

Kentwood Historic Preservation Commission
Oral History Abstract



Oral History # 062-2006

Name of individual (s): John E. Oosterhouse, Jr. with wife Arlene Oosterhouses

Name of Interviewer: Joyce Thompson

Date: June 15, 2006

Brief summary of individual's importance to Paris Township/Kentwood history:

The Oosterhouse name appears in various sections of Paris Township. This particular branch resides in an historic home located near the corners of Kalamazoo Ave. and 44th Street (formerly the Noorman home). He attended Shaffer School and later Seymour Christian School. He shared information about farm life and the impact of The Great Depression. He owned and operated Clear Air Heating & Cooling.

**KENTWOOD HISTORIC
PRESERVATION COMMISSION
[KHPC]**

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
(062-2006)

**John E. Oosterhouse, Jr.
(Wife--Arlene Oosterhouse)**

INTERVIEWER: JOYCE THOMPSON
June 15, 2006

Transcribed by: Sandy de Ryke
de Ryke Transcriptions, LLC, Oct.. 2006
Edited Version, November, 2006

**KENTWOOD HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION (KHPC)
ORAL HISTORY**

Subject: John Edward Oosterhouse, Jr. (and his wife, Arlene Oosterhouse)
Interviewer: Joyce A. Thompson
Date of Interview: June 15, 2006
Place: 4447 Kalamazoo Avenue, S.E., Kentwood, Michigan

Transcribed by: Sandy de Ryke, de Ryke Transcriptions, LLC, October 2006

JO John Oosterhouse
AO Arlene Oosterhouse
JT Joyce Thompson

[I REMOVED CRUTCH WORDS AND FALSE STARTS FROM THIS TRANSCRIPT]

JT: Today is June 15, 2006 and this is the taped oral history of John Edward Oosterhouse, Jr. We are at his home at 4447 Kalamazoo Avenue, S.E., in the dining room. My name is Joyce Thompson and I will be recording this oral history for the Kentwood Historic Preservation Commission. This tape will be transcribed, a copy given to John so he can revise or make any corrections or deletions that he wishes. When John is satisfied and the oral history is completed he will be asked to sign a release so it can become part of Kentwood's archives. Is this arrangement satisfactory to you, John?

JO: Yes.

JT: Okay, what is your name and date of birth?

JO: John E. Oosterhouse Jr.

JT: Date of birth.

JO: Date of birth is March 27, 1926.

JT: And your age today, John?

JO: Eighty.

JT: And where were you born?

JO: In this area.

JT: Okay, let's qualify that. Paris Township?

JO: Ya, it'd be Paris Township. Because my dad was involved with Paris Township. He was the treasurer, I guess for a while.

JT: Okay, your parents' names and date of birth.

JO: Well, my dad's name was John. I'm John, Jr. and I don't know when he was born.

JT: All right, their birth place?

JO: Well, they were born pretty much the same area, I think. I don't think they was born in any hospital. Dad was born here.

JT: All right. Tell me where.

JO: Breton and 44th Street.

JT: Your mother's name?

JO: Gertie.

JT: Okay. And was she born here too?

JO: Yes. Wait a minute. What you got to say? (John speaking to his wife.)

AO: Up north.

JO: Up north? Oh, it seems she knows more about it than I do.

JT: Okay, Arlene is present here. Arlene is John's wife. And you are saying that his mother was born up north?

AO: Ya, she was born in McBain. And then when they moved down here her father was a school teacher. So, that's how she came to be here.

JT: Okay, okay. And tell me about your brothers and sisters. How many siblings and their names.

JO: Well, there were seven of us kids, so it was six.

JT: Okay, who was first?

JO: Alyce, Leone, Henrietta, JoAnne, John, Gerard, and Donald is the last one.

JT: Donald is the youngest, okay. And you were in the middle, correct?

JO: Ah, huh.

JT: How did it feel to be in the middle when you were growing up?

JO: Well, I didn't know any other thing, so that's the way it was.

JT: You had older sisters, actually.

JO: Ya.

JT: So, was there a favorite sister, or -- ?

JO: Well, Leone was the one that would help on the farm. We had to milk cows in the morning, then she'd come out and my mother would too. There was three of us, my dad, my mother, and Leone, and I. There would be four of us milkin' cows. Of course, I I might have started --- before I milked, but I ended up milking.

JT: I'd like you to remember a sibling moment. What comes to mind when you think of your brothers and sisters what comes to mind when you think back when you were growing up?

JO: I don't know how to answer that. Well, for one thing, the oldest one, Alyce, they didn't help my mother with the housework. My mother had to go out and milk cows in the morning and probably clean all the milking equipment that we had. We had a place in the milk house where she could do that. I don't know if she did it all the time, my dad did that too.

JT: So, what comes to mind is work on the farm?

JO: About work on the farm?

JT: Ah, huh.

JO: Well, we had a silo with all feed in there for the cows and JoAnne used to go up there and shovel that stuff down, forward it down the shoot there, and she went and put the fork in her leg and she got infection in her leg. But, she's the only one; I don't think any of the other girls went up in that silo. Not that I can recall.

JT: Did you have a favorite place at the farm?

JO: Well, I liked to be in the barn.

JT: Okay, why is that?

JO: Well, I don't know. We had different things to do, had some little calves in the barn that had to be fed. Then we had a saddle horse in there too.

JT: Oh, so you liked animals.

JO: Ya, especially that riding horse.

JT: Did you get to ride often?

JO: Ya, I did quite often, I guess. Fact is, one of my cousins come over and then he wanted to ride. The horse went right towards the fence and then turned quick and my cousin flew right over the fence.

JT: Oh, my!

JO: He didn't know enough to what was going to happen.

JT: Did you name that horse?

