

Vance Masters

Interview with Mrs. Vance Masters, August 2, 1988

(I'd like to start this morning with you telling me a little a bit about when and where you were born.)

I was born in (?) New York. My father was on the electric lines that ran down from Buffalo, down through the state. And we were there approximately 6 months after I was born. And then he was transferred to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was working for the electric lines there. Those were interurban electric – interurban lines. My mother was there for about 6 months, and then she left to come to Northville to live with my grandfather and grandmother, Robert and Hattie McCann. And at that time, they were separated. We lived with grandpa and grandma for about a year. Then my mother would go up with her father, who was widowed, in the Lansing area. And of course I did also. And were there for, I just can't be sure, but I would judge maybe a year or two. And then one of his daughters, or my mother's sister, had a farm up out of Vanderbilt in upper Michigan, and urged him to buy some property up there – come up there to live. Well, my grandfather, my mother's father, was a carpenter, so he bought forty acres of land up there, and it had a shed on it. And we moved in there. And I remember that so well because it was outdoor plumbing, while grandfather was building the home. So we were there quite a number of years. Then as I became of school age and so on, I started school up there in a country school, which was about a mile and a half. But then we walked to go to school – a one room school. And I think in the fourth – and I was back and forth between Northville and Vanderbilt innumerable times. And at the age of nine, I would assume, because I went into the fourth grade, I came down to live with my father.

(Let's try again before we go.... Then you were saying you arrived in Northville in the fourth grade and you lived where at that time?)

At the home on Dunlap – 133 W. Dunlap.

(And that home would have been fairly close to where the Methodist Church stands now?)

Yes, it was – there was one building between that was moved by my grandfather from – on (?) Street back in the house that's over – right between our home and the Methodist Church. And it stood there for quite a number of years. It now stands down on Rayson Street.... The home, the property was purchased by a dentist, and he, in the meantime, the home was remodeled, so that it was a duplex. My grandmother lived on one side; my father lived on the other with his second wife.

(Was the house there until they tore down all the buildings for the parking lot?)

Yes.

(Let's go back because we missed it the first time and talk a little bit about your grandfather's business.)

Oh, I wish I had that. A piece of information which I do have in my apartment telling us, you know, those different stages, but to start with, Grandfather had – and another gentleman, who were neighbors, got the idea that there was a great need for fuel. And right at first, I can't bring that family name to mind. And so they decided that they would establish this business. I think that was in 1902, someplace along in there. And that information is all in that copy that I mentioned to you before. (Yes.) Then –

(For the tape, your grandfather's business was McCann's?)

McCann's Fuel and Ice Company in Plymouth. And they started out with the fuel, and they would go out – oh, I remember on Nine Mile and out through the farm areas where they were cutting trees down, you know, and disposing of them, and buying up wood to distribute locally. Then, a few years following that, they decided there was a need for ice too. So, there was – right I'm back of the Yerkes house, now that stands down on the historical plot, was the big ice house. And I remember well going down there and seeing them cutting ice, which they cut with big hand saws.

(This is the Yerkes house that was on Cady Street?)

Yes – Yerkes house – the one in Mill Race Village. The ice house was situated right behind where that was located. I remember so well going down there and seeing these great, mammoth saws these men were working with – cutting squares of ice.

(So then the ice came from) The water of that pond. (which wasn't)

And so it proved to be quite a business because they also furnished ice for the home, and it was all done with teams of horses and wagons. So, it was a full process. At that time Plymouth, as I recall, was smaller than Northville. But of course they've encouraged industry and grew rapidly, where Northville discouraged industry and became dormant for quite a number of years after that.

(So this was a period after Northville had many of its factories – factories were already closing? I know that the Globe Furniture was before that time.)

Well, it was down there. Globe was one of the factories that was. But to encourage outside industry, they never did. They discouraged it, and then of course there was the foundry also. Well, they felt that – the powers that were felt that we had enough industry, that we were a residential area and wanted to keep it that way.

(And then they still had the mill too at that time.)

The mill, yea.

(So they actually had three....)

Yeah, that was up where the Historical Society ...

