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Charlton E. Prather: We're privileged to have with us today, Mr. Everett Williams, who is the long time director of vital statistics¹ for the state health organization that in his time was the state board of health. And he continued through the reorganization of '69 into the years of the division of health but retired sometime in the early '60s as I'm recalling or the early '70s. When did you retire?

Everett H. Williams: Eighty-four.

CP: Eighty-four? He retired in the early '80s then, but he came to us very legitimately. He's a graduate of University of Florida in mathematics and a minor in biostatistics. But after graduation from University of Florida he—Uncle Sam needed him in the Second World War where he served for four years and then came back. And I know that he has a master of science in hygiene with a major in biostatistics² from the College of Public Health for the School of Public Health³ at Johns Hopkins University, but he spent his entire professional career with the state public health organization.

And it's truly a privilege now for us to have Mr. Williams, to review his fascinating career in the matters of bringing the vital statistics system, indeed of the United States, up to where it is today. Mr. Williams, it's truly a pleasure to have you here, and I thank you

¹Vital statistics are statistics concerning live births, deaths, fetal deaths, marriages, and divorces.

²Biostatistics is the application of statistics to disciplines within biology, such as medicine, pharmacy, and agriculture.

³Johns Hopkins's public health school is known officially as the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

sincerely for taking the time to come. Tell us what got you interested in the matters of the public's health from a statistical point of view?

EW: Well, I graduated from Florida in 1940 and the depression was still hanging in the air, and jobs were scarce. And the state board of health wrote to down there and ask them to recommend somebody to be a statistician. And my professor, professor M.D. Anderson down there, I was his star student and he recommended me.

And, frankly, I was thinking about staying, and going another year, and changing my major to accounting. And they offered the job, persuaded me I better take some money, so I started with Florida in July 1, 1940. And the army got me very shortly after that. And I was gone for four years and a little more.

CP: But you're on formal leave of absence, and the state was up, and you came back to your old job.

EW: I came back in 1946. And I applied for—I had my old job, but the director's job came open, and they said I was too young.

CP: Who was health officer at the time?

EW: Dr. Sowder⁴ was health officer.

CP: In '46. He came in '44. Who was health officer in '40? You remember? That's hard. That's a long time to remember.

EW: Can't remember.

CP: That's okay. We can look it up easily. But Sowder said you were too young to be director.

EW: Well, and Angus Laird of the—

⁴Dr. Wilson T. Sowder was prominent figure in Florida's public health system for over 30 years. Dr. Sowder was interviewed as part of the Florida Public Health Oral History Project on June 24, 1997.

CP: Oh, Angus Laird, yes.

EW: Who was the head of the marriage system, and, frankly, Angus was a good friend of mine too. He disappointed me. Anyhow, they hired somebody else and sent me off to Johns Hopkins. And in the spring, before I came back, I got a telegram that I would be the director when I got back. I had aged.

CP: And you had aged sufficiently.

EW: About six months. And the other fellow they hired hadn't turned out very well.

CP: I didn't know that piece of history on you. That's fascinating. And that was in 1946.

EW: Yeah.

CP: So you were now back. What did you find when you came back to be the director?

EW: Well, I found the bureau was pretty well organized in the collection of records. But Dr. Stewart Thompson had been the director from 1918 to 1937, and he was an exceptional man.

CW: He was an MD too, wasn't he?

EW: He had two jobs: one was director of vital statistics, and the other was secretary of the Florida Medical Association⁵. And, apparently, he got some pressure to take one or the other, and he took the Florida Medical Association.

CP: Oh he did? In 1936, you said?

EW: Thirty-seven. Because I know when I became director, he would ask me to come over to see him. And he gave me a bunch of statistical books from the federal government that he had taken with him from vital statistics, and he said, "I'm giving these to you, not to the state board of health. They're yours."

⁵Founded in 1874, the Florida Medical Association is a professional organization for medical doctors in the state of Florida.

CP: Oh, okay. Did you find them useful?

EW: I kind of double-crossed him because I donated them to our library, but the government had sent out two copies of each. So the library had most of them but where there was only one, he had it. He was one of the outstanding vital statistics registrars in the country in his time. So our collection methods were good. We haven't changed them a lot. And the basic statistics were pretty good.

The things that were new since he left and before I came were things like delayed birth⁶ registration, and adoptions, and writing letters about delayed birth registration. When I got back the file cabinets were just loaded with correspondence, people wanting to establish a birth certificate that hadn't been filed when they were born. And it's a new procedure; they didn't start doing that till just before the war.

CP: Oh, prior to that you couldn't get a birth certificate?

EW: Not if you didn't have one on file.

CP: If it was not filed when you were born then you didn't have a birth certificate?

EW: That's right.

CP: Oh, okay. Go ahead. All right. I think our audience would find it interesting just to know a little bit about the history of this thing of collection of vital records.

EW: Well, let me start from the beginning. Vital records, in the beginning, were birth, death, and stillbirth records.

CP: Stillbirth records. Interesting.

EW: And when they first started they filed a birth certificate and a death certificate for every stillbirth. And it was, later on during my time, that we changed and started calling

⁶Delayed birth certificates are filed in the state of Florida when no birth certificate was filed within one year of the child's birth.

them fetal deaths, and finally won fetal death certificate, cutting the paperwork in half. And this was at the recommendation of the public health service.

And later on, we picked up marriages and divorces in 1927. And, of course, the later procedures were, as I mentioned, delayed birth certificates, adoptions, legal name changes, fetal death, which I already mentioned, those things became things to do.

CP: Go back to marriage certificates, marriage records. Prior to 1927, there was, outside the judge's office, there was a marriage license required?

EW: Yeah, and that was filed somewhere. The county judge court.

CP: At the county judge, they filed marriages, and the clerk of the circuit court didn't give divorces. And so if I wanted to prove that I was married, I'd have to go to the county in which I was married, go to the judge's office, and for a fee, he would make me a long hand copy. Okay. We didn't have copier machines in those days.

EW: Those records are all now in the clerk of the circuit court's office. The county judges don't have them.

CP: I don't know all of this, so I'm fascinated. You don't let me interrupt you too badly.

EW: Let me tell you a little bit about the history of vital statistics.

CP: Please, do.

EW: Colonies came to this country and most of them had no system for filing birth records. They filed deeds, and marriages, and registered animals, but no children. In fact, it's one of the early advertisements that vital statistics people used to try to stir up registration of births was a picture of a pedigreed hog, and the thing said, "This hog is worth 500 dollars, and his owner makes sure his birth is registered." It says, "This baby is worth untold millions, and they don't worry about him."

CP: Do you remember what year that began? That sort of stuff began? The agitation to get births registered?

EW: Well, I think that one might have been '20s and '30s.

CP: Okay.

EW: But, anyhow, we believed the first birth records on file in this country are in St. Augustine in the Catholic church⁷ there. They started in 1594, and they've got records from then, pretty well. They're not complete.

A lot of the states started earlier, the New England states, where genealogy was a lot more important than it was to us down here. And then the Florida Medical Association and the medical associations all over the country started stirring up, trying to get births and deaths registered, not for legal purposes but for statistics. They wanted statistics on why people were dying, and where, and who.

And they started trying to get legislation. And during the period of 1874 to 1889, some cities started the registration of statistics. I can't remember the doctor's name, a very elderly doctor, way back in the early days, said his job was going from town to town, trying to urge the city counsels to file birth and death records.

CP: Register their births and deaths.

EW: And he got a few, I mean, Key West, Pensacola are two of the oldest. St. Augustine, Jacksonville, Orlando, and Ocala. And I heard that there were some in Kissimmee, but I never saw them.

CP: Was this a physician of the medical association or was he employed by the board of health or were you just personally interested?

