

Interview with Russell H. Amerman
Past Superintendent of Schools
212 West Street
Northville, MI 48167
Tuesday, July 19, 1988

NOTE: Questions (Q) have been edited; Answers of Mr. Amerman (A) are exact as possible;
.... Indicates audible portion.

A – I'm Russell Amerman, Superintendent of Schools in Northville.

Q – Would you tell us when you came here, Mr. Amerman, and what it was like?

A – I came here in the Fall of 1927 – there weren't any paved streets and they had just discarded the electric trolleys.

Q – What schools did we have in town then?

A – As one, we had the old high school on Main Street, back of that was the grade school that burned in 1936; then we built the one over on Main Street.

Q – So we had the grade school facing Cady Street.

A – That was facing the old West Street.

Q – Were you a teacher, in which school were you teaching?

A – I started out as high school principal, served in that capacity for six years. The Superintendent was Thad Knapp, he died suddenly in April, 1933. The School Board let me take his place.

An interesting sidelight, he came to me on Thursday afternoon, the Superintendent – said we're in a mess financially, out of money, got to have a Board meeting Friday, I mean Monday, and tell the faculty what's up. Do you know any reason why we shouldn't hold a meeting?

I said, "No, that's all right with me."

He went home and died that night, and I had to call the meeting Monday, take over.

Q – So when you took it over, the finances were in a mess?

A – Oh yes, we had to issue script to the teachers. I didn't know how to do it. I went to the Superintendent in Plymouth, a good friend of mine. He said he didn't know anything about it either. "We'll have to work it out together." So we did.

Q – Who was the Plymouth Superintendent that helped you?

A – George Smith.

Q – So they had issued scrip to teachers?

A – No, they had to, he says let's work it out together. We did.

Q – How long did that situation last, do you think?

A – About a year, and then people began to pay their back taxes.

Q – They hadn't paid their taxes?

A – They gave them a ten-year moratorium, pay their taxes as they could.

Q – Why had things been so bad here in town?

A – The beginning of the Depression, the banks closed. I put my paycheck in at the end of the school years and when I was ready to draw it, I heard that the bank was closed. There were two of them, one closed before the other one did – mine was in the bank that closed. I had nothing to live on that summer. I got in touch with my insurance company and borrowed enough to get by on.

Q – So you borrowed on your insurance to get through the summer. The school was able to open in the Fall?

A – On a shoestring – cut everybody's salary 27%, got the scrip.

Q – Who would accept the scrip?

A – Here in town, Ed Bogart ran the E & B Grocery (now Genitti's, 108 E. Main Street); Bob Willoughby of Plymouth, the same way, he'd take it if we'd buy shoes, and we'd need shoes. Those were hard times.

Q – How long did that last? Do you remember? A year?

A – About a year. Then it began to come in, and we could begin to retire the scrip. As they would pay the taxes, we'd end scrip.

Q – Just plain the mechanics – how did you get scrip? Did you have somebody print it?

A – I think I got the help of an attorney to word it, so it'd be legal. I think the Northville Record printed it, if I'm not mistaken.

Q – So the attorney advised the Record on how to print it. Because you're a good money man, did you know how much scrip to print?

A – We had to guess at it.

Q – You'd print a thousand dollars at a time?

A – I don't know whether we had more than one printing or not. I had a lot of it – quite a bit to destroy..

Q – After that calamity year (what a heck of a way to start, huh?) – how did things go after that?

A – Slowly.

Q – Oh, it didn't pick up fast?

A – It was bad until the war (WWII) came on, everything turned again.

Q – So you had seven years of coping with no money.

A – In the meantime, we had the building burn, in 1936 the old grade school that faced West Street, burned in January. We placed those kids in different buildings around town. American Legion loaned us their building. The bank that had closed, they loaned us the first floor of their building (Lapham State Bank, northeast corner of Main and Center Streets). Where Harry Vellum is, that belonged to Ray Richardson and he loaned that to us. We had to put partitions down through the middle, put two classrooms in there. A house on Main Street, where the Recreation Building is now. And the Boy Scouts had a building where the drive-in bank is now, that nice little brick building (northwest corner Dunlap and Hutton), used to be the kindergarten. And one woman was trying to muster up the people in the district about the school system, better do something about it.

