

**UNION CHURCH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW OF WILSON EVANS
RECORDED BY TRUMAN AND JOYCE FIELDS
DECEMBER 8, 2000**

Begin UC-CT-002-001

Q: Good morning, Wilson. How are you doing today?

A: Good morning. I'm just rolling right along on my wheelchair, getting along just fine, gaining weight all the time.

Q: You're looking good. What is your address here, Wilson?

A: My address is 4501 Springdale Road, Apartment 225, Louisville, Kentucky 40241-6124.

Q: All right, thank you. And your date of birth, Wilson?

A: My date of birth was March the first, 1908, the fourth of seven children. I was right in the middle of seven children and I was the fourth one.

Q: That was in Virginia, wasn't it?

A: In Virginia, Lee County, Virginia.

Q: Family members involved with Union Church.

A: My wife, Ellen Best Evans, was a member of Union Church from the date of her birth until her death.

Q: What was your involvement with Union Church, Wilson?

A: I became a member of Union Church in my first year in Berea. I was not a member of any church back in the hills of Virginia. But I did become a member of Union Church in my first year here in Berea.

Q: And that was 1927?

A: 19 and 24-25.

Q: 1924-25. OK.

A: My first year in Berea.

Q: OK. What got you to come to Union Church at that time? Were you required to go to church?

A: I came to Union Church because all the students at Berea College were required to attend some church and Union Church was just across the road from where I lived so I attended Union Church as most of the students that I lived with, came to Union Church.

Q: Do you remember who the minister was then?

A: The minister at that time was Earl Ziegler, if I remember correctly.

Q: What do you remember about him?

A: I remember he had ... he was a real good speaker. He was very friendly. He had two beautiful daughters.

Q: Oh, that's why you went to church there!

A: That's not the reason but ... All of us were always welcome to his home. It was that close to Union Church.

Q: Truly nice man

A: Friendly, very friendly. Seemed to know everybody, and everybody enjoyed him.

Q: What was your connection with Berea College at that time?

A: My connection with Berea College? I was a junior in the Academy. The second ... Back in my home we had nothing that I could go to beyond the tenth grade so I came here to Berea Academy because I had an uncle that had once been to Berea College and remembered the place. No one else in my area had ever been to Berea College. He was the only one that encouraged me to come to Berea. And I entered the eleventh grade in the Academy.

Q: Did Berea College and Union Church, were they pretty close then? Pretty closely connected, the college and the church.

A: They were as close so that the college required all students to attend some church. They didn't specify what church, but all of us were required to attend a church on Sunday. So Union Church was usually filled with students.

Q: Is that right—a big church, too. How would you describe the connection now with the college and the church?

A: I don't think it's different than any other church in town. We encourage students and we are urged to invite them to come and be members of the church. But I think the Baptists and the Methodist, the Christians work harder to get them than perhaps Union Church does. I don't know.

Q: Union Church had black and white students then, of course.

A: Yes.

Q: Were there any foreign students then?

A: I don't remember any in my class in the academy. There were some in college, I know. I don't know about the academy.

Q: Was your life or your values changed because you became a member... when you became a member of Union Church?

A: Well, I guess anyone's life change when they move away from home and live in a dormitory and eat in boarding hall with a lot of other young people.

Q: We all change when we do that.

A: We do change. We have to change to get along with people.

Q: Sure. What was the church like then? What were some of the issues, theological or political or social?

A: To tell you the truth at that age and time I don't draw about social issues and so forth and I can't remember anything of that nature.

Q: But they did have —anyone could go to Union Church?

A: Anyone was . . . , any color, any creed. And they could come and enter at Union Church without . . . just by letter and be a member. Continue to be a member there and retain their membership at home.

Q: They baptized people in the church--at Union Church at that time, didn't they?

A: They baptized me.

Q: Is that right?

A: I was . . . in the little bapistry underneath the pulpit. Dr. Hatcher, a professor of Sociology, I believe, had baptized me along with four other young students. I remember very well that.

Q: Sunday morning. And you were a teenager?

A: Sunday morning and the crowd out there. The little door opened and we waded in.

