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## UA68/8/2 John Rodes Oral History

WKU Oral History Committee

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Judge Rodes: There was a great a -

Interviewer: Go ahead, sir.

JR: Englishman, who was named Thomas Carlyle. He wrote essays, he wrote history, he wrote an essay on history, but his great history was really the history of the French Revolution. He said, somewhere, that biography was the best history. History is the story of men and their actions and their thoughts. When I speak of Bowling Green, therefore, I divide it into eras of men. The first era is the era of its founders, naturally. They were George and Robert Moore, who in 1796, when the country came into being, built a log cabin approximately down where State and 8th Street is. The reason they did that was that they operated, in a measure, a tavern, although there were very few that came and there was a spring close by, right in the rear of what is now a - where David Faxon -

A LADY: Spring Alley.

JR: I know, right in the rear of David Faxon's place of business - what is it?

A LADY: Spring Alley.

JR: I'm not talking 'bout that. I'm talking 'bout that business. Well, you ought to know the place of business right on the public square there and Dave who operates it, but. Right in the rear of that place of business was that spring and the Moores made it a public spring and to route to it they called Spring Alley. And Spring Alley exists 'til this day. It's known as Spring Alley, and this alley you see right yonder they call

an extension of Spring Alley, and way down there by Houchens grocery on the other end is another extension, for Spring Alley ran for one entire block from what is now State Street to what is now College Street, although at that time it didn't go by that name. It went by the names of North Street and South Street. Well, that's the era of the Moores - George and Robert. They were first buried down here in the old cemetery, but, subsequently removed after the Civil War, just after it, to the new cemetery out here on Fairview Avenue, their bodies were. And George Moore subsequently endeavored to establish what he called a "new town" down on the bank of the river and the way of establishing towns in that day was to set apart about a couple of acres for public buildings, and so George and Robert established what is now Fountain Park for the use of the public. Well, and that's the era of the founders. The next era is the era of a - names get by me - of, oh, the man that built the Portage railroads -

A LADY: Skiles.

JR: What?

A LADY: Jacob Skiles. Jacob Skiles.

JR: Oh, yes. Yes. His name was Skiles. He was the son of Jacob Skiles who was a pioneer and in the library up yonder you will find the story of how Jacob Skiles came to this country but his son inherited his fortune, which he made largely out here on the - what we call the Three Springs Road. What's the name of that place out there? They got a new road out there now an interchange. I haven't been out there but that's where he made his money and he came to town and he had a store down here where

3rd Street now is and he made money and he left it to his son who's a wealthy man, by reason thereof. He was a Presbyterian. I saw a book once down at \_\_\_\_\_ where the Presbyterians have got a retreat, of a missionary that came through here, a Presbyterian missionary, he said he stayed all night with Mr. Jacob Skiles on the Three Springs Road and he held a meeting at early candlelight. They had candlelight. That was Sunday; then Monday he came to town through the mud, the worst road he'd ever traveled over to the town of Bowling Green. Well, there was a courthouse in the center of the town and built of logs and that night he held a meeting and talked to the crowd assembled - he said mostly mechanics. Well, George and Robert Moore in establishing the town dedicated two acres for public building and public buildings subsequently and naturally were courthouse, jail, and a marketplace and at one time also a whipping post. Well, as I say, that existed 'til George Moore attempted to pull off from his brother Robert and establish what he called a "new town" on the bank of the river down here where that nigger school was, the high school of course, and he established two acres for public use and that's where the first nigger schools were built. It was owned by the public and was taken by the common council and built the first school down there for niggers and when I was a boy it was regarded as a fine place to live. Mr. Wilkins, Duce Wilkins, a prominent lawyer lived there and Duncan Milliken, Ol' Dunc we called, lived with him at that time when he came here to practice law but gradually the niggers came in and the whites moved uptown. Now I'm coming to the second era which is that man Skiles - I can't think of his -

A LADY: James Rumsy.

