, and pie suppers. You may not know what I'm talking about. I produced music and just had a lot of fun. The old cowboy songs were used much then. Frankly speaking, that's primarily the songs that I sing now as I attend the bands. People like them – they like them real well. They have a story to them, they're not just a matter of repeat, repeat, repeat. There's a story goes with those songs and very, very nice used today and the older people especially appreciate those songs. Then the old spiritual music is used considerably and people appreciate that, and respect it.

Amthor: You said that you made your own clothing. Did you use any of the feed sacks that they talked about that they had clothing made out of, dresses made of that?

Ray: You probably don't remember, but Mother raised chickens to bring that up. She bought feed in sacks – flowered sacks, they were real pretty, really, and she made many of the girls' tops and other clothing out of those sacks. As a matter of fact, my wife, Martha, today, has several

quilts that's made out of those feed sack material, and quilted and put away; giving them to our children, as they want them. They're pretty – real pretty; good stuff. I can remember when I was a boy that one thing that Mother did that I didn't like was when she made my shirts, she never put a button on the cuff; she just made a cuff out there and she knew just how much I could get my hand through, every time she'd be just barely would slip through there, and I told her "Mom, I wish I could have a button on my cuff on my shirt like the other boys." And she said "You don't need that. You got that shirt and that's doing you." I can remember that very well. She got blue denim material and made them and they were as nice as anybody's shirts, but they were homemade by her sitting on her sewing machine – an old Daisy hand- foot operated sewing machine.

Amthor: How about the cooking? Was there a lot of different things that were cooked that didn't have – that you had to substitute things for?

Ray: I don't know what you'd call them a substitute or not. We raised potatoes, we raised beans, we raised carrots, we raised corn – all kinds of vegetables, and all kinds of fruit. We had a fruit orchard. Dad raised animals and he was a good hand either show how or do himself the butchering. We always milked cows. We had cows to milk, we had butter, we had milk, we had cheese. Mother had chickens – hens all the time. We always had eggs, had milk to drink, Dad butchered animals – beef, hogs, sheep. We had any kind of meat that we wanted, and that's what we lived on.

Martha: Tell them about your popcorn.

Ray: Yeah, potatoes, -we raised potatoes and we – Dad was more concerned about getting enough food in the cellar and putting it away for winter than he was money to pay any bills, because he didn't have very many bills to pay, to tell you the truth about it, only taxes, which didn't amount to very much. Oh, yeah, I learned to do some of those things, as you say, we sat around after – in the evenings. I raised a patch of popcorn, and I popped the corn for the family and we played Chinese checkers, we played some Dominos, and we sang as we did those things. Music was the base of almost everything that we did.

Martha: Tell them about the wind charger.

Ray: All right. People sort of laughed at us, because any one of the family as they worked they were always humming a tune or singing a song, which teaches you the words of those songs we learned from one another, but any time we were working we were humming. One person asked Dad why he went around singing all the time, and he said "I do that trying to keep from crying." [Laugh] What did you say, Martha?

Martha: Tell them about that wind charger.

Ray: Okay. We didn't have electricity. We hardly had a telephone that would work. We were out in the area – fact of the matter is, we didn't even have a road that ran to our house. We went through a mile of cow pasture to get to our house from the main road, if you call it the main road. We walked a mile each day to get our mail, which was delivered by a man with a team of ponies

on a carriage type thing; a buggy type thing. Dad was always interested in developing something. He got a hold of a tower and a generator and a propeller and put up a wind charger that generated electricity. He got a hold of a set of batteries and put them in our cave, where they wouldn't freeze, and the wind blew that propeller and ran that generator and charged us up electricity, and we had electricity before anybody much around us anywhere. We had to be careful, because it wasn't very powerful and we could run our batteries down, but we got a lot of good out of that. We had a little radio that ran off from it, and we had lights that ran off of that wind charger, with that wind producing that electricity.

Martha: Tell them how tall it was.

Ray: Well, I don't know how tall it was – oh, sixty feet or so. We had a problem

Martha: Tell them about that.

Ray: We had a problem – me and my older brother primarily, did most of the work, or the difficult tasks, and we had a problem with that generator wearing out the brushes and we had to replace those brushes ever so often which was on the top of that tower. My older brother was scared to death of heights, and that was my job even to the time I was down to twelve years old, I've climbed that thing many a time and replaced those brushes in there with Dad and my brother looking up at me saying, "Hang on, be careful." I never was a bit afraid. I could climb to the moon and never bothered me at all.