(All in the same general side of town?)

Uh, huh.

(And then your grandfather died in 1914, and your father died in 1919, and the business was sold. And you were starting to tell me some of your memories about starting school here in the 4th grade.)

There was a Schaefer Electric Company – oh, it was just an electrical store – appliance and repair. And I remember the first day that I walked into – it was after our high school had burnt, and we were in sheep sheds behind the old – how do I designate it – the one on Main Street, which was the high school at that time. (Which was the high school and is now called – that’s the one Old Village School.) Yes, and as I walked in the door, the electrician’s son was in the back of the room, and he stands up and says, “there comes McCann’s Fuel and Ice Company.” Well, I could’ve died right on the spot. But that was my introduction to the fourth grade. Some of the funny things that happen in your lifetime.

(Do you remember what year it was the school burned down? It would’ve been before you started.)

Now let me think. I would’ve been nine. I would say 1914 approximately. When that school burned.

(And that’s the elementary school or the high school?)

The high school.

(And then the elementary school burned after that?)

Oh yes, because my oldest son was in Kindergarten at that time. (So that was much later/) That was much later.

(Can you describe your home on Dunlap?)

Uh, originally it was, as most homes have – a parlor, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, and a bathroom and a large bedroom behind the parlor, and a stair going up to two bedrooms upstairs, and a sleeping porch to the back over a porch that went off the bedroom downstairs. There also was an addition to the back, which was called the woodshed. And I remember in there on Sundays we very often used to have pineapple sherbet. And after church, we went out in the woodshed and had... And, of course, my grandfather did the greater part of the work, but I thought I was helping too. (So you mad the sherbet?) Yes, we made the sherbet.

(I don’t know about – what’s the difference between making sherbet and making ice cream?)

Well, I think it uses more of the juice than when – than cream. I believe that.... Then in 1919 when my father came to take over – no 1914 my father came to take over the business, they decided to remodel the house. So they added on to the back of the west side and made a living room, bedroom, kitchen and upstairs was three bedrooms and a bathroom. And on the other side, there was two bedrooms and a bath. So there was additions to the building at that time. And they installed – up until that time, the rooms had been heated with stoves. And at that time, they installed a steam furnace, and it amuses me when I see – I often watch “This Old House”, and I see the size of the furnaces that go into these buildings and think of the size of that furnace under our house. I just am amazed to think there could be that much change.

(You mean that they’re small now?)

Oh yes, they’re so very compact. That was a thing that was big around as this table, you know. And now, they’re about maybe like that.....

(But it worked well?) Oh yes. (You’re talking about a big house?) Uh huh, yes, and it heated very well. I think for our time probably, hot water or steam were very satisfactory.

(So had your – you mentioned before in your fuel business, they started out using primarily wood as fuel. Then they added coal and oil – things like that?)

Oh yes, they had a coal yard down – well, it would’ve been in back and a little to the North of the old depot on the other side of the tracks.

(What do you remember about the old depot?)

Oh, I remember that very well, and I recently saw pictures someplace, and I know it please me because – because I have memories of when I was in high school as a senior, we took a trip to Washington. We all –all the kids went down to the old depot, and we waited and fussed around, as kids do, until the train came in. (That would have been in the 1920’s?) Yeah, because I graduated in ‘25. So, that was really quite an expedition, going to Washington. (Yeah, in 1925.) Uh, huh. (Did the senior classes usually take trips?) Yes, I don’t remember how we financed it, but I think we worked at different projects to raise money. (Did most of the members of the class go?) A great percentage of them did. I don’t remember that there were any that didn’t, but perhaps there were. (How many people were there in your graduating class?) Around 25. And at that time, the depot was in operation. In fact, I remember one of the men who was – now what are they called – the man that takes the, oh that do the work ... Well, anyway it was just an ordinary depot, but it was a nice one I mean. (Do you remember when it closed?) I don’t remember exactly when it closed.

(Let’s talk about your high school then. When you – when you did graduate – you graduated from the Northville High School. Where were the ceremonies held?)

In what is now the building on Main Street in the auditorium.

