

## CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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

## Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Byrd Monford Morgan

PLACE OF BIRTH: Council Hill, Muskogee County,  
Oklahoma

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATES OF INTERVIEWS: May 2, 1981

PLACE OF INTERVIEWS: Oakhurst, Madera County

NUMBER OF TAPES: 3

TRANSCRIBER: Barbara Mitchell

## PREFACE

Mr. Byrd Morgan lives with his wife in a country home in the mountains near Yosemite. His experiences were quite different from those of most of the other interviewees. Mr. Morgan and his family were able to own a farm when they came to California and his story is a happy one. Mr. Morgan was very friendly and expressed himself well on tape. He is the first cousin of interviewee Martha Jackson. [118]

Stacey Jagels  
Interviewer

## CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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Oral History Program

## Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Byrd Morgan (Age: 57)

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATED: May 2, 1981

S.J.: This is an interview with Mr. Byrd M. Morgan for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Stacey Jagels at Oakhurst, California on May 2, 1981 at ten o'clock a.m.

S.J.: I thought we would start first with when and where you were born.

Morgan: I was born at Council Hill, Oklahoma on February 13, 1924.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

Morgan: Well, we were farmers. I grew up on the farm. Of course, in those days, particularly in that part of the country, you lived in a pretty small world compared to now. By that I mean transportation wasn't like it is. Roads were bad and you didn't get too far from home so you actually lived in a pretty small world. You have to grow up and look back on it to realize what a small world you were in there, particularly in those times.

Schools were a little bit different than they were here in the respect that there was a lot more discipline there. My dad was authoritarian. When he said, "Yes", he meant yes. When he said, "No", he meant exactly that. You only got one warning but you were taught to mind even strangers. You said, "Sir" and "Mam". It was quite different when we came here. We noticed this big difference.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit about your parents? Were they both born in Oklahoma also?

Morgan: No. My parents were born in Arkansas in White River country which is central eastern Arkansas. When my mother came out, I don't know, but my father came out to Indian Territory in 1893 when he was thirteen years old. He was born in 1880 and my mother was approximately two years younger. They came in a covered wagon pulled by oxen. I've heard him tell many times how everything was so loaded that he walked

every step of the way herding cows along. Of course, Indian Territory was quite wild in those days. There were outlaw gangs from the six surrounding states. They would do their raiding in the states and hold up in Indian Territory because it was only subject to the federal marshalls. My father, as a young man, sometimes rode with the federal marshalls when they'd go after somebody because he used to tell many times that federal marshalls didn't stay alive long in that part of the country. The outlaws even ran school teachers off when he was young and later, when he became a minister, there were attempts to run him off of places. They didn't want any changes. They didn't want any schools. They didn't want any ministers. They didn't want anything other than the way it was.

S.J.: Who were they?

Morgan: The gangsters, the outlaw gangs. I'm talking about people like the Davis gang and Cole Younger. My dad mentioned those names with ease. I mean he knew these people. In later years, of course, there were still gangs but most of them were wiped out in the 1930s. Pretty Boy Floyd and [John] Dillinger even sashayed through that territory occasionally too. As a matter of fact, Dillinger came through there with Floyd one particular time that I heard talked about. He was chased in front of our house by the posse one day. I was out in the front yard. I didn't know who it was, but I remember a submachine gun in the back of the car and the sheriff's posse in another car keeping a very respectable distance. They went west of our place and in about fifteen minutes they came back empty handed. There was a lot of talk about it around there when I was a kid.

S.J.: What did your father's family do? Were they farmers?

Morgan: They were farmers even in Arkansas. I don't know when my grandfather left Alabama, but he left Alabama because he didn't want his sons working in coal mines. That was his main reason for leaving there.

S.J.: Why did they leave Arkansas?

Morgan: Well, I suppose for greener pastures. I don't know. I never heard any specific reason, but people were naturally just migrating westward. Why they settled in that particular area I don't know. They had their reasons, but I never heard them say why. They settled first in a little place that never amounted to a lot that was called Lenna. It was founded by two of my great uncles in North Canadian River country.

S.J.: Do you know much about your mother's family?

Morgan: No. I know very little. My mother was part Cherokee Indian, but then many, many back there are mixed with Indian. It's nothing uncommon at all and it has been for 200 to 300 years. I really don't know too much about my mother's family. She had one sister that I knew real well who I grew up with. I was very fond of her. The aunt that I'm

talking about married into one of the early families back there by the name of Beebe. When they came to California, they came to Bakersfield and farmed in the Bakersfield and Shafter area for many years. The whole Beebe family has passed away now.

S.J.: Your mother died when you were very young?

Morgan: I was six weeks old. I was over a year old when my father remarried. I was kept by another aunt during that time because there were so many small ones at home that he needed somebody to take care of me. My aunt had a child approximately the same age. She breast fed both of us the entire time which was, I always thought, quite an accomplishment.

S.J.: Of these thirteen children you were the youngest. What was the age spread?

Morgan: My oldest sister was born in 1903 and my oldest brother in 1905. It goes all the way up the thirteen of us to 1924.

S.J.: Did all thirteen of you live with your father and your stepmother or had some sisters and brothers married?

Morgan: Some brothers had left home already and just what years they married I don't recall because it never meant that much to me at the time. One year when I started to school my stepmother packed ten school lunches. She sent ten children to school that one year and after that I don't remember. I remember hearing her talk many times about that one year she had to pack lunches for ten children.

S.J.: So as you were growing up you started out with about nine brothers and sisters living in the home with you and then since you were the youngest it decreased.

Morgan: It decreased but my stepmother had four children. One of them was about sixteen when she married my father and then they had three between them in addition to that. So I had two half-sisters and a half-brother. My stepmother was a busy woman. She loved every minute of it. She always said she did.

S.J.: Did you have a good relationship with her?

Morgan: Very good.

S.J.: You thought of her as your mother?

Morgan: I did. Some of the older ones did not. I think a couple of them had pretty hard feelings towards her, but I never even discussed it with them because it doesn't do any good. All in all I think she was a great person. She had a tremendous job and did it well. I don't think that she could have worked any harder in her entire life if she'd have tried. She just passed away in July 1980. She was 91 $\frac{1}{2}$  and in

pretty good health up until the last year before she passed away.

S.J.: Was this extremely large family very unusual where you lived?

Morgan: Well, ours was larger than usual, but there were many families back there with six to nine children.

S.J.: Did you enjoy having lots of brothers and sisters?

Morgan: I think so, yes. You had no trouble getting up a ball game. I can remember wondering when I was little and growing up how some of the kids who didn't have but one or two brothers or sisters found anything to do. Of course, you don't realize when you're small and growing up how hard times really are. I can remember them talking about hard times, but I hadn't experienced the good times so it didn't mean the same thing to me at the time. I have to reflect back on a lot of these things. Now that I have something to compare it with I can see where people like my father and my stepmother had a tremendous job on their hands to raise that many children with no help. There was no welfare and if there would have been he wouldn't have taken it anyway. I call them very successful people.

S.J.: Your father was a farmer. Did he rent the land or sharecrop?

Morgan: Oh, for many years he owned land back there. After the Depression he sold what he had and didn't do anything but lease land until we left there.

S.J.: But when he owned land do you remember hearing about how much land it was?

S.J.: Well, when he was starting out he used to clear land and get a farm in working order and sell it and repeat the process. My dad became a minister. I'm not sure what year. He was a Baptist minister back there for 35 years and he helped a lot of people. I've heard other people say this. He was never so much for patting himself on the back. It was just the thing he had to do at the time. He did what he felt he had to do.

S.J.: He was a minister in addition to farming the land and taking care of the family then?

Morgan: Yes.

