Aileen: This is Aileen Holmes interviewing Bob Getschman [did I pronounce that right?] , the 5th of November at approximately 1:00. Ok, my first question is what is your full name and when and where were you born?

Bob: Well my full name is Robert Murray Getschman and I was born in Champagne, Illinois.

Aileen: And when was that?

Bob: March 2, 1928.

Aileen: How many siblings did you have?

Bob: I had two brothers and a sister.

Aileen: And do remember what your parents did for a living?

Bob: Yes. My dad started out as a manager for the S.S. Kresge Company until the Depression came and he opened up his own Mubba Bubba Store.

Aileen: And your mom was a housewife or...?

Bob: Housewife. And worked in the store [it was attached to the house].

Aileen: Oh yeah? Um...I know that in our pre-interview you mentioned that you moved around a little bit, is that right?

Bob: Yes.

Aileen: Now did your father’s job have anything to do with that? Or did you just...?

Bob: No, it was just the things that happened in life. I lived at home until I went into the service. I was sixteen when I went into the service; I lied about my age. And that was in 1944.

Aileen: Yeah. Now during this time period of the ‘30s, I know you were really young, but what would you say your family’s economic status was?

Bob: Well, as far as we were concerned as kids, things were okay. There was enough food on the table, the store provided income, and um...My first Christmas when we had the store [which I would’ve been about seven] and each one of us for Christmas got a little black metal car. And it cost about ten cents a piece and we played on the floor with those all Christmas day. And we didn’t know we didn’t have anything. Santa brought us a car.

Aileen: So if that’s what your Christmas’ were like, were your birthdays about the same? Did you get a lot of presents or was it just family and...?

Bob: It was usually just family. We had no family that lived around us. In other words there was no nucleus family. We were it. And we were far from all my aunts and uncles and grandparents and everything like that. They lived up in Wisconsin.

Aileen: And it was too difficult for them to come see you?

Bob: Yeah. Getting back and forth was about a 26-hour ride on the bus.

Aileen: Oh my goodness. So no one had cars or...?

Bob: Oh they had cars. But those weren’t...when you owned your own store and it’s open seven days a week, and when we start...my dad had the store open every morning at eight and it was open until two the next morning. And they did that seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. The store was closed Thanksgiving afternoon and it was closed all day Christmas Day. But outside of that. And my mom and dad and I was the oldest so as soon as I [I think I was in third grade] I started having to work in the store. I wasn’t a matter of *wanting* to; it was a matter of having to.

Aileen: Yeah. So what did you do? Did you help stock...?

Bob: Well yeah. And I waited on customers. I had a little place in behind the penny candy counter, and I would sell penny candy. In those days, you have to remember, a Clark Bar was worth a nickel, and penny candy was anything from licorice strips on up. And...so my dad would give me five dollars in change, and every time I sold a piece of penny candy, I had to mark it down on a piece of paper. At the end of the time, he would count the marks [which were worth a penny a piece] and I had to have five dollars plus whatever I sold in the box. And he always told me if I came up short, I would have to pay it back. Now I didn’t get paid. I had no idea where that was supposed to come from. But I knew I better not do it.

Aileen: [laughs] Yeah. Now...did you ever work with your mom in the store? Or did she...?

Bob: Well, we were all in and out because the house and store were attached. And there was a bell over the door, so anytime someone came in the buzzer would buzz, and that meant whatever we were doing in the house we stopped and jumped up and go into the store. Whoever was there. even when we ate. We always ate in the dining room [and from the dining room to the door of the store was about four and a half feet]. And when that buzzer buzzed you jumped and went into the store, waited on the customer, and then came back and ate cold dinner.

Aileen: That sounds like a full-time commitment. Alright. And now were any of your other family members involved in politics or the military? Is there a reason why you joined?

Bob: Well, I’ll tell you. Why I joined was stupid. I hated school, and I was a junior getting ready to go into my senior year. And I had gotten pneumonia and that was in August, so I was sick up until almost the clear end of September. And I decided that was too late to start school; since I didn’t want to go anyway. And I heard that guys that came back from the service were heroes, and I wanted to be a hero. So I joined the Navy, and I joined the Navy because then you’d be on a ship; you didn’t have to do all that marching. And I was too lazy to do that. So I ended up in the Navy and found out that heroes died and I decided then I didn’t want to be a hero because I really didn’t want to die. So I was lucky I really wasn’t in any real battles or anything.