Q: Did they sing "Shall We Gather at the River?" or do you remember?

A: No, I don't remember that.

Q: Now Ellen Best was a charter member of that church, wasn't she?

A: She was brought as a baby into the church and whatever they do to children. She received some kind of . . . (baptism?) baptism or something. I don't know what it was. But she became a member of the church in her first year and continued to be a member until her death.

Q: Do you remember many of the pastors? Some of them had some problems evidently in the church. Do you remember much about that?

A: I don't remember much about that. I just remember two or three of them. I just don't remember problems they had or what.

Q: You remember Scotty Cowan, I'll bet.

A: Scotty Cowan I remember well.

Q: He's a favorite of everyone.

A: Everybody likes Scotty Cowan.

Q: Well, what implication do Fee's main message have for the church today – John G. Fee?

A: Well, I think it's the same message it always had. Interracial education. Everybody, every individual is an individual and should be respected as such, regardless of color, race or creed. I think that's . . .

Q: I think that's what churches should teach. What special qualities, strengths or weaknesses does Union Church have for a minister. For today. Coming into Union Church, what kind of minister should they have?

A: I could not answer that.

Q: Yah. They have a good minister right now.

A: Yah, They have a good one. We got some that weren't very good.

Q: Is that right? Do you remember any of those? Not right off?

A: I wouldn't . . .

Q: You don't want to comment on that?

A: No.

Q: Has the church changed over the years? How should it change to serve the world better today and its people?

A: For local people, I don't believe it has changed so much. But as far as students attending, it has changed a great deal. There are not many Really, not many students attending Union Church as ... Not as many as go to Methodists and Baptists and Christian churches. And I think, I think they make a greater effort to get them than Union Church does.

Q: I know they have big signs up and so forth. Is there anything the church has abandoned from our history that we ought to repeat in today's congregation and so forth? Anything that you remember that the church has abandoned that we should put back or have for today? Maybe the baptism, for instance?

A: They have discontinued the baptism in the water. That was discontinued not too long after I had mine. They sprinkle them now.

Q: What year were you baptized, do you remember?

A: 192 ... The Spring of 19 and 25.

Q: And pretty soon after that they quite having the baptisms.

A: I don't know how soon.

Q: Yah, a few years. Now I remember when we were in college I remember having the doors open and somebody was baptized. That was in the late 50's, early 60's. That was '59-'60.

A: Still were having some then. I don't know how long ...

Q: I heard one time that they were getting it ready and it leaked. There was water all over the place and they quite doing that. What do you remember about war/anti-war activities -- World War II or Korea or Vietnam? Did the church do anything special for any of those particular wars.

A: I don't remember anything special.

Q: What was the congregation like as the make-up changed and so forth? In other words, you said you nearly filled the church when you were a student.

A: The church became ... when students were no longer required to go, the number of attendance fell way down. No longer were they upstairs, fill the upstairs and downstairs both. The downstairs never was full normally. Lots of vacant seats.

Q: I remember coming to Union Church in 1950 and they had those "Hallelujah" choruses up there. Messiah sings. Probably 200 people singing. And the place was filled. So it's not like that anymore.

A: Right. Cause it was filled that way when students were required to go and a lot of them came there -- filled the church up.

Q: Do you remember anything about integration or desegregation when the church was changing from the Day – I guess when the black students came back in about 1950 or '52. Remember any action Union Church had about that?

A: I don't remember any action the church had. I remember that my son Bill suggested that he might go in the dormitory and live with a foreign black student just for the experience. But he didn't do it. Cause he thought about doing it. There's some feeling that we needed to encourage them to come to church. And I think he did get a number of them to come to church.

Q: Did you ever leave the church, Wilson?

A: I was away for periods of three or four years.

Q: Graduate work and teaching someplace. But you've been a member of Union Church since the '20's.

A: Since I've been ... I was away working in education down in Alabama for three years and I was teaching out in the Berea public schools for three years and I was away in graduate study but I never did take my membership away from Union Church.

Q: You were never serious about leaving Union Church. And your family—all of your three children.

