

JIM HARPER – MARCH 24, 1989

Interviewed by Fran Durham in Lakeland, Florida

FD: Jim, what is the time frame on the years that you lived in Northville and what were your earliest memories of Northville?

JH: I was a year old in 1919 when my family moved us to the lovely village of Northville. I lived pretty much all my younger years in Northville, going through school and then into the service for three or four years and coming out and being there briefly and leaving for other parts in 1945.

FD: What are your earliest memories of Northville? Can you describe what the town was like back then?

JH: One of the earliest memories was of the Interurban cars which ran two different rail lines through Farmington to the city of Detroit and through Plymouth to the city of Detroit. As they would come into Northville on Main Street, they would turn in at Griswold at what is now the Ford factory and come out again in a “Y” pattern so that when they backed up the rest of the way of Main Street to Center Street, they were in a reverse position ready to start the trip back to the city. I thought that was quite something.

I remember there being what was called a band stand. It was mounted on a small foundation. It was right at the intersection of Main and Center St. As a lad, I wondered how could they possibly crowd a band into what they called a “band stand.”

FD: That would be the early 1920's?

JH: Yes. I would suppose so. I was three or four. Another memory that comes to mind was of the thrill of Santa coming before Christmas. That also would be down at the corner of Main and Center Street. That is something that sticks in my mind. You know how you hear a certain smell or hear a certain sound and you are instantly transported back? We were handed little mesh stocking bags that had an apple and an orange, and some candy canes and nuts and other nice little things for kids. Santa would hand them off the back of a wagon in those years, I think. What a delight that was and it was a double-surprise because I didn't expect Santa until two or three days later at our house. Again, that was the early 1920's.

I have no recollection of when the Interurban ceased coming out that far, but I have the knowledge, indirectly, that my father, for some time, who was a commercial artist in the city, would take the Interurban into Detroit and back out later in the evening as well as others who lived in that town and who commuted to the city for business.

FD: Jim, we don't have to be chronological here, so let's skip ahead to Eddie Stinson's factory. Do you remember them putting together the planes there?

JH: Yes, I do. This would also have been up to and including the late '20's. Until Eddie Stinson was accidentally killed in an aircraft accident. The factory was opposite the depot. The street that curved around and became Main Street did not come that close to the depot in those days. It curved in closer to those buildings. As one would go by the Stinson Factory, there was

a distinct odor of what we called “banana oil”. Banana Oil is what they applied to the fabric after they covered the fuselage and the wings of the airplanes made there. If my memory serves me right, the (frames of the) earliest planes were made mainly of wood. Almost always fabric-covered. To my knowledge, about the only thing that’s made that way today is model airplanes.

FD: Did Eddie live in town?

JH: I’m not sure if he did or not. He must not have lived very far away. There was a grass strip out on Six Mile Road just to the west of Beck Road. I don’t know who owned it. I don’t think Stinson did, but nevertheless I’m told (that) they pulled the airplane fuselage out there with the wings carried separately and assembled the wings out there and flew the planes out of that field. Then, I suppose, (they) also delivered them or they were picked up by whoever bought the plane. I can remember some of the early so-called air shows. They weren’t very large in today’s terms but they were, nevertheless, very interesting and exciting to a young person to be able to go out there.

As a child, I was one of several who were given a chance to pass out handbills for one of the weekend air shows put on by Eddie and other so-called barnstorm flyers in those years. When we had finished putting out the handbills around town, we were asked if we wanted to be paid or did we want to go up for an airplane ride? I chose the plane ride. That was my first ride, sitting in front of Eddie Stinson, and flying out of that grass strip. Believe me, that was a thrill!

My memory of what happened to Eddie, his fate, is that Eddie Stinson went to Chicago for a weekend. He had left on a Sunday afternoon and the weather was overcast. His intention was to fly what they call the “steel compass” to follow, at low altitude, over a railroad. He was going to follow the railroad back to Detroit from Chicago. Unfortunately, on taking off at a not-very high level, one wing sheared a fly pole or something of that sort. The plane crashed and killed Eddie Stinson. I’m going to guess (that was) the very early ‘30’s.

