



Oral History of Illinois Agriculture

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Abstract: Stephen Black was born on November 5, 1945 in Carrolton, Illinois. Mr. Black's father and paternal grandfather were farmers, and his maternal grandfather was a doctor. Stephen attended the University of Illinois in Champaign with the intention of becoming a doctor, but changed his major to Agriculture because it required fewer years of schooling. During the Vietnam War, Stephen joined the Army, and was sent to Korea with an infantry unit for thirteen months. While in Korea, he witnessed farming on a primitive level, with no mechanization. Rice paddies were planted by hand, and tilled using buffalo. For more than 30 years Mr. Black was employed by the US Department of Agriculture. Upon his retirement, Stephen felt drawn to the family farm because of the history of five generations working the land. Stephen explained that he lives near St. Louis to be close to his wife's job, but that he drives to Carrolton to operate the family farm, which was purchased by his great-great-grandmother and her three brothers more than 180 years ago. Originally, 2,000 acres of prairieland and timber were purchased, and of that original acreage, 143 acres are still owned and maintained by the family. The farmhouse was built in 1923 in the Federal Style of Architecture, and additions were made in the 1950's in the Greek Revival Style. Today, both the house and the property are recognized by the National Register as a National Historic Site.

Keywords: Carrolton, IL; Farmers; Doctor; University of Illinois; Agriculture; Vietnam War; Army; Korea; Infantry Unit; Primitive Farming; Hand Planting; Tilling; Buffalo; USDA; United States Department of Agriculture; Family Farm; Prairieland; Timber; Farmhouse; Federal Style; Greek Revival Style; National Register; National Historic Site



Stephen Black

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Interview with Stephen Black

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November 24, 2008

Interviewer: Michael Maniscalco

- Maniscalco: Take two. All right. Today is November 24, 2008. We're sitting here with Stephen Black in the Black family homestead. How are you doing?
- Black: Just fine.
- Maniscalco: Great. We'll do a lot of the easy questions, we'll work into some of the harder ones. So let's start with your age and date of birth.
- Black: Well, I'm sixty-three. I was born November 5, 1945.
- Maniscalco: Great. And you were born where?
- Black: I was born here in Carrolton, Illinois.
- Maniscalco: Okay. Did you grow up in this home, or—?
- Black: Not in this home. My grandfather and grandmother lived here when I was growing up.
- Maniscalco: Okay. So you said you had your grandparents kind of nearby. What other family members were there?
- Black: That lived in this area? Well, my father farmed just next to this particular farm. And of course, he farmed here when he was younger, but I was born and raised on a farm about a quarter of a mile from here.
- Maniscalco: Did you have any aunts or uncles?
- Black: Well, my uncle was also involved in farming, my dad's brother. And he was involved in a farm that is adjacent to this one, about a quarter of a mile in another direction.
- Maniscalco: Do you have any memories of family get-togethers, times when the whole family would come together?
- Black: Well, of course every Christmas, we would always get together. I can remember being in this room back when I was a little boy, coming over here for family Christmas and family dinner. So at least once a year, and of course there were other events, but Christmas probably sticks in your mind when you're little.
- Maniscalco: And what sorts of things would you do during Christmastime here?
- Black: Well, of course we'd have a meal, and the family gift exchange, and an opportunity for the family to get together. Even though they lived very close to each other, it was still a holiday opportunity to get together and visit.
- Maniscalco: Did you do any—did you play any games, sing any songs?
- Black: Not with my father's side of the family, they were—my grandfather was a very conservative man. He was not much into partying or other types of activities. He just was very reserved and very quiet. I always remember him that way. So he was not one you did a lot of partying or playing of games with.

Maniscalco: What about your grandmother? Was she—?

Black: Well, my grandmother, she died when I was only about eleven years old, so I don't—I remember her, but I don't have as much of an association with her as I did with my grandfather.

Maniscalco: Now, that's on your father's side of the family. What about on your mother's side of the family?

Black: Well, my mother's side, her father was a doctor, lived in Carrolton, and of course a lot of stories from him about things that he did back in the 1900s. He got out of medical school in 1908, I believe. So he used to tell a lot of stories about going out on the horse and buggy and treating people. So that was some interesting history there also.

Maniscalco: Do you have any of those stories that you'd like to tell us?

Black: Well, I remember one in particular, he talked about going out in the—I think it was 1918 when they had the major flu epidemic in the country, and he was gone for days at a time, and the people would leave him sandwiches in their mailboxes, because they knew he didn't have any food. So when he was going by with his horse and buggy, he would be able to pick up something to eat in the mailboxes. And he'd go out and set up with people two and three days at a time when they were sick. You can't imagine that today, but he would spend days sitting with someone who was very ill. So those are a couple of stories that I can recall.

Maniscalco: Wow. Now, he was alive when you were a child. Can you kind of explain the type of person he was?

Black: Well, he and his wife were the more outgoing type. They were not as conservative as the Black side of the family. They often had parties, the children in the community all came to their house, so it was kind of a different atmosphere. They were more outgoing type, I would say.

Maniscalco: Now, when did your mother's side of the family come to this area?

Black: Well, they'd been here since the middle 1800s also. They came from North Carolina, I believe. Her name was March; they came from the North Carolina area. So they've been here probably well over 150 years also.

Maniscalco: So you really have your roots here in Carrolton.

Black: Well, basically we do, and it's kind of interesting, of course, now my brother and I both don't live here; we both moved away. But for five generations previous to that, all of our family were from this particular area.

Maniscalco: So what about brothers and sisters? Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Black: I have one brother, Kent. He lives in Texas, and he's been gone for many, many years also. He worked for an aerospace company for years, and is now retired and lives in Texas.

Maniscalco: So we talked about your mother's side of the family, and how they came here. How about your father's side?

Black: Well, they're the ones that were probably some of the first people to arrive in Green County. My great-great grandmother came here in 1822, but previous to that, her brother came over in 1821 and actually bought the land where this particular farm is located. She came over with three brothers and herself. They each bought about 480 acres of land. Interesting, it was only a

dollar and a quarter an acre. They bought it at the—one of her brothers named Robert came over, and went to the land office in Edwardsville, and you had to bid on eighty acre tracts of land, and the minimum bid was a dollar and twenty-five cents an acre. So, he bought the land for all of the family members, and it was kind of interesting; they didn't bid against each other. Apparently, all of the people would gather at the sale, and they'd pick out the tracts of land that they wanted, and they wouldn't bid against each other, so everybody got their piece of property for the lowest value, or the lowest cost. Anyway, the family then came over in 1822. There was a group of about twenty-two people from England, my great-great grandmother and her three brothers and their families all came to this country, came across on ships and then came across the country on wagons, and part of the way, they came down the Ohio River on boats, and then they switched back to wagons and came across country to Illinois into this farm. They arrived here in 1822. And I remember, my great-grandfather kept an autobiography, and one of the comments he made was when his mother arrived here, she was pretty put-out about how wild this country looked. So I guess she was kind of scared at first, and wanted to build a house, so the next year is when they built the house that we're sitting in now.

Maniscalco: So your family has quite the history of being here, and your great-grandmother was the one that came here with her children?

Black: Great-great-grandmother.

Maniscalco: Oh, great-great-grandmother. Okay. So they were here for a year before they built this house that we're sitting in. Do you have any stories about how this house was built?

