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## Interview with Robert Howard "Bob" Fleming (FA 388)

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2/18/82

TRANSCRIPTION

Name of Oral History Project Lifeways of the Kentucky Tenant Farmer

Tape 1 of 1. The number of the tape being transcribed 1

Name of narrator: Robert Fleming

Address: 6880 GREEN Ridge Spa Rd.  
Lewisburg, Ky 42256 Tel. 755-4352

Name of principal interviewer: Scott Elrod, Kevin Ming

Date of interview: April 2, 1993 Place of interview: Spa, Ky

Other persons present at interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Equipment used: Reel-to-reel \_\_\_\_\_; Cassette X; Model: \_\_\_\_\_

Tape used: Brand Maxell; Amount (side 1) All; (side 2) All

Summary description of interview context and contents:

Lifeways of Kentucky Tenant Farmer

- Ming: Are there ways that you could tell there would be an extremely good crop?
- Fleming: Yeah, like i said there was ways people could tell, they just plain educated themselves on it till they knew what was going on.
- Ming: Did it have to deal with the color?
- Fleming: Yeah, the color had something to do with it. And then you could just feel of it, there's a different feel in green tobacco and ripe tobacco
- Ming: You mean the texture?
- Fleming: You could <sup>just</sup> tell by feeling, you really could. And see they just educated themselves on it, they watched what happened last year and basically it was routine.
- Ming: When, was there ever a part of the season when money was more scarce than other parts of the season?
- Fleming: Well, it seemed to me like it was pretty scarce all the time. Eh, the tobacco selling time was the best time, that was the basic money crop, tobacco. And my dad would sell corn, he'd sell some hay if he had more than he needed for the stock.
- Ming: So was it lower then in the middle of the growing season?
- Fleming: Yes, that was when we'd be lowest.
- Ming: How did the family pay for things it needed, like clothes, or Doctor bills or if an emergency came up how would they pay for that? Did they pay for that or would the sharecropper, I mean the landowner?
- Fleming: No. The sharecropper had to pay for <sup>his own</sup> some family. I really, to be honest with you, I really don't know how my parents paid. I do not. I do not have no idea. But I'm sure they paid because any time they called the Doctor he'd come. But I never saw them pay a penny never in my life when he, you know. Course when my dad, let me tell you, left Todd County he went to work for the Public Works and that's where the money came

from then.

Ming: In a case like that did you always have to pay with money? could you trade things? could you give...?

Fleming: Yeah, yeah you could trade, you could trade.

Ming: What were some of the things you could trade?

Fleming: I don't have any idea, I don't have any idea. But you could go to the store and take eggs and chickens and trade them for grocerys, I know that. But as far as the Doctor, I'm pretty sure the Doctor probably has taken chickens. He has, cause that's one thing I didn't mention while ago but we raised <sup>lots of</sup> many chickens. My mother had a field full of Rhode Island Red chickens all the time.

Ming: When the crops did come, <sup>in</sup> and like you said that was when you had more money, how was that money spent  
→ initially ?

Fleming: Well, it was basically what ever you needed to buy. My dad always bought salt, sugar, and things of that nature you couldn't raise. He'd buy them by the barrel. <sup>(him roll)</sup> I've often seen a barrel of salt, <sup>a lot of times</sup> a barrel of sugar. We most of the time raised our <sup>own</sup> wheat for flour, and corn for meal we raised that, and he'd take that to the mill and have it ground up. And they'd take what they called a toll. You'd have a sack of corn and they had a container there and would take out a sack for their own, <sup>the</sup> grind the rest up and give it to you, wasn't any money exchanged there. Now I know that part to be right. But as far as the Doctor, I have know idea how he was paid when I was a kid.

Ming: How did you actually physically harvest the crops?

Fleming: Uh, well, all by hand except for wheat. They had a wheat binder that they had to rig up someway where they hook three mules to it. It would cut that wheat and tie it into <sup>bundles</sup> bonds about eight or ten inches in diameter. And there's some pictures over yonder you can look at if you haven't where they're ~~chopping~~ <sup>shocking</sup> wheat.

Ming: So when you say you did it by hand, what hand tools did you use?

