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Interview with  
WILLIE V. JORDAN  
June 3, 1987

Place of Interview: Fort Worth, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: Willie V. Jordan  
(Signature)

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Oral History Collection

Willie Jordan

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello      Date of Interview: June 3, 1987

Place of Interview: Fort Worth, Texas

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Willie Jordan for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on June 3, 1987, in Fort Worth, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Jordan in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps, usually known as the CCC, during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Mr. Jordan, even though you've participated in our project before, I'll need to get some biographical information again because the people who read this interview may not have read the other one that we did concerning your prisoner-of-war experiences.

Therefore, once again, give me a brief biographical sketch of yourself. Tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education--things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Jordan: I was born on February 10, 1922, in a little town by the name of Newport in Jack County on Highway 51 about halfway between Jacksboro and Bowie. I worked on a farm. I was

raised and worked on a farm until I went into the service in 1940.

Marcello: What was the extent of your education?

Jordan: I finished the tenth grade and got a G.E.D.

Marcello: What was the occupation of your father?

Jordan: He was a sharecropper or farmer.

Marcello: Describe the nature of that farming operation during that period, let's say, prior to the coming of the Great Depression. What do you remember about that farm?

Jordan: I remember that it was hard work, and I always milked a bunch of cows. You had to get up early and work until late. We didn't own our own land. We'd moved quite often from one farm to another one.

We had a good life. We enjoyed each other. My father and my mother were very strict parents. We did attend church as we were growing up.

The main crops we grew back at this time were grain, cotton, corn, broom corn, and, of course, all kinds of vegetables in our garden.

We owned a hay baler, and we'd bale hay for the public. The way we got paid for it is that we'd bale hay on the shares, or we'd bale so much a bale or by the ton. There're two or three different ways we could do it. It took a five-man crew to run the baler and the rake. They were myself, two brothers, my dad, and we'd usually hire an outsider to help us.

We would work from the time you could see until dark. Then you'd load the hay on a wagon if you were getting hay as your share for baling, and then you'd take it to the barn that night; and the next morning you'd get up and stack it in the barn before sunup so you could take your wagon back to the field.

Marcello: How many members of the family were there?

Jordan: There were four boys living--one boy died in infancy--and I have one sister.

Marcello: So there were seven members of the family, then?

Jordan: Right.

Marcello: You mentioned that during this period your father never owned a farm, that he was usually a sharecropper. How would that sharecropping deal work?

Jordan: I don't remember exactly, but some part of it is that the owner would get one-third of some crops and one-quarter of other crops. For our big money crops--things that you sold--he'd probably get more than one-third of it.

Marcello: Could the owner of the land usually determine what money crops were to be grown? Is that the way it usually worked out?

Jordan: No. Well, of course, when they were making the agreement--I guess when my father had known they were making the agreement--they might've had an agreement then of what they would grow. Usually, they just left it up to the farmer.

Marcello: You mentioned this hay baler a moment ago. Did your father

have any other kind of machinery with which to operate the farm?

Jordan: Well, of course, he had all kinds of plows and cultivating equipment, a harrow, hay rakes, mowers, wagons, and all different equipment. Of course, about the only thing he didn't have was a thresher. Usually, someone owned a thresher you could use. He'd let you use this thresher.

Marcello: What did you find to be the hardest, and perhaps the most distasteful, kind of work you do on the farm?

Jordan: Well, I worked best--they told me when I was a kid growing up--as a cotton picker. But, of course, that was back-breaking work. I suppose working at the thresher...I worked at a cotton gin, too. Both of them was hard work--hot work--and, of course, they had chaff and dust. I would say working at a gin or with a thresher was the hardest work on the farm.

Marcello: That was tougher than either picking or chopping cotton?

Jordan: Well, at least when picking cotton you could get down on your knees if the ground was soft or if it wasn't too hot.

Marcello: Generally speaking, what would be the size of these farms that your parents would cultivate?

Jordan: About a hundred to two hundred acres, I would say.

Marcello: Approximately how long would you stay at each farm?

Jordan: Oh, some of them we lived at two or three different times. I would say we probably lived on each farm, on the average, three years...two or three years.

