

FRED AND LAURA HICKS - MARCH 3, 1989

MZ: Fred, why don't you tell us about your life in Northville?

FH: Well, for one thing, it's been a very happy one and it started in Northville in a house just north of the Shopping Center Market. That was a double house and I was born in the half that my folks rented there. From there we moved over to Gray Street when I was about two or three years old. I lived there long enough to attempt to run away. My mother didn't talk me out of it but I talked myself out of it.

LH: She tied some things on a handkerchief and put it on a stick and told him that when you run away, you go right out and you don't look back. He got to the end of the driveway and he looked back and he went back home.

FH: So I've been home ever since. I never left Northville after that. We spent a few years there and then moved to the little house on Horton Street. (We) built that house with the intentions of it being a garage and then the big depression came along and it remained a home for a good many years both for me and my parents. Of course the big War came along and that changed a lot of things too. But before that, I had a good time running away down to the pond and various creeks.

MZ: Were you doing fishing then?

FH: Oh yeah, fishing and frogs and turtles.

MZ: In those days we ate the fish.

FH: That's right. We still do. I'm choosy about it but I do. I finally grew up to be a fairly decent sort of kid, I guess. One thing that comes to mind every time I think about the old Northville is all the major fires because my father was involved with the fire department most of his adult active life in Northville.

MZ: And your father's name was?

FH: His name was Fred also.

MZ: And your mother's maiden name?

FH: Wilcox. She came from the DeWitt area north of Lansing. My mother's sister married Will Hicks in Novi and my mother came down here to help her sister when her children were born. Of course she met Will's brother, Fred, and a romance blossomed and they got married. So it was brothers marrying sisters. Eventually my father moved to Northville from Novi and of course he always worked as a carpenter for his brother who was George Hicks, contractor in Northville for a good many years.

MZ: Did they build a lot of homes in Northville?

FH: Oh yeah, they built a lot of homes. Early on they build a lot of barns all over the country. They built a lot of barns over in Pontiac and Orchard Lake area. They built barns as far away as Tecumseh. Uncle George used to have a franchise for a silo company and Detroit Creamery had a big farm out in Mt. Clemens, I think, and they put the silos up out there in that big dairy farm.

MZ: Those were wooden silos?

FH: Wooden silos, yeah, wooden stave silos. They used to go on the Interurban which went all over the try in those days. (I) had an uncle that worked on the Interurban, too. Used to come in town and pick up gravel over by the railroad track where M-Care is now. That was the entrance into the gravel pit. Go down and pick up gravel there. The years seem to have rolled by in a big rush, but the fishin' is still good.

MZ: When did you live at the City Hall?

FH: About 1933, I think. I went in the service in 1941, and I think we moved back down to Horton Street in 1940. I graduated in '36 and I lived there then and I went to work at the hardware and I worked at the hardware 'til '39 and I know I was living there all during that time.

MZ: Who owned that hardware?

FH: Neil Hanniford. Well, he didn't own it at first. The Pontiac Paint Manufacturing Company owned it originally and he worked for them. Gradually he accumulated enough funds so that he could buy them out.

MZ: And that was the old Huff Hardware on Main Street?

FH: Yeah, it was originally the Huff Hardware. After Huff was Water Ware, then Babbitt & McCarthy and then Northville Hardware or the Hanniford Hardware, or whatever you'd want to call it, came later. When I came back from the service, I didn't go back in the hardware business, I went to work for Wellway Company which was a company owned by William B. Walker, Jr. on Eight Mile back when wages were high. A dollar an hour.

MZ: What did the company produce?

FH: They produced automotive stampings, primarily, and stampings for some of the refrigeration companies. Metal stampings was their main...

MZ: Did they employ a lot of Northville people?

FH: Quite a few, yes they did. In fact that's how I got on to work there. Her (Laura's) brother worked there. He worked there before he went in the service then when he got out, why he told me to come on down. So, I went down and got a job and I worked there for 18 years.

MZ: When did you get time to be a rural mailman?