(Do you have any other memories of growing up... your childhood? What kind of things did you do? What kind of games did you play? And so forth.)

Well, a lot of my childhood was spent up North. And I had plenty of toys and things like that. One of the things was a little piano that was probably about three feet and had two octaves, no three octaves. And I enjoyed that a great deal because I alone a lot. And I had a dog that my father gave me when I was seven years old. It was a Boston Bull, and she lived until I was 21. So then I had a cat, and I used to dress my dog and my cat up in baby clothes and things that were provided for me, and entertain myself a great deal. And I think that's why I'm not overwhelmed with being alone. I manage very nicely. (Can you sit....) I guess people who have grown up in big families find it very disturbing to be left alone. So there's something to be said for each side. And I was drawn particularly in high school to friends of big families. I guess realizing the lack in my own life.

(Who were some of your friends in high school?)

Well, the Hobson girl was one of them. And she was married to a Carl Boyd, and they are both deceased now. I find I don't have very many original friends left. I'm on the lonely side now, but the friends I have I enjoy.

(So, after high school, then -)

I was married immediately. (Immediately – was your husband also a Northville person?)

Yeah, we'd been – May Babbitt very often, she was a sixth grade teacher, which is right at the base of one of the stairwells, and she used to kid me a great deal about the time that, how my husband and I would always meet halfway on the stair between every class. And so it had gone on for quite some time before.

(Childhood sweethearts... And then after he married you, you continued to live?)

I lived on Dunlap Street. And that's where my two sons were born.

(What did your husband do?) He worked for Ford Motor Company. (Did he work here in Northville or?) No, he worked down...

(What can you remember about your sons growing up...?)

One thing I remember is all they figured they had to allow was five minutes to get to school because we were so close. Well, my older son was in a daze when he woke up one morning, and I remember so well having to prod and prod and prod to keep him going to get to school. Then of course there was six and a half years difference in ages, so when Ted came along, why he was the pride of the family. He was very ill for a great – for about six months, we didn't know whether we'd keep him or not. The valve in his stomach didn't close, and he nearly starved to death because we'd put food in, and it just would (When he was a baby?) Yes, it didn't look like

he was going to make it, but he did. Gradually he retained a little bit, a little bit more until he has, I guess, a normal stomach now.

(Have both of your boys stayed in the Northville area?)

No, the younger boy, Ted, is – lives in Dearborn. He worked for General Motors, but he started out with Manufacturer's Bank. And from there, he went to GMAC, and then of course he became involved with many dealers He is now over at Bob Seller's, which is on Ten Mile and Grand River – a Pontiac dealer. (So then the general area?) My other son lives in California, and last time, a couple of years since I've been out there. There's too many things, too many changes in my own life I have to

(After the house on Dunlap was torn down, where did you move?)

I had sold that before it was torn down. (Oh, so you moved before it was...) ...I think at that time I was over... I worked for the Doctors' Clinic in Northville for 15 years, and I was still living on Dunlap Street. And then I moved to the University as a sorority director. I got there right at the very social revolution. It was a little more than I could take. So I didn't stay very long. (The social revolution in the 60's?) Yes, it was – really I had a beautiful, I mean the house itself was an old building, but the group of girls I had were lovely girls, and it was just devastating to see what was happening right then. The pot was the big thing. You'd come into the vestibule and get this sick sweet smell. And there were no rules to regulate it, and who's going to enforce 'em if there were. So I didn't stay there very long, and then I went back and worked for a couple different doctors, and ended up with a assistant administrator of a retirement home, which was St. (?). It's located in Southfield on Twelve Mile Road, and it was a very nice home. And I was there for And I wouldn't have retired then, but my legs went bad on me so I had no choice.

(When you worked for the doctors, you said the Doctors' Clinic in Northville – which doctors?)

At that time, there was Dr. Atchison, Dr. Weterstrom, Dr. Robinson, Dr. Capuzzi, Dr. Morris.... was his throat and nose specialist, and the radiologist. And I did laboratory and administrative work, and sometimes I had an assistant. (Now, was this in the clinic that had been most recently...?) Yes. (And there were seven doctors in there?) Yes. (So, you're talking about probably certain ...) It was from '49 through '60 to '60.

