

Charles and Maxine Lapham

This is Thursday afternoon, August the 17th, 1989. I'm in Lapham's Men's Clothing Store. I'm with Mr. and Mrs. Lapham, we're here, I'm Francis Durham of the oral histories project and we're here to interview Mr. and Mrs. Lapham.

FD: I do know just from... Ok, we had turned the tape off because of the telephone, but we're ready to go now. And I had checked out of the public library, the book, Northville, the First 100 Years, because I knew the Lapham was a very prominent family in the Northville area. And so I took some information out of it, some of which Mr. Lapham has already answered, but I'd like to put it on tape. I do know, for example, that the Laphams and Ponsfords were related. Mr. Lapham, why don't you just expand on the Lapham and the Ponsford relationship?

CL: Well, Laphams came from Farmington and Ponsfords came from Flint and my mother and father were married in about ... about 1930 and my grandfather which was C. A. Ponsford started the men's clothing store under the name of C.A. Ponsford in 1910 and ran it until his death in 1932.

FD: Okay, now there were several other Lapham's mentioned... Okay, as I started to say, there are several other Lapham's names mentioned in the Northville, The First 100 Years. For example, there was a David Lapham, who had a mitten factory. But, you indicated that there's no connection with your side of the Lapham family that you are aware of. There was an A.S. Lapham and Co., that later became the J.S. Lapham and Co., and they were bankers. And you've indicated that there may be a connection there, but you're not aware of a connection. And now, there was a Lapham and Swift Clothing Store.

CL: None, I have no recollection.

FD: Nothing about the Lapham and Swift Clothing Store. Then, the other Lapham that was mentioned in this book was Dr. Mary Lapham, who eventually donated the building that became the first library here in Northville. And again you indicated, that you're not aware that was...

CL: An additional help you might get out of Farmington, by calling Byron or Harry Lapham, might be able to shed some more light on the banking side of the Lapham family.

FD: Ok, now how is he?

CL: One is an attorney, and the other is a banker.

FD: Ok, but, they're not related to you.

CL: Yes, they are.

FD: Oh, they are related to you.

CL: Yes, they're about third cousins from what I understand.

FD: Ok, third cousins and they're located in Farmington?

CL: Farmington.

FD: Ok, and they know something about...

CL: Um hum

FD: Okay, okay let's go on now. You indicated that your dad came from Farmington and that one side of the family were farmers and the other side were bankers.

CL: Um hum

FD: Okay, how did... how did your dad happen, well, now when you say came from Farmington, are you talking about the farm that was located at Ten Mile and... Ten Mile and what?

CL: It'd be Ten Mile and Haggerty.

FD: Ten Mile and Haggerty.

CL: That's right.

FD: Is that the farm you are talking about?

CL: That's the farm.

FD: That's the farm.

CL: Now that was not a Lapham farm, he married into that farm.

FD: Okay.

CL: And but it became the Lapham farm from Ingersoll I believe.

FD: Ingersoll.

CL: He married an Ingersoll.

FD: Okay.

CL: Who had the farm so he moved in, bag, baggage, and Lapham name, and it became the Lapham farm.

FD: Okay.

CL: So that was why Lapham was from Farmington because it happened to be on the Farmington side of Haggerty Road.

FD: Okay.

CL: And like she said, the cows and horses were from Novi and family was from Farmington.

FD: That's interesting because it was the boundary line; it was in both Farmington and...

CL: The boundary ran right between the house and the barn. That's right.

FD: How did your dad happen to leave the farm? And because you indicated to me that he went into the mortuary business.

CL: Well, I think he sold the farm... That's right, they sold the farm and had to take in back in the Depression in the middle of the Depression, so when they sold the farm, they all moved to Northville and lived on the corner of Dunlap and Dunlap and the street just west of Wing.

FD: Uh huh, Randolph?

CL: And they lived there for years, until...

FD: Not Randolph?

CL: Until they had to take their farm back because the man lost it.

FD: Right.

CL: So then they went back into farming, but this time, they went back into fruit farming.

FD: Oh, okay, and what kind of fruit?

CL: Apples mostly, but we did have peaches and pears.

FD: Okay, and how long did your dad have that farm?

CL: No, my ... it was my grandfather's.

FD: Oh, your grandfather's.

CL: Grandfather's. Oh, he didn't go back when they had to take it back in the Depression. They were very poor, poor people then and they just trying to eke out a living and it wouldn't support anymore than my grandmother and grandfather. So then he found a job going to mortuary school, I guess, and working for an undertaker in Redford, then one in Farmington.

FD: Okay, and how long was he in the mortuary business?

