

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin ValleyOral History Program

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Talmage Lee Collins

PLACE OF BIRTH: Jasper, Arkansas

INTERVIEWER: Michael Neely

DATES OF INTERVIEWS: January 21 and 28, 1981

PLACE OF INTERVIEWS: Bakersfield, Kern County

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PREFACE

There were no technical difficulties with this interview. Mr. Collins and his wife were somewhat distracted by an illness in the family. Mr. Collins assured me that he could be interviewed, and the interview was without incident. Little editing was necessary.

Michael Neely
Interviewer

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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INTERVIEWEE: Talmage Lee Collins (Age: 71)

INTERVIEWER: Michael Neely

DATED: January 21 and January 28, 1981

M.N.: This is an interview with Mr. Talmage Lee Collins for the California State College, Bakersfield, CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Michael Neely at 3013 Olympic Drive, Bakersfield, California 93308 on January 21, 1981, at 2:45 p.m.

M.N.: Now you were saying the first thing you remember?

Collins: My father left the farm in Arkansas to cut staples for railroad cross ties and underpinning in mining operations. He left there and went to Harrison, Arkansas and went to work for the railroad company there.

M.N.: Do you remember what year that was?

Collins: It was 1915 or 1916. I was five or six years old. He worked there for a while. I guess he was unhappy with his job so he moved back to the country about 30 miles south from where he had lived. We moved on a fellow's place on the mountain. Three children were born in the course of this time. He sharecropped for Charlie Bowlen. During the sharecropping years, which I imagine was real rough, my father would farm sharecrop in the summer-time and work at the sawmill in the wintertime. The sawmill was five miles from our home and I can always remember hearing my dad come home. Something you don't hear nowadays is anybody going around whistling. It's a rare occasion that you ever hear anybody whistle. But I know us kids would get out on the porch and we'd listen for Dad coming up the mountain. It was hill country back in the Ozarks and we could hear him whistling a couple of miles before he got to the house.

M.N.: What was he like?

- Collins: My dad? Oh, he was a wonderful guy. He was a small man about 160 pounds and about 5 foot and 9 inches. He never worked around machinery other than the sawmill. 'Course back in them days the only way to travel was wagon team. I can even remember the first car I saw. It was a 1917 Model-T Ford car and my mother was taking my younger brother to the store. We was scared of this car. We seen it coming down the road and we ran and got out of the road. We were afraid that thing would get us.
- M.N.: How did your father treat you?
- Collins: Oh, wonderful, wonderful. My dad and I always had a very good relation. Of course we didn't have the fishing and hunting relations like a lot of kids have nowadays because back in them days you was scrounging around trying to make a living all the time. When we left Arkansas there was five or six kids. Anyway, he's kept pretty busy making a living for the children because sharecropping and working in the sawmill was the only means of income he had.
- M.N.: Was he tired?
- Collins: Yeah. When we left Arkansas it was 1919. I was nine years old.
- M.N.: Could you tell me about your mom?
- Collins: My mom was born and raised in Arkansas.
- M.N.: What was her name?
- Collins: Savonne Elizabeth. Her maiden name was Flood.
- M.N.: What was the town?
- Collins: Jasper, Arkansas. It's in Newton County.
- M.N.: What kind of person was she?
- Collins: Well, she was a pretty headlong type person. She wasn't turned like my dad. She was the kind of person that spoke her mind. My dad was a very easygoing person and pretty hard to rile up. Even with us kids--being like kids were--I guess he still kept his cool. Of course, he laid it on us once in a while. 'Course back in them days they whipped kids a little different than what they do now. Well when your mom would say, "I'm going to tell your dad when he come home and he'll take the checkline to you," the checkline was what you used--not a switch, not a hand. When Dad promised he'd give a whipping--he give us a whipping. He gave us one we remembered. We didn't forget it the next day either. I can never remember my mother whipping

me. I can remember her slapping me a few times. I can never remember her whipping me but I can sure remember my dad. In fact, I guess I was about twelve or thirteen the last whipping he gave me.

M.N.: What did you get that one for?

Collins: For not unharnessing the team when he come in from town. He and my mother had been to town. He'd come back and he told my brother next to me to go out and unharness the team, unhook them, take the harness off them, feed and water them. We was busy playing. We said, "Okay, Dad", went along and lost track of time. Pretty soon he said, "Boys, I said to get the team unhooked out there." We went ahead and ignored him. Pretty soon we saw Dad come out and go out to the team. We thought he's going to do it for us. He did. He went out there and took one checkline off and stood us about fifteen feet away. He threwed the old checkline out and pulled back about two inches of that leather and he took about two inches of hide with it. So we remembered the next time he said to unharness the team and got them unharnessed. Nowadays they'd put you in jail if you did anything like that. 'Course, maybe they should but at least you had kids that didn't talk back to their parents and they usually did what they were told to do.

M.N.: What was your home like?

Collins: Real good for us kids. Then later years, after I grew up big enough to help work, it was real rough.

M.N.: Could you describe the house?

Collins: I remember the house. It was a two-room log house and the only papering inside was the old rolled-out paper. It had the flat paper buttons that was nailed on something that looked kind of like a tar paper tack. The logs were hewn off. In fact, my dad helped to build the house. They split the shingles. They called them shake. They split them with a frow. I don't know if you know what a frow is. It's a blade about fourteen inches long with an eye on the end of it. It's sharp with a wide blade. You put a wood handle in it about eighteen inches long. You make a wooden mallet about twenty inches long. You whittle it about two-thirds down for a handle and use the other part for a mallet. Then you set the frow on your white oak or red oak which you make your shingles out of. You hit with the mallet and pry it off. That type of wood splits real straight just like redwood. Dad would make our shingles and hew the logs out. I remember my dad had what they called a broad axe. They'd take those things and hew the logs off so they wasn't fully round. They'd be partly flat. Then they'd make chinking. They'd take crabgrass and clay mud and mix it like adobe.

They'd fill all the cracks between the logs. Inside they'd take this roll paper which was 30 inches wide and come in big rolls. They got these buttons about the size of a half a dollar with a hole in the center of them and a little tack about half an inch long. That's how your paper was put on the wall.

We moved from Arkansas into Oklahoma in 1919. I had never ridden on a train or a car. I was nine--almost ten years old that December 1919. I would have been ten in February that spring.

M.N.: Up until then you just used a horse and buggy?

Collins: A horse and buggy that was the only way of transportation.

M.N.: I know you mentioned a team earlier.

Collins: Yeah. I'd never seen a car till I was a big kid. I'd never been out of the county but once. Harrison's not in Newton County. The second time I was out of the county my father and I moved the family to Dardanelle, Arkansas in a covered wagon. I think I was eight years old. In fact, this guy had a covered wagon of his own. Dad had taken his wagon--the wagon he was sharecropping with. I went with him because I remember it was wintertime and it was cold. The only heat in the wagon to stay warm with was an old kerosene lantern. We'd take and drape the ends of it up and hang this kerosene lantern in the wagon and left it burn all night to keep warm.

M.N.: What kind of clothing did you have?

Collins: Oh, just ordinary clothing--nothing to compare with what they have now. I think my dad had a duck jacket and of course you always wore long handle underwear because the temperatures get down between zero and twenty degrees in the wintertime.

M.N.: I wanted to ask you about your food in your first place. What was your favorite food?

Collins: Well, back in them days we didn't have much of a choice. I think in the summertime we had potatoes and beans and peas and cornbread. We never had much flour. We never knew what a loaf of light bread was. Once in a while we'd get flour my mother'd bake light bread like they bake it nowadays in a pan. In the wintertime, my dad would always butcher hogs and salt them down. 'Course in later years I learned that you'd just literally cook them with the salt to preserve them. Then in the summertime we'd run short of lard. We strictly butchered the hog to get the lard. Dad would kill a hog and fry it up. He didn't fully cook it done but just far enough to preserve it. They would put this all in a five-gallon or ten-gallon can and cover it

over with lard. When you wanted meat and lard you'd go take it out of there right on through the summer. That's the way you kept that going during the summertime.

M.N.: What about sickness and illness?

Collins: Sickness?

M.N.: Were you ever sick?

Collins: Oh yes. I'd say back in them days you had colds continuously. They had old family remedies. They used to give some kind of an herb that grew out wild. My mother knew about it and my dad did too. They'd go gather this stuff up and they'd take the roots of it and boil it down. I don't know if you ever taken any black draught or not but it tastes about like the same. It was a miserable tasting stuff, but it seemed to do the job. No such thing as aspirin or anything like that.

M.N.: Did you have a doctor?

Collins: I don't think we were ever taken to a doctor. Some of the midwives or people around town were kind of like your nurses are now. They'd done that so darn much they just knew what the symptoms were and doctored them. About half of my brothers and sisters were born by the use of midwives. No doctors were available because it was back in the boondocks and too late by the time a doctor drove a buggy out there.

M.N.: Did the children live?

Collins: Oh yes. Yeah, my parents raised eleven kids all to be grown. The youngest to die was killed in Korea. He was nineteen years old.

M.N.: There must have been deaths. How was that handled?

Collins: The first funeral I can remember was a sister of my uncle's wife. She died in childbirth at home with no doctor or midwife. She could not give birth to the baby and she died. They had a funeral, and she was buried in the back yard right outside the bedroom. They had their own little graveyard out there for the family. There's four or five graves in it. The close relatives were buried right in the back yard. That was the first funeral I remember. The second one I remember was my great-grandmother's. She was a grand old lady. I can remember her quite well. She was confined to a chair. There was no wheelchairs back in them days. They picked you up and literally carried you and your chair. She was a rather small woman and smoked a cob pipe with a long stem. I can remember it looked about a foot long to me. She used to call me to go get her tobacco for her. Back in

them days they growed their own tobacco. Well, I'd go get it and she'd light up this old long cob pipe. That smoke from that home-grown tobacco just about knocked me out. She was a grand old lady. I don't know how old she was when she died but I remember going to the funeral.

