

**Northville Township
Historic District Commission**

Oral History Interview with
JOAN NOONAN AND CHARLES TOUSSAINT

June 23, 2009

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Lifetime Residents

June 23, 2009

Interviewers: Richard Allen (RA) and John Colling (JC)

RA - We are at the home of Joan Noonan with her brother Charles Toussaint and they were both born and raised here. What part of town did you grow up in and where did you go to school?

Joan – Both of us were born at home at 528 Horton Avenue. We both went to Northville schools. The elementary school and the high school were both located on West Main Street. Currently the old high school (Old Village School) is now the administrative office, and the elementary school is the Northville Public Schools' Early Childhood Center.

JC – Are there any other buildings like that that have changed?

Charles – Yes, Pickard's Meat Market was formerly the Opera House. That's where Sparr Florists was recently (Center and Dunlap). Currently Uniquely Yours flower shop is located there. The Comerica drive-in bank is where the Boy Scout building was located.

Joan – It was also used by the Girl Scouts.

RA - I was in the barbershop the other day and Carl Stevens was reminiscing about some of the buildings that used to be on Dunlap. He lived in the home where the drive- in bank was, Comerica. That is the same place you were talking about.

Charles – Yes.

JC - Joan mentioned that you worked for a baker?

Charles – His name was Mr. Mark and that was on Main Street.

JC - You baked all your own things there?

Charles - Oh yes, when things were hard to get during war times, especially sugar, they would get it since they were a bakery. Other people were limited. With rationing, you had to have your green stamps for different food items and limited quantities.

JC - I grew up in the same era as you did. Knowing the butcher and knowing the baker had its advantages. I assume working for a baker; you family might get baked goods that might not be available to other people.

Charles – Oh no, anybody could come in and buy the baked goods, that was not a problem.

JC - Baked goods were not rationed.

Charles - No, but what was hard to get might be the sugar for one thing. My one aunt who made really good apple pies might ask me to get some sugar. So I would just put some in a little bag and carry it out, you might say, so she could make her apple pies which I would help eat.

JC - There weren't super markets around like today and malls? Was there a favorite market in town?

Joan - Oh yes, we had A&P right on Main Street.

RA - About where the bread company is now?

Joan - Yes, right around in that area.

Charles - Before that it was the D & C store. Essie Nirider is the one who ran that.

Joan - We had Ellis Electronics too.

Charles - Ed Bogart had his store, E.M.B., it was called. That's where Genitti's is today.

Joan – When we were growing up most of us didn't have a lot. Not too many of us had cars, but one of my girlfriends had a convertible. We were always racing with the boys, and she was very good. She beat them a number of times. That was when everybody knew everybody in town. Joe Denton was our chief of police. She got a ticket, and we all had to go in and when Chief Denton saw me, he said. "Joanie, what are you doing in here?" I thought, "Oh no, he's going to tell my dad." That's all you could think about.

Joan - We had good times. During lunchtime at school, we used to drive out to the gravel pit which is now Blue Heron. We would go swimming. Since we didn't have the luxury of hair blowers we came back with wet hair. We would go swimming on our lunch hour and then come back and finish school. I was a cheerleader. I was also in the band and in the choir like my brother and sister.

Charles - I was in the choir, played clarinet in the band, and played the bugle in the Drum and Bugle Corp. I still have that bugle in my basement someplace.

JC - You're not playing it anymore?

Charles – No. I gave my clarinet to my sister's oldest daughter. She was going to take up clarinet. I said I had a nice wood one with a good tone coming out of it, and she might as well have it.

JC - Getting back to the police, how big a police department did they have then? It couldn't be more than two or three people in those days.

Joan - That's about it. It was not very large. Everybody knew everybody in town. You couldn't walk downtown without a person knowing, well, that's Rose and Henry's daughter. For entertainment some of the kids would stop outside a bar known to the locals as the "Bloody Bucket." They used to have a lot of fights in there and the kids would stand outside and listen to it and see them coming outside. That was the source of entertainment kids had. It was innocent fun. (That building was razed, and Poole's Tavern now stands in that location.)

