

Transcript

Interviewer

The following is an unrehearsed interview with Mr. Eugene Siler Sr. by Debbie Wilson for the Kentucky Oral History Commission. The interview was conducted at the office of Mr. Siler in Williamsburg, Kentucky on August 11th, 1978 at 11:15 A.m. The first thing I want to start with, Mr. Siler, is just some personal background. Now, what is your full name?

Eugene Siler

My full name is Eugene Siler.

Interviewer

Now, where were you born?

Eugene Siler

I was born in Williamsburg, Kentucky.

Interviewer

When were you born?

Eugene Siler

June 26, 1900.

Interviewer

Who were your parents?

Eugene Siler

My parents were Adam Troy Siler and my mother was Minnie Chandler Siler.

Interviewer

Now, where were your parents from?

Eugene Siler

My mother was from Campbellsville, Taylor County, Kentucky, and my father was a native of this county.

Interviewer

Where were you educated?

Eugene Siler

I was educated in Cumberland College and University of Kentucky and Columbia University in New York City.

Interviewer

Now, what is your occupation?

Eugene Siler

I'm a lawyer.

Interviewer

Now, what offices have you held in the past?

Eugene Siler

I've been a judge of the Court of Appeals of Kentucky and also a United States Congressman over a period of 10 years.

Interviewer

Who are you married to?

Eugene Siler

My wife was Lowell Jones.

Interviewer

Did you have children?

Eugene Siler

Four children.

Interviewer

Are they still here in Whitley County?

Eugene Siler

They're all married, moved away.

Interviewer

Well now, the first thing I want to start with is just a little bit of background on Whitley County and some of the things that you know about it. Do you know when the county was established as a county?

Eugene Siler

It was established in 1818 and was cut off from Knox County, the parent county, in that year.

Interviewer

Well, now, for whom was the county named?

Eugene Siler

It was named for William Whitley, who was an Indian fighter whose well-known home is up near Crab Orchard, Kentucky. And Williamsburg originally was known as Whitley Courthouse, but later on, it was called Williamsburg. William being an honor also of William Whitley.

Interviewer

Now, do you have any idea who some of the early families to the area were?

Eugene Siler

Well, the Cox family was one of the original families. And in fact, the town of Williamsburg was cut off from part of his farm. And the Faulkner family was an old family here. and the Henry King family, and the Siler family, and the Lawson family, these are some of the old families of the county.

Interviewer

Well now, have your parents or grandparents ever told you any stories about how things were here in the county in earlier years?

Eugene Siler

I've talked with them back when I was a boy, and my grandmother related about how a deer ran around over the farm where she was raised, and she caught one with a leg one time and held it so somebody would come to her assistance. And I've talked to my grandparents about the weaving of cloth out of cotton, and about their habits of milking the cows and churning the milk and the butter, and Of course, they lived a rather primitive life back when I was a boy. They had coal oil lamps instead of electricity. And nobody had a car. And the first car that came to Williamsburg was, back when I was a boy, was a Ford car. And it was owned by Dr. Archer, a dentist here in town.

Interviewer

Well, now, in your grandparents' time, was this still the day that they had to provide everything for themselves? You mentioned that they made the butter.

Eugene Siler

Yes. And transportation is very limited. And of course, people raised their own gardens and crops. And they had potatoes and onions and beans and staple crops. And also they would sometimes kill a beef. And the hogs, they Hog killing in the fall was an annual ceremony that they followed. They smoked the hams and hung them up in the smokehouse so they could have hams during the winter. And my grandmother had a cellar in which she kept her butter and milk. That was the coolest place they could find, had no weiss. Back when I was young, I heard my grandmother talk about trading butter and eggs and chickens in the town of Jellico, which was three miles from where she lived. And she would trade these products of the farm for shoes and suspenders for the boys and articles of clothing. And they would buy, of course, things like salt and sugar and things of that sort that they

couldn't raise. But mostly they raised everything they ate, and they put it away in the cellars and took care of it in smokehouses and stored the corn in the cribs. So they lived a hard life and a rather rough life, but it was a happy life, I would say.

Interviewer

Now, you mentioned Jellico. Now, that's in Tennessee, isn't that correct?

