Corwin Leeper & Mary A. Leeper Memoir

L520. Leeper, Corwin (1932-) and Mary A.
Interview and memoir
no tapes, 24 pp.

Corwin and Mary Leeper, residents of Illiopolis, discuss their life of farming for almost 50 years in central Illinois. Corwin discusses the many technological advances in agriculture over the years, and Mary provides insight into the life of a farm wife.

Interview by Scott Johnson, 2009
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Corwin Leeper & Mary A. Leeper Interview

Corwin & Mary A. Leeper
Interview and Transcript
1:02:00 recording (CD). 24 pages of transcript

Interview by Scott W. Johnson
HIS 520: Oral History Methods
Dr. McGregor
May 07, 2009
Interview Preface

This manuscript and methodology report is the product of two digitally recorded interviews conducted by Scott W. Johnson as an oral history project for HIS 520: Oral History Methods in the spring of 2009. All interviews and transcriptions were completed by Scott W. Johnson. The narrators of these interviews are Corwin and Mary A. Leeper of Illiopolis, IL. They are currently retired, residing in the Kelsen Heights subdivision of Illiopolis, IL. Corwin and Mary A. have been married happily married since 1955.

The interviews were held at the Leepers home. The first session was March 25th, 2009 and the second session was held April 28th of the same year. The interview was created to discuss farming, Illiopolis, Niantic, and the changes that have occurred in the area over time. Corwin Leeper was chosen as a narrator because he was raised in the local area on a small farm which he inherited later in his life.

Corwin Leeper was born on October 5th, 1932. He was raised on a country farm located on Acom Rd. just south of Niantic or southeast of Illiopolis. He had one sister who was fourteen years younger than him. In 1953-54, Corwin was sent to Korea in the military. Once he returned, he married Mary Alice Hastings in 1955. Corwin inherited the family farm once his parents passed away, modestly increasing his lands through purchase over time. He personally farmed this land until 1999. Over the course of his career, Corwin has seen changes in agriculture such as advancements in technology and changes in the local landscape. Mary A. provides some insight into the organizations in which the family participated in as well as some of her experiences as the wife of a farmer.
Interview Methodology

When preparing for this interview, several steps were taken to ensure a positive experience for both the narrators and the interviewer. General farming practices were researched and discussed with a Charles Johnson, a relative of the interviewer and a local farmer who was raised in the same area as the Leepers. Some details concerning the Leepers were discussed with several individuals who knew them well prior to the initial interview as well. Beyond the farming practices and the narrators, the interviewer also researched the history of Illiopolis and Niantic, IL.

Questions were created with the intentions of being simple and straightforward. Questions concerning private or personal matters were not asked out of respect for the narrators' privacy. Some personal questions were changed to promote a general answer concerning group relations between farmers during certain periods of the narrators' lives. Approximately 172 questions were posed in order to paint a picture of Corwin Leepers life growing up on and eventually owning a farm near Niantic and Illiopolis.

A meeting with the Leepers was arranged prior to the first session of interviews in order to discuss the project. This discussion included the objectives of the interview, the personal goals of the interviewer, and the addressing of any concerns that the narrators might have to being recorded. Corwin was provided a copy of the questions that were to be asked during the first session so that he may review them and reflect on what he remembered prior to the recordings.

The interviews took place in the dining room of the Leepers' current home in Kelsen Heights in Illiopolis, IL. This site was chosen due to the comfort of the home
atmosphere for the narrators and its proximity to the interviewer made it the most practical choice for the interviews to take place.

The first interview took place on March 25th, 2009. Corwin was the sole narrator during this recording. Prior to recording, the objectives of the project were stated and concerns were addressed. Corwin Leeper signed the release papers for the interview prior to recording. The interview followed a question and answer style of format. This interview lasted for approximately 46 minutes.

The second interview took place on April 28th, 2009. This interview was narrated by Corwin and Mary A. Leeper. Much like the first session, the objectives and expectations of the project were stated and concerns were addressed. Mary A., though nervous of being recorded, was willing to participate in the project. Mary A. signed the release papers for the interview prior to the recording. This interview addressed answers from the first interview which needed more detail and specific events that the narrators could recall, as well as the couple's participation in local organizations throughout their lives.

The recording and transcripts were reviewed by both narrators and the interviewer in order to make sure that all information was being provided accurately and to the approval of the narrators. During this session, additional information which afterthoughts of the previous interviews was provided. The information was retained and is provided in the transcript.
Transcription Methodology

The transcriptions of the interviews follow the same question and answer format which took place during the recording. Since people rarely talk in the same manner which words and sentences are written, the transcription of the recordings attempted to make the narrative comprehensible while retaining the character of the narrators and the interviewer. With this in mind, it was decided to remove all sounds and noises which were not words. It is common for individuals to make noises to transition from one word to another or from one idea to another. Thus if these noises had been retained, the transcription would be riddled with guttural utterances and verbal garbage such as “uh” and “umm.” One exception was made concerning these noises. “Mmhhmm” was retained since it is an affirmative sound. When read in the transcription, “mmhhmm” should be seen as another form of “yes.”

