

Kentwood Historic Preservation Commission  
Oral History Transcript Cover Sheet



Name of individual (s): Bernard "Bernie" Smith

Name of Interviewer: Joyce Thompson

Date: May 20, 2003

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

Bernie Smith shares his memories of live on the Smith Farm which was located at 52<sup>nd</sup> and Breton Road. He attended Smith School (on Wing Road) and graduated from Godwin High School, like Dale Heyboer, Les Alcumbrack, and others. He continues the story of farm life that his mother, Josephine Smith, began in her oral history, and provides more information about his neighbors and friends.

**KENTWOOD HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION COMMISSION  
[KHPC]**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**  
(041-2003)

**BERNARD (BERNIE) SMITH**

**INTERVIEWER: JOYCE THOMPSON**  
**May 30, 2003**

Transcribed by Lori Vander Stel  
May 2004/Corrected Sept. 2004

Kentwood Historical Preservation Commission (KHPC) Oral History

Subject: Bernie Smith  
Interviewer: Joyce Thompson  
Date of Interview: May 30, 2003  
Place: Bernard (Bernie) Smith's home, 10829 Nash Row, Clarksville Michigan, in his dining room.

Transcribed by Lori VanderStel, May 2004.

Bernie Smith (BS)  
Joyce Thompson (JT)

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JT: Today is May 30, 2003, and this is taped oral history of Bernard (Bernie) Smith. We are at his home, 10829 Nash Row, Clarksville Michigan, in the dining room. My name is Joyce Thompson. I will be recording this oral history for the Kentwood Historical Preservation Commission. This tape will be transcribed, a copy given to Bernie Smith so he can revise or make any corrections or deletions that he wishes. When Bernie is satisfied and the oral history is completed, he will be asked to sign a release so that it can become part of Kentwood's archives. Is this arrangement satisfactory to you Bernie?

BS: Right

JT: What is your name, age and date of birth?

BS: Okay, Bernard J. Smith, 77; my birthday is March 22, 1926.

JT: Where were you born, Bernie?

BS: In Paris Township. Really in Grand Rapids.

JT: Your parents' names and date of births?

BS: My mother's name was Josephine Burns, and my father's name was Marian W. Smith. My mother's birthday was March 19<sup>th</sup>, and my father's birthday was on March 20<sup>th</sup>. The year? I'm not sure. (Note: See Oral History # 015-1974, Josephine Smith)

JT: Okay.

BS: I think my dad was born in 1899, and mother would be in 1901.

JT: The names of your siblings?

BS: None. I did have a sister, which was Mary Florence, and her last name is Hale now.

JT: She was, you're the oldest? She's the youngest?

BS: I'm the oldest; she's five years younger.

JT: Okay. What comes to mind when you think of your childhood together with your sister?

BS: Really, it was pretty simple. We lived on the farm where the Kentwood offices are now. In fact the farm home is still there. But the rest, one other building is still there, but the rest of the rest of the buildings are gone. Um, just worked. We had worked about 400 acres on several different areas, and we had a hundred and – had a hundred and sixty acres where we were. And 80 on the side road.

JT: I asked you about your childhood together with your sister? What, what memories do you have?

BS: Well, we both in 4-H and we did quite a little of that. I raised sheep, she had ducks [laugh], yes, she was a duck gal. And I gotta tell ya, some nice flock of sheep. I had at one time I had about 125 head. They were purebred Suffolk sheep and we used to show them at the different fairs.

JT: Win ribbons?

BS: Oh yea, I've got a lot of ribbons that I've won. And I believe that one I had; I had the champion lamb at one of the fat stock shows that was in Grand Rapids. 'Course that was quite a thrill because just to get to Grand Rapids was a big deal. I mean, we're not, we weren't out that far. But back in those days was, well, you didn't get to Grand Rapids.

JT: Well the farm kept you quite busy.

BS: Well, you busy on the farm all the time. And that was one of your treats, to get into Grand Rapids.

JT: So how'd you get to Grand Rapids?

BS: We, we had a car. When we were young, just young kids, we used to go to Home Acres. Friday night was our big deal, 'cause we could go to Home Acres, and then we'd always end up at Shippy's Pharmacy and have ice cream. And we'd have, and they made the best chocolate sodas in the country. And then, but we'd go, and you'd meet neighbors, and you knew everybody on the street, and you knew all the merchants, so you'd talk to all the merchants, go up and down the street. Spend, oh, probably two or three hours. And you'd come home and that was your –

JT: Night out.

BS: That was your weekend treat.

JT: [Laugh]

BS: And then, the next day, 'course you'd go to church, and you might go to a picnic or something like that. And that would be about a weekend, an average weekend would be.

JT: So those are your memories there. What were the occupation of your parents, Bernie?

BS: Well, my dad was a farmer all his life. My mother, at one time she worked for the telephone company, I remember that part. And I don't think she'd done much after they were married. She stayed on the, she was on the farm. She was busy cooking all the time, because we would hire. We would sometimes have 18 to 20 different men working for us which were all young guys that were from more or less in the community. And I think everybody in the community at sometime or another worked, because we had one of the bigger farms, and so they came and would help. They would harvest hay with the grain and all that. And we had some quite some times with these guys. They remember what time they were going to get together, had their, got their heads together that they were going to eat all so that my mother was going to run out of pie for dinner. My dad overheard them, so he snuck in the house and told my mother that they were going to have them. So she made extra pie. So they had pie and then they had pie, and then they went out and laid in the yard and they weren't worth anything all afternoon because they were all tuckered out from eating pie [laugh]. But they, you know, they just had good times like that. Another time we had a guy that got, he had lunch, and so he would, and we always gave them, they had an hour for lunch, and so they could go out and do whatever, you know, they had a, they smoked, they smoked. This one time, went out in the barn and went up on the beam, one of the cross beams in the barn, and went to sleep on this cross beam, and we couldn't find him, and all of a sudden they found him. And when they found him my dad said 'well no, don't wake him up or he'll jump, roller right off and come and fall down on the barn floor which was probably a good 14 to 18 feet'. And so they kinda rustled around a little bit and they finally got him woke up and he, he come out of it all right. But my dad chewed him out for getting up there. 'Don't ever do that! If you wanna lay down and go to sleep, lay in the hay'.

