

Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Virginia Bomke for the Oral History Office on November 12, 1972. Rosalyn Bone transcribed and Ellen Waggoner edited the transcript.

In this memoir Rolland Stone discusses his family arriving from Vermont in Sangamon County. He also talks about Sangamo Town, World Wars I and II and the Stone Seed Company.

Readers of the 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 views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

The manuscript may be read, quoted and cited freely. It may not be reproduced in whole or in part by any means, electronic or mechanical, without permission in writing from the Oral History Office, Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois, 62708.

Rolland Stone, November 12, 1972, Pleasant Plains, Illinois.

Virginia Bonke, Interviewer.

Q: . . . personal family history. Trace the beinning of your family in Sangamon County.

A: Well, my grandfather came here in about 1831 and settled in the east part of this place. And in 1832 he built his first house around, oh, a quarter mile east of here. And from then on, why, family had one difficulty after another. And they had scarlet fever and most of the children were killed or died from scarlet fever with the exception of my grandfather survived, he and his brother and sister survived in their generation and my father the only one that survived in his generation. And my sister and I were the only survivors in our generation.

Q: Where did your family come from to Illinois?

A: They came from Vermont.

Q: Then they weren't part of the party that came from Pennsylvania?

A: No, these folks came, I don't know how they did come here.

Q: They came from Vermont in 1831.

A: 1831.

Q: Did they walk all that way?

A: No, they came by boat mostly. They came down the Ohio River in a boat. I had the exact description here a while back but I can't remember all the details now. They came there to St. Louis and then walked over land up here as I recall. And then my great grandfather had a fire to burn off some prairie and the fire got into the haystacks and he worked so hard at it that he contracted bronchitis and it went into a form of tuberculosis. And he had a man in the east that claimed that he could help him, so in his last days why he went out east. And he went to LaSalle, Illinois and then from there on, I guess they went by train at that time. Well, he never got back. He got back as far as LaSalle and he died there.

Q: That was your grandfather?

A: My great grandfather. He left my great grandmother and some small children. And she had quite a struggle to get things together until they got big enough to help.

Q: They stayed on here.

A: They stayed on.

Q: He was the one who migrated from Vermont?

A: That's my great, great grandfather. Both of them did. They both came together and about the same time. I think one came here later than the other but one of them entered this eighty acres and the other entered the east eighty acres.

Q: You say entered. How did they do that?

A: Oh, they got the patent from Andrew Jackson when it was signed and entered from the government. I could not find you any place exactly the amount they paid for it but they apparently paid about a dollar and a quarter an acre because that was the going price apparently at that time. A few years before that I think they paid a dollar and a quarter an acre for the section where Springfield was started on.

Q: Well, now did they have a land office locally around here? In Springfield?

A: No. In Springfield was the only one.

Q: I meant in Springfield.

A: Sangamon County was started in Springfield in the land office and our original county office was there. They started to probably have it in Sangamon Town but it finally ended up in Springfield.

Q: Is there anything more you'd like to relate about the early settlement of your parents? Is there anything?

A: Well, after a while my grandfather finally bought the other Herrons out and he homed the place before his death.

Q: Now was that 160 acres?

A: A hundred sixty acres. And that descended to my father and to his sister and I.

Q: What do you know about Sangamon Town?

A: Well, apparently it was entered, it started in about 1820 but it was incorporated in 1824. And it thrived for a few years. There was a mill, a woolen mill and a saw mill and a grist mill there. And the saw mill was apparently the only steam saw mill in the whole area at that time and the lumber for the courthouse in Springfield, the original courthouse, was sawed there. And also the lumber for our first house on this place was sawed there. The buildings that were there in the beginning were mostly moved by the farmers that owned surrounding land eventually when it was abandoned. And in 1850 my grandfather recounts here that he and his father went to Sangamon Town to wash the sheep. Apparently in that day, why, before they sheared them, they washed them. That was a strange

way to do it but anyhow that's what they went down to do. And he describes it as a nice, sloping, rolling plain they had there that sloped down to the river and they rented rails from the saw mill and made a little pen. They'd get the sheep in there and when they'd catch them, throw them in the water one by one.

Q: Did they swim then?

A: No, I think they just held them under until they got the wool clean.

Q: They just held them under. It wasn't so deep but what could . . .

A: Oh, in the shallower edge there. And I guess they didn't drown. That was the same . . .

Q: Now this was in Sangamo Town.

A: At Sangamo Town.

Q: Is it called Sangamo or Sangamon?

A: Sangamo. At that time he says the mill, the saw mill was still there but most of the other buildings were gone by 1850, so in about a period of 25 years it'd be all that Sangamo Town really existed.

Q: What was the significance of Sangamo Town? What was its significance?

A: Well, ended up with very little, I guess.