Charles - Mr. Lou Coe ran that.

Joan - Coming from a small village, we had pecking orders. People would see us as hicks, and then we would go over to Salem and look at them and say they were the “true hicks.” We thought we were more sophisticated. We had a lot of fun growing up. We had a closeness with our classmates. We did a lot of things together. Our trips were not fancy, we went to Washington, D.C. That was our big class trip. In fact, in August (2009) we’re going to have another class reunion.

JC - When you were both young, this was a long way from Detroit. So, was the Walled Lake Amusement Park there?

Joan - The roller skating rink was there in Walled Lake as well as the amusement park. In the summer we had a fair in Northville. Our parents would always watch us. Since we lived down by the pond, all of that area was weedy. They would tell us not to walk through there, as some of the people that worked down at the fair would sleep there. But kids are kids, and we would definitely walk through there looking to see who was there. Charles didn’t, but I did. We would take a shortcut and walk through there. At the fair there was also cake and pie judging which the local women would enter. Our mother always was a “blue ribbon” winner. She was a fantastic cook and baker. We were fortunate we had woods by our home, but now it is all built up. We would classify them as the first woods and the second woods. We would tell my mother we would be in the second woods because they had better vines that we could swing on. We spent a lot of time there. With my family, the three of us would play together a lot.

Charles - I think we were just like other normal children. We would make our own car to ride in. We would get some wheels and get a box from back of the store. You got things and you improvised. You shot marbles, put them in a circle, and you’d shoot them out. All good fun. No vandalism. I don’t think a person dared to do vandalism, not with our parents back then. It wasn’t just our personal parents, other children’s parents. They took care of their children. They knew where you were. If they said to be home at 10:00, they didn’t mean 10 minutes after 10:00. If you did, they’d ask why you were late, what were you doing, and who were you with? If they were what was considered a trouble maker, you were not to associate with them. As far as I’m concerned, parents looked after their children a lot more than they do today. Today it seems like they leave them in front of the TV set, say goodbye, and they’re gone. They don’t know where the children are and what they are doing. Back in those days, not just the Toussaint family, but all the other families were looking after their children as well.

Charles - I never worried about the Chief of Police or the Superintendent of Schools. If I had done something wrong, there were repercussions you would run into at home—my dad or my mother. You were not going to misbehave and cause a bad reputation for our family.

Joan – There was one thing we liked to do with all the children in the neighborhood. We would start at the top of Horton where we could see around the corner (where Horton turns around that curve by the pond and goes into Rayson) and see who could go the farthest with their sled. There were not a lot of houses there. Campbell’s house was there and a few others.

Another thing that I played with Charles and my older sister Arlene...we would get these crates from the stores and build ourselves a little store. Arlene would be the owner, Charles would be the manager, and I would be the customer. Since I was the youngest I got the lowest status. When we had clubs...Arlene was president, Charles was vice president, and I was a member. That’s how we played. We had a lot of fun.

In school the closeness with your classmates was really there because you did a lot of things together that didn't really cost a lot of money, just spent quality and fun times together.

JC - How big would the classes be?

Joan - I don't think our class was very big, if I'm not mistaken, and I'll double-check it. I think our class was way under a 100...60 or 70 plus. (Note: There were approximately 66 in our class.)

JC - In your own class how many would that be?

Joan - That was it, our graduating class. That's very small compared to today.

RA - Where did you go to grade school?

Joan - Where the special ed classes are now. The high school is where the offices are.

RA - All in the same building?

Joan - Two separate adjacent buildings.

JC - Did the students come from the whole area, not just the city?

Joan - From all the area. Some were bussed in...very few of them, mainly kids who lived out in the country. We had to walk because we were less than a mile from school.

JC - Was the Thayer School operating when you were young? On the corner of Six Mile?

Joan - I don't recall.

JC - It's a one-room school and I'm not sure when it closed.