JT: [Laugh]

BS: [Laugh] 'Don't go up on the beam.' Because, you know, he could have killed himself. The beams were wide, but they weren't that wide.

JT: Right.

BS: We would, we would do just a lot of good things. Everybody got along well, you know, and they would get to see who could do the most. So then how many loads of hay

they could get in. 'Cause the hay wasn't done like it is today. It was all loose. There's no bales. It all came in loose and then we had a fork that you put in the hay and then you'd raise up a certain amount, and you lifted it up to the, right up into the top of the barn, and then on a track, and then it would go over and you'd drop in the haymow. Yea, and it'd come down in the mow, and then you'd have a couple guys in the mow and they'd pulled it back and leveled it off. So it was a lot of hard work.

JT: So, like layered.

BS: Yea, and it would kept going 'til you filled the barn up full and, I don't know how, sometimes they would really survive the heat, because it would get, when you get up close to the row, it would just, just beats the hell out. And my dad was always pretty good about making sure that nobody got too overheated, you know, and you could tell when they started to get a little sick or something like. He'd make them come down and get out [ ]. That's some of the things that happened.

JT: So when you think of your father, how would you describe him?

BS: Oh, he was very gentle, easy going; I don't think anything ever bothered him. Not that he would let on that it did. And he just easy going I think.

JT: Okay.

BS: Nothing really got him too upset. I don't think I've ever seen him really get really mad at anybody.

JT: And your mother? How would you describe her?

BS: Well, she was another person that, she was easygoing, firm, and she had to work hard because she kinda cooked for all these guys. She had to hire girls sometimes and most of the time she did all of the cooking. I don't think the woman today could do it like she did. 'Cause it was on a cook stove, it wasn't on an –

JT: Electric.

BS: We had a little kerosene stove that would cut the heat down in the kitchen, but she'd be up at 2:00 in the morning baking bread and a pie, and then, and then she'd get dinner. She'd have dinner, she set the dinner up and she had to hire a girl who would help her do the dishes and all, just, we'd have the house that's got 18 rooms and the bathrooms. You know, I mean, it wasn't a little house to take care of. All the rooms weren't huge, but not while I remember it in.

JT: She canned?

BS: Oh yeah, she canned. She would can peaches, tomatoes, catsup, chili sauce, and pickles. –

JT: What were your favorite foods as a child?

BS: Oh, I kinda liked the peaches she did. She always made good peaches. and her pickled peaches were good. She made good bread, cookies, and cakes for the baking contests at the Grange. She and another lady, her lady friend, they always had a, there was three of them that were good bread bakers. They made good bread. First one would win and then the other. But then again, the gals back in those days were good cooks for the most part. And of 'course when you went out flashing, you went to the different neighbors and you knew which ones had the good food and which ones didn't.

JT: Was she the type of cook that didn't write anything down? Or did she have a lot of recipes?

BS: She had recipes, but most of them were, oh, you'd just put a little of this or a little of that in, you know [laugh]. They were always good. I mean, she made a molasses cookie that nobody's ever been able to make. It would be a nice big cookie, but everybody else's would get harder than a brick. Hers always stayed soft.

JT: Soft and yummy.

BS: I don't know how she did it.

JT: So who do you, who do you resemble the most? Which parent?

BS: Who do I resemble?

JT: Uh huh [affirmative].

BS: I have no idea. Me [laugh]. Oh, I could see both my dad and my mother.

JT: In looks?

BS: Yea. I'm probably more like my mother. She had a – I could get you some pictures and you could tell me [laugh].

JT: All right. Your family home was at 2671 52<sup>nd</sup>, correct?

BS: Uh huh [affirmative].

JT: All right. Let's go back to that house. You said this house was a big house. How many rooms?

BS: Had 18 rooms and a bath. And it was the first bathroom, inside bathroom, I think, in Paris Township. And the last I knew, the tub was still there.

JT: Okay. Which room did your family gather most in?

BS: Well, 'course the kitchen was always pretty popular. We sat in the living room a lot. Particularly after we got electricity. We had the radio, and the radio was in the living room.

JT: Do you remember the year you had electricity?

BS: It was in 1937.

JT: 1937. So electricity made possible for many changes on the farm, correct?

BS: Well, it was slow, because we didn't have a lot of money. It was at the end of the depression. You know, it was at a time when money was very difficult. And we didn't know whether we could afford to even have the house wired. But we did get that done, and then finally we got the barn wired. But then we just had lights out there, we didn't get water out there until, oh, it was long though, after that, 'cause they had to put the water in at the barn.

JT: How'd you get the water? You carried it?

BS: We had a big tank between the barn and the house. And the, you had to let the cattle out and the horses out, whatever there was. They came to that tank and drank. And then I carried a lot [laugh] of water to take it to, 'cause in the orchard to the west of the house, and we always had the sheep in there. And of course I had to haul the water to the sheep. You took it with buckets. Carried it.

JT: Part of your chores eh?

BS: That was one of our chores, yea.

JT: What other chores did you have?

BS: Oh well, you had to clean the barn, milk the cows; 'course we milked by hand.

JT: How many cows did you say you had?

BS: Oh, we had, we probably had a herd of about 25 – 30 milk cows.

JT: Was that pretty typical?

BS: Oh, yea, it was because Heyboyer's had about the same amount. And we got in; we also raised a lot of beef cattle. So we'd get a carload of beef and, oh, a carload would be probably 50 head of beef cattle. And we'd buy them when they were little calves.

JT: So, where did the milk go when shipping out?

BS: Well, milkman would come and pick it up in cans, 10-gallon cans.

JT: Just before pasteurization?

BS: Well, yea, because we didn't it, they took the milk and then they would pasteurize it when they got to the dairy.

JT: Okay. So you didn't do that for yourself?

BS: No. We didn't do that. Drank the milk, took the cream right off the top.

JT: Yummmmmmm!