M.N.: Was your family close?

Collins: No. My family wasn't close at all. My father and his father had a falling out when I was seven or eight years old. It was the year my grandmother died. My dad never seen his folks again the rest of his life. He lived to be 64 years old and never seen them again.

M.N.: Was the rest of his life like that?

Collins: Yeah. No, they told him to never come back so he took them at their word so he never came back.

M.N.: I've heard people say that their word was their bond.

Collins: Well, it was. That was the case business wise and in everything up till 40 or 50 years ago. If a man walked up to you and said, "I want to borrow so much money," he wasn't asking what security you got to put up. You loaned it to him, shook his hand, and he'd pay you back at a certain time. That was good enough. You didn't have to tie a man hand and foot to get him to pay you like nowadays. People seemed to put an awful lot of store in their word. Their word meant everything to them. You'd hear the remark that people's only as good as their word, and that's the way they literally took it. When they told you something they meant for it to be that way. But I never did know what the trouble was between my grandfather and my dad. Anyway, whatever it was was serious enough that they never saw each other again.

M.N.: What was your job as a kid?

Collins: Usually, my job was getting stove wood in for the cook stove or fireplace or heating stove, whichever it might be, so they'd have something to start the fire with the next morning. I'd feed the chickens or help feed the hogs. I didn't often go around the mules or cows 'cause my folks were always afraid we'd get hurt. I did get kicked one time by the mule. Like to broke a rib. That kind of ruled me out of getting in the pen with them.

M.N.: What did kids do for entertainment?

Collins: Swimming and hunting. I lived on rivers and lakes till I come to California. And I think in the 45 years I been living here I've been swimming twice.

M.N.: What did the family do at night?

Collins: Oh, sometimes they'd sing, pick guitar, play banjo, pop popcorn or play cards. They liked to play cards. They played a game they called pitch. You played it with a deck of cards. Or they played dominoes and checkers.

M.N.: Where did they get instruments?

Collins: I don't know where my dad came up with his banjo. He had the banjo the first time I ever remember. After my brother and I got big enough, we worked and bought an old three dollar guitar to start out with. Then my brother came up with a fiddle. We just learned to pick and sing and do whatever we enjoyed doing with the things.

M.N.: Can you remember what the women did?

Collins: Most the younger women joined in with singing and games and playing pitch. There wasn't much cooking to be done. Just didn't take too long to cook up a pot of beans or peas and fry some meat and eggs. Usually we always had plenty of eggs. Everybody always had a bunch of chickens. We raised a big garden. They'd dig potatoes and plant turnips then they'd dig what they call a hill and put their potatoes and turnips in there and cover them over. They'd go out when they'd need some of them and turn the dirt and take whatever they needed. It was just a storage place, you see.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

M.N.: You said you moved when you were about eight years old?

Collins: Yes, we left Arkansas and moved to Oklahoma in 1919. That was the first time I ever rode the train or a car. My dad taken the family to Harrison, Arkansas and put us aboard the train. We rode the train to Eufaula, Oklahoma. My mom rented a taxi. It was a 1917 Ford touring car. They didn't know anything about making sedans at that time. Everything that come along was a touring car or a roadster. This taxi took us out to my grandparents on my mother's side. That was the first cotton I'd ever seen. They had a field. I thought it was the biggest fluffiest stuff I'd ever seen. I later found out it wasn't easy to get because then my folks started to picking cotton. Being nine years old, I was out there with them. We picked cotton until they finished the season out in 1920. Well, my dad and the rest of them followed on the covered wagons from Arkansas. They arrived in January of 1920 and rented a place and we continued to sharecrop.

M.N.: How did that sharecropping work?

Collins: I think it was a 50-50 deal. The landlord got so much of the rent and then the rest was split 50-50. I never heard of anything such as cash rent for land. It was always crop rent.

M.N.: Was it fair?

Collins: I would imagine it was probably as fair a thing as they could work out at that time. Anyway, he rented from an old Indian family. I can't remember what their name was. We sharecropped with a guy for two years and then this fellow got homesick to go back to Arkansas. He owned his own farm in Arkansas and was renting in Oklahoma. By that time my dad had made enough money to buy a team of mules. Dad rented the place himself and we moved out and started farming on it. Well, there was no jobs to work at so my mother's brother, my dad and an Indian fellow there by the name of Sunny Belcher went into the moonshine business. They'd take a load of moonshine into town to a bootlegger. The bootlegger would bootleg it out. They'd wholesale it to him. My dad and uncle both got in trouble with the law. I guess they all got boozed up and they hit a cow. The law got after them and they hauled out. My uncle came to California and that was the beginning of it. This was way back in 1922. He didn't stay out here very long. It was pretty rough going out here. My dad went to Pitcher, Oklahoma and went to work in the coal mines. He worked up there till he got enough money to come back home. The farm we had didn't make a very good crop because it was dry. We moved to another place and set up a farm there. Meantime, my dad got a job for a railroad outfit. A few months after that and we went down there. By that time I was thirteen years old. My dad got his team on the railroad and they allowed me to drive the team hauling rock rip-routing railroad banks across the South Canadian River. Back in them days the railroad cars dumped the rock and I'd have to pick up the ones that got too far out and haul them back in.

That's pretty rough work. Working for contractors that way and being a kid, I always wanted to goof off. Eight hours a day they didn't allow that.

M.N.: What did they pay you for that?

Collins: I don't remember. Dad got the money. He was working himself as a hand and I was working the team. I probably didn't get very much money mule-skinning and just being big enough to drive. We finished that job up in 1923. Two of my uncles and my grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side decided to come out to California. We loaded up a wagon and headed west and got to Okemah, Oklahoma. It was about 50 miles from Eufaula. We didn't have any money to go anywhere farther on. Traveling with covered wagon you weren't going to get very far.

M.N.: What was the wagon like?

Collins: It was just an old high-wheel narrow-tire wagon. The wheels had rims about two inches long with wood wheels that were steel blacksmith welded. There was no such thing as arc welding or acetylene welding. Back in them days if you couldn't do it in the forge, you didn't do it. It was blacksmith or nothing.

M.N.: You had a team?

Collins: Oh yeah. We had a team and one or two cows and a yearling or two. Kids would walk. With the furniture in the wagon you didn't have room for a bunch of kids. There was seven at that time and one on its way when we left there. The kids walked and led the cows. We just camped alongside the road. We just built up a fire and cooked our meals right out on the side of the road. We slept under the wagon on blankets.

M.N.: Was it hard?

Collins: It was rough. I wouldn't want to go through it again.

M.N.: How did your mother and father feel about it?

Collins: Well, I imagine they had taken it in stride because they didn't know anything different. They'd never had anything a whole lot easier. They'd always been used to covered wagons. My dad had never even ridden in a car up to that point. I guess they probably figured that's the way of life and they just took it in stride. We finally got to Okemah and ran into a fellow by the name of Charlie Peters. He turned out to be a good friend of mine and we visited him since we lived right here. He lived to be 84 years old before he died. He was looking for cotton pickers. All we had was a twelve-foot by sixteen-foot white tent. He said if we'd follow him out to his farm he'd fix us a place out there so we could set the tent up. You can imagine seven kids and two adults living in a space twelve-by-sixteen. With beds and everything you had to stack up. You slept four to a bed. My middle sister was born there. We'd only been there two days.

M.N.: You mean your mother gave birth to her in the tent?

Collins: Gave birth to her in the tent. We had been there only two days and she hadn't told anybody she was even going to have a baby. Dad hadn't contacted a doctor or nothing. My dad delivered the baby and I had to tie the navel cord off myself. She's about 56 years old now.

M.N.: How did you feel about it?

Collins: I didn't appreciate it but I'd been used to things like that.

The rest of the kids, except for the little tiny ones, went 'possum hunting that night. The older kids built a fire so they could stay outside the tent. We worked there after the baby was born and my mother got along fine. She's just like a cat having the baby one day and back to work the next. Never seemed to tear her down. Fortunately, otherwise she'd never have made it. We went to picking cotton for this guy and stayed two years with him.

M.N.: What kind of work exactly?

Collins: Just working on the farm. Cutting wood, picking cotton and gathering corn.

M.N.: Was it hard?

Collins: Yeah, it's hard work. Hard on your hands too.

M.N.: Did you mind it?

Collins: I never liked that kind of a job. I done it because it was the only thing you could find to do and you did whatever you had to do. Then my dad started moonshining. This guy was doing it to begin with and my dad got in with him. That way they'd pick up money during the wintertime and helped to keep the family going.

M.N.: Were times generally hard for most people then?

Collins: Yeah. I imagine there was probably a lot of people that had it just as rough as our family. We had enough to eat. We didn't starve. About a bare existence is what it boiled down to. The same way with clothes. If you had one good pair of pants that didn't have patches on 'em you was real lucky. Usually about two pair was all you could afford and one of them had patches on it. One pair of shoes is all you could afford and that had to be your everyday shoes and your Sunday shoes for us. We worked there in 1923.

M.N.: Were you getting paid?

Collins: Yeah, he paid us 75 cents a day for picking cotton. My folks collected the money. We stayed there until the fall of 1927. Then we moved and one of my brothers was born in Bakersfield. He lives in south Bakersfield now.

M.N.: What is his name?

Collins: Eugene Collins. We moved then to Canadian, Oklahoma and my dad rented a place. Canadian is right across the river from Eufaula. We did business in Eufaula at that time. We moved there and stayed one year. We didn't do any good so we went back to

Okemah to this same guy we'd just left. We sharecropped for him a few more years. In 1928 we moved to Weleetka, Oklahoma with this same guy. My dad sharecropped for him one year and fortunately we did pretty good that year. My dad was able to get enough out of his part to buy a team and a wagon. We farmed one more year there. That was 1929. You know what happened in 1929. Everything hit the bottom.

M.N.: Tell me what happened.