Black: Yes. Actually, when they came here, they lived in log cabins about a quarter of a mile, a half a mile from here. Originally, they had intentions of converting or of organizing a town over there that was going to be called Mount Pleasant. And they were hoping that that town would be part of the county seat of Carrolton, and it didn't work out that way, but they lived in these cabins over in this town, that hoped-to-be town, for the first year. And then the next spring is when she entered into a contract with a person to build this house, and we still have the original contract that was signed in 1823, in April, I believe. A gentleman agreed to build a house, and it was kind of interesting, six dollars and fifty cents per thousand bricks is what she paid. And he had to make the bricks on-site, out of the clay, and then assemble the house, the brick work on the house, and it was six dollars and a half per thousand bricks. So they started on the house, and completed the house in December of 1823, and they moved in, and apparently it wasn't completed inside yet, but they got the outside work done where they could move in. But that was one of her goals, as I mentioned, since she said this country's pretty wild, she wanted a house to be able to live in. So they got that done pretty quick.

Maniscalco: Cool. Now, this guy made this house out of brick. Is that very common for that time?

Black: Oh, I think it was. There was a lot of other brick houses around here. They dug the clay out of the soil, and fired their own bricks here. But it was probably unusual to see this type of a house in 1823 in this location, because most of the surrounding area here was all tall grass prairie, at least out in this part, this flat area around where the farm's located. So to see a house of this size sitting out in the middle of a tall grass prairie in 1823 would have been quite a sight, I'm sure.

Maniscalco: Oh, I'm sure, yeah. Now why do you think your family settled on Illinois?

- Black: Well, I've often wondered about that myself, and I'm sure why, other than some of the research I've done is that they decided that—they rented land or leased land in England, up around close to the Scotland border. And apparently it cost almost as much to lease the land in England per acre as it did to buy it over here. As I mentioned, a dollar and a quarter an acre is all they paid for it. So I think they just figured that this was a good investment. Why they picked Illinois, I'm not sure, other than it kind of, you know, the expansion of Illinois in 1818 kind of coincided to when they were moving here, so it may have been the land values, I don't know. But they did pick—it was kind of interesting that they picked out what is now some of the best soils in the world, and these soils were native grass back then, there were not any trees on here, which was kind of opposite of what some of the philosophy was at the time. They were thinking if the land didn't grow trees, then it wasn't of any value. But somehow, the person who bought it had some insight, and ended up purchasing 2000 acres of this tall grass prairie.
- Maniscalco: Now, you had your great-great-grandmother and her kids. Do you remember hearing any family stories about the sorts of activities that they used to do, what kind of farming they were doing when they did that?
- Black: Well, I know the records real early are kind of scarce. My [great-]grandfather, ... his name was Thomas, he came over when he was twelve years old, so he ended up operating the farm later in the middle 1800s. But based on the records that we look at, early on it was mainly wheat and corn and livestock. Of course, these native grasses in the prairies were so thick that you couldn't really plow them up. It wasn't until the steel plow was invented in the 1830s that they were able to break out some of this land. So I think they used a lot of it for livestock initially. But the earlier crops were mainly corn and maize and wheat, from what we can see.
- Maniscalco: And you said livestock, do you know which types of livestock?
- Black: Well, mainly cattle, I think, would be the main thing they had.
- Maniscalco: Now, of course over time this farm has changed its kind of operation a little bit. Can you kind of tell us a little bit about that change?
- Black: Yeah. Of course, into the 1840s and fifties is when my [great-]grandfather, Thomas Black, he started taking control of the farm in those eras. And we have found records where he was pretty innovative in some of the things he did. We found some records, in 1845, he bought one of the first reaping machines. So by then, they were doing obviously more harvesting of wheat, and starting to become mechanized. So he got this reaping machine in 1845, and then later on, he started changing the technology, as they became available, he'd get a more advanced reaper or binder or some of the other types of equipment that was coming online in the middle 1800s. But at one point, I know, in the 1850 census, it was quite diverse. They had bees, they had pasture, they had hay, they had corn, they had wheat, they had orchards, they had grapes, apparently made their own wine at one point in time. So of course farms in the middle 1800s were pretty self-sufficient, and had a pretty diverse set of crops.
- Maniscalco: Now, that farm has changed. What sorts of things are going on here on this land now?
- Black: Well, of course a huge difference, I mean, right now, it's mainly corn and soybeans, and that's it. And that's a huge change from the 1850s, even up through the early 1900s, there was—at one point, there was a lot of cattle that were raised here in the 1900s, and back then, you'd have what they'd call long rotations, where you'd have corn and wheat or oats and maybe several

years of hay. But that's all gone, and today, it's mainly just corn and soybeans for this particular area.

Maniscalco: Now, to get up to you, you've grown up in this area, and kind of right next door to where we are right now. Can you kind of tell us about your childhood?

Black: Well, of course, I grew up, as I said, on the farm about a quarter of a mile from here. I helped on the farm ever since I was old enough to do any kind of work. You start out with those chores that little kids can do, like collecting eggs from the chicken house, and then you evolve into doing other things. But my dad raised cattle and hogs, and had a pretty diverse series of crops, as I mentioned earlier. Corn, and of course in that area, they went into soybeans, which back in the early 1900s, you didn't have soybeans, so, but he did have soybeans and wheat and some oats and pastures and hay. But growing up on the farm, it was hard work; my brother and I were always helping in the summertime, we'd do about any kind of job that we could do, and the older we got, the more responsibility we would have in helping Dad with the farm operation.

Maniscalco: What about chores? Which chores—I mean, you mentioned the eggs, getting the eggs and some clay—

Black: Oh, well, of course, the chores we did were helping with hay in the summer, you'd cultivate crops, you'd disc, you'd do anything, driving a tractor, doing any kind of field operations. We did just about all of that. The only thing that, it's always interesting, I thought that they—I think this was kind of traditional, the one thing that the father never seemed to let the kids do is plant corn. They always wanted to run the corn planter themselves to make sure it was the way they wanted. So that was the one thing, I don't think I ever drove the corn planter. I did everything else, but that was one that he just had a certain level of interest in that it just had to be done a certain way. But every other operation on the farm, I was involved in.

Maniscalco: Now, I'm sure your brother was helping as well.

Black: Yes.

Maniscalco: Were there certain things that you'd try to fight over, and say, "Oh, he should get it," or, "No, I should, I want to do this one," or—?

Black: Well, we were six years apart, so we kind of evolved into doing different jobs. When I was little, he was already at the point he could drive tractors, or drive a truck to town, or do the things that I couldn't. So we didn't necessarily squabble over that, because of our age difference. I was usually stuck with the lesser chores, because I was the younger child.

Maniscalco: Now, what about friends around this area? As a kid out in the country on the farm, what was it like having—?

Black: Well, of course, we weren't that far out. This is only a mile and a half, two miles from Carrolton. So that wasn't really a problem. I went to school in Carrolton, and I went to Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts and all of that. So I had friends that were in school or in Scouting. Plus my grandmother, who I had mentioned earlier, and grandfather, the doctor, he lived in town, and I was often in there with them, so I could easily associate with my friends that lived in town. But I really wasn't isolated out here. My brother was a little bit different. He was raised in a little house just down the road that's not here anymore, when my dad was helping my grandfather on this farm, back in the thirties. My brother was growing up in the little house,

and he was probably more isolated. I can remember him talking about playing by himself outside lots, lots of times, because—it may have been also because of the era when he was growing up, back during World War II. So he had it a little bit different than I did.

Maniscalco: What about—when you did have friends out to the farm, what did you play?

Black: Oh, gosh. We played outside a lot, probably most of the typical games kids would play. You played Army a lot, running around outside, or you'd hunt—well, I did a lot of hunting when I got older, I would hunt quail and rabbits and things like that. Or fireworks, that used to be a big thing, when we were kids, fireworks were legal, and you could run around and shoot fireworks any time you wanted to. Of course, that was a big thing for kids. It's a wonder we didn't blow our hands off, but that was always fun.

Maniscalco: And you mentioned Boy Scouts. What other organizations were going on that you could have joined?