BS: [Laugh] 'Course, it was always cooked. You really did have it pasteurized. And then we had, which when I was real real small, we had a nice herd of cows and we got TB. And we lost the whole herd. So they had all these destroyed. And then we'd come back, and we had a lot of cows. 'Course my dad liked horses, so he always had a least two-three horses. And that was his big hobby, was his horses. He liked to train them.

JT: When you plowed, would you use horses?

BS: Yea, at the beginning.

JT: When did you get the first tractor?

BS: Oh, it was, we had a tractor when I was just a little guy. So we had probably one of the first tractors in the area.

JT: Was it John Deere back then too?

BS: Yea, we had an old John Deere D., that I remember the best because that's what we used the most. And the last I knew that tractor was still running. When we sold it, when I sold the farm I think Louis Good bought it, and he had a whole collection of tractors, and then somebody bought it from him after he passed away. But I know that the tractor was still running then. So it held up pretty well [laugh].

JT: All those years.

BS: Yea.

JT: Was there a best place to be on that farm for you?

BS: The best? [Laugh]

JT: Why is that funny?

BS: Ooh, I don't know. I just enjoyed being with the animals. 'Cause we had a little bit of everything. We had chickens, we had pigs, we raised a lot of little pigs. I can remember one time it was real cold weather, and just the little pigs that they got, couple three of them got, they just turned blue they got so cold. So we brought them in the house and put them in the oven and warmed them up. Oh, we saved them. Yea, they, they got to be pretty good pork chops before we got done, but we brought them in, you know, it, you had to get them warm and so what else could you do?

JT: Well, if it's the best place to be.

BS: But you didn't make, we didn't make pets out of them, like, where you get attached that way.

JT: No, because you ate them.

BS: Yea, because you had, well, we done our own slaughtering and that.

JT: Oh you do?

BS: We'd go, we went next door to Pete Heyboer's, he had a slaughterhouse down there, and so they'd get together and they'd have a butcher bee. We'd maybe kill maybe 6 - 7 hogs at a time and clean them. We'd have our own pork and -

JT: And you helped each other out.

BS: Oh yea. And then we'd bring it, bring it home, we'd bring a - and then you'd take and cut them up and I can remember we had a vat, it was a big kettle. Probably about 2 feet by 3 feet and maybe a foot deep, and you'd fill that with fat off the pigs, and then you made lard. And that's how we got our lard then, and then they also ground up the meat; we made our own sausage. And then you'd save sausage, they'd put it in round pans, and then you'd just put this fat over the top and then seal it. And we'd put it out in the outside where it was cool and that's the only way you could keep it. 'Cause we didn't have refrigeration then. The only other - we did have an ice box, where you had to buy in the summertime, so when it got real hot, then you'd go and buy ice

JT: So -

BS: And you had to dump the water from the ice 'cause otherwise it went all over the floor.

JT: So the least favorite place to be on the farm for you was where?

BS: When they cleaned the barn [laugh]. There's always a project. But really wasn't that bad. When you get it all cleaned up and really nice, the animals always seemed like that got into a nice fresh pen [laugh]. They enjoyed it.

JT: Did you do this by yourself or did your sister help you?

BS: No, she didn't do too much; not in the barn. No, I didn't do it all; I mean that, my uncle lived with us too.

JT: Oh.

BS: He lived us until he got married.

JT: You said Pete Heyboer was your nearest neighbor?

BS: Yea, he was the first house to the west of us. And then Dale and Paul were over on the, cross the road on the other side.

JT: Other neighbor?

BS: Well, it was Walma's to the east. And we were talking to the other day and there was Tom, who is the same age as I am, he said he could always remember my grandpa because their, when they bought their piece of property my grandpa owned it. So they had a mortgage with him and I can remember I found some papers that he would pay maybe 50 cent a month. That's all he could afford. But, Grandpa never give foreclosed on him or anything. And then he would, I never knew that before but Tom said he would come sometimes and he'd bring in, give him the money back so he could buy the kids' shoes. So, it was a little thing that I had not heard before. We were talking that the other day at coffee. So, just some tales come out at coffee. (Note: A group of men gather at the 68<sup>th</sup> Street Grill in Dutton on a weekly basis. Most formerly attended Smith School—explained later in this history.)

JT: Okay, what was your favorite holiday on the farm?

BS: Oh, it was always Christmas. Christmas was always a big day. Because we didn't, it, we always tried to have everything done, so we didn't have to do just, do the milking and feed the animals. So that didn't take long for that. It was a big Christmas. It wasn't a big treat for my mother to get; she was cooking again all day [laugh]. But we always had a big Christmas. Always had as I can remember, when I was five, I got sick and I got pneumonia, and I couldn't get out of bed, so my dad comes and picks up the Christmas tree and brings it into the bedroom, so I had the tree in the bedroom. And, just little things like that, you know, that, why I remember that part, I don't know. But, one year I wanted a bicycle, and I thought, oh, there was a, some wheels on something and my mother had it all wrapped up. Thought sure I was getting my bicycle, and it turned out to be a doll buggy for my sister [laugh].

JT: You didn't get the bike that year?

BS: I didn't get the bike no? I didn't get a bike until I was probably 17 – 16 – 17.

JT: That's pretty old.

BS: Yea. Well, you didn't have the money; you couldn't buy it.

JT: Right. So your toys were simple?

BS: Well yea. We had wood. But, we had board games –

JT: Yea.

BS: Like Sorry and Monopoly and –

JT: Oh.

BS: Things like that, and checkers.

JT: What were you best at?

BS: None of them [laugh]. And of course there were always card games, you played a lot of cards. Different card games, I mean, -

JT: But the whole family would sit down?

BS: But the whole family would play cards. And you'd sit down and you'd come to the table and you'd either play a board game or cards or whatever. But that was your entertainment because before '37 we didn't even have radio. The radio we had when I was young, revolved when I was young, when I was probably 6-7-8 years old, we used to hurry up with chores because my, we'd go to my Grandpa's then, which was just down the road about a mile. And he had a Delco System which was, gave him electric. And so he had a radio. So we would go down there and we'd hurry up with chores because it's at seven o'clock we had to be there because Amos and Andy was on. So we'd hurry up to hear Amos and Andy. And, 'course then you heard a couple other stories and then you'd come home. But this would be, maybe a couple nights a week you'd get down and see that. Otherwise, we stayed pretty much to home.