Marcello: During that period was there ever very much cash income available, or were a lot of the transactions carried out in a barter-type system?

Jordan: Well, like I was saying, we lived in a country town, and we had well-established credit. My father was known as a very honest man. He would buy what feed he had to buy and what groceries we had to have from the beginning of the crop until the end of the crop. Then he would settle up at this time with the people he owed.

Marcello: Generally speaking, were most of these farming operations self-sufficient? By that I mean, did you grow most of the food that you consumed and so on as opposed to buying things at the store in town?

Jordan: Outside of coffee, sugar, and...of course, my father smoked, and he bought sacked tobacco from the store. He bought it by the carton. But outside of those things and maybe salt every once in a while, there were very few things that we didn't raise.

Marcello: Generally speaking, what was the economic condition of agriculture and farming in that area before the coming of the Great Depression? Let's assume we're talking about 1929. You were fairly young at that time.

Jordan: We had some good land around Newport, bottom land and different land, that would yield a good crop. Of course, more people were farming back then. This may not be so, but

it seemed like that when the Depression come along, well, maybe we had less rainfall in this period over a few years. You didn't make as good a crops as we had made before. Economically, a small farm...well, I'll put it this way. You couldn't get rich off of it.

Marcello: Okay, how did the coming of the Depression, then, affect life on the farm? Let's assume that the Depression started in 1929 and continued, of course, into the 1930s. How did it affect the operations on the farms where you lived?

Jordan: I was a pretty small child back then, but I can remember that when Roosevelt was in the office...I think that's in 1932. When was he elected?

Marcello: In 1932.

Jordan: He came out with a bill that you could sell your cattle to the government. They would pay so much, which was very little, for your cows, and the person that sold the cattle to the government could keep the meat for his own use. You couldn't sell it; you couldn't give it away. At least you wasn't supposed to. Well, of course, I believe you could sell the hides. Then along about this time, they came out... I can't remember the right letters for this. Was it PWA or WPA?

Marcello: Well, there was both a PWA and WPA.

Jordan: Well, when this came out, I remember my father working.

Marcello: I suspect it was probably the WPA--the Works Progress



Administration, which built farm-to-market roads, sidewalks, and things like that.

Jordan: Yes. My father drove an old dump truck on some of those projects, and he also was a timekeeper and a supervisor on some of these projects.

Marcello: Which again is perhaps an indication that he needed some extra income and that the Depression did affect life on the farm in terms of less income perhaps.

Jordan: Yes, sir. I can remember when we sold the cows to the government. Of course, we only had ten or twelve head of cows. Back then the kids would name the cows; they knew them all by name. When we killed them, I can remember that all of us kids just cried and cried and cried. But we knew my parents needed the income and the meat. I think Roosevelt was doing this to upgrade the livestock--to get rid of some of the old, scrawny cows and start out different. It really was a lifesaver in some cases.

Marcello: I do know that one of the pieces of legislation that was passed during that period was the so-called AAA, which is the Agricultural Adjustment Act. This particular piece of legislation paid farmers not to produce in order to reduce production. Do you know whether or not that particular piece of legislation would have affected the farm in any way?

Jordan: Yes, it did. When I was in high school, my schoolteacher got a job surveying the different farms that was in this

program. We would go out and measure...when you signed up, you could only have acres of different things. We would measure, and if they had more than the government allowed, they'd have to plow it under. They couldn't use any of that stuff.

Marcello: Do you know whether or not that affected a farm that your father was working?

Jordan: Yes, sir, it affected it, but, of course, we didn't own the land. The owner would benefit from this.

Marcello: I know that a lot of times what would happen is that when land was taken out of production, this would mean that sharecroppers or tenant farmers would be simply pushed off the land because they were no longer needed. I was wondering if anything like that happened?

Jordan: No. In our case it was just mainly that we had to cut down the acreage.

Marcello: But your father did not receive any of the benefits of the reduced acreage?

Jordan: No.

Marcello: Did the coming of the Depression affect your diet or the food supply that was available on the farm?

Jordan: Not really. I think that we ate about the same. Like I say, we had our own meat. We raised hogs; we had our own milk.