S.J.: When he would own land do you remember if he ever had so much work to do that he would need to hire someone or was it yourself and your brothers and sisters that would go out and help him farm?

Morgan: Well, when he owned land he did hire people. Sometimes during the times that I can remember he hired some help, particularly during harvest time. It was customary back there for neighbors to help each

other during harvest time. I can remember the thrashing crews and the big dinners and all that. Of course, there were no tractors in our part of the country then at all. It was all done with horses and mules. When they'd start harvesting like thrashing oats or anything else like that they'd all bring their own teams and wagons over and haul the oats to the thrasher. It was a stationary machine.

S.J.: So it was very common for your neighbors to help out.

Morgan: Oh, yes, they helped each other.

S.J.: If your father could afford to hire some hands to help him at harvest time then he must have been doing fairly well at that time?

Morgan: Better than average. He was a diversified farmer. He didn't just depend on one thing. He had some livestock and some milk cows to fall back on. He had some chickens even.

S.J.: So when you were very small you always remember having enough to eat and enough clothes?

Morgan: We always had enough to eat. We didn't have electricity but if we'd had refrigeration we would have eaten very well. Under the circumstances I think we did real well in the food department. Sometimes it would get monotonous having to eat too much of the same thing for a while but never do I ever remember there not being plenty to eat such as it was. It may be beans and potatoes because you didn't have refrigeration for the meat. When you killed a beef this had to be either canned or divided up with the neighbors and then when they did likewise you'd get a share.

We ate a lot of pork because it was cold enough back there in the wintertime so that you could salt it down, smoke part of it, make sausage and even can sausage. I'll say this, it was better than anything you'd buy today. We had quite a few chickens. We sold eggs and cream. We had a separator that separated the cream from the milk. We fed the milk to the hogs and sold the cream.

Things got so bad in 1932 and 1933. I can remember because I heard them talk about it and I never forgot it. I remember the day that I walked over to the country church where they had the poll to vote for Franklin Roosevelt for his first term in 1932. I was eight years old. They were discussing on the way home while walking down the country road how bad things were and how they hoped he would be able to do something. As usual, it's the demise of every politician when they start trying to do something and there is a certain share that's trying to pull the other direction. Maybe they don't understand what they're trying to do at first too. That might be part of it. I know there were a lot of hard feelings when they decided to kill some of the livestock off to get the prices up.

S.J.: Could we go back just a little bit more before we get into some of

the things that happened during the Depression? I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your father as a minister. Did he learn to be a minister in his spare time or was he an extremely religious man all his life?

Morgan: No, he was not an extremely religious man all his life. Of course, the Baptist religion is not too unlike some of the other denominations like Methodists and so on. Methods of worship might vary a little, but they have to feel the call to preach the word of God. He felt he was. I really believe he felt he was. I don't think anybody could be any more honest about anything than he was. I don't see how anybody could live his religion any more than he did. Not that he didn't make mistakes. He did. I can look back and see some mistakes he made but he felt he was called to preach and had a good knowledge of the Bible. You could ask him any question you wanted and he could usually satisfy you with an answer and tell you where to find it. He backed up everything with scriptures from the Bible. He had no trouble recalling which one either. I think he must have been able to memorize the whole Bible.

S.J.: So it was important for you and your brothers and sisters to go to church then?

Morgan: It was a must. We didn't have a choice. We went.

S.J.: Do you remember the revivals they would have in the summertime?

Morgan: Oh, yes, definitely. It would be so hot inside. Of course, all the old buildings were uninsulated, even in California they weren't insulated when we came here. The buildings were so hot they'd build a brush arbor outside in the summertime when they'd have a revival. They just consisted of poles planted on end and cross members and then they'd take the limbs off the trees with the green leaves on them. When they dried, the leaves stayed on and they were piled on top to make a shape. I sat there many a time through those till I thought I would die. When we were kids we'd go to sleep and maybe if you were small they'd put you in the wagon and you'd sleep. Then it was very miserable when you got home to have to wake up and go to bed. You'd have to get undressed and children were very sleepy headed.

S.J.: So you weren't too interested in these revivals?

Morgan: Oh no, not at all. It'd go in one ear and out the other.

S.J.: Do you remember whether there were very many church social events such as suppers?

Morgan: They had what they called box suppers and pie suppers. I've seen my dad auction pies off at a number of those. He was a good auctioneer. They were lots of fun. The entertainment was very simple. People ate pretty well but there was no cash money. To give an example, we had an auction and sold out in 1934. We had a lot of canned fruit and other things that we'd canned that we couldn't bring with us. A lot of it

went for five cents a jar total. This would even include canned meat. Nobody had the money to buy anything.

S.J.: So was bartering fairly common? If you had something and needed something you might trade some eggs, for instance, for some meat?

Morgan: Very common. Bartering was a very common thing. You swapped labor with each other. If one farmer needed somebody for a day or two, you'd go over and help him and then he'd come over and work a day or two for you whenever you needed it. All you had to do was call on him. People band together when it's necessary as I think they still do.

S.J.: So there was really a close-knit atmosphere where you lived.

Morgan: Yes, it was.

S.J.: And could you even compare that to the way things are in California?

Morgan: Well, they weren't as close-knit in California as they were then because I don't think the need was as great. As people get more affluent they get more independent. I think that's proven in wars. You go to war and somebody you never knew within two weeks becomes your best buddy because you're so dependent. If your lives depended on each other then you're going to get close-knit much faster. I don't think history repeats itself verbatim, but if there was another calamity I think there would be a lot of differences. People aren't nearly as hard up now as they were then. They just think they are. If their color T.V. [television] goes out they're having hardship. If T.V. and radio didn't exist, you don't miss it.

S.J.: So you think that the financial hardships really brought people together then?

Morgan: Yes, definitely.

S.J.: You mentioned a little bit about school earlier. You thought the schools and the teachers in Oklahoma were much stricter than they were here. Could you tell me a little bit about the school you went to?

Morgan: My first day at school I got a spanking because I nudged the fellow next to me a little too hard and unseated him. He found himself on the floor. The next thing I knew I was bent over the front desk getting whacked. I didn't do it again that day. They were very quick to give you a licking at school. If the teacher told you to do something and you didn't do it, you got a spanking. It was pretty hard. I think my record was four in one day. I was pretty hard to make a believer out of I guess. I got one for not paying attention. Some teachers are quicker to do this than others. Some would spank harder than others naturally. Some spanked too hard. I'd seen a couple of them in school that shouldn't have been given, not to that extent at least.

S.J.: Did you like school?

Morgan: Oh, sure I liked school. I wouldn't have wanted to have been anywhere else when the other kids where in school. If we got into anything serious at school and my dad got hold of it, we got another spanking when we got home and that was the hard one.

S.J.: So it was very important to your father that you were well behaved.

Morgan: Oh yes, very important. When my father would go away for two or three weeks to a revival that he'd be holding somewhere at another church, he would lay out the things to be done while he was gone. We did it or else we'd hear about it.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

S.J.: This school that you went to when you were a boy, was this a one room schoolhouse?

Morgan: Yes, it was. It went from what they call a primary through the fourth grade. Then you started school when you were five years old and went through the primary and first grade in one year. The second year you were in the second grade. Then they consolidated this school and others. The next one was also a country school but it had been a high school. Previous to that it was the fifth grade through the twelfth. They consolidated some of the schools. The high school kids went into town. They made that school from primary through eighth. It was called Victor School. That's where I went until we came to California. I was in the sixth grade when we came here.

S.J.: Were your studies very important to you then?

Morgan: Oh yes.

S.J.: Did you bring your work home and do your homework? Were you a very diligent student?