JT: So, you remember the Amos and Andy show. Any other favorites?

BS: Oh, Lone Ranger and The Green Hornet, Jack Armstrong.

JT: No Jack Benny?

BS: Who?

JT: Jack Benny?

BS: Oh yea, we had Jack Benny and all of those. Bob Hope, Red Skeleton, all those guys. I mean, it was a different type entertainment from what you get today.

JT: Well, you're allowed to use your imagination in it.

BS: Yea, well, you had to because, you know, but it was on – like the Lone Ranger, you could hear the feet running and you could hear the water trickling and you could imagine being in a mountain someplace, or maybe down in a death valley somewhere, and all these funny animals out there. So you had your imagination really working. The Green Hornet was probably, there was another one that had a squeaky door, can't remember the name of it. But anyhow, oh, The Shadow was another good one, and that one was, we'd get scared of that one because again your imagination was, and you'd hear that squeaking door, oh my. And all of a sudden a bang and you'd jump [laugh].

JT: So were all of you there listening to it? Or was it just you and your sister?

BS: Oh, well you were, generally, the whole family would listen together. We did things, that the one thing that we always did everything together. My folks always made sure that when they went someplace they always took us kids with them. Once in a while they'd go without us, but most of the time we went with them. The other big treat we would have would be in the summertime. And this is an odd coincidence because we would come, it was on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and we would always would come to Clarksville for the Ox Roast. And it was a big day because it would take us a half of a day to get here, and then we'd always had these friends of ours that lived here, it was an aunt of some friends. And so we would go to her house and then they had rides, and oh, it was quite an affair here [laugh].

JT: Races? Games?

BS: Uh, they had games, but they had, oh, they had the games and the bank street was full of rides and things like this, like Tilt-a-Whirl.

JT: Like a carnie, a carnival?

BS: It was kind of like a carnival, yea.

JT: Right.

BS: They still have the Ox Roast, but they don't have the carnival with it any more because it's got too expensive. But, yea, we used to come over for that and it was a big treat to come in. 'Course we'd be rewarded, Dad let us sleep all the way home' [laugh].

JT: Parents probably like that part [laugh].

BS: Oh yea [laugh].

JT: Okay, where did you go to grade school as a child, Bernie?

BS: Oh, we went to Smith School, which I was the 5<sup>th</sup> generation to go through the school. My Great Grandmother was a teacher there, and she met my Great Grandfather there and they got married. That's how he met her. My Grandfather only went through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but he was quite old because they would only go in the wintertime, so therefore they wouldn't go a full year to school. When they had to work on the farm, they weren't there. So, he was probably 19 to 20 before he finally got through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Bad enough that he chewed tobacco when he went to school. I've heard him tell it, he used to spit in the cracks in them days [laugh]. So you can imagine that happening today, you'd be arrested [laugh].

JT: When you think of Smith School, what comes to mind?

BS: Oh, there's so many things that, you mean, not big things that happen, but, you know and, it's just the way that we met each other. The kids, you knew every kid in town and, there and, we all, we always went back and forth. Sometimes, the ones that were over on the opposite diagonal from us, I never went to their houses very much. But the other ones along 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, you'd go up and down and you played with all those kids because we were all, you know, they were close by and that's what they did.

JT: After your chores were done each day.

BS: Oh yea. Awe, maybe on Saturday afternoon you can get to go depending on what you were doing.

JT: When did school start?

BS: Well, we always started the first of September and we were out in the middle of May. I can remember when I first started, that hour was the teacher, and we had a little pot-bellied stove in the back, that's all that heated the school. And in the wintertime –

JT: It was a one-room school?

BS: It was a one-room school. And when you'd, they'd set all the little kids, we always kept the choice seats around the furnace 'cause that's where it was the warmest, so we didn't catch cold as quick as the rest of them. But then you had the older kids would bring in firewood, and they had to take out the ashes, and, but it was interesting because there was five of us in my grade, one, which we're very fortunate. All five of us are still living.

JT: Name those five people.

BS: Jean Auble, George Patterson, Tom Walma, Paul Heyboer, and myself. Tom and I are the only two that are in the area now, but discipline that you had in that, I mean you'd think with eight grades there at one time I can remember we had 42 students, but

one teacher. And that was for the eight grades. But, I don't know, the teachers never had, the only one teacher that had a problem was Elmo Wieringa, 'cause he'd fresh out of college and he did oh, that year was kinda lost 'cause he [laugh] –

JT: How old were you then?

BS: I was probably in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, so I was pretty young yet.

JT: 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>.

BS: I can remember the erasers flying through the air [laugh].

JT: Okay.

BS: But you know the thing that was interesting was how you would pick up, 'cause you could hear every lesson from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, you, you heard them talking and all that. You, 'course, you had things you had to do, homework and that, but, for the most part you could hear what's going on. So, you picked up a lot of things 'cause you were long, so you really learned broader fields quicker than, 'course, the kids learn fast now because of computers and television. But it was our way of learning.

JT: Right. What's your favorite subject?

BS: I didn't really have one. I really kind of liked geography a little bit.

JT: Least favorite?

BS: Oh, geometry. I hated that.

JT: Was it? Wow.

BS: I guess I was just an average student. The subject I was really unhappy with.

JT: Were you a good student?

BS: Oh, I got the, I got my B's and C's.

JT: Do you remember childhood toys?

BS: I don't really remember any that I had, that I was real fond of. I had a teddy bear; I guess I wore it out.

JT: Were those, did you take any toys to school?

BS: No. No, that was really one thing, we didn't do too much of that. You didn't see kids bringing toys to school and that. Oh, we would bring slingshots and stuff like that, but that was about it.

JT: Back then did you play baseball at school?

BS: We played softball.

JT: Softball?

BS: And there were baseball and softball. Yea, we had a pretty good team because we used to go around to the different schools and –

JT: Boys and girls played?

BS: Yea, but mostly the boys.

JT: Mostly boys.

