PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview by Elizabeth Canterbury for the Oral History Office during the fall of 1973. Elizabeth Canterbury edited the transcript and Frances Culver reviewed it.

Frances Culver was born in 1889 in Whiteside County, Illinois. Being the only girl in the family, Mrs. Culver tells of many of the expected duties a young girl growing up near the Mississippi River would be expected to perform. Her and her husband moved to Athens in 1922 and have resided near or in Athens ever since.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator, and editor sought to preserve the informal conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

Frances Culver, October, 1973, Athens, Illinois.
Elizabeth Canterbury, Interviewer.

Q. Walter Culver, age 86, and his wife, Frances Culver, age 84, live on a farm in the Indian Point Community about 5 miles northeast of Athens, Illinois. They have lived on the same farm, which they own, for the last 51 years. They will, in turn relate changes of farm and farm home practices during this period.

Mrs. Culver, we have some things to talk about--your early childhood and your girlhood from the time you were born until you came to live in this part of the state. Do you want to tell us some of your recollections?

A. I was born in Whiteside County on the farm where my father was born and where my great-grandfather had homesteaded, not homesteaded exactly, he bought it from the government. My Mother's people were English and her mother was born on the Isle of Mann. I had three brothers, no sisters.

Q. Were your brothers older or younger than you?

A. One brother was older and two younger.

Q. Then you were the only girl in the family?

A. Yes. My father had five brothers and no sisters. (laughs)

Q. Going back to your childhood, what are some of the earliest recollections you can remember from your homeplace?

A. I remember one of the things we liked to do best was to go fishing in the creek that was down in the pasture. And we went skating there in the winter. We also went up on the island which was an island in the Mississippi [River] where my father and his brothers used to camp. And in the early days was where they used to cut the wood and bring it home to heat the house.

Q. They had to go to the island to get the wood to heat their homes?

A. Yes.

Q. What about ice?

A. There was an ice house and ice was bought in blocks from the Mississippi River, because we lived just about five miles from the Mississippi, and it was put down with sawdust between. The ice was used very sparingly but the biggest treat was to have homemade ice cream with the ice. That was something that was very special.

Q. Would the ice actually last all summer?

A. Yes.

Q. Then the Mississippi River really played an important part in your early life, didn't it. What is the Mississippi River like in that part of the state?

A. We were about six miles from Fulton which was across the river to Clinton, Iowa. Oh, I don't know it was. . . . It was about one mile wide in the summer and several miles wide in the spring.

Q. Was it navigable?

A. Oh yes, oh yes. The logs were floated down the Mississippi from Wisconsin and Minnesota to the sawmills that were in Fulton. Occasionally there would be a huge catfish that would be in some of the logs and I remember one time seeing one in a store window that weighed 125 pounds.

Marquette in his journey down the Mississippi tells about seeing monsters in the river. As near as I can make out, they were just not far from Fulton and they were these big catfish with their big horns and big mouths and the sailors thought they were demons of the deep or something of that sort.

Q. Let's talk about remembrances of your home. Can you tell us what your home was like and some of the most important parts about it to you, as you recollect?

A. Our house had twelve rooms. There was grandmother, there was Great Aunt Susan part of the time and there was always a hired girl and there were one or two hired men and father and mother and we children.

Q. Tell us what it was like having a hired girl in the home, and the things she did to help the family, and your relationship to her.

A. Well, I remember reading in one of the old diaries this statement, "Maggie came to work today. She will get 75¢ a week." Maggie was the daughter of one of the neighbors. Then I remember Amanda. She went to school and worked, too.

Q. She lived in your home and went to school and worked after school hours?

A. And on Saturdays. Oh yes, there was an aunt that was there too much of the time.

Q. As you were growing up, what was your relationship to the older people in the family? Did anyone have the special job of taking care of the little ones?

A. I don't seem to remember anything about that. I helped wash the dishes and my brothers had chores. There were the eggs to bring in, cows to be milked, the wood box to fill and. . . .

Q. Can you remember when your chores first started when you were a little girl?

A. No.

Q. Do you think your life was any different being a girl in the family than that of the boys?

A. I can remember I thought it was too bad I had to help in the house and they could be outside. (laughter)

Q. Let's start with about the age that you started in school. What are your recollections of school?

A. I remember very vividly my first day at school. We lived a half mile from school. We walked and carried our lunch. One of the big boys--this was a country school--one of the big boys called me "Frankie Rabbit" and I cried and went home. (laughs) I was called Frankie until I was grown.