Since people do not use punctuation in their everyday speech, it is difficult to insert such into the transcription. In an attempt to be constant throughout the script, commas have been used to separate two words which are the same such as “yeah, yeah” or commas have been inserted to suggest a shift in ideas or change in the line information in mid-sentence such as, “as far as that’s concerned, and a drill too as far as...” Periods were used in a number of ways throughout the transcription. A single period indicates an ending of a sentence or thought which had a brief pause before the next thought. Multiple periods indicate long pauses in the speech of the recording. Three periods is the standard that has been used to indicate any significant pause. The number of periods does not correlate with the length of the pause.
Beyond punctuations, there are a number of italicized sentences indicate by a (*).

This is information that was provided by the narrators after the recordings during the review session. It was their expectation that this information be provided within the text of the transcript as well. Other italicized information provided in the transcript is information that supplements the statements made by the narrators through the research of the interview.

The finalized versions of these recordings and transcriptions provide a great detail of insight into the life of Corwin Leeper and the changes that he has seen occur in farming and across the central Illinois landscape during his long career as a farmer. It is with great respect for Corwin and Mary A. Leeper, that these narratives be preserved within the archives of the University of Illinois Springfield.
Bibliography:
(Does not include private discussions)

Ball, Thelma. *The Prairie City*
Unknown Publisher. 2006


accessed: May 1, 2009
Interview with Corwin Leeper: Session 1

Interviewer: Scott Johnson
Session: 1 of 2
Narrator: Corwin Leeper
Institution: University of Illinois- Springfield
Session End: 46:02

Johnson: Hello, my name is Scott Johnson; this is the interview with Corwin Leeper concerning his life of farming and living in Illiopolis, Illinois. Today is March 25, 2009. So let's begin. Okay Corwin, can you please tell me when you were born?

Leeper: In October 5, 1932.

Johnson: October 5, 1932. Okay, how long have you lived in the area?

Leeper: Around here, 17 years in Illiopolis.

Johnson: Before you lived in Illiopolis you lived outside in.

Leeper: I lived out here, well out in the country as far as that goes. Here east of Illiopolis out in the country.

Johnson: On Acom Rd.?

Leeper: Yep, that goes on South, yep.

Johnson: Okay….Now, at what age did you start helping your family out on the farm?

Leeper: Probably when I was about 15.

Johnson: How many brothers did you have?

Leeper: No brothers, 1 sister.

Johnson: 1 sister. Her name was?

Leeper: Mary Jane.

Johnson: Now what was your typical day of farm chores during your childhood?

Leeper: Oh, you fed hogs and you helped with milking the cows and you helped with machinery repair, grinding feed for the hogs, cattle, and chickens livestock.

Johnson: Now did these chores differ any from your sister's?
Leeper: Oh, yeah yeah, she never did anything like that cause she was about 14 years younger than me as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Oh, Okay, well when she became about 15 what type of chores did she do generally, do you remember?

Leeper: Not, not particularly anything, nope.

Johnson: Now, how many hours would you say you worked in an average day?

Leeper: Probably 8 to 10, I imagine.

Johnson: and this is primarily helping your father on the farm?

Leeper: that’s right.

Johnson: Did he have you do anything on your own when you were 15 or was it all basically under his supervision?

Leeper: Well it was…..basically under his supervision I imagine as far as that goes.

Johnson: Now do you recall how your father taught you to do farm work?

Leeper: Well, just about seeing how he had done things to start with mainly as far as that goes. And, and telling me and showing me what to do, what kind of implement, what we was going to be doing, maybe as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Okay, so he explained farming techniques and he also kind of; you learned by example?

Leeper: That’s right, he was a good teacher as far as that goes. When I started out he was always there with me. He was very knowledgeable about mechanics and electricity. He was a good teacher as far as that goes.

Johnson: Okay, now from what you recall what were some of the implements that your father used for farming?

Leeper: 3 bottom plow, 10 or 12 foot discs, and of course then sickle barbed ______ as far as that’s concerned, and a drill too as far as that’s concerned, and then we had John Deere tractors and a Case tractor, or Case tractors.

Johnson: Now, so your farm was, in your childhood your farm was fairly mechanized, you didn’t use any livestock for…..

Leeper: No, nope.
Johnson: ....Agriculture?

Johnson: How (Leaper coughs), How many acres did your family farm when you were a child?

Leeper: Somewhere around 300.

Johnson: Did this increase when you grew older or did it stay about the same?

Leeper: Well it increased some when I got older due to different things going on as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: (5:03) What were the types of crops that your father grew?

Leeper: Corn, beans, wheat, oats, and alfalfa too as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Did you guys also have a garden for personal use or was everything used for commercial purpose?

Leeper: Did you say a garden?

Johnson: Yeah.

Leeper: Yeah, we had a garden, yeah, yeah.

Johnson: Did your father use special types of fertilizer or chemicals to enhance yields?

Leeper: Not originally, he didn’t ‘til later on in the, oh late 50’s I imagine it was, yep. That’s when, that’s when fertilizer started becoming more particular, I mean more popular as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Can you tell me which type of company he used generally or was it…

Leeper: Do you mean the fertilizer?

