



Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society

Transcription of oral interview tape with Walter Oliver

Transcribed by GWBHS member Sue Williams – October, 2010

Original interview by Jim Laarman, GWBHS member

Date: January 22, 1988

Interview takes place at “Oliver stone house” – no address given (5644 Greer Road, West Bloomfield, MI 48324)

Oliver's Grandfather originally was from Watkins Lake, Waterford area; grandmother was from Green Lake Road. Her name was Nettie Dickie. Grandfather owned the stone house with his brother.

Maternal Grandmother was a Watchpocket, mother was daughter to Frank Watchpocket.

Family name was German that was too difficult to pronounce, so everyone just called him watch-pocket, hence the name Watchpocket.

Mrs. Russel – mother was a Simpson; lived to be 107. Her father was a carpenter, had little farm south end of Cooley Lake Road

144 acres in Oliver farm, located on corner of Hiller and Greer roads; there was an additional 60 acres on Hospital Road (Waterford Twp.)

Father's brother, John, went to Watkins Lake, then worked in Pontiac in real estate. He never farmed.

Farm crops included: corn, oats, wheat, hay, beef cattle, some milk cows. Later, grandfather built 2 barns which made it much warmer for cattle and chores.

Largest barn in area was the Smith farm on 14 Mile Road, west of Haggerty – still standing at time of this interview. On east side of Haggerty, before Oakley Park Road, stood large white barn, Bob Etters was last owner; raised Guernsey cows.

Grandfather was born in Detroit, around 4th Ave. - he was 12 years old when he came to farm and went to Scotch School. Oliver notes that his Grandfather, Grandmother, mother, father, son and daughter and grandkids all went to Scotch School. Leggets also had generations attending Scotch.

Legget farm – 2 silos, located just north of the school.

Walter's father and mother moved in with grandparents. Began to do dairy cattle and raise chickens.

Grandfather bottled own milk, sold in Pontiac, also later sold to Bordens Creamery; truck would pick up and take to Dickie farm on 12 mile Road – around 1920's. Milk was cooled and put into tankers and taken 12 miles into Pontiac and Detroit.

Milk was put into 10 gallon cans, wrapped with burlap bags soaked in cold water and covered with canvas. Each can weighed 95 pounds. Father had 30 cows, one bull and young cattle.

Used veterinarian in Pontiac, then used Oxford vet named Bailey; then Dr. Emery from Clarkston.

Family had telephone before they had electrical lights. Used lanterns to do chores, later got 2 lights in the barn. .

Barn had windows, 4 on each side. Never saw a barn raising. Asked about the stone pillars across the street. Said land used to belong to the farm until son died (not explained). The land was kept with the Simpson farm, then sold to Teasdale, and then was platted out for roads and homes. Man by the name of Baker walked from Keego Harbor to work on the pillars.

Oliver went to school in grandma's horse and buggy, then by model T car. Roads were mostly clay. Recalled shoveling cars out from the snow. Grass grew up in the middle of the road.

(looking at 1875 picture of home. Looked at chimneys, front room had big stove; cook stove in the kitchen, basement in the house. Considered a large farmhouse)

Well water always in the house. Later, Walter's daughter put an additional 4" well into the house to run heat pump.

There was a holding tank in the house, and then it flowed into the barn, used to pack straw around the tank to keep it warm. Later they had water cups in the barn.

There were ponds on the farm and river in back of farm (Clinton River) good fishing; nice bluegills in spring, pike would spawn; there was also carp and suckers (cat fish) and always a mess of fish.

Remembers 3 families from "down there" - east of the farm towards the lake. Families by name of . DeMorning, Smith, Leo Harrington. Then 7 ¾ miles of canals were dredged. Lots of marshland, leveled the marsh and hills, and then there were homes built. Walter was about 9 years old then; it later became the Zox Island Subdivision. (Cass Lakeside Association – currently 250 homes)

Oliver belonged to Farm Bureau, located in Lansing. Later, each county had its own headquarters.

Remembers disastrous diseases, TB and "Bangs" - where the cow carried the calf for 4 – 5 months, then aborted it. If that got into the herd, it spread.