EW: I think he was employed by the board of health.

CP: Okay, and that was his job.

EW: Real nice old gentleman. I had a lot of interesting talks with him.

⁷Everett Williams is referring to St. Augustine's Cathedral Parish that is known as one of the oldest Catholic parishes in the United States.

CP: Was that Dr. Dame⁸?

EW: Oh, no. Way before Dr. Dame.

CP: Way before—I didn't know you could get way before Dr. Dame. Yeah, I did.

EW: He was retired. But anyhow, finally the state board of health passed a regulation that all physicians should file a birth and a death. It was like putting a barrel out on the street corner, they didn't have any people to collect them, they just had a—

CP: But you had to file them?

EW: They were supposed to file them. And Dr. Deport, at one point in the annual reports, said something about he was really proud of those few physicians that file them, but he was greatly disappointed in the profession for their completely lacking care of this. Half of the physicians were the ones that wanted them filed, were the ones that didn't do it.

CP: And they're the logical ones to file too, aren't they?

EW: Yeah, so then—

CP: When did the board of health pass such a regulation? Do you remember?

EW: Eighteen eighty-nine.

CP: Eighteen eighty-nine? That was the first year we were on board.

EW: Yeah, that's when they started.

CP: Okay.

⁸Dr. John Dame was interviewed as part of the Florida Public Health Oral History Project on September 9, 1997.

EW: And the records apparently that came in were put into a cardboard box and stored in the corner. In 1899, they made it a law. You had to do it. Still no personnel, still no money, and they went in to the same box for just a few years and then they dropped off.

In 1903, they had the idea of making post cards, little penny post cards, with the birth and death on the back. And these also went in the box, but I don't know what happened to those post cards, but they ought to be a stamp collectors' dream. But there were several thousand.

CP: And a genealogist's dream too. Do you think anyone's ever looked in the attic of the Julia Street building?

EW: Well, we had them for a long time until I retired.

CP: I hope they have not been thrown away. There's a good prospect when we, you know, moved in '76 to Tallahassee so much got thrown away.

EW: Back in my mind, it seems to me that maybe they were sent to the state archives.

CP: And that is worth noting on our tape.

EW: Because I sure didn't want to throw them away.

CP: I would hope they didn't get thrown away. And there's a way we can check that, if they are in the archives, if they're there. We have access to quote the board of health things that are in the archives. But I thank you for mentioning that for our future folks who are watching this tape.

EW: This was another failure, if they were put in a box in the corner.

CP: And they were never added up, accumulated, you never done anything with them statistically?

EW: Later on, we got them in the indexes. And we collected all the records from the cities that go back from Key West, Pensacola, and places like that.

CP: You got their original records here.

EW: We got them indexed. And the original records too. Some of them were rather loathe to turn them over.

CP: Did you have to get a law or did you use persuasion?

EW: Well, we had the law. The first law was in 1913, and this was a law that we hired a Mr. Voorhees who I never met, but he started things. And the law provided 25 cents for each certificate filed—

CP: Oh, did you pay the physician?

EW: —to the registrar.

CP: Oh, the registrar.

EW: The registrar. We got away from making the physician the main guy, although he's still the main guy for filing births. But Mr. Voorhees was trying to get registrars all over the state.

CP: And there was now one in every county, in every use station?

EW: They just had some. In 1915, the so-called model law was passed. This was a law that was promoted by the public health service, and the main model thing about it was it provided some money for having registrars everywhere, statewide, and the same 25 cents fee.

CP: Paid to the registrar?

EW: That's right. And this law was finally statewide by the year 1917, so we had registrars covering the state then.

CP: But only in 1970? That seems to be very late. I'm surprised we didn't have a better system before that but go ahead, we're learning.

EW: Dr. Stewart Thompson was hired in 1918. And he was a man that was a good organizer.

CP: And he was a gung-ho.

EW: That's right. He was a good one. And in 1919, Florida was accepted into what was called by the United States Public Health Service as the death registration area. That meant that we had a completeness of registration of 90 percent on deaths. We were the 33rd state to be admitted. And on the birth registration we were admitted in 1924, the 32nd state, estimating that we had 90 percent completion. That was an overestimate; we didn't have any 90 percent on birth certificates.

One thing I might mention in 1937, during the depression, the WPA took on an indexing problem. And they had a bunch of elderly ladies in there, typing cards, and they indexed the records from 1917 right on up to 19—

CP: Was this done in the local registrars' office?

EW: No, it was done in the vital statistics office.

CP: Oh, okay, here.

EW: There was a bunch of ladies here and after that project ended, we employed them because they had been with us for some time. And another thing the WPA did that didn't have anything to do with us was they went around the state looking for birth records and death records. And there's a book that was in the library that showed every county, mostly churches, where churches have had listings of births and deaths.

CP: And did they abstract those records and bring them back from—

EW: No, they just told where they were.

CP: Oh, there's a book as to where they are.

EW: Yeah, it's up to you to go find them then.

CP: Okay, from that's another pearl for the genealogist.

EW: If the churches still have them.

CP: Yes. I recently saw a little note about the Episcopal church in Palatka having the birth records going back through its history, and it goes into the early 1800s. And this was kind of a note to the genealogist, and, therefore, folks who were around the Palatka area, down as far as somewhere up the St. Johns River, you are very likely to find birth records in those churches' archives. I thought that's crazy. You are fascinating.

EW: They were registered in churches rather than officially with a government agency. Government wasn't interested in births; they couldn't charge a fee for that, you know. A marriage has a fee and property is all important as are registered animals.

Well, Dr. Thompson retired or changed jobs in 1937, and a Dr. Langle was employed and he was an elderly gentleman, and he was director until 1946. In fact, when I came back from the army, he no longer was there. He was alive, but at home. And I understand he came down in the basement occasionally, and talked to the secretary, his secretary, and went back home. But he was close, near the end. And he died when I was at school in '46, '47.

CP: And thus the telegram you got. And you were the only mathematician, the only statistician, the only trained person who knew how to deal with numbers that was here.

EW: Then.

CP: Yeah, yeah, of course you—

EW: Thompson was well qualified.

CP: Okay, but he left in '18 but you were employed—who was the director at the time that you came? Was he?

EW: Dr. Langle.

CP: Was he a mathematician? He either self-made or trained?

EW: No, he was a doctor whose eyesight was failing. He had big thick-rimmed glasses and he had been a research physician most of his life and it kind of ruined his eyes, you know, peering through microscopes.

CP: But he knew how to handle numbers, or did he not know how to handle numbers?

EW: Not really.

CP: Oh, okay, too bad.

EW: He was a director. That's the reason he hired me.

CP: Need somebody knows something about numbers around here.

EW: But he ran the vital records portion and then put me in there as a test statistician.

CP: Yes, all right, excellent.

EW: Let me tell you something about what are the responsibilities of various people in the system.

CP: Please do.

EW: The local registrars are really the basic thing.

CP: And today they are associated with county health departments.

EW: Right. In the beginning, now, they had close to 4 to 500. Every little voting area, they covered the country. And each was a registration district and each reported directly to the state. I don't even think they were even many county health departments in those days. And Dr. Sowder—when I came back from school, Dr. Sowder was starting to want the county health offices be the local registrars. And for a long time, it was a gradual, gradual change. The local people didn't want to stop, and the health departments didn't want it.

CP: Were the local people paid?

EW: Twenty-five cents a certificate.

CP: Oh, 25 cents a certificate.

EW: It started in 1913 and—

CP: Were they appointed by the commission?

EW: They were appointed by the Vital Statistics Bureau.

CP: Oh, appointed by the vital statistics. But it had to be a pretty good job, could be a pretty good job.