JO: Probably did, but I don't remember the name of it anymore.

JT: Do you remember what kind of an animal it was?

JO: Well, it was a regular riding horse. I think it was a mare and was a lot smaller than a work horse.

JT: Okay, the occupations of your parents. What did they do for a living?

JO: Same thing I did. Work on the farm.

JT: They were farmers, both of them were farmers, okay.

JO: Ya, well, my mother helped. We had a huge garden and she worked a lot in the garden.

JT: What did she grow in that garden?

JO: Oh, man! Everything you can imagine.

JT: Like.

JO: Well, we raised corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and what would be some of the small plants?

AO: Carrots?

JO: Hmm?

AO: Carrots, maybe?

JO: Oh, ya, carrots, we had carrots, and beets.

JT: The root vegetables.

JO: Ya.

JT: Who weeded that garden?

JO: Well, we all worked at it, I guess, occasionally. I think all our sisters worked in there a lot too weeding the garden.

JT: How many acres was the farm?

JO: It was forty on the north side and forty on the south side, so it was eighty acres.

JT: Okay, and where was this farm?

JO: It was right on (looking at a map) here's 44th Street and here's Breton and the nearest farm was in this corner right here, right next to Breton and 44th Street. The fact is our house was on the north side right there and then he had forty acres on the other side which was a little further over because my grandpa had forty or sixty acres almost right across from us, but ours went right up to the next farm.

JT: Besides the garden, what else was on the farm? You said a barn and what was in the barn beside the horse?

AO: Milk cows.

JT: Cows, you had milk cows?

JO: Oh, ya, we had milk cows.

JT: How many?

JO: Well, we used to milk somewhere between twenty and twenty-five.

JT: Okay, that's a lot of cows.

JO: Ya, and then they all had stanchions, that's where they stayed. Of course, we'd usually get 'em out in the morning and get 'em out in the pasture. Let's see, what was your first question? I forgot that already.

JT: I'll come back to that. All right, you told me about mom. What memory comes about dad now?

JO: Well, let's see. I know one thing, he and his brother, my uncle, they put a big addition on the barn so that we had a lot more storage room for hay and some of the animals were

down there. In fact, some of the farm equipment went in that place too, went in the bottom there. One side was hay right from the floor up. On the south side we kept some animals under it and the tractors. We had a couple tractors and that was under there.

JT: You're talking about the barn, okay, but your dad, what memory comes about dad? When you think of your dad you think of ?

JO: I'm tryin' to think. He was always tryin' to get us to work, of course, which was normal. We didn't mind that. I can tell you one experience we had. I don't know if you want to hear about that.

JT: Go ahead.

JO: We were goin' to church one Sunday and the road was slippery. Right down on Kalamazoo Avenue, we were going Kalamazoo to 52nd Street and we were going downhill just before you get to 52nd.

JT: It was hillier back then.

JO: Well, no, I think it was the same pavement. They had the cement pavement then already. But anyway, the car started goin' like this and he didn't know how to drive on ice, so he turned and, whoa, he tipped over. He had the whole family in the car and the youngest brother, he was just a couple years old, he was on the bottom and he started screamin' and hollerin'. I can still hear that.

JT: Were there ditches then?

JO: Well, there were, but that didn't seem to bother us much. We almost tipped over right on, you know, the car was a little bit over on the side of the cement. Then a lot of cars stopped and, well, I was in the front seat and mother she was on top, dad was on the bottom, so she had to get out first and open the doors. Well, all the people there, there was quite a few people stopped and it was an old '28 Pontiac and they pushed the thing up on the wheels again and we went on to church.

JT: What an experience. You probably were thinking of what happened during the sermon.

JO: I told some of the other guys I knew, I said, "Well, we tipped over on the way here." They just thought I was kiddin', of course. They didn't believe it.

JT: Now, you mentioned you had your uncle living nearby, what was his name?

JO: Herman Oosterhouse.

JT: Herman? Other relatives in the area living nearby?

JO: Well, my grandpa and I had two aunts who were not married then yet, that I'm thinkin' of. When I was young they weren't married yet. So, there was three of 'em livin' there and my Uncle Herman's wife died real young and then he moved in with them for a while. But, then he married another lady and he built another house, but he was just -- see, dad's farm was here and then my grandpa on Burton Road they were here and then my Uncle Herman had land over here.

JT: So, you were kind of close together.

JO: Ya, ya.

JT: So, that made it easy to visit each other when you weren't working on the farm, correct?

JO: Ya. Of course, my uncle always wanted us to help him work on his farm.

JT: This is Uncle Herman?

JO: Ya.

JT: Was Herman younger than your dad?

JO: Ya.

JT: That sounds like a young man's thinking. So, you had chores. Do you remember the kinds of chores that you had to do when you were younger?

JO: Well, I do remember the dirty job of haulin' out the manure.

JT: Well, you were the oldest boy, I can understand that. So, that was the least-liked chore. Okay, I got that. What about a "best" chore? Did you have a chore you *liked* to do?

JO: Well, I liked to, when I was old enough, which I wasn't very old, but I used to drive horses and then drag the land for whatever crop we were going to put in. I really enjoyed that because I could, which I wouldn't have, I don't know how my dad ever allowed it, but I rode right be-- you know, where you hook the harnesses to the drag, then there was a thing there, there's three horses and I'd stand on there and that's the way I drove those horses around.

JT: Oh. King of the --

JO: Oh, ya, I was goin' up and down, but I enjoyed it, I really enjoyed it. I think my dad was kind of concerned about -- he said, "Be sure to stop those horses if you fall off."

JT: Oh, yes, I can understand that. Do you remember when your parents, the farm, had their first tractor?