Johnson: Yeah.

Leeper: Oh, he used 1846, and of course lime. Then later on he used chemical. That was 24D for spraying corn as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Now what type of, where did your father purchase his seed from? Did he use Dekalb which was a locally grown?

Leeper: Well yeah, the seed corn company Dekalb, yeah, at that time.
Johnson: Where did your family store their harvest?

Leeper: Mainly in the crib. The corn went in the crib 'til later on (cough) when we got the combine then we could thrash stuff we had stored. We put beans in a bin at that time and corn too as far as that's concerned. Drying it down.

Johnson: Was this located on your farm or?

Leeper: Yeah, well yeah, on our farm yeah, yeah.

Johnson: So you never used any of the grain bins in town, in Niantic or Illiopolis?

Leeper: Nope.

Johnson: Can you recall any specific moments in your childhood where there were economic hardships due to failed crops?

Leeper: Well there's... well there be the weather I think that might mess up a crop and reduction, yield of it as far as that goes. And of course in WWII, they had shortages of coffee, and sugar like that, gasoline too. And of course at that time you was awarded stamps for the, for these products. After the war farm products were higher too as far as that's concerned.

Johnson: So the... gas coupon, like the shortage of gas, how did that impact the farm?

Leeper: Well, you just kind of rationed as far as that's concerned. As far as the number of gallons that you got, depending on how, what time of year it was and what was going on as far as that's concerned.

Johnson: Okay, so you were still able to manage the farm fairly well with the amount of gas rationed to you?

Leeper: Yep.

Johnson: Now, beyond crops, what type of livestock did you have on your childhood farm?

Leeper: Chickens, hogs, milk cows, and feeder calves or feeder stuff as far as that goes.

Johnson: Was this livestock meant for family use or, such as the hens for eggs, or was it primarily for commercial sale?

Leeper: Well... Oh, the hogs and cattle stuff like that were meant for sale as far as that's concerned. Then chickens and like that was...... I sold eggs to the hatchery as far as that goes, butchered the hogs and also sold them in the stockyards like in St. Louis or Springfield.
Johnson: (10:06) Was this fairly common for most the farms around the area? Did they all have Livestock during this period of time?

Leeper: At that time they did yeah.

Johnson: Okay, and was it also primarily hens and some livestock for family use and other livestock for commercial use, or was it, yours more unique in terms of sale?

Leeper: Well, to speak of to some extent it was for family use but mainly it was for sale otherwise as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Now you said you sold some of your cattle and hogs to stockyards in St. Louis, how did you transport them there? Did you use the railroad?

Leeper: No, dad had a truck, we hauled them down there.

Johnson: How long, like, how long did a trip like that take?

Leeper: Oh, that day in age, take probably….. 6 hours or 7 probably, I imagine. We’d leave late in the afternoon going down there and then by the time you got down there and got unloaded and got back home why it would be 10 o’clock, 11, midnight by the time you got back home as far as that goes I imagine.

Johnson: Okay, besides commercial sales, did you use any livestock for show?

Leeper: Well, I showed hogs when I was in 4-H as far as that goes, and FFA but that was about the end of it.

Johnson: How long were you in 4-H.

Leeper: Probably, maybe 4 years, something like that I imagine.

Johnson: Now, did your family hire help on the farm?

Leeper: Oh yeah, yep.

Johnson: Do you know how many on average, how many hired hands did your father hire?

Leeper: Most usually just 1.

Johnson: Just 1……..What were your mother’s duties on the farm?
Leeper: Oh she just, she did some of the work out in the garden as far as that goes and of course she had the eggs that she took care of as far as picking up as far as that goes and selling them like that as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Were there any new technologies or concepts used on your farm that were a result of WWII that you know of?

Leeper: Not ’til later on, no.

Johnson: Now did you inherit these lands or purchase them to begin your own farming business?

Leeper: mainly inherited them.

Johnson: Okay, Now, where did you attend school at in your childhood?

Leeper: At Pleasant Grove, I went through there, that up until the 8th grade, mean I went through there ‘til the 8th grade and I went to the Mt. Auburn at the high school then.

Johnson: The Mt. Auburn High School?

Leeper: yeah.

Johnson: Where was Pleasant Grove located in relation to your house?

Leeper: About a….oh about short a mile from us.

Johnson: And that was a country school?

Leeper: Yep.

Johnson: Was it one classroom or was it……

Leeper: Just one room, yep.

Johnson: One room, one teacher?

Leeper: Yep.

Johnson: (15:00) Now did school conflict with your farm chores?

Leeper: Nope.

Johnson: Can you recall any experiences that you had at Pleasant Grove?

Leeper: Nope, just went there to school about the main thing.
Johnson: Okay, about how large was the class size?

Leeper: Did you say the class size?

Johnson: Yeah.

Leeper: 1 or 2 mainly.

Johnson: And you worked along side 1st graders, 2nd graders?

Leeper: Oh yeah, It was all in the same building like that, there weren’t any partitions or anything like that. When you, when you had a class come up, you went to the front of the room like then you told the teacher and asked the questions and done the work as far as that goes.