Sold meat to Kirby's Packing in Pontiac; Man by the name of Folestein (sp?) was cattle buyer in Detroit. Was paid 10-12-14 cents a pound then, now 35 cents per pound. Some larger, 600 – 1,000 pounds could get 65 cents. Angus alive would get 65 cents per pound.

Oliver raised Holsteins and the farm was 2nd in the State of Michigan to make a 600 pound herd average. Received awards for this Lakefield Farms in Clarkston beat him out for prize; it was run by JL Hudson Company. Large farm.

Stock ate all grains raised on Oliver farm. Would buy soybeans from Highland Feed

Vegetable garden of strawberries, red currents which were sold in Detroit at Eastern Farmer's Market. Went to state Fair to see stock and Saginaw Fair to see farm machinery and Milford Fair to see crops.

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Scotch School discussion:

First school was on the south side of the street (Commerce Road) where gas station is now. Grandmother attended school there when it was just a log cabin. Remembers foundation of 4 large stone where the school sat, until bigger school (now WB. Community Center) was built across the street, on corner of Commerce and Hiller. Later, a new school was built 3 feet from old one.

Old school: When the wind blew from the east, you sat on the west side of the room. There was an old stove in the center. There was 18 – 20 feet of stove pipe running across the top of the building. Recalls seeing this pipe "cherry red." from the heat of the stove. Young kids carried the wood in; older kids loaded the stove and carried the ashes across Hiller Road to dump them.

Remembers his days at Scotch School: Bert Langdon went there, in 1908 with sisters: Lena, Fanny, Mable, Arthur, Hattie; Ellie Hallet; The Forest Dandison farm was across the street from the school, on Commerce Road. Legget Farm was 160 acres.

Flanders Farm turned into Aviation Club which did not have airport, but was a golf club with course. Big square yellow house located on Hiller Road was clubhouse.

Walter never took a vacation; hunted for deer, pheasant, squirrel, coon at nights with a 22 and shotgun.

Landmarks: Log cabin on Hiller, next to . . . (garbled) Simpson/Oliver house; Frank and Emy Lobeck house on Hiller Road was originally part of George or Jim Greer farm, located across from house on west side of the Oliver farm. Boice Bros. Brick from Pontiac bought up and hacked it into lots during Depression.

Father had a 1920's 8-16 International Tractor with steel front and back wheeled tires, sloping hood and radiator was just in front of you. For plowing and working the ground.

1930's F-20 was the two plow tractor with steel wheels and F-12 had one plow. 3 wheels tractor cultivated row crops instead of using the horse teams. Could do 2 rows instead of one. Had 6 horses on the farm. Put 3 horses on the plow due to heavy clay in the ground. Old clay ground did hold the moisture. So could not plow it wet. Needed disc or spring tooth plow to break up clumps. Double disc needed 4 horses. Went to Detroit to buy horses at the Weinberg Horse auction. Went to Saginaw Fair when he was 14 to see new tools.

Winter activities. Always had ice boats on Cass Lake. Used canvas, wood planks and bed frames for the runners. Sometimes the blacksmith would put runners on the wooden planks. Always did lots of sledding, west of the school. Skated on pond at Scotch School (filled in when school was built)

Hiller road names after that family (Jacob Hiller (looking at 1899 map)

German Park (UGARS) founded by German families out from Detroit during Depression. First they rented land down near Cass Lake near Pickeral Point and put up tents. Then they bought the property up on Greer near Hiller and named it UGARS about 1937. They were German Tool and Die Makers – family names of Notoffler, Smith, Wagner, Sheers, Bozies. East of UGARS was the Finnish Park, former Simpson farm. Once called Vehkola Park, after owner, Jim Vehkola, then the park's name was changed to Kaleva Park by the Finnish group who founded it.

Tom Legget's Farm was part of what now is Marshbank Park (now WB Parks and Recreation run Marshbank Park). Doc Robb's property, north of park, was once part of Legget's. Across the road, was the Darb Lake area, with land owned by Jim Walls.

Coomer Road named after Marion (male) Coomer.

Speers Farm, ran from Lochaven road north to Clinton River.