Q. You didn't stay your first whole day at school? Then how did it develop after that?

A. Well, I went to country school until I entered high school.

Q. Where did you go to high school?

A. At Morrison High School. My older brother and I had a top buggy and old Jen the horse, and we drove to high school. Then the next two years my next younger brother and I did [drove to high school]. Then I think Jen went to high school some more years till she was old and feeble. (laughs)

Q. Did your home life change any during the time you progressed through school from being a small child? Did it make any difference in the chores?

A. Let's see, my grandmother died and my aunt died and there were no longer hired girls.

Q. Did that change your life at home?

A. Well, there was more to do. (laughs)

Q. Right. What were some of the things you did? In the summer when you weren't in school what was life like?

A. Well, there was the washing and the ironing I remember were very burdensome.

Q. How did they wash at that time?

A. We washed on the washboard and boiled the clothes and hung them out, and the irons were heated. We did have a kerosene stove in the summertime.

The irons were heated and there were many, many starched petticoats and ruffles and linen tablecloths.

Q. Do you ever remember using an old fluter for the petticoats?

A. No.

Q. Just a hot iron for the ruffle.

A. Yes.

Q. All right, then you left high school. You graduated from high school. All right, then what happened in your life?

A. Well, then I went to the University of Illinois and graduated. Then I was a chemist in the State Soil Survey Department for a year. Then I taught science in Clinton and then in Springfield High School. And then I took a course in poultry at Cornell University and had a poultry farm. And then I got married.

Q. Oh, now we'd better pick up some of these things that sound so interesting. What caused you to decide to take a poultry course and have a poultry farm?

A. It was during the war.

Q. Tell about it.

A. Well, I did . . . Cornell University had a special course that they gave.

Q. How long did it last?

A. It was one winter. It was from, as I remember, from October along until February or March--I just don't remember. And then I had poultry buildings and brooder houses, which were an innovation.

Q. What was the object of Cornell University offering this course?

A. It seems they had done it for some time. They had a very special poultry department at Cornell.

Q. Was it because of the war you became interested in doing this?

A. It sounded as though it would be very interesting.

Q. Now tell about your poultry farm.

A. It was very successful in those days. I sold the eggs to the South Shore Country Club in Chicago.

Q. Maybe you'd better tell us where this farm was.

A. Well, it was at home.

Q. You established it at your home place.

A. Yes.

Q. Now tell about it.

A. Eggs were selling for about one dollar a dozen then which was when other things on the farm were not so profitable. But it proved to be very successful.

Q. About how many chickens did you have at the peak of your career, do you remember?

A. Isn't it peculiar, I don't remember.

Q. But you sold eggs?

A. I sold eggs and hatched them. I also bought breeding stock from Purdue University.

Q. Oh, that sounds interesting, what breed?

A. White leghorns.

Q. Was there a special reason why you chose the white leghorns?

A. I think it was because they were supposed to produce more eggs.

Q. Right. They have been noted for that. How long did the poultry business last?

A. Let's see. It must have been about three years or so.

Q. And then from the poultry business?

A. And then I got married and moved and left it. (laughs)

Q. And that's when your life with Walter was established on the farm here. We'll get back to that later. (tape turned off and on)

Q. Now, we'll hear a little bit about the 51 years you have spent at your present farm home. So, Mrs. Culver, what were your impressions when you first came to this farm.

A. Well, the house was brand new and it was all very nice.

Q. Describe it.

A. Well, there were eight rooms, a bathroom, a basement and a second story. What else did we have?

Q. Tell us about the location.

A. Well it was located north and east of Athens.

Q. About six miles, is it?

A. Yes.

Q. What kind of a house?

A. Oh it's--what would you call it, wood clapboards? No, not clapboards, but. . . .

Q. Would it be considered a bungalow at that time?

A. Yes, I think so. Yes, a bungalow painted white.

Q. How did it compare to other houses in the community at that time? Was it considered quite an innovation?

A. Well, it was brand new. That was one thing. Nobody else had a brand new house. (laughs)

Q. What was the inside like when you came? Was it furnished for you or did you . . .

A. No. No, it wasn't furnished. No, it was not. I brought a few things from home and we bought some things. We had a wood burning stove in the kitchen.