Aileen: Yeah definitely. And then...so how long did you live in Champagne, Illinois for?

Bob: Well I don’t even remember it. We moved because my dad worked for Kresge’s and he transferred around the country. And we moved from there to Chicago, and we lived in Chicago for a year or two. Then we moved to Detroit. And when we moved to Detroit I was six and I started first grade. And that’s when my dad was transferred to Steubenville, Ohio. So we went to Steubenville, which I was six, and dad was managing the Kresge dollar store there. And in the Depression they closed all the dollar stores, and they just told him one day, “Don’t come back to work tomorrow”. And so he went home...he came home [I don’t remember it real clear] but I remember he started finding a place. And we found a place in the north end of Steubenville [or he did] and he had that many years of experience as a manager so he knew how to handle money and how to have a store make money. And so that’s when we went down there and it was interesting because we didn’t have hardly anything so we made arrangements with the ice cream company to put the ice cream in, and as we sold it, we took the money and laid it aside until we could pay for the ice cream; and then the rest of the money was ours. When it came to cigarettes [and at that time cigarettes were all about fifteen cents a pack] and well, nobody had any money. But you know the nice thing [I’m digressing but I’ll get back] the nice thing about no one having money is everyone is about the same. We’re all on the same boat. And so...we opened the store and we would go down to the drug store downtown and buy two cartons of cigarettes because we could buy them cheap. And we put them on the shelf [on the store downtown they sold for about ten cents a pack, and if you bought a whole carton you got the carton for 80 cent] so we brought them up and put them on the shelf and sold them for fifteen cents a pack. And then we’d start to run out and we’d have enough money in the cash register so that my mom would get on the bus, go downtown, buy another two or three cartons of cigarettes, and bring them back up and put them on the shelf. That way we could operate a “cash and carry” business for us. There was no charge accounts. If you came in and you needed it, you had to pay for it. And we had cigarettes, and we had candy, and we had ice cream, and we had two big racks of magazines. We had every kind of magazine in the country. We had, I’m sure, at least 70 to 100 comic books in the comic book section because at that time it was a printed society. And we carried the “Steubenvile Herald Star”, and we carried the “Pittsburgh Post” because that....And then...if you wanted a Sunday paper and you wanted to make sure you could get it, you could come in and reserve it. And we had a whole list; we’d write you’re name on the top of the post so that when you’d come in during the day you could get it and we wouldn’t run out. Now if you missed one week, you’d either pay for that paper or you could not reserve on for the next week. Because remember, we were working on pennies. And we had cigars. We had a pop machine. Gambling was illegal but we had a pinball machine [and the pinball machine had a little button on the bottom] and if you won you won games. And it cost five cents to play. So if you five games you won twenty cents. And we’d give you the twenty cents and then push the button and erase it. And that was how that was done. And we a line of pop machines, which was a big box [a bright red box] that said “Coca Cola” on the side of it. And you put the pop inside and then everyday the ice man would come through and we’d chop ice to put in it. We didn’t have refrigeration systems in those days.

Aileen: Yeah, wow. So you must have seen lots of different kinds of people growing up.

Bob: Yeah, it was interesting because where we lived [we didn’t live in the high end class part of town] we were low class. And of course we didn’t think we were low class, we thought we were as good as anybody; there were those cookie-pushers. They’re the ones that lived up on the hill. We didn’t like them. I don’t *why* we didn’t like them, we just didn’t like them. But anyhow, in our neighborhood, people were coming in from the old country. We had many first generation families living here. And they all worked in the steel mills. We had Weirton Steel and Wheeling Steel and we had Pittsburgh Steel, and I don’t know, there may have been a couple more. And they were all lined along the Ohio River. And the reason the steal mills were there was because that’s where the coal was, and it took two tons of coal for every one ton of iron ore to make steel. So it was cheaper to bring the iron ore in from Duluth and Superior to there then it was to take the coal to Duluth and Superior. That’s why all the steel mills were located down in that valley. And we had Ukrainians and we had Polish. We had Italians, we had Yugoslavians. I’m trying to think...there were about four or five...