EW: It was, might have been in 1913, but that 25 cent fee—I don't know whether it's still on the books or not. It still was when I retired in 1984. But, you know, county health departments were not eager to do this work because it wasn't profitable. Now, in recent years, they're really eager to it because now they can sell certified copies of records, and it's a moneymaker. And it's a popular with county health departments now.

CP: I recently had to buy some and they're six bucks a plot, certified records. Six bucks a plot. That's a moneymaker. Go ahead.

EW: Well, they didn't charge for vital statistics, for copies until 1937. And they put a fee of 50 cents. And when I went to the legislature to change it to a dollar, you'd thought I was going to break everybody in the country to pay that much.

CP: Well, I suspect you did.

EW: And, later on, we went and tried to change it to five dollars. We were trying to get rid of those 50 cent pieces. The legislature, in their infinite wisdom, cut the 5 to 250, so we still had the 50 cent pieces coming in. Some people would send in 50 cents worth of stamps and stick it on the envelope.

At any rate, over a period of years, we finally got all of the county health departments with local registrars. One of the last ones, a little old lady held on for a long time with the help of legislative and county officials and the county health officer would recommend that she be—

CP: Terminated.

EW: —terminated and there'd be a hell of a human cry, maybe that ought to be it. And the county health officer chickened out every time.

CP: He wouldn't volunteer—

EW: Every time.

CP: The politics was too hot. I don't blame him.

EW: But, finally, it did happen.

CP: Is it fair to ask you what county that was? If you can't, if you don't want to tell us or you can't—

EW: I mostly certainly can. Manatee.

CP: Oh, it was Manatee County.

EW: There was a sweet little old lady, her husband died in the war, she was crippled, and she operated out of her house. The funeral directors loved her; she didn't enforce the law at all. And she sold them copies even though we said that it wasn't legal. But she was making money, and she was popular, and she apparently—I never met the lady, but I understand she was charming, likeable, and needed the money, needed the job, so it was a humanitarian thing but one of our big problems is timeliness of records.

The records would trickle in, trickle in, you know, we might get them a year later. And these registrars before the county health departments, they weren't going to push the issue. I can remember out in west Florida, a funeral director in the 1950s, saying, "What is this new fangled law about getting a permit for a burial?" Well, that law was passed in 1915.

CP: That newfangled law.

EW: Yeah, but the registrars weren't enforcing it, a lot of the county health departments in the beginning. I'm not sure how many of them are now.

CP: This was to serve that—

EW: Records are coming in good now.

CP: Oh, they are? Even burial permits?

EW: Well, we don't check on that.

CP: You don't find out whether they were buried or not, huh?

EW: Let me see, the registrar's job is to run herd on it. The funeral director's job is to instigate the death certificate.

CP: By law, he's required to do that.

EW: Now, funeral directors over the years have really complained. They give me a hard time at every meeting, Why do we have to get the physician's part filled out, why can't we just leave it with him and then let him file a certificate? And my answer is, It just wouldn't work that way. Physicians were the trouble; these were the kind of people who really want the records filed.

CP: They're the one that want the data, but they let someone else do the work.

EW: That's right. Some of them would use the death certificate as a means of collecting their bill. I'm not going to do this, so I've had to write many of them and tell them, "I feel sympathy for you and your bill collecting, but the death certificate is not a bill-collecting device." Over the years, it's gotten better, and better, and better, and it's got real good now. But it's been a long hard, hard haul.

CP: Within my recent memory, the physician pediatrician elected to do just that not too many years ago and was severely disciplined by the board of medicine for doing that, and that's in recent years. That surprised me then, and it even surprises me more now it occurred. Well, excuse me.

EW: Funeral directors, you know, I sympathize with them because they do have a hard time, but my answer to them is that's part of funeral directing. As a licensed funeral director, you're supposed to have the skill to—

CP: Get that out of them.

EW:—go get those records. And it takes tact, and not an iron thumb. Now, physicians' responsibility for filing birth certificates and over the years we've had trouble with a lot of them getting them in on time and everything. And we changed the law to allow hospitals, the hospital administrator, to sign the birth certificate. And since more and more births are in the hospitals this is given rise to a lot better reporting.

CP: It becomes routine.

EW: A few physicians complained, they wanted to sign those records but—

CP: They still could because—or they still can?

EW: They can if they're there right away, but the death certificate needs to be filed within five days.

CP: Yeah, immediately. Well, he gave the birth. Why can't he just go to the chart and sign the certificate? Hospital that I worked in, that's the way it was so the cities would deliver the birth certificates there.

EW: Well, hospital's responsibility and we figured that would make the birth records a lot more accurate. But what we were finding is, the hospitals have the parent sign a blank certificate and then they fill it in from the records and file it so the parent really—while their signature was right there, never really looked at the completed record. They might have looked at the hospital record in their files. But, for example, let's see, last year we had about 6,000 corrections on births, but nothing was wrong.

CP: After the parents saw it and then of course—

EW: There were a lot more, I think it was 18,000, of adding father's names to the record after it was filed.

CP: Well, every birth has a father somewhere. Seems to me that's biologically true, isn't it?

EW: But we made it, you know, in our regulations, we tried to make it easy as possible for a child to have a father. If the father wants to acknowledge paternity, we accept it, no questions asked. Now once the father is on the certificate, we're not so easy to persuade like as we say, Go to court, let the court decide who the father is.

CP: Whether we change this or nay.

EW: And started getting into two fathers, why we don't—

CP: You don't want to get in the middle of that.

EW: We don't want to get in the middle of that.

CP: No, no, no. Good.

EW: Midwives filed birth certificates. And a lot of people say, Oh, the reason why you don't have those certificates filed is because those midwives. Well, those midwives were pretty good.

CP: The lay midwives from that time, they were permitted for it.

EW: The licensed ones that were permitted were very good because you could intimidate them better than a doctor.

CP: Yeah, they were under direct supervision of the health department too.

EW: Another control is cemeteries. Funeral director, before he moves it from one registration area to another, has to have a permit from the local registrar.

CP: To move a body?

EW: To move a body and to bury that body. This law was completely ignored in the early years because, you know, although some of the registrars enforced it. You get a little rural area or a voting precinct that has a registrar, and you can't move it out of that voting precinct until—

CP: I say you can.

EW: But they did, and so by making each county a registration district we made it a more reasonable law. And the thing I finally did that made a lot of our registrars mad, but I made all the funeral directors happy, was I had a change of system where we appointed a person in the funeral home to be a subregistrar, so, in its essence, this funeral home is giving itself a permit, but by the same token, its licensed people, they're certifying that—

CP: And they got a record.

EW: —a certificate is being filed and, you know, but the onus is up on them as licensed people and the state board of funeral directors—

CP: Holds their feet to the fire.

EW: We bring it to their attention, and they do something about it.

CP: Marvelous. When did that go into effect?

EW: I'm not sure, back during my time.

CP: During your time.

EW: I think in the '70s, I believe. But it made the funeral directors a lot happier.

CP: The reason I ask for time for all that you're talking about seems so plausible. And I'm shocked that it took us so long in the history of this to come to these points in our restoration process. That's all I'm explaining about.

EW: Well, here's some of the things that we did to try to improve the situation: one, we had local registrars manuals in which we tried to think of everything that might come up with the local registrar so they'd know what the rulings were.

CP: An answer book.

EW: Yes. Then we had a birth notification system. Well, that started from the beginning of time. They used to send out little postcards with a rose and a picture of a baby, and it says, "You're treasure's treasure is registered." And many people would bring those things in thinking they've gotten an official birth certificate, it's called a birth notification.

CP: And it was a little postcard?

