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C O N T E N T S

This book contains the following order of inter-views:

George Yirrell

Book 16

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V. 16

This is George Yirrell at Emerald Ave. & 44th Street -- Mr. Yirrell used to work in the Chicago Union Stockyards.

Q. O.K. now, why don't you tell me some of the stories about when you started out there. You were a young boy?

A. Yes I was a young boy, 15 years old.

Q. What year would that have been?

A. 1910, I'm 75 years old now.

Q. You're living on Social Security?

A. I'm living at it.

Q. It's pretty hard to do. I wonder if you will tell me what it was like to work in the Stockyards. What was your first job there?

A. I worked with the Stockyard Co. We used to unload the cattle and the livestock that would come in there. In the morning we would start at 6 o'clock and we worked until, 6 o'clock at night, and we worked 5 days a week, and that's what you called steady time and we got \$40.00 a month for them hours.

Q. Well that's almost 12 hours a day, isn't it?

A. How many hours did you say.

Q. 12 hours a day times 5 = 60 hours a week.

A. And we got \$40.00 a month.

Q. And you didn't have things like overtime pay and all those thing.

A. No and there was no fringe benefits either, if that's what you're referring to.

Q. That's what I'm referring to. You said that later you went to work for Armour & Co.

A. I got in a fight ovey there in the hog house with a commission man and I guess I gave him the works and he told me he would get my job from me and I told him you can't, it's not too good of a job anyway. So the Stockyard Company fired me for fighting.

Q. Then what happened?

A. It wasn't much of a fight. He was a whole lot older than I was, and I was young and full of vinegar. So then I went to work for Armour & Co. I got \$17.50 a week and I didn't have to start until 7 o'clock in the morning.

Q. That made it a lot better job?

A. Yes and then we worked until we got through and then as the time went on we kept getting a raise and then along come World War II and we was busy all the time, 24 hours a day. Armour & Co. killed 250 cattle an hour, every hour on the hour for 10 hours, that's 2500 cattle. Then they closed down the killing floor, cleaned the place up, wash it all

up, and start. it all over again. So they killed 10 hours at night, so that was 5,000 cattle a day Armour killed and dressed and then they done that 6 days a week, every week!

Q. your job was to drive cattle from the Stockyard over?

A. We used to pick the cattle up and lot them, each lot had to be kept separate, according to the price and according to the quality of the cattle and we'd take them to the packinghouse and they would proceed to kill them and dress them. We never called it the "packinghouse," we just called it the house because that's where you had to go. So I was there, worked for Armour.

Q. Did you see a great many changes take place over the years?

A. Well, when I was there, there was no trucks brought any livestock in. Everything came in by train. I left there on a Saturday before Labor Day in 1920.

Q. That was your last time you worked for Armour?

A. That was the last time I worked in the yards. And I wasn't in the stockyards then until after the fire. The fire was the 19th day of May, 1934, and I never was in the yards all that time. In the meantime, I worked downtown at something else. But when I was there we used to get 125,000 hogs in a day and I think the biggest run of cattle was 49,000 and some odd hundred in one day, and I don't know how many sheep they got. They got a lot of sheeps.

Q. It must be pretty hard to work out there in the out of doors in all kinds of weather?

A. Well, you get used to it. You were dressed for it and in the rainy season you had well what they called fishskins and oil skin jackets and oil skin trousers. You got used to it. The work wasn't too hard, it was just steady. You know, they killed 250 cattle an hour and you had to keep the place supplied with live cattle because otherwise they would run out of cattle, and I don't know what they paid the butchers, I don't know. They got pretty good money, not anything like what they get nowadays.

Q. Well you must have been there during the time of the great big organizing campaign to build the union in 1919.

A. They started it, but it wasn't organized when I 'was there. Even the Stockyard didn't have no union and we didn't have no union, and the packers was very much against unions because they thought it would interfere with their bank roll and they didn't want that. But like my father always said "it wasn't a good paying job but it was steady," as he worked there for 45 years. My brother was there before me and I worked for 10 years and me of my nephews was there for 27 years, so all together, I guess, we put in about 100 years working for Armour & CO. between the whole family. And now

after 105 years, the place is going out of business.

Q. Right!

A. It don't seem possible, but it is.

Q. That's what has brought me here to your house. The fact is that they are going to close down and go out of business. It's sort of like an end of an era for Chicago.

A. Like the end of a century, you might say. That Stockyard Company opened up on Christmas Day, 1965, so Christmas Day, they were there 105 years.

Q. Do you remember how this neighborhood here was -- pretty nearly all of them working for the packinghouse and stockyard. Wouldn't that be so?

A. Lot of these commission men lived up here. G. F. Swift lived up on 45th Street.

Q. Do you know the exact house that he lived in? Is it still there?

A. Well, a man by the name of Ron Lafferty bought it and made it into a big apartment building on the west side of Emerald Ave. and there's a big yellow six flat on the corner of 45th Street and this is next door to it. This house belonged to a widow, her husband was a commission man in the Yards.