Joan - I'm not sure either, but I know a couple of my girlfriends who were cheerleaders came from that area, over on Six Mile. They went to a small school over there. I think my friend, Judy, and some of my classmates went to Waterford school that was located on Bradner off of Six Mile Road. That would be behind where Meads Mill is located now.

I don't want to forget to mention about the name of "Cabbage Town" (or Cabbagetown) where we grew up. I attended a function at Schoolcraft. The speaker was a docent at the Northville Historical Society's Mill Race Village. Somebody asked her how Cabbage Town got its name. She said it was her understanding that people grew cabbage there because they didn't have a lot of money. That couldn't be farther from the truth as we had several millionaires who lived up around Baseline and Eight Mile, Mr. Chase for one. That was not the reason it was called Cabbage Town. Somebody apparently liked its name and thought it was kind of a cute name and that's how it started. There were objections but I don't believe any organized group was formulated. Beal Town, located by the race track, was the less affluent area.

JC - Mr. Chase owned a lot of land north of Eight Mile which is subdivisions now.

Joan - Yes he did, and that subdivision is Chase Farms. He lived in the beautiful white house.

Charles - One time our class at school was taken out there, and they showed us how to make maple syrup from the trees. They showed us how to gather it, boil it down and make maple sugar. We got to see how that was done.

JC - Was the cider mill there when you were kids?

Charles - Oh yes, the Parmenter family ran it. That's how it got its name, but it has changed hands several times since then. We would take our apples, a bushel of apples or even some pears, they would give you so much cider—grind it up and give you some juice back from it. It was a percentage deal. They kept so much and they gave you so much. You were not dealing in dollars and cents, it was a commodity item.

Joan - In wintertime, a lot of the children liked to skate on the pond, but we had a tragedy there.

Charles - Bob Jordan was skating there. Mrs. North lived down at the corner. She was watching him. He was home from the service and waiting for his brothers to come home from school. He got over to the far side where the veterinarian, Dr. Cavell, had his office on that side of the pond. As she was watching him, he went to that side where the current was. All of a sudden, down he went. He tried to get out and kept climbing, but the ice kept breaking. She called the police and fire department and told them he was on Dr. Cavell's side. I have to say it, the idiots, came down on our side, Horton/Rayson area that comes around the pond. Well, by the time they got over where he had gone under, he drowned. My brother, Herman, who worked for the Bell Telephone Company was stopped because he had these long poles. He got in a rowboat and with these poles, hooked him by the belt. There would not have been any problem rescuing him if they had gone to the right side. She told them on Dr. Cavell's side, but by the time they drove all around there, he couldn't hang on, and he went down and drowned.

Joan - A lot of people aren't familiar that there is a current that runs through there, and you get concerned when they skate.

JC - Did they stop the skating there after this?

Charles - No, they still go down there. As a matter of fact, the city has a sign that says, "Ice Unsafe." There's no ice now and the sign should come down until there is ice. Otherwise no one will pay attention to the sign.

Joan - People get used to it and pay no attention to it. One thing I would like to mention was about Dad.

Charles - What my sister is referring to is Silver Springs. My father, Henry Toussaint, and Jim Spagnuolo worked for the railroad, and they were the ones who discovered the Silver Springs water. There used to be a depot there many years ago, and beyond that they found the spring when they were working on the railroad.

As a matter of fact, Silver Springs Bottling Company used to bottle the water and take it into Detroit. Where you go under the viaduct (on Northville Road), that's where the plant was.

JC - That spring ran out for a while, since I moved here.

Charles - Yes, it did and they are pumping it from south of the actual well, thirty or forty feet.

RA - They were pumping city water for a while.

Joan - Yes, I felt sorry for people coming out because they were not aware of that.

RA - I think Jan Reef was responsible for putting in that last well.

Charles - Another thing, the racetrack is where we used to have our fairs. They had a stage where the tote board is. They'd have plays going on, jitterbugging, crash the cars, demolition is the right terminology. The clubhouse was built later.

JC - As a young man, you didn't go down there trying to meet young ladies?