JO: Well, as long as I can remember, I think they always had a tractor. When I was workin' or when I was old enough to remember.

JT: Okay.

JO: I'm tryin' to think what the name of the first tractor was, but -- I know that they changed different tractors over the years.

JT: How long was that farm in your family?

JO: Oh, let's see, they moved out of there in about 1945 when they bought this house (corner of Kalamazoo and 44th Street next to what used to be Bowen Elementary School), I think.

JT: Okay. Well, where we are right now is the family home for a long, long time. Nineteen forty-five, correct? Wow, that's a long time.

JO: Well, some like Alyce has moved out already and Leone. I think she lived here. Henrietta Jo did. Henrietta taught school. She taught school right out of high school. And she had a car and would drive us downtown and would teach school at different schools.

JT: But, she was living at that point in this home, correct? The one we're in right now. Okay, was mom a good cook?

JO: Oh, ya.

JT: Do you remember some of her favorite dishes that you liked? What did she cook or bake that you remember?

JO: I don't remember. I know it was a difficult job for her because they had a stove in the kitchen that was heated with wood and that's what she had to do her cooking on.

JT: Those old iron wood stoves that you had to have a boiler at one side.

JO: We called it a radiator.

AO: Reservoir.

JT: Reservoir.

JO: Reservoir, ya, that's right.

JT: And it had like one of those top warming ovens. My grandparents had something like that. Those were old.

JO: Ya. What an improvement, when we were on the farm yet, they got an electric stove before they moved out of there.

JT: Oh, they had been electric stove. I bet your mother thought that was heaven.

JO: Ya, that was so nice I couldn't believe it.

JT: Didn't have to chop wood for it.

JO: No.

JT: I imagine electricity, once you had that put in on the farm that changed everything.

JO: Ya, I don't remember just how the electric went, but it seems to me we like about all we had on the farm was lights on to milk cows in the dark and just about all the electric we had at the time.

JT: Ah, huh, so did you use kerosene?

JO: No. I can't remember that we used kerosene at all.

JT: Okay.

JO: And our neighbor, he got my dad interested in putting a milking machine in there.

JT: Who was that neighbor?

JO: Stewart Christensen.

JT: Stewart Christensen, okay.

JO: He really pushed for that and it was a good thing. The girls didn't have to go to the barn anymore.

JT: I bet they liked that.

JO: Ya, I think so.

JT: Do you remember having a favorite food as a child?

JO: I don't know. We always had wheat that was ground up for breakfast cereal. My mom would cook that and I always liked that. Fact is, when we moved here we had an outfit to grind the wheat. Of course, then, all the vegetables that we raised and boy, I don't know, I can't remember how that all went.

JT: Okay. So, let's leave the farm and go to school. Where did you go to school?

JO: Shaffer and 44th Street. Shaffer School.

JT: Shaffer, okay. That was a one-room school, wasn't it back then?

JO: Ya, ya, it was one room. Eight grades in one room.

JT: Right. Do you remember how many were in your grade?

JO: Three.

JT: Three, okay.

JO: And that's the funny part of it was -- I don't know why the teacher, but she kind of pushed us with that too, but I was the only boy and there was two other girls in the grade and they'd have to come to my desk and I'd have to show 'em how to figure.

JT: Cipher, or whatever.

AO: Math.

JT: Math.

JO: And it was hard for them to understand that and I couldn't figure it out, but --

JT: It came easy to you.

JO: This went on for a long while and the teacher thought that was good. She didn't have to do it.

JT: Well, a lot of students helped each other, didn't they?

JO: Oh, ya.

JT: Do you remember what type of desk you had?

JO: Ya, it was just a plain desk and underneath you could put all your stuff.

JT: So, the top didn't lift up?

JO: No, I don't think it even lifted up. Well, I'm not so sure about that anymore, but I have an idea it was just stuff you could just reach under and shove it in there.

JT: An ink well?

JO: It could have had, ya. I think there was an ink -- but, that was -- well, maybe that top did lift up because the ink was on a board that was separate from that so the top probably did lift up.

AO: Just dropped it in from the top.

JT: So, you had a favorite subject, I'm assuming. Tell me about that.

JO: Well, I liked math and I use it a lot. I don't know how I use it in farming, but I really enjoyed --

JT: The math.

JO: Ya.

JT: What about your least favorite subject?

JO: Oh, let's see.

JT: You didn't like --

JO: I don't even remember.

JT: Arlene, what do you think he didn't like?

AO: English.

JO: You mean I was a foreigner?

AO: No, I remember language.

JT: Language arts, right, like English. Well, I can see. Did they make you diagram sentences back then?

JO: Oh, could be. Spelling I was kind of not too good at spelling. I remember that now.

JT: All right, tell me about Shaffer School. I mean, you told me it's a one-room, you talked about your desk.

JO: Ya, there was about maybe twenty-five students in there, maybe more. Robert Poll, he was in there. His dad had a farm, well, he lived right almost next door to the school. Just across the street it was.

JT: So, that's a student you remember? Robert?

JO: I remember he was in kindergarten. He got me to smoke and chew tobacco.

JT: At what age was this, John?

JO: My age? Well, kindergarten.

JT: Five.

JO: I had to go out and pump water because we didn't have water in that school and I'd vomit. I guess the teacher got after him for doin' that.

JT: So, Robert was older?

JO: He was in the eighth grade.

JT: Oh, my goodness!

JO: And he was a big guy. But anyway, after a few years when we was reminising I says, "Boy, you did a wonderful thing for me there. Teach me not to smoke or chew tobacco. I'll never do either or again!"

JT: It wasn't your thing, okay.

JO: Oh, my. I was disgusted with that. Well, when you're in school and young kids it's so different than when they grow up and --

JT: Absolutely, absolutely.