Black: Well, of course, in high school, I played all the sports. I was in a band, and played football and basketball and track, all those types of things. But other types of outside, out of school organizations, there weren't very many, other than Boy Scouts, that I can remember.

Maniscalco: What about like 4-H or FFA?

Black: Well, they had 4-H and FFA. That's something I wasn't involved in. That's kind of strange, maybe, but—and my brother wasn't either, both of us growing up on farms and having many generations here, I was not involved in FFA in high school, or 4-H.

Maniscalco: So what kind of kids were involved in those?

Black: Well, I don't know. A lot of the other farm kids were involved in those. Not necessarily the people that lived in town, but a lot of farm kids were involved in FFA and 4-H. And of course, I ended up majoring in agriculture when I went to college, but it was kind of strange, I just didn't take FFA when I was in high school. Of course, I didn't have any intentions in high school of staying on the farm. And when I first went to college, I didn't think I was going to major in ag. I ended up that way, but—

Maniscalco: Where were you going to start?

Black: Well, at one point, I thought I wanted to be a doctor, like my grandfather. And that—after awhile, I got to thinking, that's a long time, a lot of years. I'm not sure I want to spend that much time. So I ended up decided I'd just major in agriculture.

Maniscalco: What about church? Was that very important with your family?

Black: Well, it was for my grandfather. Robert Black was very, very religious, very involved in the Baptist Church. My mother's family belonged to the Methodist Church, and they were not as active. I went to Sunday school most all the time when I was little, between, say, seven and twelve or so. After that, I wasn't near as active. Once I got into high school, my activity at the church kind of went down.

Maniscalco: Now, you know, churches, going on Sunday, but sometimes there's picnics or community gatherings. Was your family involved in those sorts of things?

- Black: Not as much. Now, we did go to some of those when I was little. I can remember going to Methodist church functions on either evenings or picnics in the summer. But it wasn't something that was predominant, I would say, in our family's lives.
- Maniscalco: Now, school. You said you went to school in Carrolton. What was it like going to school in town but yet living outside of town?
- Black: Well, probably not a real big difference that I can see. Sometimes it was if we got snowed in, you couldn't get to school, but of course that wasn't a big deal, we enjoyed that. But being outside of town when the roads would drift over, you couldn't get out. But since we were only a mile and a half from town, it really wasn't that far out. You think now, people that live way farther than that live in the city. So it was easy to get to town and do whatever you wanted to, and going to school, and living in the country really wasn't that much different for me.
- Maniscalco: Did you ever notice that there was a difference in the types of kids that were living in town compared to the ones living outside of town?
- Black: Not necessarily, because a small town like Carrolton, we only had 300 students in the whole high school. I don't think there was that much noticeable difference, between the people who lived -- came from the farms or the ones that live in town.
- Maniscalco: Now, when you graduated high school, you decided to go to college. Where did you go to college?
- Black: Well, I went to the University of Illinois in Champaign.
- Maniscalco: And you were originally going to go as a doctor, as you said earlier. What was the moment that made you decide, nah, I don't want to do that?
- Black: Well, I don't know. I guess just after being there a couple of years, my interests just changed, and I got to thinking, I'm not sure I wanted to spend not only four years here, but another four years in medical school. I just got kind of a different change in interest, and I'm not sure what really sparked that. But I decided to switch to agriculture.
- Maniscalco: Interesting. Now, you studied agriculture, and after you graduated, what did you go and do?
- Black: Well, after I graduated, I ended up going into the Army for three years. It was right in the middle of the Vietnam War, so I lost my deferment. They wouldn't give deferments for graduate students, although I did go to graduate school for one quarter, down at Southern Illinois at Carbondale. But during that time, I knew they were going to draft me. So anyway, I ended up going in the Army for three years. But then when I got out of there, I started working for what was then called the Soil Conservation Service, which is now called Natural Resources Conservation Service; it's part of the US Department of Agriculture. And of course, they help landowners, farmers, and others with conservation programs. So I ended up working for them for thirty-one or -two years.
- Maniscalco: Wow. So over that time, you've probably seen lots of farmers.
- Black: Saw lots of farmers in lots of states. I ended up—I worked in Illinois, Missouri, Virginia, Maryland, and Colorado, before I retired. So it was very interesting to be able to go to the other states and learn the culture and the crops that are taking place. I mean, obviously you go Virginia and you learn tobacco; back then, tobacco was the crop in Virginia. So quite interesting to work there. Then in Colorado, of course the issues out there are totally different

than they are in Illinois. So it was very interesting to be able to see the different resources issues throughout the country.

Maniscalco: Yeah. What are some of the special things you've noticed, seeing that you've been in numerous states, talking to people involved with agriculture, what are some of the special things about people in Illinois that are involved in agriculture?

Black: Well, of course the agriculture here is different than in others, because of the kinds of crops we're involved in. I'm not sure I can think of any real differences. Sometimes you go from one state to another, and I'm not saying this is just the people in Illinois, but there's a different attitude towards the government and government programs as you go from one state to another. Some places, people are very receptive to working with the government, USDA, on programs, and in other places, they're very reluctant to do that. They just have kind of an anti-government approach or attitude. The Illinois farmers don't do that, but in some places, you might find a little of that.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. Why do you think that is?

Black: Well, some of it goes to their conservative nature, or maybe their upbringing, prior association with government. Some of these places in some states were, if they've ever had any kind of issues where the government came in and took their land for like building a big dam down in Tennessee, I know there's—I didn't work in Tennessee, but that's just an example, they took people's land, condemned it, in order to build large reservoirs that were then used for power or whatever. If you ever lost your land in condemnation to the federal government, you had a pretty sour taste in your mouth from there on out, and that lasted for generations. Some just felt that farming was very independent, and they don't want government involvement; they don't want the government telling them what to do, they don't like the farm programs that we have today. They just think the government ought to stay out of the farming business, so they just kind of have a hands-off attitude. So there's a lot of different reasons, I think, that people feel the way they do about government involvement.

Maniscalco: Now, seeing that you were working for the USDA, and having to work with people like that, how did you overcome that?

Black: Well, I think it was mainly your personality in just working with people. We never tried to force ourselves on anyone; every program we had was voluntary. So when we worked with someone, we were there because they asked us to be there. And if you try to help them, if you don't step out of your truck like you know it all, you work with the person, you ask them what you're interested in, you use their ideas, you try to interject what you think will work, it's just interpersonal skills and relationships, I think, in working with someone. I mean, you still have to have a technical background to be able to give them good solutions. But you can overcome a lot of their fears if you're a trustworthy, honest person that works with them.

Maniscalco: Now, you grew up on a farm, and you're working for the USDA. What about some of your other coworkers? Were they all from different cultural backgrounds?

Black: Well, back in my area when I first started, a lot of them were. But you look at that today and that's not the case. I mean, you've got two percent of the country that lives on farms, and if you take the children of those people that go to college, and then take the percentage of majoring in ag and natural resources, and then take the percentage that might work for USDA, that's a small number. So you can't hire only people who have farm backgrounds to work for

USDA. The other people have to kind of learn this culture, as to how to work with people, if they don't have a farm background. And it's tough for some people. If you don't know one crop from another, and most people know that, but sometimes they don't know the equipment, they don't have the little knowledge that can put you at ease real quickly with somebody that's a farmer. So they have bigger learning curve in order to get up to speed. So it's a little more of a challenge for them. But they can do it. I mean, most of the people that work for the Natural Resource Conservation Service now probably do not have a farm background.

Maniscalco: Now, what kinds of programs were you working on?

