

An Interview with
William “Bill” Lamberson

at the State Historical Society of Missouri in
Columbia, Missouri

20 April 2009

interviewed by Elizabeth Dunn
Oral History Intern



Oral History Program
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PREFACE

William R. “Bill” Lamberson was born in 1957 in Fullerton, Nebraska. He grew up on a small diversified farm and attended kindergarten through eighth grade at Glenwood School, a one-room schoolhouse located on the corner of his family’s farm. Lamberson describes the physical school building and discusses teachers, recess, field trips, and other activities held at the school. He also talks about the importance of education to the local community and how one in three students who attended the small, one-room schoolhouse ended up attaining PhDs or other advanced professional degrees. When the one-room school closed in the 1980s, the property reverted back to the original landowners. Two of his brothers now own it.

Mr. Lamberson received a PhD from the University of Nebraska in 1981 and is currently a Professor of Animal Sciences at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

The interview was taped on a 1GB CompactFlash card, using a Marantz PMD-660 digital recorder and an audio-technica AT825 microphone placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets /]. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [“”] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [__] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [_____ (??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Jeff D. Corrigan.

ED: This is Elizabeth Dunn, an intern with the Western Historical Manuscript Collection. I'm interviewing Professor William Lamberson at the State Historical Society of Missouri today. Today is April 20, 2009. Are you ready to begin Professor Lamberson?

5 WL: Yes.

ED: Okay. Could you start by telling me when and where you were born?

WL: I was born in Fullerton, Nebraska in 1957.

ED: And would you please describe your home situation for me?

WL: I grew up on a small diversified farm in a quite rural area about six miles from the

10 nearest small town and about three quarters of a mile from the nearest neighbors.

ED: And what were your parents' professions?

WL: They farmed.

ED: Farmed? They both farmed?

WL: Yes.

15 ED: Okay. Am I correct in that your mother taught prior to farming or marriage?

WL: She taught prior to marriage. She began teaching when she was sixteen after she graduated from high school and took one summer of college classes, and taught until she was twenty-one when she got married, and then I think [she] taught one semester filling in for a teacher that had resigned after she was married.

20 ED: And did you have any siblings?

WL: I have four older brothers.

ED: And where do you fall in that?

WL: I am youngest.

ED: You're the youngest? Okay. How would describe your home life? Like activities and—

WL: Well it was always busy on the farm. We had lots of animals and pets and so on and always chores to do. [There were] cows to milk and work in the fields and lots of critters of all sorts, chickens, various kinds of poultry and cattle, and dairy cattle, and pigs, and lots of horses.

ED: And what did you do in your free time then?

WL: Oh, hunted and fished mostly.

ED: Okay. With one parent teaching school, what role do you think education played in
10 your family dynamics?

WL: Well, certainly education was a priority in our family. All of my brothers went to college and really in that vicinity education was a high priority, although I don't think any of the landowners in that area had been to college themselves. Nearly all the children went.

15 ED: And you went on to get your veterinary medicine degree?

WL: I have a PhD in animal sciences.

ED: PhD. Okay. Did your parents make any adjustments for lifestyle to provide you and your siblings with a better education?

WL: Well, they certainly did what they could to insure that all of us had the opportunity to
20 go to college. We were a relatively poor family and there was only a limited amount that they could provide, but certainly they at least encouraged us to do that.

ED: And when and where did you start school? Was it in the same place that you grew up or—

WL: Yes, I grew up all the way from birth on the same farm. So the school was actually on the corner of our farm. So I went to school there from kindergarten through eighth grade and then to high school, [a] small high school was about six miles away.

ED: Did you walk to high school?

5 WL: No I didn't. There was a school bus or I participated in sports so I'd catch rides back and forth and had a car eventually.

ED: Would you mind describing the school for me please?

WL: The school was a one-room school about the size of this room¹. There were from four to I think at one time there were eleven students in the nine grades, [with] one teacher. The teachers, I think I had five teachers during the nine years that I was in the school. One of the constraints that the local school board placed on the school was that no one teacher, no matter how good she was, could stay more than three years, and their philosophy was that every teacher had strengths and weaknesses and the children shouldn't be subjected to those weaknesses for more than three years. So 10 they rotated through fairly regularly.

ED: Would you agree with that now, that sentiment?

WL: Yes, I think that was a good philosophy, yes.

ED: And you said there were four to eleven students in nine grades—

WL: —Right.