BS: We had a couple girls that were pretty good at it. Yea, they played. And of course everybody played, you know, at recess time everybody played, boys and girls together. Pom-Pom-Pull-Away and Around the Corner, EIEIO [laugh]. But then in the summertime, as soon as you could get on the ball field, boy, they were all there playing ball. And we had some pretty good players.

JT: So you have competition between schools?

BS: Yup. We used to have, 'course French Street and East Paris, Red School, Dutton. And then it was up to the teacher to haul us so she'd haul the whole load of kids, the whole team.

JT: In, in her car?

BS: In her car, yea.

JT: Oh, my goodness.

BS: So that's the way, excuse me, can we? [Phone rings]

JT: Go ahead. Okay, she would haul everyone off to these games between schools.

BS: Oh yea. Once in a while the kids would ride their bikes, but for the most part she'd load us in the car.

JT: Oh, that was a treat, wasn't it, going to the other school?

BS: Yea, it wasn't too far you know, you mean, French Street would have been about the farthest, which would only have been 8-9 miles. It wasn't too hard. But anyhow, you know.

JT: Right.

BS: We'd pack them in the car and away we'd go. Trunk full of ball bats and balls.

JT: What [laugh], there you go. Middle school, high school, where was that?

BS: Godwin.

JT: And, what year was that the you started?

BS: I started in '39 and graduated in '43.

JT: What was high school like for you?

BS: Aah, I enjoyed high school; it was a lot of fun.

[Phone rings]

BS: Must be phone day.

JT: I think there is something wrong with the, the disk.

BS: It's not recording?

JT: No, it's not, it's um –

BS: Shame on it.

JT: It won't stop. Okay that –

BS: It was back in high school.

JT: Yea, you said it was fun. What made it fun?

BS: I guess it was because it was so different from what grade school was. Because in grade school you were always in one room. Now in high school we went from room to room for different classes. And you met the, of course you met a lot of new people. 'Course even back then you got to meet people and in, we went back and forth. I'd go visit some of the kids that, and they'd of course, they'd come out to my, our place because they liked to come out hunting. And so some of the guys would come out and are, I can remember a couple of them came out one day and my mother had a made a batch of nice big sugar cookies. She had three big pans full. And we came in about 6:00

or a little after. I don't know where, she had gone someplace. And we had milk and cookies and we ate every cookie [laugh]. The guys never forgot. They still talk about it today.

JT: Did they go hunting?

BS: Oh yea, yea, we had had been hunting. That's why they were hungry when they went back.

JT: Oh, okay.

BS: Yea, but it was, it was a different challenge because it opened up a new world really, to me anyhow. Because you're out, it's like a new bird out of the nest because it was something that was so different than – now you've got six different teachers instead of one, and you got 20 different kids in every class that's different. And, it was just more or less exciting and that. And of course then you get into different things like, I got into the Glee Club and I also got into the, when I was a junior and senior I was in both plays they had. So, you know, it was, it was fun like that.

JT: No sports?

BS: No, because chore time.

JT: [Laugh]

BS: And of course we didn't have any busing. So we didn't have, the way we worked it was George Patterson used to work at Kelvinator and he always went to work, so he picked us all up. There was Jean and Paul, well; he picked up everybody that was on our row. And it was a different one each year, but he picked us all up and he would take us to school every morning, and then our folks would pick us up at night. So we'd each take a week to come and pick us up. And so that's how our busing was done.

JT: School got out at what time?

BS: We'd get out about 3:30.

JT: Oh, so somebody would pick you up about then.

BS: Yea.

JT: Each family took a turn?

BS: Yup. And then they'd pick us up and then we got clever and-

[End of Side A]

[Beginning of Side B]

JT: We're on side 2. Okay, we were talking about your high school. Let's see, when you think of high school, you made a lot of friends, they came out to your farm, you joined extracurricular activities that happened during. Your favorite subject in high school was?

BS: Hmm, [pause] I probably enjoyed algebra once if anything. As much as I hated geometry [laugh].

JT: And least favorite?

BS: Chemistry. I avoided chemistry.

JT: This is maddening.

BS: Not working?

JT: I don't know, I'm going to have to find out, figure it out why. Ah, he said I'm physical trying it, I'm challenged here. Do you remember any teachers that stood out?

BS: Oh yea, Mrs. Boersma was our homeroom teacher, and I still see her every now and then. Then of course the Saur, Gladys and Charlie, they were always kinda the old standbys from Godwin. And Mrs. Marcoff. And I had Mrs. Atkinson, she was a typing teacher and I kinda liked her. Of course I pedaled mail at high school, so I got to know all the teachers.

JT: What do you mean you pedaled mail?

BS: Well, when the mail came in they would, teachers would get different mail and so I would deliver to the teachers. And this worked out fine, but then I got so I knew the teachers and that.

JT: How did you get picked for that?

BS: I don't know. It gets, for they were looking for somebody and I volunteered.

JT: Oh, you volunteered, okay.

BS: And I had to figure it out. And –

JT: How long did you do that? Just one year?

BS: Oh no, I did it for couple, couple of years while I was there in high school then.

JT: When did you do this? Before school started?

BS: No, no, I did it during school hours.

JT: School hours.

BS: I had time, whenever I had a break and I could and get, and they'd, you know, some of the teachers got newspapers and I'd deliver all that. Some days there'd be a lot of mail.

JT: It was enjoyable.

BS: Yup, 'cause I guess I loved meeting people, and so this gave me another opportunity to meet people at least and become acquainted with them.

JT: Okay, you were drafted in 1954, correct?

BS: Yup.

JT: And what was your reaction to that news at that point? Was everyone getting drafted then?

BS: No, the war was pretty well towards the end. It was in the Korean War.

JT: Right, I thought so.

BS: And they were drafting everybody that didn't get into World War II. They made sure somebody got you somehow or another I guess.

JT: Did that surprise you?

BS: No, because we were pretty much alerted to were we going to probably get drafted. There was a few that got by but, that didn't get drafted but. And it probably was a blessing in disguise. At the time you thought it was the end of the world. But I had a good two years.

JT: What were you -?

BS: I didn't do anything. Well, I was 28 when I was drafted.

JT: Right.

BS: So the army didn't really want me to do a whole lot of things, you know, 'cause I'm too old to get too smart. So anyhow, I, I went to clerk typist school and then I became a clerk and the headquarters at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and that's where I spent my most of two years.