Black: Well, the main programs that we were were conservation programs that dealt with either erosion control, wildlife habitat development, flood control, air quality types of things. Water quality was a big one, we worked with people to help try to improve nutrient management on their farms, to keep nutrients from getting into the waters. So we basically had programs that dealt with soil, water, air, animals, all those types of things. But they were all voluntary programs that a landowner, if they were interested, we would work with them on helping them to put conservation practices on their lands that would help to meet those needs that I mentioned.

Maniscalco: So what exactly—I mean, you say you'd go and you would help them to put those practices in place. What exactly—

Black: What did you do?

Maniscalco: Yeah, to help them.

Black: Well, you look at the farm, from the standpoint of, you know, what kinds of problems do they have out there, and you ask them about that, what are you interested in doing, what are some of your objectives. But you try to look for various problems that they have, and you try to identify some solutions to those. In other words, if they've got erosion problems, there are different practices that options that they might want to install. So you work with them on developing a conservation plan that says, okay, here are the things that I'd like to solve on my farm, and we give them options that would do that. And they select which options they want, and then once they decided that they want to build a pond or build a waterway or whatever, then we would help design that, and we'd help them, we'd give them plans to how they could install that particular practice. So we'd take them from the planning stage clear through to the completion of the practice.

Maniscalco: Very interesting. Very cool. To take a step back, now, you said you were in the Army during the Vietnam War. Did you voluntarily join the Army?

Black: Well, I did, because I knew I was going to be drafted. So I volunteered to hopefully get into something that I might be interested in, which didn't necessarily out, but—(laughter)

Maniscalco: What did you end up doing?

Black: Well, I wanted to go to officer candidate school, because I figured if I'm going to spend three years, I might as well do that, and maybe I would be a little more experienced. So anyway, the recruiter talked me into signing up for infantry officer candidate school. And then he said, once you do that, you can get a branch transfer out of that. Well, so I went to infantry officer candidate school, and when I got out, they weren't giving branch transfers to anybody. And of course, this was in 1969, and they said that, you know, we don't need anybody but infantry

officers. So I ended up getting stuck in an infantry unit for the next couple of years, which didn't end up what I wanted to do, but that's the way it worked.

Maniscalco: Now, were you sent Vietnam?

Black: Well, on the other side of it, I was not. That was kind of—they told us all the way through training that's where we were going to end up, we were going to go to Vietnam, because that's what they needed. But they sent thirty of us in my class, when I graduated, we got sent straight to Korea. So I spent thirteen months on the demilitarized zone with an infantry unit in Korea, which, considering a second lieutenant in an infantry unit, I was better off there than I was in Vietnam, but it wasn't a fun place to be. We still had people killed, and we got combat pay like they did in Vietnam. But again, it was better than the alternative.

Maniscalco: Now, I imagine that the civilians in Korea that you encountered, some of them were probably involved in agriculture and agricultural practices. Were you able to relate because of that?

Black: Well, not really. I mean, I could relate myself to what they were doing, although it was pretty primitive. Mostly, they farmed in rice paddies, and they used buffalo. They didn't have any mechanization, they planted all of that rice by hand, and then whatever they needed to do to till up the rice paddies, they used buffalo, and they walked in the water behind them. So it was all hand labor, everything that they did. Plus, of course, I couldn't speak Korean, so I couldn't really associate much with the local people. And we didn't have a lot of direct association with them where we were. See, when we were up on the demilitarized zone, they wouldn't allow any Koreans up there. You couldn't be—you had to be in the military to be up on the DMZ. So I went months and never saw any Korean civilians.

Maniscalco: Really? Wow. So you were off in Korea, you came back, you worked for the USDA. Now, at one point, you decided to kind of come back to the farm?

Black: Well, that's one of the reasons we moved back here once I retired, then I decided I wanted to be involved in the farm, because it's been in our family for five generations. So we moved back, we don't live here, because my wife is still working, and she works down closer to the St. Louis area, so this is too far for her to drive. So I come up here to the farm and operate it, but we don't live here. But I just always wanted to be involved in it, given the roots and the heritage that I had here.

Maniscalco: Yeah. So what was it like coming back?

Black: Well, it wasn't like I hadn't been here for many years, because back once my grandfather died, back in the early sixties, my mom and dad moved into this house, and they lived here for a number of years. So even though I was gone, we would come back and visit at Christmas and lots of other times. So it wasn't like I had not been here for many years when I did come back. But coming back and farming on it, it's kind of fun, and of course when I'm here, I reflect on the hundreds of years of tradition that are here, and I try to envision what this place was like 180-something years ago when they arrived. And of course, I'm reminded of it every—the buildings and the house and everything reminds you of what it might have been like. But it's just interesting to be able to still be on the same piece of property after that many years.

Maniscalco: Yeah. Would you like to just show us maybe (unintelligible)?

Black: Yeah, this is—this map is an original map of the vegetation that was here in the early 1800s. This is based on the land survey. When they came through and did the land surveys in the

1800s, the surveyors kept records of what type of vegetation was out here, whether it was forest, timber, swamp, they had a bunch of different categories. Anyway, this is Green County, and Carrollton being right here, we're located right dead center in the middle of that yellow area. These yellow areas were originally prairie grass, tall grass prairie, and the green areas were timber. And as I mentioned earlier, it was kind of interesting that when they came here, my great-grandmother and her three brothers, they bought about 2,000 acres, and when you outline—and we know exactly where that was, based on original records—it's almost boxed off right in the middle of that yellow area there, which was all native grass. They did purchase a little bit of—like 180 acres of timber, so they'd have some firewood and other things. But this is—the farm is located right in the middle of that particular area.

Maniscalco: Now, that land is all still part of this—?

Black: No, not all of it. She had 480 acres originally, and her brothers had about 480 each. Of course, over the years, that's all split with deaths and inheritances and so on. Actually, her three brothers, I don't think there's any descendants of her three brothers that still have any land out in this original area. I think this—there's 143 acres here, and that's all that's left of their original purchases of about 2,000 acres.

Maniscalco: Do you have any family stories why they would pick this spot in the middle of the grass, instead of the—?

Black: No. As I was thinking earlier, I don't know why they did that. I wish I could find some records that would indicate why they picked out the native prairie rather than the wooded area. But I really don't know, but it was sure an obvious choice, that he picked the area, it just fits almost perfectly right inside of that original prairie.

Maniscalco: Very interesting. That's neat. So living here now, and farming here now, what types of things are you farming now?

Black: Well, it's mainly corn and soybeans right now. We switched to that from years ago, kind of recalling back to some of the changes that I've seen in the landscape around here. Back when I was growing up, you know, as I mentioned, it was mainly corn, beans, wheat, lots of clover, hay, wheat oats, and lots of hedge rows. A lot of this land had these hedge rows along all the property lines, and they used them as fences. And this whole area was just covered with hedge rows. But that's all gone now. You look around and you won't see anything for miles, so they took out all the hedge rows. The cropping patterns have changed. As I mentioned earlier, when we came with more chemical farming in the sixties for weed control, that changed some of the crops that we looked at. Now, of course, a lot of the livestock has gone, because the land is so valuable that most people can't afford to run their livestock out on the open fields, so all that's gone to confinement areas. And most of the land around here now is just converted to corn and soybeans. It's just completely different, looking across the landscape today, than it was fifty years ago. The other big difference that I can see, not only here but just everywhere, and I notice this mainly because of my conservation background, but it used to be you'd look across the fields in the fall and they all were plowed, everything was plowed up. They used the old mobile board plows, and everything was turned under. And now, you don't see that hardly at all anymore. You look out across the fields, and there's lots of stalk residue left out there. And that's a huge difference from an erosion standpoint. That's almost a complete reversal of what it was fifty years ago.