Q – In the middle of all this, she complained?

A – A man, he sent me a copy of the letter. I invited her to come and see me, we'd talk this over. She couldn't understand why we couldn't have a school as good as Detroit. But she got in a fight with her neighbor and moved away, so that was that.

Q – She wouldn't have been happy anywhere. What building was built to replace this grade school then?

A - The grade school on Main Street which opened in 1936. It was a prize winning building. I'll tell you how we got that building. We got \$30,000 from that building that burned, WPA put in \$40,000, we passed a bond issue for \$27,000. Thirty-some people voted for the bond issue, most of them teachers.

No cheap building - \$97,000. Had \$100,000 to work on. When we got through, we had \$5,000 left over. And I got in touch with the WPA to (return) that extra money. They said "Landscape the building, since you did so well, with coming through, with something left over."

Q – So the WPA would also give money to places, did you use WPA workers on the job?

A – Yes, lot of them. The contractor did all right by us.

Q – What buildings did we have next?

A – About five years later, we built an addition to that building on the back. Then about 1950, we built the first section of the Amerman School.

Q – How did you feel about it being named for you?

A – I fainted. I was on the committee to set up the name for it. They announced at a PTA meeting, “We’re going to give the name for the new school tonight.” I said, “How can you do that, you never had a meeting.” They smiled a little bit. They announced it at a PTA meeting in Main Street School.

The first part of Amerman School opened in 1950-55 (1953 by records) and the grade school children were split between Amerman and Main Street Schools. Music, art and gym teachers shuttled between the two buildings, shared time.

Q – What buildings came next?

A – Well,...buying property, bond issued, we planned for a new high school.

Q – How did you get that prime property?

A – I went up there looking around, it was all covered with cattails and so on, and I said to Eural Clark, who was on the School Board, “That’s the place for the new high school.” He went along with me and he said, “That’s it.” And we got ready to choose a site. They formed a committee, along with the architect, they reviewed five different places. When they got through, that was the place for the building. It was an old gravel pit, so it wasn’t worth much at that time.

Q – Who owned it?

A – I don’t know – first we bought the Amerman School site off’n; that property, ten acres, I think it was, then we bought the rest of it for the high school. Just as we were buying it, the county (Wayne) came to us and said, “We want to put a cut-off through there. Now, are you going to stop us?” I said, “No, you may have the land for so much an acre, put a bridge over to the north area so we can get to the athletic field and fence in the Amerman School on the highway.” They jumped at the offer, did everything they said they would. We thought they’d put a decent little hand bridge across there, but they built – I understand it cost them \$50,000 to build that bridge. That was around 1955 (1958 by records). And when the high school was almost built, that’s when the airplane came down in the backyard next to the Amerman School, just a few feet missing where the kids were loading the buses to go home.

Q – It tore all those trees down as it went through that little grove.

A – No, it was Main Street School. (There were two plane crashes, one near Main Street School (1959) and one on the high school grounds (1982).)

Q – How about Cooke School on Taft Road?

A – We discovered we needed two more schools, another elementary and a junior high. That's when we selected the sites for Cooke School, and the one on Eight Mile Road, the Moraine School. That was my last year on the job. I told the Board, I said, "I think you're going to throw dirt on these sites when a new man comes on." They said, "We're going to do it while you're here and we know what that is." I said, "You're only kidding me!" So I never really knew what For another three years. No decision was made, so age 65 came. So I didn't build those two schools.

Q – Was there anything in your time that was especially pleasing to you, that really made you happy or proud?

A - well, I have to back up – it was a bond issue we were after. Raising the money to build a building, to finance it. The Board of Education came up with the idea we'd ask for eight mils for five years. The PTA came in and said, "That isn't enough, if you'll vote ten mils for ten years, we'll see that it passes." That was a delightful day, I must say that. It was put on the ballot and it passed, so we got our new school and we had the funds to operate it, for the high school – all the necessary expenses. That ten years ran out the year I retired. I said to the Board "I don't have to have another bond issue." "Oh, yes you do, if you do it now, it'll pass."

Q – You served on some kind of financial group for schools, after you retired as Superintendent, didn't you?