Fleming: None, except <sup>a</sup> tobacco <sup>knife.</sup> ~~now~~. The corn we'd drive down, what we'd try to do, we'd drive down, if we had as many as three together, ~~(inaudible)~~ <sup>one picked up the down row</sup> that the team knocked down and two on each side of the wagon. <sup>that way they'd get 5 rows at a time. And they'd pull that</sup> ~~stuff off by hand and pitch it in that wagon. Get a load and take it and put it in a crib~~

Ming: Was there ever any labor sharing in you community?

Fleming: Oh yes, yes. If you'd get in a pinch then someone would come help you. Then some people would swap work. I never did like that cause I figured everybody would come out on the wrong end. I'd rather do it my self than to run down the road hunting people.

Ming: Was there ever any money you could by some nice things with ?

Fleming: They'd buy us candy spasmodically. Now fruit, other than the apple, we raised apples, had some old apple trees. Now like oranges, Christmas was the only time <sup>we had oranges.</sup> I'd didn't think oranges grew any other time except Christmas!

Elrod: I've got a rumbling in my stomach talking about food so we're just gonna keep going. Uh, who did most of the cooking in your family?

Fleming: Well, my mother until she lost her health. And when she lost her health, she died when she was fifty five years old. The last five or six years she was alive my dad helped her a whole lot with the cooking. I never knew her to go to a... well even before that he'd get up and go feed the horses and the hogs and the cows, what have you, and she'd to the house work. But <sup>when</sup> she lost her health and he'd help her cook and we'd go do the milking and things of that nature.

Elrod: Before she lost her health, she took care of the cooking primarily. Was there any time your father would have done the cooking?

Fleming: In case of sickness, yes. But <sup>just like fixing</sup> ~~as far as making~~ a meal he may have helped out a little but he never took

the initiative on it because he had so much to do in the field he didn't have time.

Elrod: When your father had to take over the cooking, was the transition hard for him, was he a good cook?

Fleming: Uh, anything in the vegetable <sup>line he</sup> ~~(inaudible)~~ it was just as good as my mother's. The cakes and pies he didn't tackle them. After she died, we stayed there the four of us and we went right on, we never missed a meal. After she died, dad did the cooking, I did the washing and ironing, and two older brothers, they didn't like the house work much, they'd do the work in the field. And when everyone got their chores done, we all pitched in and whatever was left we did it.

Elrod: So in a day you did a lot of work between the fields the cooking and the cleaning?

Fleming: And my daddy had <sup>I was</sup> a habit of getting us up at four o'clock whether ready or not and we worked from then till dark. And unless we were awful busy we'd take off an hour and a half for lunchtime. I always thought that was to let the stock rest. And they'd sleep, ~~and~~ <sup>but at</sup> ~~by~~ that time I couldn't sleep, I'd play. Entertain <sup>myself and go</sup> ~~until time to go back into the field.~~ <sup>back when they'd</sup>

Elrod: What was it that your family ate for the morning meal?

Fleming: Basically meat; we didn't have much cereal. Oats, that's the only cereal I can recall. But somehow or another, and I still can't see to this day how it happened, <sup>but</sup> we never missed a meal.

Elrod: You say you ate meat. What kind of meat?

Fleming: We'd eat like sausage or bacon and once in a while we'd have ham. Most of ~~them would salt a ham or two~~ <sup>to</sup> suffice for a little money extra. <sup>the time we sold a</sup>

Elrod: Did you have bread, jams, honey?

Fleming: I don't think we had any honey. We had jellies and jams, because my mother saw to that. She canned like

crazy in the summer time. And when they killed hogs, why they would can the sausage, can the tender loins of the meat. They'd put up five or six hogs at a time.

Elrod: So every morning it was some kind of meat, bread, jam. What did you drink?

Fleming: Mine was all water. I don't remember my mother drinking coffee but my dad drink coffee on up to World War II, and he said it got too high and he quit and he never did drink no more coffee.

Elrod: For the noon meal what was generally ~~eaten~~ eaten?

Fleming: Vegetables. Beans and peas potatoes and stuff that we raised.

Elrod: So you would come in from the fields to eat?

Fleming: Oh yeah we'd come in from the fields, every day we'd come in from the fields. Except sometimes we'd be working in the bottom and it would be too far. Then we'd take a lunch with us in a bucket. And we'd take some corn and feed the horses in the wagon bed and they'd eat when we'd eat.