Johnson: Do you recall who your teacher was at Pleasant Grove?

Leeper: Well.........well, not off hand, be right honest about it, I was trying to think of it, think of her name, I can’t tell ya.

*Corwin Leeper had three teachers while attending Pleasant Grove. One of the teacher’s names was Eva Copenbarger.

Johnson: That’s okay, now what were the relations between the various local farmers during your childhood?

Leeper: Well they...they more or less. Would you say that again on...?

Johnson: Oh, now what was like the relationships between the various local farmers during your childhood?

Leeper: And they done their own work mainly as far as that’s concerned, if someone needed some help or like that they’d pitch in and give a little help as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Was a majority of the land owned by local small farmers?

Leeper: Yeah.

Johnson: And these farmers did help one another with planting and harvesting?

Leeper: Yep, Yep.

Johnson: Did your family purchase any new implements during your childhood that significantly changed the way that you farmed?
Leeper: Well, Oh, in 1950 or mid 1960’s or somewhere along there was a self-propelled combine.

Johnson: And this was an improvement over?

Leeper: The old kind you pulled with a tractor as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Now, how much easier did this make harvesting?

Leeper: Well it…….took less work to get the combine ready for the fields, I mean in the fields, didn’t have to truck it, put the header on it or doing something like that as far as that’s concerned. With it being self-propelled that a way, you pulled into the field and started cutting or threshing or whatever as far as that’s concerned.

*During our review session Corwin Leeper remembers that prior to purchasing the self-propelled combine, fields had to be opened up by hand. This is to say, the rows of crop around the field needed to be shucked by hand in order for the tractor to enter the field.

Johnson: Okay, Can you think of any other implements that changed farming when you were a child?

Leeper: No not really.

Johnson: Okay, Now how often did you go into Illiopolis when you were a child?

Leeper: Well, not very often, went to Niantic more than we did Illiopolis as far as that’s concerned cause my grand dad lived in Niantic.

Johnson: Alright, so was it primarily just to visit your grandfather or?

Leeper: (20:01) Yep.

Johnson: Now how often would you say you went into Niantic?

Leeper: Probably at least once a week I imagine.

Johnson: What were some of the businesses that existed Niantic during your childhood?

Leeper: They had grocery stores and a gas station and a food locker, and that’s it, that’s the main things in Niantic. But the Illiopolis had the food locker as far as that’s concerned, freezer place you could store your products in.

Johnson: Alright, do you recall any of the names of these businesses?
Leeper: No not really, no.

Johnson: Now Illiopolis had Bickenbach’s during the 1950’s.

Leeper: Mmhhmm, they had a, of course Illiopolis had a hardware store, and a drug store, and a blacksmith shop, and they had of course a filling station too as far as that’s concerned, and a dry goods store, and meat locker, and 2 grain elevators, and a dentist office too, and the bank, there was a lot more or a lot bigger than Niantic was as far as what businesses was there as far as that’s concerned. Of course Niantic had a, just the filling station and grain elevator and the grocery store and the implement dealer, and telephone office was the main thing that they had as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Now what was it like visiting Niantic in your childhood? Was there, I mean you named off some of the businesses but were there forms of entertainment?

Leeper: About the only thing in Niantic was the free movies as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: And where was that at?

Leeper: Out in the one side of town, and a screen was up on the side of a barn.

Johnson: Oh okay, was it something that was hosted by a family or was it actually a theatre that somebody owned?

Leeper: No it just, I don’t know, it was just hosted by a person that lived there in Niantic as far as that goes.

Johnson: Now Illiopolis had several forms of entertainment?

Leeper: Oh yeah, they had a, they had the, well they had of course the, and movie theatre from across the bank was the main thing as far as that’s concerned that Niantic didn’t have was the main thing, that’s about all I know.

Johnson: Okay and that was the old opera house?

Leeper: they had a…… No, they just had the theatre.

(*)The theatre had been built in the building where the opera House once existed. Information found in: Kaylor, Howard, Ertl, Wilson. Illiopolis Sesquicentennial: 150 Year Reminiscence 1856-2006 (Dexter, MI; Thomas-Shore Inc. 2006)

Johnson: Okay… now do you remember what Illiopolis was like in general before the construction of the war plant?

Leeper: Well it was pretty quiet really and then later on it was pretty busy as far as that’s concerned. More houses got built and the North staff areas and Kelson Heights were
added to it as far as size of it goes due to the number of people involved in the war plant as far as that goes.

**Johnson:** Do you have any stories concerning your visits to Illiopolis or Niantic, anything that you can recollect?

**Leeper:** Not particularly.

**Johnson:** How old were you when you went to Korea?

**Leeper:** 21.

**Johnson:** Were you still working for your father when you left?

**Leeper:** That’s right, yep.

**Johnson:** Did you start your own farming business once you returned, or did you return back to farm under him?

**Leeper:** (25:06) Oh, farm underneath him as far as that’s concerned.

**Johnson:** When did you acquire the family farm?

**Leeper:** Ohhh….probably about ’75, 1975 I imagine.

**Johnson:** As your own boss what were some of your new duties that you had to do to maintain your farm?

**Leeper:** Oh, general upkeep on the fences and building repair, machinery repair, and seed purchases. I was a Jacque’s Seed dealer and therefore I got the seed a little bit less when you was a dealer that a way.