EW: It was a postcard, and it was to let people know that number one, the certificate was registered, where it was registered, and where they could get a certified copy if they wanted one. And they still do that, although—

CP: Was it still a postcard with a rose on it? I haven't had a baby in a long time.

EW: We started sending out a copy of the certificate.

CP: A little small—

EW: They were still using the rose when I became director. In 1947, right after I became director, we had had some ladies that were copying certificates for the federal government, so they could have statistics, so they operated from a copy. And we decided to start microfilming our records and sending them a microfilm copy and keeping the microfilm for—

Now, we didn't update them, the microfilm, but it was a backup in case something happened to our records we had a microfilm of how it was when it was originally filed. Many, many people were hot to do microfilm and make the copies from the film, and they could never understand when I could tell them that, you know, the problems of updating that film were immense.

CP: Yes, I can understand that.

EW: And I don't know how they're doing it now, but I was adverse to it.

CP: I wonder how they're doing it now, but the electronic, that computer thing, will scan in this today and—

EW: You can correct the computer but our purpose isn't—whenever we make corrections on records, the original is never erased. It's just add information so that people can see what was originally filed and what has been—

CP: Has been added.

EW: Now we don't do that, one thing that we don't do that for is for paternity and adoptions. We put a—when I came in the adopted certificates were titled, certificate of birth for an adopted person. Now, that's one of my first priorities was to change the law so that it didn't say adopted, that an adopted birth certificate looks just like any other birth certificate. And one of the state senators had an adopted child, and he pushed that law through.

CP: Good. I think that was well. I liked that. And that was when, late '40s?

EW: Late '40s.

CP: Late '40s. Okay.

EW: We had, let's see, putting responsibility for births into the hospitals was an effort. Another thing is we got some money from the federal government, and we called it quality control. And we hired some quality control people who were our field workers, really, but field workers doesn't cut it with the state personnel people. And there was an existing classification of quality control record for a worker, and so we hired, we got seven of them. And they were assigned different areas of the state, and they saturated with control, you know—

CP: And they went from county to county, reviewed records.

EW: Each one of them had a little district, and they had state wide and local meetings. We had the federal money at that time to invite in hospital personnel, and these are the actual ones that did the work, not the director but the person that went in—

CP: With the pencil in their hand.

EW: And they loved going to state meetings paid for by somebody else. And it helped our system immensely.

CP: I can imagine. I can see how that would do something.

EW: Well, you know, they saw more about what the total system was and how they fit it in. And it gave them a feeling of importance, and they are important.

CP: And a feeling of belonging. Marvelous.

EW: Another thing we did was start a monthly report of timeliness of records by county. What percentage of records came in within the legal time limit? And this was an effort, really, to embarrass the counties and the clerical person that did the vital statistics in the county of the leading counties was invited to the state annual meeting of Florida Public Health Association. And they were invited and gave a little talk as to what methods they used and how they did it. And it took some tact on their part.

CP: Paid. How did that work? Did you get any complaint from the health officers of putting a bad bead on them?

EW: How could they? But the ones that were at the top of the list were mighty proud, and then there was a lot of improvement, in a hurry. Another thing that really helped vital statistics registration was the schools started requiring a birth certificate.

CP: For admission to school?

EW: For admission to school.

CP: Talk about that.

EW: During the war, war industry started requiring a birth certificate. This is what came up while we had all the delayed birth certificate applications. We were just swamped with them at the end of the war, but schools required them.

I sent things to the schools to tell them what a legal birth certificate was. They were accepting these little birth notifications or one of those things the hospitals put out with the footprint. And many people think those are official birth certifications, and I tell them that's a memento of the occasion which the hospital auxiliary sells for a buck or two. And insurance companies, we worked with to require death records for paying off insurance.

CP: Real death records.

EW: And requiring legal certified copies, not something else.

CP: Not something from the funeral record.

EW: And getting on the cemeteries about requiring a permit for the allowal of burial. Now, in 1940 the US Census instigated a study, whereby the state vital statistics offices copied four months of birth records around the time when the census was taken. And they extracted all of the children of that age from the census and matched them. And then after they were matched then they were checked with the state, the state checked back with them to try to find any problems, and, at that time, Florida had 89.9 percent of the births registered even though back in 1924 they said we had 90 percent.

CP: Well, it had fallen off. It had fallen off.

EW: Rural areas were the worst, and the cities were the best. And in 1950, they made another study like that, and 97.5 percent of the births were registered. And the Census Bureau decided that was good enough, that they wouldn't do any more of those studies because it's very, very time consuming.

But I can remember in the 1940s, you know, we sent some of our field workers out. There was a Mrs. Rosenburger that was our field representative, and she tells about going down to—there was this midwife in Orlando that had a lot of unregistered births. And when Mrs. Rosenburger talked to her about it and that the federal government had sent this down, she got on her knees, and faced Washington, and prayed. And she filed certificates good after that.

CP: Go back to the 1940 and the federal government comparing their census data with your records, without the help of computers how did they do that? That sounds like a massive job to be done on a national base. They did it by hand. That's the only way to have done it, was it not?

EW: Well, we got into statistics in 1917. Dr. Thompson had set it up, they got all of those records out of the boxes, and we got a card keypunch machine from IBM.

CP: As early as 1940?

EW: 1918. 1920 is when they got it, 1920.

CP: Oh, really?

EW: We were the first in the state of Florida to get an IBM keypunch and card counting sorter. It was called a Hollerith machine⁹.

CP: Really, I didn't know they were that old.

EW: It was a machine that was designed for the census. And there were two men who designed it and got it going. One was named Hollerith and I don't remember the other guy's name, but Hollerith then went with IBM and the other man went with Remington Rand¹⁰.

CP: I see the competition there.

EW: And if everybody says that IBM had the square holes punched in the card, and Remington Rand had the round ones. But the first machine we had had round holes because I found it in the vault when we were cleaning out.

It was a thing about the size of a loaf of bread with waxed paper all around it, I don't know how long it'd been there, but it was a little keypunch machine that sat on the drawer of a desk with round holes. And I inquired around as to whether there was any historical value in it, everybody in IBM said no, and I threw it away. And I'm sorry about that to this day.

CP: I am too. I am too you threw that away because we're deciding for the film. We're actively involved today in trying to gather, quote, artifacts to be displayed as a part of the Public Health and Medical Museum in what is now the Wilson T. Sowder building¹¹. Are you conscious of that, very formerly, the Julia Street building?

⁹A Hollerith machine is a type of unit recording machine that uses a punch card to store data put in and verified by keypunch operators.

¹⁰Remington Rand was an early business machines manufacturer during the early to mid twentieth century.

¹¹In 2002, the former Florida State Board of Health building in Jacksonville on Julia Street was renamed the Wilson T. Sowder of Jacksonville, housing the Florida Museum of Medicine and Public Health.

EW: I didn't know it was named that.

CP: That's being restored. It's being restored to its original splendor, the building is. It's in the process, right now. And the legislature of '99, the '99 legislature, saw fit to name, what you and I referred to as Julia Street building, very formally the Wilson T. Sowder building as it will be a museum in due course.

And this punch machine that you had would be a prime artifact for that building. Oh, man. I just made a non-paid commercial announcement to anybody who happens to be watching this tape. If you have an artifact appropriate for that building, please get in touch. We want it.

EW: The first vault for vital statistics was in that building. I hope they are aware of that.

CP: And it's still there. It's still there.

EW: But, anyhow, that's where the statistics started, with a keypunch machine and a card counter sorter called a Hollerith machine.

CP: And so the feds could have done those comparisons—

EW: When I went in '47—'46, '47—they're still doing that, same way.

CP: They were? Still using the punch machine?

