

The following is a transcript of an interview with Bernieta Killinger Ebert who lives at 401 High St., in the Allen Terrace apartments for seniors. The original of the interview by Betty Griffin has been revised by Bernieta and will be filed with the Oral History Project of the Northville Public Library and Northville Historical Society.

Background information: Bernie, as she is popularly known, is 84 years old and an active member of the community. The interview began with her young womanhood in southern Michigan but for this purpose, will start with her coming to the Northville area and then pick up the earlier years.

Bernie: I came to Northville from the University of Michigan where I had been studying for a master's degree in clinical social work. I graduated in June 1956.

In December of 1955 Dempsey Ebert and I were married. We had met the previous year through mutual friends. He and his father had a funeral home in St. John's Michigan and I had previously lived in East Lansing so we had mutual acquaintances.

Those first few months of marriage were tense as I had a full schedule at the University and my thesis on alcoholism to complete by June. Dempsey felt neglected until he took over the task of assembling and proofreading my thesis.

The Department of Health and the University and I cooperated in the production of this quite new study of alcoholism. It was used as a model for future treatment of alcoholics. There were very few treatment centers in 1956. The State typed, printed and bound my thesis—parts were published under my name.

Strangely, the School of Social Work had not at first approved my selection of alcoholism for a thesis. They thought it was "no field for a woman". The State and I prevailed and later the University gave me high praise for my pioneer work.

After Dempsey's father retired and sold the St. John's funeral home, Dempsey and I purchased the old Schrader Funeral Home at 404 W. Main St., Northville. We moved in for the new year of 1957. Dempsey busied himself with the business matters and acquainting himself with Northville. I made a home of the very pleasant apartment upstairs in this beautiful old house. Another small apartment provided a house for Dempsey's "helper"—usually a lady to answer phones and doors when Dempsey and I were not there.

I was not the usual funeral director's wife. I had my own career—a full time job with the Family Service of American in Birmingham, Michigan. They hired only master's degree people and paid me an extra \$800 a year to handle the alcohol program.

After five years the office was moved to Berkley, Michigan. The director left and I was not happy with the new arrangement so quit.

For the next two years ('62 and '63) I was "home" doing a lot of different things; classes at Schoolcraft, a journalism class at U. of M., where I wrote a history of the Northville Record for a professor who had Bill Sliger in his class years before. I also interviewed and wrote biographies on Mike Allen from the granite quarries to Allen Monuments; and Dr. Hugh Godfrey who was referred to me by the head of the U. of M. Dental School as the best student he ever had. Earlier, as a student, I did a biography of my father "J.J.-His Life". He was born in 1874. He was 82 when he told me the story of his life. I added a psychological analysis of his "moves and moods" over the years.

I was active while home those two years in several Northville clubs and organizations: The Business and Professional Woman's Club, The National Farm and Garden Association, The American Association of University Women (in Plymouth then), The First Presbyterian Church of Northville, The Eastern Star. I was a charter member of the National Association of Social Work, a Psi Chi member (National Honor Society in Psychology), and had earned my certification from the Academy of Certified Social Workers.

These two years at home in Northville were busy and varied. I bought a darling brown poodle named Piper and learned to train and groom him.

I helped Dempsey at the funeral home when needed with many odd jobs never seen, and comforted those in grief when needed. I taught a Sunday School class at the Presbyterian Church. My parents, living in Elkhart Indiana since retired, were growing older. I spent time with them to see that they were comfortable. I lost both of them in those two years.

Dempsey was devoted to "service", not only as a funeral director, but to civic organizations and groups. He was a Mason, a Knight Templar, a Shrine and an Eastern Star member. He worked endless hours at the Shrine Circus each year for the benefit of burn victims. He was an elder at the Presbyterian Church and taught a class of adolescents there. Dempsey was a member of the National and Michigan Funeral Directors Associations and was an officer in the latter. He was president of the Chamber of Commerce in 1964, following Betty Allen-the first year in the Chamber's new building. He was again president of the Chamber in 1967. He was also past president of the Rotary.

Dempsey was active in most civic events: fairs, festivals, parades, etc. He belonged to local clubs: Optimists, Elks, Lions, etc., and took part in their charitable activities. He was part of the polio immunization program and was once an instructor in Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation. For many years he provided ambulance service to the race track (Northville Downs) through John Carlo. This continued until his death.

The Main Street businessmen met once a week around the big round table at The Old Mill for a pancake breakfast. It was a jovial fellowship meeting where they "settled the affairs of the day." It was typical of Northville in those days—the "village" was smaller, close-knit and friendly.