**Johnson:** Oh, so you were a, you were a seed dealer as well as a farmer?

**Leeper:** Yep.

**Johnson:** Okay……Can you tell me a little bit about dealing seed in the 1970’s?

**Leeper:** Well, you just contacted the different farmers around to see what there need was going to be, how many bushel, or how many bags they wanted as far as that’s concerned, and told them about the different numbers or what, what, or how good the numbers was or what the situation might be on the number as far as that goes.

**Johnson:** And which company did you work for? Which Seed Company?

**Leeper:** Jacque’s.
Johnson: Jacque’s.

Leeper: J-A-C-Q-U-E-S.

Johnson: Okay....Now just to back track a little bit, Anhydrous Ammonia became popular in the 1950’s. Did your father use this whenever he was farming?

Leeper: Mmhmm, yep.

Johnson: Okay.....Now no tillage agriculture became popular in the 1970’s. Did you ever practice this method of farming?

Leeper: Oh yeah.

Johnson: What were some of the advantage, advantages of no tillage agriculture compared to what you had done previously?

Leeper: You didn’t have to, to plow the ground, you could take the chisel plow out there and tear the ground up and work it down from that point on instead of plowing up and going through all the process of, of letting it lay there, letting it dry so on and so forth, that before you do anything else to it.

Johnson: Okay so it was much more time efficient?

Leeper: Yep, that’s right.

Johnson: Did no tillage agriculture help improve yields?

Leeper: (28:04) Mmm, it probably did in the long run, yeah.

Johnson: What were some of the major implement purchases you made in your early years as an independent farmer?

Leeper: Well, we had a DC Case tractor and a Case 400, and we bought another grain truck, we had to, oh, what they call bean buggies that you could ride to clean the weed, cut the weeds out of the bean stock as far as that’s concerned, be the main thing really as far as I know.

Johnson: Okay...how did these improve your farm?

Leeper: Well, it probably made it more efficient in the long run I imagine, as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Okay...
Leeper: Of course it saved time and labor too as far as that's concerned.

Johnson: Are there any stories that you can recall concerning these purchases, or any major problems that you had with any of the implements?

Leeper: Mmmm, no not really.

Johnson: What was the general maintenance on bean buggies?

Leeper: Mmmm (cough), just a little bit of oil and stuff like that as far as the chain goes and mainly general upkeep.

Johnson: Now as time progressed, how did the landscape change?

Leeper: Well main thing was I-72 went through took out, lost about 20 acres of ground when it went through out there as far as that goes.

Johnson: When did I-72 come through your farm? Do you remember?

Leeper: '74 I think it was.

Johnson: Now did they dig any borrow pits?

Leeper: Not on us they didn't.

Johnson: Okay.

Leeper: There was some along out there as far as that's concerned. East end there was a borrow pit and of course over there on Tobe Johnson there was a borrow pit but that's it as far as that's concerned.

(*)Clifford (Tobe) Johnson was a neighbor of Corwin Leeper who lived nearby. He is the grandfather of the interviewer.

Johnson: How were you compensated for the 20 acres you lost to the interstate?

Leeper: Well they come in there and evaluated the grounds to start with, the state did, and that's what you got paid as far as that's concerned.

Johnson: (31.07) Do you remember how much they evaluated the acreage for?

Leeper: I imagine it was probably somewhere about $500 an acre along that order I imagine probably.

Johnson: Do you think this was a fair price?
Leeper: (laughs) well probably at the time it was I suppose.

Johnson: Okay... Now did you see any changes in the families that farmed the local area or was much of the land still owned by the same families?

Leeper: Still owned by the same families really.

Johnson: Okay, so sons took on their fathers farms?

Leeper: That's right.

Johnson: Were farms expanding during this time? 1970’s early 1980’s?

Leeper: well to some extent I imagine but not too much at that time no.

Johnson: So would you say there was a reduction in the number of farmers in the local area compared to your childhood?

Leeper: Yep, sure, they oh, they either died or they inherited, I mean the ground changed somewhat as far as the people themselves concerned, so there wasn't as many of them around no.

Johnson: When did absentee farming/ absentee landownership begin to increase in Illiopolis and Niantic areas?

Leeper: Probably the '70's, 1970 to 1980 I imagine.

Johnson: Okay... How do you think this affected the local communities?

Leeper: Well...mainly cause people got their larger equipment because they had less time otherwise to have there, to have two farms as far as that goes.

Johnson: Do you know of any state or national legislation which had an effect on your farming business?

Leeper: At that time they had farm programs went into effect. They had the LDP’s and other ASCS payments for when the grain prices got down and they was lower as far as that goes, yep.

Johnson: When would you say you saw larger landowners establish themselves where... let me rephrase that, excuse me. When did large landowners begin to start farming the surrounding area rather than smaller landowners?

Leeper: I imagine probably in the ... I imagine probably somewhere in the 80’s somewhere along there probably.
Johnson: How did the increased acreage of farms affect farming relationships?

