

JOSEPH NOVAK

Interviewed by Bill Miles
June 18, 1991

Topic: Development of the Frank Lloyd Wright Subdivision

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Q: Today is June 18, 1991. The time is 2:36 p.m. This afternoon, we are going to interview Mr. Joseph Novak, a resident of Madison Heights since the early 1940's. Mr. Novak was part of the group responsible for building the homes in the cooperative Frank Lloyd Wright Subdivision. Today, we will discuss the development of this fascinating area.

Q: Mr. Novak, please state your full name and address for this taped interview and the names of your wife and children.

A: My name is Joseph A. Novak. I live on 670 Lloyd in Madison Heights. My wife's name is Mary. My son is named Joe, Jr., and my son Gary and my son, Albert. They live in Flint. They don't live here in Madison Heights any more. Now, the original start of the co-op housing was in Parkside Apartments which was government-owned housing in Detroit.

Q: What street?

A: On Warren, Warren Avenue. The meetings were held in the basement of these buildings, and at one time, we had an average of 200 people that would come to these meetings.

Q: They were all from the Co-op Housing?

A: Yes. The way it started was that the government wanted to sell the Parkside Apartments at one time, and we figured that it would be nice if we bought it as a group.

Q: Okay.

A: The people who lived in it, and they could rent it as they saw fit. Kind of like an early condominium or townhouse.

Q: Yea, you would have bought it.

A: But then, it just didn't go that way. The people didn't have the money. So then, they started discussing going out of Detroit and buying some land and building our own houses.

Q: If money was tight, how would you get the money to buy?

A: Well, the government, you couldn't deal with the government. You know. Say, they needed \$500,000. We probably could have raised. Seven hundred fifty people certainly could raise, you know.

Q: Okay.

A: So many thousands of dollars you know, which was probably a good idea. I don't think at that time that the government really wasn't too much for a down payment on the—

Q: But if you looked for your own site. Did you have money for your own site?

A: Well, we had some, all that lived there were working.

Q: Okay.

A: We could have got it even if we didn't have it at home. We could have borrowed money, you know, for that case.

Q: Okay.

A: Well, it didn't go through. Nobody was satisfied that they wanted to do that so we decided to go out and buy land. Go out of Detroit, into the farm land which we did, and we went first of all, there was a piece of land right where Hazel Park Race Track. There was so many acres in there. We tracked that through them woods down there. We looked all over there, but it seemed like there wasn't enough land. There was only, I don't know, 50 some acres in there. So, we gave that up. Then, we came out here to 15 Mile Road, and we met a farmer. We were out there talking to him, and he thought we were a bunch of shysters. He was going to get his gun and shoot us. He said you guys better get out of here, or I'm going to blow you off the map. We left. He wasn't interested. He had the land for sale.

Q: Was that in Oakland County?

A: Yea, it was just 15 Mile Road and Dequindre.

Q: Okay.

A: So then, somehow, we discovered this piece of land here that this farmer wanted to sell this on Thirteen here. So then, that's what really happened was, I didn't buy the land. I just worked with the guy that had the money. In other words, there was a Mr. Schmidt. He worked for General, or uh, Motors. He was supervisor, in supervision, there. They had quite a bit of money.

Q: So, he came up with the money to buy the land.

A: Yea, he was a real cooperator. Him and his wife. His wife was crippled, and he really wanted to buy this land, and there was a group of us that was really with him. You know, interested. We couldn't afford, but we explained to him that we'll eventually pay him back our share if he bought it first. You know, if he gave the money.

Q: Can you give me some names of the original group besides yourself?

A: Well, there was Mr. Ostriker and Mr. Smith. Oh, and I can't think of the other names. There was a milkman. No, I can't think of the other names.

Q: Okay.

A: No, I can't think of the other names. Any how—

Q: Did you have to set up a board or something to govern this as a group?

A: Yea, we met and we discussed the President having a—a president, a vice-president, and stuff like that. Then, we went into the by-laws. And all that stuff.