Morgan: If we didn't do our homework we got spanked. That's the truth. Not always with just the hand. Most teachers kept a nice board paddle. A few of them would even drill a few holes in it. This makes it sting a little harder.

S.J.: Did you have many chores around the house as you got older? You mentioned that when your father went out of town to preach his revivals he had a list of things you had to do.

Morgan: Yes. We had chores. We had livestock to take care of, cows to milk and hogs to feed. There was always chores to do around the farm. When things have to be done seven days a week it keeps you close by.

S.J.: Did that leave much time in the evenings and the weekends for leisure?

Morgan: Well, we never worked on Sunday unless it was an absolute emergency.

In Oklahoma people didn't work too much after noon on Saturday. After we came to California I think we worked more on the weekends than we did in Oklahoma. We were having to start over but there was leisure time. Of course, we had to make our own things to play with but it wasn't all that bad either. We had a stream nearby to swim and fish in and horses to ride but no money. I mean, you made do with what you had. I really didn't know any different.

S.J.: When you look back on it did you feel like you had a very happy childhood?

Morgan: I did. I had a very happy childhood in Oklahoma. I think I had a pretty happy childhood as a whole actually. I know we worked very hard and we started very young, but I don't feel that it ever did me any harm.

S.J.: Then when the Depression came things became very difficult for your family. You said your father no longer owned land.

Morgan: Well, he didn't but he moved a few miles from where he was and leased I think 320 acres.

S.J.: At that time did you realize that things were getting rough?

Morgan: I didn't. I was so small but by the time I was eight years old I was beginning to realize because I'd hear them talk about it. They couldn't hardly sell anything. You couldn't hardly sell what you raised because nobody had money to buy it. I remember one time my dad took eight hogs to market and brought them back home. The buyer who normally bought the hogs that were ready for market from him couldn't take them because they had no place to put them. Those were butchered and distributed around the area. In those days hogs weighed more at market than they do now because they wanted them larger and fatter. What do you do with 2400 pounds of pork? Things were bad. They were very bad but like I was saying, if you were growing up during that time then you aren't as affected. You don't have the worries that the adults do but over the years you pick up on all this and look back. God forbid if we ever have another time like that. I don't know if it can happen or not. Sure, times get hard, but there would still be a difference.

S.J.: You mentioned when the men were going to the polls to vote and they were talking about Roosevelt, did it seem to you even at that young age that they were very hopeful that Roosevelt could do something about it? They placed their trust and hope in him and supported him?

Morgan: Yes. I'm sure they did at least in that neighborhood because they'd been brought so low financially that there just wasn't much hope left for them that they could see. Things could not get better without some big steps being taken.

S.J.: Did you ever hear anything more about Roosevelt?

Morgan: Oh yes, very much. As a matter of fact, I didn't know what this country was going to do when President Roosevelt died. That is when I learned

that everybody can be replaced. I'll never forget the day that I heard he was dead. Here we were still in a war. What are we going to do? So that is when I learned that we can all be replaced and as a matter of fact we all will be replaced. Of course, I was still a young man and I hadn't learned a lot of lessons yet.

S.J.: Did your parents continue to be supporters of Roosevelt as time went on?

Morgan: Yes, but they also thought that there were some things that he should have dropped that were continued. They killed off a portion of cattle and hogs to get the price up. Nowadays they're doing similar things like taking certain things off the market to keep the price up.

S.J.: At that time did that take place near where you lived? Did you know that this was going on or did you hear this word of mouth?

Morgan: It took place all around. I didn't personally witness the shooting of any livestock, but I knew that it did go on because it was happening to neighbors around.

S.J.: How did people feel about it?

Morgan: They didn't like it. They didn't like it, but if it's the program it has to be. At least I guess they tried to carry it out evenly. I don't know.

S.J.: What happened to the meat?

Morgan: People used as much as they could possibly use.

S.J.: I've heard some of the people say that the government would burn it so nobody could have that meat. That wasn't your experience?

Morgan: They didn't get it all. A lot of those people turned their back on that. There were people who were starving to death in the cities. They were walking the countrysides trying to find something to do to survive. Nothing of that magnitude could happen again without I think a revolution.

S.J.: Did you ever hear about another one of his programs where he would pay farmers to plow under their crops or just not even plant their crops?

Morgan: Oh yes. I've heard of those. We've had that in recent times as well.

S.J.: Did your neighbors or people in the surrounding counties do that?

Morgan: No, I didn't experience that in Oklahoma. When we came here it took place here in California too. They even paid you to what they called cover crop. You'd let it get so high before you'd plow it under. The

Soil Conservation Program could build the soil. The farming practices back in those days were very poor. They weren't refurbishing the soil with nutrients and the government started a program to build the soil up.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about the farming practices? I heard that most of the farmers in Oklahoma at that time didn't practice crop rotation.

Morgan: They didn't practice crop rotation. They didn't seem to realize that they were losing the top soil by not terracing on slopes to keep it from washing away. I've seen great gulches and ravines washed down at the ends of the fields that came to too much of a drop in elevation. Lots of top soil washed away. In the western part of the country that had happened. They'd farmed the same thing too many years in a row. When the drought did come the wind blew the top soil away. If the wheat doesn't grow the dirt just gets powdery and then the wind blows it away. You have a lot of wind in that country and just because you have drought years it doesn't mean that you can't have a downpour occasionally. In that latitude you have a lot of violent weather where your southern and northern climates clash at certain times of the year. You can have a downpour of four or five inches of rain in two or three hours and still be drought year.

S.J.: But you feel that because of the farming methods when the winds came they did lose a lot of the top soil?

Morgan: Oh, definitely. They should never have grown cotton in Oklahoma in the first place. Cotton is very hard on soil. It takes pretty good land to start out with. They'd start raising cotton just year after year.

S.J.: Do you remember very much about the drought and the dust storms?

Morgan: Yes. In eastern Oklahoma we didn't get the dust.

S.J.: You didn't see very much dust?

Morgan: No, but the drought I do remember because when I was small we hauled water for quite some time. The creek dried up and we hauled water from a reservoir. It was small man-made reservoir that still had water. I can remember one year particularly we did that but I also remember other people who maybe weren't as fortunate to be as near a good stream as we were. They did it long before we did. Of course, that country is like anywhere else. Some wells are good and some not so good. Some will go dry and others would still be good. It was very common for people to be hauling water to water livestock. I know the last year we lived there we had an extremely poor crop. It was hardly worth harvesting.

S.J.: So do you think the drought had more to do with why you left Oklahoma

than the Depression?

Morgan: Well, it had something to do with it, but my stepmother's health was failing and that was the primary reason for us to leave at the time we did. Whether we would have left anyway I'm not sure. I was always glad that we did leave.

S.J.: What was wrong with your stepmother?

Morgan: I don't know for sure, but the doctor did advise my father that it would be best if she was taken west to this particular climate out here. When she was a young woman she lived in California a little while. Her first husband died during World War I.

S.J.: So there was no question when you decided to leave that you would come to California. You didn't consider going to some other state.

Morgan: No, we didn't consider it because two of my older brothers had already been out here and they thought it was a good place to come.

S.J.: Had they written letters back?

Morgan: They'd written and they'd also been home. One brother was in Long Beach in 1933 during the earthquake there and he was almost killed. My father came out to see him while he was still in the hospital. Why we came to the San Joaquin Valley was because it was farming country and my dad was a farmer at heart. We only knew one family in the whole San Joaquin Valley and we weren't sure where they were. We didn't come to the Valley because of them but we later looked them up. He just had it in his mind to go about 200 miles north of Los Angeles and that's where we came.

S.J.: Had you heard very much about California?

Morgan: Oh, yes, a lot.

S.J.: Did you have an idea in your mind what it would be like?

