

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ARNOLD WILLIS
Tail Gunner, Army Air Force, World War II
2002

OH
71

Arnold Willis, (b. 1922). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 audio cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 audio cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Arnold Willis, a Monroe, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a B-17 tail gunner in the 1st Bomb Division, 8th Air Force based in England. He discusses enlisting in 1942, and his journey through navigation training before settling into being a tail gunner. Willis recalls his first mission over Berlin and explains the injuries and near-misses suffered by himself and the other crew members over the thirty-five credited missions flown. After being discharged, Willis describes his career as a pharmacist, annual bomber-crew reunions, and flying in a crop duster with his son.

Biographical Sketch:

Arnold Willis (b. 1922) served with the 1st Bomb Division, 8th Air Force based in England during World War II beginning in 1943. He was involved in thirty-five credited missions before his discharge in 1945.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002.

Transcribed by Joshua Goldstein, 2012.

Reviewed and corrected by Amanda Axel, 2012.

Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

Interview Transcript

- McIntosh: Talking to Arnold Willis and the date is 26 July, 2002. You were born when sir?
- Willis: 12-21-22.
- McIntosh: And where was that?
- Willis: At Monroe, Wisconsin.
- McIntosh: But you moved later to Platteville?
- Willis: I actually, before I was school-aged we lived in, we were living in Juneau when I was born and then moved to Butternut and Wausau, New Diggings, and then to Platteville and I stayed there from school age on through pretty much.
- McIntosh: So tell me now December 7, 1941 what were you doing?
- Willis: My father was in the hospital in Wood, so the kids in our family, we had four in our family, we were with our older sister who was married and my mother was in Milwaukee with my dad. He died two days after Pearl Harbor, so-
- McIntosh: He was a veteran?
- Willis: He was a veteran. He was in the Hospital Wood [Wood Veterans Hospital].
- McIntosh: From a World War I injury?
- Willis: World War I. He had a terrible history on health.
- McIntosh: Could have been from anything. That's too bad.
- Willis: It wasn't from a war injury or anything like that. He was sick all the time he was in service, so.
- McIntosh: I see, that's too bad. So by that time you had registered for the draft and--

Willis: I registered in the summer of '42. I was working out of Oscar Meyer up here for the summer to go to school, get money to go to school. I registered with Emerson School out on the east side.

McIntosh: You were working for Oscar's?

Willis: Just for the summer than I went to college in Platteville in the fall.

McIntosh: Fall of '42?

Willis: Fall of '42. Actually I started there right out of high school; I graduated in 1940.

McIntosh: You are a year ahead of me.

Willis: Summer of '42, a friend and I came up here and roomed on the east side and worked at Oscar's to make some money for school.

McIntosh: Well when did the military start--

Willis: They had these programs they kept introducing in college and so they had this program for Army Air Force Reserve where you can stay in college theoretically till you graduated. So I enlisted September 14th, 1942 in Milwaukee and went back to school but was called to active duty on February 23rd of '43.

McIntosh: So you went into the service February of '43?

Willis: February 23, 1943.

McIntosh: It says '42 is that--

Willis: That is when I actually enlisted so that is my date of enlistment. So according to my service record I enlisted with temporary reserve status until they called me.

McIntosh: Active duty?

Willis: Active duty started February 23rd.

McIntosh: 2-'43?

Willis: Yeah.

McIntosh: In the Air Force?

Willis: Army Air Force. Army Air Corps, really.

McIntosh: Where did they send you?

Willis: We reported to Chicago and we all went in a big -- my first experience with a troop train and we went to Shepard Field at Wichita Falls, Texas for basic.

McIntosh: How was basic?

Willis: Well you know, it wasn't too bad, but--

McIntosh: How long?

Willis: Wasn't very long. Six weeks at the most.

McIntosh: What'd you learn?

Willis: Mostly how to tie your shoes and how to get up in the morning.

McIntosh: Nothing about airplanes?

Willis: Nothing about airplanes, but we had a lot of greetings. You come down here to get your airplane and they had a bunch of B-25s there, but my toughest thing I learned when I got into service was to eat as fast as everybody else. I would have starved to death. I didn't eat very fast. That was my biggest adjustment. I was used to getting up early in the morning and doing all that kind of stuff in the cold. Because we had space heaters at home when I got up and went to the farm. My dad wasn't around, so I did that all that kind of stuff. So I was used to that type of thing. The eating was the tough thing for me to get used to. Eat and get out of there in a hurry.

McIntosh: After basic did they start teaching you something?

Willis: From basic we went to what they called College Training Detachment at the University of Tennessee. I went, and this group of college kids that was in this program they sent all over the place. Some of them were up here at Oshkosh I know. It was primarily Phys. Ed. You had two hours of

physical education every day plus liberal arts course, speech and physics. Then you had ten hours of pilot training in a Cub.

