

## John Elliott Interview Transcription

### Tape #010

TL (Tom Law): This is Tape #1 of the three interview tapes with Archaeologist John Elliott (JE), conducted by Dr. Gwynn Henderson (GH) [and Cheryl Munson (CM)], at his home in New Harmony, Indiana on Jan. 18, 1999.

GH: Let's start out with some beginning information so that at the beginning of the tape people will know who you are and how it is that you came to be interested in archaeology and why you went to Chicago.

JE: Well, I grew up in Chicago, a city boy, and ah, I became interested in archaeology because my mother, ah, took avocational classes at the University of Chicago in Egyptology with James Preston and she took me along with her because I suppose she couldn't dispose of me any other way, no babysitters, & ah, so that was my first exposure to archaeological, ah, information and exhibits at the Oriental Institute. And ah, later, when I went to the University of Chicago when I was older, I started out as a zoologist and, ah, almost got my degree in Zoology before I changed my major, ah, to Anthropology. And then went back and got a degree in Anthropology, which was tough going at Chicago, because they only offered two undergraduate classes in, ah, anthropology. All the other courses were graduate, graduate school classes.

GH: So you ended up taking graduate school classes as an undergraduate?

JE: I took graduate classes with old, old guys, 35, 45 years old in the classes. Been out in the field..

GH: Uh huh

JE: Uh, who were fellow classmates. uh. It was tough competition but great because, uh, here was the real live stuff.

GH: Um, hmm.

JE: And uh, and so I...I uh, I had about one year of graduate school. Uh, I had intended to go ahead and get my graduate degree but, uh, my wife and I went to the World's Fair in 1933 down on the lake and we went to a Chinese restaurant and I got amoebic dysentery. Picked up amoebic dysentery there. And this was before the days of antibiotics.

GH: oh boy

JE: and I had a hell of a time with um, uh, diarrhea essentially, for the next several years, which, uh, made scholarly activities out of the picture; couldn't function. My doctor said you, you've got to lead an outdoor life--you'll never be able to function as a white collar person. So I uh..

GH: That worked great for going out to the field in WPA, didn't it?

JE: Yeah.

GH: Like a prescription to go out in the field.

JE: So I decided I'd, uh... before I did that, I said well, out there our family's got farms down in southern Indiana. I'll just prepare myself as a farmer and take over. So I went down to IU, to ag. school for a year, which did me not one iota of good, but I did anyhow, &, uh, about the time

I got through with that, suddenly I had an offer from Major Webb down at the University of Kentucky at Lexington to take, uh, over a project, ah, archaeological project there.

GH: Now, you had been to field school, though, prior to that, had you not?

JE: I had been on several field schools: the University of Chicago, at Kincaid, in Illinois/southern Illinois; and, ah, the Dickson Mounds, uh, near Peoria. Ah, lets see. So...

GH: When Webb asked you to come...

JE: Pardon me?

GH: When Webb asked you to come down to Lexington to take the job, you thought it was a better idea than going to a..

JE: Yeah.

GH: Take more at...

JE: Tape #10 (01:04:56) **That was the only opportunity I'd had to practice my profession, which looked like a lost cause in 1933...32-33-34, in the depths of the Depression, farming was bad enough but archaeology and anthropology were worse. (01:05:15) So...that's where I made my connection, with uh, archaeological...uh, Kentucky archaeology. I went down, I took over a project in western Kentucky at Island in McLean County that, uh, John L. Cotter had initiated. Webb moved him to Lexington to become the state supervisor of archaeological projects, and I became, uh, project supervisor. (01:05:47)**

GH: Did Webb interview you for that job or did he call you up? Did you know him? Had you met him before?

JE: No. I didn't...uh. Chuck Wilder, who had been a, uh, a colleague of mine at Chicago, had worked with Webb, who was an archaeologist, too. Had worked with Webb on TVA and he recommend...Wilder recommended to Webb that he get in touch with me. So I, I...nobody interviewed me. I just came in...with, with Wilder's recommendation.

GH: Came with your trowel in hand and appeared at Island, Kentucky and went on from there?

JE: Right.

GH: Did um, did...

JE: Can you move a little closer to me?

GH: Sure. Ok. What I'm trying to get at, John, is...When did you first meet Webb, what would be your first impression? What's the first memory that you have of him?

JE: He probably came out to visit the site while we were initiating it there at Island.

GH: OK.

JE: That was, uh, December 1937.

GH: Ok. Did he come out frequently to...to see what was going on?

JE: Not too frequently but, uh, the state supervisor came around frequently.

GH: Ok.

JE: And in this case it was...after me, it was Jack Cotter or John L. Cotter.

GH: Right. Ok. So, um, Webb then, would you characterize him as being sorta of hands off..., sorta let...did you feel like you had, uh, the option to, within his guidelines, do what you wanted to do or did you feel like he was always looking over your shoulder?

**JE: No. We were free to exercise our own, at least in my case, completely free to exercise whatever talents we had. Uh, my...my, encounters with Webb over the years I was in Kentucky consisted of, of uh, perhaps monthly visits to Lexington hauling in, uh, what you might say, the harvest of the archaeological work.**

GH: Right.

