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Ben Morse oral history interview
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ECHO Project

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Note: Moments where the speakers are unintelligible are labeled with the audio file name and timestamp for listeners' reference (i.e. C34_05.wav, 03:34)

INTERVIEWER: I'm sitting in Ben Morse's living room in Essex, NY and today is July 17th at 9 in the morning and it's his recollections.

<break in audio>

BEN MORSE: …lived to grow up. I used to run across lots over the farm to meet my [C34_02.wav, 04:35]. I used to always leave something so I'd have an excuse to come back to her, to see her. Like my hat or cap or mittens if it was winter. And she never gave me the mittens. (laughter) She keep them. Well anyway, I went to a machine shop in 1916 to live with my uncle who was a minister, and my father wanted me to become a minister and live with him and see how things worked, but I saw the troubles, all the crying that was done on his shoulder, all the women that brought their troubles to him, laid them right on his shoulder, so that fixed me for not being a minister. I can do preaching, but not from a pulpit. Then I worked in a machine shop for nearly a year. Then I came back to the farm, worked for the Forestry Department pulling gooseberries for white pine blister rust. That's why there's no currants around the country--because it was all pulled out. Then the next winter I went to Cleveland to work with an electric company and I was there in Cleveland in the factory for 5 months, and then they sent me down to a Columbus, Ohio ranch and there I had a beautiful little butterfly with brown eyes for a stenographer/secretary. She was nice and she even asked me one time if I loved tweet tweet, and I said I did, but I said don't get too personal. That was that. I came from Columbus, tried to get in the navy the first World War and on account of my hearing I couldn't get in. By then the war was over and armistice was signed and so that's as near as I got to the army. Later on, in 1920 I married my tweet tweet, and then I've been fighting ever since, 55 years of it. I went into the mail service just before I was married and I did 38-1/2 million miles on the D&H between Albany and Montreal from 1920 to 1958, when I had to take my pension on account of health and I had to retire, and about the most thrilling train that ever happened was on the mail train to be entrusted with five bags of money going from Ottawa Bank to Jamestown, New York, where the flood. I had $11 million in my care and the two men that were working with me were both ill and I had the responsibility of it all myself, but I didn't even get a smell out of it. It was all in the bag. I didn't open the bags. I don't know whether

they'd trust me with that again or not. I'd hate to have the temptation. Think of all the taxes I saved by not taking it. Prison.

[Break in audio] [C34_03.wav, 00:03:17] born in [C34_03.wav, 00:03:17].

[C34_03.wav, 00:03:25 – Morse describing his father] As far as that, Ripley got wind of it. He had it in his Believe It or Not in all the syndicated papers in the United States. That was after he'd played for 65 years. Then shortly after that he had, 2 years I guess it was, he had a stroke and couldn't play any more. He lived until he was 85 years old. He grew up in the village of Essex and he knew a lot of stories that went on local. He loved to fish and he heard about this fish that somebody reported was washed up on the shore down by the Split Rock Mountain and he went down to view it on the shore as a lot of village people didn't, and it was the same size of a man, he said, would weigh over 200 pounds probably. So what kind of fish it was we don't know, and that's no fish story either. Because my father never told a lie, you know.

Our present library was the site of Belvin and Morris French kids shoes, hand made, and dad used to fish there on the bridge, and there's a big rock down there, which is where the brook that come down by the library and he used to hide behind that rock, throw his pole out and catch bullheads and eels—right there where the library brook empties into the lake, what's now the ferry dock.

[C34_04.wav, 00:00:17] break to [C34_04.wav, 00:00:24]

My mother was born in Westport, and her mother, her father and dad's cousin lived in Essex across from the post office, where the late Mrs. Sherman did live, and dad met her there and they were married in 1894, and then I had a sister born in 1895 and I came along in 1898. I don't remember just what day it was because I can't think anything more than when I was 3 years old. But mother and dad lived on the farm up 2-1/2 miles from the village and we used to have a horse and buggy and drive to church and the church socials and all the things that they had going on—the social activities before they had TV, and everybody sits in the house now and doesn't do anything except watch the TV.

[C34_04.wav, 00:01:47] break to [C34_04.wav, 00:01:56]

As school days went by, I went to a one-room schoolhouse, what is now the Middle Road to Willsboro, as we lived within half a mile of the Willsboro line, and while Mrs. Wells, our oldest citizen now, was a teacher for my sister. I visited my sister in the schoolhouse before I was old enough to go to school as we lived only three-quarters of a mile across the lots—the pastures—to get to the schoolhouse. When I started school, I stayed in the district school until I was 13 years old. Then I used to walk down to the Essex school across lots when the weather was good. If the weather was bad or in winter time, I went back to the district school. The old schoolhouse in Essex was that brick building up at the top of the hill, the back road, up back, well up the hill. Most everyone knows where it is. But it's been closed for years. I went there for 2 years of grade school and 2 years of high school. Then when they got Latin and French, I

quit. I went in and machine shopped. I couldn't stand that parlez vous and amou, amat, amas. From then on I didn't go to any more school, except I went through Oberlin College while my two cousins were out there and I was in Cleveland. I visited them one day and I went through in one day. It took them 4 years. (laughter) Well, that's schooling. And all the district schools now, they're all centralized as everyone knows, and they have buses now and the only bus I had was the automobile I made, and it was quite an attraction because everybody saw it coming and so did the horses. They didn't like the noise. Where the Unicorn Antique Shop is now, well that was our social center for dances and graduation classes and movies, and before I was married, in fact the first World War, in 1917 and 1918 we used to have benefit dances there for the Red Cross and for this, that and the other thing that were benefit dances, and we had a lot of fun, including masquerade parties. At one dance I was dancing with one of my classmates and the teacher came out on the floor and, "Excuse me, Ben, may I take Augusta out for a minute," and it turned out that Augusta's petticoat was coming off and she was dancing with me with no petticoat on. It went down around her feet.