FH: Well, that was when I left Wellway Company. In '55 there was a little recession in this area. Things got a little tough down at the factory and I began lookin' around for something that

(had a) little better benefits and a more secure future. I thought I'd better take some Civil Service exams or something and find out if my brain's still active or not. I thought seriously about going to work at a place like Schoolcraft, or the Northville School System, or the City, which is all about the same sort of benefits. Maybe not the highest paying job, but secure. I had a good background in maintenance, electrical, plumbing, hydrolics, and so forth.

MZ: Carpenter?

FH: No. My dad's trade didn't rub off on me. No, I was really a metal worker more than I was a wood worker. It just seems that metal intrigued me and I was good at it. In fact I was pretty good as a gunsmith which was my trade in the service. That's what I had in mind and I was going to open gun shop here at one time. A fellow by the name of Schonberger from Plymouth came over here and opened up a gun shop out on Seven Mile Road and beat me to it. I didn't think I had enough on the ball to compete with him so I never did it.

MZ: How long did you work for the Post Office?

FH: Actually about nineteen years.

MZ: And your rural route, where was that? Did they change?

FH: It changes from time to time, but starting out, it was sixty miles long. I used to tell people that it went from half way to Farmington to half way to Ann Arbor, and actually it did. It went to Newburgh Road and Nine Mile, which is halfway to Farmington, and it went to Five Mile and Pontiac Trail, which is Werdon's Corners, and back all in one day.

MZ: The Northville Post Office went all the way to Pontiac Trail?

FH: Yes. I delivered mail on Pontiac Trail from Five Mile to Six Mile. I think it still does.

MZ: How long was the run?

FH: Sixty-one miles.

MZ: I mean time-wise.

FH: Well, of course that varied with the amount of mail and the weather sometimes.

LH: And how many pheasants, etc. that he noticed along the way.

FH: And I'm a social person so you had this a little bit too, you know.

MZ: That's important to people in the rural communities.

LH: He did lots of good!

FH: It's really a PR job. The rural carrier was really a PR man for the Post Office, and that no longer exists. The Post Office has gotten so they don't want this sort of thing. They're not interested in that part of it. They don't want to pay you for being a PR man.

MZ: You'd sell stamps sometimes?

FH: Yes, a rural carrier has the same capabilities (as) a fourth-class post office. We could register mail, insure mail, write money orders, and so forth, and sell stamps. The exam was the same as a fourth-class postmaster's exam. Before I got out of Wallway, I decided on this. The first exam that came open was the post office so thought this is a good way to find out how smart I am. Elmer Balko came up here one day and told me. So, he got the papers and I filled them out and I finally went down and took the exam. There was an opening for a rural mail carrier. When we got the scores back, I was only second highest and I forgot all about it. I figured, well, the highest man is going to take the job. As it turned out, he turned the job down. Two weeks before the job was to start, Elmer came and says, "You want that job in the Post Office?" I had, of course, given it up so I hadn't made any overtures to the company I worked for, Wellway. Two weeks! I went in that morning and I had to make up my mind in one day. So that morning I went in and told them I was through on such and such a date and started the next at the post office. That was when it was on Center Street next to Schrader's.

MZ: Do you remember the Post Office when it was (on) the other side of the street and we walked in to get the mail out of the boxes in there?

FH: Yeah, where what's-his-name had the barbershop. Shipley was in there.

LH: My mother used to let me go to the Post Office when I was probably about five years old and buy stamps with two dollars. It was surprising. A bag full of groceries, you could carry home.

FH: I could remember on the other side of the street, I think it was Mr. Elkington had an automotive shop about where Schaefer's built that building, I would think. North of the hardware. It has a stamped metal front like Turnbull's old electric shop. It had an embossed metal front. That was a double curve. A big high curved thing. It was two steps and I think I've got a picture around here someplace, of me eating an ice cream cone settin' on that curve and all there is on the street is Model T cars lined up on both sides of the street.