Q: (laughs) And for a while it seemed that it would be the center of population.

A: They thought maybe it'd be the capital at first.

Q: Why do you think it failed to become the center of population, as Springfield in its present site did become the capital?

A: Well, the main reason was that they sent two or three people out to survey which was the best place and the people that favored Springfield took them a long ways around till they got lost in the woods and they decided that nobody could ever find it again even if they decided it was the best place. So they finally settled on Springfield, then and after that why Sangamo Town deteriorated fast.

Q: Like Prohibition, do you remember the Prohibition year on Sangamon County?

A: Yes, I remember it all right.

Q: What were its effects?

A: I was pretty small to know how much liquor was served around the country but there seemed to be almost as many drunks then as there later was.

Q: Yes, that's what my father said. The Depression, how did it affect Farmingdale?

A: Well, the Depression did lots of things to Farmingdale and the whole country. Lots of people lost their farms and lots of people gone, disappeared after that. Up to the time of the Depression farming was more of a way of life and people kind of enjoyed it. Since the Depression, why everybody's struggling to make ends meet it seems like. Up to that time there wasn't such a struggle. But I don't know much else of the Depression.

Q: Were you in the seed business at this time?

A: Yes, we started in the seed business about 1928.

Q: How did the Depression affect your business?

A: Well, at that time I couldn't see very much difference because we didn't have very much business then. Just a little old pollinated corn that we sorted out of the fields, put up on racks, business was just a few neighbors that came in and got some once in a while when they needed it. But we didn't rely on it very much to really make a living at that time. My grandfather started saving seed corn way back in the early days and I just kind of took it over from him. Sold some of the seed corn that was selected like he did. Just went out in the fields with sacks and picked it, put it up on racks, dried it and then we shelled it and sold it.

Q: I have more detail about the Stone Seed Company later. You told me about early mail service. What do you know about early mail service in Sangamon County?

A: Well, the earliest mail service we had, as I can remember, was a rural mail carrier who came by here from Springfield. And the service was very good. I would say that it was probably better than it is at the present time. And we got the mail pretty well on time. I was looking back through the records here and I seen that in that mail service originally, the first one in Illinois was started near Auburn, but that was the second one in the United States to carry mail.

Q: What was the name of the post office--and you said you didn't know that. There used to be--where Albert Brandt and family lived on the Cordes place since I've know them.

A: Seems like I've dimly heard about something there but I . . .

Q: It would have been old, early settlement. Early settlement post office far as I can gather because Albert Brandt's father was pretty old. Politics. Who were some early political figures in Sangamon County?

A: Well, I don't . . .

Q: As far back as you have any information, either firsthand or handed down.

A: Well, I--can you shut that off for a minute while I look up . . . (tape stopped) Some of the early politicians, apparently there was Major Iles and Pascal Enos and Colonel Thomas Caucs, Charles R. Matheny and Morty Kyle Moberly and Thomas M. Neal. Those were the early forefathers in Springfield that more or less ran the town the way they thought it ought to be run I guess. Since you didn't have so much competition. My grandfather says here in one place that, "There were so few people in the county at that time that everybody knew everybody on a first name basis. And it was very easy to know what everybody was doing."

Q: One thing that's interesting from the research idea from Benjamin B. Thomas' history of Abraham Lincoln--I interviewed Mrs. Thomas, his widow, Ben B. Thomas' widow--and they said that, I mean they described voting in Old Salem, the settlement, you know, and they didn't have secret ballot. They just voted and everyone would know how they voted. Education. What schools did you attend?

A: I attended the Talbott School and then Springfield High School.

Q: How did Talbott School get its start, do you remember that?

A: Well, I think it was a man by the name of Talbott owned the land there and there was at the time when a certain part of each section was set off for school purposes. And he bought all but the part where the school was and the money went into the school fund. And I don't know exactly what the date was on that but it must have been around after 1850 because my grandfather went to Springfield in a school when he got here and went to a school at Indian Point where they board when he was about six years old. So apparently there wasn't any school in this area at that time.

Q: Higher education. You said you went to Springfield High. When did the students first start commuting to Springfield High School?

A: Well, my grandfather did and my father did I just suppose clear back to about the 1850s.

Q: I wonder how old Springfield High School is. Is this Springfield High School you're talking about?

A: Well, not this one that's there now. There's been three, I guess, that have gone before that. I think there's one on Fourth and the one my grandfather went to is right in the middle of downtown. I think it was on Fourth Street sitting there. I could find that out exactly if I looked farther but most of that was right in Springfield. Then there was an old high school there where the Internal Revenue Building is now that was torn down. That's where my father went.

Q: It was built over or around the cemetery there.

