

# Northville Township Historic District Commission

Oral History Interview – Jason Mattison

April 4, 2011

Digitized by  
Northville Township

**Special Education Teacher**

Hawthorn Center

This is Monday, April 4, 2011 and we are talking with Jason Mattison about his years at Hawthorn Center, 18471 Haggerty Rd, Northville, MI 48168.

Interviewers: Richard Allen and John Colling

*Richard - How many years did you teach school at Hawthorn?*

A little over 27 years.

*Richard - What did you do and what did you teach?*

I taught a pre-vocational program.

*Richard - That consisted of what?*

Usually the way I like to start this story, because I've been asked before how I ever got involved with Hawthorn, is that it's a very unusual story. I ended up going to the dentist, and his assistant said that they were looking for a teacher at Hawthorn Center. I overheard this when she mentioned it was for an automotive teacher, which is what I have my degree in. I talked to her a little bit about it and eventually wandered over to Hawthorn and interviewed and got hired in one day.

Those were the old times. Obviously they don't do that anymore. What they had over there was a building called Cottage One which once was the original school back when Hawthorn first started in the 1950s, and because they had expanded the buildings over the years, Cottage One had turned into a pre-vocational program, PVP they called it. They had a fellow there that ran a program that was basically an auto shop and a printing shop, and he had left and they were looking for somebody else to take his place. So I went out with the principal to look at the building and I said I was getting out of college and looking for my first job. He said he was just fine with that. Besides I was not totally unfamiliar with Hawthorn because I had grown up less than a mile away. I had seen and watched the place over the years growing up in Northville Township. What they did was take one of these cottages, and I think there were five cottages behind Hawthorn and they were built for the children that stayed there. The cottages were designed to give the children a little more freedom; they weren't behind locked doors, and they could walk the grounds and it was a little more like a real home rather than cinder block and safety glass. They took Cottage One and put an addition on the back of it and had a small auto shop there.

When I first started there, I had to clean the place up, and actually I had very little experience with special-ed students, but they were willing to go the distance with me because I had the technical experience, and that's what they were looking for. Over the years I took up my special-ed degree. After four or five years they made that a requirement. There were probably five or ten staff that went through the program to get special-ed certification. When I took over the building it was pretty much a total disaster. I had to do quite a bit of work for about a month before I started having classes. They gave me a couple of students to help me straighten it up and throw things out to get the program organized. I was just a young kid getting out so I was doing everything by the book.

*John - When you say kids, what ages are you talking about?*

These students all had to be in secondary education, so they were probably thirteen, fourteen up to seventeen, eighteen.

*John - What were your criteria for their being there?*

Well, that was a good point. For most of the students that I had, it was a program that had a lot of dangerous things. When they moved me to another program, we had an auto shop, automotive class, welding class, a small engine repair class, a small appliance repair class, a printing class, and a photography class. There were a lot of tools. A student who came up to see me you could say was on his way out. They wanted to give the students some real live work experience. In my program they didn't get paid or anything like that. They did projects and we did a lot of work on State vehicles and staff cars. They would come in with, "My tire looks low, I need to have my tire fixed" and stuff like that. Over the years, I gained a little bit of trust with the staff because obviously with a student working on a car, they trusted leaving their car out there. It was nice because they would come back and give the kids treats and stuff like that. They gave me something to do and they got something in return which I wanted.

*John - Did you function like a high school? Did they get degrees from the program?*

That's a good question. No I don't think Hawthorn had a diploma. They never had a graduation class or anything like that. The students came and went as their treatment indicated.

*Richard - My understanding is that Hawthorn had kids primarily with psychological problems rather than lack of mental capabilities. Is that a fair assumption or am I wrong?*

I'd say so, yes. Intelligence wise they were fairly normal, but they had psychological issues. There were students there with real low reading levels. In the school area we had a language clinic and they would go to a language specialist on a regular basis. They were primarily what you would call E. I., which was Emotionally Impaired. They might have something different now that they call it but I think they still call it E. I. It was a nice program because they kept the class sizes small. When I actually started out, they were giving me 10-12 students at a time. That was a lot to handle, and over the years they determined that the building was not really set up for a school so they knocked the class sizes down to five students because of the fire regulations.

*Richard - How many hours of a day did you have these five students? Did you have them different classes of the day or the whole day?*

I had them every hour, that way it was more like a high school. I would have a different class and a different set of students. It was a program where you had to show them how to work. So I had to get down there and work right with them, and I had to do everything I asked them to do just to show them how to do it.

*Richard - Your auto shop detailed, did you get deeper than tire changes normally.*

Yes, we had test engines. They spent quite a bit of money there. We got funds from Title One. That was federal funds if you had a vocational program, and they gave us equipment that they would use out in the field at that time. So we balanced wheels, changed tires, we pulled engines, and did transmissions. It was quite involved. We painted cars and did body work. The kids liked it and I liked it. It wasn't a traditional class where they sat in chairs and I lectured.

