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Place of Interview: San Antonio, Texas

Interviewer: Richard W. Byrd

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University of North Texas Oral History Collection

George L. McColm

Interviewer: Richard W. Byrd March 18, 1995

Place of Interview: San Antonio, Texas

Mr. Byrd: This is Richard Byrd interviewing George McColm for the Admiral Nimitz Museum and the University of North Texas Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on March 18, 1995, in San Antonio, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. McColm in order to obtain his recollections of World War II in the Pacific Theater of Operations.

Before we commence, Mr. McColm, I need to get a little background information on you, like, where you were born and when, a little bit about your schooling before you became involved in the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Mr. McColm: I come from a long line of farmers. In 1910, my dad and mother were married. They went to Colby, Kansas, to manage some property that belonged to my uncle. They lived in a sod house, and that was their honeymoon cottage. As soon as they got all the bedbugs out of it, it was a pretty decent place to

live. In the winds and cold of western Kansas, a sod house isn't a bad place to live.

When I was born in 1911, they were in the midst of the first of the big dust storms in western Kansas. It was a tremendous blowout of the dust of western Kansas. It pretty much originated at that time, and Kansas became famous for its dust storms. What was happening was that a lot of abandoned farmland was just taking off and leaving [being blown away]. The surface was all leaving [being blown away]. When I was born, Mother had to keep a wet towel over my crib for the first six months. Even at that, I got dust pneumonia, and from that, I got a serious case of asthma. I didn't get over that until I took up distance running at about fifteen years of age. I started to become a distance runner, and I completely overcame the asthma.

So I went on, and in college I was on three conference championship track teams, which was sixty years ago. I was back to Kansas State University last week to a reunion of those conference championship track teams. They also had other Kansas State boys that had won in the Olympics and everything else. We had a big get-together. I ran against Glenn Cunningham and the other runners of that period. I loved to run against Cunningham because nobody ever considered me in it. There was always somebody else that was supposed to beat

Cunningham. I tried to stay as close behind as I could so that I'd have a good view of the race. There was no pressure on me because nothing was expected of me. Nothing really happened, except that I got a second or a third or a fourth place somewhere down the line in these races. I wasn't expected to beat Cunningham, and I didn't. But I was on three conference championship teams, and I got two beautiful purple "K" blankets. I had fun displaying some of those at the reunions, because I've kept them in perfect condition. They're nice souvenirs of that period.

Byrd: When were you running?

McColm: In 1934 and 1935. I got out of high school, as valedictorian of Emporia High School, in 1928. I started in 1924 and got out in 1928.

Byrd: And you finished at Kansas State when?

McColm: In 1935. Let me go back and tell you how I got into agriculture. I was a 4-H Club member the first year 4-H was called 4-H, in 1923.

Byrd: What was it called before that?

McColm: It was called Extension Youth Clubs. They had some junior clubs promoted by the Extension Service, but they were called Youth Clubs.

Byrd: That would be the U.S. Extension Service?

McColm: They were with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The story of 4-H was that they came up with the "Head, Heart,

Hand, and Health," and the four-leaf clover as the symbol, and it became a real sexy organization. From there, it went on to become what it is today.

In the early days, it was very competitive. In 1923, I had the grand champion gilt at the Kansas State Fair, a Chester White Gilt. In 1927, I was state crops champion. In 1929, Thomas Edison was still alive, and I got the Edison Medal as the Outstanding 4-H Club member in the state of Kansas.

In 1928, I was a junior delegate to the Republican National Convention. We nominated Herbert Hoover and went home real quick. In 1931, I was a Kansas delegate to the National 4-H Club Congress. We all went over and shook hands with Hoover and his wife. His wife was a very gracious person. He was a kind of a stuffed shirt, but he shook hands and visited with us a little bit. That was a great opportunity for young 4-H Club members, to be invited to a reception in the White House.