Eugene Siler

That's correct. But the edge of it is in Kentucky. It's in both Tennessee and Kentucky. Most of it's in Tennessee.

Interviewer

Well, now, has there been a close relationship here between, we'll say, the people here in Whitley County and Kentucky and the people over in Tennessee?

Eugene Siler

Quite a close relationship because of this proximity. Jellico, I don't know. The railroad was 12 miles from Williamsburg, and families like Mahans and Ellisons and Silers were prevalent in both counties. And some of the leading businessmen and professional men of Jellico were from Whitley County families. One time I had four uncles that lived in Jellico.

Interviewer

You mentioned the railroad. Now, when did it come in here to Williamsburg?

Eugene Siler

It came in here to Williamsburg, as I recall, 1883, I think. And then the first bank was established downstairs, the Bank of Williamsburg, in 1883 or 1884. Common College was started in 1889.

Interviewer

Now, what has been the effect of this? Cumberland College here on Williamsburg.

Eugene Siler

Well, it's been a considerable influence, and hundreds of teachers have been educated here in Cumberland College, and also other people, business and professional people, have been educated here. And they've always had a high standard of scholarship.

Interviewer

Who started this school here in this?

Eugene Siler

It was started by the Baptist people. to recognize the need for higher education in the day in which we had no, not even high school back in the days when Cumberland College was first started. I don't think they had any high schools in the county, but they did have higher education through

subscription schools, which the pupils would pay tuition and the teacher would teach them term to term.

Interviewer

Did Cumberland start as just the four-year college that it is now?

Eugene Siler

Or how did it start? It started as a three-year college, which is something you never hear of anymore, and later on it got to be a two-year college, which is a junior college. And then from that came a four-year college back about 1963, I think.

Interviewer

Now, did the college contribute Financially to the community? Did it bring in outside students and this type of thing?

Eugene Siler

The college didn't have much that they could contribute back in those early days. Giving to Cumberland College was very sacrificial back when it started. Dr. Gatler, who became a rather wealthy man, he, I think, gave originally something like \$25,000. And then through somebody's influence, they got a grant from Rocky Fellows, who was a Baptist, and who contributed some here to start the school. So they really sacrificed, and two or three of the prominent original business people here gave all they had on, I mean, at the time when they passed away in their wills, they left everything they had to the college. One of these was John W. Sower, who started the bank downstairs, Bank Williamsburg, and he had no children, and so he willed everything he had in the college, which is about 50,000, but it was a pretty good sound back in those days. And then Mr. Mahan, Mr. James Mahan, also had no children. He willed all his property to his wife for her lifetime then to come to college. So these things all collectively made a pretty good start for the school.

Interviewer

Well now, I understand that the present president at Cumberland, Dr. Boswell, has been there a number of years, but do you know of any of the earlier leaders at the college?

Eugene Siler

Yes, there were several professors who were really outstanding and although their names weren't widely known, but they were outstanding teachers and did a wonderful job in teaching. One of these early teachers was Miss Amelia Packard, a cultured lady from Brooklyn, New York, who came down here because her brother was here. And Packard, Kentucky, a mining town here, was named for her. She taught here for about 35 years until she died. And another well-known teacher was Professor E.E. Wood, who was the president of the school back in the 1890s and on up to the early part of the 1920th century. And another one was Professor Gorman Jones. Both of these men were Phi Beta Kappas. And another one was Professor Fitzgerald, who was the Phi Beta Kappa. And another one was Professor P.R. Jones, who came down from Ohio, expecting to stay here for one school term and stayed 60 years the rest of his life teaching here. So these are the famous, some of the famous, or not famous, but very, very capable teachers who spent their lives here.

Interviewer

What does this community offer that draws all these outsiders into the area?

Eugene Siler

I think it was, to some extent, it was a matter of being sorry for us down here. They came from Ohio, which was a commercialized, industrialized state and much more advanced than we were down here. And they came down here and saw the cows on the street and had no sidewalks. And I think they realized that there was a great need for advancement in development.

Interviewer

Well, you mentioned the cows on the streets and no sidewalks. Just what was the town of Early Williamsburg? How was the town of Early Williamsburg? How would you describe it?