JR: Huh?

A LADY: His son, James Rumsy.

JR: James Rumsy Skiles was his son, the wealthiest man in Bowling Green, a Presbyterian - but not over religious. He gave the lot where the Presbyterian church is now built and that's the oldest building in Bowling Green to this day, that Presbyterian church. The next is this William's Drug Store down here because old man Henry Fox, and old gentleman, told me that on Christmas Day in eighteen hundred and thirty-five he was finishing the entrance door, but the church preceded it by about a couple a years. You'll find over there on the steps eighteen hundred and thirty-three, was that Presbyterian church. Well, \_\_\_\_\_, there ain't as many Presbyterians now as there used to be. These Baptists have consumed the town largely and do you know what a Baptist is? I heard a judge of the Court of Appeals who was a Presbyterian tell another judge who was a Baptist, he said "Logan, do you know what a Baptist is?" Logan said, "Well, I reckon I do, I'm one." Judge Reece said, "Logan, a Baptist is nothing but an uneducated Presbyterian." Well, give me that name again.

A LADY: James Rumsy.

JR: James Rumsy Skiles, now those names, that name of Rumsy may touch a thing in your mind, for Rumsy was one of the first inventors of this a steam and you'll find down Green River now a place named for him: Rumsy. James Rumsy Skiles. My father was a young man, starting law here, and James Rumsy Skiles in the panic of eighteen hundred and thirty odd, he failed, but before he failed he ran steamboats between here and the city of Louisville and loaded 'em right down here on the river bank. At the end of Portage railroad there's a bluff; that's where he unloaded 'em and he brought 'em up on a railroad in 1835 to his warehouse built where

our present courthouse now stands. James Rumsy Skiles. In 1855, the steam railroad came through here and he sold it to them, he sold it to the L & N and he went to Texas and his descendants have been lost sight of. There are other Skilesees down about Rich Pond, but they are not direct descendants of James Rumsy Skiles. I saw him once. He came right here and was at my father's house. I am the oldest immediate born citizen of Bowling Green, and I never lived more than four blocks where I was born. I was born at the head of what is now College or at the foot of what was the called Vinegar Hill or previously Copple's Knob. An ugly old hill, where as a boy I hunted birds nests and threw rocks and other things. James Rumsy Skiles is the second era. I'm attaching the era to men. The first was the two Moores, the second was James Rumsy Skiles with his steamboats that he brought here and his railroad that he built and his warehouse. I saw 'em dig up the street there near where the present City Hall, once laid cedar ties of that ancient railroad. It was a mule railroad though. The track was there and the mules pulled the coaches up from the place where the boats were unloaded up to where the present railroad is and where Portage railroad now is and then cut across from Adams Street over to Kentucky and into 10th and then up 10th to the warehouse where the present courthouse now is. That was the route of the James Rumsy Skiles Railroad that he sold to the L & N, that we now call the Portage Railroad because merchandise that came up the river by Skiles' boats were portaged over his railroad to his warehouse. Well, that's the second era. I said history is the story of men. Well, the third era, I would, of course, there were other great men came along. There were some fine lawyers but I can't go into everything. The next was the Civil War. I mustn't omit that. When that great confederate general a - a - names get by me.

INTERVIEWER: Buckner?

JR: Huh?

IN: Buckner?

JR: No, not at all. you got your history wrong. Buckner was - Albert Sidney Johnson! Albert Sidney John-ston! Get it? He came up here and he built the fort now where Western College stands and when I was a boy, there was a deep hole there. There was a magazine hole where it filled with water in rainy periods and there was a rock wall around it and there was an entrance on this side and as a boy we divided up into two sides and sought to take the fort and threw rocks as one boy's head \_\_\_\_\_ because a rock hit him right... And down where the Kentucky Building is was an old corn field that I've traveled over a hundred times and picked up lead mini balls by the bucket full. Albert Sidney Johnston. But when Bule came to Louisville and started down this way and a man, a fella by the name of Grant started down the river, Johnston had to move, and he got down and fought the battle of - what was that battle? Right down - names get by me. The great battle right down here on the Tennessee bor-, southern Tennessee border. There's a cemetary down there now.