I stayed with agriculture all the way through. In 1928, I set out the first large-scale commercial irrigated vegetable growing project in eastern Kansas. I got out of high school in 1928 and was valedictorian of my high school class in Emporia, Kansas. In 1932, the weather got so dry that I couldn't grow vegetables, so I had to go back to college and complete my degree. I had gone one year at Emporia State [College] in 1928 and

1929. Then I completed my college work at Kansas State in 1935.

But in the meantime, due to my experience with the vegetable growing, I had found out that you couldn't just grow certain crops and ship them and expect them to be sold someplace else. You had to know what the market was and why you had a market and who you were competing with. So in 1928 or 1929, I tried to ship some peas to Colorado. I'd been shipping sweet potatoes to Colorado in hampers and selling them without any trouble. I shipped some peas out there that spring and didn't hear from them for a long time. Finally, when I heard from them, the express agent told me that I was lucky to get my peas sold without a dun for the express. He had managed to sell the peas, but he said, "You shipped peas to the greatest pea-growing area in the world." (laughter)

Byrd: That's market research for you.

McColm: Then I started an investigation to find out what there was about the climate that determined the growing season for crops. I went to Kansas City because they had the growing season records there. I started a weekend research project. Every weekend, while I was in college at Kansas State, you'd find me in the files of the Kansas City Packer, the produce paper up there, studying the actual reports on the production of crops. I was

comparing that with a mass data analysis study between the published weather data and the periodic development of crops. From that, I developed the coordinates for all the basic food crops and all the principal vegetable crops, so I can look at a weather record for any place in the world, and I can tell you what crops are suitable, when they are planted, when they are harvested, what the hazards are, how frequent the hazards are, and how serious they might be in case you wanted to invest some money in that project. That's the future of agriculture today, the transfer of crops from subsistence production to commercial production.

In order to get this commercial production to a competitive level with areas that are already producing, you have to determine what level of investment would be practical in that area. If the investment is greater than what is practical, then there is no way that you can figure on developing that area or spending money to develop that area for production of that crop. That's what I do when I go to foreign countries and help them develop commercial production of agricultural crops, because I have developed the coordinates whereby we can make that type of study. Those were all developed in the 1930s, and all developed before I got my college degree.

In 1934, I realized that what I was on to was a method of determining the geography of crops. I knew

that certain places produced good commercial crops, and other places had been producing commercial crops and no longer produced them. But the weather records have the answer to where you can produce these crops. Just to show you, in this paper [I prepared for the Admiral Nimitz Museum Symposium], what I was talking about, I selected the Kansas potato industry. At that time, Kansas was shipping trainloads of potatoes out of the Kaw Valley, which stretches from Topeka to Kansas City.

Byrd: They were shipping all these potatoes out.

McColm: They were shipping literally trainloads of potatoes during the 1920s, and they were still growing quite a few when I first started the study in the 1930s. I used that because I determined from my studies that the climate was not competitive with areas that could produce potatoes at that season. Sooner or later, they would have to go out of the potato business, primarily because of the Shafter Long Whites in California. The government started to put an awful lot of money into California for the development of irrigation. When they developed the irrigation around Shafter, California, they found out that they could grow potatoes at the same time as the Kaw Valley. Instead of having potatoes that you could smell two miles out of Chicago, they shipped them in refrigerated cars, and they came in as beautiful, nice, long, white, potatoes. Those potatoes were inevitably going to take over the market

for that season of the year. So I was able to predict that Kansas would go out of the potato business, and they went out of the potato business before World War II started.

In the meantime, Williams and Haney, who were the principal potato brokers down in Topeka, found out about this paper. There was some publicity about the fact that I had predicted they were going to go out of the potato business. They said it wasn't true at all. They had their place on the market, and there wasn't any question but what they would keep on in the potato business. They demanded that my paper not be put in the college library, because it wasn't true.

Byrd: Which library?

McColm: Kansas State College Library. But the professors at Kansas State were very happy with the research, and they voted me into every scientific organization and honors group that they had for seniors. Indeed, they voted me in as a junior on account of this. This was considered to be a scientific project.

Then I started getting national attention. Henry Wallace was a writer primarily. Of course, he was most famous not only as vice-president [of the United States], but also for developing Pioneer Seed and the hybrid seed corn industry of the world. Henry Wallace called me the "weather bookmaker" during that period.

