1-30-1980

(SNP020) Edna Burrill interviewed by Darwin Lambert, transcribed by Chelsea Gutshall

Edna Burrill

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Interview with Edna Burrill
Part of the Shenandoah National Park Oral History Collection, SdArch SNP-20
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Interview conducted at Burrill Home
By Darwin Lambert on June, 16, 1986

Transcribed by Chelsea Gutshall, February, 2009

Key
[DL:] Interviewer, Darwin Lambert
[EB:] Interviewee, Edna Burrill

Mrs. Burrill’s daughters (Mary Ellen Jennings and Gladys “Peaches” Burrill) present as well (unable to tell which sister is which on recording)
(*) Unable to understand word
(**) Unable to understand more than one word
Omitted frequent use of “uh” or “um” by interviewee, as well as the “yeahs” or “sures” spoken by interviewer while interviewee was speaking.

Total interview length: 00:30:36 min.

[Begin audio file: 00:00:01]

DL: Well this is Darwin Lambert. We’re at the Jennings’s place…
DL: Speaking with Mrs. Edna…Edna Burrill, is it?
EB: Edna.
DL: That’s your name?
EB: Edna Elizabeth Browning Burrill.
DL: Yeah, okay. On June 16, 1986, and the subject is about the…what’d you call it? James Burrill’s mountain farm?
EB: Yes. Forty-two hundred and how many acres?
(Daughter 1): Almost forty-three hundred. Seriously. (unfolding map)
DL: And you’re James Burrill’s daughter? Or…
EB: No, he was just my husband’s uncle.
DL: Husband’s uncle?
EB: Yes. And therefore he was my uncle too, after…when we were married, you know.
DL: Yes, yes. Where did you live at that time? Did you live out there or did you live here in town or where did you live?
EB: Let me see. It’s been such a long time ago (laughs).
(Daughter 1): I believe you lived on Main Street or over by the church, by the Episcopal Church. I’m not sure ‘cuz that was before I was born.
(Daughter 2): Didn’t…you lived with Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Ellen after you were married, didn’t you?
EB: Yes.
(Daughter 1): Some of the time.
EB: And I was born in Roanoke. That was my birthplace, Roanoke, Virginia.
DL: You wouldn’t want to tell me when you were born, would you?
EB: Well, I’m not a hundred. (laughter)
(Daughter 1): 1896.
(Daughter 2): July 19th.
DL: That’s modest of you. (laughter) You may be…you may be a hundred in another ten years; that’s about it the way my figures go.
EB: Well let me tell you something. I don’t feel like I’m that old.
DL: You don’t look that old.
EB: Well I sure don’t feel that old either.
DL: You don’t talk as though you’re that old.
EB: And I’m not gonna be old until it’s absolutely necessary!
DL: Well that’s the spirit. That’s really the spirit.
(Daughter 2): Oh, don’t they call that the “Three Sisters”? But I think they kinda get
DL: Yes, well Neighbor Mountain is part of it...must be part of it and the Three Sisters out this way. Why were they called the Three Sisters, I wonder?

(Daughter 1 to EB): Do you know why those mountains were called the Three Sisters? You know, out the road here?

EB: Three Sisters?
(Daughter 1): Uh-huh.

EB: Well I think three sisters owned...owned them property.

(Daughter 1): Before...this was...Did Uncle Jim and Aunt Ellen lived down in Campbell when they were transacting this land to the park?

EB: Well they lived in a good many places. They lived in Marshall and Uncle Jim had an apartment.

(Daughter 2): Wait, we want just about the park, Mom.

DL: Did they have a home there on this land? Did they have a home where they lived any time on the land itself? On this mountain land?

(Daughter 1): No, they had a...they had a summer place down...a piece of land down near there called the "Front Place". Isn't that true?

EB: Yes.

(Daughter 1): And Uncle Jim and Aunt Ellen used it occasionally. Did they ever live there?

EB: No.

(Daughter 1): They used to just go there when they were...

EB: Yes, when they wanted to go someplace...different for a few days. Something about stories, Uncle Jim was a rich man. He didn’t have to take any of this kind of stuff, you know.

(Daughter 1): But he lived in town, they lived there at Kay’s Corner at one time but the house burned. Is that true?

EB: Yes. That’s right.

