KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

That I, EDWARD L BENNETT

have on (date), 4 May 2001 participated in an audio/video-taped interview with Robert Mulcahy

covering my best recollections of events and experiences, which may be of historical significance to the United States Air Force.

I understand that the tape(s) and the transcribed manuscript resulting therefrom will be accessioned into the United States Air Force Historical Research Agency to be used as the security classification permits. It is further understood and agreed that any copy or copies of this oral history interview given to me by the United States Air Force and in my possession or that of my executors, administrators, heirs, and assigns, may be used in any manner and for any purpose by me or them, subject to security classification restrictions.

Subject to the license to use reserved above, I do hereby voluntarily give, transfer, convey, and assign all right, title, and interest in the memoirs and remembrances contained in the aforementioned magnetic tapes and manuscript to the Office of Air Force History, acting on behalf of the United States of America, to have and to hold the same forever, hereby relinquishing for myself, my executors, administrators, heirs, and assigns all ownership, right, title, and interest therein to the donee.

Unrestricted Access for all military personnel and civilians except for information that is classified or deemed subject to Privacy Act restrictions by appropriate authority.

DONOR Edward L Bennett

DATED ~~04~~ 05-04-01

Accepted on behalf of the
United States Air Force
History Office

BY Robert Mulcahy

DATED 4 May 2001

Space and Missile Systems Center
Los Angeles Air Force Base, California
SMC/HO Oral History Program

Interview With

EDWARD LEE BENNETT

EL SEGUNDO FARMING

(Oral History No. 1)

Threshing grain in 1905 on the Freeman ranch in the El Segundo area.
(Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Centinela Valley via Jim Robertson)

SPACE AND MISSILE SYSTEMS CENTER (SMC)
LOS ANGELES AIR FORCE BASE, CALIFORNIA
SMC HISTORY OFFICE (SMC/HO) ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

El Segundo Farming Oral History (No. 1)

INTERVIEWEE: **Edward Lee Bennett** (1913-)

INTERVIEWER: **Robert Mulcahy** (SMC/HO Historian)

SUBJECT: El Segundo Sharecropper

SUBJECT TIME FRAME: 1920s-1940s

DATES OF INTERVIEWS: 4 and 31 May 2001

INTRODUCTION

This is Robert Mulcahy of the History Office at the Space and Missile Systems Center (AFMC) at Los Angeles Air Force Base (AFB), California. Today's date is 4 May 2001. I am going to interview Edward Bennett of El Segundo, California. Prior to the 1940s, the Bennett family farmed the land adjacent to the property that is now Los Angeles AFB. I am conducting this interview with Mr. Bennett at his home in El Segundo.

Edward Bennett on 31 May 2001. Bennett and his father were sharecroppers in El Segundo on the land adjacent to Los Angeles AFB from about 1900-1940s.

INTERVIEW

Mulcahy: Mr. Bennett, when and where were you born?

Bennett: I was born in Inglewood [California] in 1913, but my father was farming in Palos Verdes [California]. At that time, there were no roads up there to Palos Verdes and they took a horse buggy and a wagon. It took them all day to make the trip. After my father left the Palos Verdes area, he came back to the LA [Los Angeles] Airport area and leased another ranch.

Mulcahy: Please state the names of your parents, and your brothers and sisters.

Bennett: My father was Benjamin Franklin [Frank] Bennett. My mother was Muriel Joy (Davies) Bennett. My oldest sister was nine years older than I, her name was Eleanor (Bennett) Dickerson. The next sister was seven years older than I, her name was Mildred (Bennett) Ditmar. Then my brother, who was four years older than I, his name was Herbert Bennett. My name is Edward Lee Bennett, and my younger sister, four years younger than I, is Marvel (Bennett) Deliman.

1.Milo Dickerson
2.Renold Jones
3.Roy Jones
4.Andrew Bennett
5.Frank Bennett
6.Herbert Bennett
7.Thomas Bennett
8.Lew Doke
9.William Smith
0.Vera Bennett Jones Warnellw/Walter
11.Margaret(Madge) Smith
12.Muriel Bennett(Mrs Frank)
13.Phoebe Bennett(Mrs Andrew)
14.May Bennett McClain
15.Alice Bennett Doke
16.Florence Bennett Cutter
17.Emma Bennett(Mrs Herbert)
18.Eleanor Bennett Dickerson
19.Helen Dickerson
20.Edna Bennett Dickerson w/Lavern
21.Marcus L. Bennett
22.Margaret Bennett
23.Lena Bennett (Mrs Thomas)
24.Leona Bennett (Mrs Clifford)w/ Floyd,Clifford, & Marjorie
25.Frank McClain
26.Clifford Bennett
27.George Dickerson
28.Mildred Bennett Ditmar
29.Helen Dickerson's daughter Noreen
30.Marvel Bennett Deliman
31.Lila McClain
32.Helen Dickerson's son Buddy
33.Grace Bennett Rich
34.Edward Bennett
35.Bob Robinson
36.Marcus Bennett

The extended Bennett family, circa 1924
(Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Centinela Valley via Jim Robertson)

Mulcahy: Tell me about farming the land where Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) currently exists.

Bennett: The history of that goes like this. In 1898, my father and his older brother (my father was 20 and my Uncle Andrew was 22) came out and leased an old ranch. It entered from the east side of Sepulveda Boulevard where the tunnel is now, about halfway between Imperial Highway [114th Street in 1930] and Century Boulevard. They leased that ranch for a few years. The two of them pioneered the area. Uncle Andrew happened to have the lease, because he was older than my father. They didn't own any of the land. It was all owned in big lots by big companies, corporate structures and bankers. As a kid, my recollection was that the Los Angeles Investment Company owned most of it. Then my uncle got married first, being the older brother, so my father moved to another ranch. Later on, my father got married. My uncle stayed put right there.

During World War I, much of Uncle Andrew's land was virgin soil and he had three bumper crops of lima beans. At that time, there was no ceiling on the price, so he got around 18 cents a pound, and he immediately became a wealthy man. So, he bought a small area and built a big home there. It was right off of Sepulveda Boulevard where Lincoln Avenue came through at one time. He built a big ranch there. I don't know what became of it later. LAX has some kind of a plaque over there for Andrew Bennett. Uncle Andrew was the one who made all the money. My father had more fun with his five children.