- Maniscalco: That's interesting. Growing crops on this farm, what about different—crops can get diseases. At least in your time and as a child, do you remember hearing your parents talking about the diseases that could possibly get the crops, or have you experienced it here on this land?
- Black: Well, probably the earliest recollection I have of that, not necessarily diseases, but insects. We used to have army worm problems back in the fifties, you'd get army worms in the wheat, and you'd have to spray it. I can remember spraying it with airplanes, that's about the only way you could do that, and they still do that today, of course. But I don't remember any real diseases wiping out the crops. You would have to watch for certain types of insects. But back in that era, you'd normally, when you rotated the crops, you cut down on your insect problem. You have more insect problems where you have monocultures of continuous corn or corn and beans. But back in that era where you had long rotations, you didn't have the threat of insect damage like you might have today. But you did a lot of cultivating. You'd spray with insecticides when those came along, once you needed that. Now, today, of course, a lot of that's changed. We now use what they call triple-stack corn. Triple-stack corn is genetically modified. It has traits built into the crop that are resistant to corn borers and root worms. So if those insects eat the material in the plant, it kills them. So that's built into the genetics of the corn, and they're also, the corn is Roundup-ready, they call it, where you can spray Roundup, which is a weed killer, right over the top of the corn, and it won't kill the corn, but it'll kill everything else. So the genetics are really changing the way we look at things now, and all that's being built into the plant, so that it cuts down on your weed control problems, and it cuts down on the insect problems. And then even disease problems, to some extent. But all of that is only in the last five years or so.
- Maniscalco: Yeah. You mentioned a couple insects, the army worms and some of the other borers. What are some of the other problem insects, problems that you've experienced?
- Black: Well, I really haven't had any specific problems. We've checked fields for soybean aphids, and they talk about Japanese beetles sometimes being a problem, but we've never really experienced any major damage from any kind of insects.
- Maniscalco: Well, that's great. It's a good piece of land to pick then, I guess. (laughter) What about your father? I mean, do you ever remember him coming in, coming into dinner or something, and complaining about a certain insect?
- Black: Oh, other than the army worms, no, I don't recall any real problem with insects. His main concern seemed to be more the weather, which would be most farmers' concerns. Is it going to rain, not going to rain, that type of thing. But I don't ever remember having a real problem because of insects. It would be more because of droughts than anything else.
- Maniscalco: And to move just to what you're saying, what about the weather? Do you have memories as a child of your father's saying, "Oh, my gosh, I hope it rains," or—?
- Black: Well, I remember him saying it. Of course, I didn't have the urgency that he did, it didn't relate to me. It does now, when we go through drought or we go through a lot of rainy periods, I have a lot more appreciation for what he went through. He talked about the million-dollar rains back then, that if it rained in the middle of the summer when you needed it, it meant a lot of money, because you could make a crop that way.
- Maniscalco: Do you remember a time when one of those million-dollar rains came through? Any specific time when—?

Black: Well, I remember him commenting on them, yes, when they did come. I can't remember necessarily the outcome of it, because again, I wasn't as close to it as he was. I always thought back then, I shouldn't say it, but I always thought he got overly concerned about all that stuff. Well, he didn't, he was just—you know, I do the same thing now. I find myself worrying about, are the crops going to make it, are they not going to make it, or is it going to rain, not going to rain?

Maniscalco: So you have a new appreciation for it, I guess.

Black: Oh, a lot more, yeah. Sometimes I even—well, now you think back of my attitude about the farm, working on the farm when I was fifteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and if somebody had told me then that I would be back here doing this now, I would have said, "You're nuts." (laughter) But here I am. My brother's the same way. He raises cattle, and he said, "All the time I had to feed those cattle and take care of them," he says, "I couldn't stand it. And now I've got several hundred head." So you just change in the way you look at things over time.

Maniscalco: Yeah. Do you use multiple procedures?

Black: Oh, yeah. Not every year, but when I wasn't farming here, and when I was still working for Natural Resources Conservation Service, the fellow who was farming, and I talked him into starting no till, and he started doing no till on a lot of the farm. He was farming this place at the time, and he would use no till, and I kept it up, although this past couple of years, I have used one of these deep rippers, they call it, where it goes through—it still leaves a lot of residue on the surface, which we can see later, if we look at some of the fields. But it kind of busts up the ground underneath. But it still leaves the trash on top, which is what no till does. It keeps the erosion down. And I always no till the beans, the soybeans, into the previous year's corn stalks. So I use no till most of the time, but I haven't done it consistently for years and years and years.

Maniscalco: Now, in some of our past discussions with people who do no till, they've said it's very difficult when you first start it. What were your experiences?

Black: Well, of course, I'm not sure if it was difficult for me. It probably was for the tenant who was farming it, because it was new to him. I've had experience with no till, maybe not actually farming it myself, but since I've been involved with conservation, I mean, I went to lots and lots of sessions where we talked about the technology in no till, so I felt more comfortable with it, I guess. But at first, you know, they used to joke about no till that when you plant it, you ought to go on vacation for three weeks, and don't come back and look at the field, because it doesn't look the same, it doesn't grow as fast, because the ground is colder. It just looks like it's way behind your normal corn. It usually catches up, but the old joke was you ought to just not look at for three weeks so you don't worry about it. And a lot of people, farmers are often concerned about what the neighbors think and say and all of that, and a lot of people are reluctant to do no till because the neighbors will think I'm nuts, or they'll think I did this wrong, or it's not going to work. The other joke we used to say is no till only works away from the road, it only works when you get away from the road, because people didn't want to no till along their road, because they'd think somebody would see it and think they're doing something crazy. But no till is much more accepted now than it was a few years ago. You see a lot of it. And some of that is because of some of these conservation programs that came along that required a certain level of conservation if you want to maintain and continue to get commodity program benefits from USDA, you had to do a certain level of conservation. And

- no till, and conservation tillies, were one way that most landowners could easily comply with that.
- Maniscalco: Interesting. To kind of follow on no till, no till is trying to stop erosion, what about drainage on the fields?
- Black: Well, drainage, that's another item that's very important here. And these fields on this particular property, I'd say half of them are what they call poorly drained, and that would have been a real challenge, even going back in the 1800s, when they were first starting to farm these areas. Back in the 1800s, they did put tile in, they dig them in with a spade by hand. And a lot of the early tiles that they put in were wood. They'd cut them out of wood, and they'd put a square wood box, and they'd run the water down those wood tile. And then later on, they had clay tile that came in the late 1800s, and a lot of the fields here, the tiles were dug in in the 1800s, and they're still functioning very well, which is kind of amazing to me that they still are there. But drainage was a big item, because these soils are so poorly drained, if you did not have tile in them, you'd have a difficult time growing crops.
- Maniscalco: Every once in awhile, do you ever come across a tile that's been knocked out or something?
- Black: Oh, yeah. I mean, you get tile holes every once in awhile where the tile will break and the soil will wash down in it and leave a big whole in the field. And, of course, you definitely want to try to find those, because if you hit one of those with a tractor or combine, you can break an axle off. So you definitely try to find those and fix them. But a lot of tile's been installed in the last fifty years, too, as people see the advantages of improving the drainage, they'll go ahead and put more tile in.
- Maniscalco: How do you fix a hole in a tile that was put in, gosh, in the 1800s?
- Black: Well, if you have a clay tile, which I have some, you can put that back in. Most people now wouldn't do that, they'd put plastic. Most all tile today is plastic, and you'd just have a connector that you stick in both ends of the broken pieces and then fill it back in.
- Maniscalco: Is there any of the wood tiles left?
- Black: Oh, I haven't seen any, other than pictures, no. I doubt if there are any around. (laughter)
- Maniscalco: So is it the tile doing a decent job at draining your fields?
- Black: Oh, yeah.
- Maniscalco: At first, you made it sounds like it wasn't doing all the best.
- Black: No, it's doing what it needs to. I've put more tile in. The early tiles were put in mainly to drain the drainage ways. They didn't necessarily put them in to the spacing and the depths that you need to today. I've got one field that I put several thousand feet of tile in a few years ago, on a proper spacing and depth. And it makes a big difference, it gets the water out of there, and it really makes a difference on the productivity of the land. And of course, for every positive, there's a negative. A lot of people don't like—a lot of environment groups don't like the drainage, because the drainage impacts wetland areas. Of course, all of this land, a lot of it was wetland originally, and it's been drained, and a lot of folks see some negatives to that. But on the other hand, you know, we've got to have crop land to be able to produce our food.
- Maniscalco: What about equipment? What kind of equipment are you using now?