Q. You mean this one here that you're in?

A. Yes, his name was Mr. Hastings.

- Q. Let me get this nailed down about that Swift house. It was on the west side of Emerald, there's a yellow six flat on the corner and this house is next door, north of it.
- A. That was G. F. Swift's old home.
- Q. G. F. Swift, is he the one that started it, that started the company?
- A. Yes, and he's the one that instigated this Methodist Church over here. They almost called it Swift's Church. He donated money for it and I guess helped build it, and there was a lot of Irish and lots of Germans around here.
- Q. They say there was a Morris house here too! I've been told. that there was a house that belonged to the Morris family?
- A. Well if there was, it escaped me. I didn't know about it.
- Q. I'm happy enough to know about this one.
- A. Nelson Morris son married one of Swift's daughters. His name was Eddy Morris. He married Helen Swift. So that kind of kept the packing business in the family. And then Armour bought Nelson Morris out, but business was good on Halsted Street and the men were hard workers, they were hard drinkers, and they played the horses, they gambled. They'd wait for for pay day and everybody had a good time and then they'd go back to work again.
- Q. Did the cattlemen come in from the country with their stock?

A. Yes, they land right in free. They rode in the caboose with the cattle and they'd be there when they got unloaded and then they were assigned to different commission firms and the commission men had men down to --what they call -- the receiving end at the north end of the yards. They unloaded there and signed with the general commission firms they were assigned to, and then they were brought up to the yards. The steers were sold by the Steers Salesman, and the cows were sold by the Cows Salesman and the bulls were sold by the Bulls Salesman and the calves were sold by the Calves Salesman. That was a pretty well organized outfit because they knew what they were doing and they done it and they done it well. And I don't think anybody ever lost a dollar, they always got paid for their stuff and you got paid right then, not next week or not in thirty days, but you got paid that day because the standing order was over there. If you bought anything, it had to be paid for the next day, within 24 hours. And I never heard of anybody losing anything, in the line of not getting paid for their merchandise. And then there was a big horse market over there, you know, during the war. The French Government and the British Government, they were always here buying horses and they had men that do nothing else, but break the horses to ride, so that they

could ride them when they took them away to the service, and they paid the men big money just to break the horses.

Q. Was that after the first World War or the second one?

A. That was the second World War because I was working in the yards at that time. There was a whole two block of sales tables, different commission firms that done nothing but sold horses and mules.

Q. Well, you said you went to work there in 1910?

A. That's right! That's World War I, I was there, sure.

Q. You're right.

A. No, I was long gone when World War II came.

Q. Yes, yes.

A. And they took my brother in the service and he went overseas and I got hurt over there in the yards and I was in the hospital and my number came up so they sent the notice here for me to report and then the Lieutenant came here looking for me. My mother told him I was in the hospital, so he came to the hospital and wanted to know when I was going to report for duty and I said, I don't know. I think you will have to see the doctor, because the way I feel I don't think I will make it for awhile. I was laid up for 3 months. By the time I got better, the war was over so that's one reason I didn't get to go to the war. It wasn't because they didn't call me, they called me all right.

Q. How did you get hurt?

A. I was running a string of cattle at night up on the dock and we had about 4 or 5 men, maybe we had 15 bunches of cattle, you keep moving them up, moving them up, and then you keep dropping back. I went back to get that last load and someone left the gate open, one of the animals ran the other way and I ran after her, it was a heifer, and I tripped over a wire frozed in the ground and I got a Rupture out of it. Nowadays, they call it a Hernia, but in them days they called it a Rupture. When I came home and told my father what happened, he looked at me and said you're in a bad way, so we got the doctor here and they took me to the hospital. That next morning I was operated on.

Q. Did the company take care of your bill?

A. They only paid my hospital bill and paid my wages all the time I was off. I was off for 3 months. Yes, the company paid me well. My father got retired in 1930 and in May, 1930, he drew a pension until he died, April, 1948. He got his check every month from Armour & Co. I don't know how much he got but he always had enough.

Q. Do you remember the strike that was over there in 1921?

A. Well I wasn't there in 1921, I was long gone. I was working downtown.

Q. What did you find to do there?

A. I had a truck and I was working for a firm on North Michigan Avenue, doing the trucking for them. I was there until the 4th day of May, 1929, and then my mother died in 1930 and I've been running this rooming house since then, running at it anyway. Like my father said, "it ain't too much money in it but it's steady work".

Q. O.K. well, I'm pleased to have had this opportunity to talk with you Mr. Young.

A. The name is Yirrell.

Q. Well, now, tell me that's no Irish name.

A. That's an English name.

Q. You didn't feel you were outnumbered among all these Irishmen did you?

A. Well my mother was Irish. My mothers name was Margaret O'Neal, my father's mother was Irish, her name was Elizabeth Mullin and she came from Schlogo, Ireland. Well I got along with the Irish, I never had any trouble with them. They're all pretty good fighters.

Q. Well, I guess you must have been a fighter too?

- A. Well, I got licked several times. I didn't win them all. My brother used to say to my mother "when the ambulance comes up and finds out what hospital you want to take him to, don't bother looking, it'll be him". My mother said why? My brother replied because he fights with everybody. My brother always called me the "kid" because he was 7 years older than me. My mother would always ask my bother if I had a black eye today, and my brother would say "he will before the day is over". I had a black eye once a week, that was part of my trade.
- Q. OK, then we'll call it a day.