My memory says that he had a sister, Irene Stinson, who evidently had been involved with him in the business and she took over and ran the business. I don’t know what year it was, that it was then moved to Wayne, Michigan. I’ve heard, lately, that the Piper Aircraft people bought it out and it was moved out of the state.

FD: That’s quite an exhaustive memory of that. You mention that you flew in the plane with Eddie. Did you ever talk to him, personally? Do you have any impressions of Eddie Stinson, the man?

JH: I seem to remember that he was short. If he was a good flyer, he probably wasn’t a good talker. I’m going to assume he was a man of few words, but he was a man of his word, because, sure enough, I did enjoy that wonderful airplane ride with him.

FD: That’s something, to be able to say that you flew with Eddie Stinson, himself. The racetrack in Northville is one of its modern focal points, but as you well know, at one time it was the Wayne County Fairgrounds. In your boyhood, in the 1920’s, can you tell us what the Wayne County Fairground was like, how it was used?

JH: To this day I think it was one of the finest county fairs that I have ever seen. It was a very exciting time of year for a young person, especially. There was a man named Howard Fuller, who lived in the first house going out Seven Mile (Road), just past the Fish Hatchery. He was noted for the rare chickens he raised.

FD: That's probably the same farmhouse that stands at Edenderry and Seven Mile?

JH: It was the first structure beyond the Fish Hatchery, the next place was the Sutton House, as I recall.

Part of the excitement was the fair coming into town and setting up. Young boys had to be in on everything. The opening, the happening, and the closing. I searched my memory as to whether I ever paid to get in. There was always some break in the fence somewhere. Of course, these were the Depression years, so it wasn't too much enforced.

One of the things I remember, Vernors Ginger Ale was first made in Detroit. In those days, at the fair, there would be small stands with a small kegs mounted up on the counter with little canvas awnings over them. Maybe a half dozen of them (were) around the fairgrounds. For a nickel, you could get the most delicious, fresh drink of Vernors Ginger Ale in quite a good-size Dixie cup.

Another thing that I remember that excited me quite a bit was what they called a "motordrome". It was a structure made of wood in the shape of a bowl with high vertical sides inside. To call attention to the next show, there would be a fellow on a motorcycle on a set of rollers. He could rev up the motorcycle and get your attention and we'd all crowd up and see what it was all about. Whatever the admission was, I suppose a dime, we went in and walked up some steps and we stood at the top of this vertical wall while this dare-devil went around inside this wooden bowl, lickety-split, on his motorcycle, defying gravity. He was at absolute right-angle to the ground. He'd stand up on the seat and do all sorts of things that we thought were impossible.

FD: It sounds like an exciting county fair, all right. The site has developed as a horse racing track. Wasn't there quite a lot of horse activities at that time there at the county fair?

JH: Yes. In those days the fair was a three- or four-day event, usually in late August. The main attraction on the half-mile dirt track was harness racing. Of course there was no pari-mutuel betting in those days. It was for the sport of it, but it still drew a good-size crowd.

Inside of what was called the "inner ring" of the racetrack proper was held annually, during the fair, what was called "a million-dollar horse show", because of the proximity to Detroit, there were some wonderful performances by fine horses and people who were very disciplined. That was attended by a number of important people, not only from Detroit, but from other parts of the country. My first memory of Henry Ford was seeing him in a box with about a dozen chairs with his family and company, watching the million-dollar horse show. Among the groups that would come and ride would be special units of the U.S. Cavalry.

This was considered a "horsy" town. One young woman, I think her name was Kathryn Marburger, was the daughter of the superintendent of the Ford Valve Plant at that time. She had

been given instruction (by) a man named Hoffman, who had something to do with the Kaiser's stables prior to World War I in Germany. He, evidently, was a very fine horse trainer. Kathryn Marburger won many fine honors for herself and the family and the village. I think I read of her nationally one time.