**JE: And uh, we would have a little seminar at that time, with other other supervisors from other projects.**

GH: Would it last for a day or so, or just an afternoon, or...?

JE: It was usually there over a weekend.

GH: Oh, ok. And um, would this be on campus?

JE: Yes in the museum. I guess that building's still there.

GH: Lafferty Hall? The brick building? Yup, it's still there. Wow, that's great. Um...would he...

JE: Webb had his office somewhere else. Was over in a classroom building somewhere.

GH: Right, right. Well, he was a physics professor, not particularly...hadn't started out as an archaeologist. Did you ever get a sense that um...no let me back up. Did he, um...was he in charge of the, these monthly meetings? You guys, would he like say stuff and then you? Or was it more like, um, everybody sitting around and sort of sharing information?

JE: No. No. He... First place, Webb had no...uh, uh, was not professionally qualified in the field. He was ama...had an intense amateur interest but he was not professionally qualified. Uh, however,...he was a great great administrator and he was great at putting teamworks together, which I presume came from his years in the army. He'd been in charge of the Fort Sill artillery school, uh, at some time. I guess maybe during WWI or sometime in that interval. Uh, so his ability to put together team undertakings were where his qualifications shone. And he gave talent free

rein. Which uh, it was great, but on the other hand he, uh, did most of the publishing, too. Which uh, got some of us a little nervous, since we were all young, all us field guys were young and apparently had aspirations as a profession in the future and uh, accordingly hoping to

build a resume with a string of publications. Uh, in minor degrees, we overcame that. I, I got in on one publication with Webb.

GH: Did you work with him, with that publication...were you guys sitting together, you know, shoulder to shoulder, analyzing stuff together?

JE: No. He did the manuscript and I edited it (laughs).

GH: But he did let you edit it.

JE: Yeah.

GH: Ok, that's good.

**JE: I didn't have time... field time work with having crews of 35 or 40 men allowed no time for any kind of, uh, laboratory or museum processing, or preparation of of, uh, monographs.**

GH: So he basically allowed you guys to do the...the fieldwork, and do all of this...it was basically your baby and then once the information, the artifacts and so forth were brought to the lab...

**JE: Well, we were also...we were responsible for keeping the field records, & writing a final field report, which was the basis upon which the monographs, final monographs were written.**

GH: I see...ok...

JE: Plus the museum processing stuff.

GH: Right, 'cause, well, ok that's good 'cause I was afraid, um, that you guys ended up having your name put on something and not, never seeing it...i don't know why I thought that but you actually did get a chance to see it before it went to publication.

JE: Yeah, in the case of the Robbins Mound. That was the one.

GH: Um, there's a description if you would mind, if you don't mind me reading this. I want to know your feeling about this. This is a description from, um, Doug Schwartz's Studies in Anthropology, where he's describing Webb and I thought well, if I could read it to you and see what you think about how well this describes him. And this is what he says, "Webb was a many faceted man who's nature and personality are difficult to describe. He was humble but stubborn, hence the name Bullneck. Kindly but aggressive, affectionate but aloof, a dilettante yet a scholar, droll but serious, a disciplinarian but with warmth, a gregarious and delightful raconteur who

could also enjoy his own company long enough to write many highly detailed descriptive reports. An extremely effective and productive administrator knowing at the same time how to enjoy leisure. Did you guys ever call him Bullneck behind his back?

JE: No, not to his face.

GH: Ok, not to his face. But behind his back? It was, I mean, but...because sometimes...

JE: That description fits him to a tee. It's him to a tee.

GH: Wow, so he really was nice, but rude huh?

JE: Yeah, here was this old guy, you know he was a...when I was there he had to be up in his late 60's. Working with all us young guys, uh, who were on the prod, you might say. It was a

perfect match, we got along beautifully. And he was a...it had to be...it had to be his army experience of working with younger men that, uh, fit him for that.

GH: Good, cause I was...you know, you, you see stuff in print and you think "oh yeah, right, they're just making this up."

JE: No, that's no, that fits him perfectly.

GH: Excellent. All right. Ok.

JE: I have the warmest regards for Major Webb. Had...

GH: Let's move to working some of the sites. Let's talk about the...how about the sites in McLean County, 'cause those were the ones you worked at first.

JE: McLean County, yes.

GH: And then we'll move to Boone County later. Ok.

JE: All right.

GH: Um, did you, uh, hire the men for McLean County? Were they already there when you arrived?

**JE: My crew was made up of unemployed coal miners. The little town where I lived, Island, was ah,...the only thing going on in Island was the coal mine. And ah, the coal mine was worked out and all these poor guys were out of work. And, ah, I was the chief employer in Island. They were all on welfare. Er, I don't think they called it welfare in those days...on relief...and ah, WPA namely, and ah, they all worked for me. And ah, these men were assigned to me by the WPA office.**

GH: So they would go to the WPA office and look for work and one of the..

**JE: The county WPA office would assign a crew to someplace where they were making privies, for example. This place was doing archaeological work. There were other places where there were crews were doing road work...**

GH: I see.