20 ED: Would you—

WL: There was one girl that was in my grade the entire nine years. There was never any other student in my grade. I think when I started there were two of us in

¹ The conference room of The State Historical Society of Missouri is approximately 25 feet by 40 feet.

Kindergarten, [and] my youngest brother was in eighth grade. I had a cousin in sixth grade and a son of a hired man that was in sixth grade and there was girl I think in fourth grade, and we proceeded through, and picked up younger siblings along the way. Most of the students, it was a very stable area—the landowners were
5 moderately well off. Anyway, they owned fairly large amounts of farmland so there were sort of a core group of quite strong citizens that lived in that area, and then a few generally hired help that would move in and out that had contributed students to the school.

ED: So were the grades taught together or—
10 WL: The grades were all in the same room. Typically there would be individual lessons for each grade. So we would proceed through and uh—we probably would have maybe four different types of lessons during the course of the day. So you might have fifteen or twenty minutes of attention to your grade and then you'd be given work to do and then, you know, often when you'd finish you'd listen to what the
15 older or younger kids were doing and so I think there were some advantages to that, hearing what the older students were doing most of the time.

ED: And how would describe your teachers, you said there were five at—
WL: Some of the teachers were excellent and some were not very good at all. It was interesting, almost all had musical skills. We nearly always had music. The last
20 teacher that I had for seventh and eighth grade was taking college classes and I ended up doing a lot of her college algebra during the time that she was there so—
ED: So do you feel that helped prepare you for higher education later?

WL: Yeah, it certainly gave you opportunities to do things differently than what you would have in a larger school.

ED: And I understand your mother was a one-room schoolhouse teacher, which we discussed—

5 WL: —Yes.

ED: Did she ever teach you? You said—

WL: —No.

ED: —She was married—

WL: No, she did not—

10 ED: —and then she quit—

WL: She taught—

ED: —that semester.

WL: Yeah, she would've done her teaching from probably about 1932 to '35 I think. I was not born until 1957.

15 ED: Okay. And when did she teach that one semester?

WL: That was maybe oh, 1938 or 39 I would guess—

ED: Okay, so still before—

WL: I don't know the exact year.

ED: Okay. And how did you get to school each day?

20 WL: Oh, I rode a horse sometimes, rode a bicycle quite a lot. My dad actually drove a school bus for the consolidated school so occasionally I'd catch a (laugh)—during duck season we would often go hunt ducks before school and he would drop me off or we had a silo that was pretty near the school and sometimes he would go to get—

fill a wagon with silage for the cattle and I'd ride over on the tractor so—different ways, different days. It was only a half a mile for me so, a pretty easy walk.

ED: What time did school begin?

WL: Nine o' clock most of the time. Although, that varied a little bit from teacher to
5 teacher, I think we started at eight thirty sometimes. When I began, I think it was nine to three thirty. It was uh (laugh)—I think it was nine to three thirty with two half hour recesses, and an hour for lunch (laugh) so—My kids these days think that was a pretty easy load.

ED: What did you do during your recess?

10 WL: Generally we'd play games outside. Hide and seek, Red Rover, and depending on how many kids we had in the school at the time we might play softball, or during the bad weather there was a large open basement and we could play games down there.

ED: And you said that your teacher was musically inclined like all your teachers had?

WL: Yes, I think everyone played the piano and so on, and some quite good.

15 ED: So did they teach you?

WL: No, actually not—singing, but never the instrument.

ED: And what activities do you remember specifically about that time period that you engaged in?

WL: Generally there were the normal lessons that we would do. I'm not sure, what do you
20 mean?

ED: Like do you remember any events, like something that happened that was—like something fun or something—

WL: There would be the different country schools would get together for track meets and there would be academic competitions that they would get everybody together, things like that for fun. We'd take field trips. There was an Indian burial ground not far away that we would go to every spring. Generally, we would go off to the nearest 5 larger town for a field trip from various sorts each year, maybe a couple times. I remember being on one the day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

ED: Oh my goodness. Can you talk a little about that?

WL: Oh, I was quite small. I would have been in first grade probably and I remember hearing it on the radio as we were driving to the field trip, and of course it didn't 10 continue then.

ED: Did you have a chore to perform at school? Did you have any chores that you had to perform at school?

WL: I suppose erasing, cleaning blackboards, probably not much beyond that. I know my mother talked about more chores that they had to do at the schools, but the school that 15 I was in was relatively modern. It had been built in the 1950s and had men's and women's restrooms, and so on, that was unusual for one-room schools.