EW: There was one lady, Marie Martinez, who spent one year tabulating the annual statistics, took her a year. Sorting them with that sorter, counting and peaking and counting, and entering them in the annual report. And then it took the next year for Ms. Emily Tice, who ran a very tight machine, to type them on statistical tables, mimeographed. And then they ran those mimeographs and put them into annual reports.

CP: And they were three years, three years behind.

EW: At least, maybe two and a half.

CP: It just took you that long to do the grunt work.

EW: Well, you had to wait about four months after the end of the year for the late ones to trickle in so they were an appreciable amount. Of course they kept trickling in, but we decided that you couldn't wait forever.

CP: You'd do an arbitrary cut off.

EW: And there was another lady, Constance Westzel, she did the monthly reports and put those out. We had a monthly report of how many births, deaths, and things like that.

CP: And who is the audience, recipients, of these reports?

EW: County health departments, libraries, the annual report is put out by libraries. We got one over there; the latest one is 1998. People wonder why it's so late, but it takes time, although with a computer—in '47, I got a new machine that was made specifically for vital statistics people. It was called the IBM 101 Statistical Machine¹², and it was a fancy card sorter.

Instead of just sorting by one number, like one column, it would sort into one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. You could say, well, here's a certain cause of death, and you could lump them in to this one column. Two digits or more and it cut—it had to have wiring boards, which were installed, and it made the tabulation go a lot faster. And the next thing about 1954, we got IBM accounting machines where we did it by that, and we also—because at that point, started picking up names, and bookkeeping, and accounting for the whole state board of health.

CP: Oh, you did. With this machine?

EW: And let's see, I guess, '64 was when we got the computer, and we've have computers ever since.

CP: To do all of this?

¹²The IBM 101 Statistical Sorting Machine combines in one unit the functions of sorting, counting, accumulating, balancing, editing, and printing of summaries of facts recorded in keypunch cards.

EW: Yeah. It takes a while after you get a computer to iron out all of the mistakes. I mean, it's a problem because it's almost impossible to think of everything you want that computer to do. People just use their minds to do a lot of things, and putting that down on paper is exactly every little move and every little decision you make is hard. And the computer people, they don't know what you want it to do; you've got to tell them. Finally, you get it all worked out. And then about that time, there's a new computer on the market, and you've got to start the process all over.

CP: Whoops.

EW: Like we had a computer system in our office going good then HRS arrived, and I tried my best to get them to leave our computer alone, it was working. I talked to many other states and they said, Don't let them take your computer, it'll be a mess. And every complaint that I've made the man that was in charge of computers for HRS, "No problem, we can handle that. No problem, we can handle that."

CP: That was the early computer guys, you know, Computers could do everything.

EW: Yeah, and, of course, who am I to be able to tell them that they can't do everything at once. And we had a mess for a long time.

CP: And they wanted to take over your computer capacity and use your computers for other than vital statistics purposes.

EW: Well, they used their own computer. They got an enormous computer, and we did the key punching still and they did the tabulating. And, you know, there's a long period of time when we had a lot of problems, it eventually ironed out—

CP: But with a lot of frustration in between?

EW: That's right.

CP: Can we trust the reports of those years?

EW: Oh, I don't know.

Pause in recording

CP: Any major glitches we might say as you could computer?

EW: One argument I had with the computer people, which I never gave into, for years we keypunched and then key verified, which means another person went along did the same thing and to see whether there were any mistakes made. If there's any difference why then, somebody straighten it out.

Well, of course, that's twice as much labor and the people in the HRS computer system wanted us to only do once because it could save a lot of money and time, and I wouldn't let them do it. But what I understand one time they were punching our divorces and they just decided to go ahead without me knowing it, just not verifying it, lots of errors, and so they had to go back.

CP: Well, you knew there would be.

EW: But I don't know if they're doing that now or not.

CP: I don't know how to check either.

EW: Let's go back to when I started talking about delayed birth certificates. That started around 1937 because the war industry and, later on, schools, a lot of people were requiring a birth certificate and people didn't have them. So they wanted to file a delayed birth certificate—

CP: Would this have to do with national security?

EW: Yeah, fraud in vital records is big business. Anyhow, when I came back from the war, there were thousands and thousands of files of incomplete applications. And I started looking through them and our ladies didn't write very good letters, they would write, You haven't submitted enough evidence, please send some more.

CP: Oh, there isn't a problem with that.

EW: I got to insisting that they write that, The so-and-so record you filed isn't acceptable because—and tell them why—and then some of the possible things you may get are: first grade school records, bible records, census records, life insurance applications, things like that. And tried to explain to people—

CP: What to do. That makes sense to me.

EW: But we finally whittled that file down, but it was a long time. And we'd have, when school started, sometimes we'd get three, four months behind in issuing certified copies. We worked at night a number of years to try to get—but our efforts at cleaning it up was to number one, get schools to tell prospective parents of first graders ahead of time instead of waiting until the week of school opens, do it six months before. And corrections is the same way, they'd wait until the day school opened, come down, file a certificate and all, I've got to have it this afternoon, and you couldn't get it.

Another thing we did on issuing certified copies which has worked out pretty well is people used to want to have preferred service when the governor's office writes and says, Send this out, you do it. When the senator, or the congress, or the representative in the legislator does, you do it. Many is the time I wrote to the guy and said, "Look it's not fair for me to put you ahead of other people, but I'm doing it this time. And I'm counting on you to do something about it in the legislature." Not one ever did it.

CP: He didn't even acknowledge your letter.

EW: Not one.

CP: The senator or representative probably never saw your letter.

EW: Might have, but they might have not. I don't know.

CP: A staff took care of that.

EW: But, anyhow, long just before I retired we got the idea that instead of influence getting you to the head of the line, money can get you to the head of the line, so we established a fee for expedited service. Anybody can get fast service for 10 bucks.

And, you know, I'd go down there sometimes and see people applying for birth certificates, and they'd pay 19 bucks without a whimper. We used to whine about a dollar for maybe years ago. The people in the poorest looking circumstances can whip out 19 bucks without a problem.

CP: Well, there's more money in circulation today than there was when you and I were younger.

EW: But that cut down a lot of the criticism.

CP: And political influence.

EW: Yeah, influence. Anybody can—I know of one week the fellow over in, my supervisor, my head over in Tallahassee with HRS had put, Let's cut that out, never issue one—ahead of, out of order now. That didn't last the first week.

CP: Before he called to say—

EW: We got an order from the governor that the governor in Oklahoma had a constituent that had to have a birth certificate right quick. And you can make this exception.

CP: Yeah, sure. And next day we can have one prompt for another exception.

EW: Adoptions is a thing that we changed now. As I say, we used to say certificate of birth for an adopted person, and now we file them without an indication. And the original certificate is put in a sealed file and—

CP: How do you get it unsealed? Or does it ever need to be unsealed?

EW: You've got to get a court order.

CP: Okay. And this a matter of statute, is it not?

EW: You've got to get a court order. And some judges open them, and some don't. I used to appear and say, You had to get a court order with the state vital statistics brought into the case. We had to appear.

CP: Oh, you did?

EW: I was doing that above and beyond the call of duty, though. And since I've retired they've quit doing it, but I've been to courts and explained to the judge our position. And we've never had one open a record when we were there.

But they have—people want, they say they want the medical information, but adopted people—not all of them, some of them—are just really avid about finding their roots. And I don't blame them; I'd have curiosity too. But too many people help them: personnel in the circuit court, they have it; the newspaper; and the media, and they're all for the adoptee finding the mother, and it's like the hounds after the fox.

The adopted, they are organized, they have people go into the circuit court and copy all adoption records to try to match any dates and things like that, they are real good at it. And their excuse is, they need medical information. But hardly do they ever find medical information, unless they find the mother.