JT: So you got to travel?

BS: Yea, I got to go into Oklahoma all of that two years. Never been back [laugh].

JT: Never wanted to go back, or?

BS: No, not really, Oklahoma didn't have much to show me. We had a lot of good times, I mean; here again you met a lot of good guys. I'd still contact with them, in contact with a couple of them. One is the president of a big brokerage firm out in East. The other one was a schoolteacher in St. Louis. But we've kept in touch. And it was, it was interesting. It was, it didn't hurt anybody, you know. In fact sometimes I think it would be better if everybody got drafted and got a couple of years of military service in because you could see where it was helping a lot of kids. They had no idea what life was all about.

JT: So it changed you?

BS: It does, it changes you. You know, I'm sure I was changed when I came back.

JT: In what ways?

BS: Well, I think it was for the better in a way because you really learn; number one you learn discipline, which a lot of people don't know anything about today. And you also learned how to deal with, you know, of course coming out of the depression my age we knew pretty much how to handle money. But a lot of kids came and they didn't have any idea. Their money, their paychecks would be gone first week, and they had a whole month to suffer. So then I got to be so where I've blown money on people. People say 'you're gonna get buried', and fortunately I never did. But I loan them a lot of money out but I helped guys out, you know. But you learn how to, I guess living with different types of people, and 'cause there was all kinds of times they were, people had just got out of prison, everything else. And of course you didn't know that.

JT: You talked about the depression. How did this affect the farm?

BS: I think the farm was great during the depression because you had food. We never had to worry about food, 'cause we could always raise our own. I mean people in town were going hungry, where we gave food to people that were down too. People we knew didn't have anything. So, you learned how to help people that way. You also learned how to stretch a nickel. I mean, when I went to high school I had a quarter, that was my allowance for the week. And I made it last, you know, I wasn't the only kid we made it last for the whole week.

JT: Well, things were, things cost as –

BS: Well, the cost of things weren't as high, but at the same time that quarter didn't go very far either. I mean, today kids have got to have 25 dollars and they don't keep it very

long either. And, you know, it's just kinda the changing times, but, we had to go without things. We didn't get every new thing that came along, and you might want them but we never got them. But it was all right.

JT: Did mom make your clothes?

BS: She made a lot of them, some of our clothes, yup. Not a lot of them, but she made some. And it was pretty unique when you could go to school and have a new pair of overalls to wear, you know, 'cause otherwise you didn't have them. Some of the kids didn't have that. Some of the kids didn't have shoes to wear, you know, they had to struggle. It was tough times, there is no doubt.

JT: Was there any thought of losing the farm at that time?

BS: No, I don't think we ever had any; we never had any fears of that. We did lose; we had a lot of property at the time. I say 'we', it was my grandfather. And they lost some of the land they owned because they couldn't afford the taxes. The taxes were probably 50 cents. They had one piece of property I know of, it was over on 36<sup>th</sup> Street, and it was all platted, put it in lots, and we couldn't afford the taxes on it so they lost it.

JT: Do you remember much about World War II?

BS: Yea, I, well, it was, I was in high school when it broke out and –

JT: How did you hear about it?

BS: Well, I felt I was young enough that I didn't feel as if I was gonna be in any war or anything. So, but I hated to see the other guys that were a little older than I am, that were going, you know, and we had five, I think, in our class, that were a little older than me. They all went. None of them were, I guess, no, there wasn't any of them killed that I can remember. But we had some that I went to grade school with. We had two of them that were killed in the war.

JT: How did the war affect the farm at that point in time?

BS: Well, of course it made the prices of things went up a little bit. So you made better money then. So it kinda improved the farm. You could afford some of the things that are machinery and stuff like that. So we, you know, you're able to do those things.

JT: Any shortages that you can recall?

BS: No because we never, you had food stamps, you had, or not food stamps, when the rationing came in sugar stamps and they had gas stamps for gasoline. But, well on the being on the farm we got all that we needed. You know, they, we would, yea, they shouldn't extra stamps because being, you hired a lot of people and so when you did that then you got extra stamps. So we never had any problem that way.

JT: What did you do after high school?

BS: Well, I went back to the farm.

JT: Went back to the farm. During the war, this was during the war.

BS: Yup. Well, I was –

JT: The war is still going back then?

BS: Yea, the war was still going on and I was deferred because of being on the farm. You know there deferred until the Korean thing came along. Then I had to go.

JT: Right. You said you worked a lot in sales. What was your first job and what was it like?

BS: Well my first job was at Central Soya, and I was a salesman that worked in Napoleon, Ohio. And, well it was a lot of, I thought it was a lot of fun because I got to meet a lot of different people again, and I traveled around. I had the North East section of Ohio, and still I went back with another guy training in that area. And I had been gone for a number of years. And everybody remembered me and he said ‘how come they all remember you?’. I said ‘I don’t know, I probably did some stupid thing for them’ [laugh].

JT: And how has retirement been?

BS: Busy.

JT: Busy?

BS: I have a regretted retirement. It seems like I don’t get anything done because I’m too busy doing something else.

JT: And you retired at what year?

BS: 60, I was 62. ’87, ’88?

JT: You’ve been busy. I want you to go back to thinking about, you said you were a lifelong member of the Paris Grange, since as a teenager.

BS: Yea.

JT: Tell me about The Grange.

BS: Well, it was a farm organization, and it was, they did quite a little legislative work. It was kind of like a lobby group. Not really, and that's not right either. They were more of a fraternal group. That's farm people.

JT: Just men?

BS: No, they took, there's men and women. And then they got involved where they had to get bigger, so they started taking in people from the city and, well then pretty soon then they kind of lost its farmed touch. And it's still running, but I don't think it does much anymore. You don't hear much about it.

JT: Well there's hardly any farms around.

BS: Well, this is true and the farms that are around are big. It was a good social group. You know, this again, was something that would give you an opportunity to get out and meet people and see, because there was, we probably had, oh I think at one time we probably had 80 – 90 members. And The Grange was on the corner of Breton and 28<sup>th</sup> Street.

