

Northville Township Historical District Commission

Oral History Interview – Dottie Kirkpatrick

April 20, 2007



Recreation Leader - Wayne County Training School

Interviewers: RA= Richard Allen and JC= John Colling

RA. This is Friday, April 20, 2007. John and I are interviewing Dottie Kirkpatrick who has had some experiences with the Wayne County Training School. We're here to learn a little bit about it today. Exactly what did you do while you were at the training center?

I was the recreation leader, meaning I worked with a group made of two or three cottages. Usually I had the girls, because we had recreation leaders who were guys working there during college break. We played baseball. We even had roller skates but not enough areas to go roller-skating. A few people had bikes. Mainly our games were baseball and jump rope in good weather. If the weather was bad, we stayed in and played cards. I think one of the games we played was Authors, which was popular then. This was in 1948. I don't think we had Scrabble in those days.

JC. What age range are we talking about?

I usually had the younger ones—five through ten or eleven. Sometimes I didn't like the mixture of ages because some of the five year olds were "in the way". That's what the older kids said, "They were in the way." We had no choice. We were told who to take and which cottages to take, because we had so many youngsters. The male recreation leaders knew more about baseball than I did.

RA. Did you have the same group of kids each time or did you rotate them?

We did rotate them sometimes. There were times when we had kids coming from Cottage Six, and some were sick so we had to make up for the lack of numbers by going to another cottage. But usually it was the same kids. I got to know them very well.

RA. When we talked on the phone, you mentioned a lot of the kids there did not have mental problems, but a lot of them came from disadvantaged homes. Can you expand on that?

When I was there, the myth was that these were mentally retarded kids. That wasn't true. Many of the kids were very, very intelligent. It was just that they came from broken homes, and remember back in 1948, it was even more serious than it is now. Some kids never saw their parents read a newspaper! They were behind in school. They weren't the kind who could read before they got to first grade. I can remember having discussions with some of the doctors. I didn't read their records. I remember, very definitely, that most of them were intelligent, a lot higher IQ than you would think.

RA. The story's been around so long, is there a possibility that it was split and there was some of each in there. You just had the brighter ones for recreation?

Maybe.

RA. I know there was a very interesting swimming pool in there. I saw it when it was in a terrible state of repair.

It was downstairs. I don't know whether it was regulation size or not, meaning Olympic size like we have at Schoolcraft. Back in '48, to be able to swim in such a beautiful pool was wonderful! It wasn't like it is now when we have swimming pools in our backyards.

JC. Didn't they have other facilities there too? I heard they had a bowling alley.

Yes, that was downstairs. The facilities were beautiful. The cottages were lovely, much nicer than any of those kids could ever have had in their homes. I can't remember how many kids there were per cottage. The beds were dormitory style. I lived in the Teachridge because I didn't have a car so I couldn't travel back and forth to Detroit. My room was lovely on the second floor and on the same floor as the doctors. I think there were two doctors with their wives. One doctor had a couple kids, and I remember babysitting. The doctors got to know these youngsters very well. They had good medical care. They were much better off at the training school than they were at home as far as comforts were concerned.

RA. The thing that I remember about the pool when I saw it that was unique was that the shallow portion was in the middle of the pool. Each end was deep, and then it was humpbacked. When you looked at a cross section, the floor was shallower in the middle than it was at each end. I had never seen a pool like that before.

I don't remember that. I never took the kids swimming. The lifeguards did. I did swim it in though.

RA. Did you work just in the warmer months with recreation or did you do winter recreation also?

I worked there for two Christmas vacations (1947 & 1948) while I was in college at Eastern Michigan University – called Michigan State Normal then. Most of the recreation leaders were college kids. I remember they paid very well. I wouldn't swear to it, but I think it could have been \$4 an hour, and to me, that was a lot of money.

RA. That was a lot of money in those days.

Not being trained for anything...All I had were a few education courses.

JC. What years did you start and stop working there?

Christmas time would have been '47 and '48; probably not anymore than two weeks at each Christmas break. Then I worked the whole summer of '48 and then again Christmas time in '48.

JC. You didn't oversee any of the cottages, or anything? You took the kids for recreation purposes. Was there someone in charge of any of the cottages?

Oh, yes. Each cottage had a leader. There was an adult who stayed in each cottage all night. I stayed in a bigger building where the Doctors lived with their families. Some teachers lived there during the school year. We called this big building the Teachridge.

RA. I remember some of the larger buildings. The cottages, I draw a blank on as to where they were located.

Oh, they were spread all out all over. They were like mini-condos. A lot of them were not attached like we are here at Kings Mill, where I live. It was a big open space, a very beautiful campus.

RA. Were these cottages multi-floored?

The ones that I remember were all on one floor except the Teachridge which had two floors plus the beautiful basement that had the pool, the bowling alley, and pool table.

JC. Were the cottages separated by gender: boys' cottages and girls' cottages?

They were, yes, and by age.

JC. When you worked with the groups, did you work along with the housemothers when you took their kids out?

No, not really. I would go get them in the morning and line them up just like we do at school to go to class. Sometimes we'd go to the ball field across Sheldon. Of course, it was just a dirt dusty road. We'd play our games or we'd play jacks which were popular back then. The boys played marbles. I can remember playing marbles and jumping rope with the kids—especially on rainy days.

RA. Marbles and jacks are historic.

Yeah.

JC. I played those when I was a kid.

RA. The kids today don't have a clue.

When I retired from teaching school in '90, I don't remember anybody playing marbles and jacks on the playground.

RA. We interviewed Charlie George a while back. He was telling us that when he was a youngster, a lot of the kids from the school would go for mass-walks and come walking down Six Mile across Northville Road.