CL: Oh, if I remember history, I think he didn't last more than three years because he was allergic to the embalming fluid.

FD: He had done some embalming himself?

CL: Right. So that took care of the mortuary business.

FD: Okay, and then what did he do after that?

CL: I think he came in the store because my mother was still running the clothing store.

FD: Okay, and this was C.A.

CL: Because her father had died and I guess I came along somewhere in between there, because I was born in '33. And I remember with the store, I remember living up here on Main, moving from the corner of Six Mile and Beck, where I was born. I was born on the house on that corner. And then I remember, just barely, moving into town. They still had their store and they ran the store until prior to the war. And they sold it to this Earl Scofield I mentioned. And then he did construction work for a carpenter in town. And then of course, they bought it back. They bought the business, they never sold the store. They bought the business back about four, five years later and then they ran it until they were divorced in '50.

FD: Okay, so the original name of the store was C.A. Ponsford.

CL: C. A. Ponsford.

FD: And that was a millinery store.

CL: Women's millinery... Women's and millinery store, right.

FD: Okay and your mother ran that store.

CL: Ran that until they sold it to Earl Scofield.

FD: Right, Okay.

CL: Then it became Northville Woolen Goods. Then they bought it back and renamed it Northville Men's Shop. And the both of them ran it until about 19... well '49, I think, at last, they were divorced in '50, so she ran it then by herself with the manager from '50 to '54, when I got out of the service. And maybe nine, ten months after I got out of the service, I came into the store.

FD: Okay, now you mentioned that while you were in high school, you were working for the Zayti Construction Company.

CL: Right.

FD: You worked for them a couple years. I'm assuming you went to Northville High.

CL: Right.

FD: And worked for them in construction for a couple years while you were in school. And then worked for them about nine months or so after graduating from high school, but you wanted to get your military obligation out of the way, so I assume that you enlisted, rather than waiting to be drafted.

CL: I went over to enlist and they told me that if I would, which was three years, if I would volunteer draft, it would be two years.

FD: Volunteer draft?

CL: Right, I hadn't heard of that. Well you don't hear of it too much because the enlister doesn't get any points or business for that. But apparently, I looked like I didn't want to be there too bad anyway, so he took pity on me, said if you want to just volunteer draft go to your draft board and tell them that you want to go. And then you only go for two years. That sounded great, so I went over and lo and behold, in ten days I had my draft notice so I left as I wanted to get it over with and get back and get in the trucking business with Zayti.

FD: What branch, Army?

CL: I took the Army. So I spent most of my time Korea and had enough points so I didn't have to spend the 24 months. So I only spent 21, which was great. And I came back and went back to work for him.

FD: Okay, so then you went back to work for Mr. Zayti. And then in the course of events, you indicated that your mother, now that your mother and dad are divorced, your mother's trying to carry on running the clothing store. But as you commented to me, it was a woman trying to run a men's clothing store, and that's kind of a difficult thing to do. She had a manager, but did she ask you about coming into the business? Did she ask you if you would be interested or did you get the idea, that you maybe you ought'd try to help your mother out a little bit.

CL: Well, I was still living at home, yes. Were we married then? Okay, we had just gotten married, I guess.

FD: Incidentally, Mrs. Lapham is here also, and eventually I want you to get in on this conversation too, go ahead.

CL: We hadn't been married too long and my mother simply said that this just wasn't supporting itself and it was either, we had a mortgage on it, and it was either we're gonna lose it, or try some other game plan. And the manager just wasn't working out, so did I want to try it. It was as simple as that. And it wasn't a quick decision, because I still liked the construction business that I was in and I liked what I was doing. Even though I was working awfully long hours. But, and

the money was good. I came in here hardly making ends meet, and if it wasn't for my dad, who had since moved to Bay City, letting us take an apartment upstairs, because he still owned the building next door, we probably wouldn't have been able to make ends meet. But, anyway, we came in and the challenge was there. Because, I said that I could never do it... Well, that's when you get your teeth and buckle down. And we tried it, and it, one thing led to another, we finally got acclimated to our new role.

FD: Now, here's a manager that worked, how long did the manager work here in the store approximately?

CL: After I came in, or before?

FD: No, before.

CL: Oh, he was here four or five years.

FD: Okay, so he probably a certain degree of resentment that the owner's son is in, here this young wetback kid.

CL: Whippersnapper out of a gravel truck.

FD: That's right. And eventually, it got to a point where your mother had to make a decision.

CL: Well, it was forced on her because the manager said that either I had to go or he was gonna go. And she surprised us all by letting him go. And there I was, in the middle of the creek with no paddle. I guess that's what makes you work hard.