I remember all the big fires because when the call came in, why we were up and going, even if you were just a little kid. I can remember standing in front of Stewart's Drug Store when Beener's mother's place burned and Elliot's Bakery and all that along there east of the bank. That big fire. I can remember the Hotel fire on the corner. The Hotel fire, I remember the heat cracked the windows where the hardware store was. There was a dock entrance and there was a big window (on) that side of it and there was one on the other side of it, and they were cracked. There was a little café in the back of the Hotel. All I can think of is "Busy Bee". I don't know if it was the "Busy Bee" or not. Anyway, we accumulated some of the crockery from that. Real thick, heavy, white mugs and heavy dishes, you know. That went to the deer camp probably. There was another hotel down on the corner of Hutton and Main. The aunt that was married to Will Hicks ran that. Her name was Leah Green at that time.

MZ: What was the name of that hotel? That wasn't Merritt House?

FH: No. Merritt House was on the other side. Dan and Suzie Merritt ran that. My aunt was originally Leah Hicks, but she remarried and her name was Leah Green and she was the

proprietor of a hotel at Hutton and Main, on the northwest corner, which has a big long porch down the side as entry into rooms and so forth and a livery barn in back for horses and buggies. She featured home cooking, which she was an expert at. I'll tell you, she was a good cook. The name of it was the Monte Carlo Restaurant. It also was a hotel, too. I don't remember the hotel name, but it seems like the hotel had a different name. She took a correspondence course in cooking and we had the certificate that she had earned and gave it to her daughter. That would be about 1924 or '25, along in there. Then later the livery barn became a garage (that) was operated by Al Zimmer. Then later the garage became George Miller's Garage. Across the road, the corner, I think, was vacant and was owned by the Ford Motor Company and used to have a big canabed in it full of canas every summer. That would be the site of the old stone blacksmith shop, I believe, but of course it was vacant then.

The other day I was talking to somebody about Stinson Aircraft. When I was a kid, we used to go down to Stinson Aircraft because it was an important place for kids to play and it was a new-fangled thing flying through the sky. We used to steal what was called banana oil which they stored in a barrel outside the building because it was highly flammable. We used to tip up the barrel and siphon it off into a milk bottle to use to make our model airplanes. We used to make model airplanes. We used to make model airplanes out of balsa and tissue paper and you put on the tissue paper and it tightens it all up. It shrinks it. Stinson used it on their fabric, on their wings for the same purpose. Later Stinson moved to Wayne and Michigan Powdered Metal Products moved into that plant, I believe, in later years. There might have been something in the interim, too. I had the pleasure of flying with Eddie Stinson. My dad was friendly with one of his managers. The name was Cory. He boys went to school here and my father was quite friendly with him. They used to fly the planes off at Six Mile Road, in back (of) Starkweather's farm land we went out there once and went for a ride with Eddie Stinson. I don't know how old I was. Maybe ten, something like that. That was my first flying experience and it lasted for a long time.

MZ: Laura, why don't you tell us a little bit about your family and history in Northville.

LH: I was born in Salem, Michigan and moved with my mother and father to the house out on Seven Mile Road, above the Fish Hatchery. People, at one time, by the name of James lived in there and we lived there for six months while my mother and father had purchased the house on Wing Street. Charley and Irene Johnson lived in the house and they were building the house on Center St. It was not complete and so my mother and father had to wait until their house was ready and they moved in the morning on December one to their new house on Center St. and Jerry was small and we moved into the house on Wing St. in the afternoon. Jerry and I ended up going to school together, graduating at the same time, and are still friends. I lived there all the rest of my life. At that time, Wing Court was not there. There was a vacant lot from the house we lived in to the next house down which is where Dick Elkire lives now. There were no houses in between.

MZ: Was that the Grovener house?

LH: That was not there, nor then Grennell house, and the next house. I remember, vaguely when they built the houses up Wing Ct. and the excavation. I remember the big sand hill that was there that we kids played in.

MZ: Did your property butt the cemetery?

