PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Judith Haynes for the Oral History Office on January 14, 1981. The interview took place in the narrators' home. Cathy Caughlin transcribed the tape and Judith Haynes edited the transcript.

Weldon Gerdes was born fifty years ago in Bath, Illinois and his son Gary was twenty-one at the time of the interview. Weldon and Gary Gerdes were two of several persons interviewed regarding life along the Sangamon River. The Gerdes farm, located in rural Petersburg, overlooks the river that has been both a source of aggravation and scenic beauty for the farmer's family.

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.

Weldon and Gary Gerdes, January 14, 1981, Petersburg, Illinois.

Judy Haynes, Interviewer.

Q. I'm going to be talking today with Mr. Weldon Gerdes and Gary Gerdes, his son, about living and farming along the Sangamon River. Mr. Gerdes, how and when did you come to live near the Sangamon River?

A. Oh, about fifty years ago. Been on it all my life, practically. Or around it anyway.

Q. Were you born near here?

A. No, I was born in Bath, Illinois and that was on another river.

Q. So, have rivers come to mean anything to you?

A. They've been very aggravating, part of the time. (laughter)

Q. Why is that?

A. Well, when you make your livelihood on the river which we did several years ago to a great extent, I mean when you're farming along the river and we had mostly overflow ground, and when you lost a crop, it was sort of a disaster. Not sort of, it was a disaster a time or so.

Q. Did that happen frequently?

A. Oh, on the Sangamon River, you'll lose one crop out of about every five that you actually planted. There's only been one time in 1959 that we really had about a total disaster of being wiped out as far as the flood is concerned. The river come up so late and took our crop, we didn't have time to go back in and plant a very profitable crop.

Q. But most years you can replant it?

A. Usually, if the river goes down.

Q. Have you used the water from the river to irrigate the land?

A. No, never irrigate with it.

Q. You mentioned on the phone, or someone had mentioned to me, that you had built a dam on the river.

A. We leveed this farm a few years ago. Not a dam as such as you mean impounding water.

Q. The levee was to prevent the river from getting on your cropland?

A. Right.

Q. Has that worked?

A. Pretty successfully. I mean, you can't hold out . . . . Any dam that's constructed or any levee that's constructed on the Sangamon River basin is not constructed [to] withhold your greater river floods. It's built primarily to restrict the smaller floods that occur once every two or three years. But your larger floods that you're going to have every ten or fifteen or twenty-five years, you can't hold them anyway. There's no way.

Q. Have you seen any floods that were so bad--you mentioned 1959--have there been any others that were so bad that you saw the water coming up considerably on your land?

A. Well, the highest flood on record was 1943. And the next one to that was 1926. I don't remember 1926 but I do 1943. And at that time we were living near Petersburg and a lot of the city of Petersburg was under water. In fact, you couldn't get in or out of the city of Petersburg for four or five days.

Q. But you weren't farming on the river at that time?

A. My dad was and my grandad was, but I wasn't at that time.

Q. How did it affect you? How did that flooding affect you where you did live? You say you couldn't get in and out of Petersburg.

A. Well, basically, it didn't bother our farming operation where we lived at that time to a great extent because we had a smaller amount of ground at that particular time was overflow ground. And that was early in the year. In fact, let's see, that was in May and it didn't actually bother us only prolonged getting the crop in that particular year in the Sangamon River bottoms.

Q. Do you think it ever carries with it some fertile soil? I'm thinking of the Nile River, you know, they say they kind of depend on that annual flooding before they plant crops on it. Do you think it ever helps?

A. No, not on this river.

Q. Do you use the river for any recreation purposes?

A. (laughter) I learned to water ski in the river. (laughter)

Q. Really?

A. Yes. Jumping over logs and a few things like that, several years ago.

Q. I would think that might be difficult. A lot of people tell me there are a lot of trees and beaver dams in the river. How did you manage to water ski?