A: No. They all attended Union Church.

Q: What has been the most important part or parts of Union Church and the Union Church experience for you?

A: I think the fellowship with my friends, most of my good friends were members of Union Church and working together on church projects.

Q: Were you married in Union Church, Wilson?

A: I was married in Union Church, yes.

Q: Is that right? What year would that have been?

A: 19 and 2 ... 19 and 31. Right up there on the wall is the picture of our wedding.

Q: It sure is. The wedding party. 316 Estill Street is where that picture was taken. Remember the minister back then? It's pretty hard to go back that far.

A: President Hutchins married us. We asked him to marry us, and he did.

Q: It was just after you graduated, wasn't it?

A: One year after we graduated. We both graduated in '30. We were married in '31 and had our son in '32.

Q: That's the year I was born. What's been a most important part or parts of the church for you.

A: I think just the fellowship. I did some work in Union Church--volunteer work—and I think doing things with friends of mine who were also church members ... and we had town functions and we served them in Union Church—

served breakfast, election breakfast, for example. We would always serve a breakfast then.

Q: They did that just a few years back. John King was down there—you and John King. What parts of Union Church heritage do you think we should never give up?

A: I think the racial issue is ... we just accept all people regardless of their race or color. They need an education and want to come to Berea, we would not turn them down because of color or nationality.

Q: Or denomination?

A: Or denomination. Accept people ...

Q: Any country?

A: Any country.

Q: Do you remember, can you recall, some of the principle sayings or some of the people that have really been important to the church? Some of the people who were very significant to Union Church. Like you mentioned Scotty Cowan, for instance.

A: (Paused. No response)

Q: The Hutchins family? That's who married you—Mr. Hutchins.

A: And some of the teachers of Berea College always attended Union Church.

Q: You wife, your family

A: (Laughed) Well, my wife's father and mother always insisted on sitting up at the side of the pulpit and insisted their daughters sit with them. Their daughters wanted to go and sit with their friends in college, but their parents insisted they sit over there where they could see and be seen.

Q: That's not a bad practice. So you sat up front a few times with them, I'll bet.

A: No.

Q: Is that right?

A: I didn't ... I never had a date with Ellen. I used to visit the Best home often. People who (hesitate) This memory of mine

Q: Do you have pictures or an old church Bible or other memories of Union Church history? Could you describe the Bible you just showed us-- the one over there?

A: That had nothing to do with Union Church. That Bible is I had ... given to ... I had a Bible class in the Academy. And that Bible was presented to me as a best student in the class—something to that effect.

Q: I have the Bible in my hand now and it says, "Presented to Wilson Evans for excellence in Bible study during 1924 and '25." It's signed by your instructor was Mr.?

A: W.W. Fisher—Kuls W. Fisher. He was the teacher in the Academy.

Q: Mr. Fisher. And this is ...

A: D.C. Schumacher. He was the editor of the paper and had some office, I don't know what it was.

Q: Well, isn't that something. And you have pictures, of course, of your wedding there. That's a lot of people from Union Church come to the wedding.

A: Yah. We had a big crowd at the church.

Q: Judy Stammer was in your wedding party, wasn't she?

A: Beg pardon.

Q: Judy Stammer?

A: Judy Stammer and ...

Q: Was in the wedding?

A: I don't believe you'd know any of the rest of them. I have their names up here.

Q: When the Second World War started, Wilson, did Union Church have a part in that ...several people go from Union Church to the service? I think you and probably Mr. Gunkler.

A: Some of us went. We didn't go as a party; we just went individually. Yes, there were several of us went. And I was one of five brothers and all of us were in military service—different branches. But we were all in the service at the same time. Several of the teachers here, I think, went. I know some that went. No organization of getting people to go.

(Tape was turned off and then restarted at a later time. Response to unknown question is where taped conversation continues.)

A: Yes. I was able to get on a train at Pennington Gap, Virginia, and come down to Corbin and on up to Berea and be unloaded at the depot down there. Luckily somebody was there to help me with my bag. It was midnight.

Q: Is that right?