A: Yes, there's a cemetery there where the Springfield High School as we know it now stands. And most of my folks were buried there at one time or another and then finally the city gave them a half a lot at Oak Ridge and they were taken up when the school was built there and they were

taken up and buried out at Oak Ridge then. I can remember myself when the tombstones were still there on the lawn. Up on the east side of the school grounds now.

Q: When did Pleasant Plains High School become consolidated and take over the area where you live now?

A: Must have been about 1930s. The 1930s, wasn't it?

Q: Did you go to college? If so, where?

A: I went part of a year up in Bradley, at Peoria, after I graduated from school.

Q: World Wars I and II. Do you remember anything about World War I?

A: Yes, I remember all the excitement going on. I remember the day the Armistice was signed. I could hear, I was out hunting and I could hear the whistles blowing, I wondered what was the matter. All the farmers I know came up in big knots at that time because there was a big demand and high prices for things. We got threshing machines and binders and all kinds of equipment that we never could afford before.

Q: Compare the effects of World War I and World War II on Sangamon County. In what ways was it like, were they alike, the effects and what was it that was different?

A: I think as far as the farming is concerned both wars helped the farmers some.

Q: Made a greater demand.

A: Made a greater demand and raised the prices up to where they had money to go on again.

Q: Stone Seed Company. How did your family get started in the seed business? You've told us some of these things.

A: Well, back in about 1928, when I started growing open pollinated corn or selecting open pollinated corn from my fields and we ear tested it and sold it to a few farmers. Had just a few bushels we got every year and from there on in 1932 we started having an acre of hybrid seed corn, which the university released. And then we grew two acres, then four acres, came on up that way.

Q: What do you mean the university released?

A: They released the foundation. See, that was the first year you could have obtained inbreds to cross. The University of Illinois would release them out and farmers would grow it.

Q: It began with corn, then the seed business and then gradually took in other kinds of seeds.

A: Yes. Not till later years when we went into other kinds of seeds.

Q: What are some of the kinds of seeds that you sell?

A: Oh, we tried to handle any kind of a seed that midway had a need for them. Like wheats, oats, soybeans, grass seed, all kinds of flower and garden seeds.

Q: As far as progress is concerned in early Sangamon County, do you remember when the hard road came out from Springfield, came to be, was this the early twenties? You said when you were looking . . .

A: About 1922, I think, was the first completion of the road out this far.

Q: Would you trace the progress of the building on Beardstown hard road? Tell about the little steam engines pulling cement cars along on small track when Route 125 was built.

A: They had a little railroad track along the side of the road and one person would ride it to Farmingdale and I don't know how much farther west it went. Some of the men would really get the cars on there. Had lots of fun with them. They had a wreck every little bit. They'd have an engine pull about three or four cars of cement and of gravel, a lot. The water and the mixer were all down in the road, at the end of the road that they were laying. They just hauled the cement and the gravel down to mix that. They had pretty good times with that.

Q: My husband tells about they had two steam engines on some of the heavy loads.

A: Yes. Elmer McMillan up here, he's a contractor now, he's one of the engineers. He and Everett both run steam engines years on back. Bert drove for a while. George Schmidt, I think, was one of the engineers, too.

Q: Elmer McMillan handles bulldozers.

A: He handles bulldozers now.

Q: When did the State build the strip to Farmingdale?

A: Well, I couldn't tell you the exact date but it was quite a while after that. I don't exactly remember now. (tape stopped)

Q: Now, I'd like you to repeat that for the tape.

A: Hard road was finished at Farmingdale all except the grade at the creek in 1930. I suppose it was entirely finished in 1931. Hard road was complete to Rochester and Beardstown except creeks in 1927.

Q: In early days cement roads were one lane in some of the small towns my husband tells me. Do you remember this?

A: Yes, I remember a good many that was that way but I don't think there was any . . . well, there was a strip from Springfield out this way at first. I think it came out to about where the road turns to go to the creek there and it was only one-lane road for a good many years. And the next one they put through there was brick top. It was brick top out as far as Bradfordton and then from there on there wasn't any till they laid the concrete road and then they went all the way through to Springfield with it.

Q: Aviation. What do you remember about early days of this in Sangamon County?

A: Well, first I can remember when Lindbergh lifted in here to take the mail. He lit on the field there right north on the Hazlitt Lane. Field around Zvilisowski farm at that time. And he lit in there . . .

Q: Now, this is between here and Springfield?

A: Yes. You know where Slates live there, now?

Q: Yes.

A: It's right north of there and it's on the place that they farm. Right north of the railroad track there. That was the first airport of Springfield. I think he kept it three or four, five years there and then moved out to the southwest airport and now it's the main airport. Capitol Airport.

Q: The railroad. Did you ever make use of the old railroad whose train stopped at Farmingdale?

A: Yes, I rode to school on it for about two years, every morning and . . .

Q: Was that the B & O [Baltimore & Ohio]?