Collins: Well, we had no communications other than what people would tell. We had no radio or nothing. Musical instruments was our only entertainment. At that time my brother and I got good enough that we were playing for country dances. He played the fiddle and I played the guitar and mandolin. We were picking up a little bit of weekend money that way. The first I remember about the Depression was when we went into town the next morning. We had no money in the bank. The banks were locked and nobody could get in to get any money. There was people in town with some of the longest faces that you'd ever see. People had money in the bank and there's no way they could get it. I mean they just locked the bank and said, "That's it till everything gets squared away."

M.N.: There was no warning?

Collins: No, no warning or anything. Bang and the doors were locked. That's all there was.

M.N.: What did people do?

Collins: I don't know how long it takened to get straightened out. A lot of the stuff was out on loans and was bad risk. I don't suppose they ever collected. I don't know of anybody that got 100 percent of their money back. The banks had loaned it out. The banks didn't have the money. Their customers had it just like now. I don't know what percentage they got back. I do remember you thought the whole town had died when you got up to town.

M.N.: How did people talk and react to that?

Collins: Well, I can't remember too much about it. People who had money were pretty close-lipped about their business transactions. Everybody was wondering what was going to take place. They wondered--nothing like that had ever happened before. They just couldn't understand it because there were no jobs and no money to pay with. That fall we moved out on my wife's uncle's place. Now my wife's people had quite a bit. In fact, they have a lot of holdings in Oklahoma. They're well enough off to not have to worry about anything. My dad rented a place from my wife's uncle. At that time she wasn't my wife. I

didn't even know her. We moved out there and farmed one year.

M.N.: What kind of place did you have there?

Collins: Oh, kind of a rocky place. We didn't do any good out there. We farmed out there in 1930 and 1931. I didn't even know her till I moved out there. Later I got acquainted with her and in 1931 we got married. My dad farmed down there. I worked at whatever work I could find. The Oklahoma Power and Light Company was building a power plant and I worked there and made some money. I also worked on a pipeline in the oil field after I was married.

M.N.: How did you meet your wife?

Collins: I was running with a guy by the name of Hub Williams. We were both about the same age and he had a car. I didn't have one. I played for dances and back in them days if you played for dances you were pretty popular around a lot of places. They wanted help playing music. Even if they had somebody they wanted somebody else to help spell them off. My friend was going with my wife's cousin and they was the ones that owned the farm that we lived on. He said, "Going to the party with me tonight?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I don't even have anybody to go with and I don't want to go along and be a third leg." So he said, "Well, my wife's cousin's up there." He said, "I'll make a date with her and you can take her along."

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

Collins: I said, "Okay, I'll go with you then." He had a 1927 Ford roadster Model-T. We went up there and got the girls and went out to the party that night. I didn't like my wife. We just didn't hit it off for some reason or other. I'd seen her around town a few times before that. After the party we took her back home to her cousin's house. I didn't see her no more for a long, long time. I went with two different girls. One of them and I hit it off pretty good and then she did a few things I didn't approve of. 'Course I was footloose and fancy free. I started to searching the woods. Finally one day

we hit up a conversation. After that everything started to click for us.

M.N.: Did you have a lot in common?

Collins: Yeah, we did. She's a hard-working girl. In fact, every neighbor around here will tell you there's no other woman in this whole block works like my wife 'cause she's raised on a farm and there's only two boys and they are both much younger than she is. One of them is four years younger and the other is a lot younger.

M.N.: How old was she then and how old were you?

Collins: I was 21 and she was 17. Our daughter was born before she was 19.

M.N.: What was your wedding like and how did you tell your parents?

Collins: My mother objected because I'd been going with a girl. There was only two girls in that family. Her dad owned about 220 acres of land in the river bottom. 'Course anybody that owned land back in them days you'd figure well they're rich. My mother wanted me to go with that girl. Well, I never did. I liked her as a friend, but I never liked her as a lover. So anyway my wife and I hit it off real good. On the farm there were no boys and she plowed with a turning plow, cut wood and built a fence. In fact, that second time I met her she and her dad were building a fence. She was going with a guy that her folks thought was all right because they had a farm too. Well, I didn't have anything. I was a sharecropper. But nothing bothered me back in them days. It just run off like water off a duck's back. If they didn't like me, so what! But anyway, for some reason or other, it clicked between us and we got going together. Her dad objected strenuously to me. I wanted to ask for her when we were fixing to get married. Well, she was going with the other guy some and she said, "No, Dad won't allow it. He just absolutely refuses."

M.N.: Were your parents wishes that strong?

Collins: My parents'wasn't. I just told my mother--I said, "Forget it! I'm a man of my own now and I'll marry whoever I want to or whoever that'll have me." So that took care of that. But my dad never objected. Not one way or the other. He was always that way. If you thought it was right, he'd go along with you.

Her father was different that way. Her mother was turned pretty much like my dad. Her mother was a really kind, nice, gentle person and went along with almost anything within reason. Her dad wouldn't. Anyway, she wouldn't allow me to ask for her and I to be married. They was having a drawing in town. It was on

a Monday, March 3, 1931, and I asked a friend of mine by the name of Clinton Frazier, "Will you and your wife stand up for Gertrude and I to get married?" He said, "Sure." I said, "Well, we're going to get married Monday." I went to Okemah and got the license. The license was \$3. \$3 was a lot of money to me back in them days. I just scrounged around to get the money. I think I had only a dollar to give to the preacher. We come back out and low and behold her dad was sharpening his plowshares down at his brother's house just exactly a quarter of a mile from where we got married. We got married in a preacher's house and we could hear him hammering the plowshares when we got married. So we cut out then. I don't think I even seen her folks for probably three or four months after that before I got brave enough to go around them.

M.N.: Where did you go to live?

Collins: We lived in the house with my folks for about two months. Then we rented a house and moved out on a farm as soon as we got enough money together to buy furniture.

M.N.: Did people help you get things?

Collins: My folks did. Her folks didn't because her father objected to me strenuously. In fact, he finally got around and apologized to me for being wrong about me. I got up to the point that I had an airplane and everything else. I was flying to Arizona. My wife and I go over there. He finally broke down and apologized for being wrong. I said, "Well, I've had the same thing happen to me." I said, "My daughter made a mistake like that and I allowed it to happen because I didn't want her to have done to me what you done to me. I accept your apology. I can understand your feelings because I've gone through with it now. If I hadn't I probably wouldn't have knowed, but I do know."

M.N.: How long did you live out there after you moved out?

Collins: We moved out in 1931. In January of 1932 my folks lost everything they had. They had the team mortgaged.

M.N.: How come they lost everything?

Collins: They owed it to the bank and they didn't make enough to pay the note off. They foreclosed on them.

Whenever you mortgage something and you don't pay for it, the bank goes out and gets it. So they closed my dad out in the fall of 1931. We made two crops from that place in the fall of 1931. Dad had worked around and saved enough money and bought an old 1925 Model-T Ford truck.

Well, I got a job and managed to save enough and I bought an old 1926 Model-T Ford sedan car. My dad and them was leaving. There was rumors around there that in Rio Grande Valley, Texas there was a lot of work. That was right after the Depression. Nobody had any money or anything to speak of.

M.N.: Where did the rumors of work come from?

Collins: Just people traveling back and forth I guess. Maybe somebody'd heard about it. Anyway, my folks got the word. They said they were going to Rio Grande to see if they could find some work. They wanted us to come along so we did. We loaded everything that little old car would get in it and put the rest of the stuff in my dad's truck. We all headed out to Rio Grande Valley.

M.N.: Just like that?

Collins: Just like that. We didn't have nothing to sell. I think we had one hog. We butchered that and fried it up and put it in a can so we'd have food.

M.N.: Well, how did you feel about that?

Collins: Well, you got nothing here so you got nothing to lose. That's the way you feel about it. You just take off hoping for the best. It's not easy when you do that. We got the two families to Austin, Texas. This was in January before our daughter was born in March. We was facing another catastrophe because we didn't know what we were going to do about lining up a doctor. When we got to Austin, Texas they blocked us. Nobody was going to Rio Grande Valley and I mean that's it. This is as far as you go.

M.N.: Who blocked you?

Collins: The State did. They said they had all the people down there they could handle.

M.N.: Was it lawmen?

Collins: Yeah, it was the law. The law prevents you from going down there. Just like they got all the people in here that there's room for. They don't want no more.

M.N.: Were they rough?

Collins: Well, they was kind of insulting about it. Anyway, we stayed in a camp in Austin. I don't know whether we stayed one night or two nights. My folks heard of somebody having some logs to haul over to Waco, Texas. We turned around and headed back to Waco. I'll never forget this and never forget the name of the street. We rented a house from people nothing down--just moved

in it on Peach Street in Waco. Well, we got the logs to haul all right. There was a guy with a sawmill there who was cutting cottonwood logs down in the Brazo River bottom. That job didn't last very long. In fact, I don't recall we made very much out of it. No more than we could haul on a little old 1925 Model-T Ford truck. About one log was all you could haul. Finally we got hooked in with a soup line in Waco, Texas. We worked for commodities. You hear of people getting food stamps now. What it boiled down to back in them days was kind of a soup line deal. They didn't feed you there but they issued you certificates for so much canned goods and flour and beans for work. No money changed hands. They issued you a certificate and you'd take them to a store.

M.N.: Was it fair? Was the price fair?

Collins: Well, it was fair. To feed the people was what it was all about. It wasn't a steady job. You were just allowed to make so much and then they'd cut you off and let someone else work. In the meantime, I got a job with a gardener there for the last two weeks in February of 1932. This guy didn't have no money to pay until he got paid. Well, my wife and I got to thinking about well we had better go back to Oklahoma for the baby to be born. We wrote her aunt. Her husband worked in the oil field and he'd had a job as far as I could remember. She sent \$25 to buy gas and feed us till we got back to Oklahoma. We set out for Oklahoma and we got into Durant, Oklahoma one night about ten o'clock. The roads was rough and crooked. You didn't have nothing like now in comparison. My wife started having pains and we thought maybe it was time. I stopped at a cafe and drugstore and we rested a little bit and had a cup of coffee. She said she got to feeling better so we headed out then from Durant on to Weleetka to her folks. Back in them days it was about a five-hour drive in a Model-T. We got in there on the sixth day of March. On the seventh I went to Henryetta and arranged for a doctor. Back in them days they made house calls. You didn't take them to a hospital. I made arrangements for a doctor and a nurse to come down and take care of her at her folks' house.