JO: Oh, man! Well, one guy, I remember one of my neighbors, that was where Stewart Christensen bought the place. That was Potters and then Tim Potter he was kind of buggin' some of the older guys. We were gettin' ready to have lunch and we had to wash hands and there was only one place to do this Ed Merisman he took and grabbed the kid and threw him on the floor like that and I thought, man, you could have killed him, the way he treated him.

JT: Okay. So, you said you had lunch. How did you take your lunch to school? In a pail?

JO: No, in a bag.

JT: In a bag. A paper bag?

AO: A sugar bag, flour bag?

JO: I don't know. I don't remember. I don't think they had a lunch pail, but I had it in a bag.

JT: Okay. And how did you get to school?

JO: Walked one mile.

JT: One mile. All weather?

JO: Well, if it was really bad my dad would take us in the car, you know, he'd take the car and bring us down there. That didn't happen very often.

JT: You walked down 44th Street.

JO: Ya, 44th.

JT: No sidewalks back then.

JO: Oh, no.

JT: We're talking fields, right? Trees.

JO: Ya, big ditches too if you went off the road. Eventually, I think I rode a bike down there before I was out of there. But, that was kind of dangerous too walkin' way, then riding a bike. Then, one of our neighbors had a lousy dog that was vicious. When we had to go there we'd go to the other side of the road and, hopefully, that dog would never come after us. Of course, we never got bit or anything, but that dog was really, really barkin' at us. Not only barking, he'd come right up to us almost.

JT: Well, considering where 44th is right now, we're talking a two-lane street?

JO: Ya.

JT: Was it gravel? Was it paved?

JO: Gravel.

JT: It is gravel, okay.

JO: It was gravel, ya.

JT: And, perhaps, not as much traffic as it is nowadays.

JO: Oh, no, no. I probably could walk the whole mile now and never meet a car or have a car pass you.

JT: Okay, so it wasn't that much traffic, okay. Tell me about the clothes you wore to school. What did you wear to school?

JO: I think I wore a regular overall. I mean, I call it an overall --

JT: Like Levi's?

JO: It had a buckle over your shoulders?

JT: Ah, huh.

JO: And it had places you could put pencils and stuff, little pockets on top.

JT: Shoes?

JO: Oh, ya, regular shoes. Well, I had shoes that was ankle-height, a little higher than the regular shoes.

JT: Long-sleeve or short-sleeve shirts?

JO: Well, if it was cool I'd wear long sleeves. Short sleeve if it got really hot.

JT: Okay, anything on your head?

JO: I don't know. I'm sure I must have worn something.

JT: Did you have a book bag?

JO: I don't know how that worked because every once in a while we would take books home, you know, if you had to study on something special. But, I don't remember anything that I could put over my shoulder. I had to carry it in my hand, I think.

JT: And, let's talk about recess. Did you play outside? What did you play?

JO: Well, they had a little place where you could play ball. It had trees and quite a big back yard and ya, that went pretty good. I always kind of enjoyed that.

JT: So, the boys and girls both played on the team?

JO: Well, I don't remember much. Well, there was only one or two girls only, I think. There wasn't very many girls played in that.

JT: Okay, and how long did you attend Shaffer?

JO: Through the eighth grade.

JT: Through the eighth grade, okay. So, now tell me what happened for schooling after Shaffer.

JO: Well, I and my Uncle Herm's two boys which were my cousins, Harlon and Jack, we had bikes and we rode way to Seymour Christian School. That was on Eastern Avenue north

of 28th Street. Ya, we rode bikes there. In fact, I can't imagine today that we rode so much, you know, roads way over there and then on back home again.

JT: That's quite a trek.

JO: Ya, I'll say.

JT: To be on time for school and then leave. And then when you got home you had the chores.

JO: Ya.

JT: So, you were --

JO: Busy.

JT: Busy, absolutely. So, what was Seymour Christian like and how different from Shaffer?

JO: See, in Shaffer we had a lady teacher. Of course, they usually got one from Calvin College, so that's where she was educated at Calvin College. She was usually a pretty good teacher, a pretty nice teacher too. Although, I do remember once she went over to Poll's because Bob did something. He wouldn't listen to her and she went over and told his dad and I heard his brother come back the next day and he says, "Boy, my dad really got after Bob, he put 'em against the wall and beat him up."

JT: So, you had a male teacher at Seymour Christian, correct?

JO: Ya.

JT: And how was school different besides the teacher?

JO: Well, it was kind of an old building then. I was used to a lot newer -- of course, now the school isn't there anymore. They sold the buildings for something other, but we had an older building at the time.

JT: More than one room.

JO: Ya, but I think there was only two. It seems to me there was only about two rooms in that school.

JT: So, a little bigger.

JO: A little bigger and a lot more students.

JT: What were your favorite subjects then?

JO: Ya, I don't remember.

JT: Was math still a favorite subject?

JO: Ya, I always did pretty good in math.

JT: Okay. And how long were you at Seymour Christian?

JO: Just one year.

JT: Just one year? Okay. Where did you go after Seymour?

JO: Then I got a driver's license and bought a Model A Ford, or my dad bought one for me and I went to school in Grand Rapids. A school where you could get your regular education, plus they could teach you how to get into something so you could have work in something.

JT: A trade?

JO: Ya, a trade, ya. I wanted to learn how to repair cars, but there were so many guys doin' that, that I couldn't get in there. So, I went around and looked and I thought, electric, that's the only thing I got room for, I mean, I could get in there, so I decided to take electric, study electric along with the regular things.

JT: What was the name of this school?

JO: I was tryin' to think. Davis Technical School?

JT: Okay. How long were you at Davis Technical School?