**JE: Ah, this, this crew was assigned to me for archaeological purposes.**

GH: Did you ever get a sense that, um, some of these men purposely selected the archaeology to do? I mean, was the archaeology project choice better or worse than any other?

**JE: I don't know that I know the answer to that. I don't think there was any, any design in where they wound up.**

GH: Ok. And so when they came to work for you...I remember you saying, when we were in the, ah, dining room, that these guys were, ah, illiterate but really excellent field workers. Could you explain that again for us?

JE: Well, they were used to working in old-fashioned coal mines where you work on your knees with a pick and shovel, ah, in other words handling tools, workin' with tools, and they were manually dexterous, and uh, ingenious on solving little problems and making little tools, like in

working with skeletal materials, uh, fine probes and uh, blowing bellows to blow dust away out of little nooks and crannies and skeletal situations like that fireplace bellows over there. Ah, they not only were ingenious but, uh, they were all good workers. I never had any trouble...the classic notion of WPA workers being goof-offs. I never had any of that at all. And ah, the only trouble I'd have...I ever had with some of them showing up drunk once and a while. Something of that sort. Particularly Monday morning, might have a few guys not quite sobered up yet. But aside from that, they were a great bunch of guys. I got as much out of them..I don't know...I doubt if they got anything out of me but the human relationship to me, being a city-bred kid, ah, was a, ah, a revelation.

GH: Were they the same age as you? Older?

JE: They were all older than me. I was in my late 20's and they were all 40's and 50's.

GH: Wow, so you were sort of like a son to some of those guys.

JE: I suppose, yeah.

GH: Did you guys go out fishing and stuff or did you, um, hang out with each other when work was done?

JE: Not much. There was one guy, one guy who was a fundamentalist preacher who on Saturday night got drunk and was forever coming to my room wanting to read the Bible to me. That was the extent of my hanging out. I didn't think it was a good idea.

GH: Oh, in terms of...

JE: This one fellow's, this one fellow's name who I gave you, Edward Markwell, who was a very unusual young fellow, um, I did visit him in his home a time or two.

GH: Did you ever get a sense that, um, any of the guys who worked on your projects, um, wanted to go on and do...go to college? I guess because they were older they maybe thought about not have gone. This was...

JE: I don't think so. No.

GH: This was something that they...ok. What would a typical day have been like for you at one of the shell mound sites in McLean County?

JE: Typical what?

GH: Typical day. Like you get up in the morning. Say its a nice day; not one of the rainy days not one of the freezing days and not one of the dry days when everything's blowing around. But just sort of a day that might sort of come to your mind as...what it was like? I, I have a hard time imagining if it was any...was it really that much different from when...what I imagine when I think of myself going out in the field. Get up in the morning and I have my coffee and go out and..

**JE: Well, the project...the project had a truck. We had a ton truck..er...yeah, it was a ton truck. A canvass covered stake bed truck and I had a driver and he made the circuit and picked everybody up 'cause these guys didn't have transportation of their own. I had a pickup-truck of my own that I got to the site with, but the project truck picked up the crew. And ah, we had, we tried to have...build some kind of a shelter on every site so that the stuff that we were digging up and so we could keep our tools and ah, usually we couldn't get any money out of WPA for that. So, it usually wound up being...getting some sawmill...slabs from the sawmill, you know what some of the slabs are?**

GH: Un-uh.

JE: Well, in squaring up a log in order to run it through and make dimension lumber out of it, they cut, uh, the saw...the mill takes a slab off of four sides, so you wind up with a square timber and those slabs are discarded, burned up, whatever. And, uh, we salvaged some of those and used that for siding on a little building that we made out of poles cut out of the woods. And ah...

GH: Not too different from the Indian's houses, was it?

**JE: Right. And we'd keep our stuff in there. Every project had a time keeper and he had a desk in there where he could function and, uh, we kept our tools, all our tarps, and the materials that we got from field activities in there. And ah, that went on til noon, then we'd knock off for lunch and then go till about four or five in the afternoon.**

GH: People bring their own lunch with them?

JE: Yes

GH: Ok. And then in the afternoon drive back and drop em all off.

JE: Drop everybody off just like a school bus deal, like, you know?.

GH: That's a good deal. Money and transportation to work.

JE: Yeah but the money in WPA was.. it was pretty pitiful.

GH: When you say pitiful, John, what do you mean?

JE: Thirty bucks a month.

GH: That ends up being a dollar a day.

**JE: It was about that. I was making...I was making...The peak salary I made was 160 dollars a month. That's no big deal. But it was the biggest I... it was more than I'd ever made before. And, ah, of course, living was modest, my wife and I, we lived hither and thither and wherever work was going on we tried to live where the work was. That little one-room school house here or rooms in somebody's house somewhere. We lived in Calhoun for a period of time, which is the county seat in McLean. We rented a 14 room furnished house which was the mansion in the town, for 25 bucks a month (laughs).**

GH: Wow, that was a great place.

**JE: Yeah, yeah. So everything is in proportion in those days. Nobody had much money and things didn't cost much either.**

GH: Did um...You had told me that out in the field, they did the work and you took all the notes and, uh, the photography, too.

