Annie Wittenmyer Oral History Interview

Interviewer:  This is Byron W. Rovine interviewing Mr. Burl Mincer on Monday, June 20, 1994 for the Iowa Oral History Annie Wittenmyer Project of the Davenport Public Library. Mr. Mincer, why don't we start off by having you identify yourself. Tell me your full name.

Mr. Mincer:  I am Burl Lavernon Mincer and I live at 1717 25th Street in Rock Island.

Interviewer:  And how old are you?

Mr. Mincer:  I'm sixty-four years old.

Interviewer:  That would mean you were born in--


Interviewer:  Okay. Would you first tell us a little bit about the circumstances under which you happened to come into the Annie Wittenmyer Home. How did it happen?

Mr. Mincer:  Well, it was--my folks were having problems, the way I understand it now. There were nine kids altogether in the house. In 1939 one took off in one direction and one took off in the other direction. So it left six of us to more or less do for ourselves. And we had three older sisters. Two of them were married and the other one was probably seventeen or so. She more or less went on her own. And there was six from thirteen to two, okay, and we started--we got awarded to the courts and we started out for Davenport.

Interviewer:  You lived where?

Mr. Mincer:  In Newton, Iowa.

Interviewer:  Newton.

Mr. Mincer:  Newton, Iowa. And we started out. As I recall it was the latter part of 1939. I couldnt say exactly what month or what, but I remember it was in the latter part of it. So my brother, my one brother named Earnest, he had a rupture which they did not operate at home. So they dropped him off at Iowa City. And that meant five of us continued on down and were were put in the home. And then he was supposed to join us.

Interviewer:  How were you traveling?

Mr. Mincer:  By car.

Interviewer:  Whose car?

Mr. Mincer:  State.

Interviewer:  State car. And, uh, when we got there we were put in a receiving cottage. All the kids are. They go into a receiving cottage for two weeks, get all checked out, all their delicing shots and whatever. And in those two weeks we
found out that my dad came down to Iowa City through, I don't know who it was, and picked up my brother and just took him right on out to Portland, Oregon with him.

Interviewer: Had he had his operation?

Mr. Mincer: He had his operation and he just lifted him up and took him out, so--

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Mincer: Okay, and then, uh, that left five of us, like I say. There were three girls and two boys. My oldest brother and then we had a--the youngest one was two years old and she got adopted out of there. And I have not seen her since 1939. So, whether the people that adopted her told her about it or--there's a lot of kids, and we notice this on our reunion, there's a lot of kids that we get in contact with that say, "Hey, I don't want nobody to know that I've been in the orphan home."

Interviewer: That's interesting.

Mr. Mincer: Well, I tell them like this--if it wasn't for that home, there's a lot of us wouldn't be on this earth today. And I think they should start going back to it now, instead of foster homes. I don't think they'd have the problems, I don't think, they would have the problems that they have today.

Interviewer: That's very interesting because you know that orphan homes have almost completely disappeared in our society.

Mr. Mincer: Well, the orphan's home was run more like, hey, you had to get up at a certain time, you had to go to bed at a certain time. You had your play time, you had, you know, we weren't abused out there. And, uh, but it was run like a community I mean, and I think that that's good. I've always maintained, too, that any kid, I don't care what he is, any kid growing up today should have at least two years of some Army supervision because it don't hurt any of 'em.

Interviewer: Oh I don't think it does.

Mr. Mincer: No. That's just my feelings on it.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, that's very interesting. Now, now that you're there at the home, now we want to--you say when you first came they put you in a receiving cottage.

Mr. Mincer: Right.

Interviewer: And after you were through being processed and your shots and delousing and whatever else--

Mr. Mincer: Right. Everything. They--

Interviewer: And then they assigned you to a permanent cottage?

Mr. Mincer: to a permanent cottage.
Interviewer: Okay, let's talk about your cottage. First of all, what was it like physically.