A. Well, you learn fast in a situation like that. (laughter) It is difficult.

Q. Yes, I'll bet. Do you use a speed boat?

A. No, there was just a bunch of us. I was in Jaycee work at that time, and one or two guys had a speed boat or a motor boat and we went down to proceed to learn how to water ski, and we did.

Q. What part of the river did you do this?

A. Oh, it was in this area.

Q. Right in this area.

A. Yes.

Q. Is the water pretty deep down here in this area?

A. Now?

Q. Yes.

A. You wouldn't get your knees wet if you walked across it.

Q. Really?

A. It's awfully low right now, yes. Has been for the last two years. Our water table is real low right in this central Illinois area right now.

Q. What do you attribute that to?

A. Just not enough rainfall. We've been down six or seven inches on total rainfall through 1980 and probably that much in 1979.

Q. Do you think that there's perhaps an increase in population or a drawing off of the water in the water table that has reduced it?

A. No, that's just mother nature. The weather flows in seven to ten year cycles. If you go back, the thirties were dry years, the forties were wet years, the fifties were dry years, the sixties were wet years, the seventies were dry years, and probably the eighties will be wet

years. Weather runs in about ten year cycles, dry and wet.

Q. Do you hope that it is a wet year?

A. Well, we need moisture. I don't like to see it extremely wet but we got to get the ground recharged. We have to have moisture.

Q. Apart from a flood, you'd like to see some more water.

A. We don't always get it distributed out like that.

Q. Have you ever fished in the river?

A. Oh, years ago, a few times. I'm not a fisherman.

Q. Swam in the river?

A. No, not really. The river used to be too dirty to swim in because Decatur and other municipalities used it for a sewage system and still do, but the river has gotten cleaner in the last five to ten years.

Q. Why do you suppose it's gotten cleaner?

A. Well, because I'm sure the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] has done some cracking down and the waste is not dumped in it like it used to be. The river is a lot cleaner than it used to be. In low times, like the river is low now and in the summertime, fifteen or twenty years ago it would stink so bad, it would be noticeable. And now, you don't have that odor.

Q. So there's something there that's definitely different.

A. It's better. I'm sure it's cost a ton of money to get it that way. But of course it didn't all get dirty overnight and it won't all get cleaned up overnight.

Q. You've probably heard criticism sometimes about farmers contributing to things that end up in the water. What is your feeling on that, say, pesticides or chemicals that leach into the water. How much of that do you think actually happens or how do you feel about that?

A. Well, I'm sure there's probably some of that. I don't think there's any way around that. But on the other hand, we all like to eat. You don't have a choice.

Q. You feel you have to use those chemicals.

A. That's right. You got to weigh the good against the bad and do whatever is best for people in general. We have to have a good strong agriculture. No question about that.

Q. What about erosion. Do you think that some of your soil ends up in the water or in the river?

A. I think farmers in general are good stewards as far as erosion control. They do probably a lot better than some of our people from the universities might try to make people think that they don't do. Most farmers like to control erosion. It's silly for you not to. It costs you money if you don't. There is some erosion. There's not much of a way to keep 100% of it out, you can't. They have this 208 clean water bill, erosion control bill passed the state legislature about two years ago. Well, I think the ultimate goal by the year 2005 is zero erosion. That's just not humanly possible. It can't happen.

Q. I guess it's like having a high ideal to aim for or something.

A. Yes, but you better shoot for somewhere in between the bad and the good, you know. You got to be reasonable, is what it amounts to. But that's just impossible to happen. The only ground you'd have to farm is something as flat as that table top. And there's not enough of those kind of acres to support the population let alone any exports. So you have to use some common sense and so forth. But basically, most farmers are good stewards of the soil to be honest with you. Or I think they are.

Q. I like that phrase. Good stewards of the soil. I wonder if perhaps some of the people that are not doing as good a job as other farmers that are caring about erosion perhaps are tenant farmers. Do you think there's any truth in that? Do you think that perhaps the man who owns the land and lives there and farms it is going to treat it more carefully than the tenant farmer or what do you know about that?