IN: Chickamauga.

JR: No, no Chickamauga is way below that.

IN: Shilo?

JR: Huh?

IN: Shilo? Shilo? .

JR: Shilo. All right now you've got me. Yes sir. Well, he got down there and Grant got down the river and took those forts at the river and a, and a Johnston had to fight and fought the Battle of Shilo - that's what you said, wasn't it? Shilo?

IN: Right.

JR: S-h-i-l-o. When I was a boy, there was a colony of people called Shakers down here at South Union and very interesting people and they were spiritualists and they heard the sound of guns, so they said, miles and miles away. That was Shilo. Well, you know in history that Johnston was killed, don't you? Yes, he wandered around and one of those lead miniballs hit him and killed him. I had an uncle in that battle - Benjamin Covington Griver - Grider, Colonel. He had, in those days you know he was up here and his father was a Congressman, my grandfather was a Congressman, and he had some wealth so he took a nigger along his valet de chambre as the French would say. Well, they fought the battle and the nigger got scared and run away and he ran away, naturally he came back here to Bowling Green and told Colonel Grider's wife that his master he was a slave - that his master was killed in the battle which was false. As it turned out in about a month that my uncle, Ben Covington Grider, turned up back here in Bowling Green. But that was the Battle of Shilo, a famous battle and not a, not a great military exploit because they just wandered around anywhere without knowing where they were a shooting - shooting here, shooting there. Well, that was the Battle of Shilo. I'm telling you the era of the Civil War was Johnston and on the other side Bule came in here and also came Colonel Benjamin Harrison who boarded



Ignorant folks that didn't know any better, and among them was me, cause I, put two trees there that didn't belong there. They're there now and others did too. I saw the a, one day, the ladies of Bowling Green, the Garden Club, put in a plant, a tree there, crowd it in and it's growing there now, too. Well, I say at either end were these native trees - sugar maples, except four, and the four are there to this day and they are American lindens and if you'll look around the park and the fountain to this day, you'll see four lindens at either end. They were there originally. They were put there by that architect and I don't know who that architect was, but our forefathers had sense enough to employ an architect to build Fountain Park and so it was done. Well, I say it was a great era. They built a courthouse, they built Fountain Park, they did more than that, they built a new cemetary - Fairview Cemetary out yonder. Built, bought the land, and you'll find the old inhabitants of that day mostly were Confederates, and you will find they're set apart. You'll find a Confederate memorial out there to this day. Well, my wife's father was a Confederate soldier, she was a Hines and all Hines' were Confederates. My father was Union and my grandfather was Union. Course when my grandfather went to Congress from this district, he was just like the Underwoods, they were - oh, what was the name of that political party? This was before the Republican party came.

IN: Whigs?

JR: Whigs! Right! My grandfather was Judge Joseph Rodgers Underwood was a Whig. The Underwoods were Whigs and my grandfather went to Congress as a Whig. Now, when they tore down the courthouse at Scottsville, they found up there a letter that my father in his handwriting wrote to a lawyer up there to get all the boys together to do, not to elect Colonel Grider.