Yes, we called it "hiking".

RA. This was when he was younger and the kids would intimidate him.

We'd go on a hike and circle around through the woods. There was more than one group, usually the older ones. Sometimes we were a little bit pretentious about what we did. We'd call it a science hike and if it had rained, we'd find a few little snails. I couldn't identify a lot of the flowers, but I'd ask one of the fellows who was a Biology major and he could identify the flowers.

JC. I had a question you might not know the answer to. Down on the Rouge River, down the hill from where the school used to be, is a ruin. Some people say it was part of Meads Mill, which I do not believe is true. I've heard and read that it was a power plant for the school. Do you know anything about that?

It might have been. We had a whole building of power plants.

JC. They did all their own internal stuff. They provided their own electricity.

RA. It was coal fired because I was in it one time before they demolished it. They even had their own meat processing plant.

It was like Maybury Park. In the 70's and 80's my husband and I would go mushroom hunting. We could still see signs of the TB center.

RA. They've reestablished that now. They have trail markers showing where the buildings used to be.

Oh have they? I haven't been back there in a while.

RA. They put it in about a year ago. When you go in off of Eight Mile, go to the easterly parking lot. There is a smaller version of the old Maybury gate that used to be on Seven Mile and there is a kiosk there with maps. You can follow the trail and see where the children's home was and where the doctors lived. You can take a self-guided walk and read all the plaques.

How long ago did they do that?

RA. They dedicated it last fall. It was an ugly day, I remember that. It rained; it was cold.

I've been to Maybury Park many times. We lived in Novi; so we were near Eight Mile.

RA. I think it was a year ago in 2006.

JC. How did the students come to be there? Did doctors send them there or was it the courts?

Probably the courts the way I remember. I wasn't a teacher so I didn't ask as many questions. Kids who didn't have good homes. Some of the mothers were probably prostitutes and weren't home for them. There was nobody to make breakfast for them.

They were kids who didn't do well in school and some of them were in foster care. All of them were from Detroit. A lot of people ask why did we allow such beautiful facilities to deteriorate like they did. It was all up to the mayor of Detroit to do something about that.

JC. It closed in 1974. That would be Coleman Young.

It closed before '74.

RA. In '74 the township hall was already in a decrepit building then.

JC. I got this off the internet. I don't know how accurate it is. It says that the complex closed in '74 and the maintenance crew was kept there until 1978.

I don't care. In '70 it was already closed. What did the maintenance crew do because it was all weeds?

JC. Yeah, for a while. According to this it was closed in '74 and the maintenance crew was there until 1978.

I'm sure it was closed before then. I moved to Novi in 1970.

JC. When kids came, were they there for a fixed term or when someone thought they could be released? How did that work?

Some were there, I know, for a couple of years—anything to get them out of the school system. Some of them had behavior problems. Some had learning problems. None of them were wealthy that I knew of at that time. Most of them were there because they weren't doing well in school. That's where the term, "mentally retarded" came from. We don't even use that term for the real mentally challenged.

RA. I presume they had a regular school system for the kids to go to?

Oh yeah, small groups; not thirty to a classroom.

JC. I'm assuming they did have a structured school, like first, second, and third grade that the kids could progress through?

Yes, It was really a magnificent facility.

RA. I remember the township building inspector went in the dental clinic and said that all the dental tools were still lying on the trays. They just walked away from it.

When was that?

RA. This would have been the late 70's, early 80's. You would go in the buildings, and it looked like they just walked out.

I did see the pool; of course it didn't have any water in it.

RA. When I saw it, it looked like it had been fire bombed. It was in pretty tough shape. Heavily vandalized.

I was angry that nothing was done with it, and they let it just deteriorate. I know it had something to do with the fact that most of these kids were black, and nobody wanted them to be integrated here in Northville.

JC. I believe, and I may be totally wrong in this, but it was because a consensus of professionals was against institutionalization.

At that time it wasn't. It came later.

JC. It just closed down and it was neglected because they stopped doing that. They wanted kids to be in home situations rather than institutional situations.

RA. We just had an interview with the director of Hawthorn who essentially told us why a lot of the institutions for those who had mental problems were closed down. They thought it was better to be in a home situation than a state-run facility.

People are still debating that issue today. As a school teacher there was a lot of talk about that. I'm sure that if most of the kids hadn't been black, something could have been done with that facility. It belonged to Wayne County. It was the Wayne County Training School. It's too bad. They might have been able to use it for the senior citizens. All those beautiful buildings...

RA. At one time it was looked into for that, but then they got into the environmental laws of asbestos. The place was full of asbestos. To take care of the situation made it cost prohibitive, and then you have access for the handicapped, none of the buildings had elevators, etc. It was looked at numerous times to rehab the buildings, but financially made no sense.

As recently as 1989-90, there was a lot of asbestos in schools in Oak Park.

RA. Asbestos is not a problem if you don't mess with it. Don't touch it.

I know.

JC. Unless I'm mistaken when it was first closed down, Wayne State was looking into getting the property to have a western extension of Wayne State University. At the same time this catholic priest who dealt with alcoholics, I don't remember his name; he was looking into it to try to establish that there. But that fell through when he was transferred

to Montreal. There were people who looked at it, probably not to maintain it. If the priest had gotten it, he'd probably have kept it like it was.

It would be like they have in Brighton.

JC. Wayne State would have probably built college buildings there.

RA. At one time, the state wanted to take it over for a prison. I remember going to a rally down there telling the state we didn't want a prison on that site.

RA. Thank you very much.

It was a fun place to work.

Approved by Dottie Kirkpatrick on Sept 22, 2007

Transcribed by Patricia Allen.