Boices planted several pear trees along Cooley Lake Road area.

Asked where gravel for road came from: said they drew it from the south side, east corner of Green Lake there was a gravel pit, now where Wellington Road is. Then went out to /Beardsley in White Lake for gravel. There were also gravel pits on east side of Orchard Lake that were filled with rubbish then dirt and houses were built on the area.

Family had beagle dogs and Walker Fox hounds on farm, pet lambs.

Raised sheep. Wool went to Walled Lake to Breland's (sp?) and Dan Hadden from Holly who likes our wood. Hadden said all others were “sandbox fleece.”

Crossed ewes to get good wool - Shropshire with Rambouillet (curley horned sheep) to get wool that would have just right amount of grease in the wool. Also used Oxford Sheep (open faced sheep) to get the kind of wool they wanted. Often would get 18 – 20 pounds per clipping, normal being 9-10..

Neighborhood dogs became problem since they would kill sheep. Mr. Green, (father of Wendall) was the WB Constable, would come by and pay the farm owner for damages for loss of stock due to wild running dogs. He would have to shoot some dogs even though licenses were required. The sheep would be in pastures and the dogs would grab them by the wool and bite them to death. Wendell paid for a while and then told farmers that the township could not afford to pay for any more lost stock. One year Oliver got \$600 for lost stock.

Oliver sold the sheep and started to raise pigs. Pigs ate “swill” warm mash of corn, wheat and soybeans (for the protein) Got some other feed Highland; fed them very little corn. Had 80 pigs at one time. Stayed in shaded area of shed, sows and boars raised to take to market. Would send the pigs thru a chute and those less than 200 pounds would get thru and be held back to fatten up. They would sort themselves this way. Dogs never seemed to bother the pigs. Also had 300 chickens and 45 head of cattle.

Sheep shearing was 20 cents per head. Professional Sheep Shearer would come around and shear sheep at all the farms. Wool buyers would look at color of wool. Wool was spread across wooden board frame with strings at 6" intervals, wool would be placed on this grid, dark color then fleece. The strings were tightened and wool was put into bundles. Wool buyers would look at the bundles.

Best time to shear was in early April. Used to "tag the ewes" or cut the sweat locks off the ewes. Warm weather and this process would make the wool become a little greasy – desired. Bert Langdon farm also had sheep. Farm ran near where O.L Golf Course is now. First barn on left, former Willis Ward farm on Pontiac Trail.

Four Towns: place named for Cooley Lake and Lochaven Road intersection, was a school and church (Four Towns United Methodist Church) and little bitty store. (could not remember name)

Four townships came together at Four Towns. (Union Lake) Had gas station, beer garden, located at Williams Lake road and Cooley Lake Road, near old Dobski's.

Oliver Family was English. Mrs. Walter Oliver was from Clarkston; attended Clarkston High School.

Walter Oliver walked to Pontiac High School then quit in 11th grade to run family farm when father became ill. Sometimes got rides to school from teacher. Worked the farm from 5 a.m. - 9 p.m.. School gym teacher opted him out of gym. Took study hall instead since teacher knew he worked so hard. Played in the band. Remembers teacher's cars getting stuck on Hiller Road and they had to get him out with team of horses.

Mother and wife sold aprons, quilting bees, bake sales and had her own "egg money" Sold bouquets of her own flowers at the Detroit Farmer's Market. Also sold currents, strawberries, potatoes and cabbages.

Depression was hard time for family. Sold Heiffer's (given to him by father) calf to make it for \$210. Then later sold the Heiffer. Then the banks closed. Always had enough food to eat on the farm.

Many farmers could not pay outlandish taxes. Olivers sold the farm in 1956 when taxes were \$1100; 10 years later taxes were \$17,000.

End of interview.

NOTE: The Oliver farmland was sold off and now contains the Seymour Gretchko Elementary School, a cul de sac with 6 homes, and two large Pulte-built subdivisions. The original stone farmhouse still stands and is owned by a couple who have updated the inside and added an outside garage. The barns and silo were demolished in the 1970's.

See research on Kaleva Park, the Finnish Camp referenced above.