DL: That’s not where the drug store is, that corner there?

(Daughter 2): Yeah, where there’s a drug store.

DL: On Main and Broad Street? (affirmation). Oh, they lived down there. Well where...where else did he live? Where was this city place? Where...what, Washington, or?

(Daughter 1): He had apartments in Washington, DC.

DL: Apartment houses?

EB: Yes indeed and he got his check from...every... (talking over each other)

(Daughter 1): He was connected with a * from Shannon and Lux.

EB: Shannon and Lux.

DL: Uh-huh. Is that how he made the money that he had or...

EB: Oh yes indeed. Uncle Jim Burrill was a rich man.

DL: Or did he inherit money?

(Daughter 1): Well he came over from England, you know, and settled in Chicago or Philadelphia, ‘cuz didn’t he have a brother here when he came? Of course that was way before us but I’ve heard Aunt Ellen talk about it.

DL: He himself was born in England?

(Daughter 1): Yes.

(Daughter 2): And his wife too.

DL: About when would you say he was born? When was his lifetime?

(Daughter 1): Well...we have his obituary. He was seventy-eight when he died in 1928.

EB: Uncle Jim Burrill was a wonderful man. He certainly was.

(Daughter 1): So he was born in 1850.

EB: Yes indeed. And he had apartments, apartments, apartments. And he’d have to take the checks to the bank each month, you know, and oh he’d just have a fortune.

(Daughter 2): He was in the...in the...he worked for the Virginia Oak Tannery at one time, tanning leather. He gave the formula to the Virginia Oak Tannery.

(Daughter 1): Sold it to them.

(Daughter 2): Sold it to them for tanning the leather. When they had a formula for tanning the leather.

(Daughter 1): But he was in different kinds of businesses. He had a...

(Daughter 2): A huckster's business, isn’t that right?

EB: He had a... (daughters talking in background about huckster’s business) he could tan the leather.

