

Northville Township Historical District Commission

Oral History Interview – David Fluker

November 18, 2008



Resident - Wayne County Training School

1948 – 1953

Interviewers: RA= Richard Allen and JC= John Colling

RA: This is Tuesday, November 18, 2008. We're visiting with David Fluker, who was a student at the Wayne County Training School at one point. And there's three of us: it's myself, Richard Allen; John Colling; and David. And we'll start off with...David, tell us how you originally got into the school.

DF: Ok, now. There was seven children – five boys and two girls. Ok, my mother and father were both from Pennsylvania. They come over here in Detroit. And my mother died when I was nine years old in 1945. Ok, that left my father with seven small children, plus my youngest brother was adopted. He was fourteen months old when she passed away. And he was adopted to people up in Milan, Michigan, when he was fourteen months old. Ok, now, he found us 28 years ago. But, anyway, my father...I was slow in school, so with hearsay, he found out about this Wayne County Training School, and he put me in there for one thing and one thing only – to get schooling. But they had everything for me except that, but he went by hearsay, so when I went out there, the only way I could be released was if my parents left the state or died. But a year after – see I went out there in 1948 – he died three years after his wife died. Ok, so I was out there from nine years old until I was almost seventeen years old. But when you were fifteen years old, even if you couldn't spell your name, you went to school a half a day, then you worked on the grounds, like the bakery, the kitchen. We did everything supervised. See, there was 45 boys to a cottage, twelve cottages on the boys' side, and twelve cottages on the girls' side, there was 1000 children out there. Now there were three categories: from juvenile, good kids, and retarded kids. Ok, now, from the day I went out 'til I was released, I never graduated from the same room – you didn't get a diploma. Ok, so when I was released, I went back to school and got my GED...you know, diploma, but what I needed out there is schooling, which they didn't have because they couldn't... the teacher couldn't teach one-on-one. So in other words...I don't know if you've heard the expression, "I fell between the cracks"...

RA: Right

DF: Ok, now, I got out. The first job I had was working at Ken & Ork's on the corner of Penniman and Main in Plymouth, Michigan, which is no longer there. Many of the residents that were ready to leave the school had their first job working there as a dishwasher. And then from there I went to Kresge's...In 1953, I was released out to 16 ½ years old. Then I went to Daisy Air Rifle – I don't know if you've heard of that...

RA: Oh, yeah...

DF: They moved out in the latter part of June of '58. Then I was out of work, so then I moved down to Detroit, and I was down in Detroit – I worked for Burroughs a short time, then I got a job in Ypsilanti at the federal building...custodian – I worked there 20 years. I retired from there, that was in '98. I just turned 72 Halloween. So I've never got married and everything like that, and my slow learning never held me back from getting a job, but still I didn't get what I needed, but my father didn't know that, see? But he passed away a year after he put me out there – see, he put me out through the court. So then I lived in Plymouth, then I moved, then I come back to Plymouth, see, then I come back again, now I live here now again, see. And the last time I was down in Detroit I was going to the soup kitchen. I lived near the Masonic Temple on 3rd and 2nd and I met this young couple, that he lives...him and his wife lived in Plymouth for thirty years. I got talking to him and I told him about it and that's the Ann you were talking about.

RA: I see.

DF: So...and...well there ain't much more I can tell you except...

RA: Can you tell us what a typical day would have been like when you were in the training school?

DF: Well this was a typical day. You got up in the morning, got up at 6:00 in the morning, you were in a dormitory with 45 boys. You showered, you got done, you cleaned...you cleaned the floors supervised, you got done, you went down and helped prepare your own breakfast. Then you got done, then you got your school clothes on – they had a cottage father and what they called a cottage mother – two other employees that worked there. 45 boys in the cottage. Ok, then you went to school, but you were separated from the girls – because you know why, I don't have to go into that, see. And then you would come back, took your clothes or your school clothes off, put your play clothes on, then you got ready for supper and then it was a regular routine – you did everything supervised by employees. They didn't do anything – they just supervised you.

JC: Your school clothes – was that a uniform of...?

DF: No, just regular clothes.

RA: So how did that differ from play clothes, other than maybe the condition of them?

DF: Well, they were a little bit better than the play clothes. But, see, when my first father was living, he tried to get me into a Catholic home called St. Francis where you used a uniform, but he couldn't get me because he couldn't afford it. But at the training school, see, when your parents had you out there, if they could pay, they would. If not, it was run by the county; that was why it was called Wayne County Training School, see. But the whole setup was wrong because the Doctor Haskell was 95 years old and you had employees out there abusing children, you know what I'm talking about, and getting away... You know, years ago...it ain't like today, see...

JC: Now, did they have organized activities for you, then?

DF: Oh, yeah. They had everything but football. They had swimming, fishing, basketball, baseball. But from the time you got up until you went to bed. You didn't think for yourself. You were supervised.

JC: They told you when to do this and when to do that.