Leeper: Well they didn’t have as much time otherwise to spend on farming as far as that’s concerned ‘cause they were more involved with taking care of their own farm, that be about the main thing that I know of.

Johnson: Okay, so there was a drop in the level of support for farmers, farmers saw level of support drop that you had previously seen in your childhood?

Leeper: Oh yeah.

Johnson: Alright, now can you tell me when you were married?

Leeper: 1955.

Johnson: And you married? What’s her name?

Leeper: Mary Alice Hastings.

Johnson: How many children do you have?

Leeper: 3, a girl and two boys.

Johnson: What impact did marriage have on your farm?

Leeper: Well...Well...Guess just getting started with everything as far as I know.

Johnson: What were some of the advantages to having children on the farm?

Leeper: Well... Only thing I can think of is it taught them to be more independent as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: Now when your sons were about 15 did they begin helping you with farming?

Leeper: (37.14) That’s right, in the field and on the machinery, yep.

Johnson: Okay, now when your daughter was 15, what type of chores did she have?

Leeper: Well...she probably helped...well...just helped take care of the house more than anything I suppose I mention maybe right.

Johnson: Okay, so her chores differed from your sons?

Leeper: Well the boys helped out on the farm and workin’ in the fields and she helped around the house as far as that goes.
Johnson: Okay...Now did Mary A. help perform any of the farm chores?

Leeper: Well just mainly in the garden as far as that goes.

Johnson: Now did you raise livestock on your farm?

Leeper: That's right, hogs and cattle both.

Johnson: Okay, did you have any hens or chickens?

Leeper: At one time we had chickens yeah.

Johnson: Now were these used for family or for commercial sale?

Leeper: Well on the chicken part, we sold the eggs at one time as far as that's concerned. The livestock, we sold them to different stockyards, I mean to different companies I guess for like butchering I guess as far as that goes.

Johnson: Okay...Now did you or any of your children show any of the livestock that you owned?

Leeper: Well they showed some of the calves as far as that goes yeah.

Johnson: What are the, what are some of the significant changes that you have seen occur in Illiopolis?

Leeper: Well there's not the people in the town like there used to be as far as that's concerned due to the change in the different businesses in town as far as, they've got less or quit as far as that's concerned, that be the main thing. There's not a hardware store in Illiopolis anymore, the lumber yards gone too, theatres gone, car dealerships gone, everything more or less went by the way side really.

Johnson: Why do you think many of these businesses closed down?

Leeper: Well, they...people just went to Decatur or Springfield to buy stuff rather than buying here I imagine.

Johnson: So it was easier to got to Springfield or Decatur to make their purchases rather than?

Leeper: I imagine that's right, yeah.

Johnson: Okay...What are some of the changes you have seen in Niantic over time?

Leeper: Well the...oh...the...used to have a grocery store they don't have anymore really as far as that goes. They still got one over there but its not like the one they used to
have up there put it that away and the hardware store and stuff like that’s not there anymore and the only thing that’s left over there is the bank really as far as that’s concerned.

**Johnson:** What made you choose agriculture for a career?

**Leeper:** I guess cause I’ve always been around it really and always had done that as far as that’s concerned.

**Johnson:** What did you like about farming?

**Leeper:** Being independent, being able to at the time being able to do things more or less on your own that you want to. That’s the main thing I know.

**Johnson:** What did you dislike about farming?

**Leeper:** Well...mainly cause you might be spreading chemicals that are unhealthy as far as that’s concerned plus the weather on the other side of it didn’t always cooperate whenever you was doing fieldwork, and a lot of times the market was unstable too as far as that’s concerned. Main thing that I know.

**Johnson:** *(43:10)* By the time you retired how large was your farming operation?

**Leeper:** Say how large?

**Johnson:** Yeah, how many acreage, what was the acreage?

**Leeper:** Oh probably...probably 400 acres in some sense or manner I imagine.

**Johnson:** So while you were farming you did purchase some additional land?

**Leeper:** yeah, well inherited would be a better word for it I imagine.

*During our review, Corwin states that some land was purchased as well.*

**Johnson:** Okay...Now what are your feelings on genetically altered crops?

**Leeper:** Well...they do good because they, there, they probably get a better yield out of them I imagine and you got more disease resistance in them too as far as that’s concerned.

**Johnson:** When you were farming did you use Jacques Seeds your entire career or did you use other seed companies?

**Leeper:** Well we still used other seed companies as far as that’s concerned, we used mainly Jacques.
Johnson: Does Jacques still exist?

Leeper: Lets see...No they been bought out by another company now, I cant think the name of it but they bought out.

(*)During our review, Corwin Leeper believed that Jacques Seed was bought out by Mycogen Seeds.

Johnson: Now when you were farming what types of crop did you grow?

Leeper: Corn and beans, wheat, oats mainly.

Johnson: (45.15) Okay, so the same things your father had on the farm?

Leeper: Yep.

Johnson: Is there anything that you would like to say in addition to the questions that I’ve asked?

Leeper: Nah, not really, no.

Johnson: Okay, well thank you for your time today. I appreciate the answers that you provided and...