Mulcahy: Did you or your father ever buy farmland in El Segundo rather than leasing it?

Bennett: My father was a poor sharecropper with five children. No farmer could buy any property in this area. The cost was just too great! It was just out of the question. In those years, the price of an acre was about $3500 to $5500 an acre.

My only real experience with the cost of the local land was about 1932. I was 19, 20 years old. I drove my father downtown to the Santa Fe Railway who owned most of the land my father farmed. The land manager was a very nice man. We had a nice visit with him, and he told us that the taxes on the land they owned was $42 an acre.

Mulcahy: Did your father pay the landlords in crops or in cash?

Bennett: Cash equal to one quarter of the crop. We would harvest the crop and then mail in a check with a statement.

Mulcahy: Was a quarter of the crop adequate for the landlords if you had a bad year?

Bennett: The little bit that we paid them wasn't a drop in the bucket. When you think taxes, $42 an acre, there was just no comparison.

Mulcahy: Were most of the farmers in El Segundo sharecroppers?

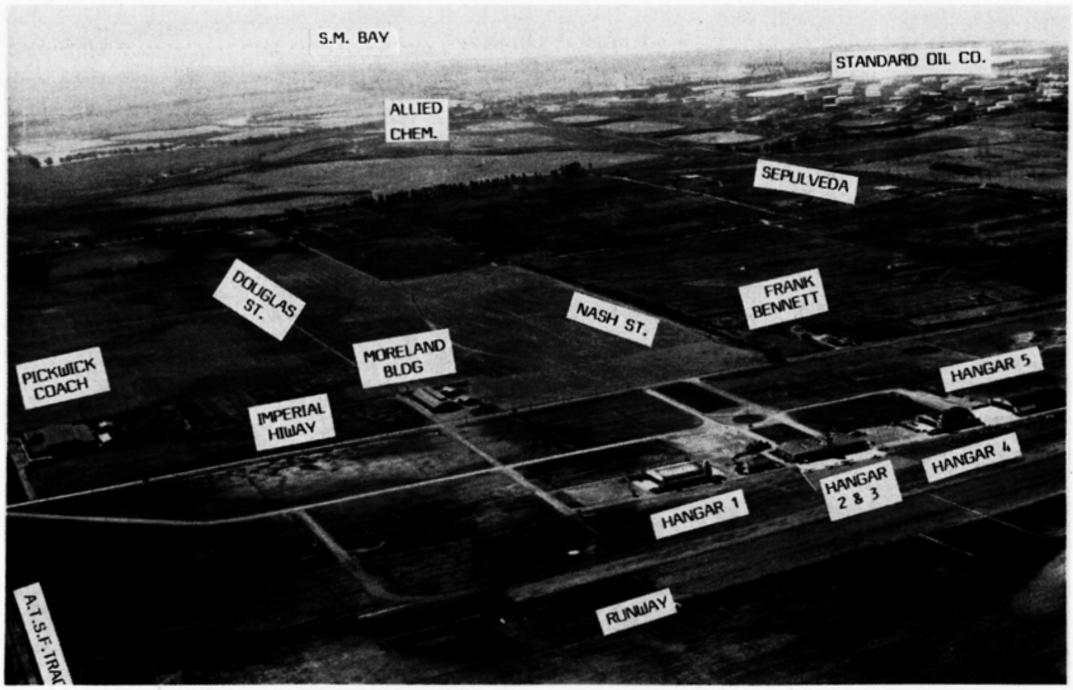
Bennett: Yes they were, but I don't know of anybody in El Segundo who used the term "sharecropper." That came from the South. Most of the land out here was so expensive that the big landowners would lease it to the ranchers for one quarter of the crop. Occasionally, some of the landowners would get greedy and ask for a third, but the farmer could not pay a third, because he paid all of the expenses. That included planting, fertilizing, harvesting, merchandising, selling and handling. Then the sharecropper would send the landowner a check. By the time the threshing and all the expenses were paid, if the farmer paid up a third, he didn't have anything left. He didn't have too much left at a fourth of his crop unless he had a very good crop.

Mulcahy: What did your father and uncle grow in the LAX area?

Bennett: Hay, grain and lima beans.

Mulcahy: Before Douglas Aircraft built its airplane plant in El Segundo, were there any buildings on that property [which is currently part of Los Angeles AFB]?

Bennett: My recollection of the very first building was either the Moreland Truck Company or the Pickwick bus manufacturer. I'm not sure which one came in first. They were the first factories in the area that I recall. At that time, my father was farming all the surrounding property. Somewhere, I believe in the real late [19]20s or right around 1930, the Santa Fe Railway bought about 300 acres that bordered on Aviation Boulevard [Redondo Road in 1930], Imperial Highway, Sepulveda Boulevard, and Mariposa Avenue. Later on, my father leased some of that land from the Santa Fe Railroad and farmed it.



Los Angeles Airport and much of the land where Edward and Frank Bennett sharecropped. Their ranch can be seen in this 1931 photograph. (Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Centinela Valley via Jim Robertson)

Mulcahy: What crops did your father grow over by Aviation Boulevard?

Bennett: Mostly barley, oat hay and lima beans, which were our basic crops. It was all dry farming without irrigation. We depended on the rain.

Mulcahy: How good was the El Segundo soil for farming?

Bennett: The soil varied. The lower areas were a black adobe and it was very difficult to work. In the summer, it would get hard and crack. In the winter, the soil would swell up when it was filled with rain. The other part of the soil was red land and it was easier to work, but both soils were fairly fertile for raising hay, grain and lima beans.

Mulcahy: Did your family use tractors or animals to plow your fields?

Bennett: We used animals in the early days when I was a very small boy. Eventually, my father got a Fordson tractor. In later years, he got a Caterpillar tractor with tracks.

Mulcahy: What sort of animals did he use to do the plowing?