Elrod: Did you have ice tea or water?

Fleming: Water. *And most of the time it was warm water by dinner time. We didn't have ice.*

Elrod: And what was eaten at the night meal?

Fleming: Most of the time it was what was left over from dinner.

Elrod: Did you have <sup>s</sup> deserts?

Fleming: Yeah, mama would make pies and cakes. But we didn't have what you call pop now, we didn't have any of that. It didn't even exist as far as I know.

Elrod: How about holidays. Was there anything special that was served?

Fleming: No. Well, we always had cake at Christamas, I remeber that cake

Elrod: Always a special cake?

Fleming: Not special. Probably just a cake like she cooked any other time.

Elrod: But that was the only difference?

Fleming: We never observed a Christmas day, except my daddy like to work on Christmas day.

Elrod: How about when folks got married. How did people celebrate that occasion?

Fleming: You just go get married and go home and go to work.

Elrod: So there was no real celebration?

Fleming: Okay. The day before I got married I planted corn all day. The seventh day, the eighth day, and the ninth day I started again. PLanting corn with a one row corn planter. That's the way we celebrated our wedding day.

Elrod: Would you say that within the society you grew up in, which worked hard in the feilds, that food was just something to feel you bellies, to refuel you?

Fleming: About the same principple as putting gas in a car.

Elrod: Did you ever have any craving for anything you considered and exotic food? Exotic fruit?

Fleming: UH huh. I liked all fruit. And my dad would buy...There was a neighbor who had an orchard, he'd go over there and he'd help him get his orchard in to get some for us. And we take the rest of it and wrap it in newspaper



and try to keep it for Christmas. If we did that we;d have a pretty good Christmas for three.

Elrod: Aside from the orchards, was fruit available at the grocery stores or the markets?

Fleming: Not that I know of. I was a great big boy before I saw any fruit. Like I said, I didn't know oranges grew except at Christmas time.

Elrod: You ever do any perserving? Did you ever take part in that?

Fleming: Yeah, I helped carry it in I never did do any of that. I stirred (inaudible)

Elrod: Can you tell me any thing about preserving? How to go about it? Preserving meat, that sounds intresting. Canning meat.

Fleming: Okay. They'd fry those sausage, (inaudible) then put them in a half gallon fruit jar and turn it upside down. When that grease in there settled on the bottomk then it was sealed.

Elrod: There was no need to put any thing in there except the cooked meat.

Fleming: To my knowledge there was not.

Elrod: And you could keep that for how long?

Fleming: Well, I'd say we kept it almost a year. Maybe over a year sometimes. And I never heard of any going bad. But see, here again we were gonna come up next year and kill hogs again.

Elrod: How about spices, flavorings when you canned meat. Did you use anything special?

Fleming: They put salt on the meat to preserve it. And as far as any spices, I don't remeber any.

Elrod: No pepper?

Fleming: They put pepper on it when they took it up to keep the worms off of it.

Elrod: If you had any food left over, what did you do with that?

Fleming: Put it in the slop bucket.

Elrod: Slop bucket was used for what?

Fleming: Feed the hogs. Because there was no freezers, regrigerators, and wouldn't keep over night. And you know we're sitting in this room right now and its nice and warm, it's cool outside. Okay, when we sat in the house the temperature was in the house same as it was outside almost. Except we could keep it warm, but you couldn't keep it cool.

Elrod: What kind of stove did you cook on?

Fleming: Just a wood cooking stove is what it was. There was a cooking stove and then there was a heating stove. The cooking stove had the eyes on that you could take off and set your pots on top of that. (inaudible) it would cook quicker and that eye that they would call it was about yey big.

Elrod: How about when gas ovens came in. When did you see your first gas oven or electric range?

Fleming: I would say I'd been married a few years before I saw an electric range.

Elrod: So that would be what year?

Fleming: I married in fourty six. I don't think I saw one before then. I know that we didn't have electricity before then. I had seen electricity, we used to go to Lewisberg once in a while and see the electricity down there.

Elrod: Well, did you guys have any time to go hunting, to shoot wild game?

Fleming: Yeah, my dad and brother they was big hunters. I never did care much about hunting. I couldn't kill any thing so I... But yeah, lots of mornings he'd get up when we were going to school, and he'd say I'm going to go get me a squirle for dinner". And he'd go get him a squirle and he'd dress it. Mama cooked it and he brought it to school with him.