Marcello: Other than these few staples that you mentioned awhile ago,

this was really a self-sufficient operation, in other words.

Jordan: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Did the farm have electricity?

Jordan: No, sir.

Marcello: Which in essence meant that you would not have had a radio unless it were a battery-operated radio. Did you have one of these?

Jordan: Later on we got a radio that was run by the windmill charger.

Marcello: You say "later on." Do you know about when that was or how old you were when that occurred?

Jordan: I'd say it was in the mid-thirties.

Marcello: Do you recall whether or not that farm had electricity by the time you went in the service, which was 1940?

Jordan: Yes, sir. I don't know whether all farms were equipped with it, but I believe around 1937 or 1938 we would've had electricity.

Marcello: Did this come about because of REA--Rural Electrification Administration?

Jordan: Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

Marcello: So those New Deal programs did touch the farming operations there around Newport in one way or another.

Jordan: Yes.

Marcello: We've talked about your father working on the WPA; we've talked about the AAA; and then you got electricity with the coming of the Rural Electrification Administration.

Jordan: Yes.

Marcello: You mentioned that you completed the tenth grade. Why did you decide to drop out of school?

Jordan: I guess that when you're a teenager, you start dreaming of what you want to do, and my dream for my future was to be in the Army or some branch of the service. I just got burnt out on school, so I quit school and signed up for the CCC camp.

Marcello: You mentioned that you wanted to go into the Army or one of the branches of service. What happened that you did not go into one of the branches of the service but, rather, ended up in the CCC?

Jordan: Well, I met all the requirements of the Army, but I was under eighteen years old, and Mother and Father wouldn't sign the papers for me to enter the service. I found out that I could help the family if I joined the CCC, and they didn't have to sign the papers on that. I think I got paid \$30 a month from the CCC camp, and I believe \$20-something of that went home.

Marcello: How did you get into the CCC? Describe the process by which this took place.

Jordan: The best I can remember, I went to Wichita Falls and put my name down and...I don't know. It don't seem like they were recruiting like the service did. Anyway, I found out that they had openings for some men, so I went to Wichita Falls

and signed up.

Marcello: Did you have to take any kind of a physical examination or anything of that nature?

Jordan: I'm sure you had some kind of examination, but I can't remember exactly what.

Marcello: Did you in some way have to be certified, that is, did you have to prove that your family had need of additional income?

Jordan: I can't remember. I don't think so, but I may be wrong. I really don't remember.

Marcello: Do you recall how long this enlistment was to last?

Jordan: Six months.

Marcello: Then is it not true that you could actually reenlist if you so desired?

Jordan: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Okay, so you joined the CCC in Wichita Falls, and this was in what year?

Jordan: I believe it was in 1938.

Marcello: In 1938. What happened at that point? Let's assume that everything's official, and you're now in the CCC.

Jordan: They loaded us on a train, and we went to Elbert, Colorado. This is where I was stationed. It was a big, big camp with nice facilities. We were to do soil conservation improvements --planting trees and different things in rural areas of Colorado around Denver and Colorado Springs and Castle Rock.

Marcello: Let me ask you this. Is this the farthest away from home that

you'd ever been?

Jordan: Oh, yes, sir. Yes, sir. Outside of going to Wichita Falls every once in a while, I suppose it was the first time I'd been away from home.

Marcello: When was it that you received your uniforms and things of that nature? Do you recall whether you received that sort of thing before you left Wichita Falls?

Jordan: No, sir, I believe that we received them after we got at the camp.

Marcello: What kind of gear did the CCC issue?

Jordan: It was Army gear. In fact, the CCC's training and discipline was along the lines of the Army.

Marcello: What kind of gear did they issue? Can you be specific?

Jordan: Well, it was the old O.D. woolen uniform and dungarees or fatigues or something that you worked in.

Marcello: In other words, when you were actually working on one of these projects, you probably had on your fatigues.

Jordan: Yes.

Marcello: When you went into town, you had to wear your O.D. uniform.

Jordan: Right.

Marcello: Like you said, it was just like being in the military.

Jordan: Yes. Your beds were the same as the military ones, and you had to make them up each day. You had to retreat and reveille and all these things. It was similar or almost like being

in the Army. In fact, your training in the CCC camp would actually help you advance in the military.