Morgan: Well, I think we fantasized a lot. I thought there was an orange tree on every corner. We found it easier to make a living here when we immediately came out than it was back there. I think it was because of the drought years there. If it hadn't been for drought years I think our crops would have been better but they paid a little bit more for working here.

S.J.: But you're not at all certain then that had your stepmother's health been good that you would have come here?

Morgan: No, I'm not sure.

S.J.: You might have stayed in Oklahoma. Things weren't to the breaking point as far as finances.

Morgan: Things were not to the breaking point for our family.

S.J.: Had you seen many other families that got to that point and left?

Morgan: Yes. Also, we saw some come to California and go back to Oklahoma again and then return to California later. Many of them did that. It's pretty hard to pull up your roots and plant them elsewhere. It was very common out here particularly for the first ten or fifteen years. Somebody would come out here and all you'd hear them talk about was how much better things were in Oklahoma so they'd go back to Oklahoma. Sometimes they'd have to borrow money to get back to California. This has happened over and over. People help each other out here. Other people would come out here from Oklahoma and be hard up and have no place to go so they'd stay with them until they could get a job and find a house. Housing was kind of hard to find in California. A lot of people lived in tents out here even.

S.J.: You had heard a lot about California. Did you have very high expectations? Did you expect it to be the answer to all your problems?

Morgan: I don't think so. My dad was more realistic than that. He knew that people here were not on easy street. There's no such thing as a free lunch. He knew that we'd work for what we got and we did. We worked very hard here. It was easier to get work here. That was the primary difference. It paid more per day than it did in the midwest, considerably more.

S.J.: You had mentioned something about an auction just before you left in 1934. Could you tell me more about that?

Morgan: Dad bought a truck to bring what we could. There were fifteen people to ride out in this truck in addition to what we could haul. It wasn't a lot. That wash pot sitting right there was one thing that came, also sewing machines. The kitchen table with the legs taken off was nailed across the bed across the top of it. Things were packed underneath it like bedding. I think my stepmother made up two five-gallon cans of cookies. Those were hanging on the back of the truck. This picture of that thing was as near the description of Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath as anything ever was.

It wasn't a jalopy. It was a good truck. It was only a five year old truck and it had new rubber on it. Now you'd have to be a rich Okie to have new tires on a good truck when you came west I suppose. How much cash my dad had I don't know. We didn't ask questions about finances ever, but I could take a good round house guess. I doubt if he had \$800 total after he sold out because nobody had any money to pay for anything. We camped at the side of the road all except one night. The first night out we stopped at an older brother's who lived in Shawnee, Oklahoma. We got a motel. There were too many to stay at his house. One other night en route we got a motel. We were en route for eleven days. We didn't make good time because we had some engine troubles

with the truck and this delayed us quite a bit.

S.J.: How long did that take?

Morgan: Well, we were delayed two days in Adrian, Texas and then we broke an axle in New Mexico. That was another day's delay. We didn't try to make too many miles. The roads were not too good then. They were not like they are now. Mostly it was two lane and some of it was kind of rough. This was a loaded truck and we just camped out by the side of the road. This was very common practice in those days. You just pitched camp, cooked and ate.

S.J.: You built a fire and cooked beside the road too?

Morgan: Oh yes. We came to Tulare and we camped for a while and picked cotton.

S.J.: On your way out did you see very many other trucks that were loaded down with mattresses and things like that that when you look back on it now might have been from Oklahoma?

Morgan: Yes, very possibly but not great numbers. Maybe it's just at that particular time, but there were people on their way out.

S.J.: And there were other people who were camped out beside the road?

Morgan: Yes, but we never camped with anybody. We always camped by ourselves.

S.J.: How about when you got to the border, do you remember anything special?

Morgan: Yes, definitely. We spent one night there. That was another delay. We raised cotton also in Oklahoma and we had with us some cotton sacks that had been used. Due to the agricultural inspection they were deathly afraid of the boll weevil in California which they very well should have been. We either had to destroy those sacks there or we had to boil them in water before they'd permit us to bring them across. Well, they were pretty hard to come by. They were nine, ten or twelve foot heavy duck sacks. We were going to need them so we just pulled off. There was a lot of open space out there. We got their permission and camped that night and took that very pot right there, filled it full of water, kept it boiling and boiled those sacks. They saw that we did. I'll always give them credit for doing it.

S.J.: Then they allowed you to come into the state?

Morgan: They allowed us to bring those sacks in with us. There was no problem getting into the state. There's nobody who can stop you.

S.J.: Were they very polite and nice to you?

Morgan: They were very nice to us at the border. Mainly I think where we ran into our problems was children in school because children can be cruel

as you know. You've been a school teacher. They can be very cruel.

S.J.: When you came into California across the desert and over the mountains, what was your first impression of California then?

Morgan: My first impression was that it was great. Actually, the view or maybe it was the newness of it, I don't know, but to me at that age I was used to really being outdoors because we'd hunted a lot at night in Oklahoma during the Depression. We sold the furs of the animals that we caught or trapped. It was just one big adventure for me.

S.J.: The sleeping out and the campfire probably didn't seem like a hardship to you. You probably thought that was fun.

Morgan: That was no hardship for me. If I'd been older it might have been a hardship. As a ten year old boy it was certainly no hardship, and I was a big strong boy.

S.J.: So you were very excited when you came to California.

Morgan: Oh, we were very excited. It was a big adventure for us as children.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

S.J.: When you first came to California you came up into the Valley and settled first in Tulare?

Morgan: We didn't settle in Tulare. We stopped there. We knew it was temporary. We took a drive off of Highway 99 and found a nice looking field of cotton and pulled in and asked if they needed help picking. They did so we stayed about three weeks and picked cotton.

S.J.: Where did you stay?

Morgan: We camped out. It was getting into September and wasn't too long until school started and my dad wanted to get on and try to find a place to settle into so the kids could start school. When we left Tulare, we came to Fresno. We pulled into Fresno on South Broadway, stopped and had some things to buy at a store on South Broadway. We left the city and went north on Highway 99. It was getting late in the day, and we camped out on the west side of the highway. My dad thought we'd come far enough north so the next morning we loaded up. I remember my brother who was driving said, "How far up Highway 99 do you want me to go?" He said, "I'll tell you when to turn off." He had something in mind. Nobody knew what. He said, "I'll tell you when to turn off." He got to Bullard Avenue. There was a sign that said CLOVIS SIX MILES. He said, "Turn here." He started east on Bullard Avenue and came into the city of Clovis which was a very small town of 1500 people at that time.

The day before my cap had blown off my head, and I didn't miss it for a minute. I thought it landed in the back of the truck but it hit the highway and was lost. I didn't realize it until later. My father

thought everybody should have a covering on their head so he stopped at the store to buy me a cap. While he was in the store he said that he and two of his sons were looking for a job possibly on a dairy [farm] and asked if he knew anybody around who had a dairy that was looking for help. He told him, "Yes, Charles Arbuckle, two miles north of Clovis needed two or three milk hands." They did a lot of milking by hand in those days, particularly Grade B dairies. So we drove out to his ranch and sat there all day waiting for him to return from Fresno and before nightfall we were moving into a house that he had for his hired hands. It was only a three room house, but it was a house. There's where we set up housekeeping. I think school had started by then and we started school. We had to walk about three miles to school.

S.J.: From the time you came to California until you moved into that house, about how much time had elapsed?

Morgan: Oh, probably a month. The job paid \$40 a month. There were cows standing at the milk station about 35 of them at a time, normally. They had to milk them by hand which means that they got up about four o'clock in the morning and they finished up at seven o'clock or so in the morning. Then during the day if they needed somebody in the field he paid them by the hour, but the milking job paid \$40 a month and that house. The rest of us worked at whatever we could get around the area for other farmers.