JO: Well, I didn't even go through the twelfth grade. I got out and one time I had an accident going over there. The school didn't have a good place to park. I had to go a block down and then over and across the street and park. I was in the left turn lane and I had my hand, you know you didn't have a light to tell you that you wanted to turn, but I had my hand out and here comes a minister bringin' his kids to another school and he's comin' flyin' through there and he hit the corner, and I see him comin', so I thought I turned off a little bit, but he still hit me. Not too hard, but anyway he stopped. It was kind of funny, the police asked me what -- he says, "Couldn't you have stopped quicker?" "Well," I said, "my brakes weren't too good." "Okay, you'll have to take that car back and they've got to put new brakes on it." Different things they had to do to that Model T and it didn't cost me a penny. They had to do it according to the police made 'em do it, or the law did. So, about the only thing I can recall was the brakes were really improved.

JT: John, can you tell me if you and the family listened to the radio as a child?

JO: Oh, boy, I don't know. I didn't pay much attention.

JT: That was not something that your family did, listen to the radio?

JO: No, not very much. I don't even know if we had a radio. Well, I'm sure we've got one somewheres in there, but we didn't spend a lot of time listening to it, like now if you have TV on you get somethin' you really want to watch.

JT: Right, exactly.

JO: I didn't listen much to the radio.

JT: Okay, I'd like you to tell me what your family did do for recreation. You worked a lot, but what did you do for fun?

JO: Well, my older sister, Alyce and I, we used to go down on Division Avenue and there was a place where we could roller skate and we did that quite a bit. She liked to roller skate and I did too, but I had an accident down there which left something I still suffer from. I was doin' somethin' that I probably shouldn't have been doin' anyway. Maybe skatin' backwards or somethin', I don't know.

JT: Did you have a fall?

JO: Ya, I fell and got hurt.

JT: So, you remember roller skating with your sister. Family times with the family was spent with the other relatives? On any special occasion?

JO: Well, ya, like my mother's family, the VanTuinens, they lived in Cutlerville and we used to go there quite a bit. Fact is, on Fourth of July we'd go over there and they had about twenty acres, I think. We'd go way to the back and we'd fire up -- I don't know how we fired up or anything, but we had some kind of firecrackers that you could set off. And, I remember my brother almost got hurt with those firecrackers. But not near serious, he didn't suffer too much. But, it's kind of scary all that kind of stuff when you think back.

JT: I'd like you to think back on Christmas. Was that a good time for you and the family?

JO: Ya, I think it was.

JT: Is there any special gift that comes to mind that you liked more than others?

JO: I don't think we got many gifts. Of course, my dad must have bought me that Model A Ford. It doesn't seem like I paid for it. I don't know how I could have. How I would have had money to pay for it.

JT: That's about when you were fifteen, sixteen?

JO: Fourteen, I think.

JT: You were fourteen?

JO: See, I got a license at fourteen, I think, driver's license. It was a lot easier to get a license then than it is now.

JT: Right, you didn't have to pass a test, did you?

JO: No.

JT: Just have a car. All right, I'd like to focus now on how you met your wife, Arlene. How did you meet Arlene?

JO: Well, let's see. It was a couple years before we got married. We got married in 1950. I don't know, it was at a church function.

JT: How old were you when you were married?

JO: About twenty-four, I think.

JT: Okay. Twenty-four, and she was how old?

JO: Probably twenty-two. Better ask her when she gets here.

JT: Okay. Where did you two live first?

JO: On 76th Street just east of oh, what's the name of that street, just on the other side of Division, that first mile? Funny I can't think of the name of that street. (Possibly Eastern Avenue.)

JT: Thirty-sixth? Thirty-second?

JO: No, it would be -- see, those streets went this way and this is a street -- we lived on 76th Street and it was only a little ways from -- it was a little less than a mile from Division.

JT: All right, so you lived in that home and you were working where?

JO: At that time I was hauling milk.

JT: You were hauling milk. For what company?

JO: Michigan Milk Producers Association.

JT: Okay, got it. How long did you have that job?

JO: Well, I started it when we was on the farm yet, then the folks sold that out. Then my brother started drivin' milk truck too. We had two trucks parked out here. That was before the station was in, so we had a lot of room to do that. But then when they started the bulk pick-up, you know, when they picked up the milk and not in cans, but you'd pump it in a big tank, those things cost over a hundred thousand dollars, those big trucks. I don't want to get involved with that. You've got to work seven days a week at that job. I had a friend, someone right across the street and he always wanted to drive truck so I got him to drive on Sundays after a while. He did a good job too.

JT: So, you had children. Can you tell me the names of your children? Yes, you had Jerry. You had Gary, David --

JO: Ya, Gary was the oldest. Roger. And, ah Douglas, Linda, Michael, Janice, and Sandra.

JT: A lot of kids.

JO: Ya, Sandra come ten years after Janice.

JT: Whoa! Okay.

JO: We weren't gonna have anymore, but finally Arlene said, "I want another baby."

JT: Okay.

JO: So, she come and oh, she was such a blessing. My wife always said it was so easy bringin' her up because we had older girls to help.

JT: So, your wife's occupation was housewife?

JO: Ya, she just worked at the house.

JT: Okay.

JO: Or, at home.

JT: Right. This home?

JO: No. Well, ya, this home. Well, when Sandy was a few years older then she started workin' out. She wanted to work out so someone from our church, a lady that they'd go out together and clean houses. But, I don't know when that started.

JT: Okay, just a minute. I'll turn this over.

End of side one

JT: Tell me about the kids and Arlene and your family times. When you think of Arlene and the kids, is there a special memory that comes to mind? Something?

JO: Well, when we were living on 76th Street Roger was just a very little, very young at the time. We didn't live there too long. But, he was born and raised. Gary, Dave, and Ron were born there. Or, they were born in the hospital, but --

JT: That's where you lived.