It seems as though in our family, maybe it was developed this way, but needs were among the children. Or abilities, I should have said. One child would have an ability to do this thing, and another one this thing, and another this thing. I don't know as my parents planned it out that way, but I believe that was just a God sent thing. Something that was needed, there was a child that had an ability to do that thing,m in our family.

Martha: Tell them about Mr. Ray giving his kid-how to repair…

Ray: Dad, as he went along and wasn't able to work, as more work was come than the family was able to do, did hire a man and he kept a hired hand most of the time. He built a house that supplied that hired man a dwelling. Usually a hired man didn't last over two or three years, but he paid those hired men by the month, gave them a house to live in, a cow to milk, meat to butcher, for their feeding their family. As that went on, and Dad finally retired and moved to town, he gave that little house to the church at Isadora where we always attended, was about a mile away. A group of men moved that little building to the church at Isadora which still operates; and that little building became a parsonage, has been added on to and a basement put under it and I think if you'd look around, it's one of the nicest church - a part of a church – places for the preacher to live. Also, a church building is very, very active. It's been operating there since 1900. We have the records clear back to when it began. The building was moved there in 1900 from about two miles east and the Isadora Church, of course, in my mind is a great thing. I went there – I suppose Mother was taking me in her arms when I was a baby. I'm still going there today; I've been an Elder and a teacher there for thirty-five years and its one of the most important things in life to me, and to most of my family and what is left of us still attend the church in Isadora.

Amthor: What type of advice could give someone that's going through – the economy is sort of like that – what you went through – not quite, but in comparison, how would you compare the '40s economy to today's economy?

Ray: The difference that I can see in the 40s and today, of course the thing that's got people in trouble today is the money that they've borrowed and can't pay back. They've bought them thinking they're going to be higher and higher and for many years it went that way, but when stock prices starts to decrease, then if you've bought something at a high price you're in trouble. Back in the '40s there was not nearly as much debt. There was some, but not nearly as much. They were more careful about buying something that they couldn't pay for. They weren't encouraged to go and buy a house that – for a larger amount of money, and then depend on the future to pay it off. In the '40s, as far as we were concerned, if we didn't have the money to buy something, we wouldn't buy it, we'd do without. Therefore, when prices went down, we weren't hurt so bad. Now, not everybody was that way; there were some people who were in trouble, because they had made some mistakes along that line and there was no welfare then. People probably don't remember that but there was no welfare then. If you couldn't make it and couldn't feed your family you just went hungry. I can remember many times when my father had very little, but he did have food. Of people coming to our place and said our family is starving and I never saw Dad ever turn anyone away without something; maybe it was a sack of potatoes or a side of beef or a ham, but Dad never turned anybody away. He usually had something that he could give them that they use for food.

Martha: . . . .The farm that we bought, and the man had lost it and then he bought it back, and then we bought it.

Ray: That was during World War II, when he added to his land, Elvie Pole was his name, and he had a eighty acres he bought twenty more for $100 an acre, which was an unreasonable price. Because of that buy, he lost the whole hundred and fifteen and the – rather than the loan company taking it over, we'd just wish you'd stay there, and they left him stay there for two years and pay what little rent he could. Two years after he had lost the farm, so to speak, really he was able to buy the farm back for about sixty percent of the note that was against it, and then went from then on up, and then, eventually he retired and we bought that land of him. That was in World – Depression times, back in the thirties.

Amthor: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Kelley: One thing I was going to ask about – you had 350 acres in your family when you were young; how – what was – did you have mechanized equipment, or did you still use horses and that a type of equipment?

Ray: We used horses to begin with and the way Dad acquired that, most of that land; of course I told you originally some of that was homesteaded and as the land came up for sale around it, that would join or in that area, Dad usually bought it for what taxes were against it. He bought a lot of that land for four or five dollars a acre. Which at that time wasn't very productive, but he said, "Boys, we've got this piece of land. Get out there and clear it off and do something with it."

And when we got through with that, that land was productive and is still very productive today. He acquired it for little of nothing.

Kelley: And when you cleared it off that meant cut the trees off

Ray: Cut the timber off

Kelley: That was all by hand, I suppose, manually done?

Ray: That's right. Stumps

Kelley: And then plowed it out

Ray: Yep

Kelley: With horses?

Ray: Primarily with horses, yes. I've – Back years ago I've run an old walking plow many a time, a team of horses, all day long. Shucked corn by hand,

Kelley: Do you remember when you got your first tractor?