Aileen: Major ethnic groups?

Bob: The kids all talked English. We all spoke English. But when I’d go into their houses with them, they’d be speaking Italian or Croatian or Eurasian or whatever. And so they could be talking about me and I’d never know it.

Aileen: [laughs]

Bob: But we all seemed to get along. It was good because [if I start blabbering too much then stop me] all of these women would all bake cookies at Christmas time. And everyone of them would bring a dozen or two to our house or into the store to give to my dad because we always treated everybody the same no matter who they were. And on the other side of the railroad tracks, that whole section there was all black. But in Ohio the schools were all segregated so there was blacks in our schools also. But there was such a hodge-podge of mixture. We all played together.

Aileen: Yeah. So what did you guys do as kids then? What did you do for fun?

Bob: Well I like you before, we played kick-the-can out in the alley. And we did some things; I guess I can tell you this now because everybody it happened to is dead and it can’t get back to me. But um...there was this one fellow who came through from the company called “The Little Pie Shop” and they sold pies that sold for ten cents a piece; little individual pies about four bites five bites. And he parked outside one of the grocery stores, Johnny Fullen’s Store. And so, we were coming up the street and saw this guy go into the store, and we knew he always sat in the there and talked to Johnny for a long time. So we opened the back of his truck and stole every stinkin’ pie out of the back of the truck. [chuckles]. We ran up around the corner and into the alley. There was this big garbage can so we dumped the garbage out, put the pies in the bottom, and I threw my coat in there. And then we put the garbage back in on top of the coat. And everybody else ran but I thought, “Gee, that’s no fun.” I mean, I want to see what happens. So I went back and I stood at the corner. And he opened the back of his truck and let out about six or eight expletives. “I’ve been robbed!” he says. [chuckles]. So I stood there and watched him go to the police and he came down to me and said, “What are you doing here?” I said, “I’m wating to catch the bus; I’m going down to the picture shows.” “Well, who stole the pies?” “How do I know? Nobody here; I just got here a minute ago.” And I stood there and watched them and then the bus came and of course I had to get on the bus and ride for a block or two. But um...yeah we were always having fun. I lived about six or eight blocks from the Ohio River...and in those days, nothin’ would live in the Ohio River that you wanted to touch. And it was kinda like, one kid said, “Too think to swim in but thin to walk on”. But we didn’t care; we went down there, and in the summer time we’d swim in the river without benefit of any clothing. And then we had...there was a little park down below us. And we’d all get down there and there’d be about eight or ten or twelve of us and we’d play some football. We’d get beat up pretty bad because we didn’t think about touch football. Nobody had pads or anything but we tackled anyway. And we did that. And we used to climb up on the railroad bridge and dare each other to go out and stand there as a train went by because it only missed you by about two or three inches. It’s a wonder somebody didn’t get killed. We went out to the first pier of the bridge and go down on the pier and jump off into the river. That thing must’ve been 80, 90 feet in the air. And as I got a little older, I’d go up on the hill where the swimming pool was, and they built a new highway up. And it was built by the W.P.A. Only WPA today stands for “Works Progress”. We always thought WPA stood for “We Poke Along” because there’d be an awful lot of guys standing there leaning on shovels with one guy shovelin’. The line outside of the outhouse was always about ten deep, but if someone really had to go they went to the front of the line and went in. There wasn’t anybody in there but...[chuckles]. The swimming pool was at the top of the hill. They built this nice road, it was a fine road goin’ up there, and it was oh, about a mile maybe a mile and a half, and they got it all built and everything and they were getting’ ready to dedicate it. So we blocked it off at the top and the bottom [and this was in the winter time, we got snow] and slid clear right down that hill. And the newspaper had a big story in it, “City Builds Million Dollar Sled Riding Track”. That didn’t endear us to anybody. But we’d go up there and swim and there was a public golf course up there and I caddied and did stuff like that.

Aileen: Yeah. Ok, I’m going to kind of get off topic a little bit, but was church a big part of your childhood or no?