**JE: I did all the professional stuff and all the...all the, ah, guidance work in directing how things must be done. I did all the surveying. Did the photographic work. Kept all the records.**

GH: OK. If we move now to Boone County, is basically the same...what was going on in McLean County what you did in McLean County relative to the way the workers were hired, and where you lived, and all...basically the same procedure, the same process, only in a different county?

JE: The personnel situation was the same. They weren't coal miners up there. Most of them were broke farmers.

GH: Broke farmers, ok.

JE: But, ah, the ah, the sites were something quite different from what Western Kentucky was. Western Kentucky sites were essentially garbage heaps. Shell heap sites were garbage heaps in which there happened to be...on which people lived and in which they incorporated their deceased

members, and ah, storage pits, etcetera. The sites I worked in Northern KY were all burial sites. Mounds mainly. Huge Adena sites. Accretional mounds. They weren't built all at once. They just, ah, grew like topsy.

GH: I remember when we were talking in your, um, dining room that you had said that some of the crew members had a problem, ah, digging human remains? Did you want to say something about that?

**JE: Yeah, there was a little problem. Particularly in, in Western KY where those coal miners guys. They were pretty, pretty fundamental in their basic outlooks on life, in religion in particular. And ah, I forgot to mention right where we lived there was a great big Holy Roller church and most all my crew were attendants at the Holy Roller church. And ah, disturbing the dead was, ah, somehow incompatible with their notions of propriety.**

GH: Did they...how did you handle that on, on the site? Did they ever say that they weren't going to dig those graves or anything?

JE: Oh no.

GH: They just sort of would make comments?

**JE: They made comments and I'd deal with them as they happened. Nobody could afford to be too...too persnickety in those days.**

GH: Did you ever have to fire anyone?

JE: No. I never fired anybody except for non attendance.

GH: At the risk of sounding post-modern here, did women, any women...what was the role of women in the WPA. Were they on the crews at all?

JE: No. I had no women.

GH: How about in the lab?

JE: Some did and I see reading in the literature, there were some female sites. But uh, co-educational archaeology...I can remember how I felt about women on those college field crews. Most of us didn't think they belonged on them and at the University of Chicago I remember that a couple of girls, Harriet Coles, who wound up being archaeologist at the Field Museum in Chicago, she and another girl had their own dig, all by themselves, and they hired their own crew and they weren't...They didn't participate in the Kincaid site. It strictly was a macho male world, for better or worse.

GH: Uh-huh. Um...

JE: The only females..let's see, uh, at Chicago there were...in the department there was one gal who was a dendrochronologist, Florence Hawley, she...she had been a protegee of Dr. Douglas down in Arizona, who developed the tree ring method. And ah, let's see, another one uh, Madeline Kneberg. She ultimately married the guy who was the archaeologist at the University of Tennessee. But, uh, women were scarce in that department.

[Stop down]

JE: ...New Mexico. That's where J.D. Figgins found the first Clovis point.

GH: Talk to Cheryl. I think you should talk to Cheryl...wait...

JE: Who am I talking to?

GH: I'm not sure yet.

GH: I mean I want to listen, but I'm not sure that you are allowed to look at me.

CM: Look towards the camera.

JE: Oh. Am I concerned with the picture taking now?

GH: A little bit.

CM: John how does Jack Cotter fit into this?

JE: It is in his, uh, graduate school days, he worked with J.D. Figgins at, ah, Blackwater Draw, famous site in New Mexico where the first solid evidence of Paleoindian association with leistocene fauna was established.

CM: Yeah, it was Clovis point.

JE: Clovis point imbedded in mammoth and bison bones.

CM: Well, the Clovis point in that frame, ah, you say came from your farm here.

JE: This was a surface find.

CM: Did you find it?

JE: Yeah.

CM: You did?

JE: Yeah.

CM: What did you think when you found that?

JE: There's not much...I found a few mortars and pestles around on this farm, and this is the only other evidence I found here. This was just some wandering hunter, who dropped it or something.

CM: And when you picked it up, did you know what it was right away?

JE: Of course (laughs).

CM: It's just a wonderful find and it's, it's so great that that you found this...

[End of Tape #010]

## Tape #011

GH: Ok, I'll ask again. How were the sites selected that WPA folks work on?

JE: I'm not sure that I know. Ah, the labor supply dictated to some extent what was done, but I'm not sure there weren't some...wasn't some unnecessary duplication, uh, like a lot of this environmental protection stuff that goes on now, uh, sites are...find an arrowhead, you gotta site. And great tons of money are wasted on, not on investigating sites on the basis of problem-solving, but just to keep some archaeologist working. And I'm not sure...that was not the case in the WPA days. 'Cause there weren't that many archaeologists in the first place. They were scarcer than hen's teeth and ah, and nobody needed them anyhow if there were any. Other than WPA. But, ah, basically Webb was involved in the site selection, and, in part that was dictated by, I presume, by the site survey work, that the state site survey manual. A great big thick thing that had already been done.

GH: Is that the one that was published in 1932 that went county by county? That's the one that I can think of comes to mind immediately.

JE: Yes. Yes. I'm not sure that the site selection process was totally rational, but whatever it was, it happened.