One time I had a circle saw, home made of course, and I had a piece of frozen meat that I had to cut and tow, and I took it out with a circled saw. Well there was about as much meat on the ceiling of the shed where I had the circled saw as there was on the meat. (laughter) That's the way we grew up. Before I made the circled saw, I had this old engine that I made the automobile with and my brother and I hop on the farm. We'd be tested, turning the washing machine and the barrel churn to make the butter. I took the window out of the kitchen and I had the engine outside with a great big long belt to go around the washing machine in the kitchen. It was more work to handle that engine and keep the belt on than it was to turn the wheel for the washing machine.

In those days there was no sanitary systems around especially on the farmhouses, so we had to take our baths in the kitchen by dishing the hot water out of the stove reservoir into a big tin tub and scrub in the kitchen, and sometimes we shut the door and sometimes we wouldn't, and my sister who was 5 years younger than I, she had a little blue coat that she loved with brass buttons. She loved to take a bath. So I had just got out of the tub and was toweling myself when in comes Kitty with her little blue brass button coat on and she jumps right in the tub clothes and all and starts splashing the water she enjoyed her bath so much.

As for refrigeration on the farm, every winter we used to pack cakes of ice that we sawed out of the lake went it got to be 8 inches or more thick, and we used to put the sawdust in the icehouse, anywhere from 100 to 200 cakes of ice depending on the thickness of the ice, and when we wanted to keep anything cold we used to uncover a cake of ice from the sawdust and put whatever we wanted to refrigerate—butter or sausage or hams or whatever we wanted to preserve—we put in the icehouse and covered it. Of course we used a gunny sack or a burlap sack to protect the sawdust from getting on the meat, but I think we ate quite a bit of sawdust at that, which helped to improve the flavor of the meat of course. Just about like shredded wheat or cornflakes now or Wheaties. I used to go to the mill occasionally after thrashing time with buckwheat or corn and have it ground at the old gristmill, the old stone mill up at Willsboro on River Street or School Street, I don't know which it is now, the one that the British

tried to burn in the War of 1812. I think it was built in 1810. Well the remains of the building is there, but the old millwheel has stopped running for a long time now. We used to have corn mush from the cornmeal that we cracked and buckwheat pancakes from the buckwheat that was ground and the flour, and of course the midlands from the corn and the buckwheat. The shucks were all saved to feed the stock with. We used to get cracked corn to feed the chickens, which ran all over the farm and all over the house. In fact, one day I had three banty roosters and hens and mother was frying the pancakes, and one little banty hen flew in the back kitchen door and lit right on the pancake griddle. There wasn't any pancakes there, so she didn't leave her footprints. Our little hen, though, had sore feet for quite awhile. She didn't do much scratching around in the yard with the rest of the chickens. Another thing I had was three young crows and they were alright because they'd eat anything they could swallow. In fact, my brother give them hens buttons one time. They ate them right down just like they would scraps from the kitchen table. The crows weren't very popular with the chickens that was running around, and I had sprained an ankle and I was sitting in the chair on the porch and the crows saw me and they came to keep me company. One old hen with a chicken saw one crow light. She just made two jabs at the crow on the head and the crow died right then and there.

As far as doctors were concerned in the horse and buggy days, we had home remedies and everything from bear's oil to castor oil and what mother used to call salty tablets. I don't know what was in them, but anyone that got a sore throat or anything, they had to have salty tablets. Why I don't know. The medicine box was a tin box that [C34_06.wav, 01:20] powders came in and mother kept that on a top shelf of the pantry out of reach of children of course, but when children were sick mother could reach that medicine box and the children had to take it. One time I had a cold and mother thought I better have some castor oil, so I was outdoors playing with the engine and she come out with a bottle of castor oil and a tablespoon full of it. She poured and "Open your mouth Benny," so I did, and then I turned around and spit the castor oil out and she saw me do it. She says to my brother, 'Merit hand me that stick'. Well, I took the next castor oil and swallowed it.

[C34_06.wav, 00:02:09] break [C34_06.wav, 00:02:16]

It was pretty hard for the doctors to get up to the farm, which was 2-1/2 miles from the village, from Essex, and 3-1/2 miles from Willsboro, of which each town had a doctor. The old rutted clay and sand roads were pretty hard to travel over. Then the Essex doctor got an automobile, one of the first ones around. It was Dr. Frank Schwepp. We had the old buggy without the fills on it out the top of the hill on which we lived and we used to put a hitch rope on the buggy and slide down the hill, and at the foot of the hill was a lot of sand, and the doctor was pretty mad at us even though we pulled out the one side because he had to pull out of that sand rut, and when he got up to see dad he told him about the boys with that old buggy in the sand and he thought he was gonna ditch himself, but praise the Lord he didn't. Now that we have automobiles and go here and there and everywhere, we don't have any doctors. It's pretty hard now. You have to doctor yourself or else go to the hospital, which I've spent quite a few days in at times for surgery and serious operations, but I'm still kicking thanks to the doctors in

the hospitals, and that is one reason why I have given my body to science. I guess that will be all until the doctors get me again. Good bye.