DL: Did he use the oak bark for that?
EB: I don’t know. For the Deford…wasn’t it the Deford?
DL: It was called the Deford Tannery back in those days.
EB: Well Uncle Jim Burrill was a wealthy man. He was.
DL: About when do you think he bought this place? Or how did he get this place? He bought it, I guess, just...
EB: When?
DL: Yes, when did Uncle Jim buy this place?
(Daughter 1): (looking at obituary) Does it say on here? 1912?
DL: About when? This date here...something like 1911...oh, September 1911! Right up here. Is that when he first bought it? That he had this surveyed and...
(Daughter 1): I don’t know, but I would imagine that.
EB: He had so much of everything.
(Daughter 2): Mother, when Uncle Jim bought this forty-three hundred acres, was it in 1911 or do you know that?
EB: I have...I don’t think I was in the family then.
(Daughter 1): No, you weren’t. You were hardly...well, you were born in 1896 so you were only fifteen so I rather doubt you were in the family then. That’s when you were...
DL: Then he died in 1928 and it belonged to Ellen, Ellen first.
(Daughter 1): No, no, no, this land was sold to the state of Virginia for the park before that.
DL: By...by the time...before he died?
(Daughter 1): Um hmm. Because what was it, in 1925 when they first authorized the park and that’s when they started acquiring land.
EB: And they went around to people’s houses about this.
(Daughter 1): The state of Virginia had to get the land because the park, I mean the federal government, would not buy it.
DL: Well, they were getting ready to buy it but they didn’t actually buy it and pay for it until 1934. They paid for it in 1934 and the park conservation, I mean the state records, of course it’s the state that did this, this work, but the park out here now has their maps and they have it in the name of Ellen Burrill.
(Daughter 1): Have they?
DL: Is that his wife?
(Daughter 2): That’s his wife’s name, yes.
(Daughter 1): He came over from England about 1870, somewhere in there, ‘74 somewhere like that, and either went to Philadelphia or Chicago because they lived in Chicago. They were there at the time of the fire. When they had the big fire in Chicago. But Aunt Ellen...he sent for Aunt Ellen after he saved enough money for her to come over. And then she came from Leeds or Liverpool.
EB: And anytime anything was going on that was worthwhile, they’d always come to Uncle Jim for some finance and he never turned them away.
DL: That’s wonderful.
EB: He gave plenty too.
DL: Well what did he do with the land? I’m just forgetting. I kinda thought Burrill was probably a German name. It is an English name?
(Daughter 2): English, oh yes.
EB: From Leeds.
DL: From Leeds, in England?
EB: Yeah. Yes indeed. And that was the only country in the world.
(Daughter 1): They came through Ellis Island and all that when they came.
DL: You don’t have any information then about who he might have bought this land from? Was it some other big owner that was before him?
(Daughter 1): It probably would be on record in the courthouse.
DL: Yes, I could probably find it in the courthouse.
(Daughter 1): I haven’t any idea because I was only three when he died and I didn’t really...
EB: Oh he had enormous **.
DL: That’s the engineer’s name that drew the map, Frederick T. Amis. I knew him, back in the thirties. He was a very interesting man himself but he didn’t own the land. He was an engineer and surveyor that they had that surveyed the land and make the map. Fred Amis. Well then we come to the question, what did he do with the land? Did he...did he do anything with it or just hold it?
(Daughter 1): He just...he just had the land. Did he sell timber from the land? (to EB) Did
Uncle Jim ever sell any timber from the land?
EB: Oh he had so...
(Daughter 2): I know but did he sell any timber from this forty-three hundred acres,
Mother?
EB: Oh.
(Daughter 2): Did he?
EB: I don’t know about that. That was before my time...in the Burrill family I mean.
(Daughter 1): See he also had a hotel, the Hygeia Hotel, down in Newport News. They were
in that business. And then he a farm in Richmond, or near Richmond.
(Daughter 2): What’s the name of that farm?
EB: You know what the Hygeia Hotel was.
DL: I’ve heard of it.
(Daughter 1): The Chamberlain now stands on the land where the Hygeia was.
EB: It was a very expensive hotel.
(Daughter 2): What’s the name of that land he owned down there?
EB: And he had the checks coming in each month from that.
(Daughters talking to each other in background)
DL: So he had this as an investment, I guess you would say.
EB: Yes, yes, oh yes.
DL: Not really to live on but he did come and spend some time on it in the summer when it
was hot.
(Daughter 1): Yes.
EB: Uncle Jim was a wealthy man.
(Daughter 1): He had land holdings in different places. They even lived in Canada for a
while when Daddy was...see...
EB: Any of the people, whatever they were doing, if they would come around for some...a
donation, he never turned them away. And he didn’t just give them a small sum, either.
DL: How did he...well you don’t know, I guess, but if he was here when the park was
buying this, I wonder how he felt about the park taking the land. Was he...
(Daughter 1): Well didn’t you take Uncle Jim to one of the first meetings about the park?
EB: Yes, I did, I did.
(Daughter 1): And I think he felt, or from what I’ve been told, that he felt it was a