FD: Were there other employees? Or basically, just you and your mother?

CL: Just my mother and I. And we had an old German tailor who my dad had seen fit to bring over, sponsor from the old country, to get her over here because he didn't have tailors back then, and you still don't have too many, and so she was a tailor and so it was just my mother and I, and this tailor working just a couple of days a week.

FD: So then you learned the business the hard way?

CL: By myself, right.

FD: All the very many varied aspects of the clothing business which you really don't realize unless you are right in the middle of it.

CL: Obviously, I didn't make as many mistakes as I did the right choices.

FD: Now your brother is younger.

CL: Yes, two years.

FD: Your brother's name is Jim. Okay, he was in the service, also he was in the Navy, and then he got out of the service and you indicated to me that he came into the business.

CL: He came in and worked about a year, maybe even a year and a half, did the remodeling of the store. Did a fantastic job, we found that he was very talented and skilled. He was even a cabinet maker. But when the remodeling was done, the shirt and tie choked him and he didn't care much to do the selling. So he went into the cabinetry and the construction business and it was back to mom and I again. But then we could afford a third person to help us out.

FD: Okay, basically remodeling was done as part of his efforts and he eventually went into the construction business for himself. Now, you had taken a leave of absence from the Zaytis, from the trucking company and I do want to come back to that. Because you made a comment that the Zaytis were more than just your employers. And I want to talk about that a little later on. Obviously, then you had to indicate to them that you were going to stay in the clothing business and I am sure it was a very amicable kind of agreement.

CL: They were just super about the whole thing, I don't know how much of that history that you want, but or how much he has passed away, since, but.

FD: Well, the Zaytis are another prominent name in Northville, so anything we can learn about the Zaytis is fine.

CL: They were my parents away from home, shall we say, and I even lived with them from time to time during rough periods. But he, when I got out of the service, I was second man with seniority in the company then, cause I had my service time compiled and when I got home, I wanted to buy my own truck, and work for him as a broker, but the unions had changed that a little bit. One thing that we remember, he said you know if you want to work like I know that you have the energy level to work, I'll give you a brand new truck and I'll give you a good run and you work just as hard as you want to work and I'll pay you a percentage if you don't mind when you get paid. Because the unions by that time were getting pretty strong. And I said fine, that's exactly what I am looking for. So I told him that I would appreciate that and give it my best shot. So I did that for about a year. I'd said nine months, but it was about a year because it that length of time we were making real good money, and we were able to make a down payment on a house. That gave us a little bit of reserve to come into the clothing store. It was a big change for me.

FD: Is your dad still alive?

CL: No.

FD: And your mom?

CL: No, passed away.

FD: Both passed away.

CL: A year apart, same month, one year apart.

FD: Then you own this building and you own the building next to it.

CL: Right.

FD: Plus the second floors in the buildings, and at one time, you lived in an apartment up above this building.

ML: The front apartment there. We lived up there until the second child came along. His mother lived in the upper apartment up here, growing up. The whole Ponsford building is where she grew up, upstairs. Because she was an only child along with her father.

FD: You got involved in real estate.

CL: I got in real estate out of accident. When I am in the clothing business, I'm in front of the public all the time and people were coming and for some reason, they were asking me questions about the town or about the real estate. Maybe it's because I was starting to turn grey already. I was grey at twenty-nine, so that made it look like I knew more than what I really did. So they were asking a lot of questions. And pretty soon, they would say, well, I gotta move, who's a good realtor in town, or I gotta sell this piece of property. I could either buy it or tell them where the real estate agent was. And finally got my license so I could get a part of the commission for referrals. But I didn't do that much. I used it for my own business, and to buy and sell land. I never did sit in an office. What I transacted was out of this office and the store.

FD: So you still have some real estate holdings, and some real estate interests then, although this is your primary, the clothing business is your primary business I would think.

CL: My hours are by inches, the real estate business far exceeds the clothing business.

FD: Is that right?

CL: Right, but I spend more time in this clothing business. But I am here. I got an office at home, so I can run both very easily, right out of here.

FD: Is this primarily real estate in this area, or are you in the out state area also?

CL: No, I stay in my own backyard, so I don't have to keep doing new research. So I either work here, or a little bit in the Traverse City area.

FD: You have a place up north.

CL: Right. But it's mostly in the Northville, Novi, and by Northville, I mean the township as well as the area I stay.

FD: Now the old Lapham farm is now the Providence Novi Center, is that right?

CL: Right.

FD: That piece of property is where the Lapham farm used to be. A piece of it. How big was the original farm?