Dempsey was able to relax and/or sleep any time, perhaps a result of often working at night when most people were sleeping. He never worried about getting enough sleep but was ever ready to go to a Tiger game or a show at the Fisher.

My two years of “full-time Northville living” ended when I was sought to be the Clinical Social Worker in a new Alcohol Treatment Program being set up by the State of Michigan, to be housed at Ypsilanti State Hospital, under a grant. It was a successful and fulfilling experience. My thesis was “blooming”.

I also held group therapy once a week for the Court in Ann Arbor. The Judge gave alcohol traffic violators the choice of jail or group therapy for three months at \$5 each, each week. Men and women—many recovered, got their jobs back; broken marriages healed, and improved health. This job required a license from the State and I obtained one in Marriage Counseling.

Word of my activities spread and I found myself with a small private practice. I met with clients individually at the Washtenaw Council on Alcoholism, which I helped found.

The Alcohol Center closed after about six years for lack of funds and I transferred to the Washtenaw County Unit under another grant to handle the Alcohol Program. When the grant expired I retired in 1970 and continued a small private practice for several years.

Dempsey had increased his business and made substantial contributions to Northville, which he loved, since we moved here in 1957. He helped me—always a cup of “wake-up coffee”—my car always ready—snow plowed and car warm. He never complained about my commuting or long hours. He made favorite dishes—chili and barbequed ribs.

Dempsey liked people and meetings but was equally happy with his Brittany Spaniel, Jay, tramping the North Woods with his gun which he shot to train his dog not to be gun shy. He never killed an animal. Our cabin at Lake Mitchell was a haven for both of us.

Dempsey knew the best fishing holes in the lake. The smell of the pines and the whisper of the wind through the birch trees drew us back to our cabin, “Chipmunk Manor”, again and again.

The last year of Dempsey’s life he was the funeral director for the Hebrew Benevolent Society, 26640 Greenfield Road, Oak Park, Michigan. Our establishments were connected by phone and Dempsey would go there whenever the Rabbi needed him. The services are different from those for gentiles. Those Dempsey provided were non-religious with the bereaved. However, the business and legal requirements were the same.

He found it a very congenial and professional relationship. The Rabbi and his staff liked Dempsey’s wit and humor as well as how he treated “our people”. They recalled him as “cheerful, helpful and cooperative.”

Dempsey died October 8, 1972. We had been married seventeen years. I was eleven years older than Dempsey. This seemed to be of no interest or concern to anyone until I suddenly found myself a widow and a senior citizen. This was a period of loss, grief and adjustment.

I stayed at 404 W. Main until the estate was settled. The funeral home was out of code so could not continue. It was sold several times as a residence and is now owned by Al and Barbara

Glover who had preserved the beauty of this historic house. I moved to Northville Forest Apts. and stayed there for about three years until Allen Terrace opened. I was one of the first tenants. That was about ten years ago—1978.

Betty: Let's go back to your early life.

Bernie: To start from the beginning I was born in 1904 in Elkhart, Indiana and named Pearl Bernieta Killinger. I grew up on my parents' farm in southern Michigan ten miles northeast of Elkhart just off U.S. 12. My parents were farmers, and my father was a New York Central railroader. My brother and I went to a one-room country school of 20-30 pupils, age six to eighteen years plus, as many farm children stayed home at harvest time and never completed the eighth grade. I passed the State of Michigan eighth grade examination at age twelve.

Following high school at Bristol, Indiana (the closest college preparatory school) I completed a Life Certificate at Ypsilanti State Normal School, now Eastern Michigan University. This was followed by teaching in Battle Creek—second grade; pupils were from the Kellogg and Post cereal area—good bright kids and a wonderful principal. In spite of this satisfactory year, I was lured to Detroit by increased salary.

In September, 1928, while teaching in Detroit—at a small school in East Detroit—at the end of the Gratiot Street car line and a mile walk down Kelly Road. Two teachers—I had the first four grades, she the upper four. We ran the school; the principal gave us her full approval when she visited us from her office in another school. In February, the pot-bellied stove overheated one night and the school burned to the ground. I was transferred to the Courville School—Six Mile and Dequindre—a mile or more east of Woodward. There was no transportation on Six Mile, so we walked, except when the police occasionally came to our rescue, especially on cold, late afternoons when the snow was deep. I frosted my feet and had chilblains for years.