Black: I should turn this—I'll just turn that off. Well, the equipment has changed considerably. Thinking back to, as I mentioned earlier, some of the stuff in the 1800s that my great-grandfather used, and of course that was all horses. There's an old horse barn out here that they used to keep the horses in, and even in the early 1900s, my grandfather—(cell phone ringing) I'm sorry. I thought I turned it off. In the early 1900s, he farmed with horses. And then there was—we got some records, when he started with the mechanization, tractor, first tractor he bought was in the early 1900s, I forget the exact date, probably before the First World War. And then he kind of upgraded as he had more opportunity to get a different tractor or plows or other kinds of binders, pickers, mechanical pickers and so on. That equipment has changed considerably over his lifetime, and then in my dad's lifetime. I can remember my dad saying that the one thing he hated about farming back when he was in his twenties was picking corn by horses and wagons, by hand. And he would tell me about going out, and spend all day, and you'd get a hundred bushel. You take one person, you could get about a hundred bushel of corn in a day, picking corn by hand and throwing it in the wagons. And he said he wasn't sure he wanted to farm either, because he didn't want to do that the rest of his life. So about that time, sometime in the thirties, I guess my grandfather got an actual corn-picker, a mechanical picker. So my dad kind of changed his mind, well, given that, maybe he'd stay around after all. So he didn't have to pick corn by hand. So the mechanization changed considerably in the twenties and thirties. And of course, during the—I'm getting off your question here, but in the thirties, Dad talked about growing up here during the Depression, and the fact that they had almost nothing. But at least, he said, farmers were a little better off than some people, because you could grow your own food, you had a place to live, you could kind of maintain yourself. But he said there were several years during the Depression that the farm didn't make any money, they lost money. But he said it was pretty tough, in those pretty lean years. But at least you could survive. Then the equipment started getting much bigger once you got after World War II, the mechanization started—during World War II, you had a tough time finding equipment, because most everything had changed through the production of war equipment. So you couldn't buy very much. And I remember he did get a tractor someplace that he bought—I think he found one, I shouldn't say black market, but it was someplace he was able to get, and at least he got a new tractor, not new, but a used tractor he was able to use for plowing and so on. But then the equipment just started getting bigger and bigger into the fifties and sixties and seventies. Like I mentioned earlier, they got rid of all of these hedge rows, the fields started getting bigger, the rotations changed, it become more corn and soybeans, and of course the more land that people had, the bigger the equipment needs to be. And I can remember planting, or Dad planting with a two-row corn planter, and of course now a lot of these guys have twenty-four-row corn planters. Used to pick corn one row at a time, or maybe two rows at a time, and now it's eight or twelve rows at a time. So the equipment's gotten much bigger; of course the farms have gotten bigger, and they have to be able to get over the land quicker. So the mechanization has changed considerably over the last fifty years.

Maniscalco: How about your neighbors around here? A neighbor picks up a new tractor, would they help out, if they had this brand-new piece of equipment that could maybe make their neighbor's job a little easier?

Black: Well, again, going back clear into the 1800s, they were helping each other back then with different kinds of new equipment. I know some of the new pieces of equipment that were used on this place actually came from neighbors that wanted to try out a new piece of equipment, and they would come over and use it here. Even in my lifetime, I can remember, especially if

somebody—not necessarily because of a new piece of equipment, but if a farmer ever got sick and wasn't able to get his crop in or get it out, the neighbors would always come over and do it for them. There would be a day when you'd have twenty or thirty neighbors show up with twenty or thirty tractors or ten different combines, and they would go in and just completely harvest the person's crops for them, or put them in, because they were sick and weren't able to do it. So there was a lot of sharing, when somebody got into a bad situation, the neighbors would always come to your rescue and help you out.

Maniscalco: Now, what about now? Is it still that way?

Black: Well, yeah, it's still that way too. I help my neighbors down the road, they help me on this farm, because given 143 acres, I can't afford all of the equipment that would be necessary. So they help me and I help them. I'll haul grain for them in the fall, and they'll help me with the planting and the harvesting on this farm. So we do a lot of trading back and forth.

Maniscalco: Oh, that's neat. That's good. And you just said hauling grain in the fall, that makes me think of markets. What about the markets? And I know that the corn market this year has been a little bit wild. Can you talk a little bit about what experiences you've had?

Black: Well, of course, they are. Again, if I go back a long way, corn prices, crop prices, back fifty years ago, they used to be relatively stable. I can remember corn used to be a dollar, a dollar ten a bushel, and it stayed that way for a long, long time. You're right, today the crop prices kind of move up and down somewhat dramatically. The last couple of years, they have gone up considerably. I mean, corn went up to almost six dollars a bushel, and beans up to fifteen dollars a bushel. So that was really good, although in many cases, a lot of farmers didn't get to sell it for that. You may have sold it before it got to that level. Or you may have pre-sold it and didn't get that high amount. But crop prices have gone up a lot; they've also dropped here in the last few months. So there's a lot of variability. And marketing is a real interesting concept anymore, trying to do that. I mean, it's one thing to produce a crop and put in a bin, but then when you have to market it, you really don't know what to do sometimes. You try to sell some of it ahead of time, so you have a certain percentage of the crop sold, even before you put it in the ground. And a lot of farmers will do that, and a lot of farmers will store their grain on their property and then sell it throughout the next year. But the prices have fluctuated a lot. The prices of fertilizer have gone up tremendously also in the last year, they've almost doubled. So that's a real challenge, trying to cover all of the fertilizer costs that have gone up.

Maniscalco: And you mentioned it just a second ago: what about storage? Are you storing some of your crop?

Black: We've got three grain bins here that we store the corn and beans in. I don't have enough storage for the whole farm, I have to take some of it to the elevator in town and store it. But most farmers around here do store their crops on the property.

Maniscalco: Now, one thing you mentioned is a child, you had livestock on this farm, and of course you don't have that now. What kind of livestock did you have on the farm then?

Black: Mainly corn and—corn. (laughter) Cattle. Cattle and hogs, mainly. Didn't have any sheep, or I think we had a goat maybe for a pet, but for production, it was mainly cattle and hogs.

Maniscalco: What kind of cattle?