Leeper: Were they good answers?

Johnson: Huh?

Leeper: I said was they good answers?

Johnson: They’re fine, they’re absolutely fine. And I look forward to scheduling another meeting with you.

Leeper: That right?

Johnson: Right.

Leeper: Got questions then?

Johnson: Yes (End Tape at 46:02)
Interviewer: Scott W. Johnson  
Session: 2 of 2  
Narrator: Corwin Leaper & Mary A. Leaper  
Institution: University of Illinois- Springfield  
Session End: 16:02  

Johnson: hello my name is Scott Johnson. This is the second session of the interview with Corwin Leaper concerning his life of farming and living in Illiopolis, IL. Today is Tuesday, Mar...April 28th at 1:20 pm. We are currently, Mary A., Corwin Leeper’s wife is in the room with us so and she will be providing some information as well. Alright so let us begin. Now, during our last session Corwin you told me about the LDP and the ASCS government programs. What were these benefits?  

Mary Leeper: LDP. The LDP program.  

Corwin Leaper: LDP, the LDP program they made up the price on the grain from what the loan price was and the market price was going to amount to. If the loan price was say 2 dollars a bushel and the market price was only a $1.85 and they would make up the 15 cent difference in there.  

Johnson: What did LDP stand for?  

M. Leeper: Loan Deficiency.  

C. Leeper: Loan Deficiency payment.  

Johnson: And the ASCS?  

C. Leeper: That was Agricultural Stabilization Committee Services.  

Johnson: Okay, and that was the.....  

M. Leeper: An organization.  

Johnson: that was an organization. Now, how did they help you specifically?  

C. Leeper: They handled the... What they handle. what they pay for the whole thing I guess I suppose.  

M. Leeper: They handled the paperwork and then they figured the amount of money that we were owed.  

C. Leeper: Okay, Alright.  

M. Leeper: And then we were paid that extra amount of money.
Johnson: Okay, Now were, did, were these programs used year to year or?

M. Leeper: Mmhmm.

C. Leeper: Mmhmm, yeah, yeah right.

Johnson: Okay. Alright now concerning Mary A., did she work outside of the home?

M. Leeper: After 1974 I did partly because of the crop failure in 1974 and then we had three children that would be going to college so I went to work and worked for 9 years at A.E. Staley in Decatur.

(*) Statistics show a significant decrease in the bushel per acre of Illinois farmland in 1974. The statistical source shows that the average corn bushel per acre was 89.8 in 1974, previously being 120 bushels per acre in 1973. Information found at: http://www.farmdoc.uiuc.edu/manage/pricing/Picture.asp

Johnson: Okay, had you previously worked for this company beforehand?

M. Leeper: Yes I had, when before we were married and afterward I worked there for 5 years from 1952 to 1957.

Johnson: Alright, now you mentioned the crop failure that occurred in 1974. Corwin, can you please tell me what happened? What occurred?

C. Leeper: We just had a....

M. Leeper: We were late planting.

C. Leeper: We had a late Spring to start with, then we had a lot of rain that summer which made things a lot later as far as that goes.

M. Leeper: And then an early frost.

C. Leeper: Then an early frost that fall is what really put the cap on it as far as that’s concerned cause it just killed everything right on the spot.

Johnson: Okay, Now how did the, how did this affect your farm? .....I know that was a broad question. Did you lose all of your crop?

M. Leeper: No, most, a lot.

C. Leeper: Well yep but....

M. Leeper: We did harvest some.
C. Leeper: Well we harvested some as far as that goes yeah but it was just, it was immature really as far as that goes. The crop was.

Johnson: Mmhmm.

C. Leeper: Especially beans, and corn was, was, hadn’t fully matured like it should really as far as that goes.

Johnson: Okay, and what type of strains did this put on the farm in terms of income?

C. Leeper: It greatly reduced the income cause it didn’t have the yield there as far as that’s concerned.

M. Leeper: And at that time there was no federal crop insurance.

C. Leeper: Yep, nope, and no crop insurance on top of it.

Johnson: Okay, did you have to cut back on your lifestyle or were you able to continue with the type of lifestyle that.....

C. Leeper: Life, Lifestyle got cut back considerably but by the same token that’s when the wife went back to work so that helped pick back up the crop, the money part.

Johnson: Okay, now how did other farmers react to this failure?

M. Leeper: About the same way.

C. Leeper: About the same way.

Johnson: Okay.

C. Leeper: and they just didn’t have the income, in fact some of them was worse off if they didn’t have any source of income otherwise coming in.

Johnson: Okay.

M. Leeper: Many of our neighbors’ wives went to work that year.

C. Leeper: Yep, that’s when Betty went to driving the school bus.

(*) Betty Johnson is the surviving wife of Clifford Johnson and grandmother to the interviewer. She was neighbors with Leapers until they moved into Kelsen heights.

Johnson: Alright, do you know how far spread the damage was or was it something that just occurred in central Illinois or was it more statewide?
M. Leeper: It was statewide.