(They, at that time, I know some people have told me that they delivered their children there. SO at that time, the doctors weren't using it as a hospital anymore?)

They used the second floor as a hospital for a while, but at that time, they evidently felt there were too many small hospitals that needed to be. The larger hospitals could be used perhaps more efficiently.

(We haven't touched at all on any community and social activities....)

Oh, the different drives, I always participated, yes. You know during the war. Oh, and another thing – during the Second World War, the boys still were under age for service, so I drove one day a week for the Army Air Force in Detroit here. And you would take personnel from wherever they came in, the train or the airplane, to the places of business and so on and so forth. (Pick them up?) Pick them up and take them to hotels or wherever. (Wherever they were coming from?) Um, huh. Most often they were going to someplace of business, I mean some manufacturing areas. (Was that through the Red Cross or....?) It was a volunteer organization – it was not (Then it was just a volunteer organization that existed during the war?)

What did you do when you worked for the Red Cross?)

Oh, I worked for the Blood Bank, and I have a pin for fifteen years of – of voluntary service for the Red Cross.

(And how long have you been a member of the Eastern Star?)

Since I was sixteen. (That's a number of years.)I can't remember all the things that have gone on. It's just as well in some –

(You've also been involved with the Northville Woman's Club?)

Yes, I've belonged to the Northville Woman's Club up until my husband died. At that time I had to go to work, and I of course had to stop all social activities. SO from there on, there was no social life to speak of. (And that would've been in the 1940's?) '49.

(What changes have you noticed in Northville? What are some of the -)

Of course, the big change, I think, allover change, is the fact that the City is only half as large as the Township, where at one time, though the area of the Township was larger of course, the population – it was just the opposite. The City was greater. That's one drastic change. Many of the older buildings are knocked down, that had to go by the boards. (Are there any of those that stand out in your mind?) Well, I think the old City Hall was one of them because I kinda like the colonial design to start with, and that was a lovely old place. But it wasn't adequate for was needed. There's no two ways about it. (And that would have been very close to – it stood where City Hall stands now?) Yes. It was a grand old home to start with, which encompassed that square there. And of course across Cady Street where the Library used to be, that was also their property because they controlled that for a great number of years as far as the Woman's Club is concerned. That had to be closed on Friday as a Library because the Woman's Club was entitled to that building – (When you were a member of the Woman's Club, that was where they met was in the Library?) Yes.

I don't know, I guess I'm not very good at this as far as ideas are concerned. (Oh, I think you are – sometimes I have a tendency to interrupt before people are finished with what they are saying, and I'm trying not to do that. You lived very close to the Opera House do you have any memories of that?)

Oh, I remember so well going down there when I'd be visiting my grandparents, and I remember the old Opera House – the architecture, and I can remember going down there. And of course I couldn't sit in the middle of the theater; I had to sit in the front row. And then I'd come home – stiff neck, be miserable for a couple of days because I had to look almost straight up to see the picture. Then it was used mainly for pictures. (So you primarily saw movie pictures – do you remember any of the movie pictures?) No, no I don't – I don't remember. (And that was about then when you were a child...) Yes, when I was a child. (Do you remember when they stopped using it?) I don't know – I really don't know, but I would say that it had to be – well – before I was in high school because when we would do a play or anything, it would be in the Alseum Theater, which was on Main Street... (Where would that have been located?) Right where the theater is now. (Oh so they rebuilt another theater in the same location?) And originally behind the Alseum Theater was the Foresters' Hall, which was just a wooden structure building intended mainly for just meetings and parties. And they used to have dances there. There weren't many dances that I missed during those years.

(And you retired because of your legs?)

That probably had something to do with it. I remember one time when I was living with my grandmother, and there was this Forester's party coming up, and oh we were all excited about it. And that night – or early afternoon – it began to rain and freeze, and the wires were down, and the walks were a glare of ice, and like that, but I had to go to the dance. And there were a few others that had to go too. But I just can remember how everything glistened – you know, the trees and everything were loaded with ice. So I – but we used to have those storms quite often. I don't think we have them much anymore because we don't have the extreme cold....