Bob: You know, it’s funny. Every time you mention something I got a story, you know. But I’m a story teller. I used to be a good one. Now I just tell stories [chuckles]. It was required at our house. Like I said the store was open seven days a week. The only time it was closed was at Christmas, and it was closed for half a day on Thanksgiving. But we as kids were required to go to Sunday School. Mom and Dad couldn’t go because they had to be there for the store. But we had to walk [it was about ten or twelve blocks, maybe] to this church. And we were all required to go to Sunday School. My problem was that I like...church better than anything to do with school. I don’t care what it is. If I’d see a school of fish I wouldn’t like them because it was school. But I used to like to stay for church because they’d sing all these songs and they a choir and this great big pipe organ. I could go down into the basement and back in the back there was this big blow machine that you’d hear it all start up and then the air would up in it and then you could hear the prgan start up above. And so we went every Sunday. We had to go, that was the requirement in our house.

Aileen: You. Alright so you hated school, but you were in first grade and you school up through your junior year?

Bob: Up through my junior year. And then I went into the service. When I got out of the service I came back and took a GED and then I went to college. I liked that better. I was old enough to realize. I was thirty-five when I started college.

Aileen: And then...So I know you were really young when you were in school, but do you remember if any of your teachers ever mentioned what was going on, like politics-wise or...?

Bob: Oh yeah. I didn’t need them. I had the radio and all the people that came in the store. It’s so interesting because I remember when Roosevelt got elected, FDR. I know for you that’s centuries ago, for me that’s a part of a lifetime. But anyone in there when he started all his programs like the WPA and the CCC camps and all of that, to give people jobs because...this was bad this time...but it was worse, not worse, but it was worse. And the interesting thing was that there were people who would come in the store or that would say, “I don’t know why Roosevelt wants to do all this stuff. His problem is that he doesn’t really understand us. *He’s rich*. He’s never had to scrub for a living. Why, he’s gonna tax us to death and we’ll never have any money. What he’s doing is establishing socialism. He’s turning it into socialism. And that’s what we don’t want. He’s making big government and what we want is no government. Government, leave us alone.” Of course, all of these programs went to work and brought us out of the Depression. And I hear exactly the same things being said today. It was said sixty years ago, seventy years ago. Almost seventy-five years ago. So it’s interesting, but we already tried the system that...Obama is using and it worked. But there’s nobody who wanted it then like nobody wants it now.

Aileen: [laughs] Exactly. So...what else did you listen to on the radio besides politics?

Bob: Oh wow. Well we listened to Jack Armstrong the All-American Boy. And...who else did we have? Lone Ranger. That was a half hour show; that’s the longest shows ever went was a half hour. And Little Orphan Annie, and there were about four or five [others]...and each one of them was a fifteen minute segment. And I didn’t realize it then, but you’d get was five minutes of commercial, five minutes of story, and five minutes of commercial again. And I had the decoder ring and I had all that other stuff that we’d send in for; send a box top off a “Wheaties” and ten cents and we’ll send you so and so. And in the evenings we listened to; I listened to Jack Benny, who’s real named was Benjamin Kubelsky by the way. And I listened to Big Bands late at night. And they would broadcast from New York and Philly. There weren’t a lot of programs across country right then, because that came when I got a little bit older. There was no television. The first telephone I remember you had...it was what they called the “candlestick” phone. It had a bottom on it and a tube that went right up here and a mouth piece and a hanger on the side. When you’d take the ear piece off the hanger, the hanger would go up and that would the connection to the operator. And the operator would come and that’s what she’d say, “Operator”. And then you’d give her the number you wanted and she’d say, “Thank you”, and pretty soon you’d hear a person pick up on the other end. And we celebrated the time when we could finally...oh! We started out with six people on our line. Friends of mine that lived out in the country, they had as many as twenty-four people. And everybody had a different ring. But it rang in all twenty-four houses, so anybody got a phone call everybody else knew about it. And you’d pick up and you’d say “hello”, and you’d hear “click, click, click, click” on the line as everybody else picks up to listen. There’s no privacy. But we got a private phone finally. And we got that because my dad used to write numbers. And of course that was totally illegal, but we made money off of those numbers. And we had to call in so much [there’s a whole story about that sometime if you want to hear it]. Yeah...and then so all of a sudden one day a guy showed up and he set a new phone down there. And it had a *rotary* on it. And you didn’t have to call the operator anymore. Wow, I could call anybody in town and it would ring immediately as long as I knew the number. Even *girlfriends*. Today, I’m not sure why I did that, but back then, I remember why. And all of this stuff we could do. And then I remember, we finally got the ultimate of ultimates...we got a phone that all you actually had to do was push the buttons on it. But they were always sitting on the desk and they were always in the same place because they were always attached to the wall. And all you could do was talk to each other. But that was our telephone system. Oh, by the way, it was either in 1928 [the year I was born] or 1926, the first radio station went on the air.