A – Not for schools. I was chairman of the committee that built the Allen Terrace, and the parking deck – been on that committee since 1970, still on it. The parking deck is all paid off. It was a building authority. Allen Terrace preceded me. When they got ready to do it, then they tapped me to be on the committee to float the bond issue.

Q – That's the trouble with people trusting you.

A – Jack Hoffman was Secretary, Bob Freydl was Treasurer and I was Chairman. I'm still Chairman; we don't have anything to do. We have to stay in existence until the bond issue's paid off on Allen Terrace. It's our building until the city finishes paying for it. Now the committee has Elroy Ellison on it, and Bruce Turnbull. We have to meet once a year to see that the city's paying its bills. They are, so far, no problem. They keep raising the rent so they can meet the bills. Now they have a financial department, for some other things that wore out in 10 years time. Building some more to Allen Terrace is just talk, as far as I know.

Q – We were once talking about consolidation, when a bunch of one-room schools decided to close

A – In the fifties, we absorbed – I think it was eight, primary school districts (in surrounding political areas). We haven't asked a one of them to come in, they asked to be annexed. The (DeKay) school, west of Northville on Seven Mile Road. The building burned, they had to do something. Thayer was on Napier at Six Mile Road.

(Mrs.) A – Chapman School District (at Nine Mile and Taft).

A - Rosella Lee taught school there for awhile. There was another on Seven Mile near Haggerty (Hinman) and one near Meadowbrook Road (Yerkes) we split with Novi. We took the part that had Meadowbrook (Golf Course) and was in Wayne County, Novi took the part that was in Novi Township.

Baseline, there's an academy there now (William Allen Academy). Waterford School District at Six Mile and Bradner Road – eighteen acres in there and they came to us and said, "I'd like to sell that property." I think they paid \$25,000 an acre for it, bought the whole business. When we took over the Waterford School District..... said, "What's in it for us?"

We said, "Well you can help pay taxes in the school district and have a high school to send your kids to and if you ever need a big school out here, we'll build one for you, and look what they have in Waterford, there's awfully good schools out there. Meads Mill and Winchester – instead of one school, we built them two. That satisfied them.

The Waterford District went east to Haggerty Road, and south to Five Mile, part of that was in the Plymouth School District. The part near Five Mile didn't want to come to Northville; they had been sending their high school kids to Plymouth. Needless to say, we worked that out. "If you'll vote to join Northville District, we'll let Plymouth District have what they want."

So the Waterford District was split – small section went to Plymouth, the rest came to Northville.

Q – Did any of the teachers come to Northville?

A – One came, she actually taught in the old school building, but left at the end of the year. K Can't think of any others that came our way.

Q – Did you have any other characters to deal with?

A – There was a man whose kids went to high school with us, and he came in and he wanted to dictate how we operate the program. He and I had quite a few rounds. I always won out. Then he told a man I know, "Amerman and I are very close friends, we've been buddies for years."

Q – Amerman School celebrates Amerman Day each spring, the kids are so thrilled to see you and Mrs. Amerman!

A – They had a very beautiful one this year. The teachers and the PTA – they had the regular ice cream social.

Q – What date did the Union School burn?

A – 1916. It was a public school, tax-supported. The building that I told you about first (burned in 1936), that was built as a high school. Then the next building, where the Union School was, was an elementary school. When they did build a new high school, they turned the old high school over to grade school purposes. When our grade school burned, some of the people thought we ought to build a new high school and use the present high school for a grade school. I said, "Let's do it right for once and build a building that's built for elementary school kids!"

Why do they always have to be second-best?" Our School Board thought that that was a good idea.

Q – Main Street was an award-winning school, what was your idea of a grade school?

A – They said that building (Main Street) is obsolete. I said, "I must be too, 'cause I helped build it." Of course, they have different libraries and facilities – we couldn't afford it in those days.

We owned that property where they built the building before I got here; took out two or three houses, I don't know why – so we'd build the grade school there, They had no play yard to speak of. Had five hundred kids in that building once... When they built the Amerman School, they decided that could be a building for walkers. I'm quite proud of many things that did happen over the years.

Q – You could plan and forecast so well, you could look ahead.