Q: Do you know who the first president was by any chance?

A: Ah, John Brzynski.

Q: Well, okay.

A: He was the first president. All right, so then we bought the land here in Madison Heights.

Q: Okay.

A: Then, we surveyed the land.

Q: Well, that was a job, wasn't it?

A: It was a big job. That was pulling a hundred foot tape through all them wooded acres.

Q: How many acres was it?

A: One hundred and twenty.

Q: One hundred and twenty. You had to survey that whole thing?

A: Yea, we surveyed the whole thing.

Q: There were no roads through there, right?

A: No, there was no roads. There was just the woods. We had to lay out the 120 acres and then after we laid it out, then we sent the layout to Frank Lloyd Wright which, he, in turn, designed houses.

Q: Designed houses?

A: Designed houses for each one.

Q: Did you plan for each person to have one acre?

A: Yes, everybody had one acre.

Q: Okay, what did you guys do about roads.

A: Well, I just explained to you . I and this guy, Syd, we bought this tractor that was John Deere.

Q: Okay.

A: And, it was one them cranky type with the flywheel. You pour a little gasoline into a little gasoline into a little jet in there and then, you get cranking and starting and then you switch it over to fuel on oil it would run on that, and that thing was a powerful tractor.

Q: Okay.

A: Them big spikes. You'd drop it in a ditch and it would crawl out. A powerful tractor.

Q: You got this from where?

A: We bought it, I think, off this guy who owned this sawmill here on John R.

Q: Okay.

A: I'm pretty sure. We bought this tongue and groove machine in the tractor, and it ran off a John Deere tractor. I'm pretty sure that the we did and that—

Q: Tell me something about making ditches. You used a tractor to make ditches, right?

A: Yea, we had this thing, looked like a plow. It was, and we hooked the John Deere onto the chain, and then I sat in the back of this and controlled the and it would push the dirt. It would start in the center, and we would push it one way, and it would keep going around in a circle and then finally go the opposite way and push it the other way, and finally you got your road in and after a mile of road.

Q: Who drove the tractor when you did that?

A: This guy, Syd, he drove the tractor.

Q: Okay.

A: And I was on the back of the-- It was like a plow.

Q: Okay.

A: Especially made for the type of building of roads.

Q: We got you where you set the plans for the layout of the land to Frank Lloyd Wright.

A: Yea, well all right building of roads. Then, Frank—Then, after discussing, you know, uh, housing, building houses. You know, everybody wanted to build shacks and stuff. That didn't work, so, this Smith, he was a friend of this people that built the, uh Frank Lloyd Wright built the house in Birmingham, the name Aldridge, or something like that. And, anyhow, the that owned the house in Birmingham, made connections with Frank Lloyd Wright, but Smith. Then, that sacked the machinery to working so then Frank Lloyd Wright was contacted, and then when he came to Detroit.

Q: Okay.

A: He was interested in, very much so, in-- He wanted to know how much land and everything and that was just up this broad acres deal and that was discussed. I recall in talking about that what he really wanted to do. He never did succeed in that but—

Q: When he came here, there was nothing here at the co-op. Where did he stay?

A: He stayed down there with the Grand Boulevard at the co-op house. He had several fellows with him.

Q: But, he did come out here to look at the land?

A: Yea, they came out here. Yea, I walked with him. We parked on Thirteen and, and he came out of the car, and he walked up the road here and up toward the left where the original house was supposed to have been built.

Q: Did he pick out the house for the original house?

A: Yea, he said, there was a good spot right there, but we couldn't figure out-- That was low land there. See, we couldn't figure out how he could build a house in an area where there's water setting and stuff like this. The catch was a large stream.

Q: I see.

A: He put in a lot of sewers alongside the house. It would drain—

Q: He had quite an overhang on the—

A: A five foot overhand on each-- You know, five foot overhang all the way around.

Q: So that would direct the water to the drain?