Eugene Siler

Well, primitive, that would be my description for it. It probably wasn't any more primitive than some other towns, like Barville, and Harlem, and London, and places of that kind, but it was a primitive sort of community back in the old days. I can recall when the cows were pastured on the streets, and sometimes you didn't have any cars, but you'd have to get them out of your way to walk down the streets sometimes. In the early days, it had no electricity. People used oil lamps. So that was the state of the town back in the early days. One of the early industries here was Kentucky Lumber Company, which was a pretty good industry. I think they employed them in the lumber yards and in the mills in 75 men, which is pretty good. They paid a very low wage in those days, about a dollar and a half a day, but Of course, the cost of living was very low, too.

Interviewer

What have been some of the other important industries here in the area?

Eugene Siler

Well, I'd say coal mining was the most productive of any of the other industries. But we've had small industries come and go. We had a little mill here one time that ran for a few years and ran out. And we had a canning factory here, which failed financially. And a few small things of that sort. The coal business was the greatest productive labor and it produced more money, more income than anything else. Well.

Interviewer

Now what do the people in Holy County do now for a living?

Eugene Siler

Well, we've succeeded in getting quite a few industries here like We have Keller Corporation here, which is, they make plastic things. And then we have Roper Corporation, and we have Enterprise Plastics. Those are all small, but they're very good for the county and the town. And at Corbin, as you doubt us know, they have American Greeting Cards, which involved over a thousand people. And they have two of the other small industry national cash registers one which probably before

about 200. So those things have been built up here and as the railroad industry went out to change their locomotion from steam locomotives to diesels and practically lemonade shops in Corbin. And so they had to develop something there to take place. For that reason American Greeting Cards was promoted, and national cash rest, and some of the others are standard like a few others. So they have a pretty well-industrialized town, in spite of the fact that the railroad industry there has almost gone out. One time they employed, I think, 1,500 in the shops up there. Now I imagine the shop force is less than 300.

Interviewer

Now has this county ever had a problem with people having to leave and go to other areas for work.

Eugene Siler

Yeah, oh yes, there's been quite an out-migration over the years. People going to Detroit, Cincinnati, and Dayton, and large cities up there. And they come in and back here, as often as they get back, they seem to have a yearning for the old home county in the old hometown. This Sunday, they're having what they call the Moses family reunion. And by the way, that's one of the old families here. They have a reunion on Wolf Creek, which is the old place where most of them came from. They come back here from places of the north, and they have a big family reunion celebration this coming Sunday, 13th. And I'm going. Are you a Moses? I tell them I'm a Moses once a year.

Interviewer

Oh, okay. Well now, in Williamsburg here, like you mentioned, the school. What other things have added to the community? Do you have a hospital here in Williamsburg?

Eugene Siler

Not a hospital. I had a clinic that was starting here, but the standards are so strict to maintain these clinics that they just finally had to close them by business. It's just a doctor's office now. The hospital, Corbin, you know, is very active and a very good hospital. London, as you know, hospital. And people go and there's one in Jellico. It's operated by Seventh-day Adventist, I believe.

Interviewer

Well now, it's my understanding that Williamsburg is the county seat.

Eugene Siler

Correct.

Interviewer

Well now, which is the larger town, Corbin or Williamsburg?

Eugene Siler

Corbin is larger.

Interviewer

Now what's the relationship of Williamsburg and Corbin? Are you like competitive cities?

Eugene Siler

Competition is mostly between the athletic teams. And they usually whip us up there because we've got a much bigger school. But I would say there's not much business competition. And we intermingle with them. I spoke up to Corbin yesterday at the Civic Club up there, and frequently we'll speak on different occasions up there. And we got a very friendly relationship, I'd say, between Corbin and Williamsburg.

Interviewer

So it's just trying to boost the whole county, is that correct?

Eugene Siler

Yeah. In fact, I subscribe to the Corbin Industrial Fund up there every year. I don't know if there, but I feel it's good for the whole county. We have a county fair here, Williamsburg, every year. It's just mostly at the farmers with a couple of days in which bring in produce and cabins and so on, and award and blue ribbons and red ribbons, things of that sort.