LH: No. There's a section in there that belonged to the city, and then the cemetery, but my father's property went back quite a ways. It backed up to one of the houses on Wing Ct. I graduated from Northville High school and went to work in September, after I graduated for Dr. Atchison, up on Dunlop St. At that time we only had one half of the building as an office. It was a very interesting experience. I worked for him for seven years, all during the War. We worked long, hard hours. Many mornings, going to work by eight o'clock in the morning and wouldn't get home until after midnight. But it was very interesting. He was wonderful to work for and I enjoyed it very much. I was married in 1942.

MZ: This was before Fred went in the Army?

LH: No. He came home on furlough and we were married. Then he went to Boise, Idaho. I went to visit him for two weeks and then I didn't see him again for over three years. All during that time I worked for Dr. Atchison. After he came home from service, I worked until I was pregnant with Pat.

MZ: How old is Pat now?

LH: She was just 41. Then I stayed home and was a mother during that time. About four years later, we had Robert. I enjoyed my children. I did not work during that time. I was a room-mother.

MZ: P.T.A.?

LH: Right. All that sort of thing. Girl Scouts and church work. My mother and father were both born in Plymouth. Then my mother's parents moved to Northville and they owned the house that I mentioned that we lived in on Seven Mile Rd. Then they moved to the house on Main Street across from Sessions Hospital, right on Main. The one with the brick front. That was my grandparents' house.

HZ: How long were you in the Army, Fred?

FH: About four years and five months that I was actually in service. I went in on the nineteenth of April in 1941 and got out in '45, in September.

MZ: You had enough points to come home?

FH: Yeah, I had enough point to get out and I got back to the States which was fortunate, although while I was out on furlough, coming back, VJ Day came along, so it was all over then, anyway.

MZ: Were you in the Pacific?

FH: No, I was in England. I was with the 8th Air Force, one of the first units to go over with the 306 Bomb Group. They have an association which I still enjoy seeing the paper from, and so forth. Made a lot of close associations, of course. I think everybody does.

MZ: Did you fly in one of the bombers?

FH: No, I didn't fly. Not as a crew member. I did occasionally fly, but not as a part of my duties. I was in an ordinance company which supplied the bombs and ammunition and the firearms, and so forth. We had other things to do, too. I remember quite a few mornings that we'd have to get up and serve breakfast to the combat crews. Of course, I didn't begrudge them having their steak and eggs because that was the last breakfast for a lot of them.

The blitz was just coming to an end when we got over there. It was 'nuisance raids', really. They had lost their incentive for the big raids. The Germans hadn't been too successful, but they still kept sending planes over to keep them active, you might say, or on edge.

I was only fifty miles north of London. We could see what went on at that distance, a lot of times, but I spent some times in London when they were coming over. The search lights reminded me of the spokes on a wheel, 'cause they'd all converge on one place or one object. They'd go beyond the plan and the plane would look like a little moth in the center of it. It was beautiful, really, and the artillery fire was beautiful. The firing was so uniform. They'd have four-gun batteries and after the first gun started, you couldn't tell one from the other. It was like a continuous machine. Lots of noise. Lots of flack. You didn't stand out in the open because there was lots of flack falling from the anti-aircraft fire. The next morning they'd clean up the streets so it didn't puncture tires on the buses and stuff. I was on a few air fields that were bombed slightly. No real damage because their effort was waning at that time.

I was stationed near Norwich, England at an air base. The city of Norwich was targeted by the Germans to develop ballistic tables for the B-2 Rocket, which was the forerunner of our rockets today. They did it in the afternoon along about four o'clock, when the sun was in the west. They usually did it on clear days. They'd shoot the rockets up and they'd leave a vapor trail. Of course we couldn't see them coming, but they could see the vapor trail as the rocket went down. They could (tell) where those were going to strike by the arc of the trail. Thirteen of them, they fired over a period of time. No warning at all. All of a sudden there'd be a big KABOOM! I was on a bomb reconnaissance squad and the closest one was about a half mile off the air base. (There) was just a big hole in the ground with a lot of shredded metal and the rocket motor at the bottom of the crater about 25 feet deep and probably 35 feet across. The white chalk that underlies England, it looked funny just like plaster down there.