C. Leeper: Statewide I would say at least this ways south probably. Oh, wait a minute.

M. Leeper: It was pretty much statewide.

C. Leeper: Statewide I would say.

Johnson: And was there any government aid provided to help the... (farmers)?

M. Leeper: No.

Johnson: Alright, now the crop, now the year following were you able to make up for some of the loss.

C. Leeper: That’s right, yep.

M. Leeper: That was a good year.

(*) 1975 had a significantly higher yield for corn crops in Illinois than what had previously been seen. FarmDoc from the University of Illinois shows the actual bushel per acre was on average 137.1. Information found on: http://www.farmdoc.uiuc.edu/manage/pricing/Picture.asp

Johnson: Okay.

C. Leeper: That’s when we had good crops and good prices the next year due to the fact that we had such a poor crop that year and the demand was there but the crop wasn’t there to meet the demand.

Johnson: Okay, so it was, So it was a temporarily, temporary setback.

M. Leeper: Right.

Johnson: Okay, now beyond farming, what did you and your family do in their free time? Such as what organizations did you belong to or participate in?

M. Leeper: He belonged to, this is organizations that we belonged to. We both were teachers at Sunday School, he was the a deacon in the church, I was a deaconess in the church, and then we had many children’s organizations. He was cub scout master, and he... we had girls and boys 4-H clubs, and then we had our church youth group, and I was a....

C. Leeper: Deaconess.
M. Leeper: Well I was in Eastern Star, and it just seemed like we were busy with, and 4-H, we had two different 4-H clubs so were busy with the children more than ourselves.

C. Leeper: That's right.

Johnson: Now what church did you belong to? Deacon, Deaconess.

C. Leeper: Berea Christian Church.

Johnson: Where is that located at?

C. Leeper: South of Niantic area, just after you cross the river.

Johnson: What made you join or participate in these groups? I'm assuming with the church you, it was more a matter of faith and such, but how about the 4-H, boy scouts? What made you join those?

C. Leeper: Because of our children to start with.

Johnson: Now were you, did you participate in these organizations after your children had left them?

C. Leeper: We did for awhile didn't we?

M. Leeper: Usually we stopped after the children got out but the organizations we belonged to we still belong. He (Corwin) is a 32nd degree mason which is up there and he belongs to the American Legion, and he was a school board member for 20, 25 years.

C. Leeper: 24, something like that.

M. Leeper: So I mean we've always been real active in community things.

Johnson: Was it common for other local farmers and there families to participate in these local organizations as well?

M. Leeper: With Scouts and 4-H the families were real active. But we and another two or three couples really did the work in those clubs.

Johnson: Okay, Was it more common for rural families to take part in these organizations beyond the township, those living in the town?

C. Leeper: That's right, yep.

M. Leeper: Yes.

C. Leeper: That's right.
Johnson: Okay, now did these organizations help their communities in anyway? In anyway create activities that helped build in the community or clean the community up?

M. Leeper: They did that. They did work cleaning up roadsides and things but I think the big advantage was just helping the children learn because a lot of them have become pretty good people in the community, I mean the things they’ve done....

C. Leeper: Carried on, yep.

M. Leeper: So that was our intent.

Johnson: Okay, now Corwin, what allowed you to farm, raise a fam... I mean farm, raise a family, and be a member of all these organizations? How did you find time to do all of these things?

C. Leeper: Really just got time.

Johnson: Just got time.

C. Leeper: Used your free time.

Johnson: Alright, now did farming provide enough free time or?

C. Leeper: Well you done a lot of this at night or on weekends as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: What did you do during the winter months Corwin, whenever you weren’t planting or harvesting?


C. Leeper: Worked on Machinery for the next year if it needed any work done on it as far as that’s concerned and you maybe tended the farm trying to keep up on the going things as far as farming goes too.

Johnson: Okay... now what year did you retire Corwin?


C. Leeper: Yeah, I guess that’s right


Johnson: 1999, okay now you said you inherited your land from your father.

C. Leeper: That’s right.
Johnson: How did your father acquire the land?

M. Leeper: He inherited some.

C. Leeper: He inherited from his dad, cause he bought some too as far as that’s concerned.

Johnson: have you passed your farm down to your children? The land.

M. Leeper: Not yet.

Johnson: No...Will, are you going to or do you intend to?

M. Leeper: (Laughs) We’re still here.

C. Leeper: In the future, right.

Johnson: And are they currently farmers as well?

C. Leeper: Just one of them.

Johnson: Just one of them. Okay. Okay, is there anything that either of you would like to, that has come to your mind that you would like to talk about?

C. Leeper: Not that I know of. How about you? (to Mary A.)

M. Leeper: I’m thinking, I’m thinking. (laughs) It’s a great life. Really is. We’ve enjoyed everything I think.

C. Leeper: That’s right.

M. Leeper: It was hard work. Very hard work but we worked together on so many things and we like each other so.

C. Leeper: Everything just kind of fell into place.

Johnson: Alright, so the rural lifestyle has fit you both well.

C. Leeper: That’s right.

M. Leeper: yeah.

Johnson: Alright, well I would like to thank you for your time and thank you for the answers you provided and thank you Mary A. for participating in this oral history and that is it so thank you very much.