Bennett: Mules and horses. The mules were a little stronger and lasted a little longer. They also seemed to be a little smarter than the horses. The horses would walk along and make their own track in the soft earth, where the mules would keep their heads down and pretty well walk in the track of the mule ahead of him.

A mule team transporting grain on the Bennett ranch in 1902.
(Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Centinela Valley via Jim Robertson)

Mulcahy: When did your father first get a tractor?

Bennett: I was a very small boy. I would guess it would be in the early [19]20s.

Mulcahy: How did you plant your different crops?

Bennett: The process varied depending upon what we were planting, whether it was hay, grain, or lima beans. In the case of grain, we prayed for an early rain in November. Then right after the weeds sprouted a little bit, we would immediately plow them under and kill

them. We would seed about the same time. Usually by the middle of December, we hoped to be ready for the winter rains and have all of the grain planted and harrowed in.

In the case of lima beans, we usually did what we called "sub-soiling." That would probably start in February or very early March. We would tear the soil up about 15 to 18 inches deep so the water would penetrate deeper. After the sub-soiling, we would deep-plow 10 to 12 inches and break the soil up real good. Then we would probably disk or harrow to further break it up and make it somewhat like a blotter, so that the rains would go down but the moisture could be pulled back up, osmosis, like a blotter.

We would plant the lima beans in the spring when most of the rains were over. The lima beans required soil that was very well broken up, because the bean doesn't grow like many other plants. The bean itself comes up as a spout and if the soil isn't properly prepared, and it has a kind of a crust on top, the crust will do what we called, "break the neck of the lima bean" and then it won't grow. It was very important that we get the soil in exactly the right condition and get the right season. During the summer months, the sun dried out the top of this soil that I've just described. The moisture was pulled up to the top, like a blotter, and that fed the lima beans' roots. So, they were not irrigated in our area here, they were fed strictly by soil that was properly prepared using the osmosis method.

Mulcahy: How did you distribute the seeds when you were planting them?

Bennett: There were two methods of seeding grain. One was called the "broadcast system" which used a wagon that had a kind of a "butterfly" that was fed from a hopper. The grain was poured into the hopper at the top, maybe 30 to 40 pounds at a time, and then it would spin (kind of like a fan) and throw the grain out; distribute it. That worked just about as good as drilling it in, which was a more expensive and a slower system where the grain was put in a lawn-hopper, and the drill opened the soil and dropped the grain in, in rows. The lima beans were always fed through a hopper and individually planted in rows, because that was necessary. It was also how the lima beans had to be harvested. They had to be in rows.

Mulcahy: How did you get your seeds?

Bennett: The seed was purchased from a place over in Sawtelle, West Los Angeles. There was a big miller over there. They would take the lima beans and do what they called "clean" them: run them through a conveyer, shake them, and some ladies would pick out the little pebbles and stems. Then the lima beans would be sold and some would be retained for seed. It was similar with the grain.

The grain that was threshed (barley or wheat) would go through the thresher on the ranch. Then it would go back through another cycle at the miller's to give it an additional cleaning so that the seed grain was about as clean as it could be.

Mulcahy: How did you harvest your crops?

Bennett: They were harvested in different manners. Usually in the month of May, we would cut the hay right after the kernel was full. The hay would be cut by a mower, raked into windrows, piled up, and then bailed. The sooner that we could get it in the swath and in a shock (a little pile of hay) to cure the better it would be. It would retain the sweetness and green color. So, we would try and rake it in the afternoon, and then windrow it, and bunch it in shocks the next day, or two or three. Then usually it would stay in the shock about three weeks to cure. Then we would bring the hay to the bailer and bail the hay. It could then be sold to the wholesaler. If we had a little reserve, we would put as much in the barn as we could, and sell it out in the winter. Much of it was sold to riding academies over near the Fox Hill areas and to individuals who had their own horses.

The lima beans were cut with cutters. They were allowed to dry, and then the lima beans were picked up and put into big wagons that carried them to the threshing machines that would thresh them and knock the beans out of the hulls.

In the case of barley, it was similar to the lima beans. It would ripen on the stalk and then it would be harvested, sometimes with a combine or with what we used as a stationary. We would cut it, pile it, and then carry it into the stationary threshing machine and thresh it there.

Mulcahy: Was this threshing machine run by gasoline?

Bennett: Yes.

Mulcahy: About how much would you harvest?

Bennett: Well, the harvest varied a lot. It might be 100 tons of hay, might be 3,000 sacks of barley, and my father never had too many lima beans. He would have maybe a few hundred sacks of beans.

Andrew Bennett would have hundreds of tons of hay and grain, and maybe a few thousand sacks of lima beans. The rolling hills west of Sepulveda were virgin soil, and he leased that somewhere before World War I. That's when he had virgin soil for his big crops of lima beans and became a wealthy man.

Mulcahy: How long would it take you to harvest your crops?

Bennett: Well, that's a question related to quantity or volume. In the case of my Uncle Andrew's crops, where he had a couple of thousand acres, it might take three to six weeks. In my father's case, he seldom had over 600 acres. Less than that most of the time, and that took from one to three weeks.

Mulcahy: Approximately how many hours a day would you work?

Bennett: Most of the time, it was daylight 'til dark, seven days a week, in harvest and in planting time.

Mulcahy: How often would these harvests occur every year?

Bennett: Once a year. The hay and grain would usually be between May and June. The threshing of grain would usually be in July, and the threshing of the lima beans would usually be in late August or September.

Mulcahy: Where did you sell your crops?

Bennett: The crops were sold to different areas. One of the biggest buyers was a Sawtelle milling company on the railroad over in Sawtelle. They handled lima beans, seed grain and storage. Another area was down in Gardena [California]. Some of it was sold to another "feed and seed" store. We often stored hay in our barn and sold out one or two tons at a time to the racetrack people, or to the riding academies or to individuals.

Mulcahy: Did your family hire people to work on your farm?

Bennett: Sometimes. My brother, my father and I usually did our own farming.

Mulcahy: About how many people would you hire?

Bennett: During harvest time, we would hire maybe 12 or 15 people at the threshing. It took a lot of people to bring in the grain or the lima beans, get it into the thresher, take the harvested grain or beans out of the thresher, put it into bags, and haul it to the storage area. So, there'd always be 12 or 15 people.