A. Why, I think that's probably a fair assessment. Yes. You're going to take better care of your automobile than if somebody else probably borrowed it off of you. (laughter) Same situation.

Q. I would think so. Do you own your own land or do you rent from a bank or something?

A. My dad owns a pretty good size chunk of land here and we own a couple of farms and we rent quite a bit of land otherwise too.

Q. So you have a strong interest in keeping this land.

A. Yes, right. I mean, if you don't, if you let your topsoil wash away, that's where your productive soil is. It's going to cost you in the pocketbook sooner or later. And pretty quick.

Q. I would think so. Do you have a favorite season along the river or how do you feel about that.

A. Favorite season?

Q. Yes, favorite season.

A. Well, when you sit there and look out over what you're looking at (points out the picture window), I guess my favorite season here in regards to the river and all would be fall because you look out there in the fall of the year, mother nature has put on her paint brush and it's really pretty out there in the fall. Well, it's pretty today with the snow on the hills . . .

Q. It is. What kinds of trees are out there?

A. On the hillsides, them are oaks and in the river bottom, you see the tree line at the river bottom, them are pretty near all soft maples. Then when you get into higher ground on the bluffs and so forth, they'll be oaks. Most of them. Some willows, but not too many willows.

Q. Do you see any animals out here? Deer or anything?

A. There's a few deer. Not as many deer, I don't think, as they're used to be since they made it legal to hunt them a few years ago. And small game, like rabbits and quail. There are more than they used to be but not too adequate, no.

Q. And you don't hunt them?

A. I don't myself. I have friends that come and go hunting, but I don't.

Q. Have you ever heard any stories about the river?

A. Stories?

Q. Yes. True or false, stories that may have come down through the years that would be associated in some way with the river.

A. You know, I suppose I have but I can't think of any at the spur of the moment.

Q. Okay. Can you give us kind of a sum up or a feeling of what the river has meant to you in your life and in your farming here, living so close to the river?

A. Oh, that's a hard question. I guess I don'tthink about it in those sort of terms like maybe you do. Of course, the river to me is well, not what it is to people who live in town. To me it can be awfully aggravating because you invest a lot of money in a crop and if it takes your crop, why, it's hell and damnation and all that sort of thing. (laughter) I guess I'd have to say all-in-all, the river

bottoms have been good to us and I enjoy as far as a river is concerned. Every time you go across there, you're going to look out the window and take a look at it and if it wasn't there, I'd guess you'd miss it, to be honest. I guess that don't answer your question very well.

Q. No, I think that's a very good answer. I am kind of probing for how somebody feels about a place and I just wonder, for instance, if you had your choice, say, of getting some land, and this may be difficult because you've lived here, but if you had your choice of having some land near a river and having some land that wasn't near a river, and you knew there'd be no aggravation from floods, which piece would you choose?

A. Well, on a financial basis, there'd be no question, you'd want all upland. There's no question there. But the river bottoms is good productive land and a lot of times it might produce a few more bushels per acre than some of the other kinds of land. But it does have its trying moments and rewarding moments. But the river itself is pretty. I don't know. Today when you come across it, I don't know if you had time to look out the window or not, but it's frozen, most of it. The snow's on the ice. But then there's a little trickle down through there that's open where the water's flowing. It's pretty.

Q. Yes, it is.

A. But my favorite time of the year, like I said a while ago is the fall of the year when all the trees are in color. It is really pretty in through here then.

Q. Yes, it would be. You have quite a panorama here. You can see a long way. How far can you see from here?

A. Well, not as far as you might imagine. It's about, it's a mile and a half from here to the river itself. On a clear day, of course, if you look out over the bluffs you can see further than that of course. In fact, you can see the power plant in Springfield.