Aileen: Oh...so you grew up with the radio then.

Bob: I grew up with the radio. The first commercial station was KTRA in Pittsburgh. And they broadcast the boxing match [my mind won’t tell me which one it is right now] but anyhow, so I grew up...radio was new when I was a kid. I remember I had an associate pastor working with me and he told, “Boy, Bob. You know I’m really gettin’ old. I remember black and white television.” I wanted to hit him right in the mouth. I remember when there *was* no television. But it shows how things have progressed. If I wanted to call somebody, like if I wanted to call Kenosha, Wisconsin [because that’s where all our family lived] we’d have to dial zero or push zero and ask for the long-distance operator, and then she would come on and we’d give her the town, the state, and number we wanted. And then she would call somebody else who would call somebody else who would put the call through. And you would tell her where you wanted and she’d say, “Thank you” and you’d hang up. And it’d be anywhere from five to twenty minutes before the phone would ring and you’d pick it up and your party would be on the other line. So, that was long distance. To show you how far that has come, the other day I picked up my phone, I dialed a ten-digit phone number, and within three, four seconds, maybe six seconds, and my nephew, who’s living in Tokyo, Japan, picked up his phone and said hi. And all of this has happened in my lifetime. I can remember. And the thing was when I was talking to him, it was...11:00 on a Friday night here, and was 12:00 Saturday afternoon there. I am talking to him in my future, and he’s talking to me from his past. And here we are, and it took, oh maybe eight to ten seconds, at the very, very, very outside to place that phone call. Not only that, but I could’ve done the same thing from the car by pulling [I don’t have cell phone but I used to have one] a cell phone out and punching the number in there and there’s no wires or anything.

Aileen: And I know you mentioned you went to the movies sometimes?

Bob: Oh yeah, we used to go. They always had...the feature film. They had the coming attractions. You had “movie tone” news. And you always had a serial. And that serial could be the “Lone Ranger” or it could be “Flash Gordon”. And “Flash Gordon” was funny; he had this spaceship with a sparkler sticking out the back of it, “put put put put put”. You *know* that’s not going to work, but anyhow, and it always ended where, like, he’d get hit and then fall over a cliff, and you know he’s dead, and the next it shows him getting hit and he falls over the cliff and somehow grabs the ledge right underneath. And the guy walks away and he pulls himself back up. That’s where the phrase “cliff hanger” came from, by the way.

Aileen: Really?

Bob: From the serials, yeah. Because you were always in some sort of spot somewhere. Now, at least when I went to the movies, they were all talkies. But...I remember when color first came in. And that made a big difference in the movies.

Aileen: Do you know what the first one you say was? Can you remember or...?

Bob: Oh my gosh, no. I don’t remember. But you’d spend about two and a half to three hours at the movies on a Saturday. And it coast you a whole dime. And you’d get a little packing of Jujubes for about a nickel. Maybe they were a dime because it was at the show and they always jacked the prices up a little bit [I talk with this hand because this hand is busy].

Aileen: [laughs] So...I know you mentioned how you paid...how you made money for the movies. You want to...?

Bob: Well we called it “junkin’”. And what we did was take the wagon and we’d go around and collect newspapers, and piles of cardboard, and scrap iron and stuff like that and then take it back to the junk dealer and we’d sell it to him. We’d work all...we’d start at like six or seven on a Saturday morning, work up to almost noon, and we’d get enough money to take two or three of us to the movies. That’s how we got the money for the movies.