A stationary thresher used to harvest the pictured bags of barley at Andrew Bennett's ranch, circa 1920s.
(Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Centinela Valley via Jim Robertson)

Mulcahy: Were these hired people locals?

Bennett: Most of them, yes. My Uncle Andrew's operation was much bigger. He had hundreds of acres. At one time, I think he had 2 or 3,000 acres, so he had a bunkhouse for the hired help. He would put them up and feed them for the harvest season. But, his was a much bigger operation.

Mulcahy: What was the most profitable crop?

Bennett: Lima beans were probably the most profitable volume-wise.

After my father died in 1938, I took his Santa Fe Railway lease and farmed alone for six years to try and pay off all the medical, hospital and burial debts of my father and sick mother. My favorite crop was oat hay, because I could store 100 tons of it in the big barn on the corner of Imperial and Nash Street. I could sell it out a ton or two at a time all through the winter. My profit was 20% or more, because of the difference in price.

I wholesaled the oat hay in the summertime. A wholesaler would buy the whole crop, and he had to store it and sell it. I could do it in my spare time on weekends. I put it in the barn, and then I would deliver it with my own truck during the winter. I made 20% to 30% profit. Eventually, I got all the family debts paid off and got some money for my mother. Then I got married.

Mulcahy: How successful was your father's El Segundo farm?

Bennett: Much of the farmer's life depends upon the weather. All farmers, naturally, have good years and bad years for rainfall, harvest and crop payment. So, I would say my father's farm was not too successful. He died a poor man.

Mulcahy: What types of farm animals did your family have?

Bennett: When I was a small boy, we had most everything. We had chickens, ducks, geese, pigs, a cow or two, horses and mules. Occasionally, we had a goat and sometimes a sheep. As a child, my pets were rabbits and pigeons.

Mulcahy: Did the other farmers nearby have any kind of cattle or flocks?

Bennett: During the [19]20s and [19]30s, all the farmers had horses, and/or mules, chickens and miscellaneous small animals or pets, dogs, cats and so forth.

Mulcahy: In the 1920s, were horses still used for transportation among the farmers at El Segundo?

Bennett: During the [19]20s, just about everybody had cars. They weren't too good, but they were cars.

Mulcahy: Were birds, insects or rodents a problem for growing crops?

Bennett: They weren't what I would consider a major problem. They were more of a nuisance. In the El Segundo area, in particular, there were quite a few ground squirrels. My father used to pump gas in the ground to poison them, because they were dangerous to the horses. If a horse stepped in a squirrel hole, which might be covered with weeds or stubble, he could easily break a leg or injure himself. We tried to keep the squirrels out. The birds were very little problem.

The field mice were a problem in the wintertime at our adobe area. In the summer, the adobe would crack and the field mice would live and multiply in the cracks all summer long. Then in the winter with the heavy rain, the adobe soil would swell and close the cracks. At that time, the field mice would come into the barn and get into the hay, and eat the hay, and crawl under the hay bails. If they could get in the warehouse they would eat the grain, so they were quite a problem.

Mulcahy: Did you hunt around your home in El Segundo?

Bennett: My father and I occasionally hunted rabbits with shotguns. In the wintertime, when there were little ponds out there, the migrating ducks would sometimes land in the evening and be there in the morning. They would eat the grain and the bugs, and we would sometimes get a couple of ducks and eat them. Sometimes in September, when dove season opened, my father and I would go out and shoot some doves, but hardly anybody else ever hunted. Really, we were within the city limits, although it was all wide-open ranches. Technically, we were not supposed to be shooting, but nobody ever patrolled our area. Nobody ever came out.

Mulcahy: Do you know if the Leuzinger Family owned the land where Los Angeles AFB [Area A] currently exists at the southeast corner of El Segundo Boulevard [Ballona Avenue in 1930] and Aviation Boulevard [looking at a map]?

Bennett: Maybe, but I don't know.

Mulcahy: Do you recall, at that time, what was being grown at the southeast corner of El Segundo Boulevard and Aviation?

Bennett: No. I don't recall. There was some farming there. I remember the Leuzinger ranch raised hay, grain, corn, and quite a bit of their own foodstuffs. They had a big ranch right there. He owned that, I don't know how much, maybe 20, 40 acres. The Leuzinger home was on the northeast corner of El Segundo Boulevard and Aviation Boulevard up on a hill.

A little further down here by Continental Boulevard there were two pretty good-sized ranches. They farmed hay, grain, lima beans and black-eyed beans. One was an Italian family named Muretti. East of Aviation Boulevard was mostly homes out there. East of Douglas Street was mainly farms.

I leased this area here [pointing to the map] after my father died. I leased the land between Imperial Highway [northern border], Mariposa Avenue [southern border], Sepulveda Boulevard [western border], and Aviation Boulevard [eastern border]. We farmed where the Douglas factory was and west of it. The Moreland [Truck Company] and Pickwick [Motor Coach Company], whichever one came first, were one of the first industries built on that land that I recall. The Santa Fe Railway acquired that land sometime around 1930.

Prior to that time, a rancher named Dinsmore owned this area here around Mariposa and Imperial. That would be 160 acres, maybe 320 [acres]. He was a very good farmer and I only vaguely remember, because I was very young at the time. He leased the land to some Japanese farmers. Somewhere in that cycle, Dinsmore and his wife retired and went to Europe and got killed. So, the two living Dinsmore daughters and their husbands sold the property to the Santa Fe Railway. I'm unsure of all this detail, because it came down to me only kind of hearsay when I was very young.

I do know some Japanese farmed their land for a number of years. The Santa Fe Railway acquired the land in approximately 1930. When the lease expired, the Japanese farmers didn't renew it. So, my father leased it and cleaned up all of their irrigation ditches and their reservoirs. In 1936, we eventually moved into the buildings on the corner of Nash Street and Imperial Highway. My father died in 1938. I got the lease and kept it until 1944. Then they took the buildings for the war effort, so I moved to Inglewood. My Uncle Sid Bennett carried on the farming for a number of years, what was left of it. Gradually the development and the factories acquired it all.