Marcello: Okay, so you arrived at this camp in Elbert, Colorado, which obviously is out in the boondocks somewhere.

Jordan: Yes, a small town.

Marcello: Take me on a tour of this camp. First of all, describe what your living quarters were like.

Jordan: They were wooden barracks, two-story, if I remember right. Like I say, you had Army cots or beds just like you do in the service, and they were spaced close together. Of course, Colorado was cold, and you had them big ol' coal stoves to heat the building. You had double doors at the entrance and the exit of the building so that all the air wouldn't rush in at one time. They had a centrally-located bathroom or latrine. The barracks were sort of built on both sides of the mess hall, and the latrine was built in the sort of center of the camp. So it would be nearly equal distance from anyone in the building to the latrine.

Marcello: Were there more than one barracks in this camp?

Jordan: Oh, yes, sir.

Marcello: They were all more or less built around the central latrine and mess hall?

Jordan: Right. Then they had, of course, a motor pool facility. They had trucks that we rode to work on.

Marcello: Would there be some sort of administration building or

something of that nature in the camp?

Jordan: Well, it was similar to an orderly room in the Air Force or Army.

Marcello: We do know that these camps were actually operated or supervised by military personnel.

Jordan: Yes.

Marcello: You would probably have to estimate this, but about how many military personnel might there be at this camp in Elbert?

Jordan: Just about all your group leaders, sort of like in the service where your squad leaders were out of a few men... most of all your group leaders were military. Then you had a base commander, which is an officer, and it seems like we had another officer to take care of the paperwork or make sure that the paperwork and records and all that were kept straight.

Marcello: What kind of a relationship do you have between the CCC enrollees, who, of course, were civilians, and these military people?

Jordan: I would say a good relationship. I know that in my case this was true because my leader was a master sergeant. He'd had a lot of experience. He was also a good baseball player, and he was the manager of our baseball team. I got along fine with him because I like sports, and I did play on the base baseball team. In fact, all the military were...they



tried to teach you something about discipline in different things. They were not as strict as some places I've been in the Army, but it was certainly different from being home. You had to be in the barracks at a certain time, and you had to get up at a certain time. You were restricted in your daily activities.

Marcello: Let me just pursue this a little bit further, and this is a subject I think we need to talk about. When normally would reveille occur?

Jordan: I believe it was 6:00 in the morning.

Marcello: And what time were lights out?

Jordan: At 10:00.

Marcello: When could you leave the camp to go into town?

Jordan: Well, you didn't get many special passes during the week. On the weekend you could get a pass on Saturday or Sunday or maybe both.

Marcello: Suppose that one broke camp rules. How would that person be disciplined? For instance, suppose that two enrollees really got involved in a fight. How would that be handled in this situation?

Jordan: Probably a minor infraction such as you're talking about would mean confinement to the barracks without any leave. Of course, they had rules, like I said. Like in the Army, if it had been a more serious offense, they would have probably put you in confinement at an Army base. I don't think we

ever had that to happen.

Marcello: What would have happened if somebody would have been found stealing...had been guilty of theft?

Jordan: I believe he'd have been discharged from the CCC.

Marcello: Is it not true that they could get a dishonorable discharge?

Jordan: Yes, sir.

Marcello: In other words, when your tour was completed and you had no desire to reenlist, you were given an honorable discharge in effect.

Jordan: Right.

Marcello: What was the stigma at that time for having a dishonorable discharge, whether it was from the CCC or even from the military?

Jordan: I can't remember.

Marcello: It was nothing to be proud of, was it?

Jordan: No, it was nothing to be proud of, and you had restrictions. You didn't lose your citizenship or nothing like that.

Marcello: I suspect you could have trouble getting a job if an employer found out that you had a dishonorable discharge.

Jordan: Yes.

Marcello: Describe what the food was like here in Elbert, Colorado.

Jordan: The food was good. We had a variety of food—different things. I'm sure they had someone making the diet and making sure that everyone got the right vitamins and things that you needed. It was good food--real good.