Interviewer

Now, what does this town of Williamsburg, is there anything special that you had, you know, unique things about Williamsburg that you had to offer?

Eugene Siler

Especially and distinguished from other places? I don't, in the early days, see... 40 or 50 years ago, people would always point to Williamsburg and say that it was the richest town in Kentucky for its size. This never was true, but people would say it, you know. In other words, I think at one time they said, they said it had about 23 millionaires. This was never true. I think they did have as many as 3 millionaires at one time. Because of the coal bins and the development of the coal bins, they've had some well-to-do families here, probably people.

Interviewer

Is there still any coal industry here in Whitley County?

Eugene Siler

Stripping, mostly. There's no, so far as I know, there's no deep mine here where the men go underground and they got the coal. But it used to be a big industry, a big industry here. Places like Wilton, which is near Corbin, and Mountain Ash, and Packard, and Gatliff, and Proctor, and Evangelical. And these have all gone out. They've all faded out. They're left in there now, except for remnants of communities.

Interviewer

Did you ever have the actual mining camp towns? And is that what these areas were?

Eugene Siler

Yeah, we had the mining towns. Gatliff was one. Packard was one. Gatliff one down had a population of 1,500. Now it has a sort of a remnant population of maybe 25 people. Packard, which was the birthplace of the actress Patricia Neal, as you know. She was born there, raised there. And her home is gone and everything's gone. Packard, you can't. Nothing's there except the bats and the hoot house in Packard. And Proctor is a farm owned by a few family. Very beautiful valley, but there's no industry there, of course, no coal industry. Mountain Ash is a community with the remnants of the people there, maybe a hundred people there around there. Where there used to be at least five hundred.

Interviewer

Do you know anything about life in these coal camps? Did you ever live in it?

Eugene Siler

No, I never did, I never did. I worked one summer in Bonzella Got to know quite a few of the men. I liked the people. And some of them are still around here. And they have a reunion every year. And I usually go.

Interviewer

Do you know anything about their life? I mean, the song like the Tennessee Ernest things, you know, it was 15 tons and all that.

Eugene Siler

Yeah.

Interviewer

Oh, and you sold to the company store and things. Did they have the company stores in these towns and everything?

Eugene Siler

Yes, oh, yes, they had company stores. commissary, as they called them, you know. And he had a square meal for 15 cents, a dime for cheese and crackers, and a dime for pop, or a nickel for pop, I guess. And their prices were high compared to big stores in the towns, you know. But the rents were always, I think, very reasonable. Certainly, compared to rents nowadays, they were very rich. It seems like they had a rather happy life among them, but they had hardships, too.

Interviewer

Now, what type things, other than homes, would the coal companies provide for their people? You know, any services?

Eugene Siler

They always had a doctor, and they cut so much out of wages to pay the doctor. furnished that, but the miners had to pay for it out of a cut in their wages. They had the doctor, they had the commissary where they'd buy things, and they had the house rent and electricity, and they would

haul coal from their own mines to burn, you know, to heat the houses and cook with. And they'd provide some recreation, like baseball, Gatliff used to have a good baseball team. Tackard had a good team. And I can recall they had a brass band in Tackard and one Gatliff. And so that was sort of a recreational program about all they had. They would have box settlers and sometimes and sell. I don't know what to give you the money, but sell boxes and raise some money. Probably use it for the schools.

Interviewer

Now, did they provide schools in the cold camps?

Eugene Siler

Yeah, they were public schools, but they were fairly good, about like the rural schools nowadays, I guess.

Interviewer

Were there ever any mining disasters here in this county?

Eugene Siler

There was never one of major proportions. They had You've probably heard of the Jellico explosion, which was a time when a car of dynamite and nitroglycerin exploded down just almost on the border line between Jellico and Tennessee and Jellico, Kentucky. And I believe 15 people were killed in that, and a hundred or two injured. And the town was quite a while getting over that. major disaster. I remember my aunt, who lived on the Kentucky side, telling them about how a piece of steel railing came somehow up on the hill where she lived and went through the wall close to where she was standing. So that was quite a disaster. I guess you read about the recent fire down at Jericho and the Jenkins Hotel. Seven people burned to death. They were people of old age, pensioners mostly, but seven of them died since the first year.