And they have ways, once they locate the mother, they go to the door and pretend to be salesmen or taking a questionnaire, and talk to that mother, and decide whether they want to reveal themselves or not. So it's not fair—

CP: This is the child going—

EW: This is the adopted child when they get to be—I know when I go to one of their meetings, all of a sudden there's hush when I walk into the room. I did hear some mention of their—what did they call their methods?

CP: Callestine [clandestine].

EW:—sneaky methods, sneaky.

CP: Fascinating, fascinating. I've never had to do that.

EW: Now, I did the couple of things in court. I told the judge that if you give me an order, I would try to find that parent, and contact them, and ask do they want to be found. If they do, fine. If they don't, I'll so tell the court. Now, I can remember one case where I found the mother and she said she didn't want to be found right then, it would be awkward, but I gave her the name while she contact that person at some later date.

But I don't think she ever did and that person started bugging me, 10 years later, and I told her I didn't have any idea where that mother is, although I did. But she found her, and the way she found that mother was the hospital told her the names of people in all the surrounding rooms where she was born. She then interviewed the people in those rooms, and one of the people, Oh, I remember some talk over in the next room about some caves. And it turns out that their natural mother was in a family that owned some caves up in the Midwest, and she found her that way.

CP: That's fascinating.

EW: I hope she didn't think I gave it away.

CP: So these adopted children petitioned a court to have their birth record opened for information purposes, is that the way the court gets involved? And they do a formal petition and then the judge has to decide whether to order you to produce their record or not?

EW: One of my employees overheard a group of adoptees talking about a local judge who they could go to him, and he would call for their adoptive record, and show it to them in his chambers, no records being made. I got wind of it and decided to do something about it and report him to the presiding judge in the county, but just about time I was going to the presiding judge's office, this judge died and solved the problem.

CP: That was basically illegal for him to do that from a statute point of view. So adoptive records have been a kind of a problem for you in many ways.

EW: Oh, yeah.

CP: You wanted to get a law protecting them, and then do protecting them.

EW: At one point, we had an employee that was adopted, and she transferred from the laboratory to vital statistics. And we didn't understand why, made the laboratory people mad, she was a good employee. When we put her—she was a very attractive lady, and we put her on the front window, she met people very well. She quit then; she wanted to work in the vault where the adopted records were.

CP: Oh, did you know this on the front end?

EW: No, no, we didn't put her back there. We knew she was adopted, so we weren't going to have her working in the vault.

CP: Oh, how did you know she's adopted? She told you that?

EW: I don't know. Somehow or other we found it out. I remember another employee in a county circuit court who had seen all of the stuff in the circuit court on her adoption, but it wasn't enough. So she—

CP: Did she petition you, or petition for her job?

EW: Adoptees are clever.

CP: They really want to know their roots.

EW: I had a young man call me at night, recently. Charming young man, talked to me about his adoption, this, that, and the other, and he didn't get anything but he sure tried in a clever way. He didn't just ask and try to get me to do something that was wrong, but asked me about systems. And he was just hoping that I would slip up and drop something that would help him.

CP: I can understand how they are so anxious to know who their parents were, you know, who their real parents were. I can understand that.

EW: This young man was facing an impossible task because the lawyer that processed his adoption didn't put one word of truth in the record. Now, this is not right, but it sure works.

CP: It works?

EW: It works because it's amazing what a little tidbit of knowledge can do to help you locate people. You really go at it. And the computer has made it a lot easier. Things which used to be lost in the records, they're there, but how do you find them, now pop out with a computer.

CP: And your vital records are all computerized now too, are they not? But you still keep a hard copy?

EW: I don't know what they do now.

CP: Seems to me you'd need to keep a hard copy and computers back up. But it'd be very easy to—

EW: They did something that I didn't approve of after I retired, the computer knicks were after me for the whole time to—well, the way we have done it for years was get the records in each month, put them in order by date and by county, then number them, and put them in volumes and then computerize them.

Now, they wanted to keypunch immediately, and they guaranteed we'd have an index within three days, but I just—I'm an old fashioned string-chaser. And I insisted that we have a manual method to find a record if the computer system was down, but now they're filed as they come in by no miscellaneous order, and the only way to find them is the computer index now. Which is fine as long as the computer's working.

CP: Don't tell me that those hard records are not somehow ordered for recovery.

EW: Not now.

CP: They just put it back in a pace board box over the counter, huh? In essence that's what we—

EW: They may have some record of when the report comes in from a county and what kind of order that the county sent them in. And we used to ask that the county send them in in order by date. And maybe they still do. But they have a more laborious way, I think, but sometimes when just turning the pages and looking at the record, you can find things that you can't find from an index because the handwriting may be bad and the keypunch operator might misread it.

The fact is, I know when we were doing the old records over, indexes over, the people, keypunch operators, put down what they see, letter by letter. Vital statistics searchers look at names by the shape of the name. Sometimes you can tell a name when you can't read the letters, and I know we had these people doing old indexes. And Elsie Hyatt—we had them typed, and verified, and then Elsie Hyatt would give them the eagle eye. And she corrected maybe 35 percent of those real old records because you see trained searchers recognize a pattern of a name, whereas a keypunch operator they read letter by letter.

CP: They could be not interested in all in what the name is. They just want the sequence of the letters because that's what they're doing. I can understand that, and you can understand that, obviously. Fascinating. Since '84 though, you retired in '84, there's no telling what kind of a water's gone over the dam and no telling how they got your system screwed up.

EW: Well, the computer people take over, and they're very clever at promising everything, We can take care of that. Any objection you raise, We can take care of that, with a very knowledgeable sound.

CP: But to get it online. I remember sitting with you in Dr. Sowder's office on occasion where we were beginning the movement to get morbidity reports¹³ computerized and that way we could stop our manual stuff. You'd agree, and we had some federal money to add to your capability computer-wise, we being the Bureau of Preventable Diseases. And we got Sowder convinced that our new computer system would increase our workload capability by some astronomical number, you know, and with no increase to cost.

And we finally got Sowder to agree for us to give him the hard data that looked exactly cost-benefit and all this. Well, sent it to him and I think it was going to require six new FTEs, six new workers, people, in order to get this computer system to work. And we

¹³According to The Florida Department of Health, a morbidity report is compiled to summarize annual morbidity from notifiable acute communicable and environmental diseases, and cancer in Florida, describe patterns of disease as an aid in directing future disease prevention and control efforts, and provide a resource to medical and public health authorities at county, state and national levels.

went back to all this, as I recall, the workload was on my office mostly, therefore doing all the grunt work for this, and sent it to Sowder that these new computer system we were going to do would increase our output by 100 percent, but we're going to have to add new six new workers to do it.

EW: That killed it, didn't it?

CP: It killed it. Yeah, it's where that had to have new workers and we didn't—the money I had promised from the feds didn't produce people, it just produced hard work, you know.

EW: Well, you know, the computer, I'll say, is one of the most laborious ways of recording data, but once you get it down the numerous uses is the advantage.

CP: Oh, yes, yes, yes. I'm sorry for the interruption but our growing pains for computers, and I especially appreciate the early stuff. That IBM punch machine came here in 1917, fascinating. Go ahead.

EW: Well, in the statistics unit they do an annual report, as I've said. I've got one right over there about yea thick and its got all manner of statistics, which most people aren't interested in, but research people who want it, it's good. And we send that out to every county health department, all the libraries in the state, the universities, and anybody that asks for it as long as we have them. And we have to have some on file from back years.

And they have the monthly report that they put out and send to same people, and it's one that shows how many births, how many deaths, causes of death for counties, and that's useful for not only health people but population estimation people. And then there are special reports that are made, people request things, and we try to fill their thing.

