

JOHN & RUTH BURKMAN ORAL HISTORY – October 14, 1988

Q = Phelps Hines
Q2 = Mernie Hines
J = John Burkman
R = Ruth

J. My name is John Burkman and the date is October 14, 1988. You ask questions and I'll answer.

Q. You came from Houghton? What year did you leave Houghton and come down to this neck of the woods?

J. Well, I was still a youngster when my folks came down here and bought a farm out west of Birmingham and we grew up there. Went to school in Birmingham.

Q. What was the occasion where you met your wife in this area down here in Northville?

J. Yes, well I worked in Northville for Stinson Aircraft and lived there and met my wife at that time.

Q. Where was the Stinson Aircraft Plant here in Northville? Beck Road and Six Mile or somewhere out there?

J. No, no, right in town. Yeah, Main St. goes around the bend and it was right on the bend.

Q. I thought it was outside of town, but right here in town? And you told me you worked for Stinson and any comments you want to make about the product or Stinson Aircraft? I'd like to hear about that.

J. Well, back at that time aircraft was quite new, and anybody involved with an interest in aircraft was in the business that had a lot of intrigue.

Q. It was a bit precarious and you didn't know what was going on the next day. And the man, Stinson, who ran this, he was a local person or he moved here?

J. He moved here.

Q. To set up business. Any particular reason why he came to Northville to make planes?

J. No, not that I know of.

Q. I thought there was something in the way of business here that interested him. Well then you worked for Stinson in their plant here in town. What kind of life did you lead, what kind of social life was there in town at that time.

J. Well, course I wasn't married then, so I don't know too much about the social life.

Q. What was the occasion through the church that you met your wife?

J. Yeah I guess so.

Q. Um hum

Q2. Did Stinson sell airplanes to any interesting customers?

J. Well, yes, and most of 'em back then when they bought a plane or contracted for a plane, they would move right into Northville while that plane was being built.

Q. They parked right here while they built the airplane. I tell you. I spoke of Six Mile and Beck. I think there was an airfield out there. Did they test the planes there?

J. Six Mile and Beck... Yes, I think they did.

Q. Cause you can build them here in Northville, but you gotta get somewhere where you can fly them.

J. That's right.

Q. Well all those years at Stinson. How many years were you working with Stinson?

J. I can't tell you exactly, but I think it was in the neighborhood of six years.

Q. I see. And you left Stinson and went to work as a freelance accountant more or less, doing accounting for places in town, people like that. What were some of the companies you did accounting for in Northville.

J. The merchants, mostly.

Q. Storekeepers. Then you were here in the early days when Freydls and Laphams were in business, but the earlier generation. Were there any interesting things you can tell us about the merchants you can tell us about?

J. Well, not really. It was just small-town storekeepers and so forth. At that time Northville was quite a small town.

Q. At that time Henry Ford showed quite an interest in Northville, didn't he? And, did you have any occasion to have any contact with him or people from Ford Motor?

J. No

Q. He used to be around town a lot I guess. He came here to visit. About that time he got the new Ford plant started.

Q2. One of the things I was curious about John when was we first came to town 30 years ago wonderful old houses would disappear overnight. Then we heard about the definition of the historic district and we heard about the development of Mill Race, and we heard that you were involved in that.

J. Yes, yes I was. Very much.

Q2. How would you go about the historic district? What would you have to do?

J. Well, there wasn't much work done. It was pretty much preserving this historic district.

Q2. Who did you have to contact to get this sort of a legal definition made? So that the area was protected? Do you remember?

J. Well, there was a bunch of us who worked for Stinson Aircraft and we were the ones who promoted the historic concept of the village.

Q. What year did you get the historic district established?

J. Well, I can't tell you exactly. It was in the early 30s.

Q. Early 30s. Did you have to file an application for this with the federal government in some way?

J. No, no. It just incorporated the town.

Q. I see. Incorporated yourself here within Northville. How did it work to prevent houses from being messed around with?

J. That's why it was done, to keep...

Q. Keep from tearing down and changing them.

J. So we made it a little tough to get permission to tear one down.

Q. So you incorporated...filed papers of incorporation for the historic district of Northville. What determined the area covered by this?

J. Let's see. Where the older parts of town and the older houses more or less determined where the boundaries of this historic district would be.

Q. Mill Race, that land was provided by Ford. Ford gave the land to the city or something?

J. I think so.

Q. What was the first building put in Mill Race, Hunter House? I know I took pictures of them moving the Yerkes house down on Cady around the way. I took pictures along the way and have them at home. I know it was already established when they moved that house. Like the old New School Church was one of the early ones. I have made drawings of the one on Wing Street so I was familiar. I was wondering which was the first house?