- Black: They were Hereford cattle. My dad raised some of his own cattle, and then he would buy feeder cattle every fall and feed them through the winter, and then sell them in the spring. That was pretty typical of a lot of farms around here. This particular farm here, there's a big cattle barn where they did the same thing. My grandfather would buy cattle in the fall, and then feed them and sell them in the spring. And hogs, we raised those in the field, where we had clover or hayfields, we would raise the hogs out in the field, which is not very common anymore, but it was back then.
- Maniscalco: To start with the cattle, how many cattle did you have?
- Black: Oh, gosh, I don't remember exactly. I would guess he probably had fifty or so that he raised. He raised some on his own, he had a bull and heifers and he'd raise cattle, probably had fifty. And then he'd buy maybe another eighty or another feeder cattle to feed throughout the winter. And hogs, we probably sold 400 or 500 a year, I would guess. Something like that.
- Maniscalco: What breed of hog, do you remember?
- Black: Yorkshires.
- Maniscalco: Yorkshires. Now, compared to some of the neighbors, was that a large operation, small operation?
- Black: Well, the farm that I grew up on was 240-something acres. That was probably kind of medium-sized, average-sized operation, I would say.
- Maniscalco: What were you doing to deal with diseases or anything at that time with the animals?
- Black: Well, you'd vaccinate them.
- Maniscalco: You'd vaccinate.
- Black: We always vaccinated hogs for cholera. We don't do that anymore, I don't think, but they did back then. When they were relatively small, we'd vaccinate them all for cholera. That was about the only vaccination we ever gave them. And for cattle, we had antibiotics and other kinds of pills that we would give them whenever they needed it, but normally, if you had a sick cow, you'd call the vet to come out and look at it.
- Maniscalco: Now, you mentioned something that I had never heard of, which was putting hogs out in pastures. Can you kind of explain that?
- Black: Well, when you had hay or clover fields, there was part of a rotation, we would take a portion of that, and we had houses, wood sheds that hogs would live in, they'd get in there in the wintertime or in the summer for shade. But we'd line those things up out in the field, and we'd have a water tank out there, and we'd have a little corn crib, and we'd haul corn down there, so you would have the water and the feed, and feeders, and then these houses, I call them hog houses, they were lined up, that they would live in. So the hogs actually lived out in like a twenty-acre field, and we would take the food and the water down to them. That was interesting in the wintertime, of course, the water would freeze, so you'd have to go down there every morning and build a fire, we had a heater that was inside of the water tank, and you'd put coal and corncobs in there and you'd build a fire, which would then thaw out the water, so they'd have water during the day. But you had to do that every day, you'd go down there and feed them and build a fire in the water.

Maniscalco: That's pretty neat. What other chores were involved with the keeping the hogs out in the field that would be different, I guess?

Black: Well, you haul feed down there, and then you have to sweep the corn out to them, and take—if they were getting ready to have little pigs, then the sows were put in each individual shed would have its own—one sow per shed. And when they were in there, you'd have to haul water and feed to each one of them, and dump it over into a pan in each one of the pens. Then you would rotate those throughout the field. Of course, when hogs get in one spot, you know what they do, they kind of root around and tear all of the vegetation up. So then you'd move the sheds to another part of the field, so you'd do that maybe two times throughout the field, rotate them around. But mainly the chores were feeding them, watering them, and then moving the houses.

Maniscalco: It must have been a lot of work to move those houses.

Black: Well, we had a little trailer. Dad built a trailer, it was about that far off the ground, and you'd just tip—these houses weren't that big, you'd tip them off, and you'd drag the trailer under it, and you'd tip them back down, and put two on this trailer, and then you could haul them. One thing we did have to do, we did have to bring them up and wash them. We bought them all the way up to the house and we washed them all down, again from a disease standpoint, just to clean them all up, so that when we moved them to a new location for a new batch of pigs to come along that they were clean, and we didn't transfer any kind of diseases from one place to another.

Maniscalco: Wow. That's really neat. And finally, you don't have livestock here now, when was that decision made, and how did that kind of come along?

Black: Well, a lot of it, I guess, was an economic decision. When the prices of raising cows and hogs, especially if you didn't have an opportunity to raise a lot of them, the scale sometimes, the more you can raise, you keep your prices down. I think it just became a conflict between the price, of course the price of cattle and hogs is always going up and down, but your costs associated with raising cattle or hogs versus your opportunity cost of being able to put that land into corn and soybeans and not have a rotation, it just, the economics drove most people towards going more to corn and soybeans and away from the livestock. And if they did have livestock, they would build a confinement operation, and they'd put the animals completely inside. Although I was reading just the other day in a farm journal that some guy is now talking about taking the hogs and going back out in the field with them, and doing it like we did fifty years ago. So I thought that was interesting.

Maniscalco: That's neat. Do you remember a certain point in time when you know that your—I guess it was probably your father that decided not to have livestock anymore?

Black: Well, one thing that may have changed him was probably when he moved, he retired and moved from the farm that I was raised on—well, no, I take that back. He didn't necessarily retire at that point. He moved over to this farm and lived here, but he kind of semi-retired about that time. So, and he had to give up the other farm. So this farm didn't really have facilities to raise a lot of livestock on it, and he just decided at that point to stick with the corn and beans. And he probably, in his age at that time, didn't want to continue to have to take care of them. Because when you've got livestock, you've got to be here all the time. You can't just go off for

a week at a time and leave them. So I think it was his age, and the fact that he had down-sized to this smaller acreage that he gave it up.

Maniscalco: Now, what about—you know, there's a lot of work that goes on in the farm. Just as you were saying, your father was probably thinking about that. Did they ever have any hired help?

Black: He had a man that worked for him on the other farm where I was raised. There was a gentleman and his wife that lived in a little tented house that's not there anymore. He worked there for years and years, helped with all of the work associated with the farm. I think he was given free—the house didn't cost him anything, he lived there for nothing. So, he had one person that worked for him. And I know on this farm, when my grandfather was still operating, and he hired a lot of people, because his records will show six or seven people that worked for him each year on the farm. Of course, back in that era, there was a lot more labor intensity. We don't have that today. One person can do a lot more with this larger equipment. But back then, there were a lot of people that either had a tenant that lived on the farm and just worked there.

Maniscalco: And through your family's history, have there been stories of hired hand coming on?

Black: Well, not real personal stories. Just the records that show that a lot of different people—I mean, there are names of these people, some of them of which I knew maybe their families, but people who worked out here back in the thirties, twenties, thirties, forties. But I don't have any real specific stories, per se.

Maniscalco: Now, this is a nationally recognized historic site. And from what I've read, I think you were involved in creating that, this building, getting into that side of it. Can you talk a little bit about making that decision?

Black: Well, I of course have always been interested in history myself, and this place has an awful lot of history associated with it, because it just happened to have been here a long, long time. And I thought it might be interesting to get it designated on the national register. So I started the process back when I was still living in Colorado, and wrote up a narrative, it takes quite a lengthy narrative that you have to write up and submit, and explain the significance of the property. You have to explain either the architectural significance, or the early settlement, or the history of the property as it is significant towards agriculture, which this one was. Of course, this property was significant probably on all three of those categories. I wrote it up and sent it in, and they first sent it back to me saying, well, you've got beef this up a little bit, you've got to write a lot more technical information about the architecture and so on. And it kind of scared me off, because it looked like a PhD thesis that I had to put together. But anyway, after I retired, I thought, well, now I have time to get into this, and I started into it again, and got some help from the State Historic Preservation Office, a woman named Amy Easton was very, very helpful in helping me through the process of getting it revised and written, so that it met all of their criteria. And it was designated then in 2005 on the national register. So I was real happy to see that happen.

Maniscalco: Okay. So seeing that you wrote this up, can you explain to us the architectural styles?

Black: Oh, well, the early style of the house, it's called the federal style. The house was built in 1823; they called it a federal style, because it has a central hallway and two rooms on each side, and it's the same upstairs and downstairs. Some of the entryway, this side of the house over here was the original entryway, and it's got some fan lights over the top that are significant, that were typical of that period. Then, of course, all of these fireplaces, there are six fireplaces in

here, and all of the doors, and just the layout of the inside of the house was significant also. Then in the 1850s, the wood part of the house was done on the outside, and they put on a porch and some columns, a washhouse, another entryway that has what they call Greek revival architecture, it's got side lights and decorative lentil over the top of the door, it's got these columns out here that are kind of the Greek revival style. So that type of architecture is what made it significant to the 1850s period. And then of course the farm buildings, some of those are from the 1800s, so those were significant to the agriculture side of it.

Maniscalco: Now, you said there were three things that they wanted you to touch on, which were—one was architecture, what were the other two?