Me: That’s so cool. I don’t think kids...I don’t think *I* would have that work ethic actually.

Bob: well, it was just kind of one of the things you did. Because I had to work in the store a lot...but I said to my dad one time, “When do I start getting paid?” and he said, “Did you have lunch today?” and I said, “Yeah,” and he said, “Okay. You’ve been paid.”

Aileen: Yeah. So I think we’re about done but is there anything I didn’t ask you about that you would like to talk about?

Bob: Well, I remember of course the beginning of the war, the war started in 1941, by the time I got in it was pretty much on its way down. That’s why I can never figure out, we took on the whole stinkin’ world and beat them in six years, and we’ve been over in Iraq for forever but that’s another story. But...during the war, my dad decided they were going to ration sugar. And so my dad bought two 50-pound bags of sugar and hid them up in the attic. Well, it turns out as they rationed the sugar, we didn’t need more then four and five pounds a month. So the stuff sat up in the attic. By the time he got ready to tap into that sugar, it was so hard you couldn’t...you’d have to put a stick of dynamite in it to blast it apart. I remember some of the words he said but they weren’t too nice. But we had that, and we had...oh the speed limit was 35 miles an hour. The slower you drove, the less gas you used...I don’t know why because it took you longer to get there. I never understood that. But some of the stuff they rationed was...now people used sugar were the same people that used sugar before the war started. But it was a way for the government to make you feel like you were a part of the war. Now, the one thing that *was* really needed of all things was tapioca, because tapioca was used to preserve film in the hot [like in the South Pacific] and things like that. Because at that time, we still took pictures with film and had to develop it and all that stuff I know nobody does anymore but that’s the way it was back in those days. If you had “A”, “B”, “C” or “T” [T was a truck stamp because if you had a truck and you were doing deliveries, you got extra gasoline to be able to do that]. But we had a public transportation system; everybody used it. When the buses went to town they were full; they’d empty out downtown, and other people would get on at the other end of town. Um...people would get off and it’d come back and be full again. People depended on it; the buses ran every five minutes and then every ten minutes in the evening. [I’m trying to think of anything else you might be interested in].

Aileen: Oh, anything you have.

Bob: It used to be, when we to church, like I said we walked [we walked *a lot*. I don’t think anybody else did, but we did]. And in the winter time, the temperature would be like about, oh twenty, thirty degrees, it’s noon, it’s been snowing. You’d come out of church and you’re nice and warm. You get your coat on and you’re all bundled up and you start home and it take you twenty, twenty-five minutes to walk it. And b the time you get to the back door, you open the back door and you’re cold and you’re miserable and the whole world is wrong. And you smell a biscuit cooking, you smell potatoes cooking, and you smell vegetables cooking and the stove’s been fire up in the dining room [by the way we didn’t have central heat. We had a stove in the store and a stove in the dining room]. And it all smelled so good you were ready to sit down and eat two or three helpings of whatever was there. And we were never short on food. I would never remember that. We had a Mr. B and his brother [who] owned a bakery across the street from us up on Dover. And we used to up to B’s and buy a loaf of bread, that cost us twenty cents. And then we’d get on of those big ten ounce bottles of pop, not the big, big, ones but...and that cost another dime. And then we’d go down to “Icely’s” and get the Chipchaw Jam and cut the bread down...slice it down sideways and open it up and fill it up for...for about fifty-five, sixty cents you had a meal that you couldn’t finish. And you’d sit there and eat all that, just having a good time, that’s all. I remember when I was about twelve years old, our house sat right on the sidewalk, and the sidewalk went into the street, there was no grass or anything like that. You came out, and stepped out of the front door onto the big stoop and onto the sidewalk. And I came out this one day and this guy was sitting there. And, like I said, I was about twelve. And he was telling me, “I can remember when so and so was so and so and so and so,” and all this. “You know, there used to be a...” and I’m thinkning to myself, at about ten or twelve years old, I’m thinking, “Man, it’s wonderful to have memories. I don’t have any memories. Everything is right now for me. I wish I had memories.” Well, now I have memories, and I wish it was right now for me.

Aileen: Yeah. Thank you so so much.

Bob: Oh you’re welcome. You’ve been very nice.