Especially out in the Salem area, there were two or three breeders of the fine draft horses. They were a very important part of the fair there and of the State Fair, which was held in Detroit. The Porath Farm is one that comes to mind. They were noted for their beautiful draft horses.

FD: You mentioned the first time you saw Henry Ford. Can you tell us any more about Henry Ford and his relation to Northville? I understand he and Clara one time shopped at the E&B on Main Street. What are your memories of Ford in Northville?

JH: I don't have any memories of that, really. For a period, before the War, I worked for the Cadillac Motor Car Company downtown in Detroit. I was coming out Ford Blvd. one day. Having heard these stories about Henry taking a car off the assembly line and having his chauffeur drive him home in it that day. Woe be (for) whoever was responsible for whatever wasn't right on that car. I had pulled up to a light as I drove along Ford Blvd. I glanced over and here in the lane next to me was Henry Ford sitting in the right hand passenger seat with his chauffeur. Sure enough, he was fiddling with something do with the glove compartment. I (don't know) whether things were alright or not but I had to surmise that it was true what they said about him checking up on the cars.

I heard, sometime later, from the Will Yerkes (who) owned a home up on the curve of Griswold just about to Mill Race Village. He had a mill. That was the purpose of the dam on the pond on the north side. That branch of the Rouge River came down by the Ford Factory and I suppose (Henry Ford) wanted to control that. He was determined to buy that property including the mill owned by Mr. Yerkes. Mr. Yerkes told me he knew nothing about Henry Ford and the dealings until the deal was signed. He said a man came out from Detroit and he said his name was A. Crow. He dealt with (him) and it wasn't until after he had signed the deal that he realized that he'd made his sale to Henry Ford.

FD: What are your recollections of the Ford Valve Plant there in Northville?

JH: Originally, there was a furniture factory there. I believe it was the Globe Furniture Company making school furniture. It was a high, old, brick building rather typical of some of the manufacturing buildings in the northeast. It was painted light gray with a white trim. Ford converted that old furniture factory into the valve plant.

That reminds me of something that people might have forgotten about Henry Ford. I think he might have been one of the first to have this idea. He believed in moving out and establishing satellite plants out of the city to give his workers who desired to live away from the city that opportunity. Many of them had small or good-sized farms and worked in the wintertime. In my estimation, that's always been an estimable thing about Henry Ford.

FD: You mention those houses across Griswold that Face Main Street. Did Henry Ford build those houses?

JH: I do not think he built those houses. They were existing. He bought up the complete block from Griswold, on the north side of Main Street to the street, I think, that's called Church that ends just in front of the Presbyterian Church. There must've been six to seven houses included. His purpose was to have a convenient home for his supervisory people. The first house, for instance, was occupied by the Marburger Family. Mr. Marburger was the superintendent of the Ford Valve Plant for many years. I think the next house there was a family by the name of "Flaherty" and if I'm not mistaken, Mr. Flaherty was the assistant superintendent of the Ford Valve Plant. The last house at what I think is Church Street, opposite of the Presbyterian Church was a large old French provincial-designed home with a Mansard roof. To the best of my memory (it) was occupied by a Doctor Spaulding and his wife, who was also a doctor. She, I think, was a pediatrician and he was a general practitioner. I believe that they, in many cases, took care of problems that the Ford employees may have (had).

FD: There's another area in here, Jim that is of great interest to many people. And at the end of this Henry Ford tale, is what is known as the Northville Opera House. Can you picture, in your mind, the Northville Opera House and any memories that you might have about it?

JH: Only after it fell into disuse. I have a good memory of the cobwebs inside. We boys would find a way to pry a board off on a Saturday morning and get inside. I suppose I was too young to appreciate some of the décor but I've read and seen photographs reproduced since showed some very interesting décor in the old Opera House. Beyond that, I have no direct knowledge.

FD: Somebody mentioned seeing the Opera House on the night it burned. Do you have a memory of that?