GH: How about logistical challenges, challenges to doing the work, challenges to getting the materials to the lab...want talk about that kind of thing.

**JE: Logistical supply problems. I don't think there were any, other than providing us with plenty of paper bags and cardboard boxes. We didn't use much materials. That was one of the beauties of WPA projects. They did not compete with organized labor and, and organized labor is a major factor in the western KY coal fields. We did not compete with organized labor. Ah, we used precious little, ah, purchased materials. It was mostly sweat and grunt, and ah, shovels and trowels. Supplies consisted of paper bags, cardboard boxes, uh, photographic materials. Essentially low cost operation. And labor was a cheap, ah, expense item.**

GH: That's what I was going to say. So the mainly what the money went to was to people.

**JE: Yes. That's where it was supposed to go. To keep people alive who were in bad straits.**

GH: Right. Did...um. Within the context a particular site, you're working at the site, um, most of the money is going to, ah, the men who are working there. Um, would you say that...what kind of community support was there for the WPA projects where you worked?

JE: None that I was aware of, but, but, no, no hostility either.

GH: Did you have, um, folks from the local paper come out and take pictures, or school teachers bring their kids out or anything like that?

JE: Hardly ever. I remember one time somebody came out from the Evansville Courier and, ah, took some pictures and wrote an article about it, but practically non-existent.

GH: Teachers come and ask you to come to their classrooms and talk to their kids?

JE: Nope. No.

GH: Nothing like that. So in terms of public archaeology kind of things?

JE: Not at all.

GH: Not at all. All those guys out there working and nothing.

JE: Never encountered any of that.

GH: How about the landowners?

JE: I think it was...I think it was such an alien undertaking in their midst, you know, that, ah, didn't stimulate any interest. Even up in the, uh, in the fairly urbanized area around Cincinnati there, which Boone County was.

GH: There we have hundreds of guys excavating interesting burials and wonderful artifacts and what a classic news story and nobody, nobody...

JE: No, I, I did not experience any of that. There was one guy from Newport, that somehow got wind of me, and used to come out and see me once in awhile, but there was no, no public interest.

GH: How about on the part of the landowners? Were the landowners...how would you characterize the landowners?

JE: Indifferent.

GH: Indifferent?

JE: Yeah. The best I hoped for that they would give me permission, you know?

GH: Did you ever encounter...did you ever have to go out to a site and say We're coming to your site next and they'd say, Nope sorry Mr. Elliott you're not coming here at all?

JE: I was never rejected, but, uh, never received with any great enthusiasm, either. And that was all, that was all I wanted. All I wanted was acquiescence, clear the road.

GH: Don't throw up any road blocks...

**JE: I can remember down...one time down on Pond River, I can't remember the number, McL11, I believe it was. We got drowned out with a flood and we had to get in there and get stuff out of the shack. And the whole river bottoms was under water. And ah, the fellow who owned the land, he hitched up, ah, 6 head of mules to a wagon and we went back there and got all of the stuff out of the shack. That's the only time I ever had any ownership participation. And...that Butterfield site, for example, there in McLean County, that was the Butterfield of Smith and Butterfield in Evansville, Jo (Josephine, his wife is in the room), that owned that big business supply store. It was a shell heap site on the Green River.**

GH: That's amazing.

(Background question from TL)

GH: He wants to know what did the local people know about the people who had built these mounds or lived in these sites?

JE: Nothing, far as I know.

GH: Nothing. Did they ever talk to you about...

JE: I never even scared up...ordinarily you scare up local enthusiasts who are collectors, you know. I never scared up any collectors.

GH: Do you suppose they ran the other way when you-all came?

JE: I don't know. Course I...Archaeologists don't look with great delight on collectors.

GH: That's true.

JE: So that explains part of it, I suppose, but nonetheless, if I'd been a collector, and something like that was going on under my nose, I believe I would have shown some interest. But I never had a thing like that.

GH: That's interesting because people who have talked to me about doing research out in that part of the world say there's an awful lot of collectors. I wonder if it's a...do you suppose it's a more recent phenomenon? No, there would have been collectors out there then wouldn't there have?

JE: You'd think so. Young people today, I don't think young people today can comprehend how tough those times were.

GH: In what way? You mean tough in terms of...

**JE: Every way. For example, we were selling corn off the farms for 5 cents a bushel. And it was cheaper to burn corn...people who lived on our farms who burned coal in their stoves to keep warm instead of coal.**

GH: You mean corn instead of coal?

JE: Yeah. Field corn.

GH: Field corn in their stoves...

**JE: Yeah. Instead of hauling it to elevators. Times were tough. And particularly in rural areas. Of course, in rural areas, if you had any gumption or get-up of course you could provide yourself with food. Chickens 'n cows 'n garden 'n so on. But as far as money, nobody had any.**

GH: So I guess WPA projects going into rural areas, 30 bucks a month was...these were maybe some of the luckier folks, then, to be able to work on these projects and have the money.

JE: Yeah. Well, the Department of Agriculture up in the Vincennes area north of here, they had a, they set up a model farming area, there, for, uh, impoverished Appalachian farmers. Brought a bunch of those rednecks up there and set them up on that prime Wabash River riverbottom land. And uh, I forget what they called those projects. Do you remember that Cheryl?