JT: Do you remember topics of discussion?

BS: Ooh, not really.

JT: So it wasn't just farm? I could have been political too?

BS: It could have been but it didn't get too much, although we had some members that were –

JT: More vocal?

BS: State representatives. I know that –

JT: You keep talking, don't worry about this.

BS: I don't know, you know, it's been so long since I've been to anything like –

JT: When did you used to go? Every week?

BS: We used to meet on Friday nights I think.

JT: Oh, Friday nights.

BS: If I remember right.

JT: Okay.

BS: Well, I guess that was a false alarm.

JT: Okay, -

BS: Then anyway, you always went to dances on Saturday night.

JT: Saturday night.

BS: That was where –

JT: On The Grange? At The Grange.

BS: At The Grange, yup. Every other Saturday night we had a dance, and then the opposite Saturday night we'd go to another Grange. Either Whitneyville or Carlisle, and we were always, there's always a bunch of us that'd go. Then I got to be, I called the square dances for a while. Oh, for maybe for 4 or 5 years.

JT: You've got something you and your wife liked to do?

BS: Oh, we loved to dance, and we loved to square dance and that. 'Course when I was a caller, well then she didn't –

JT: Didn't get to dance [laugh].

BS: She didn't get to dance, yea [laugh]. But we had a lot of good times. For a lot of guys met their wives.

JT: Is that how you met yours?

BS: Nope, I went to meet her on a blind date.

JT: A blind date?

BS: But it was a square dance, [laugh], and it was a square dance that, would it be Franklin Park? It was in Grand Rapids. Friend of mine knew her, and -

JT: What year was this?

BS: Oh, it had to be at fifty, probably about fifty-two, fifty-three, somewhere around there.

JT: And you married when?

BS: '56.

JT: '56. And where was your first house?

BS: On the farm.

JT: On the farm?

BS: And we went back and we lived with my mother 'till I went back to college, and when I went back to college then we lived in Spartan Village.

JT: After you graduated from college?

BS: And I went to Central so I, I was with them for 10 years. Then I went with Westway Trading for 17 more.

JT: And you still lived on the farm?

BS: No.

JT: No.

BS: I moved all over –

JT: You moved then.

BS: Because when I went out of college, I went, first I went to Ohio, and then was transferred to, with two places in Wisconsin, and then I went to Pennsylvania. And Pennsylvania, I came back here.

JT: Oh I see.

BS: And I've been here, when I quit Central Soya I was the manager of the (grain) elevator here then, Clarksville for a couple years. And then when I got, then I went with West way Trading, and I stayed right here. And I traveled 5 states.

JT: Okay. You mentioned you get together with the Smith's School guys.

BS: Oh yea, we meet every Monday morning.

JT: Every Monday morning.

BS: And if we didn't have, it's been great really; we've been doing this about eight years now, maybe nine.

JT: Really, that long?

BS: It's been a long time because we first started out in, when the 68<sup>th</sup> Street Grill was in a little cracker box and then she moved up to where she is now, and we stayed with her

and now our group is still 12 people. We've lost one person out of it, and, but we're all getting [laugh] to the frail age now. But –

JT: What do you like about this meeting?

BS: Oh, we reminisce. I mean, and, we bring up some of the craziest subjects, but it's always fun because you never know what you're going to talk about.

JT: Do you recall the last meeting? What was the topic?

BS: Well, we always talk a lot about tractors.

JT: Tractors?

BS: Oh yea, they, 'cause Harold VanderLaan collects tractors. And we have, and of course he collects a lot of those things too. But he's our information center. He can remember more about different people, and who they married, and when they married, how many kids they got, the whole works. So he's kind of our authority on that. And then, oh, Chub Heyboer was, he'd been up fishing but the fish weren't biting. Al Weirisma went to the, Al was feeling pretty good the other day, so different things about the boat.

JT: Right, right. You just, whatever comes up, it's just fun to know that –

BS: Oh yea, and, and sometimes we get, well, when we reminisce about school too, about – I can remember Ted Weaver came one, one day and he said some of you probably don't even this. But he had brought a gun to school and they took it out. 'Course the toilets were outside, so he took it outside and he shot it through the roll of toilet paper, and nothing was ever said.

[Doorbell rings]

JT: Been a busy morning here hasn't it [laugh].

BS: Anyhow, he, now Ted was a little older than the rest of us. I think Ted is probably the oldest one of our group. But anyhow, he didn't, nobody said anything but the next morning the teacher called him in and she said 'I wanna know what that say, if you know what this is'. She had the bullet. The bullet was laying on the, - how she knew, nobody knows. Now she said 'I'll make a deal with you, don't you ever bring that gun to school again, and I'll not tell your father'.

JT: Yea.

BS: 'Cause if she'd told his dad he would have probably killed the kid [laugh]. But anyhow, she never said anything and he said 'you know, I never knew that my dad known 'till very end'.

JT: [Laugh]

[Phone rings]

BS: Most popular guy on the block.

JT: Today [laugh]. It always works that way.

BS: But anyhow, he evidently had told his dad –

BS: When he was dying.

JT: Oh.

BS: And his dad was furious with him [laugh]. It was then.

JT: That he knew.

BS: That he knew, you know, and he said that she never told. And, you know, little stories like that. Another time we can hear I remember, we used to always at noontime, we, there was a long hill across the road and we could go sliding. Well, I couldn't get my sled to go; all of a sudden there I went. And I went full out when the bell rang. Well I was late for getting back to school. It was the only time in my life I was late for school.

JT: This is Smith School?

BS: Yea. This is back in grade school days. The only time in my life I was late.

JT: So did you get detention?

BS: No, just got a tardy mark.

JT: Called tardy mark.

BS: Tardy mark, yea. Oh, we went on, another time one of the kids went back and fell through the ice in the creek [laugh], came back to school soaking wet.

JT: They had to get out of those clothes, right?

BS: Yea, yea, it's all wet [laugh].

JT: Where'd they get the clothes to put it on?

BS: But, well you had clothes on, I mean, but he, he fell in the creek –

JT: Right.

BS: With all his clothes on. He just came back dripping wet.

JT: So you don't remember what happened.

BS: Well, I think she sent him home.