(Yeah – do you remember heat like this?) Summer of 1988.

I don't recall. And a – but as I've often said, I think if I had been born in the South, I'd never gotten out of bed. SO I'm sure if we had had this type of weather, I would remember it because it takes the ----- right out of me.

(You were talking about before – clock striking drowns out interviewer and Vance Masters.)

Boy that really – I remember the night that happened. I was in high school – I don't remember just where – I would think pretty close to a Senior. So it must have been '24, in there. And it really lit the town up because there was a – a big glare.

(Do they know what cause it?)

It could have been anything because the structure wasn't

(At the time they had this fire, they had some other fires in town too. What kind of a fire did they have?)

It was a volunteer department, and they had as good equipment as any community its size, but it was not adequate.

(Did they have motorized trucks....?)

I do recall when the old fire hall was still in existence.

(Where was that locate?)

That was located on Main on the south side – well, it would be probably between the what is now that building that has been such a wreck there on Main Street (oh, you mean the Winner's Circle?) Yes, the Winner's Circle Bar – between that and right next to it. And it was a cute little building. I remember as a sort of a square little brick building, you know, with a tower...

End of Side A

Start of Side B

But at that time there was – it was just a cart that was pulled by the volunteers and like that. There weren't even horses involved.

(They probably didn't have to go very far, right....)

Uh, huh.

(At that time was the Ambler Hotel still standing on the corner?)

Yes, I believe it was.

(That was also destroyed by fire.)

But that again was an old wooden building. It was not constructed to standards of buildings. ... I don't mean to say – it was good in its time, but its time is gone. Oh, another thing that they discovered, or we discovered, was underneath our home there on Dunlap Street, many of those timbers in the basement were black walnut.

(Must have been the kind of trees they had.)

Yeah, most abundant at that time.

(You mentioned much earlier about your grandfather moving a house.)

No, he – yes (From somewhere else?) Uh, huh.

(Was it common in that time for a building to be moved....)

I don't know that it was. It wasn't moved too far. This would be Dunlap, and this would be Wing. And it was the second house from Dunlap on Wing. And they took it back...

(When they moved the one on Wing, what did they do with that one? Did they build another house there then, or did they?)

Yes, the Brook's home was built there then, and Mr. Brooks had horses, and he had a barn back there. And he had horses. Another thing that Grandfather had in back. He had the center lot of the square, the town square there. And that was a ginseng – ginseng – that, I mean it was just like a grape arbor.

(Ginseng is what they make tea out of – is that what you mean?)

I think it is, and I think it was used for meditation at that time.

(When the houses all stood around that block, there was a center courtyard?)

Yeah, a center square – it wasn't a courtyard, it was just a square. And I think there was quite a few ginsengs around town in various places. Not that I can name.

(Did the people use it for home remedies, or did they...?)

I think they grew it for a pharmaceutical company. What was the name – Parke Davis – probably, that was the big one in the Detroit area.

(Are there anything about Northville that are gone now that you'd like to see come back?)

Yes, I wish the old maple trees on Dunlap weren't going so fast. But I guess they've lived their lifetime, and it's perfectly normal that they should go because they were beautiful. We were never able to have a good front lawn because of the trees. But certainly, you wouldn't sacrifice a tree for a lawn.

(When you lived there as a child, the building that's the Casterline Funeral Home now – was that a residence or?)

Yes, that was Mrs. Strong's still – their home, and Mrs. Strong taught music, and I took piano lessons from her.

(When your grandfather's business – did he have his business in the same place where you....)