Dr. Isaiah Bowman was the world's greatest geographer at that time. He pointed out that facts more valuable than all the gold in the Klondike lie buried in the Weather Bureau records and that it was up to scientists to pick them out and examine the weather records to develop these facts. Paul Appleby, E. A. Norton, and Hugh Bennett from the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture; along with Dr. Sarle, and Dr. Reichelderfer in the [United States] Weather Bureau all had praise for the work I was doing in that field. Of course, I was just a kid scientist at the time. To get recognition by people of that caliber was quite an honor for me.

I think one of those people remembered me when World War II started and the Army needed information in regards to Japan suddenly. I was offered a commission in the Navy for a special project. At the time I was offered that commission, I was in charge of the crops on the Japanese Relocation Farm in Topaz, Utah.

Byrd: Was that where they had the internees?

McColm: That's where we interned the Japanese. There's a lot of misunderstanding. We had a big program [at the Admiral Nimitz Museum Symposium] this morning about interning the Japanese. The truth is that most of those Japanese were perfectly happy to get out of California because the [domestic] terrorist levels in California had reached

almost epidemic proportions, to the point where no Japanese was safe in California, and they knew it. They were very anxious to improve their situation. The ones that came to Topaz were from the [San Francisco] Bay Area, and they didn't know anything about farming. They had only 200 people that had ever lived on a farm, out of the 8,000 that came over to Topaz.

Byrd: So that was out of the San Francisco area?

McColm: Yes, they were out of San Francisco and the Bay Area. They were great people. They were nice people and all. They had good businesses. They were terribly deprived. It wasn't the internment that was a problem. The problem was the way their property was handled. That was their primary concern. Saving their skins, they were happy about that. We did that. We put them behind barbed wire to protect them. They weren't behind barbed wire to keep them confined. It wasn't like the usual internment camp. This was a relocation camp. Anybody that wanted to leave could do so. We had them leaving for summer work, and then we had them also leaving for permanent work.

I helped recruit and helped locate jobs for many Japanese. In fact, two weeks after they moved to the center, my wife had a family going to Minneapolis to be sponsored by her family there. They all became very successful in Minneapolis. We had another group in Minneapolis that literally were the backbone of the

Chungking Food Company. Of course, that was a good Chinese name for it. I don't know what the background of that company is, but we had lots of Topaz Japanese [internees] go up there to work for Chungking Food. We had others go to Seabrook Farm in New Jersey. Vernon Ishasaka, one of my best ag [agriculture] men, went to the farm there. We had Bob Sakata, who went to eastern Colorado and became the state's leading onion grower. He was a very fine young man, fifteen years of age. I said to him one day, "Bob, your dad must have been an awful good truck gardener." "Oh, no," he said, "not so good. I just got him out of debt two years ago." It was Bob that was the brains in that Japanese family. Bob went to Brighton, Colorado, and now he owns 3,000 acres of onions. He was voted the Outstanding Young Farmer in the United States one time. We had quality people, and I got a chance to get acquainted with some very quality citizens of this country that happened to be in the Relocation Center.

The main thing I learned, that helped me later about the Japanese in Relocation Center, was that they loved to work with committees. Each field foreman had a committee, and they'd get together in the morning and decide what they'd do that day and why they needed to do it that day. They'd all come to a consensus pretty quick, much faster than we come to a consensus on things.

But they had patience to stay and work on developing a consensus on anything they wanted to do. That idea, working with committees, also coincided with what we'd been doing in Kansas on the PMA committees.

Byrd: On who now?

McColm: Production Marketing Administration. They were AAA [Agricultural Adjustment Act] program committees that we had in Kansas when I was a county agent in 1935. So I learned the committee system in Kansas and also in the relocation camp. That was the system I used when I finally got around to writing the Japanese Land Reform Law, because I knew the Japanese would work with it.

Byrd: They could fall right in with the committee system.