- Marcello: Describe some of the things that you would get from the meal.
- Jordan: Well, of course, you'd get all kinds of vegetables. You'd get potatoes in some form or another. You'd get hamburgers; you'd get chicken. Of course, on Friday you'd get fish. At certain times you got steak or roast or something like that.
- Marcello: Was the quality and quantity of the food that you received here better than what you received at home?
- Jordan: Yes, except outside of your mother's touch. It didn't have the taste of your mother's food, but it was better for you, and you had more of it.
- Marcello: I do know that there have been some studies showing that the average person who came out of the CCC weighed...oh, I can't remember the exact number now, but he did weigh several pounds more than he had when he entered.
- Jordan: Yes.
- Marcello: Okay, take me on a typical work project that was carried out by the CCC. You mentioned that reveille was at 6:00.
- Jordan: Then we'd have breakfast, and I believe that we'd load onto the trucks at 8:00 and head out to wherever we was going. As I was saying awhile ago, we was doing soil conservation. We were planting trees or building terraces or things like this. Of course, we loaded our tools, and we'd be ready to go by 8:00. I don't remember the models of the trucks, but they were Reo Speedwagons. They'd have about twelve men

on each truck. They were equipped with governors. A lot of times, if you were going any distance from the base, you might not get to where you was going to work until nearly dinnertime. Then you'd work a little while and have lunch and work a little while in the afternoon, and then you'd go back home.

I remember that what I thought was peculiar about Colorado was the changes in weather. Let's say you went thirty miles a day to work. You might leave camp and the sun would be shining, and you might travel five miles and it might be snowing, and in five more miles it might be sleeting or hailing. Of course, Texas has bad weather, but Colorado, to me, had funny weather.

Anyway, like I say, we set out trees and built terraces, and just did soil conservation work. At a certain time, we'd leave camp, and we would be back into camp at 5:00. Then we'd go in and shower or bathe and dress, and then you'd go to mess hall at 6:00 in the afternoon.

Marcello: When you were out on one of these projects, you were no longer under military supervision?

Jordan: No, we had regular civilian foremen that went with us.

Marcello: Do you recall which government department was responsible for these projects that you were working on? Was it, perhaps, the Forest Service?

Jordan: No, I really don't know. I imagine it was, but I don't know.

- Marcello: As you look back on these projects, whether they involved planting of trees or building of terraces, what do you think about the quality of the work? In other words, do you believe that these things were necessary, or were they simply "make-work" projects?
- Jordan: No, sir, to me they turned out to be very, very useful, and they were necessary. I think it did a lot to conserve the land. I know some of the projects that was done by the WPA are still in existence and still being used. Now about this time, my father...I was telling you off the tape that the Newport school burned, and the WPA built a schoolhouse there in Newport out of native stone. The week after next, I'm going to the Jordan reunion up there at Newport, and it'll be in this schoolhouse. They don't have school in it. It's now a community building, but you could have school in it. It's in good condition. This was built back in the 1930s, and, of course, it's thirty-something years old.
- Marcello: As you look at some of that land where the trees were planted and terraces were built and so on, could you see the evidence of erosion and that sort of thing?
- Jordan: Yes, sir. It needed the type of work that we did.
- Marcello: What time of the year were you in the CCC?
- Jordan: I think I went in in the summer, and I got out in the winter. I went in in July and got out at the end of December.
- Marcello: Did you have any problems getting used to doing that kind of work?

Jordan: No.

Marcello: I assume this was probably because of your agricultural background.

Jordan: I was used to hard work and long hours. No, I didn't have any problems adjusting to it.

Marcello: One of the other things the CCC would do from time to time would be to fight forest fires. Did you have occasion to do that sort of thing?

Jordan: No, sir. No, sir, I didn't.

Marcello: When you came back into camp and the day's work was done and you had eaten dinner and all that sort of thing, what would you usually do with your spare time?

Jordan: Well...

Marcello: Let's say during the week, first of all.

Jordan: Well, like I say, I was interested in sports, and, of course, in the summer we had baseball practice. We usually had baseball practice on Saturdays if you wasn't out on a pass or something. You had a recreation hall on the base. You could play pool, cards, and different things. It was set up for recreation.

Marcello: With regard to the baseball team, who would be your opponents?

Jordan: Little small towns around in the area.