Black: Well, you don't have to touch on all three of them. You have to either meet either architecture, early settlement, or being significant towards some historical period, which agriculture would be one. But we just happened to meet three of those, because the age of the place, and the fact that it's been a farm for that long, and early settlers came here, so we met all those criteria. And actually, we put the whole farm in. It's not just the house; it's the property and everything is listed on the register.

Maniscalco: So this will then—the whole farm will always be a farmland.

Black: Well, not necessarily. The national register restrictions don't stop me—I could come in tomorrow and tear the place down. It doesn't stop you from doing that. It just gives it a designation. But it's still your property; you can do whatever you want to with it. So it doesn't quote "protect" it forever.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. So it just gives it a designation?

Black: Well, it's just that throughout the country, any properties that are significant in either architectures or historical value, you can place them on the national registry. It just gives it kind of a notoriety. It does protect it from, if somebody wanted to build a highway through here, when you do an environmental assessment for government projects, you have to look at certain things, and whether or not, if a piece of property is on the national register, it does give it a little more protection, because it has some significant values, historical values.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now, you mentioned a little bit earlier that you give tours through here once and awhile? Can you kind of explain what—?

Black: Well, I had an open house here in 1998. Well, even going back before that, my mother was very interested in history also, and when they lived here back in the seventies, their hobby was antiques. They purchased a lot of antique furniture, much of which I had to refinish when I was younger. But they equipped this whole house with period types of antiques, and the place was really a showplace. It just looked really nice. And so they would host tours every once in awhile; there were some groups from Springfield that came down to tour historic sites in the vicinity, and they went through the house. In 1998, when the house was 175 years old, my brother and I had an open house here, and let people in the community come through and just look at things. We had some historical stuff put out, so we had a tour for that. Then I had another tour for the historical society a few years ago, and then of course when we were designated, we had a ceremony, the historical society sponsored an open house and a ceremony here when we actually dedicated the place. And I have a marker out in front that we can look at later, and a plaque that shows the typical designation of the property. So I'm always interested in showing it to people who like history and like to see it.

- Maniscalco: Yeah. Now, I'm sure not only do you have just the house that's really neat, because it's an old house, but I'm sure your house, just like you were saying, there were some antiques that your parents had put together. What were some of the kind of neat things that you've acquired through the home?
- Black: Well, there's two pieces of furniture in here that I can show you later that came over with the family when they came here in 1822. There's two chests that are still here. They came across the ocean on the wagons, and they're still here in the house. Some of the other furniture wasn't necessarily always theirs, or that came over originally, although I've got a number of pieces, a big walnut desk, and some others, that was my great-grandfather's. And my brother's got a lot of antiques that were part of the family history. So we've got desks and beds and chairs and all that type of stuff that at some point were in this house.
- Maniscalco: Wow. That's pretty cool. Now, you know, you've come back, you've got this place designated as a national historic site, you've kind of left the farm and you came back to it. What's the joy of being a farmer, being back on the farm?
- Black: Well, that's kind of hard to maybe explain. I just enjoy being here because of the roots, I guess, that I have around this particular farm. It's just kind of neat to be able to operate this and think back to my father and grandfather and great-grandfather and others, and what they were doing here hundreds of years ago. I don't know, I just like to be outside, I enjoy the production of the crops. The neighbors here, I enjoy working with them, and helping them. And just the history of being here, I guess. The other thing I do, I spend a lot of time trying to maintain the house and keep it up because of its significance. So, I don't know, I guess it's just my historical interest that really, I get a lot of gratification from that.
- Maniscalco: Now, you know, farming is not always the easiest job in the world. You have weather, you have diseases, all kinds of things that kind of bombarding you. What are the real difficult parts of it for you?
- Black: The real difficult parts of the farming? Well, the weather, as you mentioned, is probably one of the most difficult parts, dealing with—like this year, it rained and rained, and it was late, we were a month late getting the crops in. And then it never stopped raining, and then of course previous years, we went and didn't get any rain. So I would say that's probably one of the biggest factors, is just the uncertainties of not knowing what each year's going to bring. But I'm a little different here maybe in that I don't have to depend on this farm for my total livelihood, so I may not have some of the same kinds of fears or concerns that somebody would if everything that they got on the farm, what happened or didn't happen, was 100% influence on their life. So I'm maybe shielded a little bit from some of those kinds of concerns. But, yeah, I'd say the weather's probably the biggest factor. Other than that, I can't think of any insurmountable issue that we deal with.
- Maniscalco: Now, you know, I'm kind of interested in this question for you, because you do have the historical interest. Farms were small family farms for a long time, and those are starting to kind of disappear over time. How do you feel about that? The consolidation of small family farms into these larger farms?
- Black: Well, I don't think there's any other option. I don't know—the only other choice to try to maintain a small family farm is you'd have to go back to some level of diversity in crop prices that we don't have right now. And it's almost not sustainable. I don't know, some people that

because family farms got bigger, then they immediately equate that to corporate farms, and that's really not the case. And in some cases, the corporations are family corporations. A lot of the farms are not run by huge, gigantic corporations, at least around here. There's a few that raise a lot of hogs and have a lot of land, but most of the farms are family farms; they just are bigger than they were back then, and you don't—the landscape is different, you don't have as many of them as you did. But they're still family operations. The folks that have helped me a lot, they have a father and two brothers, and they farm together. And a lot of the operations around here are several brothers that are together.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. What do you see for the future of farming?

Black: Well, I think we're going to continue to see the changes in the technology, and especially the genetic technology that we've got; they're talking about corns in the future that have—I've mentioned three different kinds of traits that go into the corn; now they're talking about eight different traits they can put in there for different kinds of resistance to it, to all types of things. So I think that's going to continue to evolve. Some of the big issues that we're going to face will be energy, the cost of fertilizer, as I mentioned, is double. The cost of nitrogen that goes on the land has doubled. And of course corn takes a lot of nitrogen. So I don't know if we'll see a switch in the types of crops that we grow or not. A lot of people talk about getting alternative crops, different types of crops that would be maybe a better market. So I think that's always an opportunity, but I don't see a lot of that happening in the short term. So I think the technology's going to be there; I think you're probably going to see farms continue to get a little bigger, they're going to continue to creep, to get bigger and bigger, so you can spread your costs over a larger income. I just don't see it going back to the way it was fifty years ago. Some people would like to see that, maybe, but I just don't see that happening.

Maniscalco: Yeah. This is the last question I have for you. So this is an oral history interview, and it's going to be in the Illinois State Museum, it's going to be archived, and around for years and years and years and years and years. One day, one of your great-great-great grandkids could be—maybe they stop here and then go to the State Museum and walk in and say, "There's Grandpa Black's interview up on the shelf." What do you want to put on this interview for them?

Black: Well, I guess I kind of did this to a letter I wrote to my grandson that he's not supposed to open for twenty years. I just hope that this place is still here, and I hope that they can be involved in it, that people would still enjoy the history of this house and this farm. I hope it's not a subdivision. I don't think it would be by then, but I just hope that they can maintain the history that we've tried to maintain, the legacy of this farm and the history of this farm, and I just hope it can be maintained in the future, and if I have great-grandchildren or great-great grandchildren, that they're able to sit here some day and talk about what they've seen over their last generations. So hopefully this will just still be here, I guess. And I would hope that they have developed an interest in the history of the farm.

Maniscalco: Excellent. Well, thank you very much, Stephen.

Black: Well, thank you. I've enjoyed it.

Maniscalco: This was a lot of fun.

M: Very nice interview.

Black: Well, thanks. If my phone hadn't gone off—(laughter) I can't believe it. I'm always telling people to turn their phones off, and then the thing goes off.

(end of interview)