*Richard - It was hands on; learn by doing as Henry Ford used to say.*

It was hands on. The principal would come up; he was an older vocational man. His name was Milt Sakorfis. A lot of times he would come up in the morning and spend a couple hours with me. He enjoyed getting away from his office, and hang out with me and we'd both work with the kids. There was no real hierarchy. I used to have a therapist, or social workers. If they were starting a student out with the program, they would come up for a week just to be with him and work with him and see what was going on. That was one of the real great things about the place. You could talk to Dr. Wright or to anybody about certain students and things that happened, and they would listen and come up and see me. There was real great cooperation at the facility. Probably a lot of stuff started happening during the last seven or eight years of my career when the State was closing a lot of facilities and they were consolidating. When I started at Hawthorn there were 22 or 23 facilities like Hawthorn in the State, and when I left there was one—Hawthorn. What would happen was when people were getting laid off at Hawthorn, other people with more seniority were coming in. There was a lot of change in staff and it was harder and harder to have that cooperation. There were some other things that changed as far as the way they were handling some of the students. But that's another whole deal. But after one of these times when people were getting laid off and they were offering early retirements, I ended up getting transferred to another building at Hawthorn. It was a building that was called Work Activities, and it was actually a Sheltered Workshop. That building was on the grounds of Northville State Hospital. It was called F Building and it was on the eastern end, the farthest building toward the east, a one-story building. That was another hands-on program.

*Richard - What time frame was that?*

They opened up a whole new wing in Hawthorn called South Wing in 1976, so there was a lot of expansion. I started there in 1975. The Sheltered Workshop Program had been going on when Hawthorn started and was set up for a group of students that were in another building called E Building. The students were a little bit more problematic, so the were children actually on the Northville State Hospital property. They were in this E Building, and they would go across the street to F Building and work in the Sheltered Workshop, and there were classrooms in the E Building.

*Richard - Were the students in the Sheltered Workshop residents of Hawthorn?*

They were with Hawthorn because they were all under 18 years of age.

*Richard - They were not dropped off for the day, but were residents?*

Yes, residents. When I first started there, I was primarily getting what was called Day School students, which were students that were dropped off by the public schools in school buses. They were considered the least problematic. Then what happened after a number of years they eliminated the Day School because there were regulations, or they figured out it was cheaper if the public schools had to take care of their own special-ed students, not the State taking care of them which is generally the theme.

*Richard - What kinds of things did you do in this Sheltered Workshop?*

We had contracts with companies.

*John - When you started there it was residential, the students came and stayed there, and later on like right now, it's just outpatient?*

Oh no. When I started there, there was a day school, inpatient, and E Building. The E Building was closed and students came over to Hawthorn and there was a big inpatient and day school. They each had their own principal. The inpatient had a separate cafeteria and the day school students had their own cafeteria, but they all went to school together. They finally eliminated the day school so there was all inpatient, and right now they're all inpatient.

*Richard - Let me go back to your E Building. You said you had different contracts—minor subassembly work? For anyone who is reading this, give a couple of examples.*

When I was there they had two contracts: Michigan Caterpillar and Detroit Edison. When the fellow retired that ran work activities, they needed a teacher there in order to call it a school program, so I stepped in. There was another fellow, his assistant, who was not a teacher, but could run the program, and I learned a lot from him over the years. We used to have a small school bus. The Work Activities Program ran two hours a period. My friend, Mike Broderick, and I had a 24-passenger school bus. We would drive down the pipeline drive (Wayne Ave.) and pick up a group of students from the Work Activities Program on Northville State Hospital property and then drive them back to Hawthorne. Here are some of the pictures I have (see pages 10 and 11).

*Richard - What did you do for Michigan Caterpillar?*

The thing we did for them was a packing job. They had brochures for dealers all over the U.S. The one we dealt with is here on Novi Road. They would give us a pallet load of brochures and boxes. We would assemble the boxes, put the brochures in, apply address labels, and group the boxes according to zip code, so the post office could ship them off. That was a contract that went on and on.

*Richard - The reason I asked was that Our Lady of Providence had a similar program with nuts and bolts assembly. So many nuts and so many bolts had to be packaged for shipment.*

That was more like the Detroit Edison contract. You would get some work from Michigan Caterpillar and then you wouldn't hear from them for a few months. The Detroit Edison contract was never ending. We had a contact down at a recycling service center on Warren and Livernois. They donated electric meters like you have on the side of your house, and we would take them all apart with wrenches and screwdrivers and sort out the aluminum, copper, brass, and steel and sort it out and take it down to a scrap yard at Haggerty Road and the railroad tracks at Haggerty Metal. They would pay us and the money we would get from scrap as well as money that Hawthorn would pitch in was used to pay the students. We had a license to pay the students lower than minimum wage. If a student was there for one of the class periods, he made \$2. If he came five days a week, he made \$10 at the end of the week. That was good because it gave them some money and they could buy things.

*Richard - We talked earlier about Cottage One. There were photographs that you thought might be squirreled away in there. There is someone on the committee that would be interested in that, but he works and would have a hard time getting there.*

I can't say what's still there because I haven't been back on the Hawthorn property since I left. When you say squirreled away, there may be a squirrel living there. Unfortunately when you drive by on Haggerty Road you can see Cottage One where portions of the roof have fallen in.