A: Right. Well, not only that but the water from the ground, you know, would, you know, you can't have it seeping into the Peezee walls because it would fall apart. You had to have it dry. That would fall apart.

Q: Now when you say Peezee (?) what exactly was that?

A: Seventy per cent sand and 30% clay.

Q: Okay.

A: And if you looked at the sand-- If you look at it through a microscope, you'd see it had little legs, sort of bind together-- Well, anyhow that was explained. Ah, you would ram this earth in the wall, You would ram that down till your rammer bounded off. Then, you put a couple of feet more, shoveled a couple more feet in there and then spread it out and then started ramming again, but that would drive you crazy. It took hours and hours.

Q: You had to build your own forms, didn't you?

A: Yes, the tongue and groove machine.

Q: That's what you used the tongue and groove machine for? To build those forms?

A: Yea, the tongue and groove, and then there was the rods went through that held the forms together.

Q: Okay.

A: Steel rods and they were bolted in the—

Q: This was a process. This was a big job just getting this thing ready to put together?

A: Right. Of course, the footing was just cement, you know. We built the footing, and it was just even with the ground, and then the forms sat on that.

Q: You never planned for basements?

A: No. We didn't plan any basements. We didn't plan a floor. There was ground.

Q: There was dirt floor?

A: Yea.

Q: Oh, no kidding?

A: Dirt floor? Because basically he wanted these things to be inexpensive. That was the idea, wasn't it?

A: Yea, yea. That's why for \$1250, how are you going to do a house that day. But I would like to show you the house if I could show you that book

Q: Anyhow, you guys started the work yourself on the house. You didn't contract it out? You were working on it yourself?

A: I was working on it and another couple of guys were working on it. I also was working at the time at Packard Motor Car Company for the war building. I had a high-classified job. The connector rod bolts that were pistons. Well, the bolts were held the bearing up against the connecting rod, you know. There were five dimensions on there—step-down dimensions and that had to be precisioned when you cut your wheel it was cinder less grinding machine that I ran and the diamond would cut this wheel into different sets and each set had a dimension using micrometers. Each one was so many thousand. That probably saved me from going, because I was up next going into the service. You know, going into the service? You know, anyhow—

Q: That isn't what you call a gear grinder, is it?

A: No.

Q: Because that's what my grandfather did at Lincoln. He was a—

A: I was a center less grinder. You have a form on top of this thing. This thing travels back and forth, and your diamond is underneath cutting the wheel.

Q: Okay.

A: You got a six inch wide wheel, say, and then you have a hydraulic lever, and you push this lever. This diamond goes over that stone and then if there's a contour in it, it'll drop down and cut that stone out and then go to the next one and then cut it out like that. That's the way a center less grinder works.

Q: With your skill, you couldn't have gotten off work much?

A: No, I took an hour off. Something happened to my kid. He got sick or something. They come after you. They-- you had to work—They. You had to be there.

Q: This was during the war?

A: We were making that for the Mustang.

Q: Oh, the fighter plane. Oh, okay. So, you had someone working out of there when you were working?

A: Well, we come out after work. You know, out here. And then Sundays, we weren't working Sundays. We done a lot of work Sundays. They worked us six days a week at the factory and then Sundays you had a free day, so you came out and worked out here. But, I can't recall whether we were building the Peezee house after the war.

Q: You mentioned something to me about you started it but couldn't finish it because of the war. You couldn't get carpenters to—

A: Yeh, you're right. We couldn't get any labor because no more than we'd hire somebody to help us. You know, the army was after—It's the same way with this Ferry Seed fellow. He was upstairs there and one night, a couple of big detectives come and hauled him off.

Q: You're talking about upstairs, now let talk house. Now, you had a place to stay out here didn't you? Even though, there was nothing else around. There was what, a farm house out on this piece of land.

A: Yea, but there was people already living in it.

Q: The ones that owned the land or just somebody?

A: No, people that were with us.

Q: Okay. Part of your co-op?

A: See, there was three groups actually that changed hands.

Q: Okay.