A: And got me to a dormitory. And I was placed in a little cabin right next to Putnam Hall. I was in there with a student named Bobby Harlow. He was new at Berea also. He was, I thought, the noisiest person I had ever seen. He had lot of clothes and a lot of shoes, a big talker. Made me feel like I was a middit. (Laugh)

Q: What happened to him? He go on through school?

A: He went on through school and was my best man at my wedding.

Q: Oh, is that right? Is he still living?

A: He's still ... No, he died ten years ago. His daughter lives down in Florida now. She made me promise to send her copies of the book about Bobby Harlow and me that was being written at the time she was here. And so I'm going to get a book for her and send it to her. Bobby Harlow was ... I played basketball with him and tennis with him. He was a real good friend.

Q: You played basketball for the college in the first Seabury Gym, didn't you, when it was first opened?

A: I played in the old Tabernacle.

Q: the old Tabernacle?

A: My last year of basketball there and then I moved into the new gymnasium and played my first game that was played.

Q: What year was that, Wilson?

A: 19 and twenty (hesitate)

Q: seven

A: six

Q: 1926

A: I entered in '24, graduated from the Academy in '26. And started the college the fall of '26.

Q: You graduated college in ?

A: '30

Q: And you got married at '31. And at Berea College, you were the ... you did several things for the college, didn't you? You were Dean of Labor, I know, for one job.

A: I came back here as secretary of the Alumni Association. I was teaching at a mountain school down in Alabama and they invited me back to take the place of Charlie Morgan who had organized the Alumni Association and had conducted it and he was leaving. And so I took over as Alumni secretary. My office at that time was the two little rooms on each side of the entrance to Lincoln Hall. Those two small rooms—I had one and my secretary had one. And we had four students working for us. Now you ought to see what students they have now.

Q: After Alumni secretary did you go right into Dean of Labor?

A: Alumni secretary, yes. I think the realization that Dean Wiedler who had been Dean of Labor so long was soon to retire. So, I think they had an idea that maybe I ought to get prepared and see if I could become the Dean of Labor. So, I did go away to graduate school, to Columbia University, and got my Doctor of Education and Management and so forth, and sort of prepared for the job at Berea College. Came back to work for the college in the... as assistant to Dean Wiedler for a year. So, I had a little office outside his office. I was an assistant for one year under his tutelage. And then he retired and I became the Dean of Labor.

Q: And you were there for several years

A: I was there from that 19 and 72, I guess; 1972, I believe. And then I was released from that responsibility and asked to organize and get everything organized in the Student Aid program. I was the only person that had ever directed the student aid program, and it had become quite a big operation since I

was there. And so, I was the only one familiar with all the different funds and what they were supposed to be used for. So I had a little office upstairs in the ...

Q: Lincoln?

A: No, in the little building there, near Lincoln Hall

Q: The cottage?

A: Cottage

Q: Rustic?

A: Rustic Cottage. A little room there. I worked over in the office of the people who ran the funds for Berea College. And they had control of all the funds. In fact, I could order money from them for student aid of all kinds.

Q: Well, that's a big job, a big responsibility.

A: It was a big responsibility. And so, I knew all of these several funds. In one case, President Hutchins--Francis Hutchins--called me in and said he'd received a sizable contribution from some Northern doctor who had come to Berea and had visited in the mountains and saw the need for medical help in the mountains. And so he went back to ... home and sent the college a sizable check to be used to help improve the medical situation in the mountains. And President told me how much it was and said, "I want you to take charge of that." And he didn't give me any directions. He said, "Work out a plan for it." And so I worked on it and finally devised a plan to help Berea College students who wanted to go to medical school and couldn't afford it, but would promise to work in the mountains for at least two years. And they were to get that money without any strings being attached to it. And they would be expected—they wouldn't have to repay it—but they would be expected to put the money they received back into the fund when they were financially able to do so. So that it would be a continuing fund. So it worked real well, and I had a wonderful time administering that.

Q: Is that program still going on?