My assignment was a split—grades second and third. Mostly first generation from Southern European countries whose parents had responded to Henry Ford's offer of \$500 a day. I had 72 pupils who couldn't speak or read English (two black children and three Norwegian children were the exception).

This was a different assignment but having been honored in Ypsi for my teaching of reading and high praise for the same in Battle Creek, I proceeded with my own methods, much to the displeasure of the principal who wanted to follow the rage of the time, "picture stories", a method of individual progress which was discontinued after its failure of several years.

In September of 1928 I married Michael Timothy Doyle of St. Paul, Minnesota. We lived in an apartment in Detroit; he worked for an investigating firm and I taught. The following May we were visiting my parents on the farm and Michael was driving to South Bend to visit his Notre Dame friends, when a carless driver snuffed out his life. Michael was returned to St. Paul for burial. The Doyles were a founding family of St. Paul. His father was an attorney, his older brother a psychiatrist at the Mayo Clinic and his older sister was Mother Superior at Rosary College in a suburb of Chicago. Michael and I were to have returned to St. Paul in the fall so he could return to the University of Minnesota. I was devastated.

I did not return to Detroit but took a year's health leave of absence. I was recovering from scarlet fever, contracted at school. Immunization was not available in those days and teachers were at high risk for many diseases.

I lived at home with my parents for a time. Then I visited my college roommate and some relatives in California for a year. I also visited the Missions and worked several months in San Francisco in the old Mission District where the fog rolled in at 4:00 p.m. On my return to Michigan I lived at home or with family friends while working as a secretary in Elkhart.

It was there that I met my second husband, Charles G. Randall, a patent attorney for Tim-O-Stat, an electrical switch company. We were married in 1931. The company was bought out by Minneapolis Honeywell and he was asked to go with them. He wished to stay in patents in the automotive field as this was a fast developing field.

He obtained a job at Packard Motor in Detroit. This was a very satisfactory job but only lasted a year or two. These were depression days and Packard reduced staff radically before eventually closing. Charles was out of work but after some freelance work he contracted the patent work for Reo Motor in Lansing. He opened his office with the Foster and Cameron Law Firm. Mr. Foster was legal counsel for Reo.

We moved to Lansing and were there for nearly 10 years. After a couple of years renting, we bought a house in East Lansing. We had many friends, belonged to the country club, city club, and a cabana club at Lake Michigan. We generally lived a carefree, happy life as we furnished and decorated our new home, built lawns, landscaped and made flower beds.

Charles owned and played a beautiful concert harp which he had played during law school days in Washington D.C. at many musical gatherings—once at the White House. Charles was also a talented horseman, having ridden since childhood. When I spent too much time riding his horse he gave me a mare, Irene, for Christmas. Charles and an old black stable man from the horse country in Kentucky, taught me to ride. My childhood bare-backing may have helped. Between the two of us we won a barrel full of ribbons. I still have two silver plates and a loving cup I won that is engraved, "Good Hands and Seat." My horse-y friends understood.

Charles' work for Reo was successful and lucrative. He was known affectionately as the "fair-haired boy" for his ability to write patents which stood up in courts. He never lost a case. He was young and brilliant. He patented the first automatic transmission. General Motors and other car companies paid royalties to use the patent. Ford refused and failed to develop their own patent for its seventeen year life. I drove the first test model before it was put on the market. It has "push buttons" and worked as well as current automatic transmissions.

In the late thirties The Reo Motor Co. was the target of a "takeover" by a group from New York who had no intention of operating the company. They moved in, fired everyone; closed the plant, sold machinery and some of the buildings, appointed themselves as high paid officers. There was chaos in Lansing as previously Reo was a closely-held company by local investors. The

Security and Exchange Commission finally stepped in. Some of the group went to jail, there was a suicide, and some escaped to South America. Reo eventually reorganized but made only busses. This ended Charles' work for Reo.

A few months before the take-over, Charles was in a serious auto accident on the highway on Grand River Ave. (no expressways then) near Brighton. He had skull fractures and twice broken jaw, and other injuries. He was in the hospital for three months. A farm family witnessed the accident, but the driver of the car causing the accident sped away and was never found. Charles seemed to be recovering, but was not well. Since Reo had closed he was out of a job and it was then that a succession of jobs followed. He was unable to keep up professionally. He would not talk about his health or seek medical help, somewhat unaware of why he was failing.

My family and I wanted him to go to the University of Michigan Hospital, but this was not to be accomplished until his friends at the patent law firm where he had interned as a law student at George Washington University, and where he was currently a non-producing employee, devised the plan with me, my parents, and his father for Charles to go there. He was admitted in the fall of 1944. I stayed on in Washington D.C. in our apartment, and had a job with the government.

