

This interview with Mr. Mills took place at his home on State Road 39 South on August 2, 1978. The interviewer was Jerrold Gustafson.

JG: You're going to tell a story?

TM: They lived among themselves, they didn't have the recreation that we have now and there were a lot of real characters around here. We had Lou Pratt, he was one of the first settlers in here, the Pratt family, Lou was born here. He was a big story teller and a great hunter - he was the first man to have a pump gun in this part of Indiana. Lou used to guide for Lew Wallace, on the marsh. He'd push him for maybe fifty cents a day, take 'im hunting. Back then there were literally thousands of prairie chickens and Lou told the story about how during that time this area was all bullgrass - all marsh - in fact grandmother used to hang out clothes to dry in this front yard where we're at from a boat. Anyway it was all marsh hay country, there were sidings here and at Thomaston and Hayville and in fall they'd load this hay in the boxcars and take it into Chicago. Lou told the story that he went down below here on what they call the Big Marsh and they'd had hay piles there and he said that was just covered with prairie chickens. He said he couldn't figure out how he was going to get the most so he took his gun and he bent it over his knee and he shot and that bullet made a circle, went around that stack, ha, he killed nine hundred and ninety nine chickens. And the guy he was tellin' that to said, "Well how come ya didn't kill a thousand?" And Lou said, "I wouldn't lie for one chicken." Ha ha ha ha. Then we had another man - that was Bunk Seagrave. He was in the Spanish-American War, he's almost a legend around here. He was over in Starke County, a very good friend of Governor Shricker's. He used to work here and he used to reside here. He, Bunk now, he was an old bachelor, alcoholic. He'd drink what we call rot-gut and sober up on rubbing alcohol or canned Heet. These are facts now, that's not fictitious. I can remember him. Anyway he was in the bank over at Knox, talking to former governor Shricker. Shricker then was the head cashier at the bank. Bunk said he was down at the Point, a place on the river we called the Point. It was right at the time when the conservation laws had become effective, and he was telling the former governor that he'd got the nicest, string of bass there that he'd ever seen. There was a gentleman standing to the side of 'im and he heard the conversation and the gentleman started a conversation with Bunk and he said, "Who are you?" And Bunk said, "Wait a minnit, I want to know who you are." And the fellow said, "I jest heard you talkin' about all them bass you caught there and I'm the conservation officer and now who are you?" And Bunk said, "I'm the biggest damn liar in Starke County!" Ha ha ha. I can remember Bunk real well - he used to come down to the old Willvale School at dinner time, sitting under an old maple tree and spin yarns by the dozens. He said once that when he was in the war, in the army that he was where the bullets was the thickest. And we asked him where that was and he said, "I was dead drunk hidin' under the ammunition wagon." Another time, he did work a little bit, he worked as an engineer on the Pennsylvania Railroad in La Crosse down here, somewhere or another the train had hit this expensive bull down there around La Crosse and the railroad company didn't want to settle for it. They took it into court and course Bunk had to go in to testify cause he was the engineer. Two or three had testified and it come to Bunk's time. Bunk got up and he was kinda' bashful. The judge told 'im, "I want you to tell us everything ya seen." We'll, Bunk kinda looked around. "Well, I'll tell ya," he said, "Judge, the first thing I seen was the bull a comin' outta the grass. The big grass along the side." He didn't say anymore, he hesitated. The judge said, "Yes, go ahead Bunk, what else did ya see?" "Well," says Bunk, "The next thing I seen was the grass a comin' outta the bull." Ha ha ha. Ha ha. Those

are things that happened down here. They were good people, because they had to survive. And they had to get along with themselves in order to survive, it wasn't like the north end of the county where there was more civilization. These people were real primitive down here and they had to make their own entertainment. That was it. In the fall and winter and early spring there was no way of getting to Knox. Knox was only nine mile from here, but they couldn't get there because of the high water 'n the Kankakee River. There was Austin's Landing, just a little ways from here, there used to be a man who had a steamboat that ferried across there. But of course in the winter and spring when the water was so high he wouldn't run, but in the summer time he would. There's a lot of things that happened here. A lot of this area was settled by Germans, prior to World War One. There used to be a lot of hunters come in here, see they had a siding out here in front of our horse. They'd push in, like in Chicago or in Pittsburgh these wealthy fellows would get a gun club together and they would rent a passenger car and they'd push it off out here on a siding. North of us here a half a mile is what we call Bellemore Slough, a great hunting spot in there. Then instead of having blinds, they would take a barrel or tub and sink it, anchor it down, dip the water out of it and they'd get down into that and that's how they'd hunt, see. Just settin' there. Well, they'd get to feudin', shootin' at one another there one day. And a fellow by the name of Tarble outta Chicago he'd come out here and make fun of all the people here and he was back there hunting and I don't know, somebody was mad at 'im, anyway, they shot and the bullet went right through the barrel in front of 'im. And that was the last anyone seen of Tarble around here. He never showed up after that. Those things went on down here.

