



Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society

Transcription of Oral Interview cassette tape with

Marion Browning- Stephens – Jones

Interviewed by Jerry Stephens – nephew

Member of the Clean Lake Association, Upper Straits Lakes, West Bloomfield

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Transcribed July, 2010 by Susan Williams, GWBHS

Tape quality: poor in some sections

Different taping sessions

Opens with discussion about Uncle George Browning . . .

MBS: After he left the farm he built his own place, near the Apple Branch property of grandfather, Frances Orr. George bought the land from the woods down to the lake. He used to build boats. He had a little shop by then, down by the road what is now Myrtle Street. Grandpa had the post office and a little store. Built a little fence around one end of the kitchen and sold candy, tea, coffee, peanuts and chewing tobacco. There was quite a demand for chewing tobacco at that time. I can remember sticking my hand into the peanut pails. Rest of the kitchen was large enough for use to use. Grandpa would take the mail out and hang it on a post that was fastened to another post so the train could pass by and snatch it up. Store was south of the track on Halstead Road and Pleasant Lake. Just a few steps from the railroad tracks.

Grandpa Orr passed away and grandma wanted to claim her property and build on it. Kitchen was moved for an extra room . . . she had boarders there. Some would stay for two weeks. She built two small cottages west of the house. She also had a large tent to the east, single beds rented to men for the weekend. Another large tent under the catalpa trees. They had access to the lakes; they were allowed to go to the lake. They use the path and rented boats from Uncle George. He kept building boats to supply grandma's boarders. They had to get their own worms. (Looking at pictures . . .) Grandma built the upright (2nd story addition – two bedrooms w/upstairs and parlor.)

Great Grandpa Orr married a Richardson; I don't remember her first name. We'd go over there (grandma's house) on horses. . . one corner of the cemetery there was blueberries. Uncle George built the upright. He was a carpenter, you know . . .

Discussion on Eagle School.

MBS: Went to school with Beulha (sister); my last year was 8th grade. I was a real little girl. The boys would drag me around on the end of a broom on the ice in the winter. I was a little thing . . .

In the spring, the teacher would let us sit out in the grove of trees. Our teacher was named Brockwell. They had a farm west of the school. Her brother's name was George. He was a bachelor and she was an old maid. Never had children; she helped her put on my leggings, with all those buttons above and below the

knees. Can you imagine a teacher doing that nowadays?

. . . lived near them on Pontiac Trail. Borlands, and Rockwells . . .

We went swimming in the lake a lot. We'd run ¼ mile to the lake. Hard sandy beach. We could see the white barn. Grandpas would take me fishing, just at dark. Bluegills just as fast as we could pull them in. (discussion on bullheads and garfish.

L: Did Mildred (older sister) swim in the lake?

MBS: Not much, she was busy going to school She went to HS and then off to college. I went several terms to Eagle School, then finished up at Green School. I could walk with Clara Marsh and Helen. But I had to dry the breakfast dishes before going to school.

My father bought a strip of land there, in front of the stand and next to the road. Raised potatoes there. Schaeffer's were rented at first, then finally built the house across the street after buying from Uncle George. No other kids around to play with

Talked about property east of Pontiac Trail, Langdon's house. Cranberry Lake (now called Mirror Lake) ; used to walk there to skate. . . . Gladys Hallets . . .

Also lived in the John Dougherty house. Used to cross the road and go swimming, east of where we lived, men planted flowers, daffodils and narcissus crocus. One corner was covered with them when the men got tired and just threw them in the corner. Every year that area bloomed. Several families lived on the farms and picked bouquets. Langdon family: Bert, Bob, Fanny, Lena, Fanny and Harry Langdon. Discussion on Bert's children who sold the land and subdivided the land. Trees all along the fence, swampy, then he filled it in from the field.

People on the north side of the Lake: Dandisons, Olivers, youngest Oliver boy was a clown . . . used to row over to Oliver's then walk home.

Remembers when she rowed a rather large woman over to Oliver's landing, northwest side of the lake, started back and a heavy wind from the west made it hard to row. Lester and Margarite Oliver were the children.

. . . talking about Milford business . . . name not clear.