Elrod: Do you think humting was more for food or as much as anything for sport ?

Fleming: Food in my family. They didn't... Now latter on they got to bird hunting a little for sport, but most of it was for birds. Go kill two or three squirrels and come to the house. Go rabbit hunting, he'd kill two or three rabbits then come to the house.

Elrod: When you went to school, you mentioned this while ago, what did you, or what did most kids bring for lunch?

Fleming: We'd take a little sac and bring a biscuit probably little meat and a biscuit with some preserves on it take off.

Elrod: Can you recall any food that was considered to have any medical value to it? Curative?

Fleming:

Elrod: None. So if you got sick, you just fought it off?

Fleming: Unless you were real sick then they'd call the Doctor and he'd come out. Reach in his pocket and get a bunch of pills and give you a pill or two. And I always thought the same pill for every disease that  
(inaudible)

Elrod: So you never resorted to chicken soup?

Fleming: No, not me. I had pneumonia once when I was real little. And it come a snowing and I wanted some snow cream and I begged them to give me snow cream and they wouldn't do it and the doctor came and said give him all he wants. I took about two, three bites that's all I could stomach.

Elrod: Was ther anyone in there anyone in the community who had knowledge of herbal medicens, who was considered somebody you'd call if the doctor wasn't around ?

Fleming: No. We didn't have anybody like that that I knew. There was just this one doctor who served the whole country as far as I know.

Elrod: How about food that you grew at home. Vegetables, did you raise any melons ?

Fleming: Yeah we'd raise watermelons, mush melons just for our own use.

Elrod: And the vegetabvles that you raised?

Fleming: Oh yeah, all kinds of vegetables.

Elrod: Did you buy any vegetables at the store?

Fleming: Nope. Back there then, butter beans, what they call limas now, my folks raised a lot of them when I was a youngster. And there wasn't no such a thing as canned those. But they would put those things up dry, just like you would pintos or northerns. We raised what we ate, basically.

Elrod: Was that pretty common among everyone you knew?

Fleming: Yeah.

Elrod: Were there any folks who were an exception to that?

Fleming: Not that I knew of.

Elrod: How about the doctor. Do you think the doctor grew his own too?

Fleming: I don't think so. I think he stayed pretty busy because he covered a great big community there of people. He doctored all.

Elrod: So just among the people you knew that was pretty common?

Fleming: Yeah. In fact, everybody I knew did the same thing. They wanted so they could go on to the grocery store. Once in a while we'd go up to buy sugar and stuff like that. But we always tried to have a few eggs and a few chickens to take to buy the groceries we needed. We didn't buy a lot of groceries.

Elrod: Did you ever use any of your produce to barter from any of your neighbors?

Fleming: Oh yeah.

Elrod: So food was a sort of rate of exchange for other goods?

Fleming: We'd take a couple of dozen eggs to the store we could buy a little bit of sugar, a little bit of whatever. Let me tell you one thing about this. This is kind of mean thing, but I wasn 't engineer of that, my brother who was a little older thought it up. We had taken five dozen eggs to the store... and he made this up because I wasn't old enough to have been smart enough to have done it... but he said "eggs had gone down a penny today". I said oh they have and he said "yeah". So, I remeber it was five dozen eggs which made a nickle. Okay, we bought whatever groceries mama had on her list and she always aimed to have a little money to come back. Okay, why when we got back home, we had bought a stick of candy for a nickel. And we ate that and he tolled her that eggs were down a penny. She questioned that . Well, she let us off. But see, like you said, we was kind of hungry for that kind of stuff. We'd see it once in a while we were just gonna get it.

Elrod: What can you tell me about working in the feilds, and having to do the laundry, cook the food once your mother got ill. How did that effect, that must have been really difficult. How did that effect getting the work done in the house as well as getting the work done in the feilds?

Fleming: Well, just eberybody pitched in. Just whatever.

Elrod: Do you look on it as a difficult period?

Fleming: Not now. It was a varied transition in our family. Because, see, like I said mama had been sick for a few years and dad had been helping her and he understood the kitchen. It wasn't a hard transition at all in our case when mom passed away. Like I said. The four of us pitched in and went ahead. Course, I'm not saying we didn't miss her, but we went ahead.