McColm: That would be the way they would want to develop the program. Anyway, I'm getting kind of disconnected on this whole thing. Two weeks before I got out of college, I didn't have to take any final exams that spring. I wasn't the valedictorian, but I had good enough grades. I was running on the track team and making nineteen track trips all over the United States with the track team, so I wasn't in position to make straight A's like my brother did. So I didn't worry about that.

Two weeks before I graduated, they let me out to go to Chautauqua County to get all the farmers off relief down there. That was a program the Republican administration in Kansas had figured out as a way to

help. It was called the Kansas Rural Rehabilitation Program. We were getting farmers off relief by consolidating their loans and making them a loan. The federal government was financing it, but we were carrying it on as a Kansas project. Each farmer's debts were scaled down as much as we could. We scaled down the farm debts and made him a loan. Then we made him a loan to buy any additional material that he might need--any equipment or any livestock or anything that he might need to have a sound economic unit. The concept of sound economic units in connection with farm loans is fundamental. We developed that system in Kansas, and later they adopted it for the whole country. When Wallace went to Russia during the war, they showed him the communes. Henry Wallace didn't buy it very much, but he said, "Well, that's a noble experiment." If you read Henry Wallace's literature on it, he said, "That's worthy of a trial. We'll see how it turns out." He didn't come home and approve communes, but he was impressed by the commune system. The idea of a commune is that you are able to consolidate a considerable acreage so that you can farm more efficiently, but you forget the human angle, that these farmers want to own their own land. That's the key to farming--to be able to own your own land. The communes removed that, so Russia's never been successful with it. Nobody's going to be successful with

it.

During the war, Russia took a lot of Japanese farm leaders to Russia and showed them these communes, just like they showed Henry Wallace the communes. The idea was that all they had to do was shoot the landlords, and they could form communes out of their farm associations in each village. Then they would farm on a scale that would be practical.

Well, when I got into position to help write the Japanese Land Reform Law, I rejected that whole concept entirely. One reason I knew that the Japanese would succeed on it was that every Japanese farmer, if he got to own his own land, would utilize all of his own labor, his own household labor. Every Japanese farm is just tilled like a flower garden. The more food they needed, the harder they worked on this place. They were very unhappy during the war and before the war because they were tenant farmers, and the landlords in most cases weren't even giving them half of what they earned from that farm. So it became a source of trouble for us after the war. I'm getting kind of disjointed on this whole thing, but that's the general background.

I'll tell you a story about the relocation center that indicates what I learned about Japanese there. One year--I believe it was in the fall of 1943--we had a freeze at Topaz on the 15th of September. We had at that

time a twenty-five-acre field of the most beautiful cantaloupes you ever saw. That freeze not only knocked the leaves off, but everything turned black, and there were a lot of frozen cantaloupes. Some were just starting to get ripe. The entire crop was a total loss. So I want to sympathize with our foreman. I said, "This looks like an awful shame to lose a crop of cantaloupes like this." He said, "No matter. I'll take care of them." Before noon, he had a procession of trucks coming out from the center. They gathered up all the boxes and crates that they could find. Two or three hundred Japanese-Americans gathered up seventy-five tons of cantaloupes. Some of them weren't any bigger than your fist. They brought them into the mess hall, and they made pickles out of all of them. So they had seventy-five tons of cantaloupes, and seventy-five tons of pickles resulted from it. You can imagine what would have happened anywhere else in the United States. That would have been a total loss.

Now, in Japan, with the way Japanese farmers handle things, nothing is a total loss. Nothing is ever allowed to be a loss. So I learned right there that all we had to do for Japanese farmers was to give them an opportunity to own their own land. With their own labor, they would become independent, and they would <u>never</u> be suitable material for Communist agitation.

One of our primary goals in this whole program for postwar Japan was to prevent a Communist takeover. When I was recruited for this, I was working at the relocation center. I got a call from Washington, from the Navy Department. They wanted to know if I would accept a commission, as a lieutenant (j.g.) [junior grade], for a special assignment. They didn't say what the special assignment was because they said it was top secret. But I got the papers in a few weeks, and I applied for the commission.