Mr. Mincer: Well, when they assigned you to a cottage they took in consideration your age. And your age--you go into the same age group as the others. And so I was in one cottage, four, and my brother was in six, right next door, you know, because there was four years difference but they still went right in there. And, like I say, you had--when we got up in the morning we knew that after we ate we had chores to do, whatever, and then we went to school. And when we came home we had--may be we had a chore to do and maybe we didn't, we went out and played, you know.

Interviewer: How many kids would be in one cottage?

Mr. Mincer: As I recall, I think we had thirty-six kids in our cottage at that time.

Interviewer: Was it one-story or two-story?

Mr. Mincer: It was two-story with one big dormitory upstairs. Your bed was right next--you just had a little aisle.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Mincer: Where all the beds were placed around. And we had a fire chute and we had one toilet over there in the corner. And the matron, she would sit at the door until we all got to sleep. And there was no such thing as airconditioning. There was fans, but I think the matron got that. We had our hot days, but we lived through it.

Interviewer: Now you say this was the dormitory. Now what was downstairs?

Mr. Mincer: Downstairs we had a big room where we could do our homework at night. We had a bathroom. We had closets down there and we had a front room which very, very seldom you used. And then there was a little, well, I don't think you could call it a room hardly, but the matron would stay in between the front room and our bid room that we had to work in. She stayed in this little room and maybe had a radio in there. If you were good you could go and listen to the radio and she did her sewing in there and little different things like that, you know. It was more or less her room.

Interviewer: A day room. She didn't sleep there, did she? No. She slept upstairs.

Interviewer: Oh, she slept in the house.

Mr. Mincer: Yeah, there was a big dormitory and then there was her apartment up there.

Interviewer: I see. So in addition to the dormitory there was a room for her. Did she have her own bathroom there?

Mr. Mincer: Bathroom and she had--uh, I think it was only one room. I never, you know--
Interviewer: Well, anyway. That's very interesting. Now then, did they issue you clothing? Did they give you clothing?

Mr. Mincer: Right, right.

Interviewer: Were they uniforms or any kind?

Mr. No, no. They were just ordinary clothing. And we all made sure—if we needed anything we’d just get a slip and go down. They had a warehouse down there and uh, we had our own meatmarket, we had uh, everything was right there. We did our own canning, we did everything.

Interviewer: That's very good. And—you were there for nine years.

Mr. Mincer: I was there from 1939 to 1947.

Interviewer: Okay, eight, nine years. Did you have the same matron? Is that what you called her, matron?

Mr. Mincer: Yeah, it was a matron. Uh, no, I had three different matrons. I had Mrs. Brennan, Mrs. Gould--. Vance Gould was the boy's supervisor and then his wife was uh--

Interviewer: How would you spell Gould?

Mr. Mincer: G-o-u-l-d, I think. And then I had Mrs. Hattie Platt. And then next to 18, Cottage 18, there was a chapel. We also used the chapel as a movie theater.

Interviewer: I've seen movies there.

Mr. Mincer: Have ya?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Mincer: And then we had young people's meetings—we had a real good scout leader.

Interviewer: Very good. Well, you had three different matrons—uh, how were they to deal with? I mean were they friendly, were they stand-offish, what were they like?

Mr. Mincer: Well, like I told you in the beginning, we had two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen. Okay, by the time you get up to cottage eighteen, you're about ready to get out of the home. And everybody didn't think had a plan when—well, real good, but--. You know, you look back and she was just trying to tell you what life was all about, you know. Where, when you're seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, nobody has to tell you nothin' because you know it all.

Interviewer: You know everything. Well, during the years you were there, not just your matrons, but any of the other matrons, did word get around that like some of them were mean or nasty?

Mr. Mincer: Not mean--I can't remember. There was one matron and she
required different things to be done and everybody knew it. And she wasn't mean. I--I don't think I had--in fact, I liked all my matrons and, you know, I mean you don't like everybody as you're going through life, but, I mean, these here people, they were just trying to help ya', you know?

Interviewer: Sure.

Mr. Mincer: But I don't think I can recall any of the matrons being really mean.

Interviewer: So they were pretty fair and decent.

Mr. Mincer: I think they were.