JT: Oh, she sent him home, okay.

BS: Yea, she sent him home.

JT: Right.

BS: But you know all of these little stories come out and that's why it makes it so such fun because you never know which ones –

JT: Are gonna pop up.

BS: Who's gonna pop up with 'oh, do you remember when this happened?' Oh yea.

JT: It brings back those memories.

BS: Yea sure, it brings back all those memories. But it, it's just a ball.

JT: You guys should record then.

BS: But, if you recorded some of them, it would be hilarious, don't talk about it [laugh].

JT: [Laugh] You could write a book.

BS: Then, you know, every, it's amazing, everybody, when you stop and look at the 12 of just these 12 people, of how well each and everyone has done.

JT: You all have been successful.

BS: Yea, they've all been very successful. They've all, you know, they've all traveled all over the world.

JT: Different experiences.

BS: I don't there's any of us that haven't been in some foreign county and that. Either through the war or otherwise. And Al Wiersma wrote a book on his part while he was in the war, very interesting book, and curls your hair once in a while. It's amazing he's still

alive for all the things he went through. He's doing pretty good. You should come to one of our coffees.

JT: That's a deal. [laugh].

BS: Yea, you'd enjoy it.

JT: Okay, so how, we're getting to the last two questions. How would you describe Bernie Smith?

BS: [Laugh] That's a question, not very favorable [laugh]. Oh I don't know, I guess he's a happy go lucky old guy [laugh].

JT: Happy go lucky old guy, huh? And?

BS: I'm still helping out people I guess. You start out, you meet people, and I'm still doing this 'cause I still, like at church, people need a ride, go to the doctor or something, and they know they can call me and I'll take who ever wants to go. And I've been doing this quite a while. So, I volunteer at the Kent Blood Center. I'm not doing as much of that as I was, but that is interesting to go and meet all these different people. But I'm still, wanna meet people, have fun and visit. You know?

JT: Okay, and what would your advice be for Kentwood?

BS: For Kentwood?

JT: Uh huh [affirmative]. That's good, no; you're fine, sorry.

BS: That has changed so much, I don't know what I would do, 'cause I'm not that familiar with, you know, the city itself now, like it was. I think I've seen a lot of changes.

JT: You like the changes?

BS: Well, some of them I do and some of them I don't [laugh]. You know –

JT: What changes do you like?

BS: Well, I'm like anything else.

JT: I won't go with the ones you don't like though. What changes do you like?

BS: Oh, I don't know 'cause I'm not, not living there I don't, you know.

JT: Okay.

BS: I don't have any problems with them.

JT: Yea, we know, I know. But growing up in Paris Township, those were good times?

BS: Yea, and I think everybody, like I read on the Internet the other day, back in the, even in the '50s, there were less people, but you knew everybody. But today you don't hardly know your neighbor. I don't know my neighbor like I should, right. Right here in my back yard and I don't; my neighbor across the road, I see her every once in while. But you don't see your neighbor like you used to. And I guess that's part of what I don't really like.

JT: Busier isn't it?

BS: They just don't care about each other, and this is sad. I mean, we gotta live together and if we can't live together

BS: If we don't live together and enjoy one another, we can't enjoy life I don't think. Because you gotta enjoy one another. You can't, it's not a world where you're all alone in it.

JT: Or there goes your 12 guys.

BS: Yup. Because, you know, I don't know what's gonna happen. You hope you're not the last of the 12 [laugh]. But because we're all in probably, well, Dale, no Andy would be the youngest one, and he's 72. So we're all in the 70's and 80's, so –

JT: Right.

BS: But it's one of those things that I, what I don't, that's what I don't understand that young people today, they don't, they just don't seem to know how to have fun together. I guess the kids run their business more than they do. I don't know what else. Because everything's centered around, which is nothing wrong with it, but my folks didn't care, those kids like parents do today. And I don't think that, I think they cater too much to the kids. There isn't a thing that kids can't have, and he doesn't appreciate anything. And it's going to hurt him and injured some day in his life. I talked to a young fellow the other day on the Internet, and he was complaining because he works two jobs and he's got himself indebt with credit cards, and I said 'it's because you just didn't discipline yourself, and you should have'. And he said 'I know that now', but he said 'how do I get out of it'. I said 'there's only way you can get out of it', and I said 'you gotta work and work and work, and you gotta work hard to do it', but I said 'once you get out of it, you will appreciate what you're getting then, and then you'll be all right'. But then he said 'you know, nobody's ever told me that'. And I said 'you know, that's one of the problems, because' –

JT: How old is this guy?

BS: Well, he's in college. Intelligent kid, but he said 'people don't explain these things to you that you can get in trouble doing this and that, you know'.

JT: Aah.

BS: This is true, how many kids are taught even when they should be in grade school, they don't even think about it, and in high school they barely touch it, but they don't tell him how to run a home or a family, or they don't know how to organize for money, how to handle their money. You know, I have a fellow living here with me; you know what his comment was last night? He has a fish that he paid 100 dollars for, and it pert near died, and he said he felt so sorry for the fish. He said the money don't mean anything because the money will come anyhow.

JT: Hmm.

BS: Now, when you're thinking like that, there's something wrong. They're not getting the right knowledge of what to do with things that they need to do, you know?

JT: The practicality of life.

BS: Yea, there, well there isn't any. You go down the road and they drive like maniacs, and 'oh yea, we've had driver's ed', but what did they learn?

JT: Oh I see.

BS: And, and that's what I'm getting at. They're not teaching them, I'm not condemning the schools, but, 'cause they're getting, there's kids that are doing a lot –

JT: There's a lot of forces here at work, right, right.

BS: There are wonderful families. But I, yea, I think the other thing is they got too much. I mean, how can a kid decide what he's going to do today, when he's got 50,000 things that he can do, he loves 10 of them, they all would make good money, -

JT: Right.

BS: But if he doesn't use that one little thing right, and enjoy it, forget it. Don't do any good.

JT: Well, our interview is over. Anything else you would like to say today?

BS: No, I've talked enough.

JT: You've talked enough. Okay, okay, we are done, okay? All right, now we'll stop it.

[Tape ends]

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