Subsisting then with that many in the family you had to can a lot of stuff. Of course, fruit and stuff was readily available in those days. I can recall going out in somebody's tomato patch where you could pick all the tomatoes you wanted to for ten cents a lug. You picked your own tomatoes which meant you got good tomatoes. A lot of fruit was given away in those days. They weren't getting a very good price out of things here either. We picked grapes in the Clovis area for as low as a cent and a half per tray. We picked up dried figs off the ground, lots of times it was grassy underneath them. They hadn't been cared for very well because the farmers couldn't afford to keep those farms up like they could if prices were good. We picked up dried figs for as little as five cents a forty pound field box. I don't think you could probably pick up more than eight to ten boxes of them a day under those conditions. Some of them worked for as little as twenty cents an hour. The following year when the cotton was planted out here we chopped cotton which consisted of thinning it and removing any grass or weeds in the row for \$1 per acre. Like I said before prices were better here than they were in Oklahoma. These houses which were uninsulated had a wood cook stove.

S.J.: How long did you live in this house at the dairy?

Morgan: We lived in it approximately a year.

S.J.: Could you describe it to me?

Morgan: It was just a bungalow type house with three rooms in a row. One door

opened right into the other. There was no hallway. If you took an elongated building and partitioned off three spaces, that was it.

S.J.: Did it have an indoor toilet?

Morgan: No, it was an outdoor toilet. That one didn't even have a sink inside. There was a faucet outside for water. Of course, we had no washing machine. When you washed you took this twenty gallon wash pot and you put it up on bricks for those three little legs there. You set it up on the bricks and built a fire under it. You had a wash tub and a sturdy bench to set the tubs on. You scrubbed the clothes in one and rinsed in the other. My folks always insisted on you being clean. The house had wooden floors. You also scrubbed those down with homemade lye soap periodically. Wash day was quite a deal. It was a big thing and it took most of the day. Of course, nobody had too many clothes, but if you only had two pair they got washed often and you never went to school dirty.

S.J.: How many of you were living in this house?

Morgan: At that particular time there were eight kids. Ten people at that time living in that three room house.

S.J.: This must have been difficult for your stepmother to go from living in a much larger house.

Morgan: Well, if it was she didn't complain about it. She didn't complain. She did what she had to do. She was very cheerful about it.

S.J.: Did she try to make it homey and try to fix it up right away with what she had?

Morgan: She would put up curtains, but she was never one for interior decorating. She really had no knowledge of anything like that.

S.J.: You probably didn't have any furniture with you at that point.

Morgan: We brought the large dining table that was nailed across the top of the bed of the truck. We had six cane bottom chairs that we brought and we made benches for the long table on either side of it and used those until I left home. There were benches on the side of that long dining table.

S.J.: Did your mother also work in the fields?

Morgan: She did some in 1935 because my dad got sick. He was bedfast for about six months. By that time two more of my brothers left home. She took the four that were available in the summertime and we'd go out and work. The following year when my dad got sick we leased a 40 acre place. We moved from the dairy farm to a 40 acre place and farmed it and worked other farms around.

S.J.: Were you better off financially then?

Morgan: Not really. There wasn't much change there. There really wasn't a big change until the following year. Well there was a change all right, but as far as being financially better off I don't know. The following year we leased 160 acres in Madera County on Highway 41 which you passed on the way up. It's all full of houses now. It was 100 acres of orchard and vineyard and 60 acres of open land, but we still did it the hard way right at first because we didn't have the money to buy a tractor so we farmed it with horses and mules. We also managed to farm that and still do some work for the neighbors. There was never any end to the work. A lot of hard work.

S.J.: But at that point even though you were farming four times as much you still didn't have any more cash?

Morgan: Not right at first because you have an investment regardless of what you go into. If you increase the size of the operation you have more investment. It's like many farmers still operate today. They borrow money to make the crop with. My dad having a good credit reputation was able to borrow money as well as anybody and, being a very conservative man, he never borrowed a dollar extra. He made do until he could get crops in, but things were still very hard in 1936 which was the year that we leased 160 acres. You couldn't borrow money on orchards and vineyards in those days. I don't think it's any different now before May 1 because they have had severe frost in the Valley in late April. You borrow money on the crop, but the bank isn't going to finance the crop until they are reasonably sure that it's not going to get wiped out. Even then you sold raisins and dried figs for \$40 a ton. It takes three and a half pounds of fresh fruit to make a pound of dried fruit approximately if it's of good quality and you didn't get that unless it met a certain standard.

It was still difficult and there were many things you didn't have that you needed to farm. It was pretty hard to do, but finally he had bought an old tractor and the thing blew up. He bought another old one. After the third old tractor went haywire he went way out on a limb and borrowed money to buy a new rubber tired John Deere tractor. That was the point right there where things got easier because you can do a lot more work sitting on a tractor than you can following a team of horses or mules. We worked just as hard but got more done and that brought more money in because we worked that tractor out for the neighbors also. If you want to compare it to today's prices, we did 40 acres of land for a neighbor for \$1 an acre with our tractor, our disk and our fuel. Fuel was six cents a gallon. Now I don't know how much it would cost per acre to get that same 40 acre disked, but I know what you would pay for that same tractor and disk now. If you were to hire it here it would be approximately \$35 an hour. I'm sure your profit would be more today. We baled hay for another neighbor for a couple of those years when we were on the ranch.

S.J.: How long were you on the ranch all together?

Morgan: Well, my dad was on it for seven years, but I left to go in the service in 1942.

S.J.: You were there from about 1936 to 1942. Where did you live?

Morgan: There was a home on it. It was a three bedroom and it was a good average ranch house. Today it wouldn't be considered a good house, but it was all right in those times.

S.J.: How would you compare it to the home you lived in in Oklahoma?

Morgan: The two houses that I remember in Oklahoma were better houses than this was, particularly the first one. It was a lot bigger. Size would be the only difference really. Construction was about the same. The climate isn't as severe here as it is there so you could be more comfortable in something like that in California than you could in Oklahoma. You don't get as much cold wind here. I'm sure there were hardships. I wouldn't want to go through it now because it would really be a lot harder on me now than it was then.

S.J.: But it sounds as though after you were on the ranch from about 1937 on when you had the tractor that things did get much better for you.

Morgan: They got better for us. For one thing, we had plenty of work. I know my half brother and half sister that was five years younger than me and my half brother seven years younger didn't have to work nearly as much as the rest of us did and I was glad for it.

S.J.: Did you know very many other kids your age who were in the same situation as you whose families were renting farms of that size and farming?

Morgan: Yes. I knew other kids.

S.J.: It was fairly common in that area?

Morgan: Yes, it was. If you came here during the Depression years and if you had any knowledge of farming, you could rent or lease land. It didn't take a lot of money to get started particularly if there was enough in the family to do most of the work which was our situation. We could rent a fairly good size farm and do all the work. Maybe right at the peak of the harvest you had to have help to pick 40 acres of grapes because they have to be gotten off in a certain length of time so you can make raisins and get them in before the rain starts.

S.J.: Some of the people that I've talked to that came from Oklahoma were not in as good a financial situation, had absolutely nothing when they got here, and found it impossible to rent or lease a farm so they were migrant workers who traveled from crop to crop.

Morgan: That's true they did. A lot of them were in that rut for a long time. I knew people like that who borrowed money to get to California to live.

They ended up with absolutely nothing. I know one family that started to California, and they heard that there was some work in southern Texas in the Rio Grande Valley. They had enough money to get there but not to California so they went there. That area is somewhat like the San Joaquin Valley only it's not as large but they have some oranges and grapefruit. They got a job hoeing the grass from around orange trees for a penny a tree and they still couldn't make enough to get to California, and they borrowed money from Dad to get the rest of the way. There were people that would come here who had no place to go and they would stay with us. We knew some relatives or some friends. We always took them in.