JH: No, I don't remember that but I can tell you about some very large and fierce fires. For some reason (they) would come in the wintertime, I suppose because of furnaces overheating and that sort of thing and some of those were right downtown. One was right at the corner of Main and Center. That was called the Ambler Hotel. It was a wooden structure. The Ambler family was an old Northville family. That stood vacant for many years and according to what I've read in The Record, they are now tearing down the bowling alley just south of that on Center and there's a large multiple-commercial building going in there. I don't know if it's going to be department stores or what. That will be the first time in many years because the Ambler Hotel burned down, I would say, somewhere in the mid to late '20's.

FD: Do you have any memories of being inside the Ambler Hotel?

JH: No, I don't. I just know a little bit about the Ambler family. There was the Ambler Foundry down by the Stinson Factory. I also remember the old theater burning down, the Penniman-Allen. The present theater was built soon after that building burned down. That was built by a Mrs. Allen who, I believe, lived in Plymouth. She had two theaters in Plymouth, as well. There was a fine organ in there and I seem to be reading things in The Record that productions are being put on in that theater today.

FD: Are there any other fires that you can recall? What was the Fire Department like in your day?

JH: My earliest memory of the Fire Department was (that) it was in a little white building down about three hundred feet to the west of Center Street on Main. There wasn't a siren in those days. There was a bell tower and a bell. I'm not sure how far the bell could be heard. And I don't recall the exact equipment.

Getting back to fires, there's one more that I'd like to mention that was a delight to most boys' hearts. That was when the school burned down. We thought we wouldn't have to go to school anymore. This happened in the middle of the night. It was a terrible fire. It burned that school completely to the ground and I didn't know what they were going to do about getting us educated and I wasn't much worried. But they managed. There were some houses nearby where they rented space and held classes in there. They managed to do it until a new grade school was built. The old grade school was (in) back of the high school. That is to say to the south of it. The street that ran along in front of it is now closed. It has been for some time. They built a new elementary school along Main Street alongside the high school.

FD: Was that school building that burned the original Northville High School, from 1909 or 1910?

JH: I think so, because Ida Cooke (one of the teachers many of us remember), I remember hearing about a photo of her sitting on the steps and that being the High School, but that's second-hand.

FD: You must've started school in Northville. Do you have memories of that?

JH: Yes, I have good memories. Everyone has a favorite teach that they never will forget. Mrs. Wilson was my second grade teacher. She was a darling. I very much liked her. I liked them all. I didn't start to get into mischief until I got up where all the other boys started to get (into) mischief up around middle school, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.

FD: You were in the second grade in about 1926, right?

JH: I think I went through about five or six grades in the old grade school building. I must've nearly finished when it burned down, unluckily.

FD: What was the classroom like in those days?

JH: Physically, the classrooms were very high-ceilinged. There was no air conditioning then. A blackboard usually around two walls, high windows, plenty of daylight, much different than the way they seem to be building them today. The old grade school had three stories and a basement which was half submerged. The fire happened at night. There (was) no one in the building other than the janitor when it started. Luckily, before then the city or whoever had mandated that (fire) escapes be put up. They put up large culvert-style pipes. We thought it would be just great if they'd have a fire so we could jump out the window and ride these pipes down to the ground.

FD: What hours did you attend school and what did you do at lunch time? And how strict were the teachers? Just give us some memories and opinions of those things.

JH: Up to sixth grade, we stayed in one room during the day. I don't have any opinion whether things were better or worse than they are now. They seem to be happy memories. We lived close enough to home to be able to go home for lunch. Later, in junior high and high school, which was all in the building that still exists today, there was a cafeteria. Interestingly enough, the young ladies who were taking domestic science, learning home-making. It was great to go by there and smell the soup cooking on a cold winter morning. Especially if the weather was inclement, then maybe we'd stay and eat in the cafeteria or we were near enough downtown that we could go downtown as well. (We could) go to places like Fry's Restaurant and have a burger and places such as that. I have good memories and I might be typical and forget the bad memories.

FD: How were the Northville athletic teams in your day?