In no time at all, I was in Navy training. They first sent me down to Tucson, where we were in "bear down." All 1,200 of us were living on the gymnasium floor without any air conditioning. When I completed that basic training for the Navy, I was sent to Princeton, Navy School of Military Government.

I spent a miserable winter of 1944, up through January of 1945, at Princeton. I had to live on the campus, and my wife lived off-campus marooned by the ice, so that she couldn't drive around and pick up her groceries. She got a distinct hatred for the East from that. After the war, when they offered me a post at Cornell to head a new Department of Agricultural Applied Meteorology, she turned it down.

Byrd: She turned it down.

McColm: There was no way she was going to live in the East again

and put up with all that ice and snow and bad weather. So I didn't take that job.

What happened after I got the training at Princeton was that they sent me to the West Coast. That was CASA, Civil Affairs Staging Area. We had 900 officers, both Army and Navy, in training and waiting to serve as occupation officers for the forces, when we went into Japan. They were to be the occupation officers, and they were all in training at CASA. They called me aside and told me that I was the Chief of Agriculture of the training section of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Byrd: When we flipped the tape, you were getting ready for the occupation of Japan, and you were in training with 900 officers and men.

McColm: They had 900 officers there--and seventy-two of them were agricultural officers, to do agricultural work in Japan. I was in charge of their training program as chief of the training staff for the agricultural officers that were assigned to the government of Japan. I would not be studying Japanese. Supposedly, everybody was there ostensibly to study Japanese.

But I would not be studying Japanese because I was also a member of the top secret staff that they had literally hidden in the Presidio at Monterrey [California]. We were working on both the plans for the

invasion and for the occupation of Japan as a special staff, the staff officers of the Joint Army/Navy Chief of Staff Group. They never told me anything about who our bosses were in Washington or anything else, but I knew my commanding officer there. He was Colonel William A. Hartman, and he was a Joint Chiefs of Staff economics officer. He was making plans for the occupation of Japan. Before the war, he had been an agricultural economics professor at the University of Wisconsin. In that capacity, he had written the Wisconsin zoning laws. He had been in the European war, and he had been a military governor in Italy. He was transferred there with some experience in military government. He was chief of the economics staff, and he was the only one that I was in consultation with at any time in connection with the development of the Japanese Land Reform Program.

When I first got there, no mention was made of land reform. The first thing they told me was, "We've got to select a date and a location for the first invasion of Japan Proper. For our first invasion, we haven't selected a location or a date yet. You're to help us on that. The first thing we want to know is all the information in regard to the maturity dates of rice on all the coastal areas of Japan. It's been determined that we will not invade Japan with any crops in the field. We have three reasons for that. The first is a

military reason. Rice is the principle crop, and we don't want to bog down 1,400 tanks in rice paddies. The second thing is that a lot of the rice areas also involve high water table areas. High water table areas are especially dangerous to tanks."

When I started the first studies [and I helped bring this up] in regard to where we were going to invade Japan, everybody thought we were going to invade the Kanto Plain or somewhere around Tokyo. That was not a satisfactory area, from an agricultural standpoint, for two reasons. One was that the water was kept on fields almost the year round in that area, and we didn't have any chance to invade in a dry situation. They had irrigation water available to use. They could have turned that in any time, to hurt us in an invasion. So I rejected the whole Kanto plain, the Tokyo area, pretty quickly.

I liked the looks of Kyushu because they had a fairly narrow coastal area there. I gave them the 30th of October for invading because that was the time that they would be plowing the ground for the barley. In other words, they grow a crop of rice, and then the rains stop about the first part of October in that area. Then they generally have the ground dry enough to plow for the barley around the 1st of November. Then they grow a barley crop during the winter. Then in the spring, they

go back to the rice.

Byrd: So it would be drier.