S.J.: Do you think you were aware then that you were much better off than most of the other people from Oklahoma?

Morgan: Yes, I had to be or else why would you be helping so many people? My dad was one of these people that anybody was welcome if they came along. If they were a stranger and it was time to eat, they came in and ate. I saw that happen in Oklahoma too. I saw that happen with a man and woman that was carrying one baby in their arms and leading one that was very small. She wasn't well and it was a hot day. Dad persuaded them to stay there for a couple of days until she got better able to travel. They were walking the country looking for something to do with no place to go. Things were different then. You trusted everybody until they proved otherwise. It isn't like now when you trust nobody until they prove themselves honest which seems to be the mood these days. I had trouble dealing with that for a long time. I still do I think. I'm pretty easy to be taken the first time.

S.J.: Do you think other people were as kind as your family was to those migrants? Were there other families who also took them in?

Morgan: Oh, yes, there were others. I know relatives who did that all around. There were probably people that didn't. There were scoundrels from back there too. Everybody has their different kinds of people you know. I can remember bread being five and six cents a loaf. I remember when it went to seven and then to eight [cents]. People were complaining. You could buy luncheon meat for fifteen or sixteen cents a pound. If they didn't have enough money to go and rent a house when they could rent one of those old houses for \$5 a month, then they had to be pretty hard up. Many of them were.

S.J.: Did you ever see any camps where they had pitched tents or built shacks under bridges?

Morgan: I saw a number of them. The biggest one I saw was at Tranquility on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley on the Russell Giffen Ranch. There must have been at least 400 to 500 people in that tent city. It was out in the gumbo-type mud in the wintertime. They picked the cotton by hand before they used the cotton picking machines. It would take them all winter long to get it picked and those people would set out there with nothing to do when it was raining. They couldn't

pick cotton and it was really a misery hole.

S.J.: Did you see that from afar or did you go up to the camp to see how they were actually living?

Morgan: I went over there one winter to pick cotton during my Christmas vacation and it started raining when we got over there. As a matter of fact, we only worked about a half a day. I stayed about a week in a tent. I went with two of my brothers, and we gave it up and came home because it didn't look like it was going to be dry enough that we could work. We went over to pick up some extra money.

S.J.: Could you describe the kinds of conditions that they were living in?

Morgan: Well, picture putting tents probably within four or five feet of each other and the tents in rows with maybe twenty foot avenues between them. This area must have covered at least five acres. They had outhouses built and the people got their water from an irrigation pump up at one corner of the area and you cooked and ate with kerosene stoves. If you had any heat at all it would have to have been a kerosene heater, a lot of them did have that. We didn't have a heater in that tent.

S.J.: In the ditch camp were you aware of any problems with health or disease because of the poor sanitation and the conditions these people were living in?

Morgan: I wasn't really aware of it. I know a lot of people were very unhappy with the situation at the time while I was over there because they weren't working. They had to be desperately in need or they wouldn't be there in the first place. Many of those people went on to steady jobs. This was a temporary thing for a lot of people but some of them never seemed to be able to pull out of it. They went from area to area. They'd go to Modesto and pick peaches when peaches were in season and when cotton picking started they'd go to Bakersfield where they'd start first and then go north as it progressed. Many of them do. I think it became a way of life or maybe they lost their will to do any better, I don't know.

S.J.: Did you think that many times they could have gotten themselves out of that situation?

Morgan: Possibly if they had known how. Some of those people were uneducated too and didn't know how to get out of the situation. I think that was part of the problem.

S.J.: Do you think they probably hadn't lived very well in Oklahoma?

Morgan: A lot of them didn't live very well in Oklahoma.

S.J.: They lived in shacks and tents in Oklahoma even then?

Morgan: I think a lot of those people were in that part of the country where the hunting and fishing was pretty good. I went back later to Oklahoma and visited some of my uncles who were still there and had an occasion to go down in the South Canadian River country at the time and observe some back woods people that were still there. There was a family with eight kids living in a one room log cabin with a dirt floor. They'd always lived that way. What do you do if you take some of those people and bring them to California? How do you bring them out of that sort of thing? You're not like to do it that same generation. You may a generation or two later through educating them.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

S.J.: Do you remember seeing any government camps that they had built for the migrant workers?

Morgan: I didn't see any. I didn't see the government build any in our area. I wasn't aware that the government built any in the 1930s. It might have been somewhere else, maybe around Bakersfield or Delano or someplace, but I don't remember any in Fresno. I remember in later years there were some migrant camps built but not during the 1930s.

S.J.: You mentioned that your father's health was bad for a time in 1935.

Morgan: Arthritis is what got him down for a long time, but he got on his feet again and did a lot of years of hard work after that.

S.J.: Was he under a doctor's care?

Morgan: Oh, yes, but there wasn't much the doctor could do for him.

S.J.: Was that a private doctor? He'd come to your home or you'd go to his office?

Morgan: Yes. Well, they made house calls in those days too.

S.J.: But your family was well off enough that they could afford to pay the doctor?

Morgan: Managed it somehow, yes.

S.J.: You mentioned that you didn't really seem to have any problems about being from Oklahoma except when it came time to go to school.

Morgan: Oh, the other kids would tease you and you'd have a fist fight or two now and then.

S.J.: So you did have a few fights.

Morgan: Oh yes, definitely. I had more fights when we first came out here.

About the time they'd say, "Okie," I'd put my fist in their mouth, but you learn. You get over that.

S.J.: What kinds of things would they say that would make you so angry?

Morgan: Just call you an Okie. I didn't like the word. I never heard of it until I came to California.

S.J.: There was something about the way they said it that you knew it was not a compliment.

Morgan: Oh yes, definitely. They'd gang up on a kid if they had a chance like any kids will do. Yes, I had quite a few fights for the first two or three years, but that soon passed. In high school I didn't have any problem. Oh, there were still comments made and there still is today, but I handled it in a different way. After a little while, you joke back. One favorite one was they'd asked if you knew why they didn't have any insane asylums in Oklahoma. "No, why?" "Well, they sent all the crazy people to California to teach school." So you learned to cope with it.

S.J.: Were there very many other children in your classes who were also what they would call Okies?

Morgan: Not at first. There was one boy in that school at the time we started. He welcomed us because he was really picked on. So there were three of us boys at the time in our family and not long afterward another family in the area came and there was another boy in that family. He was the biggest one in school which helped. From then on we didn't really have as many problems.

S.J.: Once you had a fight with them or stood up for yourselves they seemed to back off then?

Morgan: Yes, if we stood up for ourselves they'd back off naturally.

S.J.: Was there anything that sort of gave it away? For instance, did they tease you about your accent?

Morgan: The accent would certainly give you away, no question about it. We said, "Ya'll." Of course we learned to drop that pretty quick. I thought at the time that "you guys" was the favorite expression here of the kids then. I'd never heard it used before. They would tease us about saying, "Ya'll", and I'd say, "Well, it's better than naming everybody 'guy'". I had a brother name Guy.

S.J.: Were there any other things that they seemed to pick on?