Q. Oh, so you can see quite a ways.

A. I don't know how far that would be across the country, I suppose ten or twelve miles.

Q. If you can think of some other things you want to share with us that would be in some way helpful to this particular project, I'd like to hear about them. Maybe you'd like a few minutes to think about that and then I could ask Gary a few questions.

A. Go ahead and ask him.

Q. Gary, how long have you lived here?

Gary: Twenty-one years.

Q. Were you born here?

Gary: Yes.

Q. And what are your feelings about the river?

Gary: Never really thought about it much. It's just always been there. I guess if wasn't there it would be really different, like Dad said. I've done several things there.

Q. What kinds of things?

Gary: Oh, we went swimming in it several times and fishing, hunting along it. Like I said, it took our crops several times. I can always tell how much damage that does because it takes out on all the family.

Q. Yes, I imagine it does. Do you help with the farming?

Gary: Oh, yes. I farm okay.

Q. When you swam there, what was it like?

Gary: Pretty bad. It was awful. Yes, I only went there once. It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't been so dirty. This has been five or six years ago when we went and it was really, really dirty. That's how bad it was and the current was real strong. It's just not a place to swim really at all.

Q. I've heard that it can be a dangerous river because of the current and because it's so changeable and in some places it's low and in some places it's high and there are holes. Have you heard that too?

Gary: Oh, yes. It's killed two or three people down here that I can remember.

Q. Did you know any of them.

Gary: There was one person that was about three or four years older than I was. The river was out down here and they tried to go swimming in it and they got out and the current just took them. He couldn't get back.

Q. And he drowned?

Gary: Yes.

Q. About what year was that?

Gary: I don't know, it's been about four or five years ago.

Q. 1975 or about that time.

Gary: Yes. And then there was a crippled guy that tried to go across the road down here in a car and he couldn't get out of his car and the river just took him.

Q. He was driving across the river where it was low enough to drive across but there was water there or was there a bridge?

Gary: Well, see when the river is real high and gets out it goes across the road down here and he thought he could make it across where the water was but the current gets really strong across there and it just took him off. And he couldn't get out of the car.

Q. You said you did some hunting along the river?

Gary: Some of my friends and I go hunting once in a while. Just rabbits and squirrels. We don't hunt deer.

Q. Are there many rabbits and squirrels?

Gary: Not too many.

Q. Why do you suppose there aren't too many?

Gary: Well, a lot of people go hunting anymore for the meat because they like to do it and everything's so expensive. There's a lot of them that hunt and there's not too many left anymore around here.

Q. I heard this from others and I was very curious about, especially the rabbits. I didn't realize the rabbit population was so low. I live just south of Sangamon State over near I-55, just south of Springfield. Still a little bit country out there and there's always rabbits in the summertime running around in the yard. So I don't know. We have a high population of rabbits but I think it would be nice if they would go someplace where somebody wants to hunt them instead of in the yard.

A. Instead of in the garden?

Q. Yes. Do you have a favorite season?

Gary: Oh, I don't know. It's kind of a toss-up between spring and fall. I kind of like both of those seasons real well but I guess I'd have to say fall probably for most of the same reasons my Dad said.

Q. The colors and the foilage and . . .

Gary: Yes. But spring is always real nice. Never know what's going to happen during the spring but it's always . . .

Q. That's the usual time for your flooding, I would imagine, in the spring.

A. Yes, usually, from the first to the twentieth of June normally, is when the Sangamon River gets out. But on the other hand, Lake Springfield don't help that situation any.

Q. How is that?

A. Well, they have gates on Spaulding Dam up there that they can raise or lower. Of course they keep the lake there at Spaulding Dam at 560 feet above sea level. That's when it is full and they try to maintain it at that level for a water supply. In the winter, like now, this would be an ideal time for them to draw that lake down three or four feet with the anticipation of spring rains and then they could refill the lake, recharge the lake and prevent some of the excess water coming down the channel at the opportune time.