M.N.: How much did they want?

Collins: Twenty-five dollars for the trip from Henryetta, the childbirth and everything. On the night of the eighth she started having labor pains. I went and called the doctor. We lived off of the main highway off of Highway 75 three-quarters of a mile so I told them I'd be sitting there. It was cold, man. The eighth day of March it was really cold. I stayed there till they got there and I led them up to the house. The baby was born the next morning sometime. That was one of the coldest nights.

We stayed in the house with the folks until the baby got to where we could move out. Then I rented a little old two-room house and

and got a job with some guys there on a farm at 75 cents a day. We stayed out there that summer and worked for them. Then a paving contracting outfit paved Highway 75. It was a gravel road at that time. Contractors started coming in there. I went and applied for a job and got lucky. I got on at the beginning of the job and I stayed with it till they finished it. We kind of got a start on that and was able to pick up enough money to buy a little old two-room house from my brother-in-law that he'd bought and sat on my dad-in-law's farm. I don't remember what I give for it but I bought the house off of him and lived there till the fall of 1935 in that little house.

Then I sharecropped for the fellow by the name of Allen. He furnished the land and the team. I furnished the seed and the feed and the labor. We split the profit down the middle. There was very little profit. We left there to come to California in 1935. My folks left earlier. They'd never done any good. They were just moving from place to place barely making enough to survive on.

M.N.: Was the weather and the climate like the dust bowl?

Collins: Yeah, this was all dust bowl country. That was one of the real problems there because farmers wasn't making anything. It was just literally blowing them out.

M.N.: What was that like?

Collins: Well, I can remember. I think I planted over about three times. I'd plant the seed. You'd plant it down in the furrow where you'd plow to it to get more moisture. You'd go out there and it'd be leveled over like you'd taken a bulldozer and bulldozed it. I am sure it was a lot worse out in the western parts. We were in the hilly areas and the wind didn't get quite as severe down in there. The trees and stuff would kind of break it up. The worst of it was in western Oklahoma where there's rolling hills and there's not that much timber to break up the air current as it flows along.

M.N.: How did you feel? Just give up?

Collins: Yeah, you get to the point that you wonder what's the use. You're fighting a losing battle. I think you take that attitude. I know I worked hard from the time we was married in 1931 until 1935. Then we sold the house and I'd traded around and gotten three or four cows and a few pigs. Everybody traded first one thing and then another. There wasn't that much money to be had. In 1935 my wife and I chopped cotton for a guy after we got our own crop worked out. We chopped cotton and he didn't have any money to pay us. He paid us in apples. He had an apple orchard there. We'd take the apples and we'd cook them up and can them. You could eat them.

M.N.: Who took care of the child while you were working?

Collins: One of my wife's younger sisters babysat for us. Part of the time I made a wood box and back in them days you had a walking cultivator. You'd walk behind it. I made this box and fastened it to the cultivator and I put the baby in the box and hauled her along on the cultivator while I was plowing.

M.N.: What was the final straw? What made you decide to go?

Collins: Well, my folks got out here. My folks come out here in the spring of 1935. They wrote back to me that they all had jobs and was working in the grapes up there up in Delano. They were getting 25 cents an hour. Yeah, they was getting 25 cents an hour. They was pruning grapes. I think we were getting 75 cents a day. In fact, I worked some that summer for my wife's cousin and it was 75 cents a day back there. Anyway, we wasn't getting anywhere. We decided it was time to do something. My folks said we could probably find work out here. They was pulling bolls. Back in them days there was no such thing as cotton picker. You did it by hand or it wasn't done.

Anyway we decided we'd sell out. We didn't have anything excepting a cow. We sold out everything we had. Finally, after I sold the house to a fellow for a hundred dollars, he moved it off of my father-in-law's place. We wound up with enough money to buy an old 1929 four-door Chevrolet car. It was five years old but still a pretty good old car. A fellow by the name of Schwartz wanted to ride to California with me and I charged him \$20 for a ride out here. So, all in all, we had \$40.

Three adults and one baby headed for California. We came out through Globe, Arizona into Los Angeles. I'll never forget that. I'd drove trucks some in Oklahoma City and Kansas City but I never been in a place like some of Los Angeles where you go through tunnels and towns and stuff like that. We couldn't find our way out of Los Angeles to get out north to Bakersfield. I don't know whether you've ever been over the old Ridge Route or not. It's the one up on top of the hill. That's something else. We asked people, "How you get out of here to go to Bakersfield?" I told Roy [Schwartz], "Roy, we're just going to have to get somebody to lead us out of here." I said, "Let's find us a policeman and have him lead us out to the main highway." In the meantime we went around this one street about three or four times. The sign was pointing to where San Pedro and something else was. I said, "We'll fix it so that the next guy can find his way out." I'll never forget that. We got out of the car--both of us--went over there and pulled that street sign up. We turned it around and pointed it the other way and stuck it back in the hole. Just for the heck of it, you know. So anyway, we went and found a policeman then and he escorted us out to Highway 99 and we headed out.

M.N.: How did he treat you?

Collins: Good. Oh yeah, he was very good to us. He just said, "Follow me." We weren't very far away but we couldn't find our way out. 'Course being out in the boondocks back there why you didn't have that many roads to contend with in the towns. He was very accommodating to us. 'Course we didn't tell him we'd pulled a sign up and turned it around. We just did that to confuse somebody else.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SESSION 2 January 28, 1981

M.N.: What time of day did you start out for California?

Collins: We started out on Thanksgiving Day, 1935. We stayed all night with my wife's sister in Weleetka, Oklahoma. We left there Thanksgiving morning. I don't know how far we got. It couldn't have been very far because back in them days the road was narrow, rough and crooked. We was looking for work. We stopped in Globe, Arizona. It was the first stop I can recall. We looked for a job at a mine. It was a copper mine.

M.N.: Would you have settled there if you could have found work?

Collins: Yes, if we could have found work. Out here there was no work either except farm work in grape vineyards and in cotton. All cotton was picked by hand then. There was no such thing as a machine. Anyway, we stopped in Globe and asked for a job. Yeah they needed men but they needed them down in the pit and not on top. I said, "No way." I said, "I need a job bad, but I don't need a job bad enough to go down in the pit for one." They can't take me too high to frighten me, but when I get below head level of the dirt that's too deep in the ground. So I said, "No thanks." So we kept coming. We come through Los Angeles. It was quite an exciting trip because neither of us had ever seen orange trees or grape vines.

M.N.: While you were traveling how did you stop? Did you make a camp at night?

Collins: No, we stayed in motels. We stayed in Los Angeles one night.

We got so low on money that we decided we better sleep in the car. Roy and I slept in the front seat and my wife and the baby in the back seat. We had a three and one-half year old daughter.

M.N.: So it wasn't really bad coming out?

Collins: No, the trip coming out wasn't too bad. We had a 1929 model Chevrolet and that was 1935. It wasn't a real old car and it wasn't all that bad beat up.

M.N.: Did you have to stop at the border?

Collins: Yeah, we had to go through a border check. Back in them days they were quite fussy. They checked all of your clothing. You couldn't have any cotton mattresses, you couldn't have any cotton sacks for picking bags back in them days. A lot of people will refer to them as white trailers. People pulled them behind them to pick cotton. All of that stuff was a "no no" as far as getting across the border. Crossing the border from Arizona into California was actually more severe then than crossing the border getting into old Mexico. I've been to old Mexico and they didn't even check me going in. They did check me going out.

M.N.: Did they ask you a lot of questions?

Collins: Yeah, they asked questions about where we were going and what our plans was. Of course, there was quite a number of people migrating out here for a number of years. My uncle migrated here back in 1923 and he went to work for DiGiorgio Fruit in Delano. He was working for them at that time. Outside of that, my dad, mother, and my brother and sisters and my uncle was the only people that we knew here from Adam. We didn't know nobody else.

We got lost in Los Angeles. I can remember we did sleep in the car because it was right outside of Los Angeles International Airport. The planes where we had parked was coming right over the car taking off and landing. The next day we come on into McFarland. We didn't know how to get a hold of the people. We knew they was in the McFarland - Delano area. The people's name was Wimberly. We ran across a mail carrier who--back in them days--would help you. He told us exactly how many miles to go here and there to get to the place. So we finally wound up at my folks' place and they lived on Pond Road. That's three miles east of 99. In fact, it's exactly right at the Friant-Kern Canal.

We got there and our daughter was sick. She was tiny and we were having problems trying to take care of her. There was all kinds of boll pulling back in them days. The winter was quite foggy

and the cotton bolls had gotten rotten. You couldn't pick the cotton so they's pulling them. Well, we got a job pulling bolls. He [employer] didn't have anybody around to do the weighing and he didn't want to stay there and do it so he had me do it. A family was there from Texas. A fellow by the name of Peters and his wife had two children a little older than my daughter. Their kids was probably three or four years old. This guy had a little old one-room shack. I think it was twelve feet by sixteen feet. We went to town and I don't know how we rounded up enough money but we got enough money together to buy a little old bedstead and a two-burner kerosene camp stove. We set up in there and moved into this thing. We started pulling bolls for him. I was weighing for him. He'd allow me to pull and he'd pay me 25 cents a hundred. That's what the going rate was. That way I'd weigh and then I'd pull bolls. Gee my wife and I thought we were getting rich real fast 'cause she was a good boll puller. She pulled 700-800 pounds of bolls a day. She was a good cotton picker and in Oklahoma her dad raised cotton so she knew how it was done. We worked for those people. By the way, they were from Texas too. They had come here back in the 1920s. In fact, all the people that we come in contact with was migrant people. There was no natives. There was native young people but no native people in the farming business. All your farming people was from some other state. This one fellow here was from Texas. Another guy my wife worked for picking cotton--after I went to work for the Citrus Association--was from Texas.