The railroad owned the land, and they kept their spur tracks. They had a number of spur tracks off the main artery, which goes down to Aviation. Some of them are still there. They used the spur tracks for transportation for the manufacturers, because all that area was zoned that way for manufacturing.

Mulcahy: How hard did the Depression hit the farms in El Segundo?

Bennett: It was pretty tragic. Unfortunately, my father had two almost rainless years in 1931 and 1932 and harvested almost zero crops. They were extremely difficult times. I can recall my mother buying a big knucklebone soup bone and getting vegetables from the farm gardens that were left over after harvest, and we would have vegetable soup and cornbread for our dinner.

I remember the thing that bothered me the most about the Depression. My Uncle Andrew had a bunkhouse, and he hired a lot of people during harvest time. There were people who lived over near Imperial and Inglewood Avenue, men who had families. A few of those men would walk about a mile and a half to work in the field all day. They wouldn't eat breakfast. They'd leave the food for their children, and at noontime they would try to eat two meals in one. Believe me, there were men there that were skinny. How they worked from dawn until noon, without any breakfast, I don't know. They would gorge

themselves at noon and then work until dark and walk back home. That was my worst recollection of the terrible Depression.

Mulcahy: Do you think your family was better off or worse off, economically, than most of the nearby El Segundo farmers during the Depression?

Bennett: Our family wasn't as well off financially. My father was not the best manager in the world, and he had five children. None of the other farmers that I knew had more than two children or possibly three, but we were not as well off as most.

Mulcahy: Did your family have enough to eat during the Depression?

Bennett: Yes.

Mulcahy: How did the Depression affect Andrew Bennett and his farm?

Bennett: Well, that's rather ironic. The same ranch and crops that made him a wealthy man, almost broke him. He also had terrible crops and he was late in coming to the big tractors. He had 60 or 75 head of mules and horses that he continued to farm with. By that time, the land was pretty well worn out, and the Bermuda grass had come in with the sheep, and it was hard to kill. So he was farming like it was 25 years earlier. He was losing a lot of money every month.

He finally got killed in 1940, and many things happened then. When he was quite wealthy, he owned a home in Inglewood, and they built a theater in Inglewood during the early 1920s. It was called the "Granada Theatre." At one time they were getting $1,000 a month from the theater, and that's what they were using to continue farming uneconomically. Somewhere along the way, there was a huge fire at the theater, and the insurance took care of that. Later on, I believe in 1932, an earthquake busted the place up pretty bad. The insurance saved the day again. So, there was still quite a bit of money in the family. My uncle got killed in 1940. My Aunt Phoebe Bennett then moved to town and gave up what was left of the ranch lease.

Mulcahy: What did the people of El Segundo do for fun in the 1920s and 1930s?

Bennett: (Laughs) I don't know. You'll have to ask them. They probably listened to the radio a little bit or read the newspaper a little bit.

Once in a while, after harvest, we would have a party. My father liked to party, and dance and have a drink. All of my sisters danced, and their friends danced, and I learned to dance and danced with them. But most of the other farmers didn't party much.

Mulcahy: Did most people in El Segundo obey the Prohibition laws?

Bennett: I don't know. My father made a little wine and a little home brew during the early days when it was allowed. There was a little drinking, but very little, to my knowledge anyhow. Most people couldn't afford to drink.

Mulcahy: Were there many people in El Segundo during the Depression from states like Oklahoma or Arkansas who were escaping from the Dust Bowl?

Bennett: There was one family I knew that worked for one of the oil companies as pumpers. I don't remember their name. They came from Oklahoma. I don't know of any others.

Mulcahy: There weren't people passing through a lot, at that time, looking for work?

Bennett: There were some.

Mulcahy: Did the El Segundo farms have electricity when you were a boy?

Bennett: Yes. There was a power line that went right up Nash Street.

Mulcahy: When your father first leased the land at El Segundo, did the house come with the lease?

Bennett: The farmer, Dinsmore, that left there had a very nice home. He had a huge barn and a bunkhouse for workers. All those buildings went with the lease. One of the executives at the Santa Fe Railway had the big home disassembled and moved to Encinitas [California]. The smaller house is what we eventually moved into, and it had the electricity in the house. My father, somehow, acquired the buildings. He bought them from the Santa Fe Railway, but they weren't movable.

Mulcahy: Did you have a well for your source of water?

Bennett: The water was already piped in from somewhere. We did not have a well.

Mulcahy: Why did you finally stop farming?

Bennett: Well, there were two reasons. In 1943, I had a bumper crop of good grain and I got a good price. I paid off all of my father's debts and provided about a $2,000 nest egg for my mother. I was in lower management at North American Aviation at that time. Farming 300 acres and being in lower management was killing me, so I had to give it up. Then we moved to Inglewood, and I became a supervisor right at that time. So I turned the lease over to my uncle, Sid Bennett. I let him take it and the equipment.

Mulcahy: When did your uncle stop farming in El Segundo?

Bennett: He dribbled on and had some acreage up into the early [19]50s, and then it was almost gone. I don't recall exactly what year.

An aerial view (circa 1940) of the undeveloped land that would later become the locations of Area A and Area B of Los Angeles AFB. (Photo courtesy of the Boeing Company via Patricia McGinnis)

Mulcahy: What do you remember about Mines Field [the original airfield where LAX is currently located]?

Bennett: I was 15 during the 1928 Air Show. That was my first experience with air shows. They had different programs. Intermittently, I saw most of that show because we were there pert near all of the time in 1928. The air show had all types of aerobatics and the old planes of that time.

I think the air show was eight days long, and there were a lot of people there. My father leased the land that bordered Aviation and south of Imperial. He and a partner put up a number of little concessions to sell hot dogs and soft drinks, and we parked cars. I parked cars, as a kid, in that corner as the people went across to the air show. I think they had another show in 1932 and we did some of the same again.

Mulcahy: Did the air show impress you?

Bennett: Oh, yes! I was a schoolboy in high school.