J. I don't know.

Q. That's quite something to be proud of. A very very lovely arrangement. We've had company from out of town and showed them Mill Race. They were very impressed. A nice job. The Cady Inn.

J. It was done because so-called businessmen, they had no feeling for an old house.

Q. History.

J. They just wanted it out of the way, so they'd tear it down. We fought against that.

Q. I know one time I was talking to a businessman and I said it's too bad we have to tear down these old houses to build a parking lot for the track. He took exception to my complaining about the track being responsible for losing these houses. All I said was I hate to see these houses go, that's the main thing. Between Center and Wing, several houses in there were just taken down.

J. That's what we battled against. It had some effect.

Q. It worked.

Q2. Who worked with you John?

J. Gee, I can't even remember. I can't remember.

Q2. Fran Gazlay I think was one.

J. Yeah, Fran Gazlay was and oh, a woman's name, she owned a house out in the country. But she was very much against tearing down all the buildings in town.

Q. Were there any other instances you can remember as a young man before you were married and back in the old days of anything of interest in town that you can tell us about?

J. Well, Stinson Aircraft was the big deal, and to save that took some work. But other than that...

Q. Who were some of the people from Stinson Aircraft that worked with you on the historic district?

J. This was a long time ago...Your memory gets worse as you get older, you know.

Q. Yes, I know that from personal experience.

J. So I wouldn't dare start naming names.

PAUSE TO INTERVIEW RUTH BURKMAN

Q. Do you want to tell me your name?

R. My name is Ruth Yerkes Burkman.

Q. I know the ladies are not supposed to tell their age. We'd like to know when you were born?

R. 1905

Q. Where were you born? In Northville?

R. Yes, right here.

Q. Right in the present house, 535. You haven't moved around too much have you?

R. No, well during college days and after school I wasn't back home right away. I lived away from home for a while. But most of the time I was here.

Q. You spoke of college. Where did you go to school?

R. I went to school in Ann Arbor.

Q. U of M?

R. Yes.

Q. I see. What area did you specialize in?

R. I took a smidge of everything and my major was literary.

Q. Literature?

R. Yeah.

Q. Now you had several brothers, at least two that I know of. Ed, Was he your brother?

R. No he was a cousin.

Q. I want to get the relationship, and Don Yerkes was also your cousin?

R. No, he was my brother.

Q. Your brother. I knew Don and I knew Ed but I didn't know what the connection was. Then you met John back when you were a young lady here in town. He was working at Stinson Aircraft or something like that.

R. No, he was working for my father. My father had a mill right down here, and he worked for my father.

Q. Doing accounting work for him?

R. I can't remember.

Q. He spoke of doing freelance accounting work for various businesses in town.

R. I don't know if he was one of them.

Q. Is there anything about those early days in Northville that you want to tell us about? Like young ladies, wasn't there a Princess Club here in town?

R. I've never heard of it.

Q2. I'm curious, back behind the Marquis Theatre, there was some sort of hall wasn't there? It was an old skating rink or a hall?

R. Yes, it was a theatre.

Q2. Oh, there was a theatre in back of the Marquis, which probably wasn't a theatre.

R. No, I think it was the Marquis, the Marquis was the name of the theatre.

Q2. And there wasn't a building behind it facing Dunlap?

J. Where the parking lot is now.

Q. It seems like there was a social club of some kind back there. And they used to have parties.

R. I don't know about it.

Q2. The Yerkes family, when did they come here? Who came here, was it like your grandparents?

R. Well, let me see. I really don't know.

Q. Your father owned this house and lived here. Was he a farmer and owned land around here and farmed? As far as you know, were his parents living in Northville ahead of him?

R. Well this was the family farm and I think it was owned by my grandfather and then my father.

Q. What was the occasion? When did he come to Northville? What year?

R. No I don't know. I have the Yerkes Book which probably would tell that right away. Pappa? Could you find the Yerkes Book over there?

Q. I understand that there is a Yerkes house off the north side of the 275 freeway at just about 10 Mile. As you go north on 275 on the right-hand side, there is a big old Greek Revival two-story farmhouse, still sitting there. In fact they have been complaining with a banner on the back of it about not putting up a sound barrier against the 275 traffic. It's very noisy. And several years ago we attended a class at Mill Race by Jack Hoffman, and a woman came to it who lived in that house with some Yerkes connection. We were wondering what the connection is?

R. I have no idea.

R. What was I going to look up in this? (holding Yerkes Book)

J. I don't know.

Q. When your grandfather first came to Northville.

R. Here Pappa, you take it and look it up. It's heavy.

Q. When William Yerkes came here in 1884?

Q2. With his father, Joseph.

Q. In 1884?

J. Sept. 11, 1794.

Q. He was born then or came to Michigan.

Q2. He was born then, that was his birthday.