DF: And then when I first went out there, see, I went in Cottage Six. Then after Cottage Six, I was in Cottage Seven. You matured more. Then the last cottage I was in was Homestead. So you were more or less able to take care of yourself, but regardless of how intelligent you got, you were still told what to do, regardless. And sometimes that'd hold you back because, you know, you can't think for yourself – but that was the setup. But that's been history, see, you know.

RA: You said you didn't really get a lot of education. What did they do in your supposed school time? What kind of classes or...

DF: Well, what you had, you had in your class you had what you called the Weekly Reader, you know, like that. See, in my case, I never advanced because from the time I was out there to nine years old 'til I went to school only half a day...see, you only went to school half a day, even if you couldn't spell your name. You only go to half a day and you worked like in the kitchen. You had a supervisor that appointed jobs. There was the bakery, the greenhouse...see, everything was done on the grounds. They grew their own stuff and everything...and cows. Then when you turned sixteen, you no longer could go to school even if you couldn't spell "what". So you got...the bad thing about it - you didn't get no education. But my father didn't look into it, see. He went by hearsay.

JC: *Did they give you any organized training, like trades or anything like that?*

DF: No, nothing like that. No trades at all. See, that's too bad...think about it.

JC: *So all you learned was the things that they had you do like cooking and...*

DF: Yeah, right. See I worked in the bakery. Then there was kids that worked in the kitchen. Then they worked in the greenhouse, landscaping...but everything was done by the kids, but supervised by the supervisors, see...like that...but... So the only regrets I got about it, I didn't get no schooling out of it. Other than that, they taught me one thing, because out there was one thing you had to answer, like when this gentleman talked to me, I had to answer, "Yes, Sir." When the lady talked to me, I had to say, "Yes, Ma'am." If I didn't, you'd be put in punishment. They had kids that would run away. But they knew exactly where they were going--they were going to their house--they would pick them up and bring them back and give them little punishments like that, see.

JC: *Were they physical punishments?*

DF: No. No, like scrubbing the floor. They take...I don't know if you know...but you can take, like, you take steel wool, you know, and these pots and pans and you clean them and they shine like a silver dollar. Little things like...no physical, though...but there was supervisors that would hit the kids. But if they got caught, they were fired. But there was a lot of supervisors out there that shouldn't have been working with kids because...you know what I'm talking about...what they were doing – they were abusing kids...you know what I'm talking about...sexually...and getting away with it, see. But that's no longer, because... The place sat empty for 45 years. People went in and stripped it. The cottages...like the copper and everything - and it was owned by the county. Then what they did, they tore that all down now it's all condos on Sheldon Road, you know. All the way from Plymouth to Northville is condos. But when we were out there, it was apple orchards, that's all it was. And on Five Mile, it's Home Depot...all the way down - that was apple orchards. That's all been changed. 'Cause progress never stops, right?

JC: *Right.*

DF: But being out there I have no regrets. Because I could have got in trouble very easily, see.

RA: *You learned to follow orders...*

DF: Yep. It was almost like being in the service.

JC: *Well, I was in the service, and a lot of what you described is the same...*

DF: Well you had to answer, "Yes, Sir", "No, Sir"...But there was some kids out there was from juvenile. Well, see, the thing about it is, when you were released, they put you on parole. What they called parole. You had a social worker, he would find you a job, he found me a kind of job in Plymouth. And then if you got in trouble, you went back. But after they thought you were doing good, you were discharged. Then if you got in trouble, they had nothing to do with you. See, they give you one chance...

JC: *There was no follow-up or anything?*

DF: No, no. Because when I got out, it was a new world to me.

RA: *It would be.*

DF: I was only sixteen. See, I got out in '53. I was out there seven years. Went out there when I was nine years old and I got out July the 6th of 1953. So I was almost two months older...two more months I'd be seventeen years old. So I've been on my own ever since I was sixteen years old.

RA: *They turned you loose, then you had to go find a place to live and...*

DF: No, they found the first room for me.

RA: *Did they? Ok.*

DF: Then after that, the social worker did like that...he found me the first room. It was \$6; it was right next to the Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic Church on Penniman, see, and then like that... Then they found me the job, see. Now some kids...see, it wasn't a orphanage, now. People think it was a orphanage – it wasn't. Some kids still had their parents living. Sometimes they would release them with their parents; they'd find a job. But still, the thing about it is, once you were released, see...they wanted to get you out of there as soon as they... because there was a total...there was 1000 kids out there. Total girls. That's a lot of kids. So, but I have no regrets.

JC: *You never had any interaction with the girls there?*

DF: The only thing we had, if you remember years ago - square dancing was a big thing. But other than that, no. We weren't mixed – for a reason. We were told...you know why.

RA: *Did they allow you to use any of the facilities over on the other side of Sheldon Road, where there was a swimming pool and a stage...*

DF: No, I'll tell you what it was. The school itself had a downstairs gym swimming pool. We went there. And we played baseball on the diamonds. And I don't know if you know it, but Sheldon Road used to have a tunnel that went across the road. I don't know if it's still there...

RA: *No*

DF: ...went across the road. But then, like, when you got like at Homestead or Seven, you could go to the show in Northville or Plymouth, and at that time it cost a nickel. You'd call up to say you got there ok. In other words, when you got those other cottages like Seven...Cottage Seven or Homestead, you were more or less considered more mature. But still you were told what to do every day from the time you...almost like the army.