. . . sisters would bring cukes and take them to Highland, put them into large vats barrel size with iron bands going around the stays on the barrel. Cucumbers went into the barrels, water and salt (salt was measured with an instrument), they pounded the plug and loaded the barrels into the train and they were dumped into a tank. They were taken to Detroit. Sold out business . . . He plowed farmland for other. Successful farmer . . . (name not mentioned)

We never locked our doors. Very civilized area.

. . . Grandma Browning's boarding house: she would get meals for all these people. Big Sunday dinner.

She used a kerosene stove and oven. Baked pies and biscuits and chicken and mashed potatoes. Corn on the cob. Variety of pies. Used strawberries for pies. Added sugar and cornstarch to the pies. People used to love to come there and eat. She would serve sometimes 60 – 70 people over the weekend. Vacation people. Gals would play cards. She'd get at them for playing cards, she thought it was a sin. She showed a good example of how you ought to live. She used to have some peculiar sayings. . .

Apple trees all over there. They were all old and had to be taken out. . .

Tape stops.

PART 2 - Marion Browning Stephens - Jones.

Discussion on grandma's house . . .

MBS: . . .the kitchen she'd taken off the house. She made it into a bedroom. He didn't try to finish it off and all. She put down and rug with a double bed. With a cot. Sometimes I slept with grandma.

JS: How far over did Uncle George Browning own?

MBS: Over to the lake. Back to the creek. There's a little creek right in front of his shop, where we used to pick violets.

JS: I remember that creek. We used to play there.

MBS: Just a tiny creek, south side of Pontiac Trail, over way the swamp. It was springtime . . .

They had a boarder there and he stayed a long time. And he went somewhere and got something to drink. Grandpa didn't approve of drinking. He (the boarder) imbibed; grandpa went down to use his boat and it wasn't there and the boarder was gone, and so they located it and this man had rowed it down to the east end of the lake and taken off and left the boat. So grandpa never heard from him again. He probably did drink before, but couldn't stand it any longer. But that was quite a thing to happen because we never heard of anyone ever stealing anything before. Of course, he didn't steal it, he just went off with the boat. . .

JS: The boats were very heavy then. Did he make the boat out of oak from our land?

MBS: No uncle George bought the lumber. Little shop all painted red. He left his house, his cash and other assets all to Grandma Alta's girls.

JS: I heard a story about finding a whole bunch of money in the walls.

MBS: I never heard about that.

JS: What did he (George) do to earn so much money?

MBS: You see, he was left the Browning property, the farm. And he sold that and the Watkins family bought it. Jimmy Watkins, and he (jimmy) made payments from time to time. And so George had money coming in he didn't have to use.

JS: Was that Jim and Alana (?) Watkins We know her . . .

MBS: Albert was named after our great grandfather, Alfred Browning. A . . . I . . . don't know . . . garbled . . .

JS: He lives down there in the trailer park.

MBS: He had the flower shop. They kept the name Watkins Flower Shop.

JS: Did you ever go down and play in the swamp by the lake?

MBS: We went down and picked cowslips (buttercups) and cut them up and made greens out of them. Grandma would take a dishpan and a knife in her big apron, and we'd go out, and she'd put milkweed, yellow dock, green dandelions. And we'd come back and she'd wash 'em real well, clean 'em, and cook 'em. She'd say, "Oh, that's my spring tonic . . . "

We ate dandelions greens and pork salt. In the winter dad would butcher beef and in the spring, the pigs. And we'd have fresh meat all year, so we had to eat it when it was fresh. And my mother learned how to can . . .

JS: Did Grandpas Browning had a lot of animals?

MBS: No, just one horse, one cow and lots of chickens. And a big ole rooster. One day the rooster picked up a button with a long thread on it and he ran around with a long thread coming out of his mouth all day. We finally got it out of his throat . . .

JS: Did they grow crops across the road?

MBS: Yes, owned from the clearing back to Woodpecker Lake. I hated to see him sell off that property, but the Schaeffer's wanted it. It was an orchard over there.

JS: Some of the apple trees are still standing . . .

MBS: My mother and I would go back to the lake and fish. I never got near it without falling in that lake . . .

JS: See, that's where my brother gets that (laughter)

MBS: It's a real deep lake. You fall into the water and it goes right down.

JS: A lot of those lakes are spring fed, just big deep holes. . .