A: I don't know. I guess it is. It should be because the money was there and was building up. And I would write a letter each year to all the people who had received help and give a report on how much had been loaned and how much had been repaid. I suppose it was a reminder to make their payments when they could. One interesting thing was that this politician up in the mountains—there's two brothers—one was a doctor (went to the University of Kentucky and we even helped some people going to other schools, not just the University of Kentucky.) And we let him have some money, and he never did pay it back. And then he was running for office, and they never had paid it back and I'd written to him, but he never had given any money back. And I don't know how he got word, but somebody told him that I had ... somebody told him ... told the papers that he had not repaid his loans. I wasn't the one who did it. I don't know who did it.

Q: Was he elected?

A: He was elected, yah. Became a politician, and he was doing well as a doctor.

Q: Did he ever pay?

A: I think he paid it back, but after I was gone.

Q: Well, I hope so. Well, you played basketball for Berea College. Do you remember when the Car Creek guys came down, I think they went to Richmond. I know Berea played Richmond at that time.

A: I know we played Richmond, and we beat them every year until they got the Car Creek boys. And when the Car Creek boys came in, we never beat them again.

Q: I think they got all five of those Car Creek starters. They came down in 19 and 29, I believe, after they'd been to the nationals.

A: I don't remember the year. I do remember that we were not able to beat them after the Car Creek boys came. But we had beaten Eastern and we had beaten Western. And one year we got within three points of beating University of Kentucky. And we played the University of Louisville and Western University and held our own with them in those days.

Q: You were a starter on that team, weren't you?

A: Yah.

Q: Did they jump the ball every time a score was made?

A: Every time we made a score, you'd take the ball back to center and jump it.

Q: What were the final scores in 1930? Teams won by scores of what approximately.

A: Twenties or thirties

Q: Twenties or thirties, yah. They had no three-points, of course, at that time. They had free throws, of course.

A: Had free throws

Q: And every time a point was scored, you jumped the ball.

A: Right.

Q: Even a free throw?

A: Yup.

Q: I'll be darn. Isn't that something.

A: Go back and jump center. I was center most of my life because I could outjump most of the people. And I was outjumping the center at East..., at West..., at University of Kentucky.

Q: You were 6-2?

A: I was getting the tip on him, and he kept trying to knee me in the groin.

Q: Is that right?

A: And I told the referee, and he stopped it.

Q: Is that right? How tall were you then?

A: 6 feet

Q: 6 feet and that you're jumping against guys 6-3 and 4?

A: 6-4 or 5. I was outjumping him.

Q: Is there anything else you can think of you'd like to say about Union Church, Berea, or the city of Berea or the college?

A: Well, I dearly love the college and am going to support as much as I can. And we are establishing a ... my wife and I ... a scholarship for two students, male and female, in the senior class who was considered to have done the best job of doing above and beyond the call of duty, working above and beyond the call of duty, one girl and one boy. And there'd be a scholarship each Labor Day for that person.

Q: Well, that's great. Nice. The Labor program at Berea College—people from everywhere comment how great it is. What's your reflections of the labor program at the college?

A: My ... (laugh) It's very good. I think it's a wonderful program. I'm very much in favor of it. And while I was Dean of Labor part time, half the students were on the half-day program. We used to have the program where the students would work half the day ...

Q: I was one of those.

A: ... and go to school half the day. You were, well. One time there were two years in a row there that more than half the students were on a half-day program.

Q: They would work 24 hours a week, I believe, and take half a scholastic load. It took five years to graduate.

A: Right, that's right. And there were a lot of them because in those days that was hard times, and they just didn't have any money. And then that kept falling off and falling off, and they started paying more money and having more scholarships. So, I saw that development. I'm a great believer in the labor program, and I've often heard that people are eager to employ Berea College people because they know how to work. They come to them knowing how to work. I've heard that time and time again.

Q: It's still a fine program. That's all the questions I have. Do you have anything else you want to add?

A: I don't think so.

Q: OK. Well, thank you so much, Wilson, that was excellent.

A: I don't feel like I've done anything.

Q: You've done quite a bit—a lot of good history there, a lot of good stories. Thank you so much.