CM: Yes I do, but I don't remember the name, either.

JE: Rural Resettlement or something like that.

GH: Stories, any interesting stories about things that happened?

JE: Oh, a few, few problems dealing with characters.

GH: You got any stories about characters you'd like to share?

JE: Yeah, that fundamentalist preacher was on my crew...got drunk every Saturday night and came to my room and read the Bible to me. That was my light entertainment on Saturday night. I had a few drunks give me some problems on the site, but interestingly enough, some of those drunk situations other guys wouldn't put up with them getting threatening with me. They'd deal with them. I didn't have to deal with it. They would take it in their own hands and put a stop to it, for which I was thankful, because I didn't want to get involved in the problem of a physical encounter with anybody.

GH: There was in, uh, this particular book here a story that I wondered if...that there was more to this story than just what was in here. Something about, um, high water interrupted or shut down work as well? One memorable occasion 2 supervisors and a WPA state supervisor John Elliott and John Schwartz and John Cotter, rowed over 20 miles to rescue tools and previously excavated material from the Barret site. You guys rowed? Like got in a boat? What was the deal with that?

**JE: At this Pond River site, McL11, the river flooded, um, the whole bottom starting up one winter and, ah, I had an assistant at that time Johnny Schwartz. And ah, we needed to get into the site to let stuff out of there...were sure it was all going to go under water in our shack. And ah, the road into the site was completely under water. It was...even getting in there with a team was out of the question. So we went up river. Say this site, these shell heap sites are more or less on the berm of the river bank, as you might expect. You know the circumstances under which mussel beds occur? Mussel beds occur in shallow fast moving water. Ah, that's where you find mussel beds. Now you don't find them in the Green River now because they put dams in there...screwed up the natural level of flow. But that's where you find, in wild rivers, that's where you find mussel beds. And ah, the only way to get to the site was to go up river to where a road crossed a bridge. We had a boat, we had a rowboat in the truck, put it in there and start down, down river towards the site. Well, it was easy enough to follow the river as long as there were trees on each side. But we came to places where both sides were cleared and we didn't know where the river was. We started wandering around out in the river bottoms...got lost out there. And it was a wild night. My life was in on that one. And uh, we finally, we finally made our way out of there, but if you can imagine if, what it would be like if...I don't know if you've ever had the experience of driving along a road 'til it's completely covered with snow and all the fields and you can't tell where the road is. That was a similar situation in the water. Everywhere was water. That was an experience.**

GH: Your saying that reminds me of a question I wanted to ask. All your days off. Did you ever have a day off?

JE: Yeah we had rainy days off. We didn't work even if we had perfect weather, we didn't work a full month. Uh, as I recall, we worked all but maybe about 5 days out of the month if we had no interruptions.

GH: So there would be called days off? Like for instance, if you had worked, worked almost all days... say a good dry month and you hadn't had to call off work you would like have 4 or 5 days off in a row?

JE: Yes. That's when I brought all my field work up to date. All my records up to date.

GH: Such a day off...

JE: Yeah.

GH: So did...um, were there times when the, um, field supervisors, because you guys were all sort of scattered around by yourselves with these various crews. Uh, aside from this monthly meeting that you would have, were there other times that you all would get together to just meet and chat or do fun things...

JE: No. Just these Lexington gathers.

GH: Which reminds me, uh, about Hooten Hollow.

JE: That was not a WPA project. That was a busman's holiday. Ah, went during one of these periods when we all had a string of 4 or 5 days off, all the supervisors came into Lexington and we went to Menifee County. And, uh, worked on one of those dry ash, one of those dry ash caves.

GH: For about 5 days or so?

JE: Yeah

GH: Was it, uh, I think I know how I would have felt, being able to get my own hands dirty, use my own trowel, do my own work. Is that how you guys felt?

JE: Yeah. Well, we were all doing the manual work. We weren't supervising. And it was fun.

GH: I know myself, sometimes it just feels good to sit down and have your own trash pit and dig your own trash pit and not have to worry about what everybody else is doing.

[break in the flow of the tape conversation. Appears something is missing]

JE: ...and that's where Wilbur Libby worked and, ah, of course developing the carbon 14 test was incidental to the other work, but he was the one who brought it to, brought it to light.

GH: Libby was. Please describe Libby and your relationship to this man.

JE: Say that again.

GH: Please describe Libby, I mean, how is it... Let's go over it again so we've got it on tape here.

JE: My recollection of Wilbur Libby, physically, was that he was a mulatto. I'm not sure about...he was extremely dark. He either was a mulatto or he was a Middle Eastern background because...he wasn't black like a black; he wasn't Negroid. But he was very dark.

GH: And you say you grew up near him?

JE: Yeah, he grew up in the same neighborhood I did in Chicago. I knew him in church and he's in the youth stuff going on in church. And uh, he went to the University of Chicago just like I

did. And then later was involved, uh, during the war in that carbon...in the uh, the Manhattan Project working on the chain reaction there, which eventually gave birth to the atom bomb. And incidental to that research and development of that project, uh, an offshoot of it was the, uh, carbon 14, uh, application to dating as a dating technique to archaeological materials.