Q. Describe that stove. Was it for cooking, too or was it just for heating?

A. Oh, yes, [cooking]. It was a Majestic stove. The Majestic was supposed to be quite a stove and the water we heated . . . There was a reservoir at the back of the stove to heat the water.

And when we washed in the basement there was a little laundry stove. And when we washed, we heated the water in a wash boiler. Now the wash boiler is here (laughs and points to magazine rack)

Q. Used for decoration. Tell us how you washed.

A. We had a washing machine that you had to turn the handle, I think. It was not a power one, but you did it by hand and you turned it. And then the wringer, you did by hand and then we boiled the clothes and hung them outdoors.

Q. Did you have a special wash day then?

A. Oh yes, washed on Monday.

Q. What did you do on Tuesday?

A. You know, I don't remember.

Q. Was that ironing day?

A. Oh, not necessarily, maybe we did part of that on Monday. I just don't remember.

Q. Now, tell us about some of the routine and how you did things around the home when you first came 51 years ago.

A. We had a garden and chickens; had to feed and water the chickens and gather the eggs.

Q. Was that the duty of the housewife at that time?

A. Yes, raised the little baby chicks.

Q. Besides the things you did outside the home, tell us some of the things you did inside, home duties—a typical day in a farm home.

A. You got up and made muffins for breakfast while the man went out and did the milking. So there was that and we had a very substantial breakfast as I remember.

Q. Of what type?

A. Well, there must have been eggs and bacon or sausage and coffee.

Q. Potatoes?

A. No, I don't think we had potatoes.

Q. Or mush?

A. Oh, it was varied. We had mush, fried mush sometimes, yes.

Q. Did you eat any differently in the winter than you did in the summer then?

A. Except you had more. (laughs)

Q. Then what did you do the rest of the day?

A. You know, I don't remember.

Q. For instance, after you had done the breakfast, then did you have any household things that needed to be done each day? Did you have to keep the stove going?

A. Oh yes, the stove had to be kept going and what did we do for the furnace? Coal furnace.

Q. And you had a child?

A. Yes.

Q. Tell us how you reared your young boy.

A. Well, from the time he was two until he was three he was sick all the time. Infantile--or rheumatic fever. He was very ill for a long time so that meant that there were many duties that one didn't do because there was no one--he had to be taken care of day and night for a goodly part of the time. And that was months, months.

Q. Did you have any help when you had a sick child?

A. We had a nurse part of the time but Alfred didn't like her.

Q. You thought you could take better care?

A. So I did it myself.

Q. How did that change your responsibilities in the home?

A. Well, it meant there was more to do. Some things had to be done, some things you just let go. Then eventually, he got better. We used to make at least two or three trips to Springfield a week to the doctor.

Q. How did you go?

A. Car.

Q. What kind of car did you have then?

A. Ford.

Q. That would be about in the 1920's, right? A 1920 model?

A. Yes.

Q. What were the roads like?

A. Well, part of the time to the hard road, the roads were very bad: muddy, rutty. In the wintertime it was difficult to do and in the spring there was much mud. Part of the time we left the car down near the hard road and went in a buggy down there and then took a car to go the rest of the way.

Q. Tell us how you provided food for the family.

A. Well, we had a big garden always and I canned much.

Q. How did you can?

A. Well, we had a pressure cooker and before then the jars were put in a boiler and boiled and so on. Then eventually one got a pressure cooker and used it and that was simpler.

Q. Did you preserve foods any other way?

A. Preserved? We use to, oh, preserved and canned a hundred quarts of this and that.

Q. Did you have a root cellar?

A. We had a root cellar, yes. It was for the potatoes and carrots and all the vegetables that could be kept that way. Cabbage.

Q. Did you have enough to tide you through the winter?

A. Yes, with what had been canned. Yes, plenty.

Q. You didn't have to rely too much on things from the grocery store? What did you buy mostly at the grocery store?

A. Well, I don't know. I know we had cows and we make our own butter and, yes, sold the cream and made our own butter and made bread, cakes and things like that.