CL: Well, there was eighty acres south of Ten Mile, west of Haggerty, which is now a little commercial, professional, multiple residential. Then there used to be a driving range over on Grand River. I think you now have Pheasant Run in there and you have a Mobil Gas Station on the corner of Providence Hospital and you also have professional offices on that same quadrant off of Ten Mile Road. Then the Ford agency bought the homestead which was in Farmington across the street in what used to be a gravel pit.

FD: Oh, that was a gravel pit.

CL: Both sides of the road were a gravel pit. Then they filled them in and then they built on them.

FD: Was your dad involved in the gravel business at all?

CL: My grandfather was. He was farming and getting paid ten cents a yard for everything they took out of there in the gravel business. But still farming and he only let them mine where his trees were. So it looked kinda funny when they were done, he never... oh and then they got close to the barn, so he stopped it and they couldn't mine anymore. The gravel pit, beautiful gravel was there.

FD: We live in Highland Lakes, and Highland Lakes was at one time Northville Sand and Gravel.

CL: That's right. Levitt came in and did a land balance on that, and did a fantastic job of reclaiming they're going to do the same thing out on Beck Road.

FD: Blue Heron Point.

CL: Blue Heron Point. Yes, that's reclaimed and the Thompson piece has been sold to D'Angelo and they're going to reclaim that in the next couple years. So the area is changing.

FD: It's going to be just like Highland Lakes. Do you want to talk at all about your involvement in the City Council? You listed on your biography that you were on the Northville City Council and you were part of the Northville Jaycees, the Northville Merchants' Association, now you say Northville EDC. And I don't know what EDC means.

CL: Economic Development Corporation.

FD: Ah, Economic Development Corporation. Is that still in existence?

CL: It is in existence, but it doesn't meet very often because you don't have much land to develop anymore into industrial, commercial which was primarily what we were trying to help bring in. Our primary goal was to increase the tax base. Encourage others to come in even if we had to sell bonds to get the industry in here, till they got on their feet. But, we don't have that much property left to encourage a industry to come in because we are pretty much a residential state here.

FD: There is really no place actually, wasn't that kind of a disadvantage of having this, all this taxes in property around here, you had Maybury San at one time. You had the Wayne County Training School.

CL: Twenty-five percent at one time was tax free, that's tough for the rest of people to carry. Northville Psychiatric, and that took up a lot of land. A lot of land use. Eastlawn, Maybury at one time, State Hospital part of the child center out here, that's Northville Township.

FD: How did that happen, did you think? That the state or the county acquired all this land out here and built all these facilities out here.

CL: I can't say that they liked the topography, I think what they found was as they were going to have Maybury and Eastlawn and DeHoCo, maybe as long as they had the government people in this area, why don't they go out on Seven Mile Road, they bought that, and I guess nobody was thinking about the tax base at that time. They just came in and built because it gave employment. Well employment's one thing, but tax base is another.

FD: As you have already said, there really is no property available for industrial development.

CL: To carry the tax load. You had residential and really you don't carry the tax load with residential, when you figure your school tax.

FD: You're not involved at all in this disposition of this Ford plant?

CL: No, I'm not.

FD: I happen to be on the Citizen's Advisory Committee for this question as a bond issue, whether to put up a new middle school, or open up the old school there at Taft Road, Cooke. They are talking about maybe we'll get the Ford plant, but that's so iffy and there are problems there with stuff up in the ceiling that you still have to worry about. They're talking about asbestos and oil contamination.

CL: Yes, contamination now is a new wrinkle in purchasing property or acquiring property because it will come back to haunt you in years to come.

FD: How long were you on the City Council?

CL: Four and one-half years.

FD: Was that a rewarding experience for you?

CL: It was a college education. You see, I never went to college so I had to learn all mine through experience. That was definitely a college education, it was challenging, I enjoyed it, but it was interfering with my real estate because I had to put my real estate in a holding (conflict of interest), well I got accused of it anyway, but as long as I felt I was doing it right, but I had to put in mothballs for four and a half years, but it was changing so fast that I could see so much that I would like to be doing out there, so I went out of town and bought some property out on Novi Road, even got criticized for that because it was too close to Northville, and they thought I'd put a shopping center out there. So I just felt that I had the big project done, that I kinda wanted to do and that was Northville Square. The reason I got on the council in the first place is because they wanted to make Northville a mall, close Main Street off.

FD: Make it a mall?

CL: I didn't want to mow a lawn out in front of my store, I wanted the customer to be able to park there. That really got my interest to run for city council. That soon fell by the wayside, and then we developed this quadrant up here, Northville Square, and we had that in the bag by the time I figured it was time for me to move on.

FD: How long was it that you were on the council?