MZ: Did you often wonder what a little guy from Northville, Michigan was doing over there?

FH: I know there was a little guy from Northville that was just anxious to get back home. That's all I was working towards.

Well back to my life on Horton St. The early years was pretty good, but then the Depression came along. I like to think of them as being formative years in as much as I'm still pretty thrifty. I don't spend a nickel where a penny will do.

LH: You're not going to change!

FH: I still don't like rabbit stew too well. I ate a lot of that and a lot of baloney and cottage cheese.

LH: And canned salmon.

FH: We were more fortunate than many. My mother was a practical nurse and worked at Sessions Hospital all during the Depression, seven days a week for \$21 a week. But it was money, which a lot of people didn't have any of. So, we were able to do pretty well. Of course, my father was a hunter and a fisherman and supplemented the diets that way and we had a pretty good time of it. The thing that I look back on now which I'm sure wouldn't happen if we had another depression is the attitude of people toward each other, and what they had, and what they shared.

LH: Yes, that's right. We had a lot of fun. I can remember my parents having the Balkos come for an evening. Maybe we had popcorn and we visited, played cards, and we had lots of good times. Didn't involve any money.

MZ: We could make taffy or fudge.

FH: Apples or something. It was a time (in) which people helped each other. If we have another situation in the same thing, it will be a riot. You'll have to sit up nights defending what you've got from somebody else. The morals of the citizenry has changed. There's no doubt about it. It was an experience we'll never forget. We wore a lot of old clothes and work them long. Went without shoes. (I) spent many a summer bare-footed.

LH: We never got shoes until it was time to go to school.

FH: My mother used to send me to the cider mill for vinegar, and to the mill for flour.

MZ: Which mill was this?

FH: This was the Yerkes, Northville Milling and Lumber. Don Yerkes Sr. and Harry Wood would be out on the side of the building pitching horseshoes. They could pitch for hours and never score. One ringer right on top of another. Mother'd send me after whole wheat flour and corn meal, usually, and maybe white flour, too, (in) five-pound bags. Old J. Goodall was the miller and he'd throw it out of the appropriate shoots. I'll never forget because he was always covered with dust. He had white eyebrows and they looked, for all the world, just like pigs' eyes.

MZ: Do you recall what it would cost for a five-pound bag?

FH: Oh, probably a quarter. I'm not sure. I don't remember what vinegar was, but I do remember that the cider mill was great for furnishing the pucks for hockey on the old mill pond. The wooden barrel bungs just floated down the river and just seemed appropriate things to use.

MZ: Was that water always running at the mill pond in the winter time too?

FH: Oh yes. Free flow most of the time. Of course in the summer, the mill pond was still there. But for swimming, we had a place dammed up in the creek. That got used maybe once or twice a day almost on a regular basis. This place was back of Don Yerkes farm, north of Eight Mile. But there was one on the south side of town, down by the old bridge to the slaughterhouse where the new condominiums are going in.

MZ: What was that dam used for, down there?

FH: That was called the Ambler Pond and they used to cut ice on that pond. My father helped cut ice on there, some.

MZ: Who do you think put that dam in?

FH: Ambler put the original dam in. Then it went out, and then Ford came along and bought that property and put a dam in. That dam cracked and it was never dammed after that.

MZ: What did the Ford Motor Company use it for?

FH: I don't know what they built the dam for, really.

MZ: But for Ambler, it was for the ice.

FH: Yeah. Ambler had an ice house and furnished ice.

LH: Do you remember when the Ford employees had gardens down there during the War?

FH: Did they have them on the Ambler Pond, too?

LH: On the flats. It was called Ford Gardens.

FH: They also had them down here over the bank where the playing field is.

LH: Yes. Ford Field. They had big gardens.

FH: Yeah, it was bottom land, flood plain, which is always good. Then in the summer, we used to go to Curtis Lake, swimming occasionally, too, which is now known as Silver Springs Lake.

MZ: Is it true there were snakes in that lake?