Interviewer

You mentioned Jellico, Tennessee, and Jellico, Kentucky. Is it actually part of Jellico, Kentucky? I've never heard that before.

Eugene Siler

It used to, yes. It used to be Jellico, Tennessee was, of course, the major part of the whole community was Jellico, Tennessee. And then over on, still over into Kentucky, and they, for a time, several years, they were incorporated as a fifth class city over there. They had a mayor and a policeman and all. But they no longer incorporated over there, but it was in the way of incorporating cities over on the Tennessee side. Used to have a lot of violence down there around the county line, killings, and trouble of one kind or another. You've probably heard of the author John Fox Jr., who's a famous author of books. He came down there, Proctor, he was basically a mining engineer. He came down there and stayed, I don't know, I guess six months, maybe a year, and he wrote One of his short stories with the background of Jellico. I think it was Cumberland Vendetta maybe is one of those shorter stories. The basis of it was down at Procter.

Interviewer

So if you were sending a letter, you would send it to Jellico, Kentucky if it was on this side of the...

Eugene Siler

You were sent to Jellico, Tennessee because it's all the same postal service, same zip code. The famous Grand Opera singer you know was in Jellico, Grace Moore. You heard of Grace Moore? Killed in an airplane accident, burned up over in Belgium, I think. She was raised in Jellico. Her father was a merchant down there, wholesale merchant, Moore Dry Goods Company. And they were a common family down there. Grace was a beautiful girl. kind of strong-willed, circus came to town, surely on top of the elephant's head.

Interviewer

Pardon me just a minute. I got to turn the tape over. The following is side two of an interview with Mr. Eugene Syler, Sr. Now, Mr. Syler, before I turn the tape over, you were speaking about Grace Moore and the elephant comes to town or the circus.

Eugene Siler

Of course, another famous actress that came from Whitney County, born and raised in Whitney County of Packard, you know, was Patricia Neal. She was kin to me. Her grandmother was a sailor, and her father was an office worker in the coal company's office down there. Coot Neal, they called him, and her grandfather, whose name was Petrie. Dr. Petrie was the mining camp physician, Dr. Petrie. Then he married Asaba, Flora Asaba, who was Mike Hendry. Then we had one vice admiral who came from Wither County, and he graduated in Annapolis and retired and been dead several years. He was my father's first cousin. He was an illegitimate child. His father was John W. Siler, who was this banker that started this bank, and he always acknowledged his son, Charlie, who was illegitimate. He remembered him in his will. He was proud of him, but he was illegitimate, a very personable father, a very intelligent man. When we come back to town here, everybody just faded him, you know. He was a social lion. When he came back here, everybody wanted to entertain him, Charlie Blakely, because he's a big man. But he came up under those circumstances, adverse circumstances.

Interviewer

Who have been some of the other outstanding citizens?

Eugene Siler

Well, let's see.

Interviewer

Now you should include yourself, a ten-year congressman.

Eugene Siler

There were three congressmen, only three in the history of this county, who came from this county. One was Judge Finley, who served four years in Congress, and then his son, Charlie Finley, who

served three years in Congress. And I served ten years in Congress. These are the three congressmen came from here. And we had one former governor that, two former governors that went to school here. One of them was Edwin P. Mara, who really lived in Somerset, but he went to school here, this Cummins College back in the entire day. And Bert Combs went to school here. So he had those two. And I suppose that Dr. Gabbard was the wealthiest man ever there. He operated coal mines and had two towns named after him, Gabbard, Kentucky, in this county in Gabbard, Tennessee. And he developed, I would say, four or five coal mines. One was high-splant coal in Harlan, maybe you've heard of high-splant. He developed that. So he was a very prominent man in the way of finance.

Interviewer

Now, what about your son?

Eugene Siler

He is the United States judge. He is the only United States judge that ever came from this area down here. Never had a United States judge from Laura County, never had one from Whitney County, never had one from Knox County. They've all been from up in other parts of the state. Swinford came from Santana, and Judge... Well, they all came from northeastern Kentucky or other places. They never had one before in this southeast Kentucky area. Judge Cochran came from Maysville. He was one of the judges. Judge Ford came from Georgetown. So this is a good honor to be a federal judge. Really, I guess it's more than an honor to be a congressman. At least it pays a little better money.