McIntosh: In Tennessee?

Willis: In Tennessee.

McIntosh: It was called primary wasn't it?

Willis: No, primary is once you been in the cadets and you are in the pilot program. I wasn't in the pilot program; I was just an aviation student at this time.

McIntosh: But you had a chance to do some flying?

Willis: Yeah I think they wanted an idea if you want to be in the air, so they gave you that little bit of training. Then they, actually, if you did well in school. That was a good thing for me because coming from a small town that hadn't been any place, and these kids with me primarily in my class where from Texas A & M or Marquette University, the fellas in my class. So when I had to help them in physics I figure I should be able to get along even if they did come from the sticks down there someplace. That was sort of a learning process for me. We stayed there and from there we went to classification which was in Nashville and they decided if you were going to be a pilot, a navigator or a bombardier. And they decided I was going to be a navigator. They classified me navigator then we went to pre-flight in Santa Ana, California. That was primarily physical training and marching and that type of thing.

McIntosh: You had flown in more planes than that Piper Cub?

Willis: Nope just that Piper Cub. Then we went to Las Vegas, Nevada, to gunnery school. Since you were a navigation cadet you manned a gun on a B-17, so they had to go through gunnery school, bombardiers and navigators. So I went through gunnery school at Las Vegas than to Hondo, Texas, to try out navigation. I found out that trying use an E6B computer and plot on a locator map and look through at the drift meter, I was air sick all the time. I had another friend that was having the same trouble, so we went to our instructor. He said, "Well, you just stick through it." The first phase was dead reckoning, you had fifty hours of flight time in that and we flew AT-11s or Lockheed C-60s. I got so that I could just sit on that airplane and I was sick before I got to the end of the runway. So I never got over that. Our instructor said, "Well, you have to go before a board." So they asked

you why and I said, "I'm air sick all the time." They said, "Well didn't you have your little flight training when you were at your college training?" I said, "Sure that was fun; we did spins and did everything, that was great. It didn't make me sick at all." They said, "Well, why didn't you go to pilot school?" I said, "Because they classified me navigator and I thought they said something about that my color vision isn't good enough." So he said they'd send me down for another physical, which they did and I passed that. So they were going to send me to San Antonio to wait for a flight school to open. But there was about six of us I think that had had gunnery so they called us in one day. They said, "We need gunneries real bad in the ATO so I'm sorry to let you go, but you are going right now." So within ten days I had been sent to Lincoln, Nebraska and was a tail gunner on a B-17 and assigned to a combat crew in just that little bit of time, then on to Rapid City where we did our staging.

McIntosh: Is that where you got your own airplane?

Willis: We actually we didn't get our own airplane until we flew overseas. So we flew every kind of an airplane—

McIntosh: You finished that air gunnery and became a tail gunner. Was that your last training before you left the States?

Willis: That was the last training before I left the States.

McIntosh: How did you get to England?

Willis: Actually, we went from Rapid City to a staging area which was Kearney, Nebraska, and we were given a brand new airplane and we flew that across in a couple of leaps we went to Manchester, New Hampshire, and than up to Gander, Newfoundland, and stayed there a couple of weeks for the weather to get right and then we went to England. Actually, we landed in Ireland. And then they took our airplane away from us; we felt we would have this airplane but they took the airplane away from us. They put us on a boat and sent us over the Irish Sea to England, and went to a place called Stone, which was a staging area where the crews from the 8th Air Force came through there going in, and when they finished up they came through there going out. We were there just a few days and they sent the gunners down to a gunnery school along the wash and the navigators and the pilots went down to a school near London. Then we reported to Molesworth, England, the 303rd Bomb group which was the—

McIntosh: When did you get there?

Willis: We got there in about probably the 18th of August—

McIntosh: August of '43?

Willis: August '43, and we flew our first mission on the 27th of August. Once they got things rolling I got to move right along.

McIntosh: Tell me, did you enjoy the plane?

Willis: Oh yeah and I had all that trouble with navigation with airsickness and tail gunner we went backwards and that tail moves up and down big time all the time, but that didn't bother me, as long as I didn't have to do something with my eyes. It seems that it is related to my eyes, it seems my eyes were the factor.

McIntosh: Were you pretty proficient with your shooting?

Willis: We had a lot of good training and then after we got on the B-17 we did a lot of training. While we were in gunnery school in Las Vegas you fired from every position like the two upper and lower tour of the ball tour underneath and the waist guns and from air to air and on the ground and all that sort of thing. While at Rapid City, we'd have did mostly air to ground stuff which we did there.

McIntosh: So tell me about your first mission.