Colonel Grider was my grandfather running for Congress and elected. He came back here, he was faithful to Lincoln's policies. He came back here after the Civil War, right at the end of it and he died out here across the road. Well, that's the Civil War era, I'm tellin you about. A great era because the courthouse, the park, the cemetary all came into being then and more than that. The waterworks came into being. The men of that era right after the Civil War, they did those four things. They built a waterworks; they've ruined it up here now on reservoir hill but, in my young days it was a reservoir and there was a big bowl there that held water and there was a pavement around it with an iron fence that people could go up there and enjoy the view. Came along, time, until finally came along, and I helped too, came along and was talking hospital and they built a hospital and employed a carpenter to build the first place instead of their ancestors employing a man that knew something about it like they did with the courthouse and Fountain Park and yonder cemetary, a beautiful cemetary's been ruined because they had spaces reserved out there and alley ways beyond the cemetary and what happened? Rich men come along and saw the reservation and took it, got next to the Board of Public Works and took it and you'll find Hubert Potter out there and, and others too. They grabbed those place but, that was the era and those were the things they did and I say it was a great post belum era for Bowling Green. After that, came kind of hetrogenious era in which I remember, I was a young practising lawyer and about 20 or 30 fellas including H. H. Cherry, Dr. Blackburn and others came around to my office and asked me to run for mayor. I didn't know a thing about politics, not a living thing, so I consented and the first crack out of the box a politician asked me to promise him an office, which I refused, I make no promises. He said, "I'll beat you if you don't." And he gave me opposition, too. Well, at any rate I ran and was elected and I did some

things when I was mayor. I was mayor in a period of the Great Depression when hundreds came through here \_\_\_\_\_, tramps; had no place to stay and nothing to eat and I had to provide for 'em. I slept 'em down in a, in a - well, down here where City Hall now is. I put 'em where the, where the judge sat when the prisoners were brought in and gave them little cushions under their heads and the next day bought 'em a gallon of gasoline and shoved 'em on down south, that's the best I could do. I, also, yonder hill, Reservoir Hill, was full of cactus so I sent 'em up there and paid 'em a dollar a day, just a dollar, and when I found out the dollar was going to liquor in part, I got a hard boiled woman and I paid 'em in script and she took the script and saw to it was bought for beans and fat meat and they lived through that period of the Great Depression. I had to get along and I got along that way. Well, that was that period - my period - when I was mayor of Bowling Green. Well, I did some things, I established yonder Municipal Park and I a, they had the waterworks here and everybody using it, letting the water run all night and I brought in the first meters and I brought in the first sewer system and Lord, how they - I was the most unpopular man that ever was in Bowling Green. Yes, they had outside privies and they had sinkholes and I drew an ordinance, and it was the first one too, and that, I got money, I borrowed \$630,000 from the Federal government and in that way I started a sewer system. Drew an ordinance that compelled a man to put his own sewer in his own house and bring out his pipe and join at the curb, that was an essential part of it but now, they fought me, my, I lost my best friend, I did, I had college professors and the men that had asked me to run for mayor all deserted me except two. When you do things really beneficial you ain't going to be popular, young man, I can tell you that. When I was doing that, there was a mayor of Hopkinsville come up here, and that was when Franklin Roosevelt started, and he said, "Mr. Rodes, I see

you, Mayor Rodes, have a sewer system. I'd like to get on for Hopkinsville but it occurs to me that I'll have a public meeting and at the courthouse and let the public decide." I said to him you're gone already in advance and he was. He was. Well, I got my sewer and I got, I made 'em put in these meters, water meters, and not run all, not turn the hose loose and run all night and I learned my own lesson that at end of my period not to run for office anymore but I did when I became judge. So, that's your eras now, about Bowling Green. I've give you the era of the Moores and the era of a - what was his name?

IN: Skiles.

JR: Huh?

IN: Skiles.

JR: Yes, Skiles. I know, but the full name.

IN: James Rumsy.

JR: James Rumsy Skiles and then the era of the Civil War and then the great era when our forefathers, after the Civil War, had the sense to employ experts to build the courthouse and to build the waterworks and to build Fairview Cemetary and a, I mentioned something else, too. At any rate, that was the post belum era, that did great things for Bowling Green. Fountain Park, the courthouse, Fountain Park. It taught us the lesson, when you're going to do something lasting and of benefit, don't employ to do it, get the best man possible to do it. Well, young man, what else you want to know?

IN; Judge, that's plenty.

END OF INTERVIEW