Q. Have they done that?

A. No, they won't work with you.

Q. Why is that?

A. Well, I presume in the back of their minds they're afraid they wouldn't get their lake recharged.

Q. Which they need to service the population's water supply?

A. You mean Springfield?

Q. Yes.

A. Yes, of course, that's where they get their water from, you know. You understand that.

Q. Right.

A. We had an organization a few years ago--Sangamon River Valley Organization--and in 1973, the prime example, Hugh Gardner was City Water Light and Power Commissioner at that time and we had a lot of rain in a period of about ten days. And when I say a lot of rain, I mean six or seven inches. The lake was full, and the river got out, out of its banks and they had an awful lot more rain in South Fork, which is south of Springfield, south of Sangamon State. And Mr. Gardner let them lower the gates, all five of them, and let that thing go. And he nearly washed away Chandlerville down here. He caught a lot of flack over that. But that's all the good it done, but they were threatening with lawsuits and so forth and so on.

Q. How do you think they could have done it differently?

A. Well, if they'd had that lake lowered, four or five feet . . . . That's a large lake and when you start dropping those gates, those five gates down four, five or six feet, you're letting more water out of that lake than the channel can begin to carry.

Q. Do you think if they had let down only some of the gates . . .

A. Well, if they would have had some capacity to hold some excess water coming in to start with, see, then they could have held some of the water back till some of the water from Decatur, Champaign and that area had moved on down and into the Illinois River. Then they could have let that water out slowly. And the crest--the river would have still got out--but the crest would have been much lower than what it was. You'd have had a lot less damage to the community and the farm properties and bridges and everything else.

Q. What was the Sangamon River Association? Was it made up of farmers only or was it . . .

A. Farmers and landowners.

Q. Farmers and landowners that lived along the river and had an interest in it.

A. Right. Had an interest in property along the Sangamon River and some of them, we had two people, I think there was maybe a half a dozen at the most, had an acre or two, and had a cabin, summer cabin or something like that. But most of them was farmers that owned land along the river. But usually when mother nature gets aggravated, she lets a lot of rain loose and you get the river up to a certain level, a normal flood which is like, oh, five hundred and about five hundred and thirty five feet above sea level, I think that's what the bottom of the river is here. When you put about ten feet of water in there and the river gets out, say, it's three or four feet deep on the farm land, that's in the bottoms that wouldn't be leveed. But then you let a big lake on top of that and raise that another three or four feet . . .

Q. That's a lot of water.

A. It hurts. You can understand that, you know, but they won't use the lake for a deterring factor like that. Of course, like I say I presume they wouldn't get it recharged in the spring of the year. But I've never seen a spring yet you didn't get some rain, or quite a bit of rain. Not saying it couldn't happen.

Q. Although you mentioned earlier, the last couple of years have been a bit drier.

A. They have been drier. But how low is your lake? Not real low. Dipped down a little, it's about 570, it's about 557. It's down

about three feet. This is why when they talk about building lake two up there, I can't see that they need it.

Q. I don't think you're alone. What do you think about the possibility of using the Sangamon River for part of the water supply?

A. Oh, I don't see any qualms in that. I don't know why they couldn't. To me, that would be a lot more feasible than what they have proposed doing. You see, they did that back in the thirties when they had such a dry period, in 1934, 1935 and 1936. They pumped water out of the south fork. This isn't no new idea.

Q. I think what concerns some people today is can they clean it up enough? Do they have the technology to take out say, the metals and some of the toxins.

A. Oh, I think they have. They pretty well proved that by the tests they run a while back, as I understand it, what I heard over the radio and so forth. But that's a lot more feasible to me than taking a lot more acreage out of production and so forth and building another lake.

Q. Did you know some of the people that owned the land that would be taken from them for Lake Two?

A. Just one, personally was a pretty good friend of mine. But they weren't against it to be honest. Of course, they have a different motive in their mind.