good idea that they would...to conserve part of the land for generations to come.
EB: He had nobody else to chauffer him around and he had a nice big car and he said,
“Edna, would you take me” so on and so on and I said “But I’d be delighted to, Uncle
Jim”. And I certainly took him wherever he wanted to go. And he was a wonderful person.
(Daughter 2): I remember Mother telling about them going to Harrisonburg when this first
came up, about the park; taking a load over to go to the courthouse or whatever to hear
about it.
DL: And this was just to look into the matter and see what was going on?
(Daughter 2): I think so.
DL: Yeah. There was an organization over there promoting it but of course the decisions
on...on the land and the price and so on would have been in the Page County courts. They
had a separate proceeding of eminent domain, as they call it, in each one of the eight
county courthouses.
(Daughter 1): See it was forty-three...almost forty-three hundred acres; I think I was told
one time he got from two and a half to ten dollars an acre for the land.
DL: Uh-huh. That would be about right.
(Daughter 1): But he...I mean he didn’t do it for the money that he was gonna get out of
it. He did it because he wanted the land to be preserved.
DL: Yeah. There is some clearings (unfolding map)...this is where it says “eighty acres;
James Burrill’s hammer land”. Apparently that means it’s a clearing. And there’s some
little bits of clearing here. And here’s another thing labeled a clearing. And it looks
like there must be some houses there; two buildings there anyway. These rectangles are
probably buildings. As far as you know, no one lived on it? They didn’t have any renters
or tenants on the land? Or did he?
EB: Oh yes he had...that’s what his monthly checks would come from.
(Daughter 1): No, he meant on this mountain land, Mother.
DL: This is on the apartments down in Washington. But I mean on this land here. On this
forty-two hundred acres of...forty-three hundred acres of land here. Did he have anyone
living...
EB: No, I don’t think so.
(Daughter 2): No one there had to be moved out.
DL: I see some things that look like buildings; like on here, white rectangles that look line they're buildings.
(Daughter 1): That may have been who he bought the land from.
DL: Yes..but as far as you know, nobody actually lived on this land when he owned it?
EB: Well now I...I can't say for sure, 'cuz...
DL: Maybe somebody like a caretaker or somebody to just look after it so somebody else wouldn't come in and start cutting trees on his land or...
EB: Yes, well, see I was...that was a long time ago.
DL: Oh boy...that's a long time ago.
(Daughter 1): You and Dad weren't married until what...the late 1915 or 1917 or '18, wasn't it?
EB: I wasn’t married to the Burrill family until...at that time. I was...
(Daughter 1): You met 'em when they came up to Mountain Lake Park, right?
EB: Yes. They had a...they had a hotel up...what was it? A hotel?
(Daughter 1): No, a summer resort or something.
EB: Yes, a hotel. And...
(Daughter 1): In Mountain Lake Park.
EB: A summer resort place.
(Daughter 1): That’s up in Garret County.
DL: The other voices we have here are...its Mary Ellen Burrill Jennings and you’re...Peachy...not Jennings? Peachy Burrill.
(Daughter 2): Peaches.
DL: And you’re the two daughters of Edna. I just want to get this on the tape in case somebody wants to listen and I'm not there to explain it.
EB: And I'm Edna Elizabeth Burrill.
DL: Your name is Edna Elizabeth Burrill.
EB: Yes.
DL: Okay. Well, tell me something more about James Burrill. What...
EB: I was a Browning before I was married.
DL: You were a Browning?
EB: Yes indeed.
DL: Where did you live then?
EB: Well back...my folks lived at the...they had a summer home at Mountain Lake Park and that was when I first met my husband. He wanted to know who I was and I was not concerned about anybody. And I told him I lived up on the...in that pretty home up on the hill. And let me tell you something, it wasn’t too long before he was up there. (laughter)
DL: Well you must have made an impression on him. Well tell me about James Burrill. What...how tall was he, say? Was he a tall man?
EB: Who?
EB: No, Uncle Jim was not a tall man. He was just medium height.
DL: Medium weight too? About average?
EB: Yes and he had a heart of gold. He did.
DL: If you do have a picture, I’d kind of like to look at him. What color was his hair, do you think?
(Daughter 1): Dark.
DL: Dark hair. Black or brown?
EB: Uncle Jim?
DL: Uncle Jim, yes.
EB: Uncle Jim...well he was no spring chicken. He was...I imagine he was...he had a lot of business and a lot of this and that in the oven and that’s been how many years ago?
DL: Well more than fifty. Sixty, I guess.
EB: Yes, it’s been a long time ago. And I, oh I just worshipped Uncle Jim.
DL: A very, very kind man; he always helped people, supported all the public causes.
EB: Everything.
(Daughter 2): That’s Uncle Jim (showing picture) and this is...
DL: This is Ellen? (affirmation) He looks like a good, kind man that’s interested in many things.
(Daughter 1): This is when my dad was pinned. That’s Uncle Jim and Ellen. And this is a Mr. Stead from Baltimore who was a nephew of theirs. See they took my dad when he was ten months old...ten months old and raised him. And they raised thirteen other children that
were not theirs. They didn’t have any of their own. Through the years, different places they lived.