And vital statistics over the years has tried to make some special reports. I remember when we first started putting birth weight on certificates, and we made a tabulation, and we matched births and birth weights by deaths. And it showed the life expectancy of people at different birth weights.

And I remember writing an article for the newspaper with a lot of statistics, which everybody thought was dull, but I just added down that in that year so many tons of babies were born. *The Times Union* had headlines like about the size of a war is declared,

so-and-so many tons of babies born in Florida last year. That shows what attracts interest: statistics that had no meaning whatsoever. So we do have our moments.

CP: I don't recall seeing that headline, but I can imagine. And you never know what's going to turn an editor on, a newspaper editor. No, you surely don't.

EW: I used to have a monthly argument with, remember Andy Anderson, who—

CP: Very well, he's our PR person.

EW: Well, every month we wrote a, on our statistical monthly report, we had an article picking some cause of death and writing about it. And then Andy would get it and rewrite it for the newspaper, and then he and I'd go around and round. And he said, "The way you've written it, it's not interesting." I said, "They way you've written it, it's a lie." And he says, "Oh, that's alright. Newspapers do that all the time."

CP: I know that. Was there ever any repercussions from that because you and I know that newspaper reporters write for a read?

EW: Sowder insisted that I approve it so I wouldn't have—

CP: As Andy writ.

EW: Yeah, well, I wouldn't approve it until he put it so it was true. He didn't like it but we had a lot of problems in the past with fraud on vital records. Some years back the head of—somebody published an article that said, "The Paper Trail." And it told people how to fraudulent identification and it starts with the birth record, people go out to the cemetery and find a tombstone of a person that died at a very young age. They apply for a certified copy of that birth. Now they use that name, and they go and they get a driver's license, and they go to social security and get a card, and they get all manner of credit cards under that name, then they use those credit cards and charge away a lot of stuff and then, as they say, go back underground and reemerge with another ID.

We worked with the federal government and with law enforcement people—well, one thing that we did in Florida that a lot of states didn't is from the beginning of time to make sure we got a birth for every death of an infant we matched infant deaths with

births and put a mark on the birth certificate which indicates this child is dead, but we've had a lot of those dead children come to our window downstairs.

CP: Oh, you have.

EW: Sometimes we've called the police, but they didn't seem to do anything about it. But we've notified the FBI and notified the police—

CP: Did you give a certificate for those who come to the window?

EW: No, we tell them to wait a minute and then we come in say, There's some problem with the certificate, and usually they go.

CP: Oh, really?

EW: They're gone. They got a car outside waiting. But there were a lot of fraud, and the federal government had a committee to work on it. I can remember one young lady down in central Florida, over west of Brooksville somewhere. She was too lazy to go to the cemetery, so she wrote and wanted us to give her copies of infant death certificates so that she could do this study.

And, I don't know, I just decided to tweak her a little bit. And I'd write and I'd say, "We're really interested in your study," and I'd ask her questions about it, and she keeps writing back, and finally she caught on that she wasn't ever going to get them. But she was a teacher's assistant in some little grammar school down there outside of Brooksville. I think there was a community of hippies down there and they—

CP: So we needed a lot of—that's everywhere. First of it, didn't we?

EW: They should have known that they should have gotten somebody over a year old because people that died in the second year of life are not very many. If they're going to die, they're going to die in the first year.

CP: Yes. Fascinating stories. How about deaths—birth certificate for the purpose of a visa or an alien, somebody trying to get into the country or out of the country?

EW: Well, we work with Immigration and Naturalization¹⁴ agency. We keep a close contact with them and—

CP: Did you find a lot of that?

EW:—and they—yeah.

CP: I'm recalling a number of health department break-ins, and the only thing missing was blank birth certificates, the forms for birth certificates, you know. There was a rash of those in the panhandle in the late '70s, early '80s it seems to me, a rash of health department break-ins. And the only thing stole was the blank copies of birth certificates.

EW: Well, we've given law enforcement agencies and immigration lists of who signed state certificates in what periods of time, what the signatory was so that at least they could make sure they got legitimates from here. Now, county once they're—I think they're issuing them here for the counties, I'm not sure how they're doing it now. But counties can send up here and get one issued for them but trying to make sure it's a legitimate certificate is tough business.

The other thing we went to finally was the safety paper where if somebody makes a copy of a certificate and the watermarks are void, and so you can't copy it. We used to seal them in plastic too, but we stopped that, it was too much trouble.

CP: That would be rather expensive too.

EW: But fraud is a subject that needs a lot of work.

CP: Apparently it does. I didn't appreciate that it was so widespread.

EW: You know, these delayed birth certificates. Anybody that's slick enough they can file a delayed birth certificate that our clerical people can't catch, but some of them don't. In fact, sometimes they'll send a Bible record¹⁵ in as proof of their birth and the ink is hardly

¹⁴The Immigration and Naturalization Service, before the reorganization of 2003, was in charge of handling immigration and naturalization matters.

¹⁵Bible records are family records that were written inside family Bibles and/or in other important documents.

dry. You can tell whether ink is old or new, and usually we don't record Bible records as worth much because there's no date.

We want something that was written down some years ago and can be proven that it was written down some years ago. One of the things we like now is a first grade school record, what is the age they said when they started the school because—

CP: That is neat. Are those difficult, easy to come by? You go through old school board records and pull things out?

EW: Some counties they have them, and some they don't. And some they have them and they're too much trouble to look them up, so they tell them they don't have them. I can remember some fraud, high school athletics, over-age students playing baseball, football, so forth.

In fact is, a neighbor of mine right down the street, he just died the last year, but about a year before there was an article in the beach paper of him bragging about how he got this certificate showing him a year younger so that he could play football. He thought it was—he was proud of it. And he said he went out to this doctor up in Georgia, and the doctor was out on the lake, fishing, and he went out there, and got him to sign a certificate.

Well, I think he was embellishing the story there, but there's some good basketball teams out in little towns in West Florida, and I know several of them had boys that—what most of them would do, a lot of the times in the earlier days, birth certificates wouldn't have a first name. The doctor, woman couldn't decide on a name, and he'd file a certificate.

Of course, some of them filed on birth side of wedlock with facetious names, but, anyhow, the boys would find a younger brother, and put their name on the younger brother's name, and play ball on his certificate with their name. And then long later on when they're working or they were getting ready for social security, now they want to confess and have it all straightened out. And I just tell them to go to court and tell the judge that. If the judge decides it's wrong, while we'll do it. But I've never have heard one do it, Judge, I lied.

CP: That someone'll do it. Fascinating, Everett, these are fun stories. Excuse me, excuse me. Keep going.

EW: Well, I just have one last subject, and this is facetious, is unusual names on birth certificates.

CP: That's not facetious, that's amusing. Go ahead.

EW: Well, when I first came to work here I saw them all huddled around this birth certificate, and it had 5/8 as a first name: a letter five, and a slant line, and a letter eight. And it was here in Jacksonville, and I called the father at his place of work, and asked him, "Where'd you get that name?" He says, "Named him after another man with the same name," and he was so proud. I said, "Thank you." And I didn't follow it any farther, but although, I think I heard of a politician in Georgia who had that name and he had attributed his success in politics to his name.

CP: To 5/8.

EW: But about a month later, I'm passing through the keypunch room and there's some—the operators are all gathered around this certificate, they can't, it's 5/8. And I say, well, you know, just put the first name as five, and spell it out, and the middle name is eighths, so that's what they did. As far as I know he has never asked for his birth certificate because I think it would attract some attention, and they'd be talking about it.

CP: I would think so.

EW: Another one we've got: Starlight Cauliflower. This is the age of the flower children. We asked her, How did you come with that name? And she said, very sweetly, "I like starlight and everybody likes cauliflower."