Mulcahy: Do you remember when the *Graf Zeppelin* came into Mines Field [in 1929]?

Bennett: Yes. I couldn't tell you what year it came (laughs), but I remember it. The Zeppelin just landed and flew around. It probably did other things also.

Mulcahy: Were there Army soldiers there when the Zeppelin came?

Bennett: I don't recall. Probably couldn't see them, because they were all inside the field, and we were outside diagonally across on the other land. We never did go in to see the show.

Mulcahy: Did the public have to pay admission to see the air show?

Bennett: Yes.

Mulcahy: Did you ever see Charles Lindbergh at Mines Field?

Bennett: No.

Mulcahy: Tell me about the Moreland Aircraft Factory. What do you remember about that?

Bennett: It was a truck factory. I don't know whether they ever built any airplanes there or not. As far as I know, it was the Moreland Truck Company.

[Editors note: Moreland Aircraft, Inc. built a few small trainer airplanes from about 1928-1931 in the same building that they had previously constructed trucks in.]

Mulcahy: Was there any oil drilling on the land your family leased?

Bennett: Yes. There were one or two wells, but they did very little. I only have a very vague memory of them, and I don't think they amounted to very much.

Mulcahy: Do you recall if there were any oil wells where the Douglas Aircraft factory was later put up?

Bennett: No.

There was an oil well that blew up, and I think it was near Duley Road and what is now Mariposa. It blew up a lot of water and sand. Two or three acres were about a foot higher than all the rest of the terrain around there after that.

Mulcahy: Do you recall if there were any oil wells near the Leuzinger house?

Bennett: There were a few oil wells scattered around the area over by Inglewood Avenue. I'm not sure which side of El Segundo Boulevard it was. There's still two or three of them right over here by the city yard that are still pumping. So, there've been wells scattered throughout the entire area for probably 50, 60 years. I know there were some on the other side of El Segundo Boulevard, maybe near Nash Street.

Mulcahy: Were the oil companies the main employer at El Segundo during the 1920s and 1930s?

Bennett: During the [19]20s and prior, yes. Somewhere in the mid-[19]30s, the Air Force and the Army started buying some airplanes that were constructed locally. I first went to work in May 1935 at the old Northrop Company in El Segundo. They had a contract to build airplanes, and Douglas had contracts to build airplanes. Within maybe a five-year span, from [19]35 to [19]40, the aircraft companies became the biggest employers, and they exceeded Chevron and Standard Oil.

I worked at the old Northrop Company for two years, until the union went on strike in 1937. It was probably the CIA or CIO. Donald Douglas actually owned controlling interest of the Northrop plant, so they closed the plant and moved everything over to Santa Monica [California]. I didn't want to go to Santa Monica, so I went across the street and went to work for North American Aviation.

Mulcahy: Tell me about your work at the Northrop Division [of Douglas Aircraft].

Bennett: I started as a laborer in the warehouse. Eight months later, I got a promotion and became an interviewer in the employment office. I spent a year in the employment office, and I enjoyed and liked that, but I did not like labor relations and labor unions. The unions were getting stronger and nastier at the time.

I then went into production control in the shop. That's where I really learned how to build an airplane and make the parts. I spent a year, year and a half, in production control.

Mulcahy: What was your job in production control?

Bennett: Production control at the old Northrop Douglas company was moving parts, moving stock, and handling shortages. If the assembly department was short a part, then it was my job to locate that part or parts and push them along, get them into the assembly department.

Mulcahy: What hours did you work at the Northrop Division?

Bennett: Northrop was always eight hours a day.

Mulcahy: During the day?

Bennett: Yes.

Mulcahy: Did the Northrop Division plant have only one shift a day at that time?

Bennett: They had a second shift. I know very little about it.

Mulcahy: Do you know if any of the employees were ever injured on the production line while you were at the Northrop Division?

Bennett: Only once do I recall anybody getting hurt, and that was somebody's mistake. They had some fuel tanks that were leaking, and they drained and aired them, but they did not blow them out. They should have done that and dehydrated them. A welder was welding around one of the rivets to seal it, and the tank still had gas fumes left in it. The fumes exploded and hurt the welder. I don't know how bad he was hurt.

Mulcahy: Were the Northrop Division facilities at El Segundo adequate for aircraft production?

Bennett: Yes. It was a good factory with good people. We built a good airplane with a good design. The Northrop company won a contract to build the [Northrop] A-17. Of course, it was propeller-driven, and it was a good contract. John Northrop and Donald Douglas were both excellent design engineers.

Mulcahy: Was the A-17 the only airplane being built at the Northrop Division at that time?

Bennett: Yes.

Mulcahy: Did women work on the production line when you worked at the Northrop Division?

Bennett: No women were working on the true production line. I think there were maybe half a dozen or so that worked in the sewing department where they sewed some fabric for certain parts of the airplane.

Mulcahy: What did you think of John Northrop?

Bennett: I didn't really know him. As far as I know, he was an outstanding designer and an outstanding person. Donald Douglas was also an outstanding designer and was more into design in engineering than in manufacturing.

When I was hired, it was Northrop Aircraft. It was John Northrop's designs and planes, but Donald Douglas had ownership. Douglas furnished a lot of the capital, and probably had more than half of the ownership of the plant. Eventually, Douglas took over our plant when the strike took place and moved everything over to Santa Monica.

In my opinion, the management people at Douglas were more "good old boy-oriented" and not really progressive. I think history and business has shown us that down through the years. Eventually, Douglas was taken over by McDonnell Aircraft (McDonnell Douglas), and then later on Boeing took them over.

North American became Rockwell, but they always had outstanding management people. "Dutch" [James] Kindelberger was one of the tops during World War II and for many years after. He was progressive, innovative, and one of the few engineers that became a very top corporate manger, CEO. Kindelberger was really good.

Mulcahy: Do you remember Ed Heinemann at the Northrop Division?

Bennett: He was a very good engineer. I never had any business with him, but he was considered a very good engineer.

Mulcahy: When you were at the Northrop Division did the other employees ever try to pressure you into joining their union?

Bennett: No.

Mulcahy: What did the unions want at Northrop when they went on strike?