DL: He looks kind of…well I was about to say I could tell he was British but really I couldn’t. But he sure looks like a nice, wonderful man.

(Daughter 2): I thought maybe there’d be something on here about his age but there isn’t.

DL: Well you said in the...that he was seventy-eight in 1928 when he died. You were quoting an obituary.

(Daughter 1): Where’s that obituary? In here?

(Daughter 2): Upstairs, I think.

EB: Oh I just worshipped him.

DL: I’m causing you girls a lot of trouble.

(Daughters): No, that’s all right.

DL: Running around but I would like to get some of the main facts about him and the obituary would probably be an excellent place to get the principal facts.

(Daughter 1): See I didn’t know him very well because I was only three and a half when he died. But I do remember him.

DL: But the personality and the type of things he did...what did he like to do for recreation? What...did he play games, like golf?

(Daughter 1): He played solitaire a lot.

EB: He played cards a lot.

DL: He had his own thoughts and he didn’t always speak them out. I mean people who play solitaire...

(Daughter 1): I think some of the people...older ones...some of them used to get together and play cards.

DL: Oh, uh-huh. Did they play for stakes or money?

(Daughter 1): I don’t know what they played for but I would imagine it was...

DL: Poker?

(Daughter 2): I imagine they played from something a little bit worthwhile.

DL: I bet they did. It makes it more fun. (laughter)

(Daughter 1): He played with Mr. Strickland...wasn’t it a Mr. Strickland from Shenandoah who used to play.

EB: Yes and he told me. He said well...it’s something about he could just walk out and just leave his hat or something like that he got the store. (laughter)

DL: I wonder if he ever played billiards. A lot of these people, gentlemen from England, played billiards.

(Daughter 1): Billiards or darts too but I don’t know that he did either.

EB: But Uncle Jim Burrill was a wonderful person.

(Daughter 1): But I don’t think so. Well I don’t know. I think he used his mind more for other things. He just got...you know, from different things.

DL: And with these various businesses he would have plenty to think of, plan about, thinking about all these various businesses and properties.

(Daughter 1): When they lived in Newport News, they used to get up early in the morning and get newspapers and go out on the boat, go out on the little boat to all the big boats, and sell these papers. They didn’t know he was doing this ‘cuz Aunt Ellen used to tell me about it.

EB: Uncle Jim Burrill was a rich man.

(Daughter 1): They’d get up and go sell these papers to make some spending money.

EB: Yes indeed, he was a rich man. He just didn’t have...

(Daughter 2): Didn’t they have...didn’t they raise sheep at one time?

EB: I don’t know about that.

DL: Well they didn’t have any sheep or cattle here though, I guess, here on this land?

(Daughter 2): No.

DL: I should imagine he probably did sell some of the timber. I would think he would.

(Daughter 1): Oh I would almost think so too but I don’t really know.

DL: Saying it’s a farm...he really didn’t raise crops though, what you usually do on a farm, but he called it a farm. There were, as I say, some clearings on there and I guess we just don’t know what he did with the clearings. But probably just let them be. But he wouldn’t have raised any himself.

(Daughter 1): But, you know, some of these things they put in the News and Courier might give you an inklein’. Once and a while they do mention his name in there about...didn’t they have...did they have a drug store in Luray at one time?

EB: They had interest in it.
(Daughter 1): He was associated with the drug store. But was it Reed’s? Who were Reed’s?

(pause) The name Reed?

EB: I don’t... I don’t know about that. McKay’s.

DL: Well, McKay certainly had a drug store here from way back.

EB: Yes. I think they had a dentist in there. I’m not sure.

(Daughter 1): Were he and Mr. McKim good friends?

EB: Yeah. But that was later. They were not... they were younger than Uncle Jim.

DL: Well that’s a different drug store. You’re shifting from ‘McKay’ to ‘McKim’. McKim and Huffman. McKim was up there first I guess before Huffman but he took on Huffman as a partner later but... maybe they were a couple of Scotsmen. McKim and McKay sound like Scots.

(laughter) I think McKay really was. McKay, I think, must have come from the McKays that got land very early up near Front Royal. There were McKays up there that had, oh several thousand acres near Front Royal way back in 1730, I think. (talking over one another)

EB: Well Uncle Jim Burrill had the land, all right.

(Daughter 2): Yes, he had the land.

DL: Did he fish or hunt?

EB: No.

DL: Didn’t fish or hunt.

EB: He wasn’t of that...

(Daughter 1): He was very active in the Episcopal Church over here. It was up on the hill at that time.

DL: Yeah, very active in the Episcopal Church. I doubt the microphone could have heard you from clear in there.

EB: They didn’t have an Episcopal Church here until Uncle Jim Burrill gave them the money to start it.

DL: Oh, now there’s an interesting thing. This... this church here was built after he gave them some money to start the Episcopal Church here?

EB: Yes indeed. Absolutely.

DL: They have a nice church here and a rather large parsonage too, where the...