CP: Starlight Cauliflower. Excuse me.

EW: That was one of your Tallahassee people.

CP: It what? Wasn't one of my Tallahassee people. I'm from Jasper, I just happen to live in Tallahassee.

EW: Well, we got First Time Benjamin, No More Jones, and he must have been the last one, and Sports Model Higginbotham. Then a lady named Gladys wrote in and said,

“She’s suffered an inferiority complex all her life with the implications of the name Gladys,” and wanted to know if we could change it, make her feel a lot better.

CP: Did you tell her how to get it changed?

EW: We didn’t help her. Her name was Gladys.

CP: Oh, it was Gladys, okay.

EW: Here’s the one I like, and this must have been one of the hippies or flower children, this is one word: Truewilllaughinglifebuckyboomermanifestdestiny, all one word, no capitals. And the middle name was Georgejames, all one word.

CP: And still added to that is a last name, which I don’t need to know.

EW: I didn’t record the last name. I’ve forgotten what it is.

CP: Did you check up on why we came to that name? Wouldn’t that be fun?

EW: Truewilllaughinglifebuckyboomermanifestdestiny. Can you imagine a little boy in the first-grade telling the teacher what his name is? Then there was, this was a long time ago, but twins came to the office and their names were Shadrach¹⁶ and Meshach, and they wanted to change them to something like Tom and Dick. He said, “Well, why do you want to change it?” And he says, “Everybody that we meet wants to know where Abednego is.”

CP: That’s very good.

EW: Well, the last thing I want to say is when we started getting births on the computer, I had them run off at the end of a 10 year period what the first names were in alphabetical order. And this is about 1970, as I recall. And over the ages John and Mary have been the most popular names. Now, that doesn’t hold true anymore, they get all manner of names nowadays. John and Mary are slipping back some, but they’re still a popular name.

¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are references to three pious Jewish youths thrown into a fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, when they refused to bow down to the king’s image as told in the Book of Daniel in the Bible.

CP: But do you have a statistic on what is the most common name today?

EW: No, I don't know whether they do that anymore or not.

CP: That would be a useful to know. It'd be an entertaining newspaper article. We had an Andy here; he could really build that up couldn't he to get the dead.

EW: There's some long ones, and some strange ones, and some popular ones.

CP: You are a walking encyclopedia of fun, Everett. You obviously enjoyed your days as the vital statistician for Florida.

EW: Yeah I sure did. I enjoyed the work.

CP: And what was your most down time? You've highlighted all your fun for us, is that fair, during your years with the board of health? What was your worst nightmares? Funeral directors? Getting doctors to cooperate?

EW: Well, they were troublesome but they weren't—they don't get me down.

CP: You didn't lose any sleep on it.

EW: I guess HRS¹⁷ taking over the computer work was for a little while. In fact, as I understand, we have the computer back now, back in vital statistics. Something they should have left in the beginning.

CP: Somebody saw the light over in the big shots. And you can't speak now we have a department of health, a state department of health. HRS is no longer; you know that. Legislature finally recognized the idiot-ness of their experiment of 1969 and then made it worse in 1974. And it is now gone, all the departments that were brought in are now back independent, if you will, or something separate from that massive experiment.

¹⁷HRS, the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services was created to promote and protect the health and safety of all residents through the establishment and maintenance of high quality public health standards.

EW: Well, I can tell you why I retired: HRS. I loved vital statistics here but I—working with HRS was terrible.

CP: And that was from, let me see, '40—you came in 1940 for all practical purposes in '84, that's 44 years. And that, you got some extra time for your—no, you get year for year for military time so—

EW: And 44 includes time in the military.

CP: Really? It was 44 years that you were with the state public health system? You saw a lot, a lot, of important changes. Can you highlight some of this? One was HRS; we'll give you that. The '69 reorg¹⁸ act liked to have killed us all.

And I'm sorry that I cannot have the total joy, personally, of the department of health of two years ago, you know. And you can't, either. And I'm so far removed from it, I can't even speak to it but I'm giving you time to think about the highlights of your career.

EW: Well, you know, the gradual improvement of data processing methods, the gradual improvement of certificates being on time and correct, and giving a certificate in the first place, that was the bigger problem, at first. And all of those things there were no dramatic change, really. It's work, work, work, and work with people, try to get them to appreciate the reason. You know, trying to persuade the county health officers to do vital statistics because they should want the statistics for their county.

CP: Seems to me they would. I, as a local health officer, would want that right up front, quick as I can get it.

EW: I remember there was one health officer that flatly says, "What's in it for me if I take this on?" And I said, "Nothing, just the knowledge that you're getting a lot better information." He wouldn't do it and—

CP: He saw no need for information.

¹⁸This revision of the state constitution in 1968 consolidated 200 state agencies and boards into 23 departments. The next year the Florida Legislature created the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) and the State Board of Health was abolished. County health departments were transferred to HRS under the Division of Health.

EW:—and next week, he found out that he wasn't going to get anymore salary raises until he did it, and he became 100 more enthusiastic, better health officers.

CP: Sowder declared that—

EW: Yeah, I got backing from the health officer there.

CP: Seems reasonable to me. Okay, over the years, that spans a long time from 1944, were some of the worst years from the larger public health point of view? Subject, not years, HRS.

EW: Well, the worst was the data processing and the transfer from vital statistics to the central product now. Following that my data processing people quit except one very new, inexperienced young man and my data processing director, Harry, went with them, and so the director of the central system insisted that my people program our projects.

Well, this young man, he worked hard, and I really appreciated him, but, you know, he really didn't know what our system was and, you know, but he did it and with all the mistakes, so we had to suffer through it. And once somebody else handled the system, data processing that had dollar signs in front of the numbers took priority over statistics, just numbers, so we ran way down the ladder in priority.

CP: And you fought all the time to get your data, to get your summarized data.

EW: Yeah, so it was hard, but we worked it out.

CP: Wow, you really ran into that? In '74 is when that really began, when they took over the computer system. From '69 till '74 you were still yours with all your staff doing it, and you owned and operated the machines.

EW: From 1964 until 1974. Of course, in '64 we had problems getting them started, but we'd just ironed them all out and everything was going smoothly.

CP: All right, what have we left out?

EW: I can't think of anything right now.

CP: This is so informative. I joined the public health system in '52, you know. But I had never been privileged to hear you speak to an overview of vital statistics as you have done today. And I'm sorry I had to wait these 48 years to hear this summary because I'm terribly fascinated with public health history in Florida.

I suspect we're going to have to come back to you with very specific questions as we move on and not least among those is when the committees and the funds are available for finalizing the displays in the Julia Street building. I hope that you'll continue interested in these things and will willingly be a nonpaid consultant, which all of us will be, for getting the Julia Street building—

EW: Can I say, "What's in it for me?"

CP: What's in it for you is the pride of accomplishment. It's what Jane and I get out of this is the pride of accomplishment because you have so much, so much to add. There are very few people still living who can go back 60 years in a direct experience of public health history in Florida, and because of that I'm doubly grateful that you would take the time to come and share with us.

And on behalf of the College of Public Health of the University of South Florida and the library system that has seen fit to collect these chapters in the history of Florida public health, I just thank you sincerely, and I thank you in behalf of myself and it is.

EW: It's been a pleasure. I've enjoyed it.

CP: It's been fun.

EW: I was a little leery at first but—

CP: Oh no, I'm glad. It's fun to kind of sit and remember. And these are valuable tapes, they'll be used by current historians, me, and by future historians for what was public health, or what is public health in Florida. And today is February 20, the year 2000, and I am Skeeter Prather, thank you.

End of Interview