Bennett: Money, I guess (laughs), and more privileges. They didn't have rest periods. They would smoke in the toilets and things like that. There wasn't much money. An apprentice assembler, who would go in and buck the rivets and help the riveter, started at 40 cents an hour. I went into the warehouse as a laborer at 50 cents an hour. There was no apprenticeship in labor. You were a laborer, period (laughs)!

The union just struck, and Douglas closed the doors. Douglas had control of the facility at the time. You could say the strike resulted in closing that factory. They closed the factory in June or July of 1937 and took all the jigs, fixtures, airplane parts and components over to the Douglas plant in Santa Monica. I guess they continued the assembly work over there. What happened there, I have no information about. Many of us were out of a job as a result of the strike. So I went across the street and applied at North American Aviation. A few weeks later, I went to work there.

I started working at North American Aviation in October of 1937 in production control. I was again learning about manufacturing parts, manufacturing components, and manufacturing an airplane. A number of trainers were built for the USA and other countries: NA-16, BT-9, O-47, NJ-1, RC-1 and the NA-50A.

I worked in the machine shop and ran the control station for two years. I had five people working for me. It was our job to bring in all the raw stock, casting, forging material and so forth and get them on the machine. After they were through inspection, we pushed them out on a little pushcart into the next department, which was usually inspection. After that, it would be put through processing, cleaning, painting, plating, and on down to final assembly. I also kept in touch with the intermediate assembly and final assembly departments to help them with their shortages. If they had shortages in the machine shop then I would move those faster.

After two years of that and another year of production in tool control, I was able to qualify as a manufacturing planner. That's when I went into manufacturing planning. I went into lower management there, and I stayed there until I retired at the end of 1977.

Mulcahy: Do you remember the 1941 strike at North American Aviation?

Bennett: It was during the early war years. I guess, the government and the company worked together to end it. I guess, it was the Army that moved in and put a stop to the picket line, because the factory wanted to stay open, and some of the union people wanted to strike, and they weren't letting people into the plant. The Army came in and put a stop to that.

[Editor's note: soldiers from Fort MacArthur in San Pedro, California were deployed to the North American Aviation plant to protect the factory from the strikers.]

I distinctly remember one event. A very strong union man that I knew when I was in the machine shop was like some of the union people who were borderline workers. He was just barely good enough to keep his job. They were hiding behind the union skirts. He was defiant, "We are going to keep this picket line, regardless!" One of the soldiers that had been fighting somewhere doing service, he wasn't putting up with that. He walked up to the union man who wouldn't move out of the picket line. The soldier took his gun and beat him over the shoulder and knocked him down. That put a stop to that. That's my recollection of the strike.

Some of us kept right on working during the strike. I like to speak for myself. I don't want a union speaking for me. I want to earn my way, and earn my raise, and earn my classifications and promotions. I don't want to get it through the union. I felt real strong about it. I was always on the boss's side. Eventually, I became a boss.

Mulcahy: Was the strike about getting higher wages?

Bennett: That and other things.

Soldiers deployed to the North American Aviation strike.
(Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Centinela Valley via Jim Robertson)

Mulcahy: When you were going to work during this strike, did you get harassed by the strikers in the picket line?

Bennett: No. It seemed like the majority of the employees wanted to keep working. They didn't want to strike.

Mulcahy: Were there hundreds of employees on strike?

Bennett: I suppose. I don't know what the headcount at the factory was at that time. It must have been in the thousands.

Mulcahy: Did the picket line get unruly during the strike?

Bennett: The picket line was determined to keep the strike going, and they're the ones that the soldiers stopped. So, eventually, they went back to work

Mulcahy: How did the military stop them?

Bennett: I came in the other gate at Imperial Highway because of where I worked. They were picketing mostly on Aviation Boulevard. I didn't really see very much. They had quite a picket line, and there were lots of soldiers out there with their guns, and they were making sure that the picket lines didn't keep the other workers from coming in.

Mulcahy: Were there clashes between the soldiers and strikers?

Bennett: There must have been. The only one I know of, and I happened to see it, was right off the railroad track. There was quite a bit of commotion. That's when the soldier took his gun and slammed this character in the shoulder and knocked him down. Other than that, I don't know.

Mulcahy: How long did this strike last?

Bennett: Just a few days, not very long.

Mulcahy: Did it break the union?

Bennett: I don't think it broke the union. I think it just broke the strike.

I'm strong against the unions, but we have to have them. We need them, but they abuse their privilege. A number of years later, when I was in management, the unions at North American had come to the point where they were filing grievances for every little nit-picking event. They would file a grievance and, of course, the grievance would require a labor relations man, the employee who filed the grievance, his lead man, and maybe the foreman of the shop. They all had to appear in the labor relations office. It got to be, if the general foreman walked by and didn't say hello or he scowled because he was thinking of business, somebody would file a ridiculous grievance. Nit-picking!

Sometime in the 1950s, it got to the point where the labor relations people in the personnel office accumulated all the complaints and showed how much productive time was lost. When it came time to negotiate with the union, the management and personnel office brought in all of these useless little hen house grievances that were nit-picking, and showed how much time was lost. Practically all of these grievances lost and they really were unjustified. Nothing was accomplished. They put a stop to that type of thing. There was a tremendous change in the grievance procedure and in the unions filing grievances. They had to have a reasonable case that would stand up in court and be heard by a jury.

Mulcahy: How did World War II affect El Segundo?

Bennett: They gathered up all the local Japanese people and sent them up to Manzanar [an internment camp in California for Japanese-Americans] and places like that.

Mulcahy: Did you see that happening here?

Bennett: Oh, yes! The Japanese were just vacating and leaving. At the time, one of my sisters and her husband had some property in Inglewood. It was a deep lot, 240 feet deep. They only had one small house on the front, because of my mother's health. They said I could buy a house and put it on the back of their lot. I bought one of the best houses from the Japanese people that were moving. I paid them cash, a fair price, and moved the house up my sister's lot.

Mulcahy: What was the immediate reaction at the local aircraft plants to Pearl Harbor? Did they increase security?