RA: *So, does the other side of Sheldon Road – the training school over there – had a nice pool and gymnasium and stage?*

DF: Yeah. Now we played basketball. We played different...like Ypsilanti and Dundee, like that. Then we played against employees. But the thing about it is, you had a lot of the young kids mixed in with good kids, so the setup, well, like I say, fell between the cracks. But that's over with now. I can't dwell on something that's over with, because I'm just hurting myself.

RA: *You gotta move on.*

DF: You gotta move on, yes. But other than that, see...

JC: Well, you had these various...cabins, whatever you called them tell me about them.

DF: The boys' cottages were west of Sheldon road, and the girls were on the east side. The boys' units were numbered One through Eight with the lower numbers assigned to the younger children. The more mature residents went on to a unit called Homestead. Since I was nine when I went there, I started in Cottage Six and worked my way up to Homestead. The boys had to use the tunnel under Sheldon Road to go to school as the classrooms were on the east side.

JC: ...cottages. Did they interact at all?

DF: Well, see, they were outdated.

JC: Did you, where you were living, have any interaction with the other students that were there?

DF: Oh, yeah.

JC: Or just with your...

DF: With the boys. The only time we weren't isolated...the only time we seen the girls like in the kitchen if they worked along with us, like that. But to mix with them, we went to school all boys, all girls, all separated for a reason. And then, see, out there on Northville, now if you go Five Mile to Sheldon Road – you know where CVS is on the corner? – you walk a little ways down, and they left a monument – a brick thing saying “Wayne County Training School”.

JC: Yes, we're aware of that.

DF: Still there, see, to let people know, see...

JC: We're on the Historic Commission.

DF: Oh, I see.

JC: We're trying to have that re-established so it's a little more...

RA: There is about four feet of fill around it, and we're trying to figure out how to get it excavated without breaking it and also costing a fortune.

DF: Well, see, the wood on the top is all rotted...

RA: Yeah, well, that can be replaced...

DF: Yeah, I know it. But it ain't too far from CVS.

RA: We know exactly what you're talking about. We've got a program going right now. In fact, it's going to be discussed tonight to try and get it done yet this year to get that thing raised back up again and we've got people lined up to replace the roof on it, put the slate back on it, we've just got to get it out of the ground.

DF: Because, see, on the corner there where CVS is, that used to be Plymouth State Home. Then you know, like that see. Then they tore that all down, and then the St John Seminary, where the golf course is,

that used to be a seminary for boys going to become priests but it ain't anymore. I don't know why...but it's still there. But it isn't for the...

JC: There was a high rise down there at Five...

RA: That's what he's talking about. It was like a hospital--it was 5 or 6 stories.

DF: Because down there on Five Mile, you've got Busch's, right there, you know, and Speedway--I know that area good. Then you walk down Five Mile, you can take Sheldon Road all the way into Northville. Now we used to go on hikes, you know what I mean. Beck Road – we could only go as far as Beck Road because there was the house – DeHoCo – so we had to turn around and come back, see. But that's all Home Depot and all that now. It's all changed. It's built up, see, like that. It ain't like it used to be.

RA: No, things never are.

JC: Well, I've been out here now for 34 years, and it's changed a lot in those 34 years.

DF: Well, like Plymouth, see, when I first come to Plymouth in '53, Plymouth wasn't even a city – it was a village. Actually, now it's a city. There was no township, where there is now. Now Plymouth is a money town, you know that. So is Northville, see. Northville was...it had the racetrack, which is still there, and all that stuff.

JC: Well, this whole area had a whole lot of institutionalized things, like you mentioned DeHoCo, and it had the hospital up on Seven Mile...

JC: ...which is closed, yeah...

RA: Plymouth State Home...

JC: ...and the complex that you were at – it's all gone.

DF: But like I say, I have no regrets, because the place did do me good, because only one thing I didn't get what I needed – the schooling. But my father, he didn't look into it. You know, he was left with seven children. You know, a man with seven children – what was he gonna do? Then a year later when he put me out there, he passed away.

RA: Now your mother and father – you lived in Plymouth originally or?

DF: Huh?

RA: Where did your family live before you went there?

DF: They lived in Corktown. Downtown by old Tiger Stadium. See, they come from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and we were raised like on 15th and Grand River, in that area, which is all messed up now.

JC: That was where...the area I grew up in.

DF: Oh, did you?

JC: Do you know where the old Western Market was?

DF: Yeah, right.

JC: I lived just north of there.

DF: Remember Jeffrey Projects?

JC: Oh, yeah.

DF: Well, that's where we lived in. Before I went out to the home. They tore it out. We lived on Brainard and Lincoln, in that area. On Trumbull by Scripps Park.

JC: Yeah, I had a good friend who lived there.

DF: Did you? It's still there, but the neighborhood is all bad now.

RA: Ok, thank you very much for your time.

DF: That's ok.



Approved by David Fluker on January 6, 2009.

Transcribed by Linda Last