No, grandfather had his business in the living room of the original home. The parlor became the living room then. The living room became his office. When my father came, and they remodeled, he had a little office in what is the restored as the Schrader Building – just about in the center of that group of stores. So it would be along maybe where – would be – along where that wallpaper store is – Green's (now Judy's in 11/90). But it was such a narrow office – it wasn't as wide as this room, as I recall, maybe and went back, you know, through a bunch of

stores there. And next to it was the waiting room for the D.U.R. Now, the D.U.R. came up Main Street to Center Street. And when grandmother used to have a doctor down in the David Whitney Building (Detroit – Woodward and Grand Circus Park), well, we'd go down to Detroit every month. We'd get up about five o'clock in the morning, and we'd get ourselves ready and we'd have our breakfast, and we'd go and take the first interurban out. And that went by the way of Plymouth, Newburgh, and Wayne, and eventually into town.

(How long was the trip to downtown Detroit?)

Oh, it took you maybe an hour and a quarter, an hour and a half.

(Did you have to change?)

Then at Wayne, we had to change to the one that came from Ann Arbor through and went downtown. And that was often – we would arrive down off of Jefferson right near the Vernor Plant, someplace down in there, and then you'd walk downtown. But it was quite a distance from the David Whitney Building down to where we – it would take an early start for us to get down there in time for her appointment.

(Did you spend the day downtown when you were through?)

Yes, we'd get back – maybe early evening.

(Do you remember when the interurban stopped running – the service to Northville?.....)

I think I might. Another thing, in the meantime, I want to tell you about My grandfather was on the board of the Presbyterian Church. So when the real old church became a little too small, they put on tow wings on the side of it, and so he was available for supervision. He used to go down there while they were working on it like that. And he would take me, and I remember sitting on the porch there andthe bricks – the cobblestones. And also I remember the interurban coming up through there, but I cannot tell you when I think that service ceased because I remember going to basketball games in the interurban – going to Farmington, Wayne – like that.

(That would have been when you were in high school?)

When I was in high school. So probably around in the early 20's I would say '24 maybe '23 – someplace around in there. I'm not sure. At the time my father was on the Council, City Council. it was called the Crow's Nest – in the center of Center and Main Streets. And the band used to play there every Saturday night.

(But that must not have stood very long there?)

They built that when my father was on the City Council. He died in '19 so it had to be before that.

(And isn't the story that the train itself knocked the Crow's Nest downNo. So how did they take the Crow's Nest down? Do you remember that?because the trains would have stopped running when the Crow's Nest was built there – right?)

The train didn't go up that far – the tracks stopped – oh, it would be probably twenty feet from there anyway.

(I heard a story in town that someone used the tracks....)

I don't know. So I can't say.

(But you remember the Crow's Nest being there for a long time?)

Yes.

(Can you think of anything else that I haven't asked you about that you might like to talk about?)

There's probably lots of things but

(Well, I'd like to thank you very much for taking your time and talking to me.)

You're most welcome if I've done any good.

(I think you've done a lot of good, and it's been very interesting.)

Another thing that I know that there has been a little misunderstanding about is where Aunt Jennie White lived. They had her placed down on Center Street, and it wasn't Center Street where she lived. It was on Randolph, and right at the end of Wing there was what used to be a brown house. And then the next house down was a white house, and that's where Jennie White lived. And she wrote an article that was given at Woman's Club when I was a member. And I wish I knew where and how and when a copy of that could be secured if there is one.

(Do you think it's possible that it might be with the Woman's Club minutes?)

Yes, I think it's possible. And it was a review of history of the town and like that, and it was wonderful. But I've often wondered where there could be a copy.

(That would have been in the 1930's or 1940's?)

Yes, 1930's. I think she died in the '30's.

(And she actually gave the paper herself?)

Yes.

(.....)

So, I've often wondered about that because to me that was such a wonderful revelation. There was many things that were talked about in there that I wasn't – you know, sure about.

(She was – Jennie White – a Dunlap daughter – right? She was the daughter of William Dunlap?)

Yes.

(But she was born after the family was in Northville....)

I don't know that – it could be. I don't recall that.

(It would seem to me because I believed the Dunlaps came in the 1930's – '32 or '31. So she died in the 1930's. Probably before.....)

Yeah, it would stand to reason, wouldn't it because people didn't live that long then. Well, I've enjoyed this very much.

(I've enjoyed it too, and thank you very much.)

And I wish some of these things we've researched