Morgan: I don't know, but looking back I think a lot of what the kids picked up on they heard at home. There must have been some talk at home or they wouldn't have disliked the fact that the kids were from Oklahoma

or anywhere else. A lot of them didn't know where Oklahoma was. It was really foreign to them. It could have been an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean for all they knew. As a matter of fact this is not just a funny story, but this is a true fact. My dad had occasion to work with a Japanese man. They were helping a neighbor remove an old grape vineyard. In those days they'd cut them off under the roots, loaded them manually on vineyard wagons, hauled them out of the field in piles, and burned them to get rid of the stumps. Walking along there, the Japanese fellow whose English was pretty broken says to my dad, "How long you been out here from Oklahoma?" My dad said, "About six weeks." "I don't understand," he says, "I've been out here nearly 40 years. I don't speak as good English as you do!" Yes, it happened. My dad told that the rest of his life and laughed about it. He'd only been here six weeks and speaks pretty good English.

S.J.: So not all the ignorant people were from Oklahoma.

Morgan: Well, I think if you'd go back when the Korean War started, how many people knew precisely where Korea was? When the Vietnam War started, how many of us knew exactly where Vietnam was located? We might have known it was in Southeast Asia maybe, but a lot of people wouldn't have known that. They'd never been made familiar with it. Question a lot of people today and ask them the specific location of certain states, and I think a lot of people would be hard put to tell you exactly where it is.

S.J.: So after you got used to the teasing of the kids, you might chalk it up to ignorance? Did you think they just didn't know?

Morgan: Well at the time, being a boy that age, I took it pretty seriously. Of course being a large bunch of boys at home you're always fighting. It is nothing new to you. You grow up doing it. I think we had one teacher who was actually prejudiced. I'm sure she was. That made it kind of hard.

S.J.: Did she say things?

Morgan: Well, I think we got the blame in some cases when we didn't have it coming. I know we did. Because of that this stepbrother of mine and I got pretty ornery sometimes. We were pretty hard scrappers anyway. After we moved from there though I really never had any more problems at school.

S.J.: That was when you were at the dairy farm?

Morgan: Yes, at the Garfield School. At the first place we leased we went to the same school in the same neighborhood. After we came over into Madera County, it was a very small grammar school. Madera County wasn't too thickly settled at the time, and there was only eight kids in the whole school. By that time I was in the eighth grade, but I was still only thirteen years old.

S.J.: Did you work very much? Was this after school, weekends, vacations, or whenever you could?

Morgan: When we got home from school we had chores to do. We also had chores to do before we went to school. We worked on weekends, during vacations, all summer long, and we occasionally stayed out of school for a few days at a time when it was really critical. There were certain things to be done that he had to have help with. We'd take turns doing this.

S.J.: Did you consider that unreasonable or did you just say, "Well, this has to be done?"

Morgan: I didn't consider it unreasonable. I just did what I had to do.

S.J.: Did you think of it as a harder life than what you'd had in Oklahoma?

Morgan: No, not really. The day started at four o'clock in the morning and stopped when it got dark so there was no difference there. Four o'clock was getting up time.

S.J.: Since your father had a farm in Oklahoma and a farm in California, did you feel that your life was very much as it had been in Oklahoma?

Morgan: It was other than it was different at school here a little bit. Even then I would never have gone back to it by choice. A lot of people here thought they wanted to go back and they did. A lot of them would come back again. Very few of them went back and stayed. I never had any desire to want to go back again and live there. For one thing I like the climate here so much better. I think particularly for people who are poor or for a farmer for that matter, I think it's easier in a milder climate because your weather can be very severe, very changeable there. If you have to go out and do something out on the farm and there's a 40 mile an hour cold wind blowing, that's considerably different than doing it in the weather that we have here in the wintertime. Even though the Valley can be miserable in the fog, it's not quite that bad. You know you get used to a lot of things. You don't even know you're poor until you grow up and look back on it. I didn't know I was raised on soul food until I was 45 years old.

S.J.: So you and the rest of the members of your family were glad that you came here?

Morgan: I think so, generally. None of them ever went back and made it permanent. I think that speaks for itself there. If they would have thought it was better there, I'm sure they'd have gone back and stayed. I had one brother that went back and stayed for a while and had a good job there, but he came back again.

S.J.: Did you find you got along well and were treated well by the people you worked for in the small jobs?

Morgan: We got along very well because my dad was a person that would see that things got done the way they should be done. This is what I think got us by. We'd go back and work for the same people if they had anything to do. Like I told you once before, I think he was as honest as anybody could be. He worked at it and I think it came through when he talked to somebody. I think people pick up on this in a hurry. We had no problems with the people who employed us.

S.J.: Did you ever hear about migrants who did have problems who were possibly taken advantage of by their employers?

Morgan: Yes. I've heard of it, and in later years I saw it first hand with Mexican people in the Mexican labor camps. I heard a lot about that. The same thing went on with the people from eastern states when they came here. They were taken advantage of by a lot of ranchers.

S.J.: Did you ever hear anything about attempts to form unions to prevent things like this?

Morgan: The first thing I heard about a union attempt was in 1935 or 1936, but that never really got off the ground in the Clovis and Fresno area too well. There was a lot of talk about it.

S.J.: Do you remember any specifics like any names or anything or was this very general?

Morgan: I don't remember names in that particular instance. It was pretty general. There was some talk that the cotton picking machine was being developed at that time, but up to that point it had never been successful. I remember some talk about the farmers who were using that as a threat. If they unionized, the farmers would go to machines quicker and put a lot of people out of work. I remember them using that ploy. I'm surprised that it took so many years for the farm workers to organize. It took a lot of years. That was due a lot I think to the Mexican people coming in. There were the so-called wet backs. Then they had the programs when the [braceros] came who were the green card carriers.

S.J.: But you think the Okies were discriminated against much in the same way that you saw Mexicans being discriminated against?

Morgan: Well in some ways, yes. The people from Oklahoma were up until about World War II. When World War II started, things started getting better. I never did think we came out of the Depression through any of the programs they had. I think the war is what brought us out of the Depression. It also increased the debt an awful lot, but a lot of people had been out here from Oklahoma and were getting started enough particularly the ones that didn't go in the service. A lot of them made a lot of money during World War II. They were getting up in farming. They were able to pull themselves out of it. A lot of your wealthy ranchers later took advantage of some of the Mexican labor or

Okies. There's no use in going into names. I can name a few of them, but I won't. They know who they are.

S.J.: Do you remember any strikes during the late 1930s?

Morgan: We didn't have any in our area but I heard of strikes. I heard of the ones down by a ranch in the Tulare area.

S.J.: Many migrants probably were in a bad situation where they probably had no choice but to take some help until they could get on their feet. Did you know very many of the people who did?

Morgan: I didn't know too many of them personally. People didn't talk as much about that then either. They seemed to be more reluctant to go for something like that, but I did know some. I really don't believe that I ever knew anybody that got it that didn't really need it, and possibly there were some people who should have gotten some for the sake of their children maybe and didn't.

S.J.: Perhaps they were too proud to take it?

Morgan: Too proud to take it. It wasn't as easy to get as it is now or at least was for a while. Maybe it's getting harder now, I don't know.

S.J.: We talked about the hostility that some of the kids had in school. Did you find any problems or did you hear about other people having problems when they went to church or perhaps when they went into stores or other public places in town?

Morgan: No, not really. Wherever we went they seemed to be glad you were there if you had money to spend, really. We came here and worked and everybody had the opportunity to go to school except one brother. The oldest one who was still at home when we left was a junior in high school and he couldn't go back to school that year because my dad needed him. He was the only one out of the family that at least couldn't have finished high school. He couldn't help them beyond high school. If they dropped out of school before they graduated from high school, it was their own fault with the one exception. He never did go back. My dad was always sorry he had to do that but that year he needed him so bad.

S.J.: Have you read the book The Grapes of Wrath?

Morgan: Yes, I read it.

S.J.: Do you have any thoughts about that? Most people that I've talked to seem to think that it was a very large exaggeration of the way things were.