We moved. I didn't like the way things were going. I guess I was homesick and pretty disgruntled to get along with. We decided to look for something else. We went over to Jasmin which was a citrus area. Of course, back in them days there was miles of desert between any farming operation. Going out of here to Bakersfield and Delano there was just a spot of farming occasionally. We went over there and found a fellow that had an orange ranch. He had a little old chicken house. It was a little bit bigger than the one we lived in. I don't remember what size it was. It was one room. We cleaned that up and scrubbed it down and papered the walls. It was a lot tighter house for the wintertime. Of course, after being used to Oklahoma weather, winter out here wasn't even winter to us. We went around with shirt sleeves. Other people had coats on. I guess we looked like a bunch of dummies. The weather wasn't cold to us 'cause we was used to colder weather.

M.N.: It's possible that people might have thought you were so poor you couldn't afford a coat when in fact you just didn't want to wear one.

Collins: Yeah. You just didn't want to wear one because it wasn't that

Collins, T.

cold. We'd been used to being out in weather below freezing in the winter most all the time. Out here, if it got below 30 degrees--that was cold and it's still cold. It's colder now to me. When the temperature gets down around 45 I get cold. I freeze outside. Back in them days I could run around in my shirt sleeves in 45 degree temperature. Anyway, we went to work for this guy.

M.N.: Do you remember his name?

Collins: Brockman. They were natives from the state of Oregon. They migrated here back in 1913 or 1914. They bought a little twenty-acre tract of land out there and put in five acres of olives, ten acres of oranges and five acres of figs. I worked for them. They didn't have a full time job. I did have enough work to supply me with enough money to buy our everyday needs. Gradually, I worked up. I was an eager beaver to do any kind of work. I wasn't afraid of work. I could go out there and work with the best of them. Finally on April 1 a guy come down and wanted to know if I wanted to work about six weeks during the Valencia [orange] season irrigating for him. I said, "Sure." I'm just doing part time work and I just finished picking up a little work from a fellow by the name of Homer Kyte. I think he lives in Thousand Oaks now. Anyway, I had that job finished and I said, "Sure, I'll work." So I started to work. I worked for him ten years before I left. He had his nephew, Harry Goodell, working for him. Harry and his wife had separated. He was footloose and fancy free. He didn't want to work seven days a week. They just had enough water to be run everyday. You couldn't shut it off on weekends. It didn't matter to me. I'd just as soon work on Sunday as any other day back in them days. So I went to work for him. My wife did some housework for people and chopped cotton. She did whatever she could to help pick up extra money. Finally she worked in the packing houses. When the end of the season was over, the guy I was working for decided he didn't want me to go. He didn't have enough to give both of us a steady job. He got us both together and he said to Harry and myself, "You boys can split this work between you. That way Harry can have his weekends off and it would be a living for both of you to make enough money to feed on." That was good news back in them days. Back in the mid-1930s, if you was making money to survive on you was doing pretty good.

M.N.: That was very generous of him.

Collins: Yeah, that was very generous of him! Harry, being a single man, decided no. He didn't want no part of it. He just didn't work at all. Well, naturally that throwed the whole job on me. Well, that was 25 cents an hour and it was \$2.50 a day. I was working ten hours a day, seven days a week. I was making \$17.50 a week.

That was a lot of money. I hadn't been making that kind of money since I'd got off a construction job in Oklahoma years and years before that.

M.N.: Bet it was hard work.

Collins: It was hard work. I didn't know how to drive a tract-layer tractor so he taught me how. Then I was doing the cultivating and a lot of the pest control work. I worked for him and actually took care of his place for ten years. For six years he was my total boss. He was doing contract work. When World War II broke out in 1941 the army sent me some kind of a rating that I was supposed to be froze on my job. If I left they'd pick me up. Well, I had been taking a mail correspondence course in electronics in aircraft. I liked to fool with airplanes. When the war broke out, Douglas Aircraft in Los Angeles sent a representative up. I had only two or three courses to go. I'd fill sheets out and mail them in. They'd grade them and send them back to me and give me whatever information I needed. Anyway, they sent a representative up and this guy said, "Well, you're good enough that we could train you on the job and you can go ahead and finish your correspondence course and go to work for us." So I informed my boss. He just about went through the ceiling because at that time all the men that wanted to work was heading for defense work. It was paying big money. They'd moved up to 35 cents an hour then on the farm. The first part of 1942 they went to 50 cents an hour which was a lot of money.

M.N.: On the farm?

Collins: On the farm. I don't know what defense work was paying but it was getting all the people around there. My boss came to me and he said, "Well, if you won't leave and you'll stay on the job and take care of my place, I'll go with you to all the other growers that I've got in my contract and get them to turn it over to you and I'll turn it over to you and you can be the contractor. I'll give you a contract to take care of my place"--which he did. So I did stay. He had twenty acres of raw land and the four-room house I lived in while I was on his place. He said, "I'll sell you that twenty acres and the house." Well I thought that was nice. It worked out fine and gave me the start I needed. I accepted it and we went to all the growers. A couple of them lived down south, one of them in Fontana, one at Ojai, and one in Los Angeles. We went down and they was willing. I'd been doing all the work for six years anyway. They turned it over to me and I was the contractor.

M.N.: What kind of contracting exactly?

Collins: Taking care of citrus groves--cultivating, irrigation, pest

control, harvest and the whole thing a general contractor of agricultural farming does.

M.N.: You mean you'd do one place and then go to another one?

Collins: The growers were there all close together. I had 160 acres and the largest tract in any one block of oranges was 30 acres. There was 10 acres, 20 acres and so on making up the whole thing. I had quite a number of people I was working for and taking care of their property.

Then I started making some money. I bought a new tract-layer tractor and a new Ford truck so I'd have some means of hauling the fruit and everything. Then I ran into another problem. I couldn't hire dependable help. All the local help had pulled stakes. At that time I think we had one black truck driver out of the whole bunch of people and one Mexican truck driver. All the rest of the people were white migrants from Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas. When the war came along all the people left. Well, then we didn't have any housing to house labor. The Richgrove-Jasmin Citrus Association along with the Fruitgrowers Exchange--now it's called Sunkist--went together and built a labor camp at Porterville. All these Association members drew their labor force from this labor camp in Porterville.

M.N.: Were you ever there?

Collins: Yeah, you had to go up there and pick up your labor at that camp every morning and deliver them back there at night. That's how you got your labor.

M.N.: What was that camp like?

Collins: It was a very congenial camp because it was strictly all Mexican people. We hired Mexican cooks and local Mexican people to maintain it. These people could speak English. All your people from old Mexico just never could talk English so we had problems. I even had to hire a local Mexican guy more or less just as a foreman of the picking crews to run the crew 'cause I couldn't talk to the help. I couldn't make them understand what I wanted so I hired him. I'd tell him what I wanted done and he'd pass it on to them. Then we decided well, we would let one of the Mexican guys from old Mexico take the truck back and forth to haul them up at night and load them up and bring them up in the morning. It would save one trip on the truck. It just took one weekend to lose the truck. He took it out joy-riding one Saturday night and washed the truck out. Back during the war it was rough to get a truck. I went to Los Angeles and bought a new Ford truck. The one we'd just lost was a Dodge. Couldn't find another one. After that we decided that was no route to go. I'd go up and get them in the morning. I'd put a crew bed

on the truck and pick them up, bring them down and they'd work all day. Then we'd take the bed off and haul fruit into the packing house. Come time to take them back to the camp, I'd put the crew bed on and take them back and then bring the truck back. The boys would haul fruit maybe till midnight or till they got it all hauled in.

M.N.: Do you remember what year that camp was built?

Collins: The camp was built in Porterville in 1942 and it was used up until the first part of 1946. The whole situation was starting to change around. A lot of people started to migrate in and develop more farming areas.

M.N.: When you first got here what was your family like?

Collins: My kids and my sisters and brothers went to school. I only had one brother and one sister that was past school age. The rest of them went to school. They had good schools when my daughter grew up. She started in Kindergarten in Delano and she finished high school across the street. The high school was on the north side of the street and the grade school was on the south side. She started there when she was about five and one-half years old.

M.N.: How old were you when you actually got to California?

Collins: Twenty-five. I thought I'd lived a lot then, but I learned a lot more after then.

M.N.: How did you feel? Were you just fearless coming out here and looking for work?

Collins: Yeah. I think when you can see no advantage in what you're doing and you can see no way out --I was sharecropping. The guy was furnishing the land and the team. I bought the feed and the seed. We were splitting the crop in half. I couldn't make enough during the summer months to get me through the winter months. I still had to find a job to partly support me. I think that was one thing that made me come out here. I was looking for a better life. All of us I guess--all the way through life--are looking for a better life to kind of upgrade ourselves. I think that was the thing. I never had any fears about it. I knew that as long as I had my health I knew how to work. If somebody told me how--when I didn't know how to do it--I could do it their way.

M.N.: Did you see other people having trouble?

Collins: No, not really. I would say back in them days all the people we come in contact with were migrant people. Over a period of

probably fifteen years in the Delano - McFarland area almost everyone that I can think of migrated from some part of the country. Our very best friends migrated here from Wisconsin. Now they started here in 1913 and their kids finished high school in Delano. Harry Goodell, one of our friends, lives in Delano now. He's 75 years old and they came here when they was kids.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 1

M.N.: Did many people live in camps owned by farmers?