Q. Your own eggs?

A. We had our own eggs and sold eggs.

Q. What about other meats?

A. We had pork and beef.

Q. Did you butcher your own?

A. Yes.

Q. Tell about providing clothing for the family. What was your responsibility there?

A. I sewed. I did the sewing. When Alfred was little I made his clothes but when he got older I didn't. I think I didn't make many shirts for Walter though. But I made clothes that were . . . During the Depression you didn't waste what you had even if it was out of style you were very glad to have it.

Q. Tell us how your life changed during the Depression.

A. Well, it didn't change so much because we always had been frugal. And you didn't buy anything if you couldn't pay for it, but then we never did that anyway. And clothes were made over. And we had plenty to eat.

Q. Do you think being on a farm made a difference?

A. Yes, because you see, you had plenty, and if you took care of it you got along very nicely and the same way with the clothes.

Q. Did you have bigger gardens and do more canning?

A. Yes, we had enough to [can] and then we had a little orchard so we had fruit. We didn't fare so badly during the Depression.

During the war later on when there were stamps for meat was when so many people had so much difficulty. You see we didn't need them and usually when we were at the store getting things, if there was someone who looked like they would want something very badly, I'd give them some [stamps] whether I knew them or not because we didn't need them.

Q. How did the war make a difference on the farm?

A. Of course, it was difficult to get as much sugar as you wanted and, of course, Alfred was away.

Q. Did it make a difference in your living habits or any of the things you did within the home?

A. Well, you didn't buy much. That was one thing sure. If you didn't need it, <u>really</u> need it, you didn't buy anything.

Q. What about the trips you had to make to Springfield or Athens. What about gasoline? Did it make any difference?

A. I don't remember that we were curtailed on gas to get to Athens or Springfield.

Q. Tell us now how you think the lot of the farm wife has changed from the time you came to this farm as a bride until now. What changes have been most interesting to you?

A. Well, no longer a wooden stove, an electric stove. The washing is much simpler. We no longer raise chickens so we don't do that. We still have a little garden.

Q. Has the housework changed any?

A. Oh yes, with the vacuum cleaners and the things it is much simpler to do things, the work, than it used to be.

Q. What about spring housecleaning?

A. Walter Culver: (laughs) I get in on that. You don't do so much. (laughs)

Q. It's become pretty unseasonal, right?

A. Yes, you do it most of the time as it needs it and so there isn't the glorious hubbub. (laughs)

Q. Tell about the changes in social life on the farm. What changes have you seen from the time you came 51 years ago until now? How has the social life changed?

A. Well, when we first came there was a community club and the whole community turned out and had fun together. Oh, then we belonged to a pinochle

club. There must have been fourteen or sixteen or so in that; we had fun.

Q. What about church activities?

A. Well, the church had activities, the school, the P.T.A. [Parent Teacher Association]. Everybody was interested of course, in all the school activities. And those really comprised more of the social activities than other things did. Church and school, then a few little extra things on the side.

Q. You've been real active in Home Bureau. Can you tell us what Home Bureau contributed to your life?

A. Well that sort of kept one busy.

Q. Doing what? What do you think you learned from Home Bureau?

A. Well, let's see. Other counties had Home Bureau and I thought we ought to have one so I was instrumental in forming the first one in Menard County and was the first president.

Q. Tell about it. Tell what Home Bureau was like then.

A. It was more recipes I would think you would call it. Things one could do new, not so much the new things, as to be able to do with what you had, it seems to me, as I remember.

Q. Then how did it develop during the years?

A. Then during the years it developed and grew. Then finally there came a time when the girls worked during the day and weren't able to go to meetings and so the number of units were less. During the last few years it has been poofing up again. But there was a time when it was sort of on its last legs.

Q. What do you think Home Bureau can contribute to a farm wife's life?

A. Oh, I think there is much they could do. The latest things in homemaking and get to know people who are interested in the same things you are interested in.

Q. What are some of those interests?

A. Well, the new things in foods because there are many new things in foods now, and in household furnishings and in all phases of farm life or home life. And it is no longer restricted as much to farm families but with town families as well and what would interest everyone.

Q. Do you see a trend to the fact that farm women have a much more similar life to the town women than they did when you first belonged?

A. Yes.

Q. How can you see the shift in that direction?