McColm: It would be dry, and we would be invading before they got the barley planted, if we came in about the 1st of November. I never found out, at any time whether, any of my information in regard to it had anything to do with the selection of the date or the location. This is a common thing in intelligence work. This is the thing that President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt used so effectively, and later [President Harry S.] Truman used very effectively, and that is why Roosevelt had committees set up to do all kinds of research work in regard to postwar Japan. It is amazing, the amount of people he found that could give him information in regard to Japan. He had one committee after another, not only just the old hands that people referred to. He had people all over. He even had Dr. Isaiah Bowman working on the geography end of it. He had Henry Wallace working on it in connection with world agriculture. He had Paul Appleby over in the Department of Agriculture, and he had Dr. Sarle in the Weather Bureau.

They brought in a large body of information that they'd gathered about Japan. If Roosevelt had to make a decision where he could use some of that, he would call in somebody who had been studying that. He'd make a decision and write a top secret order on it, even orders

back to the Chiefs of Staff. He would write orders back on it, but he would never stop this guy that was studying it. He went right on on the same track, gathering more information. He never was told that his information had anything to do with some top secret decision. He might not even have clearance for top secret.

Byrd: But he generated the information.

McColm: But he was providing information. Truman kept the same system going, and it almost got to be ridiculous when Truman did it, because he had committees working on things that had been decided in May, as late as October (laughter). He had committees all over the country working on things for him.

When Truman found out about secrecy, he found out about it the hard way. When he got to be President, he inherited the whole staff, the whole cabinet, from Roosevelt. The very first week, here came these boys: "Mr. President, we've got to make a decision this week on this." Truman would just say, "What?" He had no idea what they were talking about because he hadn't been briefed on anything by Roosevelt. Then two weeks later came [Henry L.] Stimson, and he was Secretary of War. Stimson came in and said, "Mr. President, I guess you know about the atomic bomb." Truman had never heard about the atomic bomb. He was president for two weeks before he even found out we were developing an atomic

bomb. When he found out that secrecy was such a great thing, he realized that secrecy was the greatest thing for a politician since fried chicken. So he made <u>everything</u> secret.

We had a joke at CASA. We realized that we weren't the only people that were working on this. They might have a dozen other committees doing the same thing we were doing. So we had a joke at CASA about the Japanese spy. This spy was sent to Washington right after Pearl Harbor, and he was supposed to report back to the Emperor. He didn't report, and he didn't report, and finally the Emperor called him in. He said, "How come you no report?" The spy said, "Americans so very clever. Always do same thing three other places." (laughter) "No use bomb most honorable Washington."

I'll tell you an interesting story about what was going in Washington at the same time it was going on in our office. When I got this book, I can show you that in my briefcase here. What'd I do with that?

Byrd: It's behind you.

McColm: Here was the manual that was given to me when I first got to CASA. They said, "That's the manual that you can use to teach the agricultural officers. Each one of the agricultural officers has to read this manual. We haven't got very many, but you spread them around and make sure everybody reads that manual." This was one of

the Hildring manuals.

Byrd: The which manuals?

McColm: The Hildring manuals. They were called Hildring manuals because General Hildring was Roosevelt's fair-haired boy when it came to preparing for the military government of Japan. He started in the fall of 1943. There was a number of groups working on the information for postwar Japan. General Hildring was heading up an Army group. Joseph Grew [prewar Ambassador to Japan] had gotten repatriated and had come back from Japan. He had been ambassador in Japan. He headed up a group working in the State Department on all the information in regard to Japan. Out of all these people working on it in various places, came the policy decisions that determined what plans we were going to write.

So the first day we were handed this. They said, "This is going to be your manual to teach the agriculture of Japan. It will also be you guide to develop the changes that need to be made in agriculture in Japan." Now I have this copy. Everywhere I've gone, to seminars for colleges and everywhere else, they want a copy of this. The Truman Library wanted a copy, and they copied it. I've sold a copy to the MacArthur Library. I've finally had to make up copies for everybody. It cost me fifteen dollars apiece. I've been sending them to anybody that wanted a copy.

Byrd: I see that it's restricted--at the time, anyway.

McColm: I've got a release code number on that.

Byrd: We'll finish this in the morning.

[Interview interrupted and abruptly ended by a member of the Admiral Nimitz Museum staff].