JO: Ya, that's where we lived at the time.

JT: That's 76th Street, okay.

JO: I don't think Doug was born there, but anyway, now what more do you want to know about that?

JT: Do you have a favorite family time that you'd like to tell me about?

JO: Well, we used to get together with the whole, like the VanTuinen family and the Laninga family and that was always real interesting. We'd get one of those parks, there was one on 84th Street (probably Douglas Walker Park), I think it was. We met there quite often. I can't think of the name of the park.

JT: So, you had family picnics.

JO: Ya, right.

JT: Oh, neat. Like in the summertime?

JO: Ah, huh. Ya, and man, what a big crowd we'd have.

JT: Ya, I would say. Well, you had a lot of children.

JO: And a lot of uncles and aunts that came too.

JT: And you came from a lot of aunts and uncles. Oh yes, absolutely. I can see where you'd have a big crowd. Did you play ball?

JO: Ya, we played ball. That wasn't the big thing. If we played ball it was just a few of the smaller guys.

JT: I'd like to focus on the Depression Era. You said you can remember things about the Depression. Can you tell me what you remember? How did it affect the farm? The Depression and the farm; your parents.

JO: Well, the Depression it just seemed like your income went down because they weren't payin' much for milk and everything went down so you didn't really make hardly anything. You were lucky to be able to make enough to pay taxes, although, taxes didn't amount to too much then either.

JT: You didn't lose the farm.

JO: No, no we didn't.

JT: You were able to secure that.

JO: Yes.

JT: I'm sure you didn't go hungry because of the farm either.

JO: No.

AO: Always had a lot of food.

JO: A lot of food, but see, my sister, JoAnne, when she got out of high school she went blind. And she went way to Ann Arbor for them to try to do something and Alyce went with her and that's where Alyce met her boyfriend, right?

AO: Ya.

JO: But anyway, they couldn't do anything for her so she's still blind today. She was blind all her workin' days. But, she worked in Grand Rapids and I was always amazed, sometimes I'd bring her down to Grand Rapids where she'd have to work, not very often because I think she took a bus, but she'd just say, "Let me off at this corner," and "at this street," and "that street, that corner and I know how to get there from there." And I'd wonder how does she figure that out? I wouldn't be able to figure out where I was without having vision. But she could do that. She worked all her workin' days.

JT: Was it hard for you to get a job at that time? How old were you in the '30s?

JO: In the '30s?

JT: Ah, huh.

JO: I'd only be four years old.

JT: Correct, so you don't remember at that point in time.

JO: No, I don't.

JT: I bet you remember World War II, though.

JO: Ya. Ya, I had to ride a train right through here and there used to be a train track right across here and then I went on that to go to Detroit for a physical and they checked my eyes, they said, "You don't have to go through any further, you don't see good enough to be in the Army." So, "Well," I said, "can't you just give me a physical anyway?" They said, "Oh, ya if you want a physical just go around."

JT: So, you didn't get to have military service.

JO: No. No, they wouldn't take me in. I thought at first that would be a good thing to do at the time, but when I think back now boy, I'm glad I didn't have to go in.

JT: Well, everybody wanted to do their civic duty.

JO: Ya.

JT: They wanted to do something. Do you remember how you heard about the war the first time? Was it in the newspapers? Did you hear about it on the radio?

JO: Boy, I don't know.

JT: Can't remember that, okay.

JO: Do you remember how you heard it?

AO: On the radio.

JT: That was shocking, wasn't it?

JO: Ya.

AO: President Roosevelt.

JT: Ah, huh. Absolutely, okay.

JO: But, the funny part of it was he started the Social Security thing, Roosevelt did.

AO: After.

JO: Huh?

JT: After. Ya.

AO: You had to work at General Motors a short part of the war.

JO: Oh, ya, that's right.

JT: We'll get to your work. That's my next question coming up. So, how did World War II affect you and the family?

JO: Well, it didn't affect us too much because I didn't get in the service and, I don't know. It's hard to figure out.

JT: Were there shortages? That's what I'm thinking about.

JO: Shortages of what?

JT: In the war that you can remember.

AO: Tires?

JO: Huh?

AO: Tires. Hard to get tires.

JO: Ya, I suppose it was. There's the thing of it, if you wanted a tractor they weren't makin' 'em anymore at that time. You couldn't even get a tractor. It might have even been hard to get tires, you remember that, huh? I don't remember that so much, but no doubt we had -- so, that went for quite a while we had to use the old -- I can't think of the name of the old tractor, but it kept runnin' until we finally got a better one.

AO: This one here?

JO: Let's see. I think that was the old one.

JT: You're looking at pictures right now. What picture is this? Oh, the picture of some --

JO: Farm equipment.

JT: Farm equipment. And who's on the tractor?

JO: I don't know. I can't tell by this picture.

JT: It's an old picture, okay.

JO: This was a baler here, wasn't it?

JT: Right. That's an old picture of the farm.

JO: We'd bale hay with it. The bales would come off the back and drop off. Of course, we did a lot of baling for the neighbors too.

JT: Right, you helped everybody else with their harvesting. It was a team effort.

JO: Ya, we did a lot of baling.

JT: All right, I'd like to focus on your work experience. Your first job, can you tell me about that? Where was that?

JO: Hauling milk, you mean?

JT: Ah, huh.

AO: How about working at GM?

JT: Well, you were hauling milk.

JO: Ya, I hauled milk first and then --

JT: Was that at Joppe's Dairy?

JO: Ya, I worked there first.

AO: I think you're getting way ahead.

JO: Ya, I can't quite figure how that fit in with the Depression.

JT: Um, I've left that topic.