MBS: There's a string of lakes. Back behind there. One's Big Morris and Little Morris. Just holes. Deep. Nice place for the turtles. Dirt was kind of sandy. Turtles would lay their eggs and we'd dig them up, just for fun. We shouldn't have. We'd take them home and try to get her to cook them, but she wouldn't you

know . . . you can't . . .

JS: Is that the same sand piles where grandpa found the Indian artifacts?

MBS: No, it was the sandy field that Grandpa found them, not too far from the barn. The whole field was sandy. Up and down, up and down, up to the barn. Dad would plow it up every spring. Put in navy beans. Every time he plowed, he'd plow up arrow heads, and other things like hatchets and other stones, they'd call 'em "skinning stones."

****taping session changes – then very bad reception for new tape. . .

Several people looking at pictures.

Garbled conversation . . .

JS: . . . right now it's a public place. The Dougherty farm became the civic center . . .

MBS:long driveway on Pontiac Lake. Stayed on a farm of Arlene road, but name was not on it when we were there. It was a little farm that ran clear to the railroad. Dad used to take the cows over there.

JS: Did the cattle graze there?

MBS: No, our cattle would not craze there. That property belonged to Mr. Ward. He owned the island. Mr. Ward owned all the property all around the lake. He bought up property up along Pontiac trail; rich guy from Detroit. He bought a lot of land. On the farms he would hire a family. A family would live in the homes and he would pay them for working the farms. So many of the families around us were Mr. Ward's people. But he seemed to be a good job. He paid them well . . .

(gabled discussion on Apple Branch farm) . . . used to stay there with grandma a lot.

JS: Was that near our house, the one Dad called the Blue Roofed House, on Arcadia?

MBS: Down away. Brought the Browning house from grandma Browning. She was still alive. She left it to them. Aunt Alice, Alta and Beulah were the Browning girls. Alice married a Slader, a minister, Harry. Second mother married a Stephens; Beulah married a Sherman. We were born there in that old house.

Over on Walnut, west of us, was the Watkins farm. And my mother's grandfather's parents. Big farm with stone house. Years ago, fathers would leave property to the oldest son. He left everything to George, a bachelor. George sold the property to Jim and Lean (Alana?) Watkins. They were our neighbors. Everyone knew one another.

George lived in the little house, left it to Aunt Beulah on Upper Straits Lake. All theses years George went over for Watkins for dinner. George was not very clean. Didn't keep himself clean. I used to ask my mother why he smelled too much. Grandma scrubbed floors on hands and knees. She didn't know. Everything went to George.

For something to do he (George) built rowboats with oars. He had a boat livery, rented boats. He was a

carpenter. Grandma kept summer boarders and Uncle George would rent them boats. Used to go fishing and we'd get bluegills around the point. Beyond the bay . . .

JS: They dredged it out . . .

MBS: We'd pull in a bullhead once in a while (catfish). She'd cook it. They were good . . . (discussion on bluegills and how to freeze them in cartons . . .)

. . . Farm on Walnut Lake Road, the Barber Farm. Whenever he plowed sandy hill, he'd plow up Indian relics. Used to buy large picture frames and he'd mount them (inside). Stone pipe got stolen. He was ill. . . there were some not very nice people around . . .

We used to be interested in the tools the Indians used. Used to be flint, easy to chip into shape. Used feathers on the shaft to make them sail. Grandpa had hickory bow and made bows for the boys, too. Never made me one.

. . . sandy hill, burial grounds, easy to dig in. Buried Indian people facing the East. Skinning knives, hammers for making fires . . . Whatever they owned, they'd put into the grave. Things they needed for later on . . .

discussion on families: . . . Pallets (sp?) had house on Apple island. Raised pigs and had gardens.

JS: Ever hear of a house being dragged on the ice across the island?

MBS: There was a steep hill. One evening we skated over to the island. (no name of boy given) He played accordian-like instrument and did the schottische (dance). I slipped on the hill all the way down; didn't hurt me. We lived up the road then.

. . . house moved from the island to Langdon's livery. Waited for the ice to move houses. One time there was a boatload of pigs; they got frantic and pigs jumped out and swam all the way home. Another family lived there, and every morning she'd row the kids to the island so they could go to school . . .

TAPE ENDS