A: The first group at this Brzynski house. That picture of that house there.

Q: The one in the newspaper.

A: In the basement, on one of the walls, we filled a glass with the names of the first original group.

A: Okay, that's 675 Wright.

Q: That's sort of like a time capsule.

A: Yea, it's still in there. How we're going to get to it. I don't know. It's not if he would let us dig it out to get to. It was a dumb thing to do, but anyhow that's what they wanted to do. That was the original group. It was all together different from the second group and the third group.

Q: You were part of the original group?

A: Yea, I was the one on the Frank Lloyd Wright, the first group, the Smiths, the Ostrikers, a guy by the name of Roth. Maneo came in a little bit later. He wasn't original. He used to meet with us. He used to attend our meetings at Parkside down in the basement there, but somehow when the war came on, he had to leave some place. He went away, and then when he came back, we already had been working on the Wright house and then after he came back, got, he lived in the farm. He fixed up a couple of rooms and him and his wife lived in there.

Q: Oh, you were talking about a Mr. Ferry. He was from the Ferry's Tea Company, the son of the guy who owned Ferry's Tea Company. He stayed in that farmhouse on your land.

A: He was the designer-- He was going to design the furniture for the Frank Lloyd house.

Q: Okay, did he ever design any?

A: No, because the army got a hold of him, and they hauled him off. They sent him down to Texas. A college guy, so they made a pilot out of him. He had to go, you know.

Q: Okay, so he got the house and you got a footing (?) put in. You got the walls put up.

A: No, we didn't complete the walls.

Q: You started on them.

A: We started the walls. We did a shed or something, one wall on each side. Then, we put a roof on that part. That was what Frank Lloyd Wright called the sunken garden or fruit cellars what he really called it.

Q: Okay.

A: That was the tail end of the house. Then, from the fruit cellar, like here, then the open spaces, the driveway for your car went under the cantilevered roof and then it attached to the whole house.

Q: I see, okay. This fruit thing was like an out building. There was no heat or anything in that. That was like for keeping potatoes.

A: You came out of the house through a door and then you walked through the area where you parked your car, like overhang. You see these place where they have overhangs.

Q: Breezeways, or something like that.

A: Yea, and then you would open the door into the fruit cellar. That was separate, you know.

Q: So, really that's all you got to build was that fruit cellar part?

A: Yea, we built that part and then we put the roof on that, and it just didn't jive too much (?). Well, we rented an air hammer, and we ran with the air hammer. That's how we got going faster—the air hammer. We got a compressor. We pulled the compressor right up next to the building, and we pushed the button and the thing would ran.

Q: You must have gotten better compaction with that.

A: Yea, well, it worked a whole lot better.

Q: The whole theory of this stuff was. If this Peezee material stood long enough, it would dry out wouldn't it? It would petrify and turn almost like cement.

A: Yea, like stone and it would get hard.

Q: You said it was 70% clay and 30% sand.

A: Yes. No, wait a minute, 70% sand and 30% clay. You have to have more sand than clay because sand is what, when you ran the sand, it's the one that ties themselves together.

Q: Because, you were saying like sand has like little grabbers.

A: When you ran them, that's what makes the Peezee bind and the clay in between is what holds it together.

Q: Now, your walls—they didn't get a chance to actually get covered. They were open to the elements.

A: The walls didn't—We put a roof on it. Yea, there was a roof on it, but then there was a lot of good lumber in the roof so the guys this John (inaudible) building his house. He bought the lumber for his house plus the (inaudible) for the roof.

Q: Bought the roof for your model. So that uncovered the walls.

A: The kids started jumping all over.

Q: You said this house looked like it came out of the ground. Can you describe the way it was supposed to look.

A: Yea, that's the way, as you came in from 13 Mile Road you saw. You looked at it. As you approached, you saw. It looked like it was rising. It's something that was beautiful about it that it's hard to describe.

Q: In addition to having walls, you actually had dirt pushed up against the sides of the house. It was like a slope.