EB: Well now I don’t know about the parsonage when that was...

(Daughter 1): The parsonage was built in the ** (faintly in background)

EB: I don’t think that was... at the time. I don’t think that was complete. But the church was there. And he gave the funds for whatever was necessary for the church. And I couldn’t tell you the amount, ‘cuz I don’t know. But whatever they needed for that Episcopal Church in Luray, Uncle Jim Burrill was the one provided it.

DL: (talking to daughters) Well don’t mind... do much. We can... we probably got enough about him.

EB: Yes, I tell you I just worshipped Uncle Jim.

DL: He was probably born about 1850 and born in Leeds, England; that’s what the indications are. His wife, Ellen, was also born over there, I guess. He sent for her later after he’d established himself here.

EB: And Uncle Jim was not a man to show off. He didn’t want any show. That’s just what he was.

DL: He didn’t a chauffeur in uniform to drive his car?

EB: Oh, no indeed! (laughter) If he wanted to go anyplace, anytime, he’d say “Edna, are you going to be busy today?” I’d say “no, indeed, Uncle Jim. Where do you want to go?” And I would take him anyplace he wanted to go. (thumping table for emphasis)

DL: He didn’t like to drive himself? Or he didn’t really know how?

EB: He didn’t drive.

DL: Never did drive?

EB: Never did. And I used to have a... I wanted to be in the races one time.

DL: You were really a driver.

EB: Yes, indeed. I... I wanted to be out there. And I knew how to drive. Oh yes. But my mother said no and I never had that to go on. You’ll never run in the races.

DL: Well race-car drivers often die young, you know.

EB: Yes, yes they have wrecks.

DL: They sure do. They just tangle up together on the... like that Indianapolis race track. But it would be fun.

EB: Yes and... my folks were well-to-do too and they didn’t have to do that for a living. And...

DL: Tell me again, what was your maiden name?

EB: Browning.
DL: Browning, yeah. I think it’s probably on the tape already but I’d forgotten it myself.
EB: Edna Elizabeth Browning.
DL: And your husband’s name was…what?
EB: George.
DL: George Burrill.
EB: George William Burrill.
EB: And I’ve been a widow for a good many years.
DL: Well the men often don’t last as long as the women. I think about that sometimes.
EB: You don’t do anything with the birth and you don’t do anything with the death. You take things just like they come.
DL: Well I think we have a lot of nice information here. (to the daughters) If you can find that, that’ll be fine but otherwise we probably better…better stop about now. We have here a paper from…of James Burrill’s real estate dealings in…in relation to the Valley Land and Improvement Company. This paper seems to be dated at the top on November 30, 1906 but it lists a lot of real estate transactions, deed book number twenty-nine, page seventy-three, and so on. (phone ringing in background)
EB: In Washington?
DL: No, this is in Luray.
EB: Was it?
EL: Various other deed books of land right here in Page County. There’s one Charles M. Brown, special commissioner to C.T. Holtsman, James Burrill, and William M. Rosser, deed dated August 28th, 1894. And he was…he was here. Here’s another one in 1894 where…where he was in a real estate transaction. Another one here in 1896. Apparently the Valley Land and Improvement Company was making a real estate subdivision, it looks like, and starting a new subdivision.
EB: Well he had those apartments in Washington DC.
DL: So he would…he would be a natural for that kind of business. And this is also signed by this Frederick T. Amis, the engineer and so forth. See it says on here “James Burrill alone owns ten lots. James Burrill, with Holtsman and Rosser, own twelve lots. James Burrill with Holtsman owns three lots.” So that was back in the 1890’s. At that time, whether he owned this place we don’t know. But he may have owned this forty-two hundred acre, or forty-four hundred acres, also at that time.
EB: Well I’m sure he did. And in Washington DC he owned apartment houses and that doesn’t speak of it on there.
DL: No, no. No, this is just a local thing here in Page County, Virginia. This wouldn’t have any records of his Washington dealing. But I bet I…maybe I ought to go to the courthouse and find out when he bought this land. It would be interesting. But I have most of what I really need. I have an account of the land before the park took it and that’s what I was really after, to find out where the park got all its land and who the park bought the land from. This…this much I’ve got here now. So that’s what I really needed.

[End audio file, 00:30:36 min.]

End of interview

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