ED: How large was the school?

WL: How large was the building?

ED: —the building.

20 WL: It really—going back and visiting it a few months ago it was not as big as (laugh) what it seemed at the time. I suppose the main classroom was twenty-five feet by forty feet and there was a little area where we came in and hung coats and kept lunches. There were the two restrooms and sort of a little back area that—there was

one of the teachers that lived several miles away and she would—she actually slept there quite a lot when the weather was bad so she didn't have to drive. And this I mentioned, there was a full basement then below that.

ED: What influence did going to a one-room schoolhouse have on your life?

5 WL: Well, I don't know if it had any specific influence or not, it certainly gave you the opportunity to sort of experience what was going on with all the students at a time. You're pretty independent, most of the time you were kind of on your own. The teacher was not focused on you for very much in any one part of the day. You'd have a few minutes of her attention a few different times during the day, but that was really 10 all. I always thought it was a really good experience to be able to hear what was happening with the other classes as they were being taught.

ED: Do you still keep in contact with any of the students that you attended the one-room schoolhouse with?

WL: I haven't very much, there was one—I know of at least two of the students that still 15 live in the local area, one that was in my graduating class in high school so I have talked to her some since then, but not particularly.

ED: And you just mentioned a few minutes ago that you recently revisited the school?

WL: That's right.

ED: Would you mind telling me what prompted you to do this?

20 WL: Well I'm getting remarried to a woman that has two children, eleven and twelve year old girls, and we took them to see the school.

ED: And do you think it was important for your kids to see this—the kids you took?

WL: Yeah, I think it was interesting. They've been reading about *Little House on the Prairie* and so that was an opportunity to see that. They had visited the school at Shelter Insurance, Shelter Gardens, and were curious to see how it was different and so on.

5 ED: Does the school provide the same function today as it did when you attended it or?

WL: That school?

ED: Uh-huh.

WL: That school has been closed for—let's see I would have been there until 1971—it probably closed in the early to mid-1980s I suppose. The school property was actually on our farm and that reverted to our farm then when the school closed and two of my brothers own the farm and have used the school as a summer cabin, things like that, a place to stay when they visit.

ED: Does it look the same today as compared to when—

WL: It is worn a little bit, needs to be painted and the shingles are in pretty bad shape but inside it's not too bad. I guess I was—when I was there recently, I was wishing I had chalkboards as good as the ones that were in that school in my classrooms here, they're nice, very nice quality slate chalkboards.

ED: Upon arrival at the school, what were your first impressions would you say?

WL: When I was a child or—?

20 ED: Both, maybe when you were a child and—

WL: Oh I suppose I probably visited quite a lot when I was a child because my older brothers had gone there and the school was kind of an everyday part of our life because it was so close to the farm and we'd had—oh their Christmas programs that

the whole neighborhood visited there, and the schoolhouse itself was used also as kind of a community center. So I'd been there many times. There were also what they called school picnics where the whole neighborhood came at the end of school for a little celebration. So I don't think it was particularly intimidating at that point.

5 It was kind of mixed emotions going back to it recently. I had not been in the building for twenty years, I suppose, and it was interesting to see how you remembered things and how they were the same and different. Sometimes just your memory doesn't really—isn't really very accurate with things.

ED: How would you say your memories were different than—?

10 WL: Things were much smaller than the way I remembered them. The school room itself was smaller and (laugh) one thing in particular, there was a tiny little water fountain in the schoolroom and I had not remembered that actually at all being there but uh—

ED: Would you like to add anything else to this interview?

15 WL: One of the things we mentioned earlier, it was, I think there was a really high priority on education from the community and uh—with the schoolhouse we had all the of the school records came back to us and my brothers and I were going through them a few years ago and had records from, let's see, my oldest brother would have finished elementary school probably in about 1955, and from the time that he finished we went through all of the classes until the time that I finished. There were fifty-seven
20 students that had graduated eighth grade until then, and of those that we knew of there were nineteen that had gone on to get PhD's or professional degrees of various sorts, and for one in three to do that, that's probably remarkable for almost any school or at least a public school. I think it just emphasizes—especially because I suspect that

every one of us was a first generation college student. [It's] quite remarkable that the proportion would be that high.

ED: Well thank you for coming here and talking with me.

WL: You're welcome.

5 ED: It's been a pleasure.

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