Morgan: I think it was an exaggeration as much as the Indian and white man movies. The Indian always loses with the exception of Custer. I guess they let them win there, but I think the only reason they let the Indians win then was that there wasn't anybody else left to tell about it. I don't think it was a good book at all. I think it was degrading to the

people. I think it was written to sell.

S.J.: Do you remember when it came out and the furor there was over it? It was taken off library shelves and there was quite a to-do over it.

S.J.: Yes, I remember a lot of people from Oklahoma were upset over it, but the same ones, a lot of us paid money to go see the movie. That's why it was done that way in the first place.

S.J.: Do you think it's possible that a lot of people who are not from Oklahoma or aren't aware of the migration to California might form their entire opinion of what Okies are from that book? They might just think that this is the way all of them are?

Morgan: Very possible.

S.J.: In that sense, Steinbeck really did a disservice.

Morgan: Well, people are too quick to categorize anyway. It's kind of like "they say, they say." Well, who is "they"? You hear this all the time. Sure "they say" that the Chinese do this and the Chinese do that. Well, there are so many different people that you just can't do this. You can't stereotype people. I find one thing interesting in California that we didn't have in Oklahoma. What sort of fascinated me from the very beginning was the different races of people. Most of them back there were either Indians or white people or a mixture. You didn't have too many in our part of the country so I wasn't used to Orientals at all. I'd never seen very many Italian people. I think that was one of the most difficult things for me to get used to was these different peoples having maybe some different customs. I'd never been around a lot of Mexican people. It fascinated me, and yet, it was kind of hard not to put them in categories too.

S.J.: Most people put the Okies definitely in categories.

Morgan: Yes, they did. Looking back on it I don't approve of it, but at least I understand it. I can see what those kids were thinking and why they would resent anybody. I think they picked it all up at home. I really believe that just about everything starts at home with the family and how they're brought up in their environment, the attitudes at home, and the support that they have at home on getting an education. If they're from an uneducated mother and father, they don't know if their child is doing well in school or not. How can they possibly know? They maybe don't know how to give them the support they need. A lot of them never come in even for an appointment for a conference and wouldn't keep it if they made one. They don't have the time or won't take the time that it takes to devote to a child to help them get an education. If they aren't educated how can they pick up the homework and see that the child has even done the homework. They don't know if it's done or not. If he says it's done, it's done. They have a feeling that as long as he's going to school it's all taken care of. They'll go out and work their fingers to the bone to educate the child. He may be going to

school, but he may not be getting much of an education. I determined that I would know what my children were doing in school and that I would keep up with it. I did and supported them in it.

S.J.: Could you tell me what your children are doing now?

Morgan: Well, my son's a hydroelectric engineer. He spent eleven years with Southern California Edison in the hydro division and then just last year went to work for the Army Corps of Engineers.

My daughter is married to a hydroengineer. He also went the route with Edison and two years ago went to the Army Corps of Engineers and now he's transferring. This weekend they're moving to Colorado.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 2

S.J.: Tell me how things changed for you and your family. When the war had started I wondered how that had changed your family?

Morgan: Well it changed things at home quite a bit because when my brother who was just older than me and my stepbrother went into the service it was getting hard to get help on the farm because there were so many men in the service. The feeling during World War II was such that I think people were more patriotic than they are at the present time and particularly during the Vietnam War or the Korean War. We'd been attacked, and everybody wanted in on the action.

S.J.: So that left a lot of work for you to do at home then.

Morgan: Yes, but I also went in and that left a bigger than ever shortage. By that time my half brother and half sister were big enough to do quite a bit, and they hired more help. Prices on things started rising, and they could afford to hire help. It was still a hard thing to keep the 160 acres going, and that's why in 1943 he moved south of Fresno and bought 40 acres and got by with them working it.

S.J.: Could you tell me what you did during the war?

Morgan: I was with military intelligence communications. I was chiefly intercepting the enemy's messages. Of course, it was coded. I was not in decoding just in the interception of it. That's mainly what I did.

S.J.: So you were here right on the California coast and part of the time overseas?

Morgan: I was on the California coast and then in the South Pacific.

S.J.: You received a special commendation for your work?

Morgan: Well, my group and I all received one. We didn't get that until just

before we got out of the service.

S.J.: When you came out of the service, you moved back to the Valley?

Morgan: When I came out of the service I moved back to Fresno. I had quite a few different jobs for a while. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I had a couple of office jobs. I worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad twice. I job hopped for about two years and then I settled down for a little bit and went into dry cleaning. Didn't stay in that too long because it didn't pay too well. In 1948 I started doing work for a company selling wholesale. I liked that. I stayed in that for thirteen years. I worked in Fresno for seven years, and they sent me to Merced as manager of that area. I managed for them for five years and then bought the company out and became a distributor in Merced and Mariposa Counties and a portion of Madera County. I got out of that in 1964. I didn't want to go back to inside work of any kind, not even a dry cleaning plant. Due to the dry cleaning experience, I decided there was enough carpet in homes that I could make it in carpet and furniture cleaning, and that's what I've been doing since 1964.

S.J.: You also mentioned that you built a couple of homes.

Morgan: Well this was in spare time. I'd hire a carpenter and help.

S.J.: Have things changed a great deal since the 1930s? Do you feel like this is totally another world?

Morgan: It's changed a great deal. Some things never change, but I think there's been a tremendous improvement in a lot of ways. I think sometimes we get carried away with progress. I think we're too quick to call things progress. I think some things are not as progressive as we'd like to think they are. Forever wanting something to be bigger and better and newer, I think we've gone a little overboard. We tend to maybe put too much stock in material possessions. A lot of people don't seem to be able to satisfy their wants. They've met their needs long ago, but they never can satisfy their wants. They want too much.

S.J.: So you think there's something in between this and poverty and there must be a happy medium somewhere?

Morgan: Well, I'm not sitting here and saying that you need poverty. I think we've gotten ourselves into a predicament where it comes to the way we distribute our wealth. I really don't know what the solutions are, and I don't think anybody else at the present time does. I think there's enough in this country for everybody but therein lies the problem. How do you distribute it? You just can't take it from somebody and give it to somebody else and have things come out even. I think they should never lose sight of the fact that if people do not have an incentive to do something they aren't going to go very far. If you give it to somebody long enough, they have no incentive and become

almost worthless to society. If you somehow can show a person that if they do so much they will profit by it but if they don't do it they will not profit, then they're more apt to do something. That's the very reason I think when you have a calamity people band together. You take a disaster of any kind like a great earthquake and people from all over are going to help them out because they're needed. People need to be needed. If you take somebody and put them on welfare and you keep them on welfare all their life and they raise a family on welfare and they turn around and do likewise, by about the third or fourth generation, what are they looking forward to? Welfare.

S.J.: We talked before about how you were very glad that you came to California. So California really does seem like home then?

Morgan: Oh, definitely. I'll put it this way: California is. I'm a Californian by choice. I certainly have no regrets of having been born in Oklahoma either. I've seen both ends of it. I would say to anybody, "If you have nothing, start out here not back there. You'll find it easier."

END OF INTERVIEW

Byrd Lonzo Morgan  
b. 1880, Marion County,  
Arkansas  
[His parents from Alabama]

Mittie Lee Layman  
b. 1885, Arkansas  
[Her parents from Indian Territory]

Byrd Monford Morgan  
b. 1924, Council Hill,  
Muskegee County,  
Oklahoma  
Education: high school  
Church: Baptist

m. 1943 → Florine  
b. 1926, Maud,  
Pottawatomie and  
Seminole Counties,  
Oklahoma

Timothy Edward Morgan  
b. 1949  
Hydro Electric Engineer

Linda Diane Leatherland  
b. 1944  
Homemaker

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