Bennett: They put camouflage nets over all of the local aircraft factories. They also changed the design of the roads, so that anybody flying aerially would mistake the roads. Lincoln Boulevard, at that time, angled into Sepulveda, about the middle of the distance between Imperial Highway and Century Boulevard. They covered all of that part of the road and constructed another fake Lincoln Boulevard. It came through the property that I leased in 1942. It appeared as though Lincoln Boulevard went way south and east of where it really did. There was a very wide strip that ran right through my ranch. They put white gravel on it to make it look just like Lincoln Boulevard. If somebody flying aerially wanted to take a picture of it and maybe do some bombing, they would have bombed south and east of where the factories actually were.

We also gradually increased the aircraft production. We produced the [P-51] Mustang pretty good then. It was one of the best fighters. At one time in [19]44, we at North American were building, I think, 22 airplanes a day. That was our best. That would be at LA, and probably at Texas, and maybe Kansas. I'm not real sure where else North American was manufacturing, because they were pretty quiet about all that information at the time.

The Douglas Aircraft El Segundo plant under camouflage nets during World War II.
(Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Centinela Valley via Jim Robertson)

Mulcahy: Did the local aircraft plants fly the airplanes they manufactured out of Los Angeles Airport during the war?

Bennett: A lot of planes were being flown out, and I just wouldn't attempt to say which ones were. The Mustangs were and many of the others. Some were shipped. Clear up through the [19]50s, military airplanes were flown out of the airport, like the F-100 [Super Sabre] series and the F-86 [Sabre] series that North American built. They were flown out.

Mulcahy: Was there a nightly blackout in and around the airplane factories at that time?

Bennett: There were blackouts in a number of areas. It was effective.

Mulcahy: Did the people at El Segundo fear a Japanese invasion from the sea?

Bennett: Some did and some didn't.

One day all the air raid sirens went on. I was still on the ranch and everything began to happen. At that time, the Army had bunkers surrounding El Segundo. They had quite a group of antiaircraft soldiers stationed on the ranch right near where I was living on Imperial Highway and Nash. They had antiaircraft guns and lots of folks there. I think there were over 100 soldiers there most of the time.

I think the big alarm was in February of 1942. All of the sirens went off, and the antiaircraft guns out on the sand dunes were shooting. I had a very good pair of binoculars and went out in the yard. I could see three planes way, way high. I will make a wild guess that they were 28 to 30,000 feet high. They flew on over. Of course, a lot

of people still argue about whether they were Japs or Navy planes. I'm sure a lot of people know, but I don't. The antiaircraft guns on my ranch were going off.

Later on, sometimes I would talk to the lieutenants when they would come up and visit. I tried to get them to say what they were shooting at. The only thing I could get them to say was that they were firing at an altitude of 20 to 25,000 feet. Their shells were going off there. Whatever was happening, they were firing lower than the aircraft going by. There's a lot of debate about whether there was any aircraft at all, but it was plain to me. I could see them with my binoculars real plain.

Mulcahy: About what time of day was this?

Bennett: It wasn't daytime, it was nighttime. There were a lot of [search] lights going up. That was probably why a lot of people said there weren't any airplanes there at all. It was nighttime, but I guess a lot of the lights went up and the antiaircraft was going off, and they were shooting out on the sand dunes. There were gun emplacements all around down there shooting up at the air.

Mulcahy: Was there any damage on the ground from all those shells going off afterwards?

Bennett: I don't think so.

Mulcahy: Were there antiaircraft guns at the aircraft plants?

Bennett: I would say adjacent to them, nearby in strategic places, like up on the sand dunes, and then down in the trees where they couldn't be seen. There were three rows of huge, huge eucalyptus trees. I still got a lot of pictures of them there, right where their big barracks were.

Mulcahy: Where was the local Army barracks?

Bennett: Right on Nash Street, about a block south of Imperial Highway.

Mulcahy: Did the aircraft plants also have barrage balloons?

Bennett: Yes, there were. There were balloons around, but I don't have any knowledge of what their assignments were.

Mulcahy: Were there a lot of women working in the aircraft plants at that time?

Bennett: Yes. My oldest sister Eleanor went to work at North American for three years. She had never worked in her life. She was good with her hands. She could sew, so they put her on the bench to do light assembly work. She did good! Yup.

More than half the workers at North American were women. Even when I got into lower management in late [19]43, early [19]44, most of the planners that I had were women. The employment office did a very good job. They hired some very bright, capable college girls. I had two or three that had a high IQ [intelligence quotient], like 160, and they were good employees. They learned fast and they did what I asked them to do. They were a tremendous help!

Later on, we became friendly with a lot of the college girls. They used to come out to the ranch with their boyfriends and we'd go out around the ranch. I was proud of those girls. I don't know exactly what they did about college, because they worked full-time. As far as I recall, they went back to college, because they were bright, bright girls. Oh, they were good!

Mulcahy: How did the Santa Fe Railroad affect life in El Segundo during the [19]20s and [19]30s?

Bennett: I can't say how it really affected the life in El Segundo, but the railroad purposely acquired those, roughly, 300 acres. It was two-quarter sections bordered by Aviation, Imperial, Sepulveda and Mariposa. At the time, the railroad knew that all of the land east of Sepulveda was zoned for manufacturing and commercial development. So, they started running spur tracks. That was their design, to keep their railroad business going in the manufacturing areas. They ran a number of spur tracks into El Segundo, clear up almost to Sepulveda. That did assist the manufacturers in moving their merchandise at that time. Much of it was before trucking got so big.

Mulcahy: Did the aircraft industries use the trains?

Bennett: A lot of their heavy material came in on trains: big castings, forgings, sheet stock, plate stock and bar stock came in via the spur track. The first spur track that was put in came right off of the intersection of Aviation and Imperial. It ran right by the Northrop factory and on up to the Moreland [Truck Company] and Pickwick [Motor Coach Company]. They kept adding more and more spur tracks.

Mulcahy: So, they must have run quite frequently during World War II.

Bennett: Yes.

Mulcahy: Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?

Bennett: No.

Mulcahy: I would like to thank you for your time, Mr. Bennett.

Bennett: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW