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Transcript

Name: Bob Schwing

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Tape: #19

Project Number 20012

Tape FLHP0038

13:01:04

Q:

First of all, if you could give us your name. We already know how to spell it but.

A:

Robert Schwing. S-C-H-W-I-N-G.

13:01:15

Q:

Great. We're going to start with a little bit of early background. First of all, where were you born?

A:

I was born right, the house that sat near the corner of Crosby and Willey Road. 81 years ago. Was born right in that house. No hospitals to go to in those days so we just was born and reared where we were.

12:01:38

Q:

Tell us a little bit about the house. What was it like?

A:

Well, it was a nice old house. I mean it had let's see, kitchen, a big kitchen, a big living room and a big dining room and 3 bedrooms upstairs and it was a good livable house. It was a joy to live in it. We had see there was 3, 4 of us kids. There was Ruth, Genevieve, Dorothy and myself. I was the youngest one. I guess I come up spoiled a little bit maybe that's it.

13:02:24

Q:

Um, tell us a little bit about your parents. What did they do for a living?

A:

My mother, she was born in College Hill, a suburb of Cincinnati, and she taught school. When she graduated from college, so come out here there's a little school down here called Sader's Special and she taught there for several years and that's where she met my dad, he was the farmer and they got married and they built that house right over there and that's where they lived the rest of their life.

13:03:00

Q:

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Tell us a little bit about your early childhood. Do you have any special childhood remembrances of the area?

A:

We had a lot of fun when we were kids. My dad owned the ground down, well he owned all of this and he owned a big field down Dry Fork creek and it run through the edge of his place and in the summertime all of us kids would go swimming down there. It had some pretty good deep puddles of water and I mean it was running all the time and there was some places in there there was 6 and 8 feet deep so it made some really good swimming places.

13:03:40

Now you can't hardly get your ankles wet in it but it was a pretty good size creek when we were kids. We had fun in it. We'd go down there every time we had a chance and go swimming in the summer time. Not only us, all the kids in the neighborhood. We'd get down there and swim every time. Every Sunday afternoon there would be 20, 30 kids down there swimming all the time. So it was a pretty enjoyable childhood.

13:04:10

Q:

How was school? Where did you go to school and what was your class like?

A:

I went to a little school down here, Sader School. It was from first grade to 8 grades and then graduated, we had a graduation from the eighth grade. Then I went from, we, the schoolboard down here had contracted out and they shipped, bused us to Okeana, up in Morgan Township and they, that's where I got high school education. That was the end, I didn't want to go on to college. All of my sisters and them got degrees and everything, but I had enough when I got to.

13:04:53

Q:

Tell us about the area that you lived in, like were there grocery stores here, what kind of little shops were here?

A:

Well, the only grocery store that we always went to was uh, down in New Haven. It was a corner grocery store. Fitzgerald's owned it at that time and uh we did most of our shopping there. Then later on, it was Depression times then and Kroger's they said we'd buy your milk, you buy our groceries. So we'd go to Harrison then and get some, groceries.

13:05:37

Q:

Great. And um, do you have an special childhood remembrances just from when you were growing up in the area?

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A:

Nothing really special. We always, I always helped out on the farm over here when I was young but we had a good childhood though. I mean, we worked and had plenty of recreation too to do, like I said swimming in the summer and all that kind of stuff.

13:06:11

Q:

When you were helping out on the farm, what kind of work did you do?

A:

Well, my dad had cows. Always milked cows night and morning and then those days when they, he owned a big field down by Dry Fork Creek and there's a weed that always come up in the corn and he'd have us in there with a hoe whacking weeds. So that kept us pretty busy 'till the corn got tall. We were, we always had activities going on. Plenty.

13:06:45

Q:

Now tell us um, about right after high school. What did you do right after high school?

A:

Well I helped Dad on the farm. Then Corson, down here at Fernald, when he'd need extra help when I was a kid then, I'd go down and help him and uh, then it ended up, he wanted me to work for him steady and my dad was slowing down on farming so I worked for him down there at Corson's. I'd do anything. I mean, I shoveled off cars of coal and unloaded grain off of railroad cars. Took care of customers when they came in and we sold lumber and all that kind of stuff down there.

13:07:30

Q:

Tell me about Mr. Corson.

A:

He was a good guy to work for. I've always liked him. I think he kind of took me like I was a son and we got along real good and I worked for him for years. He was real good to get along with. He treated me real good. He was a wiry little fellow but he was really a good businessman. He taught me a lot all the while I was working for him.

13:08:03

Q:

That's great. And uh, so you were working at Corson's for a while and then you went into the service?

A:

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Yeah, I went into the service.

Q:

Tell us about that.

A:

Well, see I went over. I don't know when, I was in the Army about 4 years I think and uh, I was a crew chief on a B17 and I lucked in and got into the Air Force and they sent me to school at New York. It was the Academy of Aeronautics in New York and we went there and then I come out and they were just building an outfit was getting ready to go overseas. When I went with that outfit, they sent in one B17 bomber, that's all.

13:08:54

And we'd take turns about working on the engines and that, that's where we really got training. And then we got shipped overseas and went on to North Africa then when they cleared the, enough out of Italy, they moved us into Italy. And we could hit pert near anything in all of Europe wherever there was fighting going on. We could reach all of that. It was a heavy bomb group is what we were in. I don't know how many airplanes we had, must have been 15, 20 B17's.

13:09:35

And there were fighter planes in behind us. We'd start out, they were slower than the fighters and they could leave about half an hour after me and by the time you hit the target why, the fighters would be up with you and they could fight the other fighters off, German planes off, so that's about it.

13:10:00

Q:

Now your sister served as a nurse?

A:

Uh-huh. Yeah, she was a...

Q:

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

A:

She was in the Army Nurse Corps. She spent her life in it. She liked it and she was overseas quite a while. She went in with the invasion in Normandy and they were moving up, when we were in North Africa, they were moving up into, where we they going. I don't know where they went to but anyhow they went into England that's where, they were heading towards England then they went in on an invasion, she hit the beach with them, she was an Army Nurse Corps with field artillery and she went in Normandy, I think it was D plus 2, I think about the second day pretty hot right there then at that time.

13:11:00

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Q:

Now she narrowly avoided capture? Can you tell us about that?

A:

She, well they got cut off, I don't know where it was, it was someone up in there. She said it was kind of raining one night and she was sitting under a tree trying to catch some sleep and she had a raincoat thrown over her face and she said somebody come along and lifted it up and said no it's a girl and he laid it back down over her.

13:11:34

Q:

Wow. That's amazing. Um, tell us about uh, coming back to Fernald after, or coming back to the Fernald area, or I guess it really was the town of Fernald you came back to.

A:

Yeah it was a little town. Let's see, I was, we weren't married then, Bernice and I, and I come back to home and Corson, he found out I was home and he was up here to see me right away and wanted me to come back to work the next day. And I said no I'm going to take a week off and then I went back to work for him.

13:12:09

Q:

So that was the end of your military career then?

A:

That was the end of my military. I was in about, pert near 4 years, I think roughly, I forget.

13:12:17

Q:

And you saw the end of the war then?

A:

Yeah. War ended, they shipped us right straight home. I come right, they wanted me to sign up for 4 more years, but I decided against it. Maybe I should have stayed I don't know.

13:12:36

Q:

So then shortly after you got back then, you started working at Corson's again.

A:

Yeah.

Q:

And uh, probably just a few years after you got back they started building the Fernald plant.

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A:

When did they, I don't know really when they started the.

13:12:52

Q:

I believe it was around '51.

A:

Yeah cause I came back in '45 and I worked at Corson's. I remember when they was first starting it.

Q:

Well before we get into that, can you tell me first how you met your wife?

A:

Yeah. Um, let's see. I can tell you exactly. Let's see, I was bringing the cows in over there and Florence Flemin was a friend of hers, they worked together and she drove past and she says how about going out Fourth of July evening. So we went to Coney Island. Bernice was my date that night so. And after that we just went on got married. I didn't, let's see, that's when it was I think wasn't it. That's how it was I think.

13:13:47

Q:

That's great. Tell me a little bit about your early married life. Right after you got married?

A:

Well, we got married, there was a house down there right next to the elevator. Corson told me he said that house is yours when you get married so we got married, moved right in the same day. Our wedding night was down that house and then of course it was handy. All I had to do was fall out of bed and eat breakfast and run over and open up the place. It was real handy. I couldn't have found it any better.

13:14:27

We, I don't know, it was a good place to work. Corson, I always liked working for him and you met an awful lot of people cause he had a pretty good size business. I bet, I don't know how many customers. My biggest job was to wait on customers after I got married. I mean Cliff Otto and I, we practically run the place down there.

13:14:56

Q:

Who were some of your customers? Do you remember some regulars that used to come in all the time?

A:

It was mostly farmers around here. Then he sold lumber and there was a lot of pretty good size

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contractors. Well Bernice's cousin, she was a Sieferman. Well, the Sieferman's was builders and they used to buy a lot of lumber there. Then all the farmers around, local farmers, they come in and bought feed and then sold grain to him and that was about it I guess.

13:15:30

Q:

Great. Are we getting the wind a little bit? You want to redress the length?

Q:

Something we neglected to mention. Um, your sister who served in the Army nurse, as an Army nurse, what was her name?

A:

Ruth. Ruth Schwing that was her name. She was my oldest sister.

13:15:51

Q:

OK. Um, let's see. We were talking about Corson's, how you met Bernice, um, if you can tell us a little bit about your children.

A:

Well, we had two children. Linda and Cathy, both married. Linda taught school and she had two children a boy and a girl, Gus and Holly. She married Joe Viel, he's a carpenter and they live out of Bright Indiana. Linda died several years ago, 4 or 5 years ago I guess and Cathy, she was a nurse. And she lives up around Morgan Township and um, she, she has two children, a boy and a girl named Kevin Johnson and Sara Johnson and that's about it.

13:17:10

Q:

Good. OK.

A:

My eye itches.

Q:

Oh, sure that's fine. You should be comfortable. Um, OK let's get a little bit into building the plant when they started building Fernald, you were living right here in this area. Can you tell us a little bit about those years that they were building the plant?

A:

I remember when they started the plant because the contractor, he used to buy a lot of things from us down there. He run the road in then they started the, well there was a lot of contractors then that was building the buildings and that but other than that, no one seemed to know to, all they knew it was going to be an atomic energy plant. Everybody kind of figured it was going to help make the atomic

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bomb or something so other than that it's about all we knew. There was a lot of traffic you know lots of people were working there to build it.

13:18:16

Q:

When the government came in and they started buying up some of the land, did you know anybody who lost their land?

A:

Well, Arthur Fuchs. I think you said you mentioned Arthur Fuchs. He uh, they bought his ground and there was Ben Skull he had up on the other, Brookville Road I think it's called, they got his ground. Then they moved, they bought ground up along around Paddy Run Road and they moved those houses across the road from, a couple people that I knew they just moved their houses across the road and set them back up you know so that's about it I guess. I think there was only, there wasn't too many farms there that they took over that I know of.

13:19:15

Q:

What was your opinion of how they handled everything as far as building the plant and buying the ground up and everything?

A:

I think it was handled all right. There was no, I've never heard anyone talk or no complaints or anything about it. 'Cause these people they just went out and bought other ground and I know Pat Fuchs he moved to Indiana and bought a farm out there. He just seemed to get along all right.

13:19:43

Q:

And uh, once they started building the plant and things started happening, what purpose did you and your friends and your family think the plant was there to serve?

A:

They just thought it was atomic energy and then figured it was kind of, figured on, well most of the people I think thought it was atomic energy was coming. It was the atomic age and things were going to be just for preparation for you know defense or something like that.

13:20:18

Q:

Did plant personnel ever do any type of outreach come and talk to the community or anything like that?

A:

No, I don't believe so. I was kind of a hush hush deal when they were building it there you know.

13:20:35

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Q:

Now after a while you started to do some work with the Fernald site, can you tell us about that?

A:

Well, years later I went in to the fuel oil business. I used to haul a lot of fuel oil in the Fernald plant. At that time I knew quite a few of the people who worked there but I wouldn't know their names now but at that time I knew a lot of them. You had to stop at the guard gate when you went in and after a while of going in a lot, they got to knowing me there and they didn't question me quite so much but I could just, and fact is, in the winter when I was busy hauling fuel oil.

13:21:16

If there was a bunch of trucks in front of me in a line, guys at the guard knew me and they'd come down and get me and tell me to pass them all and go on in cause I knew where I was to go in there. They just kind of let me have free run. There was a guy who rode with me but he just sat in the truck and I guess that was his job you know to watch me as I went around and we just went around filled all the tanks and come back out. It was a good business for me.

13:21:51

Q:

Of the folks that you knew that worked at Fernald, did anybody ever tell you about their jobs?

A:

No, no one said what they ever did. I don't know if they knew themselves but no one ever talked about it at all much.

13:22:10

Q:

Um, and since the plant brought with it a lot of people, how did it change the community?

A:

I really don't think it changed the community much. It, sure it brought more people coming into work over there. A lot of them from Indiana drive through there. I know several of them worked there, well they did, they retired from there, they'd go past here and we got to knowing them, quite a few of them that worked over there. But they're all retired that I knew that worked over there.

13:22:51

Q:

Great. Um, let's see, I asked that question, I asked that question. Um, let's see, during those process years of course while they were making uranium, they were processing uranium, uh, what was your impression of the safety of having such a plant so close to your house?

13:23:21

A:

Well when they first started it, well I think it's really safe now, but when they first started it, there was a couple of building over there, in the evening, I'm not exaggerating, you could look out that kitchen

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window and there was a big pipe, and it just looked like sulfur coming out of there so thick, you know it was a smoke, and I won't say whether it was smoke but it was brown and it just looked like it was so thick it couldn't hardly get out of that pipe coming out it was just crawling out of there.

13:23:51

And it was going way up in the air. But they stopped that, I don't know, they must of finally got some other way to disperse of that I think.

13:24:00

Q:

And that was mostly during the night?

A:

Yeah in the evenings when they, I don't know how they held it that long, but it seemed like in the evening they'd dump it loose but other than that, I mean it's clean now, you never see anything. It was only that way for about maybe a month. But that was the truth. I mean, that's when they first started of course everything's under control now, I think.

13:24:29

Q:

Wow, and uh, a lot of people that I have talked to have mentioned the fact that since the plant was such an important part of defense, a lot of people were afraid that it might get bombed. What was your reaction to that danger?

13:24:46

A:

I never really thought of it. I didn't, I mean I never dreamed of it being bombed. After you mention that though it sounds like it could have been bombed but I never thought of it in that way at all.

13:25:02

Q:

I grew up right next to Wright-Patt so we always had that you know. (Comment - Oh, did ya?) They were always saying that we were on like the top 5 targets or something.

A:

Yeah, you could be up there. Wright-Patt up in Dayton?

Q:

Yeah, yeah so that's always interesting to me. I just have heard that from the last couple of interviews.

A:

They could have, now I never heard it, it never dawned on me that that could happen.

13:25:23

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Q:

What about the community's reaction to it um, just people that you knew, uh, from working at Corson's and from people that you knew in the area, what were a lot of your friends reactions to the plant?

13:25:35

A:

I don't think any one ever really condemned it, not that I know of any. It was brought a lot of employment in there while it was a going. But I don't think there was anyone that ever thought it was dangerous or anything. At least I didn't think it was, I don't know.

13:26:04

Q:

And what are your impressions of what is going on right now? The cleanup process at Fernald?

A:

I really don't know too much about that. It was, I guess they're shutting it down. I know a fellow that's over there, he told me, told us the other day, Pat, that it's going to take him 2 years to get this building that he's supposed to take down, they've gave him 2 years to get it torn down. So, that's about all I really know about it.

13:26:33

Q:

Um, what is your opinion of the whole idea of cleanup on that site?

A:

I really don't have much of an idea. I think, cause I told Bernice, if you take all the building down and let it set for a few years, Mother Nature will clean that up so good, they'll never know it's been there. I think, that's my theory now, I don't know.

13:27:00

Q:

That sort of leads me to my next question too, uh, with future land use, um, what would you like to see that ground used for in the future?

A:

I really don't know. Turn it back to farm ground or something, but they won't. See it's a, I guess the government owns that parcel of land and they'll probably do something with it. I don't know make a park or something. And then I've heard, what's his name, Schomaker, tell them about the Indians. I went down to one of those meeting one night down New Haven, he was talking about the Indians, they thought they might bury there, I really don't know. That's the first I heard of that.

13:27:49

Q:

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Now in the mid '80's um, you were speaking of living so close to the plant that you could see the smoke coming out of the stacks, um, there was a lot of media about a dust collector leak that happened in Plant 9, and Donahue came to town and all that stuff happened, uh, what was your reaction to the media coverage to that particular event?

13:28:16

A:

Well, golly, I don't even remember that but uh, my sister, I don't know whether this is just, could be a coincidence that I'm going to tell you, but on Lehigh Road, that's wind is prevailing westerly, from west to east, there was 6 house right there all in a row and I know everyone died of cancer on that. My sister and all the neighbors on that street died from cancer. Now I'm just a saying that, not that it caused it but it just seemed odd that everybody got cancer that lived on that street and they all died with it.

13:29:00

Q:

Did you ever hear, since you lived close to the plant, did you ever hear anything about the water supply?

A:

No, huh-uh. Of course, I'm on the west side and I got a well. My water's good and I'm not worried about it cause I think it flows down towards the river, that's what they say. I'm on the safe side of it, I think if it is flowing.

13:29:25

Q:

Right. I think we're going to take a break here just for a second. We're going to change tapes.

FLHP0039

14:01:05

Q:

How involved have you and your wife been about going to some of the public meetings and those types of things that Fernald puts on?

A:

I've never been to any of their meetings. The only meetings I go to is down there at New Haven to the, what do they call it? Historical Society, isn't it Jim? And, other than, I've never been to a Fernald meeting, never. I guess, I'm not worried about Fernald, I guess that's why I don't go to the meeting. Some people are really shook, but I'm not worried about Fernald. I think it's a pretty safe place myself.

14:01:47

Q:

What would you say to someone who was worried about the plant, like in the years that they were

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actually running the plant?

A:

I, I wouldn't tell them much. I'd tell them I wasn't afraid of it, I mean if I was working over there I wouldn't be afraid of it, cause I think it's a pretty safe plant, I don't know.

14:02:10

Q:

Uh, tell us a little bit about, since you served in the Army, uh, what is your opinion of what Fernald did as far as the defense of our country?

A:

I think when they started Fernald they was into the atomic energy stuff and I think they really needed it then because I think they were thinking there might be some atomic bombs used, which I guess they did on Hiroshima and some other place over there didn't they, 2 of them didn't they drop?

14:02:51

Other than that, but I think they found out how bad they were and that's, they thought against it because. But I think at first they thought it might turn in to be more of an atomic war. But I think now they found out how strong that was of a thing that they kind of dropping it now I believe.

14:03:20

Q:

And all those years that they're calling the Cold War years, um, when the plant was at its optimum, up to speed, tell us a little bit about those years, I mean, were you aware of any kind of threat from the Soviet Union or what was your opinion of that?

A:

I think there was a possibility but I wasn't too much concerned because I think one country was a little leery of what the other one could do and I think it was kind of a standoff there for a while. 'Cause those atomic bombs were pretty disastrous when they hit. Fact is, they did wipe out a couple of cities over in Japan didn't they? So.

14:04:15

Q:

Do you remember that? At the end of the war?

A:

No. I was out of the Army long before they dropped, I think when Japan, when they dropped those couple bombs it was kind of disastrous I think to those, wiped those whole towns out didn't it? So I think they found out then that they better not use them, they're too destructive.

14:04:46

Q:

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Is there anything that you'd like to add? Anything that we didn't talk about that you'd like to cover?

A:

No, I think you about covered everything. You're a good interviewer.

Q:

Thank you.

A:

You answered the good questions, I mean you asked the good questions.

Q:

Good. OK. Yeah, we're going to get a little bit of nat sound. So quiet on the set. This is nat sound.

14:05:57

Q:

OK, yeah we're rolling now, so can you tell us about the birds that fly over Fernald?

A:

Well, there was kind of smoke a going and uh, there was starlings, they were flying, they always flew in flocks, I'd say there's hundreds of them in a big bunch of them and the ones of them that got in the smoke, they just fell down, hit the ground. They were dead too when they hit the ground so it must have been pretty potent stuff that was, that they let loose on there.

14:06:23

But that's the only time now, I know they don't do that over there now because it's much farther advanced. Like I told you the smoke coming out of that pipe that time? You don't see that any more, it's, I think it's a safe plant now. Like everything, when they first start them, there's always things that's got to be taken care of afterwards.

14:06:50

Q:

You know something I forgot to ask you, um, we've imploded a number of plants, actual buildings on the plant, um, were you guys aware that that was happening?

A:

Imploded, you mean? I see, blew them up you mean? Uh, no I don't think, I've heard of it but I mean I didn't know myself know they were doing it.

14:07:18

Q:

Did you hear it?

A:

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I never heard a thing.

14:07:21

Q:

Huh. Cause we're not that far away, I've always kind of wondered that. OK. Was there anything else that you can think of?

A:

No.

Q:

Along that line of stories?