Charles diagnosis was brain damage from the accident. He was in and out of the hospital for over two years. While there he repaired an old press and printed a newspaper for the Psychiatric Institute. He had excellent care and showed improvement. He was employed for a few months by American Aviation Co. in the Fisher Building where he died of a stroke/heart attack on December 1, 1947 at 39 years of age.

He was mourned by all who knew him. There was a certain sadness that gripped all of us. I came from Washington to bury him in the family plot in Mt. Hope Cemetery in Lansing.

I then returned to Washington and went on with my life. I worked at many interesting federal positions for agencies specializing in my fields of interest: Office of War Information (Personnel for domestic and overseas placement); the U.S. State Department; the National Institute of Mental Health, etc. Jobs were often given or terminated on the basis of politics as civil service status was denied all new employees (there was a fear of too many "temporary employees" who would overload the Civil Service government employees retirement plan). Many new employees were from below the Mason-Dixon line as these were "Democrat Days." Between these jobs of uncertain tenure in U.S. Government, I sold real estate, typed masters and doctoral theses; counseled vets at George Washington University and volunteered at Walter Reed Hospital Psychiatric Ward. I also went to George Washington University and completed by BA degree in Education and a MA degree in Psychology (vocational and Educational Counseling).

There were many interesting experiences in Washington. I was entertained at a tea by Eleanor Roosevelt with a group in the Rose Garden at the White House. I was in Washington when President Roosevelt died. The whole city mourned. I saw Harry Truman take his morning walk (no security guards) as I passed on my way to work.

It was challenging and exciting to work in Washington during those times. The city was full of uniformed military personnel. New employees arrived daily for this post-war world reconstruction period. The tourists came by the bus loads.

Washington wasn't "home" and I heard the ever-present call to Michigan. Eisenhower was president when I returned in September, 1954, to enter the University of Michigan and then to Northville in 1957 as previously noted.

Betty: What is life like at Allen Terrace?

Bernie: Life at Allen Terrace, Northville's senior apartment complex of 100 apartments is pleasant and comfortable. I attend some of the clubs and church mentioned in my earlier account of my life in Northville. I have added Northville Town Hall and enjoyed the various speakers and fine luncheons at the Hilton Hotel in Plymouth.

Our Allen Terrace director, Frances Yoakum Hopp, interested me in senior activities and I serve with her on the board of the Senior Alliance of the Area Agency on Aging which serves the 34 west and southwest communities of Wayne County. We are also members of the Northville Area Senior Citizens Advisory Council, administered by the Northville Recreation Department.

The Senior Center at Cooke School on Taft Road is a busy place. Karl Peters is the full time director and works closely with John Anderson of the Recreation Dept. The center offers social gatherings, cards and games, entertainment, classes, speakers, health tests, pot lucks, holiday parties and tele-care services, among others. The senior bus offers twice-weekly local shopping and once a month mall shopping; also one-day trips to many points of interest, for example, Tiger games and the Redford Theater. Longer trips, such as to the Smokies, New England or the Amish country in Indiana are by commercial bus. A monthly newsletter of all activities is provided for all seniors wanting it.

Allen Terrace is the dining place for the congregate and home-delivered meals through the Area Agency. This senior complex is owned by the City of Northville and now has a waiting list for apartments. We receive privileges and advantages over many big government-run senior housing facilities. Our apartments all have smoke alarms, sprinkler systems, emergency pull cords and handicap features. The Fire and Police Departments are five minutes away and are here with emergency fire aid, false fire alarms or any emergency which may arise.

It's interesting to look back to the early 60's and then look at today: Phil Jerome was our paper boy and used to run across Main St., from the high school to visit his grandma, Ruth Enright (Dempsey's helper); Del of Del's shoe stores, was our milkman; Dewey Gardner swept floors (he told me), made bouquets and drove the delivery truck at the little flower shop; Butch Casterline was driven to school by his mother. I often wonder why he didn't walk. After military college, he came home fire and trim. Remember when Mary Alexander was "the staff" at City Hall? When you could hear the call "Culligan Man" before Detroit water came in? And when Maybury Sanitarium treated tuberculosis patients with "fresh air and best rest"?

Remember when the old City Hall was torn down and when East Lawn Nursing Home stood where Allen Terrace is now?

I could go on and on but this is already lengthy with 84 years of living—31 years in Northville.