JG: I've heard those people described as "river rats"...

TM: Yes, yah. We had some people - two families by the name of Brown and McKenna that owned the Brown and McKenna restaurant in Chicago prior to the depression. And they owned dairy farms out here half a mile north. They'd ride the trains out here to the Willvale Station and get off. When they'd go back they'd yell out and call my folks and the other folks that lived here "River rats!" and "Mossbacks!" But come the depression they lost their restaurant in Chicago, they both moved out here to the farm and joined us river rats. I guess it's true, sometimes I feel like I've wallowed around out here in the water so long I feel like I've got webs between ma toes, it don't make a great deal of difference. Ha ha. Yep. You must remember, it used to be in the spring this area was under water for, oh heavens, this was all flood area. When my greatgrandparents settled here, they settled on a little knoll, built a home and if they farmed an acre there around them out of 365 acres they were lucky.

JG: How did Big Skunk Hill get its name?

TM: Big Skunk Hill got the name, course during the summer time the water would go down and it gave the wild animals a chance to multiply and then when the water began to raise in the fall and the winter time they'd go to the hill, that was the only place they could survive because of flood conditions and there would be huge numbers of skunks that would hibernate on that hill during the winter time cause they were driven in by the water. And that's how it got the name Big Skunk Hill. That's where they stayed for the winter. That's the reason we've got those two hills named Big Skunk and Little Skunk Hill. Letchford Knob, that was a pioneer that had built just a little shanty thing there and that was a way of telling where that area was. See, most of these areas down in here had names like this, like Grandma's Bayou, Austin's Landing, the Burnout,

Jackson Ridge, Lone Tree, the Big Marsh, White Oak, Hickory, Holiday, all these areas you could in conversation with the people tell where you was at that way. The Big Marsh, that was down here south at Highway 8 and just west of the Kankakee Game Area. Some a my relatives went down there once and fell through the ice and perished, they froze to death before they could be got out to high ground.

JG: What kind of game animals were down here?

TM: Primarily deer, primarily deer. Pigeon. Wild pigeon. Some partridge, prairie chicken. Course when you say wild animals - muskrats, there were millions of muskrats down in here. Frogs. Grandfather used to hunt frogs, he'd stop a train out here and ship 'em in to Chicago by train to the taverns and saloons in Chicago.

JG: How wouldja catch frogs?

TM: Oh, use a net or your hands or take a hook and line and put a piece of red material right above the hook and swing it out over the frog and he'll strike at that red material and of course swallows the hook at the same time. Yah. Deer was their main meat food. My greatgrandfather killed twenty-one deer here one winter, on this farm. That's the way they fed their family through deer. Deer meat. I've got the rifle - that's it right back there in the corner.

JG: That's amazing.

TM: Game was abundant, ducks, geese, sandhill crane, I've heard Grandad tell about eating sandhill crane in the spring when they migrate through here. ,Prairie chickens. Wild pigeons, my grandfather tells about how wild pigeons used to come through here, migrate through, and they would used to have to take sticks as a kid, when they were home from school and beat them together to keep them off the corn, keep them from eatin' that corn. The wild pigeons were that thick. So there was food as far as meat. It was abundant. Fish - all kinds, northern. The old Germans, the old settlers, used to like dogfish so well. And it was nothing to get twenty, thirty or forty dogfish in two hours. Some of 'em weigh eight, nine pounds. The old Germans loved dogfish. There were northern here, too, plenty of northern. Walleye. Bluegill. Croppy. Yella'-belly-bluehead. Plenty of frogs, plenty of turtles, everything like that.

JG: The guides that took the hunters out, did they use a boat?

TM: Oh yes, they'd take a boat. A ord'nary rowboat, uh, now they didn't use oars like we use today. They had a pushpaddle. A pushpaddle was about twelve foot long, its built like an oar. They'd be two men in a boat, the guide and the hunter, the boat would be all handmade. They would, course the guide would know, the time of the year would determine where they would hunt, mallards come in, the blue bill come in, the wood duck come in, all of 'em have got a different flight time through here. And the guides would know where to take these hunters. They pushed, they had no motors, there was no motors a'tall then. It was all pushpaddle off the bottom. The paddle would go down into the mud and they pushed off that. There were three hunting clubs here. One of the clubhouses is still here, thats just south of the railroad track. One was the Pittsburgh Gun Club and one, I think, was the Chicago Gun Club. One is still here, it is

inhabited, course they've done a little remodeling on it. I can remember being there as a kid the upstairs was all lined with mahogany. And they had one big room up there full of gun cabinets made of mahogany. A lot of these gun clubs would come in here they'd rent a passenger coach, I don't know how much it would cost 'em, but they'd come in here and they had the railroad company put 'em in on a siding for a week, two weeks and maybe ten or fifteen men would sleep in there. Now they boarded here, my grandmother boarded them, cooked for them here. These gun clubs were strictly hunting, they didn't have no entertainment, you couldn't get entertainment in here. No way. No way could you get entertainment in here. When they come in you couldn't get out to Knox and possibly you couldn't get out to the north, except by boat. There was no way to bring in chorus girls or anything like that.