Marcello: And would you play most of your games on the weekends?

Jordan: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Did the CCC equip you with uniforms?

Jordan: Yes, sir. They had uniforms, but I don't remember what they were like. We had uniforms.

Marcello: I know a lot of these CCC camps had a small library. How about this one at Elbert?

Jordan: I couldn't say for sure. I don't remember using the library.

Marcello: I also know that in some cases there would be night classes for those who wanted to take them. Did you have any of those here at Elbert?

Jordan: I didn't participate. They did have them. They were available.

Marcello: What kind of subjects did they offer? Do you know?

Jordan: Math and arithmetic. I really don't know what else.

Marcello: About how large was this camp?

Jordan: It's been so long that I can't remember, but I know it covered quite an area. It had a big flagpole, and, like I said, we had our own garage for the trucks and other equipment. There was quite a few trucks. Of course, you have to have garages up in Colorado, you know, to keep your equipment out of the snow and all that.

Marcello: You mentioned this a moment ago, but let's get in on the record again because I have a couple questions relative to it. How much were you being paid for this?

Jordan: It was \$30 a month.

Marcello: How much of that \$30 did you actually see?

Jordan: I can't remember exactly, but I think my parents received

\$21 and I received \$9.

Marcello: Was that \$21 automatically sent home to your parents?

Jordan: Yes, sir. I never saw it, unless you could talk your parents into sending it back to you (chuckle).

Marcello: In your particular case, what did your folks do with that money?

Jordan: Well, like I say, what I did get back from them, which was not too much, I used to live on.

Marcello: So they would've had, then, some of the CCC money and some of the WPA money plus whatever income you would've had from the farm.

Jordan: Yes. In 1938 or 1939, at this time, my father was in bad health, and I don't believe he was farming at this time. Just what he got from me and what he got from the WPA was what they were living on. My father was kind of a horse trader. He swapped cows. He did a little trading. He made some money that way.

Marcello: What would you usually do with \$9 that you received?

Jordan: Well, you'd buy your toilet supplies--toothpaste, hair oil, or whatever you used. I didn't have much of a beard then so...but, of course, if you had any dry cleaning...we could keep our civilian clothes at that time. They would let you wear your civilian clothes, so you would need to get them cleaned from time to time.

Marcello: I'm assuming, then, that there was a canteen or a PX of some



sort on the base.

Jordan: Yes, sir.

Marcello: What could you get there other than the items that you talked about?

Jordan: Well, candy, soft drinks, writing material--the usual.

Marcello: Did you go to the town very often?

Jordan: No, not very often. In the six months, I went to Denver; I went to Castle Rock, which was not too far from Elbert; and I went to Colorado Springs.

Marcello: What would you usually do when you went into town?

Jordan: Just site see. Colorado's a nice place.

Marcello: Was this particular camp in Elbert all-white, or did they have Mexicans there and blacks, also? Was it strictly all-white?

Jordan: I would say it was all-white.

Marcello: Why did you not decide to stay in the CCC for another, let's say, six-month hitch?

Jordan: Well, my parents would write to me wanting me to go back to school, and I had made up my mind that I was going back. I did start back to school, but I still had the desire to be in the military service. So I quit shortly afterwards and joined the National Guard.

Marcello: Incidentally, did you ever get home at all during that six-month period when you were in the CCC?

Jordan: No, sir.

Marcello: As you look back upon that period of time that you spent in the CCC, suppose we had a depression again. Do you think the CCC would be a good thing or not?

Jordan: Yes, sir. I really do. I really think it'd help.

Marcello: I should've asked you this at the beginning of the interview, and I'll ask you now: What was the attitude at that time of you and your family toward President Roosevelt?

Jordan: Of course, I'm a Democrat, and my father was a Democrat. Of course, I wouldn't have known at the time, but I think now that Roosevelt is one of the best, if not the best, president that the United States has ever had. I think he did more for the people of the United States, especially the poor people, than any other president.

Marcello: Okay. Well, Mr. Jordan, I think that's a pretty good place to end this interview, and once again I want to thank you for giving me your comments relative to your experience in the CCC.

Jordan: It's been my pleasure. Thank you.