Collins: Almost all of your farm labor with excepting the foreman lived in some sort of a camp on the ranch. They just maintained camps right out here north of Bakersfield. Used to be the Dick Lundey place out there just north of that grain elevator. Used to be quite a large camp there that people lived in during grape harvest season and the potato harvest season. A cousin of mine's in Arkansas now. They come out here during the war days to harvest potatoes. They went back to Arkansas and bought land. For some reason land was the place where you wanted to put money. My cousin's made a mint at it. He's really well off sitting back there in the hills and he enjoys it. I can remember that there used to be what they call a President Hoover Ranch over at Shafter. I've been to that ranch. In fact, my brother-in-law and sister-in-law lived in that labor camp. They worked on the Hoover Ranch and a Hoover family owned it at that time.

M.N.: Can you describe the camp?

Collins: Yeah, it was just a series of little old two-room deals. The front had a room which usually had a bed in it. It wasn't like a house or anything. If the family needed two beds, the kitchen might have a bed in it. It wasn't no three- or four-room house. It wasn't nothing like as good as this labor camp they got north of Shafter now for the Mexicans. You know they got about three rooms and they got toilets inside them. Well, over there they didn't. They had a public bathroom outside.

M.N.: Is that where they got their water too?

Collins: The water was usually piped to a center spigot outside. It wasn't piped inside. You had to go outside and get it. Most

of them had a sink in them but they'd have just a hose running outside into a ditch. The water would run out on the ground. Back in them days they had no building code on stuff like that. However you wanted to throw it up--throw it up.

M.N.: What were they made of, just wood?

Collins: Yeah, they was wood structures.

M.N.: Did the people--the farmers or the residents of the camps--take good care of them?

Collins: The people that lived in them? Oh, no. That was one of the things I guess the farmers objected to. Most people of their laborers was very destructive in nature about stuff. They didn't seem to care about taking care of anything like that. It was pretty much like The Grapes of Wrath picture. Part of that picture was made in the Shafter Labor Camp. They went right over there to the Shafter Labor Camp when they made The Grapes of Wrath picture and got quite a few of those migrant people to load up their vehicles. They took pictures of them right there. A lot more of it was made at the the Tagus Ranch which had tremendous labor camps. The motel is still there and I think one office building. Those are the only things to show for it. If you didn't know those things, you'd never know there had been a ranch there. It's just like maybe you go back to the old country where you was borned or something like that and you think oh well, there used to be a nice house set here. No more. There might be two or three post oak trees growed up there and there's no signs left. The only thing you have is a memory that it was there or a photograph of it. Few people have something from away back in them days because you didn't have much photographs. I did have this old 1929 Chevy and I traded it off for a 1930 model Ford coupe. Back in them days the only people we knew was our own family. So, on Sundays when we had an opportunity we'd go for a drive sightseeing around the country. Well, all this country back west of here in the Buttonwillow area was just starting to build up then. They used to have jackrabbit drives out there. Jackrabbits eat the farmers out. Well, the farmers would get the wire netting and people would go out there and drive like they do to capture animals. They'd build this net up into a "V". People would go out and they'd drive the jackrabbits into this wire netting. They'd club them to death. They had to get rid of them.

M.N.: Did they eat them?

Collins: Some people used them to make chili, but not very many.

M.N.: I've heard them called Hoover Hogs.

Collins: Yeah, that's what they're called. Hoover Hogs are jackrabbits

and cottontails.

M.N.: Have you ever heard of an armadillo called a Hoover Hog?

Collins: No, I never did. Armadillo is something I never seen anywhere except in papers until late years. I tell you, Oklahoma is overrun by them. When I lived there there was never such thing as an armadillo.

M.N.: Now you are familiar with The Grapes of Wrath book and picture.

Collins: Yeah, I read the book and I also saw the movie a couple of times.

M.N.: Was there that kind of violence? Was there that kind of exploitation of the workers?

Collins: No, I think that was played up. There was some violence, yes.

M.N.: Did you ever see any?

Collins: I never saw any violence 'cause I never lived in the labor camps. The only camp I lived in was those one-room shacks. This fellow had two shacks and Peters lived in one and we lived in the other. They was probably 25 feet apart.

M.N.: Did you ever hear of Communist agitators?

Collins: No, I never even knew there was such a thing as a Communist back in those days. Never heard of them. I'd heard of the Ku Klux Klan back in them days. In fact, I'd heard of the Ku Klux Klan when I was a little boy growing up. I think one of the things that sticks in my memory more than anything--and it always has--was that my dad and I was going to town on a Saturday morning when I was ten years old taking a load of cotton into town.

I was told--and I heard my dad tell it--that this black man worked for a cattleman. This cattle guy was out buying cattle and they told that this black man raped this white guy's wife. Anyway, we was going into town. Back in them days they had wagon yards at the edge of town. This wagon yard had this deal that ran out in front about six or eight feet where they put a rope pulley up to lift the hay up into the barn loft. They had this black man hanging to that and they wouldn't cut him down. The Ku Klux Klan was responsible for that and that's the only thing I ever heard of that Ku Klux Klan was responsible for. There's something about violence like that. I didn't approve of no part of it.

M.N.: Where was this now?

Collins: In Oklahoma.

- M.N.: What part of Oklahoma?
- Collins: Eufaula, Oklahoma. That's back in 1922.
- M.N.: Was that fairly common?
- Collins: No, it was the only case I ever knew of. I'd read of them in the papers over the years.
- M.N.: How did people handle things like that here in California? Was there law?
- Collins: Well, I would say you had as good a law then as you have now. You had violence quite often. You had killings in camps and stuff like that. The only news we had was radio. We never took a newspaper so I was never able to keep up with it like I do now. I read a paper every day and I listen to the news a couple of times a day and watch the news at night now. I keep pretty well on top of what is going on or what's being told. 'Course there's always a certain amount that's never told.
- M.N.: Was the radio an important thing?
- Collins: The radio was a very important thing back in them days. To us it was doubly important because all we had in Oklahoma was an old battery-driven set which used the car battery. I'd pull the car up by the window and throw wires through the window and run the radio till I got ready to use the car. Then I couldn't use the radio. After we came here and we got enough money, we bought a little old electric set. It was a small set. It was very entertaining to us. In them days the Sons of the Pioneers and some of those people was hot on the airwaves. We listened to that for all hours.
- M.N.: What did you eat on a regular day and what did you eat on a holiday?
- Collins: Well, most times on a holiday we had chicken.
- M.N.: Did you have a lot of special food?
- Collins: No, just about the same as you have now. Just potatoes and beans and we always liked cornbread. Usually our special dishes was fried chicken or chicken and dumplings. Those were special meals. We were never overly fond of steaks. We don't use that many steaks now. I know I bought a hindquarter of a beef quite a long while ago and we probably still have half of it.
- M.N.: What would you do when you all got together?
- Collins: Most of the time we'd pitch horseshoes out in the front yard.

The women would just sit around and talk. Sometimes they would sew. My wife was a great hand to get with other women and make things like doilies or scarfs. They'd do sewing like that on the machine. That was both entertaining and would pass the time for them too.

M.N.: Were you happy?

Collins: Yeah, yeah we were. A lot of times we'd go jackrabbit hunting. I got a friend here in Bakersfield by the name of Sam Elkins. His wife still runs a real estate office here in town.

M.N.: Is he a migrant too?

Collins: Yeah, he's from Oklahoma. He's about 69. He's a little younger than I am. They come here a little before I did and they worked for years. His wife run a dress shop in Delano for years and then she come down here and went into Real Estate 7. I think she's in her own outfit now. She worked up till she got a license so she could set up her own real estate business. She was a pretty sharp cookie. Outside of that there was really nothing exciting except after I started to learn to fly an airplane before the war.

M.N.: When was that?

Collins: In 1940. I started to take lessons in an airplane from a fellow by the name of Dwight Reynolds. He used to be here at Kern County Airport. In fact, he was the private pilot for Jim Camp--or S. A. Camp Companies--for a long, long time until he retired. I think he lives at Arroyo Grande now. The war came along and that shut down all private flying excepting in the army. I tried to join the Air Corps. Because of my age I couldn't get in as a fighter pilot. I didn't want to fly anything else. They wanted me as a gunner or bombardier. I told them, "No way," I said, "If I don't fly, I'm not going. I'll just stay where I'm at."

M.N.: What was S. A. Camp? [Sol A. Camp, owner]

Collins: It's a farming operation and pump company here in Cawelo. S. A. Camp Companies is what it's called and it's still out at Lerdo and Highway 99 out north of town.

M.N.: Were they powerful?

Collins: Yeah, pretty powerful company.

M.N.: Let me ask you about the farmers. Were there Associations and were they powerful at that time?

Collins: Yeah, I would say they were. Of course they was nothing big

then like there is now. No way to compare them. In fact Camp Company wasn't that big. They started out with 640 acres over by Shafter. Before they sold out they'd built it into somewhere around a 5,000 acre operation. Sol Camp--the original promoter--started the whole business. He died and it went to his son and daughter. His daughter was the wife of Mayor Don Hart--the mayor of the city of Bakersfield for the last twelve years. In fact, he just went out as Mary K. Shell came in. Have you met Don?

M.N.: Yes, in fact I've talked to him.

Collins: Wonderful guy--real nice guy.

M.N.: Where did Sol Camp come from?

Collins: He was a migrant but I can't remember where he come from. I've forgot the state that he migrated from.

M.N.: But he came out here and got his start here.

Collins: He came out here with nothing and he told me this himself. He said, "I come out here with nothing and went to work as a cow-hand for Kern County Land Company." His wife went to work as a cook in Kern County Land Company's cook shack for the cowboys. Back in them days why they kept the ranch hands. The cattlemen had their camp set up for their ranch hands same as cotton farmers. 'Course cotton was no big deal back in the early 1930s. They were just starting it in California. In fact farming was just starting--period. Back in them days if somebody said, "Why it's going to look like this now," you'd say, "There's no way." But it does. The more water they give it--the better it's going to look.

M.N.: They turned that into a big company?

Collins: Yeah. So Sol Camp first really hit pay dirt when he put in quite a large acreage in potatoes the second year of the war. He netted over a million dollars off of that crop. So from that he started buying land and of course land seemed high but there was no way but up. It's still going up. There's no way you can lose when you buy real estate. Sol Camp just happened to be one of the guys that did it. When he left the Land Company he went in partners with Charlie West--dead now--and Lawson Lowe--he's dead. It was called Camp, West and Lowe. You probably heard that name because it's a pretty old established name here. They was the first starters of the Camp Company. Then times was rough. Now this was before the war that they got started. They bought that place over there and decided that they wasn't going to make it as a trio. They decided to sell out to whoever could come up with the money. Well, Sol

Camp managed to get the money and he bought the deal out at the beginning of the war. That's when he started to go. I went to work for him in 1952. I worked 28 years before I retired.

M.N.: You went to work for him in 1952 and worked for 28 years?

Collins: Twenty-eight years.

M.N.: With Sol Camp?

Collins: With Camp Companies it was called. Yeah, Sol Camp was the originator of it but it was called S. A. Camp Companies. At that time they had an oil company, a cattle company, a land company, and a ginning company. At one time they had sixteen gins.

M.N.: So he did quite well for himself, didn't he?

Collins: I don't know how much they got now. The general manager of the Company--Jim Camp, Jr.--is the grandson of Sol Camp. He's a young guy about your age.

M.N.: Did you ever hear of people getting government aid?

Collins: Yeah.

M.N.: Could you describe that?

Collins: The only thing I ever knowed about government aid is that these farmers would get so much money for plowing our cotton under or plowing so much wheat under. I never was involved in it. All I knew is what I heard other people say.

M.N.: How about workers getting welfare or relief?

Collins: Back in them days after Hoover was defeated by President Roosevelt in 1932 they come out with this NRA [National Recovery Act]. I know two or three people who's quite religious and they said it was the end of time coming. That NRA was something that was going to be stamped on your forehead. I remember hearing preachers preach that that was the mark--you know--"NRA". Well it wasn't.

M.N.: What did it stand for?

Collins: National Recovery Act is what it stood for but a lot of people didn't know that. When they put that into effect the government bought up cattle. Now they did this when I was in Oklahoma. They bought up cattle. People couldn't sell their cattle because nobody had any money to buy them. The government bought them and they slaughtered them. What stock was fit to eat they gave

to people to can up. You could go get it if you had some means. Of course there was no such thing as home freezers like we have now. The only freezers was in town where the people had walk-in boxes. If you got some of the government beef handout why the only route you had was to can it and we did. We got all we had cans for and we canned it up. We cooked it up and canned it. It was eatable just like opening a can of canned beef. That was the only connection I had with that.

The State or Federal programs were new and it was a means of getting enough money into the hands of the people to buy the actual necessities of life. My father-in-law owned 80 acres of land and two teams of mules. He got his team of mules on this job and I drove the team and the mules drewed exactly the same pay I did. The team drewed the same pay as a man. But you were only allowed to work so many days a month for a certain given time. That's all you could make because I remember this was in 1935 and I was paid \$1.50 a day. The team and I got \$3.00 a day. This meant my father-in-law got \$1.50 and I got \$1.50. 'Course that was big money because on the farm 75 cents a day was all you got so you was getting twice the wages.

M.N.: What about politics? How did you feel about politics?

Collins: Well, I registered when I was 21. The State of Oklahoma had a law then that in order to be eligible to vote you paid poll tax. A poll tax amounted to so much money which you could either pay in cash or work two days a year for the privilege of voting. That was every year. You worked these two days for the county for free for the privilege of voting. And I know the year I turned 21 in February, 1931, I worked that year. The Presidential election was coming up. I voted in the Presidential election and I never missed one since then. For as long as I lived in Oklahoma I worked and paid poll tax. Well, I come out here and there was no such thing as poll tax. I've often discussed it with some of the guys I work with and some of the people that worked under me when I was foreman of the electric shop of the company. They'd say, "I'm not going to go vote. It doesn't make a difference." I'd say, "Buddy, if they made you pay to go vote, then you'd probably want to. That's just exactly what I started out with. I'll never miss an opportunity to vote for as long as I can get to the polls." I register as a Democrat. I vote a split ticket whenever I feel that the opposite is the better of the two people. I've never been bull-headed enough about politics to say, "Well, it's going to be one or the other." Like I say, all of my life--and my parents did--I have always split the ticket. My wife and I do the same thing if we feel one politician is better suited to the job.

M.N.: What do you remember about Hoover and Roosevelt? Do you remember Hoover?

Collins: No, I don't. All I remember is hearing them refer to Hoover Hogs. That was a rabbit whether it be a jackrabbit or cottontail or a swamp rabbit. Now there's a difference. Swamp rabbit-- now most people in California wouldn't know what you was talking about. It's a rabbit about the size of a Belgian hare. It's between the size of a jackrabbit and a cottontail. They're only found in swamp lands or river bottoms.

M.N.: Did you hear people talk of Hoover?

Collins: Yeah, nobody had any use for him. He let the country go to pot pretty much like they claim Carter did during his administration. It's fell apart see. Well, I can see how people would feel that way. Of course, I think a lot of times with our present setup there's no way that Carter could be blamed for all of our cost-of-living increases. That was brought about by the oil prices which he had no way of controlling. He still got blamed for it, and a lot of people voted against him for that simple reason. The same thing might have happened to Hoover.

M.N.: What about Roosevelt? What did he do when he came in?

Collins: He made a turn-around just like Reagan is trying to do now. He did a darn good job of it. That was right after the crash of the 1929 year when the banks folded up. He made a turn-around. He made insurance available to people that had money in the bank so it wouldn't be lost. The government would have to back it up through an insurance deal. He brought out this National Recovery Act which put people back to work. They had some deal that younger people went to the forests.

M.N.: CCC? [Civilian Conservation Corps]

Collins: Yeah, CCC camps. Now one of my brothers-in-law even went to that. That money was paid to the folks--you know--to help support them at home. The money went back home--the biggest portion of it. He just got his clothes and his living while he was there. The money went back to help support his parents. My wife's younger brother was in that. I think he was in Colorado. A lot of that was used for building roads or rejuvenating forests. They set young trees and all kinds of stuff which was good. Now those are the things I remember Roosevelt bringing out. And, of course, progressively times got better. I think the thing that really started the ball to rolling was

when the war came along. As destructive as wars are, they seem to be profiting to a sense. I would never advocate wars to bring a country out of any slump because I just can't see it. It destroys too many things. It's always been my contention if they can spend millions of dollars for battleships and airplanes to destroy them and insurance companies to pay for men who get killed, then they can come up with the same money to support the people without having to do all of that. There's no reason for them to have to waste like that. And that's what it boils down to. It's expense. Whichever way you go it's still government expense.

M.N.: You felt there could have been a constructive way to turn things around?

Collins: Right, just a destructive way to turn it around. That's the way they went about it.

M.N.: How do you feel about the way things turned out for you and the people you knew?

Collins: Well, I'm very well satisfied with myself as far as my fitting into a lifestyle and everything. I haven't set the world on fire but I started with nothing and I've got a comfortable home and a comfortable living coming in as long as the Social Security holds. Hell, they keep hollering about that but I don't see how they can let go of that. They've got too far into it. The thing that bugs me about it is that they allow so many people to retire at two-thirds of their salary after 25 or 30 years paying into it. You can pay into this other system for the same 15 or 20 years and then they keep going under. They should either make it all or none. If they would bring the whole governmental pension system into one system it would work a lot better in my opinion. Maybe I'm wrong but why should you and I fill the same place in life and we wind up with \$600 or \$700 a month income and a guy that's done work no more important than what we've done--and maybe not as important--winds up with \$1,000 or \$1,500 a month for as long as he lives. There's a little bit of a lack of justice somewhere along the line.

M.N.: Have you seen people change from the 1920s?

Collins: Yes, they have. It's been a progressive change over the number of years. I think the machine age has brought it about. A particularly drastic change has been television. People are more selfish. They don't seem to have the time for each other. People are friendly enough, but nobody seems to have time to stop and talk to you. They're not as generous to help you do something. Used to be if somebody had a problem why the neighbors was right in to help him out if it was at all possible. But I think people have changed over the years. I don't see

how they can change much more--looks to me like we're just about as far against a wall as we can go with it. Maybe not. Always seems to be something else that can be done about it. In my own opinion, I think television has brought more of a drastic change in our human lifestyle than anything you can come up with.

M.N.: How is that?

Collins: For the simple reason that most people are content to sit and watch a movie or program on television. If you come in or you go into their house, they want to sit there and watch that television set instead of turning it off and talking to you and hearing what you have to say. They want to wait until that program is over with. By that time you might have something else to do and excuse yourself and go home. I think that happens in almost anybody's home. So many times I've gone places to visit with very good friends and they'll be watching a football game. No way you can turn the television set off or down. They want to hear and they want to see it. So if you want to set through it fine. You'll visit afterwards. If not? Why forget it and go home.

M.N.: How have families changes?

Collins: I don't think you have the love in the families you had back in them days. You don't have the family closeness today that we had back in the 1920s and 1930s for the simple reason that you made your own entertainment back in them days by singing--playing guitars and musical instruments. On Sunday the men would get together and gather up somewhere and have a horseshoe pitching game out in the yard. You could go to church. I remember my wife and I went even up until we left Oklahoma in 1935. You'd go to church almost any Sunday. You either asked to go home with somebody and spend the rest of the day or you'd have a meal and eat supper with them and go back to church. That is a rare occasion now --if anybody asks you to go home and have lunch. They might ask you to go out and have lunch but after that they don't usually go home. As far as families, I would say they are spread quite aways apart. 'Course, kids have different ideas. There's so much dope and stuff now that kids are involved in. Back in them days about the only thing was once in a while you would drink a little white lightening. Outside of that, why there was nothing to get them high.

M.N.: What was white lightening? How did they make it?