Q. I see. Maybe they had hoped to sell the land.

A. They did. Well, they weren't going to sell the land, they was going to sell cottage sites on it was what they was intending to do. Which is good business, nothing wrong with that.

Q. One thing about a lake, it always seems to bring pretty little houses around the lake, with everything comes the good and the bad. Did you ever camp along the river?

A. Camp?

Q. Camp.

A. No. (laughter)

Q. Gary, have you done any fishing on the river?

Gary: When I was younger, we used to. Grandpa and I used to once in a while. Dad used to go with us once in a while but hardly ever anymore.

Q. What did you catch?

Gary: Catfish, mainly.

Q. Did you eat them?

Gary: Oh, yes!

Q. Were they good?

Gary: They were pretty good.

Q. Were they pretty big?

Gary: They were medium size, no real big ones.

Q. Have you ever heard of hogging fish?

Gary: I haven't.

Q. Have you, Mr. Gerdes?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you tell me about it? Have you ever seen it done?

A. I have never done it.

Q. How is it done?

A. Well, you just simply . . . . You walk up the river. When you're on the Sangamon River or any river--you were referring to holes in the river a while ago and the way to find a hole in the river--never walk down the river with the current, always walk up the river. That way you walk into a hole or a washed out place gradually. But if you walk down the river, you'll fall into it all of a sudden. The way they hog fish, they'll find an old log or an old tree that's fell in the river and at a low time, like the river's low now and those fish will be in the deeper water where these holes are, so they just simply feel around them logs, they find a fish with their hands and grab them.

Q. Have you ever seen it done?

A. Oh, yes, several times. It's not for me, I don't want to do that.

Q. It sounds like it might be dangerous.

A. Well, you have to know what you're doing and I'm sure you learn pretty rapidly.

Q. How do they grab them? I mean, by the mouth, or the fins or the gills or how . . .

A. They just grab ahold of their bodies like that. They have to wear gloves. Most of them wear gloves of some kind or another. They're not going to get hurt, the fish are not going to hurt them. I was always afraid I might grab a snake. (laughter)

Q. What kind of snakes do you think you'd find around here?

A. I don't know whether there's very many poisonous snakes in this area anymore or not. Used to be there was water mocassins and so forth and I presume there still is some but I couldn't vouch to say that there is. But most of them is what you call water snakes. They're not a poisonous snake.

Q. I didn't think it was warm enough for water mocassins in this climate.

A. Well, there used to be, years ago water mocassins on the Sangamon. I'd say there probably still is but I don't know for sure. But there are snakes in the river and they just call them old water snakes but they're harmless as far as hurting you anyway. More the thought than anything else.

Q. I had heard about hogging and I would like to see that done. It sounds like quite a sport. (laughter) Did you ever see any Indian relics or arrowheads or anything when you were digging or farming?

A. Yes, on the bluffs right above the river bottoms. You won't find any of those in the river bottoms themselves.

Q. But up above?

A. But immediately on the river banks or on the bluffs above the river bottoms you'll find arrowheads and that sort of thing. My father found an ax--oh, when did he find that, several years ago, five years ago--it's in mint condition. It worked up out of the ground and he was, I don't know, I don't know how come he found it but anyway he did and that thing is in really mint condition. There's a lot of people would give a lot of money for that thing. You can see where they chipped it out around the head of it to tie the handle on to it. It's just perfect. We find arrowheads. It's not uncommon to find them if you want to get out and look for them. In the spring of the year, when the snow goes off, when the ground is heaving and thawing and it heaves up that brings that sort of thing to the surface and that's when most people [who] are in that sort of thing or that hobby, why, that's when they go hunting.