Willis: Well the first mission I remember very well. We were going to go to Berlin the first mission. Our bomb division, which was the First Bomb Division in the 8th Air Force, was going to lead. They told us like the 8th Air Force, but I would have thought it was the First Bomb Division which was made up of several combat wings and the three groups were combat wings so that probably enough. General Travis was flying with because we were leading this big bunch and we flew number three off the lead on his left wing. We thought we were up there being taken care of but everybody was pretty nervous. And we flew at a lower altitude. Normally we'd bomb from 25,000 so you are getting straight oxygen but we were lower. I don't remember what the 'tude was but I could look it up. When the flag started coming up they had their bomb bay open and the smoke was coming through, and you'd wander out there and see these little puffs that didn't mean anything but when you could hear them and they were right there and the smoke came through; and you had enough outside air coming in to us I could smell the smoke. And I thought, "Man, this isn't

too good.” The bombardier was more shook up than I was because we had the bomb bay switches on backwards and we went through the target and he didn’t drop any bombs. So we are flying back to England, so he didn’t get credit for that mission but the rest of us did.

McIntosh: Did the pilot recognize there was some problem? How did he deal with that?

Willis: Each one of the officers had their own duty. Like he and the co-pilot had the airplane to take care of and the navigator was suppose to be able to tell them where they were at any time if they asked him like this. The bombardier had the least to do out of anybody. He just had to get that switch turned on but you do a pre-flight before you go but I don’t think he ever checked up on it.

McIntosh: Too excited.

Willis: No, so—

McIntosh: Did he get dumped from the plane when he got home?

Willis: He heard that about that and he stayed with us and flew a few missions, and on the fifth mission we had he got hit and he was the only one who got a Purple Heart and he got hit mostly by glass from when the nose got blown out. After that we couldn’t keep him up in the nose to drop the bombs. The navigator would say, “Get up there, Nick, and drop those bombs, get up there.” And he couldn’t get him back up there so they made him a navigator for the rest of the—he was a good navigator he just couldn’t sit up there and watch that stuff.

McIntosh: Stuff coming at him?

Willis: Yeah, so we had a togglier, what they called a togglier, for the rest of our missions because we didn’t fly lead. We may have flown deputy lead but we all dropped off a smoke bomb. A togglier, all he has to do is hit the switch and he’s primarily a gunner up there but—

McIntosh: He has to stay there?

Willis: Yeah, he has to stay there.

McIntosh: And he has a gun too?

Willis: Yeah, and he has a gun and he knows how to use it. I didn't know if Nick knew how to use it. He wouldn't be up there.

McIntosh: Never got to that point.

Willis: No. [laughs] So that was sort of a big thing.

McIntosh: Did you keep track of him?

Willis: Yeah he actually stayed in the service and became a Lieutenant Colonel. He kind of was-- I don't think he was much of a combat person but he did a lot of administrative. He was the kind of guy if we went to town or something in Rapid City just for fun, why he'd be in a bar standing on his head on the tables. He really was the life of the party type guy, so he kind of let things brush off.

McIntosh: Did he apologize to the rest of the crew?

Willis: Well he kind of just hung his head a little bit you know.

McIntosh: But that's about it?

Willis: That's about all.

McIntosh: I'm surprised he stayed on that ship.

Willis: Well as I say he did the first six or seven missions. After he got hit that time, he flew one more time. He went with another crew and he was navigator. He could be back, you know the navigator is still in the nose but he was back away from the glass, everyone sitting up there looking right staring at the ground.

McIntosh: No place to hide.

Willis: No, so I guess he was okay. In fact, they made an emergency landing in Brussels one time, the crew he was with, and there was like a roller to roll down the runway. The airplane hit and bounced right over the top of this guy that was on the tractor going across the runway because it wasn't open for business at the time. They just had to come in because they couldn't go any farther. But the pilot dropped in and bounced it over the top of that guy. And he had some good adventures after that, but it didn't seem to bother him after he got done with that nose business.

McIntosh: So did your plane suffer any damage on that trip to Berlin?

Willis: No. We lost two airplanes in our group, not in our squadron; that is the only losses we had that day. You always get some holes because they come close enough. We didn't get any close to us or me or anybody.

McIntosh: Generally, did you fly every day or every other day? How did it work?

Willis: We might fly three days in a row and then they'd give you time off. Usually they gave us a forty-eight hour pass to London.

McIntosh: Two days?

Willis: A couple of days, but the weather had a lot to do with it too. Sometimes you'd be stood down a week and then couldn't do anything. Then they got us a forty-eight hour pass to London every two weeks approximately and then they'd have us in London by the time our pass started too. They'd put us on a truck and take us to Bedford and on a train to London. We had it really good that way but—

McIntosh: Did you enjoy London?

Willis: Oh yeah, sure, we had a good time. Usually like the radio operator and myself always went together. We had a routine we'd follow. We wouldn't take a room unless they'd give us breakfast in bed and that was pretty hard to find then, you know. We couldn't stand to stay in bed to eat it, but you had to do that.

McIntosh: Where was he from?

Willis: He was from West Virginia. He is the only guy we haven't been able to find now.

McIntosh: That was my next question. You still keep in contact?

Willis: We have four guys on the crew that get together; we have a reunion every year now. The four of us are always there. Bomb group has a reunion we have three, four, five hundred people at this thing. Those four of our crew still get together, the pilot, co-pilot, the flight engineer, and myself. The rest of the guys, we know what happened to most of them. Like I knew when the rest of them, when they died. The one guy we haven't been able to locate at all.

McIntosh: That's nice the four of you can still—

Willis: Yeah, the four of us.

McIntosh: That's unusual I think.

Willis: There were two other pilots in our squadron and their wives that always got together and of course I didn't know them being a tail gunner and not with those guys at all. I didn't know them too well in England. We went on pass once with them; most of the time we went with our own.

McIntosh: They being officers, they went to their club?

Willis: Yeah they'd go to the officer's club or something, so we didn't have too much in common there but now it doesn't make any difference anymore.

McIntosh: Of course not.

Willis: We get together with them. We are going to Branson this year in October.

McIntosh: The honkytonks.

Willis: Yeah. We have been all over.

McIntosh: How many missions did you have?

Willis: I actually flew thirty-five—we got credit for thirty-five, we flew thirty-six. One time we flew an eight hour mission and couldn't drop our bombs because of weather. So they took that in to account that the fact we didn't drop our bombs. So they kind of made that one mission for us. The bombardier didn't get credit for the one. So we flew thirty-five.

McIntosh: Ever get in serious trouble?

Willis: We had—after all these years, this spring it would have been our pilot finally got the DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross] for this one mission that we had. So that was one of our most thrilling missions. This is where the airplane was when it came down. It had this prop feathered and so, but he got it on the ground and he called it a controlled ground loop. We had to follow—

McIntosh: Only had your two engines on one side.

Willis: Actually one engine was working full and one on each side that was just putt-putting along. And we hit there and the tires and under carriage had been shot out on the one side. We got the gear down but the tire was flat. So when we hit the runway, we just skidded off. He called it a controlled ground loop. That was probably one of our thrilling entire mission type. But we had some that each individual, no matter where in this particular mission wind up, the pilots had a shell go up between them some place and knock their oxygen tanks. Blew them all up. And there was insulation floating around and all that sort of thing. So it was more in their area. But then they cut my inner phone off by the wires on deck behind my head and it cut that in two. So it took me a while to realize; it was awfully quiet for a while, then I could see a guy coming back so I waved to him.

McIntosh: Tell me about the German fighters.

Willis: German fighters, we had actually nil, in a way. We had one time they took after but changed their minds and went to the group behind us. I observed them in action more than once. We were up here and I'd look down--

McIntosh: You had a great view.

Willis: Yeah, it was just like watching a movie. The poor guy down there they were really after them. One other time why they got—

McIntosh: So, didn't get the chance to shoot your gun?

Willis: When the guys came at 3:00 o'clock, then they went back this way. I fired, but I wouldn't have a ghost of a chance at hitting them. Flack was really our biggest concern. And another thing, when it comes to combat I still think luck is one of the best things. Because on September I think it was the 28th, our squadron lost seven airplanes. We lost nine in the group and the guys that were on another crew. Two combat crews to a Nissen hut, why we lost those guys.

McIntosh: Your group had how many left?

Willis: Fourteen that we got up.

McIntosh: So you lost half of them?

Willis: Oh yeah, that was the other time but we lost half of them that time. That's what seemed to be that the Germans had kind of changed their tactics. They'd gang up, maybe get sixty or more airplanes in rows of four, and

come from the rear and just come through with their cannons. I mean, you'd get some of them but you wouldn't get them all. So when we missed all that time that that happened and when we got the rear bunch—we always lost, we'd lose some of the flack off and on, but then you'd see them; they'd blow right up when they went. Overall, why we were really fortunate, everybody on the crew had one that came close to them. Like the navigator had a piece flack bounce off his helmet and so did the radio operator. On New Year's Day of '45, which I will always remember, we were coming back over the line and the home guards weren't too sharp with their ADAs [Air Defense Artillery] but at the line they were. So they were getting real close and we had a togglier that was getting towards the end of his mission, so we just called one oxygen check after another to keep us busy. And the tail reported in first, so just put my head down like this, and was reporting every check and all of a sudden the noise and the glass went down the back of my neck and this window was gone and this window was gone on that side. So had I'd been sitting up my head—

McIntosh: Right through your ears!

Willis: Yeah, so you just got to have to have some luck.

McIntosh: When did you have your thirty-fifth or thirty-sixth mission?

Willis: I'm trying to think. It was January 7th of '45.

McIntosh: Of '45.

Willis: Uh-huh. [affirmation]

McIntosh: You were flying then from August of '43 till January '45?

Willis: Right.

McIntosh: Then you knew you were all done, you wouldn't have to fly anymore?

Willis: I knew I didn't have to fly any combat anymore. I flew some more, but I didn't have to fly combat.

McIntosh: But you knew on your thirty-fifth mission this was it.

Willis: Yeah you knew this was it. The war was still going on of course, and you could volunteer for another tour, but my dad told me when you are in the service never volunteer for anything so I thought well I better not do that.

In fact, when I got home in March and my wife and I were married, she was in nurse's training. She went back to nurse's training and I went to the army; but we thought if the war went on forever, in those days you didn't go over unless it was your husband. You didn't go just because it was your significant other. I went to a gunnery instructor school down at Laredo, Texas, and became an instructor for the gunners on B-29s, which they were using then.

McIntosh: How'd you get home?

Willis: From England? I was the only one on our crew that came by ship. It took us nineteen days from Southampton to Boston, and we had a huge convoy. We ran into a huge storm in the Atlantic. We had to go around. We went clear down to the Azores than came back up to Boston. One of the most pleasurable trips I ever had. You didn't worry about anything. We had a hospital ship. It was actually a troop ship converted and they only had about 200 and some patients. So it was like a ghost ship and we just had all kinds of room to run around. It had a library.

McIntosh: You were on a cruise.

Willis: Like a cruise. I got to know the fellows. It was a merchant marine ship and I got to know the guys down in the kitchen. So they said anytime you want something to eat they showed me where the walk-in coolers were and they had apples and all stuff—

McIntosh: Really living.

Willis: I was really living it up, you bet, that was excellent. We had a huge storm and I never have been in one of those things. I always wonder then how these fellas with these little ships in the ancient days came over. This thing stood way out of the water and the wind and the waves would come right over the top of it. The thing would chug up the waves, chug-chug-chug, then down it would go and the props came out the back and go whir and then it just hit the bottom and just shake and then it'd go again.

McIntosh: Wonder if it is going to come farther.

Willis: Yeah, but I really didn't worry about it at the time. I had done my worrying before so I thought I'd let that go.

McIntosh: I'm sure it was a pleasurable trip to be through those missions.

Willis: Oh yeah, through with that.

McIntosh: Ever fearful that you might not make it?

Willis: Yeah, actually.

McIntosh: That your luck is simply not going to hold out.

Willis: Yeah. The way it was to me, when we started out you felt well and ready to do this. But then things were so tough and after about seven missions you thought, "I'm not going to make this," so you just didn't worry about this anymore.

McIntosh: You knew that it was thirty-five [required missions] and not twenty-five.

Willis: We knew it was going to be thirty-five. That had moved up on ya.

McIntosh: From twenty-five to thirty to thirty-five.

Willis: I knew we'd have to have thirty-five. So when we got between seven to ten, then we just gave up. You didn't worry about it anymore.

McIntosh: You knew you could be shot down this mission.

Willis: Yeah, but when you got to like the first of January, then when I had seven to go or six than you got real shaky again. We came back in a snow storm in on that last mission and I thought, "Man I'm not getting into one these airplanes again!"

McIntosh: No matter what!

Willis: But I did. In fact my son's got a little airplane now and we go riding around when we go up to his place. I really enjoy that.

McIntosh: And then you get back to the States and you are home for thirty?

Willis: Actually they gave us only two and a half weeks or something like that.

McIntosh: Then you got married?

Willis: We got married in that time and reported to Santa Ana to a kind of rehabilitation type place.

McIntosh: Gunnery instructor?

Willis: That I just went out there for rehabilitation. Then they sent me to Laredo, Texas. And there we went through gunnery instructor school. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** Changed my MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] when I got through up to 938 as a gunnery instructor. Then went to Fort Meyers, Florida to Buckingham where we had B-29s and I taught in the classroom rather than on an airplane, so that was all right too.

McIntosh: Ever fly on the B-29?

Willis: Never did fly on the B-29.

McIntosh: That sounds like it was pretty easy duty than sitting in Florida with a new bride.

Willis: My new bride was back in Milwaukee; that didn't work too good, but otherwise it was all right, though. Then the war ended and some of these fellas didn't want to do anything, then it was really kind of a mess. We closed that airbase and had to take care of all the equipment and stuff. I had enough points to get out and I thought I should be getting out but we were stuck down in Fort Meyers.

McIntosh: You got out and were discharged when?

Willis: In October, actually October 20th of '45. That was up at Maxwell Field Alabama; they sent me up there at the end of the war.

McIntosh: So when you got home did you use your G.I. Bill?

Willis: I sure did, man that was a great thing. Because I had been going to Platteville taking industrial arts and math, and it was all right, but I always wanted to be in pharmacy. So I started all over, went to the university there, my wife was with me.

McIntosh: Where?

Willis: At Wisconsin, up here.

McIntosh: In here?

Willis: Right here, lived in one of the trailers five doors down from the field house right on Monroe Street for a couple of years. Went to three semesters, we went to school year-round then—

McIntosh: And went to pharmacy school?

Willis: I went to pharmacy school and graduated in '48. Then ended up working for about ten years for Oscar. I worked five years in Evansville for this fella, then I worked for him up on the square; we were on Pickney Street for five years. It was right next to the Emporium at that time and they had the Three Sisters all along that side. The American Exchange Bank and that short of thing—

McIntosh: So how'd you enjoy working for Oscar?

Willis: I really enjoyed that. They treated me really good.

McIntosh: All of us who grew up in Madison miss the run-down drugstores. Those were really terrific and the Walgreens doesn't cut it.

Willis: No, they don't have grilled danish anymore. That's the thing, and you can't get a soda any place now, a regular ice cream soda.

McIntosh: They put the fizz in.

Willis: I always liked lime soda, man they just don't exist anymore. I know how to make them if I got the stuff. I thought they treated me really well, and I was with there with him for five years and one of the fellas.

McIntosh: [unintelligible] John.

Willis: Yeah, John, yup. He was a nice guy, treated me really well. Then when I had the chance to buy his store back in Evansville where I worked before, why then I went down there and he told me if it did work out why you just let me know and come back up if you want. I thought that was really okay.

McIntosh: You bought a store?

Willis: I bought a store down there, then I had my own store.

McIntosh: I mean it had been established before?

Willis: Yes. The fella died you know, that's what happened. The fella I worked for died while I was working on the square; there were two stores.

McIntosh: I see.

Willis: But at that time I had just started up here and really couldn't quit and go down and see about—I went down and helped him out for a little bit at night.

McIntosh: Then moved to Evansville.

Willis: Then moved back to Evansville. We lived there right out of school and moved back to Evansville. Worked out very well because I worked there for five years before so everybody thought I was a native. They kind of forget how that goes. I have more people tell me, "When did you graduate from high school? Who was in your class?"

McIntosh: Did you enjoy going back to a small town?

Willis: Yup. I always liked smaller so I can walk to work. That was the big thing I had against working up here was driving even when I lived in Cottage Grove when we moved up here. I still a drive up here.

McIntosh: And if the weather is bad, it is really unpleasant.

Willis: Then to park is another thing. So working on the square you didn't have much opportunity.

McIntosh: How about the amount of control you had? That must have pleased you in a way. More responsibility, but you got to run the store exactly the way you wanted, didn't you?

Willis: That was nice, too. In fact, that was the way it was for years.

McIntosh: How long were you there?

Willis: I had my own store almost thirty years, about twenty-seven or something in Evansville. I had the small store I started with, then the other fella in the other store died and I had to buy that one because he couldn't sell it. Then we had a big building across the street that had been a theater at one time, so we moved the store there and had 4,000 square feet over there. I had a partner then, I took in a younger guy. It was fine until you started having third party pays and the insurance companies and the paperwork.

McIntosh: The government got into it; that spoiled it for me, too. I enjoyed practicing medicine so much until we got into all that.

Willis: That just really killed it, you know. Like you had a rapport with all your customers, you knew them, in a small town. When I first opened my own store, in the evenings, of course I worked long hours from 9:00 in the morning till 9:00 at night. In the night, the farmers would come in and sell. At that time, the vets hadn't really gotten going yet so we'd do the livestock thing. You know, have to figure out the shots for the pigs and all that kind of stuff, help throughout the cows. I used to order this stuff out for them.

McIntosh: They bought all their veterinarian medicine from you?

Willis: Yeah, they must. Then see, then the vets started. See, we were trying to get another doctor in town. We couldn't get a doctor.

McIntosh: There wasn't a veterinarian in the area?

Willis: We got seven vets finally. They have a clinic with seven vets and trucks, but we couldn't get a doctor for people after a while.

McIntosh: There was Sam what's his face—

Willis: Sam Sorkin was there. Sam was there and Dr. R .J. Gray and Roger came with his son.

McIntosh: I knew all those people.

Willis: We still get together. Roger lives up in Eau Claire. We are going up there first part of next month.

McIntosh: They are nice people.

Willis: Roger's son-in-law is Tom Dow and he is an ophthalmologist. His son is an ophthalmologist and works for him and they have a whole big clinic full of ophthalmology up there. We still get together for lunch now and then.

McIntosh: Did you have a soda fountain?

Willis: We did to start with, but then we took it out. We just didn't have enough room in there. Actually, it gets to be a hangout too, ya know, so.

McIntosh: I was going to say next that is an attractive nuisance, isn't it?

Willis: It really is. At 9:00 o'clock at night on Saturday night when the farmers were all over in the tavern and their wives were all trying to find a place to come. They would all come and park at the soda fountain and want to stay there till 10:30 or something.

McIntosh: So the girls were with you and the boys were all over at the tavern?

Willis: Yeah. The girls were there.

McIntosh: That's cute.

Willis: We had the girls and the kids.

McIntosh: You had to work long hours too, boy.

Willis: That was long and you couldn't get any help than so I had to do it myself.

McIntosh: Did your wife help?

Willis: She didn't at first because the kids were small, but then she did later on. Then I got my partner and we got the bigger place and they put in this store, and both the gals worked; then it was a family deal. I took on my partner so he would take over my store when I was ready to retire, but he was up to here with the third party pay and the insurance company so he said, "Let's just sell this thing." He actually took the state boards down in Florida and Alabama before we sold the store. He wanted to move to Florida. That was a good business for those guys at university.

McIntosh: So what did you do when you wanted to retire?

Willis: When I retired we bought a motor home.

McIntosh: Yeah I know, but who'd you sell it to?

Willis: Oh, we sold it to five guys, five pharmacists. Like, a fellow in Stoughton, Bob Sherry.

McIntosh: All of whom had pharmacies?

Willis: All of whom had pharmacies and then this was—

McIntosh: This was their project.

Willis: We were fortunate that we would sell it that easy. So they have a pharmacy there and the way they set it, supposedly the pharmacist who worked for them had a chance to buy in and be part of their group, but it didn't seem to work out that way. Everybody who goes there is not too satisfied and so they finally leave; so I don't know where they stand now. That's too bad.

McIntosh: Did you have a lot of kids, did you?

Willis: Three kids, a son and two daughters.

McIntosh: Grandchildren?

Willis: Two. And I'm old enough to be a great-grandfather and our first granddaughter is just graduating from high school this year or just did.

McIntosh: Oh, you are behind.

Willis: Yeah slow kids. Our two daughters aren't even married and they are not interested in that. My one daughter would have been, but she had too many health problems early on and now she figures she is too old. She works in; she lives in Bayfield, and has a library all the way from K through twelve. So she enjoys all those kids there.

McIntosh: That can turn you off from parenthood, I'll tell ya. They do it all day long.

Willis: She enjoys that, but that is enough. Our other daughter says if she ever gets married it would be to a traveling salesman that wouldn't be home. She could have that going around the house all the time. She is a geologist and works for an oil company. She lives out in Long Beach with Signal Hill Petroleum Company is who she is with right now. She's enjoyed herself and likes that.

McIntosh: Did you join any veteran's organizations?

Willis: I joined the Legion right out after I got to work when I first got out of university and went to Evansville. I could never go to meetings. You know, I'd work at 9:00 in the morning till 9:00 at night. I thought if I'm going to belong to anything then I'm going to belong. So I quit that and I didn't join anything till later on when I found our bomb group had its own

organization so I joined that. I joined the 8th Air Force Historical Society. So, like, the VFW, [Veterans of Foreign Wars] they were always after me but then they want you to participate in all their things. And if I had the time I'd be glad to do that but so I just stayed away from that. I have a friend that lives in Evansville and he had a Ben Franklin store at one time. He joined the national organization he doesn't belong locally. So he gets the magazine and all the news and that sort of stuff.

McIntosh: So at least you have some way of keeping contact and these four guys from the plane—

Willis: We still.

McIntosh: On a yearly basis.

Willis: Annually.

McIntosh: All circling the drain now.

Willis: Used to be every year and a half but now they all got a little shaky so we got to do this every year.

McIntosh: They far away?

Willis: One is in California, and one is in Texas and our flight engineer lives in Oshkosh. So when they have the EA, why for a long time he was the head of their security and that stuff. And now he isn't really that well so now he doesn't do that anymore. So I don't see these guys in between time because they are that far away.

McIntosh: Nice that you are able to keep in contact with them.

Willis: We do have a good time when we get together. This other fella, we had these other two pilots, one fella has died now and his wife comes. The other pilot who was really a character, he used to fly with us occasionally. If we were doing something like when we became deputy lead, you're not to lead the squadron but you lead the six of the squadron why they call that deputy lead. We broke into that and he flew with us to break us in. I always liked to fly with him because when you come in to land in combat, you fly right down the runway, get to the end of the runway, you keep in formation, then you peel off and come around and land. Well the big thing was if you were flying number two over here you tried to cut it shorter so

you cut out number one and number three to come in and land first, you know, and that type of thing.

McIntosh: Games like that.

Willis: Yeah. I could look right down and see the cabbages in those gardens you know. I don't know how high we were.

McIntosh: Sneaking in underneath them.

Willis: We weren't that far off the ground and then he had it straight up. He was a fun guy. He says he wanted to be a P-51 pilot primarily.

McIntosh: Never got a chance to fly that long.

Willis: Actually he became one later on, but then he got shot down twice after he left our squadron. Second time he really got it bad and so he got help. He met his wife that way because she was his nurse for a long time. It got him in the innards and took stuff up in there.

McIntosh: Did these other guys go up to you or anything?

Willis: The one pilot that died, he always came up and he was from Iowa. He came up with a motor home. I met him up there the one time. Otherwise they have all been there at least once sometime but they really don't come every year.

McIntosh: It's a long couple of days up there. I've done it three times but probably won't go back. It's tiresome.

Willis: It really is; by the time you get through it's tiresome. The last time I went, Ed was there and so he had me a pass to go where ever I wanted to. That was interesting because they had the Concorde and for \$187 they gave you a flight. I thought, man how can they sell that? Man, they were lined up forever.

McIntosh: That's what I understand. No trouble selling that.

Willis: No, I couldn't believe that but I did. Our reunions were always held—one of our members actually was in charge of the reunion that lived in the area. Like if it were San Francisco, some guy from that area. Last year it was in Baltimore, and the guy from right close by there was in charge. Now this year we are getting too old for that so we hired a reunion outfit

that is going to do it now this year. We will see how that works out. So right away they wanted us to go to Branson, so that is where we are going to go.

McIntosh: Where did your son get his pilot training?

Willis: He actually he is a crop consultant. He lives up there in Minnesota in the northwest corner about sixty miles east of Grand Forks and about eighty miles south of Winnipeg.

McIntosh: A terrible place to live.

Willis: At first it looked kind of barren up there.

McIntosh: Summer is about a week long up there.

Willis: He bought a farm, then he bought the adjacent farm now so he can have a runway there for his airplane. He was just always interested, and one of his good friends was a crop duster guy up there and was a certified instructor so he taught Tom how to fly. He had a little Cessna to start with, but he really wanted a tail dragger so he got a-- what do they call that again-- it is aerobics spelled backwards or Citabria. I guess they make some of them over here. They look like just about like an old Piper CVA5. Yeah, but they are really fun to ride around in. We go up there and go up the Red River Valley and look around. I think it is just like Kickapoo, I can see why it floods all the time. Of course it goes north and everything freezes up in Winnipeg and that backs everything up.

McIntosh: That floods North Dakota.

Willis: Every one of those when you fly over that river, the Red River, they have these huge things and every little things are the farms right in the loop. I can see why they'd be flooded. They make it five or six years before they get flooded, and then they with all this insurance maybe they come out all right you never know.

McIntosh: The government probably pays off all the flood damage.

Willis: And they raise a lot of sugar beets up there and that's all in the program too. He has all these clients and he just goes around and checks the crops. Tells them whether to spray or not.

McIntosh: Crop dusting, is that just in the spring?

Willis: Actually, when they do this spraying, and most of it seems to be liquid spraying too, and sometimes it is just fertilizer. They can get through a whole season without doing a lot sometimes. Some of it is fertilizer and pests too. He'd have to check like potato growers if they get beetles or something, why then he has them spray it. It's really quite tricky because it costs a lot to tell when because if you have them spray too early, then it doesn't get the bugs. If it is too late, then it costs a lot to do it so you got to be sure it is the right time and whether it will do any good or not, also. To me it would be ulcer-producing type work; but then he seems to like it.

McIntosh: Does it on a regular basis?

Willis: Yeah and he used to have a three-wheeler, but they got rid of those now and has a four-wheeler. He drives up and down. He does soil testing, two kinds, where you take your four or five to the acre like you always did and give them the type of fertilizer they need. They do this where they use the GPS equipment. He does eighty of them in an acre and they have it pinpointed and it goes on a chip type thing. And when they put that little thing on the floater, it lays the fertilizer down and leaves the right amount of each kind. So he just drives that thing down there and that's it. The crop duster they still do, but when they do the big fertilizing job, why, they do that with a truck with what they call a floater. It is just like how these guys have their cows all on the computer, oh wow!

McIntosh: Well good, thank you sir.

Willis: Well thank you very much. That's a nice thing—

[End of Interview]