Charles – No. Matter of fact, I sold papers down there. Mr. Burt Brennan and Mr. Ray Carol were sitting in their box seats. I came around with the Free Press, and they said, “Kid, how would you like to work here as an usher?” I said, “I really would.” Mr. Carol said to come out to his house on Eight Mile Road, which isn't there anymore. He's deceased now. I went out there with others who would be working there. We were measured for uniforms. For a number of years I was an usher down there. He told me that he couldn't help but notice how polite I was with “Yes Sir, No Sir” when I came around with my papers. He said, “You're the kind of person we want to have as an usher.” The section they gave me was right on the finish wire. I did really well.

RA - Virtually every old timer in town worked for the racetrack at one time or another.

Joan - My brother did. He was a very, very hard worker. He delivered papers and got up extremely early.

Charles - I'd be home by 6:00 in the morning, and then I'd go up to the bakery on Saturdays. On my route, someone said, can't you get here earlier so I can read my paper before I go to work? So I did. I went to bed earlier and got up in the morning and was done before 6 am.

JC - When I was a young man in Detroit, they had an evening edition of the Free Press. Did they have that here?

Charles - No, just the morning edition. Then I did the News and the Times in the evening. I worked for the gentleman who had the distributorship, Mr. Dutch Sonnenberg. His home was on Grace St.

Joan - One thing the kids liked to do too was to get cokes or sundaes after school. We went to Gunsell's drug store for the cokes and Stewarts' for the sundaes. I think the sundaes were bigger at Stewarts'.

RA - Was that Rexall or where Northville Drugs ended up?

Joan - Gunsell's was on the corner of Center and Main.

RA – It was a pet store last.

Joan – Yes, where Gunsell's was.

Charles – Stewarts' was just down the street past Genitti's. Essie Nirider had the Five and Dime. Brader's had their store, then Del Black came with his shoe store. That was quite a while later though.
RA - Any other recollections?

Joan - It was a nice peaceful town. It was a lovely place to grow up.

Charles – Comerica Bank was previously known as Manufacturers Bank. Prior to that it was Depositors State Bank.

The first time I ever went hunting, my dad and my older cousins, who were about twelve years older than me, all went out pheasant hunting. I had this little 410 and my mother said it was okay but to be careful. I crossed Baseline and took my dog, Prince, which was a boxer. He was really good. I think I shot a rabbit. When we got down to where Guernsey's is now, all of a sudden up goes a rooster and sits in the tree. To show you how frugal I was, I took out the high-powered shell and put in a low powered one and knocked him out of the tree. I came home with a beautiful rooster pheasant. My mother was going to clean it. I told her to wait until Dad came home, so she hung it on the line. When my Dad came home they didn't have anything with their so-called hunting dogs. He said, "Where'd that come from?" I said, "I got it. I took Prince and I went out. He put him up and I got him."

Charles - Another hunting spot was near Maybury Park. The Meyer's had their farm there and so did Ramshaws, who had the photo company. Both of them said I could hunt there anytime. Whenever I got something, I offered it to them, but they always said, "No, no, you take it home." But I said, "I'll get some more." We had enough at home. It was enjoyment, my dog got his exercise, and I got to go hunting. My older brother and his friends would come out with their true hunting dogs. My dad would go out with me because of my age. They would say, "There's nothing here, you're wasting your time." They would go back to their car. We'd go twenty feet and a rooster would come up. "Bang," and I knocked him down.

Joan - They loved to hunt. At Ramshaws you could buy churned butter.

RA – Where was Ramshaws in relation to the Meyer Berry Farm?

Joan - It was a little beyond Meyers, right next to it. I went to school with Howie Meyer.

JC - Was the dairy that was on Six Mile there when you lived here?

Joan - Yes, Farm Crest, that was wonderful! I really miss that. We'd go out there and get milk and butter.

JC - They had a little retail store there. When I was a kid we got ice cream there.

Joan - Yes they did, ice cream and dairy products. You could see all the cows in the field. I miss that.

RA - Thanks very much, that was very interesting.

Transcribed by Patricia Allen on July 17, 2009.

Reviewed by: Charles Toussaint and Joan Noonan in September 2009