GH: Um, as the supervisors at these archaeological sites..

JE: I didn't know a thing about carbon 14.

GH: Right, And there was no c-14 dating before...

**JE: I saved charred wood like crazy. I can remember. But you know what I did?**

GH: What?

**JE: I wrapped up, wrapped these little fragments up in cotton. Which was exactly the wrong thing to do. I thought I was doing the right thing to protect them. They're so fragile, you know. Course you can cleanse, you can cleanse, uh, alien material like that now but in the beginning, that screwed up the whole works. Nevertheless, uh, we didn't do anything in paleontology. We didn't do anything in carbon 14, but we were on the...we were on the doorstep of that and all of us had a feeling that something there was coming. We saved soil samples by the jillions. Every burial that I excavated, I took soil samples from the burial pit. Whatever became of them I haven't the faintest idea. But somebody could have done a paleontology project there. And we saved charred wood, uh....**

GH: Rocks samples?

JE: Huh?

GH: Did you save rock samples, too?

JE: What kind?

GH: Rocks?

JE: Rocks?

GH: Cause I know that Bohannon got in...

JE: Burnt rock?

GH: Yeah, I know that Bohannon got in trouble for saving rocks. In his notes, the Major had bitched him out, basically...

JE: Oh. Oh, he did?

GH: He was numbering the rocks and everything and the Major said, you know, you're supposed to be moving dirt. You're not supposed to be numbering rocks. And he just...

JE: (laughs) I didn't know about that one.

TL: What did the archaeologists at that time, before radiocarbon 14 dating, know about time depth and how did you know how old something was?

**JE: Depth. Depth determinations. It was basically the old rule of stratigraphy. Which was...there was was nothing new about that. Whatever was underneath something else was**

older than what was on top of it. Uh, uh, pottery typology. We knew about that, of course. Uh, projectile point typology. But in most, most, uh, of the archaeological sites, uh, in KY that I ever had anything to do with there was not much, not much you don't have much superposition of cultures. They're fairly shallow, one culture sites.

GH: So the question of knowing exactly how old these sites were...based just on the ceramics and then the stone tools.

JE: Yeah. We knew...

GH: And before radiocarbon dating, there was really no idea about how old...how very old...I mean... When you were working, let's say, at those shell mound Archaic sites, could you have guessed, did you feel in your bones that they were 7000 B.C.?

JE: Yes...absolutely! These, uh, these these sites were the first step away from the hunter gatherer mode of livelihood. The thing that they provided was the essential ingredient of, of abundance of food and in fixed position. They provided residential stability, which was a fundamental ingredient to the beginning of, of people living in towns, which hadn't been there before, with the exception of a few other places in later years, uh, on the Great Plains, of course, uh, during historic times, you had like...a excess food supply situation. Northwest Coast among...in the salmon area, running up and down the rivers, you had that surplus food again, which is a basic ingredient leading towards residential stability. Um, this is moving away, just beginning to move away from the hunter and gathering, uh, lot of these...uh, mobility, where people had to be constantly shuffling around, following herds and so on.

GH: What did you guys think about, I have often wondered...when you came across dog burials at uh,...

JE: Lots of them in shell heaps...

GH: Yeah. How did you expl...Did it seem to you that they had been buried specifically because the dogs were special or anything like that? I mean, when you came across the first one did you say what the heck or....

JE: They were in pits. They were deliberate burials. They didn't just die out on a hillside. They were in pits. Course you could see the pits. So that says something. Don't ask me what it says. It says that there was a relationship between human beings and these animals. Because they didn't get in those pits by themselves. Right?

GH: Exactly. Just as an aside...As an example of what WPA archaeology has done. A couple of summers ago, a woman came to UK to study the materials curated at UK. She was specifically studying the dog burials excavated at all those shell mound Archaic sites. Not looking at the people, not looking at the shell, she was looking at the dogs.

JE: Didn't Bill Haag write a monograph on the shell heap dogs?

GH: He did, but he wasn't talking about the diseases that these dogs had.

JE: Oh, diseases?

GH: This girl's come looking at the dogs to figure out the dog sickness. Once again, contribution of WPA archaeology.

JE: Those dog skeletons are still there aren't they?

GH: They are. OK, John here's a question. And this...either from McLean County or from Boone County or other archaeological sites in KY that you worked on during WPA, which would you say was the most challenging site to work on of the ones that you...

JE: Professionally? The big Adena mounds up in Boone county.

GH: And why is that?

JE: Because they were so complex, structurally.

GH: Could you elaborate on that? I remember when we were talking in the dining room you were explaining about the excavation of those mounds and the loading and so forth.