Q. And you've lived on this property fifty years did you say?

A. We have lived on this farm for twenty-five years.

Q. Twenty-five years?

A. Yes. But I've been around the Sangamon River all my life.

Q. How old are you, may I ask.

A. Fifty-two.

Q. Did you think of anything more that you'd like to say about the river, Gary?

Gary: Not really. You were talking about the Indians though and there used to be an Indian village over there where Grandpa lives. One of my friends did a report on it, from the library at Athens. I don't know what kind they were. Do you know? Grandpa could probably tell you all about it. There used to be one over there.

Q. Tell me about the Green Belt project of the Army Corps of Engineers.

A. Several years ago, the Army Corps of Engineers and several other organizations decided they would create a Green Belt Zone along the Sangamon River and they wanted to buy all the . . . Basically, they wanted to buy all the first flood plain ground along the Sangamon River and just let it grow up back into brush and horseweeds and whatever, just like it was a hundred years ago or so.

Q. Is that what they meant by Green Belt Zone?

A. They just wanted to let it go back to nature. Of course, they was talking about a very expensive program. Now they was talking from an area starting in Decatur and they come to Chandlerville. In fact, it goes on further west of Chandlerville, almost to Beardstown. They was talking about a very expensive program, a program in my opinion, not feasible in a lot of ways. It was going to disrupt a lot of landowners and people that make their living off that land. The people that owned land in most cases anyway was not for it at all. This was when the Sangamon River Improvement Association was formed, to more or less combat this idea. And I guess to make a long story short, we succeeded. We succeeded because it wasn't feasible to start with.

Q. In what ways was it going to affect you?

A. Well, we own about eleven hundred acres of land here and they was going to take between four and five hundred acres of our best productive land.

Q. They were just going to take it away. Who would it belong to then? The federal government?

A. It would belong to the federal government. And the price they was going to pay us was not even a fair market value price. If they wanted to disrupt you, if they wanted to buy your land, then at least

they ought to have the courtesy enough to give you a reasonable price for it but they didn't even want to do that.

Q. What were their arguments for having this green belt? Was it erosion control or . . .

A. Recreation program.

Q. Recreation program?

A. Strictly. They had all kinds of figures told what the recreational benefits would be for hunting and camping and fishing and they was going to put a (laughter) . . . they was going to put a six foot wide concrete and asphalt path along the river for bicycles.

Q. Concrete all along the river?

A. Yes, for bicyclists. And then they was going to have rest stations every three or four miles and this sort of thing. It was somebody's idea that, well, just really didn't live in this world. (laughter)

Q. The Army Corps does get involved in some pretty big projects sometimes.

A. Well, they were completely stepping out of their bounds. That is not their bounds. They do a lot of good. We need them but they do not need to get involved in something like that. And they are involved in those sort of things like Lake Shelbyville and Lake Carlisle and sometimes you wonder if all those projects are needed. You need some of them, there's no question about it. I'm not against that all together, but you've got to go back to where is the breaking point, where is it really feasible and where is it not feasible. You know, it's hard to build a dam in central Illinois without disrupting a lot of farming land and a lot of agriculture. It's too flat basically. Like Lake Springfield Two where they would have had to construct that dam if they did, they're going to take a tremendous lot of good prime agricultural farming land. And when they once cover that up, it's gone possible forever. But anyway, back to the original question, it was not a feasible program from the word go and it was eventually overcome.

Q. About what year was that?

A. Latter sixties, early seventies. If my mind remembers right.

Q. How many people were in the association?

A. We had approximately one hundred landowners and tenants, all the way from Decatur to Beardstown.

Q. And you did defeat the plan?

A. I don't know if we did but we had a hand in it, I'll put it that . . . They said they run out of state and federal funding for it and I like to believe we had something to do with it.

Q. Did they have hearings?

A. Yes, they had several hearings. The hearings that they had in public were . . . . Well, from a farmer's viewpoint, was tilted. The figures and so forth and so on that they was using for construction purposes and all this, and the ratio, if I remember right, they had to have a three to one ratio of what they called a three to one recreational benefit to a dollar cost benefit.