FH: Probably. There's water snakes around most lakes, but they're harmless. I don't ever remember any rattlesnakes being in this particular area.

MZ: Is that the lake you can see from Griswold Street now?

FH: No. That's the gravel pit. Curtis Lake, you could see only from going down Silver Springs Drive. When I first went there, there was one house on the lake. It was built by a man by the name of Truax. It was on the north side of the lake. We used to catch a lot of fish there. Good fishing! I can remember going down there once when I was about fifteen or sixteen years

old and we got a boat from old Pete Troust, but no oars and no anchor, and a good-sized leak in it, to boot. We were gonna fish bluegills. We had to set on bulrushes on the side of the lake to anchor the boat if you stood up, of course, you drifted away. The boat got water in the bottom of it 'til it got about four, five, six inches deep. We'd just throw the fish in the bottom and they'd just go zooming from one end to the other, throwin' water all over. We were pretty well soaked, but we had a boat-load of fish.

MZ: Was that a real deep lake?

FH: Thirty-five feet, probably. It begin to get a little bit dusk and the first thing we know there's a horn honking over on the road and it's the parents of each of us. They were quite perturbed that we didn't come home for supper. After we got the boat into shore and they'd seen all the fish, they kinda mellowed a little. Of course, they were both fishermen, too, so that helped. It didn't help the mothers so much as it did the fathers.

MZ: Did you clean the fish when you got them home?

FH: Pan fish, my mother usually cleaned. But I cleaned them with her. I'd help her. It's a cooperative effort between my wife and I, to this day.

MZ: Laura helps?

LH: Oh, yeah. I scale and he filets. Then I help filet.

FH: That helped the Depression. The swimming and the fish and everything, that all helped the Depression go by fairly easily for a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old. It was a little tough in school. You didn't have clothes that you might have. There was a big disparity in clothing between different families.

LH: There were lots of made-over things that I just hated.

MZ: Did you have the proms and J-hops?

FH: Oh, yes. They went on, but they were more austere, I think.

MZ: No tuxedos or that type of thing?

FH: No. No limousines. My mother working at that time, as I said, so lunches were a problem for me. She didn't put up my lunch, but she'd give me a quarter, or maybe thirty cents, and I could get a bowl of soup and a sandwich at Bob Lee's.

MZ: Where was Bob Lee's?

FH: That was in the old German Building, at the bowling alley. At Bob Lee's, I could come down from school and get my lunch and go back, no problem, for thirty cents. A bowl of probably vegetable soup and a hamburger or some sort of sandwich.

LH: You can't do that today.

MZ: I had a bowl of soup someplace. It was three dollars!

LH: We make lots of soup. I think that's probably a hang-over from our early days. Our parents made soup. We ate very plain, but very good. Saturday was always bean day. During the Depression, I ironed for Emma Reed. Her mother paid me ten cents an hour. I, lots of times, made eighty, ninety cents.

FH: Your mother baked bread during the Depression, too.

LH: Yes. When Junior was mentioning about flour, I dare say that you could buy a 25-pound bag of flour in those days for less than a dollar. My mother would buy a 25-pound sack of flour and would make a dishpan full of bread and sold the bread for ten cents a loaf. It was better than nothing.

FH: We ate a lot of rabbits during the Depression.

MZ: Raised them, or were those wild rabbits?

FH: Wild rabbits. My dad was a good hunter.

LH: We raised rabbits during the Depression.

FH: He hunted, too.

LH: Oh, yeah. My father hunted. He also trapped with Ed Musoff. Quite a bit during that time. But we raised rabbits at one time, and he made cages. We had to move these cages and they ate all the grass off the back lawn. We couldn't afford to buy food for them so we had to cut dandelions and grass and whatever, to feed them...

MZ: And a lot of canning in those days.

FH: You used to read about it in the papers, some. They stole chickens. They stole livestock. There was a lot of that (that) went on.

LH: But I don't think they did it to their neighbor.

FH: No. It was usually strangers, but you couldn't blame them. They were hungry. It's the only source of food they had, really.