JH: They were very good. A great deal of school spirit behind them. I think probably football and basketball were the two foremost athletics. The gymnasium, which still exists (I'm not sure if the race track does) was two or three stories high and there was an inside racetrack with banked corners. The j-hop and the senior prom were held there. For basketball, one could sit up on the running track as well as down on the floor. Above it was the auditorium. That would've been the third floor.

FD: Do you have memories of going to the school dances or events, so that our modern children can compare them with today?

JH: As I got on toward graduation, it was the Depression years so things had to be cut back considerably. The yearbook was a cardboard cover. Everybody had the same problems so as the saying goes, "We didn't know we were poor, 'cause everybody else was." At the j-hops and the senior proms, the big dances, it wasn't just for the young people. People who had graduated would come and that was a big event in town in those days. Many of them dressed up in tuxes, but it wasn't required. I don't remember women wearing expensive evening gowns for graduation events in those years.

FD: Who furnished the music?

JH: I couldn't answer that, but being near Detroit, it wasn't hard to make contact. Some of the big-named bands would have satellite bands who would come to affairs like that.

FD: This goes back to my own childhood. What can you tell me about the Nebbs comic strip and its connection with Northville?

JH: As I understand it, the word "Nebbs" is a combination of the family name 'Neal' and 'Ball'.

FD: They were Northville families?

JH: Frank Neal, at one time, was the editor of The Northville Record among other things. He married a woman, as I understand it, whose maiden name was 'Ball'. Somebody in her family, possibly her brother, was the cartoonist who did the strip and he came up with the name 'Nebbs' (by) combining the family names 'Neal' and 'Ball'. When you drive up to the Rural Hill

Cemetery, as you first come into the cemetery, you will notice a small, private mausoleum, just to the left. If you look over the entryway to that family mausoleum, you will see the names 'Neal-Ball' above that. My recollections of the comic strip itself are sketchy, but from time to time there would be something familiar to Northvillites included in the cartoon strip.

FD: I remember one of those was the first square in the comic strip would have the Northville well that still exists today on Northville Road. Another area that I wanted to cover with you was the beautiful park system that surrounds Northville. I understand that you have some knowledge of this, how it began its planning.

JH: Before I talk about the parkway and Cass Benton Park, it occurs to me that the man (who) I will speak of was also the man who designed the well that exists today, with the spring water. I understand (that) they've re-drilled that well and there is a well-water coming out of that again. T. Glen Phillips and his family lived in Northville and he was a very fine landscape architect. Among his credits was the landscape design for the Michigan State campus in East Lansing. He also designed continuing plans and I hope their being followed today. I understand it's one of the most beautiful campuses.

I don't know all the origin of the Edward M. Hines Parkway. Edward M. Hines was a county commissioner, who evidently was quite influential in the political end of putting through that Parkway. Part of that system, the Cass Benton Park, was named after a man named Cass Benton, who had a farm which bordered along the Northville-Plymouth Road. He donated a considerable amount of land there. Cass Benton Park existed, in fact, before the parkway was put in. Much of the work was done during the Depression years under the WPA project. Many of the buildings, the restrooms and bridges and those sort of structure were done during that period of time. Many people don't realize the importance of the beauty along there. They, I think, assume that it was done by nature, herself. T. Glen Phillips, in the area from Plymouth to Northville, designed that. That is to say, it isn't so much the plantings and what he brought in, but what he took out. After all that was all pretty much wooded. He would make decision on what trees and shrubbery should come out and what trees should stay to create this beautiful vista.

As you drive along Edward Hines Drive and you approach Cass Benton Park and you go over that little rise and then head on toward Northville, you think about T. Glen Phillips. I don't care what time of the year it is, you look at it and you see that great beauty and try to remember what I have passed on to you. He was a very fine man and, in my estimation, very much an artist and he left quite a legacy.

Northville will always be my home. It will always be in my heart. There's nowhere else on earth like Northville to me. (It) may be hard to understand for someone who has stayed there all these years, but you will have to accept my word. I look forward to going back real soon and especially taking that beautiful drive along that parkway. I've never seen anything as gorgeous as that is anywhere in this world. And thank you so much. What you're doing is most worthwhile and will be appreciated by generations to come.