*Richard - I guess that pretty much settles what's in there.*

It still would be interesting to see what's still in there.

*Richard - They probably wouldn't let you in if you could get it open.*

The Work Activities Program students were not like the students I was getting in Cottage One. They were more problematic. We often had to end class early and take students back because they had gotten in a fight. They had a behavior problem or we had to separate them. I'd take the problem student away to another part of the building. That started off in F Building, and then when they started closing up Northville a little bit, we had the opportunity to move to another building that was called the Laundry Building. It was just huge and we had access to three large rooms in it. They were probably gymnasium-size rooms. We had the Work Activities in one room, another room was the prep room so that items we were shipping back to Edison or to the scrap yard could sit there. The other room had an auto shop run by a fellow there who did the same thing I did in Cottage One, only he did it with adults. They also worked on staff cars and State cars. So I, all of a sudden, had an auto shop dropped in my lap again. I loved it. When we started doing Work Activities in there, some of the students wanted to work on cars rather than the meters. So I'd take them and work on a car and that was beneficial. It was a much more spacious building, and there was a hoist in there and we did a lot of oil changes for the State cars as well as staff cars. In fact, we had a sign out in front of the building saying we did oil changes.

*Richard - At the time we went through there, there were still machines for checking tow in wheels.*

We were in that building for four or five years. Then they started to close up Northville and they eventually closed the Laundry Building, shut off the heat, etc. We took what we could from that building and went with the Work Activities Program back to Hawthorn and took over a woodshop and made that our Work Activities building. We still did contracts with Detroit Edison for a while, Michigan Caterpillar, and we also had a Christmas card contract; it was a charity thing that had to do with children. They had Christmas cards printed up and we had to package them. That lasted three years and they decided they had another early retirement, and I took it.

*Richard - You mentioned the woodshop. Where was that housed?*

That was in the South Wing.

*Richard - In Cottage One you had your auto shop. Were the other cottages residential facilities? Were there any other facilities?*

Yes, there was a greenhouse in the South Wing. That's been torn down. The Work Activities Program students would go in there every spring or fall and wash the whole place down. It was another paying job for the kids. They had energy up the kazoo. It was like the old Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn story of painting the fence white—let's make this fun.

*Richard - The greenhouse was used for State facilities?*

They had plants and would have a plant sale, and they would also give flowers for the whole building. Everybody who came in to Hawthorn was an artist and you had a blank canvass. "Here's your colors, take off and see what you can develop and invent." Unfortunately, we had to work year-round. There was no summer vacation like the public schools. We had vacation time and you could take it anytime you wanted. The idea was since the kids were there their mental health problems don't stop in the summer. We had to be there all summer. They let the teachers switch rolls, a math teacher could become an art teacher, a science teacher could become a greenhouse teacher. You could move around and do things just to keep from teacher burnout. Back then that was a thing they worried about. One summer I worked in the greenhouse, another summer I did a ceramics class. You didn't have to change unless you wanted to. A lot of teachers did.

*Richard - It was basically to teach them skills they could carry with them into adulthood?*

They did things like a models class to build car models. It would come up in April and they would start planning the summer program. If you had an idea you wanted to try for a program, you could present it and see if they went for it. It was so creative there, that's why it kept people there.

*Richard - It sounds like a great place to work.*

Well if you could get by the hardships. There were students there that were very sad cases. You had to not think about it when you were dealing with them. People would say to me, "When you get a new student, what do you have to do to prepare yourself?" I

would tell them, “Nothing.” I just take them for how they present themselves and start from there. If I would notice something was strange, I would pursue it. You didn’t have any prejudice.

*John - Did you have any inherently violent people?*

There were a lot of female teachers there, and when a male wanted to be a teacher at Hawthorn, they pretty much grabbed them. I was a minority there, and it didn’t hurt if you were big.

*John - When you were talking about auto shop, you were talking primarily about boys.*

Oh yes. At first it was all boys and then there were girls who wanted to take it.

I was 300 or 400 feet from the main building, and if there was a problem with a student, I ushered them out of the building or told them to go take a walk. Then I’d get right on the phone and childcare workers would come up and get them. I also had Northville patients walking into my shop. Onetime I was up there in the morning and parked near the building. We had probably six or seven cars that had been donated that we’d work on. Some guy got out of a car and I knew he was from Northville because he had a bathrobe on and slippers. He was asking me where to get some breakfast. I told him to go right down there where that big truck is, and that’s the kitchen. While he was talking to me, I’m walking around one side of the car and he was walking around the other. When he started walking, I called down to the switchboard and they called Northville to come by with their station wagon and pick him up. You couldn’t let things like that bother you. You couldn’t let a lot of stuff bother you. It happened. Let’s move on. Even though a student called me a so-and-so, and every name in the book, you started fresh every day.

*Richard - Let’s end the interview now and take a look at your pictures.  
Thanks for your time.*

*Transcribed by Patricia Allen, May 14, 2011.*

*Edited and approved by Jason Mattison Dec 4, 2011.*

Cottage One

South Wing

Greenhouse



E Building

F Building

Laundry



QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.