JO: Pardon?

JT: I left that topic. All right, your first job was Joppe's Dairy and you were hauling milk there too?

JO: Ah, huh.

JT: Okay, then you went to work for Michigan Milk --

JO: Milk Producers Association.

JT: And you were hauling milk there. Where did you go after that? What was your next job?

JO: Well, I started into heating, but I had to work three years for a company to get the education. For education I had to work three years for a licensed heating company. For three years, that was quite a while.

JT: That was in Grand Rapids?

JO: Ya.

JT: Okay.

JO: Ya, I had to go way down on Michigan Street, right in town almost.

JT: That interested you, didn't it, the heating and the electrical.

JO: Oh, yes. Ya, the electrical because see we use electrical and heating all the time and that electric was a good thing I took that because it worked right in. Fact is, when the inspection department knew that I had taken electric he says, "You don't even have to take a permit out for electric, you just hook it up. Of course, you can't go rewiring a whole house, but you can just wire through the furnace and then you don't have to take a permit out." Isn't that somethin'?

JT: It's so much different nowadays.

JO: Oh! Different today, now it's all state-controlled, you know.

JT: Oh, ya, much more, absolutely.

JO: But, I remember one time before I went on my own, he says, "There's a customer that called out there. They have a coal fire, but they want it converted to gas," and he says, "I want you to do that all on your own, and I'll see whether that works and whether you've got to stay here longer than the three years." So, I hooked that all up and then he went to look at it. See, the old furnace had a big old smoke pipe about ten-inch. And, with gas you only needed a six-inch to -- it was just a regular-sized house, it wasn't a big one. But, when he came there he says, "Oh, you put in too small a smoke pipe." "No," I says, "I don't think it is." You let the inspector come in then if that's the way, but he -- well, he called the inspection department and told them what was happening. "No," they says, "a six-inch will handle 150,000 btu." And the furnace would fire at probably only 100 or 125 at the most, before they knew, or I guess he knew how high it was fired. So, I had done the right thing. I must have had a book to study so that I knew I was doin' the right thing, but the guy that I was workin' for he should have known, but he didn't know that.

JT: Well, that was a new thing back then.

JO: Oh, ya.

JT: A new thing, a new business. Not too many people knew about it.

JO: You know, later on a third of the city was on oil fire. But, there was still a lot of 'em on coal yet. Fact is, when we moved here we had just a coal furnace.

JT: So, where did you go when you had your license? What did you do, your next job?

JO: Well, I bought a furnace-cleaning truck and that really got me started really good into heating because I could make a pretty good income just gettin' started. I'd advertise the furnace cleaning and then I'd gradually put in furnaces and did a lot of repair work.

JT: And your family was young at that time too.

JO: Oh, ya. Ya, like Douglas now, he has his own heating license, but I don't remember him gettin' involved in that for quite a while, but he did eventually.

JT: So, that led you to start your business?

JO: Ah, huh.

JT: When did you start your business?

JO: Oh, let's see. That was about the time we moved here, wasn't it? In Cutlerville where we lived on -- what street was that?

AO: Kenton Street.

JO: We had a furnace truck sittin' there that I didn't do anything with for a couple months. It was just a brand new truck sittin' there.

AO: That's when Linda was a baby.

JO: Ya.

JT: So, are we saying in the 1950s?

AO: Fifty-seven.

JT: Nineteen fifty-seven, okay. What was the name of this business?

JO: My business?

JT: Ah, huh.

JO: Clean Air Heating & Cooling.

JT: It's still in production, I mean, you're still a business, correct?

JO: Well, ya, but I don't do much anymore. At my age I don't install furnaces. Well, ya, I did install a couple.

JT: Who's doing the business?

JO: Nobody. Well, we turned it over to Doug seeing he's got his own heating license. Doug ends up with a lot of the work.

JT: So, Doug took it over?

JO: Well, not really. He had his own business goin' before I quit, or before I slowed down. Pardon?

AO: Well, he takes care of the business, that is, the things that you don't want to do. Ya, if we get any calls emergency, why I just call him. Of course, he used to live in Grand Rapids, but now he moved away to Wayland.

JT: Are you saying you're not retired yet?

JO: Well, I say I am, but yet it wasn't that long ago I had Bible study on Saturday morning and I had gotten something that stopped me. I couldn't go to there and about 15 minutes after I decided not to go I got a telephone call and this was Bob Poll's wife. Bob wasn't living anymore but I did their heating for many years. Well, her granddaughter called because she was gettin', she was in her 90s. Her granddaughter called and said, "Say, we've got water runnin' over the floor and would you come and look at it? Could you do that today?" I said, "Ya, I can, I can come right over and do that." So, I did some service work right then.

JT: So, when did you "officially" retire from the heating business?

JO: Well, I'm not officially retired yet.

JT: That's what I was getting at. You're still doing it.

JO: Somebody wants me to come over today at eleven thirty.

JT: Okay, okay, all right.

JO: Well, they're servin' a big meal.

JT: That's a good enticement.

JO: Not only that but they're selling some equipment, but I'm not interested in that anymore, but I'll have their nice dinner if they have one.

JT: So, what's kept you busy, John, in the last few years?

JO: Well, it was heating.

AO: Gardening.

JT: Gardening. I notice the flowers outside.

JO: She's taking care of the flowers.

JT: Okay, so gardening.

AO: We don't have a garden this year, but this is the first time he didn't.

JT: Family, you have family. With all those children you've got grandchildren. And greats here?

AO: No greats.

JT: No greats yet, okay.

JO: Twenty-seven grandchildren.

JT: Twenty-seven grandchildren. That's a lot of children here. Do you have reunions?

JO: Ya, we've got one comin' up. We just got a notice from your cousin.