CL: I think it was '68 to '72, something like that.

FD: That was a period when there was some growth going on in Northville, as far as development.

CL: Well, what we were up against at the time was every community was faced with this diminishing commercial, and they were having satellite or outside development taking place. In other words, they figured the downtown wasn't doing any business, so let's start a new one outside of town. Well they did it in Farmington, they did it in Livonia, they did it... well Novi never really had a center, and then Plymouth... same problem... so I would say that they had a definite problem of where to locate their new commercial. We didn't want it to go out of town. So we got criticized for putting Chatham, which is now the grocery store down here on Center Street. We put the shopping center down there, and we got criticized for it, maybe rightfully so, because we put in a commercial area, but we defended, I defended that in my own mind because it was keeping business in Northville, instead of giving your perimeter development business, which deteriorates your downtown district. It becomes derelict really. So we wanted to bring in local business downtown, the Shopping Center helped us, the grocery store helped us, getting this quadrant developed up to here, which is Northville Square, saved the downtown little bit. Got started on Seven Mile Road, but not enough to help us, because after I left the town, fathers had foresight enough then to redesign the downtown, and from then on, you know its history just climbing up the ladder from there.

FD: Were you on the council, let me ask this question first, was there ever an effort to bring the township into the city and consolidate the two, so that you don't have duplication of services? Was there a period at one time when Northville would want the township to come in and be under one government?

CL: I think the city wanted the township to come in under one government, but the township was more reluctant because they knew that their taxes would go up. I took the position not just because I was in the city, but because I am a businessman and to me, I don't think my wife and I can live as economically in two separate houses. That is exactly what you have, and I just attacked it from a business standpoint, which is the most economical. Well the people in the township couldn't see that right away, because their taxes would go up immediately, well they're going up anyway. They got their own fire, they got their own police, if they had done it back then, I am sure that our taxes would have been less expensive for everybody and we would have had a more well-balanced city, and fire and recreation. And library and court system, really. But that's hindsight, and...

FD: I think it's a point now where there's no way that's going to happen.

CL: No, they're too entrenched out there with their obligations that it looks like we'll have a divided town but when people say they're from Northville, they don't even know where the boundaries are. It's all one but as far as the tax base goes, there are invisible boundaries out there. But to me, Northville is the township and the city, all one.

FD: Well, what does the future look like for Charles Lapham? What stay in the clothing business continue your real estate operation stay, I am assuming that you live within the city limits of Northville.

CL: Yes.

FD: You do have a place up North, you like to take long weekends during the summer since you don't have time to take vacations, one of the comments I guess, what I'm leading into, one of the comments that a lot of the people I have interviewed have said that despite the changes that have taken place, and some of them, they don't feel are too favorable, still they feel Northville is a good place to live. Do you feel the same way?

CL: I think Northville is a fantastic place to live, but I'm prejudiced, but I think the reason Northville has maintained its present appearance and tranquility is because we are fortunate enough not to be on a mile road. We're between two mile roads, kinda tucked away, when people find it they think they've found something we've preserved, what they come to find, and it's a healthy district, we have some rolling hills out here, which I think we're becoming another little Birmingham or Bloomfield, you can see the quality of homes and the people it's bringing here, so I look for Northville to do nothing but gain in popularity and quality, by quality of

residents and homes and things of that nature, because you really can't take it away with an expressway coming through it or any closer than it is right now, we're nestled away for good.

FD: Well that's a good point. That is nestled between two mile roads.

CL: That's right and if you've looked at the towns that have fallen in despair, they were cut in half like Farmington with Grand River running down between it, Novi never did have a focal point they're searching for one with the development at Novi and Grand River, but that's not the four corners and you can't find the downtown or the four corners of Livonia. Plymouth has preserved it a little bit, they did have this perimeter development, but it's starting to come back to downtown a little bit, but Northville for some reason maintained that tranquility because of its geographics between the mile roads, so I can't see it... Let me put it this way, your investment is going to be well amortized.

FD: I think you may have seen the article in the paper sometime ago, about the zip code 48167 and the fact that it is one of the most desirable places to live in the state of Michigan, even more so than Bloomfield, Birmingham, Rochester, and of course there were some who disputed it, but it was written saying, and you can see that by the developments, that have taken place, Eight Mile, Six Mile.

CL: And you can take Blue Heron out there with three and four hundred thousand dollar condos, in an old gravel pit, people have taken to that setting, fantastic.

FD: Well, I have enjoyed this interview.

CL: Well, if you have forgotten anything, just give me a holler. I'm sorry I couldn't spend a little bit more time with you.

FD: Thank you very much.