A – It took a lot of work to do it. School censuses we took in those days- house to house, people – (we paid them), and they'd ask what age children were there. They don't take the census like that anymore. I don't know how they manage it now.

You know the building that burned, the grade school, they had spent a year with the WPA helping renovate it, rewired it, built a new chimney for it, and fire escapes, this was a two-story building all –wood structure. In January (1936) the building burned down, but before that, in the Fall, I went over to the building during recess and the teachers were there. I said, "Have you folks used this fire escape yet?" (chutes)

"No," they told me.

"Every teacher's supposed to use that fire escape to see how it'll work out for the kids."

May Babbitt spoke up to me, and she said, "Have you been down the fire escape?"

I said, "No, I'm over here to do that."

She said, "I'll go right now, if you will."

"Okay."

She said, "You go first."

I didn't know kids had been coasting down on was paper – they were slippery as they could get. Zing! And I could just see a white sheet following me. That teacher got in so quick, she came down. I landed on my back, rolled over, and she landed right on top of me. I thought those teachers would die laughing. I had a lot of fun with the staff over the years. I went back to work, she went home to change her clothes. She remembers it. She taught fourth grade.

(Mrs.) A – Dave (their son) was in her grade down at the time of the fire. Their class was housed in that building on Main Street. It was the Legion Building; it's the bedspread place or flower shop now (341 E. Main Street).

A – People were so good to us, to help us house those kids. Within a week after that building burned, we were back in business again.

The Legion house, Henry Ford had given it to them. Ford bought all that property, he owned everything, most of it anyway, up to Hutton. He might not have owned the corner building. He built the valve plant about that time. I think they said he built the building in 1936. That was the years we had our fire.

In Wisconsin as we left, they were celebrating their hundredth anniversary. When we moved to Northville in August 1927, they celebrated their hundredth anniversary. I told 'em we thought they were celebrating our arrival in town. That Centennial set-up that Sliger (Northville Record Jack Hoffman) intended to start in 1969, I got him out my copy to use in his next book seeing the way he needed to get hold of it. So foolishly I lent it to him and never saw it again. So if you can run that down and get your fingers on it, you can verify what I told you.

Jack was sick with his heart attack. We were very good friends, we worked together so many years. He moved to Indian River. I thought Bruce Turnbull told me one day, he'd seen a copy of my paper. Somebody has it here in Northville. I spent a lot of research on that, with access to the books in the school and so on.

Q – The write-up – is it typed, is it 8 ½ x 11 pages. How many pages?

A – I'm not sure. I didn't, say, sense it to the early years of Northville. It was the Depression years, the War years, and the building years. Did it after I retired..... I did the typing. Took a lot out of my brain, not much left now.

(Interviewer note – Diane Rockall, Archivist for the Northville Historical Society, located his six-page manuscript in Mill Race files and we were able to return it Wednesday, July 20, 1988. We had made copies for the Historical Society and the Public Library.)

Q – Did the War years affect the schools?

A – Averil Green and I were co-chairmen to sell bonds. She's since dead. We headed a group to sell bonds for the war effort. And we had super rationing – they put that on the schools too. We had to ration the sugar. We set two or three days for it. These days the people would pile in there, tell how much sugar they had on hand, so then we could ration sugar to them. We'd give them stamp books. Not gasoline rationing.

(Mrs.) A – Tell about the woman who came to the door, she'd forgotten to tell them that she had some sugar in the sugar bowl. And she wouldn't want her John to have to go to prison.

A – She said, "This is terrible, keep my husband out of jail!" I said, "Don't worry, we'll save him from the authorities." She was honest.

The Ford dealer had a hundred pounds of sugar on hand, he loved canning. So he didn't get any sugar from us. That was his bit – he was honest when he said he had it

Another thing for the reputation of Northville. We were one of the first schools to put in driver education (1946). It was mandated by the state legislature, supposed to do it. They paid the cost of driver ed, Ford Motor furnished the cars, did for years.

We had the first safety patrols in schools (1937). There were no crossing guards.

(Interviewed by C. Phelps Hines and Marian Hines for the Northville Public Library and Historical Society Oral History Project.)

Mr. Amerman died October 20, 1988