Interviewer

Now, you mentioned Patricia Nell. It's my understanding that she is an Academy Award winner. Right. Has she ever returned back here?

Eugene Siler

Yes, she's been there several times. And she's told me about some of her pictures. I think she told me that Hood, I believe, is the one she got the award. on, wasn't it? It seems to me like she told me that was her favorite vehicle, as they call it. But yes, she's been there several times. She has an aunt that lives here. Mrs. Mullen Mahan is her aunt, and she lives here. She's up in years, and she's in a nursing home there. But she kind of like to see her Aunt Mullen every year or so. to have some kind of a dinner and invite people in and see her. We attended. She said, Just what is the relationship between you and me? I said, I'm your cousin. And she had another cousin there who was a section foreman, a good man. His name is Petrie. He stood in there receiving when her receiver hunting came down. He was proud of her, of course, and I think she was proud of him, too. She was always proud of the people here. She became a very famous actress.

Interviewer

I was quite surprised to find out that she was from Whitley County. I used to see her with all her pictures on TV.

Eugene Siler

She's very adaptable at the meet, you know. She's very sociable.

Interviewer

Well, are there any other outstanding citizens from the area that you'd like to mention?

Eugene Siler

Well, there is another one that I don't guess you'd say is too outstanding, but he used to write short stories, which then got into publications. His name was Grover Cleveland Kidwell, and he wrote several stories that were published in publications like Saturday Evening Post, I think some of them of that sort. And are you familiar with the sports writer Tom Syler? That's for the Knoxville News Sentinel. He's my first cousin, and he is the sports editor over there and has been for a number of years. He's written, I think, about three books on sports, I guess. One of them is not the Volunteers, but that's the name of the University of Tennessee, and he's written one book on them. couple of others. So I guess you'd say he's pretty well known. Of course, we claim Colonel Sanders is one of our own, you know, because he got his start in Corbin, and he's always proud of coming from down here. Good man to meet. He's really a nice fellow. I was thinking and Corbin for the Rotary Club and I read it from his book, Finger-Lickin' Good is the name of his book, you know. It's a very interesting, very readable book. And he tells, you know, in that book about his early days in Corbin and his connection to the Rotary Club and so on. And of course he's a multi-millionaire and he's internationally famous. But we sort of claim him here too, you know, because Corbin's part of Wiscounty.

Interviewer

Well now, was he born in Whitley County or just--?

Eugene Siler

No, he came from Indiana and had a hard life back in his early days and started out as a railroad fireman and farming and all that sort of thing and got into the restaurant business so accidentally and became famous.

Interviewer

Did he ever visit Whitley County?

Eugene Siler

Once in a while, yeah. We had one of these walk-a-thons, you know, where he walked so many miles to raise money. And he was in on that. That's been about just three years ago.

Interviewer

Does he have any family left in the area?

Eugene Siler

His former wife is living in Corbin, and I talked to her one day, and she said, well, she thought a lot of . She sent her money every year. So although they got a divorce, I think it was sort of an anarchical arrangement between them. He married again, married a woman that worked for him a long time.

You'll get that little book of his and read it. You'll enjoy it. Finger licking good. Read it, you just don't want to put it down. Read all night. That's about the only ones I can remember.

Interviewer

Sounds like quite a list that had an outstanding county here with all this.

Eugene Siler

Well, I think it is really. It's not good. It never has been a very highly industrialized county, but a lot of good people, a lot of achievers, you know. My daddy was raised on a very thin soil farm up in Hollard and worked hard and had nine children in the family. And he became a country school teacher and then became county superintendent of school. He used to elect him, you know. the board, but all the voters, so he was elected twice. And he came to town, became a lawyer, and became president of the bank here and served 35 years president of the bank. So he had a hard life, but he was a very successful man. I appreciate it.

Interviewer

Is there anything you'd like to say, to add about Whitley County and its history, maybe any outstanding events that happened in the county? Well, I'd like to thank you for taking this time out to share this with me. It's my pleasure.