A: It wasn't in the beginning, it was some other name, then but I don't remember what it was. B & O when I knew it.

Q: Was any seed ever shipped on it from the Stone Seed Company?

A: Well, not in that day and in later years we've shipped quite a few loads of seed on it.

Q: Not when it was stopping at Farmingdale?

A: Not when it was a passenger train.

Q: It would have to stop to get it, but I mean, yes, when it was a passenger train. Where did it stop that you put the loads of seed on it?

A: At Bradfordton.

Q: At Bradfordton, that's right.

A: We loaded the Cordes trees on there.

Q: When did this train cease to stop at Farmingdale? Was it very recently?

A: No, it's not very recently.

Q: Oh, not stop at Farmingdale, I meant going through at all. Well, they still go through there, don't they?

A: They still go through. Still got a freight goes through but the passenger train that I thought you meant it's been gone quite a while. I can remember when the passenger trains quit. Why, we used to ride that to high school and every morning we'd . . .

Q: That's what some of the others whom I interviewed said. Eugene Dunkel.

A: Walked down there at six-thirty in the morning to catch the train in and get back here about four o'clock in the evening and walk home. Walked a mile and a half each way.

Q: People and inflation. It seems to me that expanding population produces expanding inflation of prices. What can we tell about this? Describe the expansion or inflation in land prices beginning with earlier times.

A: Well, it's amazing, even to me that the rate that inflation in land prices is taking place right now. It's hard to tell how far it will go and it's, I expect, inflated probably five times in the last twenty years.

Q: As you remember Depression prices, did they become as low or lower than the prices of pioneer times, or was it just a comparable low to the World War I higher prices?

A: On going over the records here that my grandfather kept of the prices year by year, that was much lower than in 1932 than it had ever been I guess. Corn was only about fifteen and twenty cents a bushel at one time there. I saw one place in his diary where he sold 768 bushels of corn at thirty-five cents to pay the taxes.

Q: Thirty-five cents a bushel.

A: Thirty-five cents a bushel. And at most the earlier times and before that a bushel of corn was around a dollar.

Q: Well, I meant in pioneer times. How much did he bring back when he had used to take it to St. Louis?

A: Well, back as far as his records go here I think it was very seldom much under dollar a bushel. So, that hasn't inflated near as much as the land prices have.

Q: That's because of the population explosion. Conclusion. Name any other noteworthy events or people in early Sangamon County.

A: Well, there's lots of people that have worked hard and are long gone now but I can't think just right offhand in a hurry of who they all were. This township, I think, was started in about 1820 and . . .

Q: This is Gardner Township.

A: This is Gardner Township and it was named after a man by the name of Gardner. It was a big part of it owned by him at that time. It was organized and officials elected in 1861. Named in honor of John Gardner who was one of the three commissioners appointed by the board of justices to divide the county into townships. That was a great grandfather to George Gardner who lives in Springfield now.

Q: I thank you very much and I hope I have covered enough on this half hour interview. It's possible that someone else could interview you and get more information do you think later?

A: Well, I guess . . .

Q: I only took a half an hour and you probably have more material than that. Is that possible that someone else could learn more?

A: Oh, I guess they could. There's a lots of interesting things there that I was particularly interested in about the days of the Civil War particularly. Several articles written here about our grandfather, who was in it, but . . . July 2nd at Rock Island . . .

Q: I'm recording this.

A: Oh, are you? A soldier of the 115th battlion was killed at a saloon and only three days after the saloon was finsihed he had gone there for game of the companion when a man stepped in at the door and struck him on the back of the neck with a stick and he fell dead. The man was arrested as he attempted to get off the island. I don't know what punishment he suffered as he remained in the guard house during our stay at the island.

Q: What island was this?

A: This was Rock Island.

Q: Rock Island.

A: Rock Island. It's not in Sangamon County. But there's very interesting things here about the Civil war. The saloon would have been torn down that night had not the Colonel placed a guard it over. The same evening a soldier was killed on the other side of the slough by the Cooperhead Grocery. He was told he was the thirteenth who had been killed there.

Q: Now where was this located at approximately?

A: That was in Rock Island, Illinois. The main army headquarters there was on the island. And he was stationed up there and all of these things went on. We think it's bad now with crime and all but they really had crime back in them days. They killed thirteen there in a short time. That was thought to have been done because they hated the boys in the blue. Some of the boys believe this to be the case that they was supposed to go and scatter the grocery to the four winds and some of them brought their accoutrements to take action and only the captain said the man at the grocery was not at fault. And that's just one article, there's one thing and another like that that happened. It appears interesting to me, I don't suppose it'd be . . .

Q: Well, it's possible that someone could interview you about those . . . that was taking the Civil War for a subject. Thank you very much for your cooperation and kindness.

A: Well, it's all right.

End of Tape