Q. That's not when he came to Michigan.

Q2. They came here in 1826, with his father Joseph.

J. William Yerkes was soon appointed territorial Justice of the Peace by General Cass which he held throughout many terms.

Q. How old is this house?

R. It was built in 1825, I think.

Q. About the time they came here. Moved here and built the house soon after he got here. An old, old house.

J. Reads from a book: Mr. Yerkes was a member of the Oakland County Pioneer Society. He married Nov. 5, 1817 Hester Dennis, born in New Jersey in 1799. Died at Novi, Michigan, 11 September 1881, daughter of Joseph Dennis by his wife, Sarah Miller. At the golden wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Yerkes, their son, Robert Yerkes, read the following poem composed by him.

Q. Seems to me, that the answers to our questions can be found in the book. And just get a lot of information from there this afternoon, instead of reading it right now.

J. The anniversary of the marriage of Mr. William Yerkes was celebrated by his own wedding at his residence Tuesday the 5th. Over 100 relatives and many acquaintances were present. Among those who offered their congratulations to the couple were Mr. Thomas Pinkerton, Mr. John Yerkes and Joseph Yerkes (Uncle Joe), Miss Nancy Yerkes, and Mrs. Utley who extended the same courtesy at their marriage in Romulus, New York.

Q2. Did you go to school here in town? You went to high school here in town though?

R. Yes

Q2. It's hard when buildings change, but the building that has the arch window, called Old Village School now, I think was the high school. Do you have any idea if that's the school you went to?

R. No, I don't. The school that I went to was later turned into the high school. I don't know anything about the one that you speak of.

Q. This cemetery that is called the Yerkes Cemetery, on Eight Mile Road, is that the old family burying ground? What of these people that are mentioned in the book here? Are those people buried in that cemetery as far as you know?

R. Some of them, I couldn't tell you which ones without looking them up. But, I think probably.

Q. It was called Yerkes Cemetery, and I figured it must be the burying place of many of the ancestors. Down on Cady Street is Oakwood. Oh Yeah.

Q2. Your father had a mill here?

R. Right next door.

Q2. Where the lumber company is now? The other side of the tracks.

R. It was this side of the tracks.

Q2. Oh, this side of the tracks? Ah, what happened to it? Did it burn?

R. No, let me see. Father was the one who changed it to a lumber company. There wasn't enough business from the other company, so he changed it to a lumber company.

J. And continued the milling business too.

Q. When you were in business, was it operating off the river? What was it, a feed mill, gristmill, what kind of a mill was it?

R. Well, it was a grist mill wasn't it Jack? Wouldn't it be a gristmill?

Q. Grinding wheat and corn and so forth? Where was the mill located?

R. It was right next door.

Q. Oh, right next door here? I thought it might be near the river.

R. No

Q2. What would they use for power, what would they use to make the mill turn?

Q. A coal boiler? Or electricity?

R. Electricity.

Q2. We were aware that electricity wasn't available everywhere. And we weren't sure when they started these mills what they were getting their power from.

Q. We wouldn't have to go back very far before you wouldn't have power. It wasn't too terribly long ago that power was established. Electricity.

Q2. Were there other mills in town at that time?

R. No, no.

Q2. Down by the bend on Main Street, there seemed to have been factories at different times.

J. Stinson Aircraft

Q2, Yeah,

J. And I worked for Stinson Aircraft when I first came to town.

Q2. Uh huh. Has the Presbyterian Church always been in that building as far as you know?

R. Uh, it was in a very small building.

Q. On the same site though?

R. Yes

Q2. Did they add some spaces to it?

Q. That would have been an essential gathering too. Lots of things went on there. The young people would gather there. I remember my own mother talking about the church was central, all the activities revolved around the church. Is there anything of interest about church affairs you could tell us about?

R. I don't believe I can.

Q. That was so long ago, I thought it would be okay to tell about it now.

R. I know that our family was very active in the church. I'm sure that we could find reference to them in the church.

Q. Records?

R. Yeah.

Q2. We were interested too in the Mill Race Village and Historic District here in town and were checking about that.

R. Well, that was pretty much before my time, so I can't remember too much about it. It was on Main Street. They had their office in the theatre building on Main Street.

J. You mean the city did, the town did at that time?

Q2. What group are you speaking of that had their offices there?

R. Well, the church I think. I'm not sure, it was a long time ago.

J. I was under the impression that the church was a much older building than the theatre.

R. Well, the church that is there now is a reconstruction of the original building.

Q. In the last 15-20 years, they did quite a bit of adding on to and adding to the church building.

R. Yes, they added on to it just once that I know of. And that was when they made it into a theatre.

END OF TAPE

Transcribed by Pat Allen, April 8, 2006.