**JE: Those big mounds....Uh, they weren't built all at one time. They were what is commonly called acretional mounds. They were used as burial sites as needed. But instead of being burying people out in cemetery, conventional cemetery-like situations, they were being buried in little, essentially little individual mounds piled on top of each other that had crypts in the middle of them shored up, uh, shored up with, uh, with small logs. And uh, these things were roofed over with poles and bark and then dirt capping them. And of course, in due course, they all collapsed into each other. And the uh, this this multiple collapse that occurs in these big mounds from top to bottom, where they fall...where these little crypts collapse and then the one underneath collapses and the one beneath that one collapses, and they all fall into each other, dissecting them, essentially is what it is. An attempt at dissection is a hair raising proposition. Um, based almost entirely on your ability to translate the evidence that that is revealed in profiles through the mound. Especially illuminated by what happens to the loading when you haul dirt in by the basketful into...to build up a pile of dirt and dump it, basically the pile of dirt you'd unload, pancakes. Lays flat. Spreads out. And then it gets gets compressed by more dirt on top. You get a succession of piles, little piles of dirt piling on top of each other, which, if nothing occurs to them, they maintain their original posture. But if something happens, if they happen to be underlain by a cavern of some kind, in this particular case, these Adena mound crypts, open crypts whose roofs collapsed, then suddenly you get fracturing of these loads. Which is your guide to what's going on, to what's happening. When the...**

End of tape.

## **Tape #012**

(03:00:56) Robbins/Adena

Describes Robbins Mound excavations. ID basketloads/weight. 25-lbs. average weight. Pancake shape lens. (03:02:04) Adena Mounds. Collapses. Fault lines valuable to determine profiles. Work done in segments. WPA regulations prohibited work next to wall over 7ft maximum (policy). Reason for terraced excavations. Dotted lines.

(03:05:06)

TVA knowledge. Not associated, but read reports.

(03:06:12)

CM question on soil DI. Geology background, familiar with describing soil types.

(03:07:18)

Oil drums with water used as sprinklers to "freshen" surfaces and enhance visibility of features.

(03:08:18)

Didn't have color photography. 7x10 view cameras.

(03:09:23)

TL What most interested you. Fundamental problem with Adena, great mounds. Little evidence of villages. Where were the people who built these damn things? Refers to Berle Clay's theories (bands come together for ceremonies). Don't know the answer. Not domestic sites. Disagrees with Clay's theory of roofs, Smaller mounds evidence of charred thatch.

(03:12:30) Kriegler site example.

(03:12:55) Robbins Mound description.

TL Why should we investigate the past?

(03:13:48) "We are the last chapter maybe in the past. They are preambles to the present."

(03:14:20)

TL

Dark and Bloody Ground historic reference not prehistoric.

CM End of WPA ere archaeology

**(03:15:05) "WPA activity came to an abrupt end with Pear, advent of Pearl Harbor, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 (03:15:17) As you might expect. (03:15:21) Um, People who were on relief employment (uh) got jobs in (uh) defense factories, and, many, and young people went into service. (03:15:38) And, uh, that was the end of WPA." (03:15:42) (Smiles, quick laugh).**

**(03:15:46)**

GH:

(03:16:10) Amazed on how vivid the memories are. Memories still vivid. Out of archaeological work in Kentucky. Describes teaching in Indiana.

**(03:17:58) "That was big time archaeology. I'm not bragging, but that was big time stuff**

**(03:18:05) And was, as big time undertaking were, thee had to be division of labor. (03:18:11) I** did my thing and I trained specialists who did nothing but burials. (03:18:18) And, and then I had trained a guy on how to use an (allodade?sp). And, a few things like that. (03:18:28) I did all the photographic work. I did all the record keeping, but the, the uh the constant struggle that you had to keep in mind was to reconcile your training with your accuracy and precision. (03:18:47), which I'd had in the field schools at the University of Chicago. (03:18:52) Reconcile your personal demand to generate precision and systematic investigation with the actual pragmatic situation of dealing with weather, severe weather, full-time crews - a big bunch of men - uh **(03:19:20) Puttin' that all together, was something that hasn't happened before, and, has never happened again. (03:19:25) And, uh, without, without bragging, I think there was some significant work done in those days (03:19:35) Under , making allowances for those little** problems. (03:19:42) And one other thing that I wanted to mention in the case of stratigraphic evidence. (03:19:47) I never dug in any shell heap that was more than 6 or 8 feet deep. But, have you ever seen any profiles through, uh, that big shell heap down in Alabama - what's the name of that it was one of the TVA project. Profiles through shell heaps that were 15 and 20 feet deep, where there's obviously stratigraphic evidence there. I never had any evidence like that, in terms of superimposed depths. (03:20:31)

Reference mussel shoals.

CM question on preservation

(03:21:55) Never completely excavated any shell heap site. Repetitious, waste of money.

(03:23:00) Robbins Mound. I took it completely down. You had to in order to expose what was underneath it. Kriegler - would have done it but the war interrupted. Suppose its still standing.

## **Photos**

**John Elliott describes photos off camera.**

(03:23:48) Photos #1. (Stats and moves)

Webb and site supervisors in front of Wright Mound, Fayette County. Taken during monthly gathering in Lexington.

Photo back markings. Montgomery County (1937). L-R John Buckner (Wright), David Stout, Albert Spaulding, Clyde Johnston, Major Wm. S. Webb, John Elliott.

(03:29:23) Photos #2. John Elliott with summer field school crew, University of Chicago (1933), Kincaide Site, along Ohio River, Southern Illinois (Mississippian). One ton truck in background. John Elliott, crouched in front row.

End of tape.