Q. That sounds right. I mean, that sounds like the usual formula.

A. Well, you know, they could put in whatever figures they wanted to use and you and I wouldn't know whether it was right or wrong. And I'm not sure they did. But anyway, to make a long story short, they run out of funding.

Q. Which you're pleased with naturally and the people in the association?

A. Yes.

Q. In looking out over your land, how much of that would it have taken?

A. All of it.

Q. All of that would have been taken.

A. We would have this small field right here to that first row of trees down there which is the creek. And we had about twenty or thirty acres back out in there. And they'd have took all the rest of it. They'd have took four-fifths of what you're looking at.

Q. That's a lot of land.

A. Well, yes, it is. The project was just not a feasible project from one end to the other. Economically, sensibly, or any other way.

Q. There are not that many trees either around here. I would think that for a recreation area, even if you let it grow back to its natural state you might get grass and brush but I don't know if you'd get enough trees. Do you think?

A. Well, the trees would come eventually. They'd be willows and that sort of thing. There probably wouldn't be a good variety of trees unless you planted them like oaks and that sort of thing. Of course, oaks won't grow in a bottom, you'd have to have a wet type

of tree, which is soft maple and that sort of thing. You don't see any hard trees, like oak trees growing on the first bottom. They'll grow on the hillsides and those areas.

Q. You say they would come back eventually. Do you think, or do you know, over the years in your history that there were a lot more trees before the land was farmed?

A. Oh, yes, there's no doubt about it. I mean, all those bottoms at one time had timber on them. There's no doubt of that. It's all been cleared.

Q. I didn't really know how much was cleared and how much was sort of what I think of as natural grass land or prairie.

A. It was basically all cleared in the bottoms. It had timber on it, lumber on it. Now your prairie grounds, like in the Fancy Prairie area, it's the real dark prairie soil 'cause it had what's called prairie grass on it. It didn't have any trees on it. Some, but not very many.

Q. What kind of flowers do you see around here? We talked a little about the trees, I was just wondering if you noticed, you know, in the spring perhaps what kinds of flowers there are.

A. You're asking the wrong person about flowers. The only thing I know is violets. You do see several of those. You don't see a lot of natural flowers, I don't think, along here. A few. Not many.

Q. Birds? Ever notice many birds?

A. Yes, there is, there is a lot of birds, I think along here. Of course, the Audubon Society, you know one of their lookouts or whatever terminology you want to use is up at, oh, up on the other side of Decatur between Decatur and Champaign. Robert something park, up there. Have you ever been there?

Q. Is that in Mahomet?

A. Yes, in that area.

Q. Lake of the Woods, in that area.

A. No, it's right around Mahomet, in that area. But anyway, there was an area there about two thousand acres left by a man . . .

Q. Allerton.

A. Allerton Park.

Q. Okay.

A. That's on the Sangamon River and there is an area there that is a natural state, it's never been . . . . It has what's called virgin timber on it. It's never been cut and it's just like it was the way mother nature created it.

Q. That is pretty, I have been there once or twice.

A. The Audubon Society, as I understand, uses that for a lot of their nature studies in that area and so forth. There's a lot of birds in and along the river. In fact, that little tree right down there, in warm weather you see blue jays there, four, five, six, every morning and red birds. In fact, I seen a couple of red birds a while ago out there.

Q. I sometimes hear people say that there's more beaver around today on the river and that they create problems by building dams and cutting the trees and the trees end up in the river beds. Have you noticed any of that?

A. There is beaver around. I don't notice any. I know they are around. I know they build on creeks and smaller streams. I don't know about the river or not. They do build on creeks and small streams.

Q. Okay. Gary, can you think of anything more you want to add?

Gary: No, not really.

Q. Okay. Well, I'd like to thank you both for talking to me about the Sangamon River. It's nice to have the farmer's perspective because I didn't have that before. Thank you.

END OF TAPE