Ray: Yes, Dad was one of the first to have a tractor around. Actually he got a little education along that line, because the girl he married's father, who was Frank Hall – if I understand it correctly, and I think I'm right, was a half Indian and he finally got a job working for the railroad company when it first came into being in this area. He learned steam engines and steam power and how to develop it. He worked for the railroad company, he was a railroad engineer, as much as you could call one then. When he finally got away from the railroad, then he acquired a steam engine of his own, and a saw mill and a thrash machine and he thrashed around over the country and Dad's wife, my mother, being Grandpa's oldest child by his second marriage, I must add, taught Dad many things concerning steam power and Dad worked with Grandpa a long time in that area and Dad began to get – he finally got a hold of an old – an old Wallace tractor, which I don't remember, and then he got a hold of an old International tractor, of course, all on steel, but still primarily we did most of the work with the horses. Some of the heaviest work the tractor took off the horses, which made it a little easier on the horses, but primarily, yes, we worked horses. Dad raised horses; Dad raised mules; he instead of having a pasture full of cows, Dad had a pasture full of mares, and he raised mules, and we'd round them mules up in the fall, and the ones that we wanted to save and break for our own use, we kept, and the rest of them we put on the market. Dad sold horses and mules all over this country when I was a small boy. And I worked many, many of them, drove many horses, many mules, shucked corn by hand, plowed corn with the horses, and

Martha: Tell them about your combining.

Ray: Well, Dad was one of the first men to come up with a combine. He had a thrashing machine very early after he learned how to operate those things from Grandpa. He had an old

Advance-Rumeley thrash machine which run with that old International tractor with a belt. We cut the grain and run it through that thrashing machine and harvested it, and as we went along, Dad acquired tractors as he could, which was nothing as to what we have in tractors today. First combine we ever had, I'm talking about a threshing and combining machine all in one, if you understand what I mean, was an old Allis Chalmers – a hand lift that cut a three foot swath around the field and run with a power take off and that was really an advancement. Really, an advancement. Dad raised a lot of wheat; course, like I said, we raised what we ate, and ate what we raised; Dad raised wheat, we ground our wheat and made our flour and that's just the way we lived when I was young.

Amthor: Now you said you got to stay home during the war to plant the grain. Did the government have any say in what you planted?

Ray: Not at that time, and you said – I noticed you said I got to stay home. [Laugh] Can you imagine you getting to stay home when all the friends you grew up with went to the service? [Laugh] I *had* to stay home; I'll put it that way. Wasn't particularly that I wanted to. I don't know – what was the question that you asked me?

Amthor: Did the government have any say in what you planted?

Ray: No, not really a say, but yet there was – there began to be some – well money paid for certain things that the government wanted produced. Like today, you have a subsidy on this crop, or that crop, if they want more or payment on this crop or that crop. Wasn't very much then; usually pretty much on your own, you planted whatever you wanted to, and you made good of it, or you just didn't make good of it. There's been very much more government control since that time. I don't know if that's good or bad, but that just makes more government and more dependence on the government.

Amthor: Did you have anything you would like to comment on yourself?

Unknown: Here's the first victim.

Martha: The grain that he got from threshing machine, they couldn't pay the bills, so they gave him grain, and I fed that to my chickens and then I had a hundred – I got three hundred chickens every year and I had a hundred roosters and my brother-in-law hauled them down to Isadora and I got a dollar a piece for them. But I gave them the wheat that they paid Wilbur for threshing.

Ray: My Dad done much thrashing for his neighbors; everybody didn't have a threshing machine, Dad did. When he got his done, he went and thrashed for the neighbors. Many times, people didn't have the money to pay for the thrashing which was so much a bushel. Dad said, "Alright, just give me some grain." And they'd give him some grain, whether that was wheat or oats, or whatever it was, and they paid their thrash bill in that. I can think of many who were never able to pay anything; didn't give any grain and Dad just went ahead and did the thrashing anyway, whether they could pay for it or not. People looked out for one another then; more; much more than they do now.

Amthor: Well, I thank you for coming; I think we've had a great interview, unless there is one other little thing that you want to tell us?

Ray: Not particularly that I know of.

Amthor: Okay.

Ray: This is to the best of my remembrance and knowledge. I wouldn't guarantee it to be a hundred percent correct, but it's the best I can tell you, and I think you'll find it nearly exactly that way. And I thank you.

Amthor: Okay. Well, thank you for coming.