Collins: They took sugar, water and barley. If you wanted to make what they called apricot brandy you use seven and one-half pounds of apricots or peaches like they use to make peach brandy. It was referred to as white lightening because it usually run

about 100 proof. If you'd take a good swig of it you'd run around in circles about two minutes trying to get your breath. That's why it was called white lightning. You always bought it in a quart fruit jar or a pint fruit jar depending on how you wanted to come about it.

M.N.: Did you make it at home?

Collins: Oh yes, we made it at home. It was illegal. Back there during the prohibition days a lot of people made their living or subsidized the amount of money they had coming in by making moonshine.

M.N.: How did you make it?

Collins: I remember my dad and my uncle made moonshine. They would bury a couple of wood barrels in the ground. 'Course you had to hide it from the law. You buried it in the ground with about a foot of dirt over the top of it. You'd dig a hole for a 52-gallon barrel in the ground and you had a lid for it. You'd take and put your ingredients in there. So much sugar, water, barley and your apricots or peaches--whichever you wanted. You could use raisins depending on the market. Some people wanted it and some people didn't want it. You'd cover that over and it would sit for a given number of days. It would ferment. Once it was fermented they'd pump in a little more sugar and that would start it all over again. The more it fermented the more alcohol you could build into it.

Then you'd take the ingredients and they had a copper boiler which would hold about 30 gallons. It was about 30 inches long and about 15 inches wide and about 18 inches high. It had a copper dome with clamps fitted around it. Then they would take flour and make up a paste--just water and flour--and they'd put it around this top. Then they'd put this lid on there and that was a sealant. They would take those clamps and fasten the lid down. Well, out of the top of this thing--the come--you'd hook up a copper tube. The copper tube had a lot of coils and went down through a barrel of water. When it came out at the bottom of this barrel of water the steam would condense into a liquid as it cooled. That was your alcohol. Then you would run that off. Back in them days they didn't have such a thing as a tester to find out whether the strength of it was 80 proof or 90 proof. Like I say, it was more up around 100 proof 'cause you'd take one big swallow of it and you was about to lose your breath. They'd run it off until the stuff got kind of a greasy taste to it. Kind of a flunky taste and then they would abandon it. A lot of times they'd take wheat bran to put on there as what they called a cap. I don't know what part it played. Anyway I remember my dad and uncle used to take that and feed it to the hogs and chickens as a feed.

M.N.: What was left in the barrel?

Collins: The rest of it was water. They'd just pour that out.

M.N.: Was it good?

Collins: Yeah, it was good feed. Only you had to be very careful about it because you couldn't allow them to get very much of it. If they did, they'd get drunk. And if you want to see something funny, you should see some pig get drunk. I seen it happen one time. They got too much of this bran and there were about four or five sows which probably weighed about 400 pounds apiece. I never seen such a show in my life as those four or five pigs did--boozed up running into each other squeeling. I've seen chickens do the same thing. Chickens eat that bran off that alcohol and they'd just get drunk. They would act like they were going to fly and flop their wings.

M.N.: Was that alcohol dangerous at any time?

Collins: No, it was just like booze you buy over the counter down here. 'Course this stuff is bonded and tested to 98 percent because they weaken it down. Just like in a winery. I worked for a little while in a winery and they take out the alcohol. Well they set up 100 proof alcohol. Your wine is probably about 12 percent by volume of alcohol. They take the wine and cut it down to 12 percent alcohol by volume with 90 proof or 100 proof alcohol. The government has control over the winery because the government's the only one that has locks and keys to it. The owners like Joe Giumarra east of town have several tanks of 100 proof alcohol but they can't get to it. They call the government guy up. He comes out and unlocks it. He draws them off so much and makes a chart of it. Now they do the same thing with the brewery. It's only so much alcohol by volume and they're not allowed access to the alcohol. The government's in charge of that. Once it's made and put in that tank you don't get it when you're ready for it. You get it when the government lets you. That's when the taxes come in. At the tank itself you pay government taxes on the alcohol.

M.N.: You talked about being a mule skinner and running a mule team. What was that like? Were mules hard to work with?

Collins: No. I knew how to drive a tractor because there was one tractor in the whole farming area around where I lived. I was fortunate. The guy was budding a lot of pecan trees over from native pecans to paper shell. We were leveling the ground up and making it look halfway decent. They had an old Fordson. It had the old iron growers on it. Old big long points about six inches long and I learned to drive that. When I came to California I knew how to drive a wheel tractor but the guy I went to work for when I first got here had two teams of horses and one tractor.

He had a little Farmall tractor. The horses were never hard to drive. In fact, I drove six of them pulling a land plane with six head abreast. I've worked horses all my life. In fact, I never knew that there was any other means of power until I was grown.

M.N.: Did the tractors make a big change when they came?

Collins: Oh yeah, the tractor made a terrific change in a lot of things. Well, the biggest change I would say it made was in the size of farms. Progressively it went from the one-family farm into big operations and then into companies and it's progressively going more that way now. Just in the last couple of years they've gone up into these big eight-row machines. They plant eight rows or cultivate eight rows at a time. Back in the days when you had a horse and buggy you did one row at a time. We had what they called a Georgia stock. It was a plow. You just put one plow on and plowed one furrow and then had a mowboard turning plow which turned the dirt one direction. Those were in varied sizes depending on the size of your team. If you had a small team, you got a ten-inch plow. If you had a big team, you'd get a twelve-inch plow.

M.N.: Was that a mowboard plow?

Collins: It was a mowboard plow. It had a point that they would sharpen at the blacksmith shop. It fastened on with three bolts. One on the side and two on the flat part of it. Those were used and they still use pretty much the same kind of point even these big breaking plows they use on what they call tumble bugs. They use them behind these tractors or rollers. Some of them tumble and some of them roll. First riding turn plow I think I ever seen was in the middle 1930s in Oklahoma. A guy was breaking wheatland out in western Oklahoma. Out there there's acres and acres of level land just about as far as you can see in places. That's where the real dust bowl was generated in that wheat country around Enid, Oklahoma.

M.N.: Did the tractors cause that by breaking up the soil?

Collins: No. Plowing the soil up did it with no rain. Once the soil is plowed up there's no roots or anything in the turf to hold it there. That's why it blows away. You have the same situation right here west of town. Almost every year we have people having wrecks out there west of I-5 because Tenneco West has developed all that land out in there. That alkaline area--once they tore the sagebrush out and plowed the ground up--there's nothing to stop the winds. It just blows the dust so thick you can't even see across the road out there.

M.N.: If people hadn't farmed, would there have been a dust bowl?

Collins: Not as much, no. Well, it would if the land had been overtaxed by stock with the vegetation eat off. You could create a dust condition a number of different ways by tilling the soil or by burning off the foliage.

M.N.: But the dust bowl was really man-made?

Collins: Yeah, it was really man-made because at that time all of western Oklahoma and even western Arizona was just starting to develop. A lot of us right now can't even think about California being practically a desert. But it's a fact. A lot of old timers that come here years ago probably remember a lot more of it. I know one time we went out here to what they called a wildflower festival. They used to have a tremendous amount of flowers between here and Shafter. I remember one time we went out here on Seventh Standard Road just east of Santa Fe Way to a wildflower festival. It was such a big deal that the governor of the State of California come out there.

M.N.: Who was he?

Collins: I've forgotten his name. Seems like it was Knight but I'm not sure of that. It was before Jerry Brown's father was governor. It was quite a while before that because they come out there in a twin engine airplane. I remember they landed out there on the desert alongside of the road. It was one of the first one of them we'd ever been to. Of course, there was lots of people there but no comparison to what it would be now because Bakersfield was small. Well, at that time in 1935 Delano was only around 3,500 population. Of course, there was a lot of people that traveled on the railroads back in them days. I think there was four passenger trains on this track going up by Porterville. Two in the morning and two in the afternoon.

M.N.: You mentioned Mr. Hart, the mayor of Bakersfield. Did you know any other people who really did well?

Collins: Yeah, I know a lot of people that come here from the middle west that's did terrifically good. In fact, I would say some of them is millionaires or better. 'Course Don Hart is and Camps--the company is several times over millionaires. One fellow--C. B. White up in Delano--come here from Texas about 1929 or 1930 and has done extremely well. I don't know just how much property they got in the United States, but at one time he had somewhere around 5,000 acres in Australia. He was flying back and forth twice a year over there. In fact, he still owns property over there. Last time I talked to him was down here at Montgomery Wards. I happened to bump into him and I asked him if he's still over there and he said, "No." He just goes back there once in a while and looks after the property. He's 70 years old now.

M.N.: Was he poor when he came out here?

Collins: Yeah, he was poor. Albert Davis is a quite successful farmer. He's a dairy farmer out in Delano. He's got property in Australia and considerable property around McFarland. They were poor when they come here. The Tudors--the grape farmers in Delano--came here from Italy.

M.N.: What's their name?

Collins: Tudor, an Italian fellow named Dan Tudor. He's worth a tremendous amount of money and Joe Giumarra of Giumarra Vineyards Corporation. No telling how much the company's worth. He ran a fruit wagon when he come here from Italy. There's some other people. Jim Banducci came here from Italy. They didn't have anything. I could have done better myself, but I never was no gambler. I mean I just wouldn't take the chance. I've had the opportunity but I refused to grab it I guess. Just scared. Most people that's taken the chance has made good. When they worked hard they made it. It seemed they could go as far as they wanted to.

M.N.: Well, I sit here and look at you and it looks to me like you made it.

Collins: Well, I'm comfortable. That's all that matters. It isn't the amount of money you've got, it's how comfortable you are.

END OF TAPE 4, SIDE 1

END OF INTERVIEW

James Collins
b. 1886, Arkansas
[?]

Elizabeth Flood
b. 1892, Arkansas
[?]

Talmage Lee Collins

b. 1910, Jasper, Newton Co.,
Arkansas

Education: 7th grade

Church: Freewill Baptist

m. 1931

Lena Gertrude Burden
b. 1913, Oklahoma

Alberta Lee Collins
b. 1932
Housewife

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