JT: Well, that's a cousins' reunion, my cousins' reunion.

AO: But ya, Mother's Day, Father's Day.

JT: Then they come over, or you go there?

AO: Ah, we go somewhere else. We can't get 'em all in here.

JT: Right.

AO: The road is too busy to have little kids around.

JT: It is busy now. Where do you go?

AO: Oh, some one of the --

JO: Well, Jan invited us now next. That'll be in Lowell.

AO: Ya, or, we have Thanksgiving dinner at a church in Lowell. Christmas we had at our church.

JT: They have a hall big enough, a place big enough, because that's a lot of people.

AO: It's usually kind of a potluck thing.

JT: Right.

AO: And that's always fun and you get to see people and that.

JT: Right. I can understand that. We're getting towards the end here, John. I'd like to know what adjectives would describe John Edward Oosterhouse, Jr.

JO: Well, I can't come up with any, so I don't know.

JT: Tell me how you would describe yourself.

JO: Hmm. I don't know. Hard worker.

JT: I would say that's a good one.

JO: That lady that I was tellin' you about where they called, I had to put in a new hot water heating system and I had to put in a new zone dial, which would have took a lot of time, but I had everything on the truck, which I thought I'll never had that on the truck anymore and I had three of 'em on there. But, then, when I got that done I couldn't get the furnace to run. I says, "How come that furnace -- do you have any oil in the oil tank?" It was oil fire. It was way out in Caledonia. "Ya," she said, "I just paid four hundred dollars, there's plenty of fuel in the tank," but then the granddaughter, her husband came over and he checked the level of the fluid in the tank and it just had about that much oil in the tank, so it wouldn't run. But, then they said, "Well, we're on a contract with a company. They're supposed to keep it full." I said, "I don't see why they didn't." So, she called 'em and they said, "Well, we can fill it up today, but it costs a hundred dollars to come there on Saturday." A hundred dollars more than normal. "Well," she says, "I don't want that. It ain't cold enough to even worry about it." It was just kind of in the cool. It did cool down a little bit. So, she waited 'til Monday and then I had to go back and fire it up and get it set right.

JT: So, you said you're hard working. Could we also say interested in helping others?

JO: Ya, ya, that's --

JT: Arlene, would you have anything to add at that point?

AO: Ya, he's interested in helping others.

JT: Okay, good. Anything I've missed, John? Anything else you'd like to add?

JO: Well, when my folks bought this place they built this garage here after they moved here my Uncle Herman and my dad built that together.

JT: Kind of a garage-raising party.

JO: It was a two-level and what they didn't put up for the top level was all concrete and then they had these big concrete beams that run through every three- or four-foot with one of those. I thought what a job they had building that. I didn't get involved in that at all.

JT: This thing will never fall down, huh?

JO: Well, I wouldn't want to be under it when they have too much weight on top.

JT: I can understand that.

JO: Well, what happens, you run a car in and if it's in the winter then it gets in there and it's a little warmer and then that thaws and one of those beams started going to pieces because that water went through the floor and got in the beam and I thought boy, be careful. I wouldn't run a heavy tractor in there.

JT: Anything else to add?

JO: Can you think of anything else?

JT: Arlene?

AO: No, I was absent for part of the time.

JT: We pretty much got through the whole scenario here, so, we're good.

AO: Did he talk about working at GM?

JT: No, he did not!

AO: Oh, gee, that was after he was deferred from the Army, then he had to work at GM as part of his career.

JT: Oh, I see.

JO: Ya, that was -- I had to do it.

JT: That wasn't on my list here, so. What did you do at GM?

JO: Oh, that was kind of funny. At first they didn't have anything to do. It seemed like I set there doing nothing.

AO: Didn't you work on the tracks from the tanks?

JO: The track from what?

AO: The tanks. Somebody was telling me that --

JO: Ya, that's right. They made these tanks, that's what we were making and sometimes I had to work on some of those things. It was kind of scary because they had the trucks to lift just those things that went around, you know, the track things?

JT: Ah, huh.

JO: And that was *so* heavy and they did it with a little lift truck that was scary. Boy, you wouldn't want -- well, they wouldn't let you be near it either because it could fall and cause an awful lot of damage. They didn't have the equipment that they really needed, but boy, that guy could lift that up and they'd have three or four layers up overhead. I couldn't figure that out, but anyway.

JT: How long were you there at GM?

JO: I don't know how long I was, do you?

AO: I wasn't here.

JO: You wasn't here?

JT: No, you weren't married then.

JO: It was before I was here.

AO: Well, that was before we were married.

JT: Right, right before you -- a good five years before you were married. That's a short amount of time. All right, I have my last question. What would you like to say as advice to your children?

JO: Hmm. Remember what advice we gave 'em? Hmm, boy, I can't --

JT: Anything for your grandchildren?

JO: I guess I ain't a very good grandfather.

JT: No, you're a great grandfather. Come on.

AO: I'd say, get all the education.

JT: Okay, get all the education you can. That's good advice.

JO: Ya, that's really changed nowadays.

JT: You have to have the education nowadays.

JO: College.

JT: Or, trade or something that is specific.

AO: Even the girls.

JT: It doesn't matter. Girls, boys, absolutely. Education is good advice. Get an education. Is that it? Because we are almost done here, John.

JO: Well, I probably told 'em how to run their cars and how to keep 'em, make sure you get the oil changed and all this and that.

JT: Okay, you went for the technical, okay.

JO: Ya.

JT: That's okay. I'm ready to stop. Are we ready?

JO: Ya, I can't think of anything else, can you?

AO: No.

JT: Okay.

JO: Well, let's see. Ya, I can't think of anything right now.

JT: Okay, that's it. I'm going to stop it.

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