JG: They probably wouldn't want to come here anyway.

TM: Nooooo way! Heavens no.

JG: I've heard some talk of bootlegging down here...

TM: Uh, there was a lot of bootlegging, not in this particular area. The bootlegging, most of that took place around English Lake. That was a big bootlegging outfit. They did have at one time, at this one clubhouse they were gonna start a big still. They brought in a truckload of sugar, but the Federal Revenue men caught 'em and put 'em outta business. There was a big bootlegging outfit up by Davis, just across from the Davis church - Perry's Camp. The old Yellowstone Trail used to come through there and cross the Kankakee River and they had this camp just to the south side by the Kankakee River, that used to be a bootlegging place. But basically the bootlegging was out north and east of Knox. I, ha, I can tell ya a story about that. When I was in high school, course you couldn't buy whiskey, but anyway, three of us young fellows went over there. You could put fifteen or twenty cents on a stump and sound your car horn and be gone fer ten or fifteen minutes and come back there'd be a quart of "White Mule" on the stump.

JG: "White Mule?"

TM: We called it "White Mule," anyway we done that and we's goin' over to Valporaiso to go rollerskating and, ha, we got over to the intersection of this county road and 30 where it turns to go to Valpo and of course then we had an old 1927 truck that we was ridin' in and of course the headlights on it wasn't much better than two candles. Well, anyway, right there in the middle of the road was a great big black bear standin' right straight up. We didn't know wether it was the "White Mule" or if it was really a bear. We turned around and went back to Hanna to Fred Lute's garage. They used to have these travelling shows, the Chataqua, they'd go around selling patent medicines at these little towns, well anyway they'd had this bear and movin' thru there they had a wreck and the bear'd got outta his cage. Ha ha. Oh ya. The bootlegging mostly took place in what we call Redbrush. There was bootlegging around here. At Davis, at English Lake. They used to have dances down there, and never did they have a dance on Saturday night that everybody was drunk and one fellow had bought a brand new Model T Ford. He went down there, they'd just dredged the river and the water was deep, he'd parked the car close to there, and there was no bank close to the edge, them guys got drunk and pushed that brand new car right into the Kankakee River. Ha ha. Then there was the Holiday School down the river, at least once a month

them guys would get drunk and bust every cotton pickin' window in that place, you know throw stones through the windows. Stumps. Anything handy.

JG: Did they make that whiskey to sell, or to drink around here?

TM: Some of 'em would. They'd sell. But not too much. They couldn't keep up with local trade. Ha ha. Some of 'em whenever they had any money was always out on a drunk. Like the Doms family. Thats a German name, but we always called them the Dumbs family. The old dad, he used to cut wood by the river bank and haul it into Hanna and sell it. That was a way to make a little money. He'd get teed up and come home and argue with his wife. One time she got on him about not doin' something she wanted him to and he went and got the shotgun and shot the chairlegs right out from under her. Ha. Thats a fact, shot the chairlegs right out from under her. Another time I heard he was in a saloon over at Hanna. And a fellow was standin' there next to him, bet 'im ten dollars he couldn't drink a fifth of whiskey without takin' a breath. Well, he thought about it, finally decided, no, he wouldn't take the bet. Pretty soon he left, he was gone a while and then came back in. He said to the fella, the man'd made 'im the bet, "I'll take that bet now. I was just out in the parking lot and I practiced up a bit. I drank a whole fifth without a takin' a breath. I'll take that bet now." Ha ha ha. Ha ha. They lived in an old log house. Humpy was his oldest son and he slept in a little room they had over the kitchen. One time the dad was yellin' at Humpy to get up and Humpy didn't get up so finally the old dad takes a shotgun and fires up through the ceiling. Well, Humpy was just gettin' up, puttin' his shoes on and the bullets come up and just tore away the whole bottom, the whole sole of his shoe. Ha haha haha haha.

JG: You expect me to believe that?

TM: This is true! Thats a fact! These are true stories, yessir, they are! Those are actual facts. I can't remember, though, what that old boy's name was. Billy. Billy Doms. Yep.

JG: What over the years has impressed you most about this area?

TM: My favorite thing about this country is its just the best damn place to live. Thats all I can say. We've got a lot of good people around here. If anybody gets sick they're there to help ya. I've traveled, we've traveled, Doris and I, quite a little bit, and this is one of the best places I know of. We may not be the richest, but I'll tell you - we have a lot of fun. Ha ha ha. Yep.