A: Yea, but that came later. Of course, your walls had to be built, and then the finish of the house. Yea, the dirt came almost up to the window line. It had small windows at the top where the roof came over top. The windows were right underneath the roof.

Q: Okay.

A: There were a row of windows that weren't too big. They were smaller windows. They had rows around the house and then the roof sat on them. The roof cantilevered 5 feet out just like this here. It come out—

Q: Like a 5 ft. overhang?

A: Like a 5 ft. overhang all the way around.

Q: And if that would have gotten finished, that would have kept the elements away from the walls too?

A: Yea, well that's the idea. That's what kept it from disintegrating even if the storm would come at an angle, it wouldn't hurt it. There's things that you could use on it if it was soft. You could use linseed oil. You could paint it.

Q: To keep the elements—

A: To keep the moisture out of it.

Q: Okay, then you said something about the inside. When you did the inside, you said it had a dirt floor.

A: Everything was dirt.

Q: How'd you get closets? Forms? There were the forms used to make the walls?

A: Yea, you set the forms up and you rammed the courth (?) around the forms.

Q: Now, this would have been a really large house, wouldn't it?

A: Yea.

Q: Square foot was what?

A: Oh, I can't recall the exact. That's why I wanted to find that book. You would look at that and you would see.

Q: Because I know some of them over there are fairly large houses.

A: Yea, some of them are fairly large, but they're not all Frank Lloyd Wright's.

Q: No?

A: After Wright, men came, these two young architects from Chicago that these solar houses. You see these. If you were out there, there were two real long houses. They're real long with the all glass fronts.

Q: One side all glass.

A: Yea, well those were the solar houses. They were designed by a couple of young architects from Chicago, but that's getting away from Wright. Now, anyhow.

Q: We didn't talk about water yet. You had to have water for this. Right?

A: Yea, the first well where we found this water we had a pump, a gasoline pump that pumped the water with a big flywheel and an arm, and it brought the water up.

Q: From where, the well? You dug a well, didn't you?

A: Well this, the first thing was water. We couldn't do without water. So, we found this spot and we had the well man put in.

Q: How did you find it?

A: Well, it was this guy here's picture. This guy, yes. If you were walking around the field there, and he thought that something pulled his—

Q: Dousing stick?

A: And, he said. Right here, we're going to put the well. I said—you think so. That don't look like too good of a spot. He said. Yes, right here. Sure enough, they got the well man. He went down 147 ft. an 11 ft. vein. He hit the first rock, and he went through that rock then dropped down 11 feet. And hit the other rock and that's where the 11 ft. vein of water is in that gravel and that.

Q: He didn't think there was enough water there, did he?

A: Then, after we went to buy a pump. We bought this pump that goes down in the bottom of the well and pushes the water up. They put the casing in. This guy came out and said that he wasn't sure that's a good well. He said what I'll do. I'll put this pump in there, and if it don't pump enough water out for you guys, then I'll take the pump back, and he put the pump in there and he started up and he flooded the whole acres in there with water, and he said. Man, you got a good well. He said. He let the pump right in there.

Q: And it's still running today?

A: Yea. I think it's the second pump. But, anyhow, that's. That's one of the things that finding the water, right.

Q: How did you build them? How did you work on the houses? Okay, now we've got the Frank Lloyd Wright house. We got that out of the way. People found their own plans. You still had the idea you wanted it to be a co-op. Right?

A: Yea.

Q: So, you kind of helped each other on your houses?

A: Yes. We had an electrician. I was block man—did the block work. Fred Hiller was the plumber.

Q: Okay. Who was the electrician. Do you remember?

A: The name was House. He's not here any more. I think it was Holster. He lives up North some place. Anyhow, I would lay out on the acre of the land and here's where he wants to put his footing. I would lay out his whole footing, lay the pad down to the bottom of the cement and start the blocks there—three or four high. Put all that in and get it ready for him to start his house. In the meantime, he would come and do some of my electricianing. He'd wire a couple of roofs, and, I, in turn, would be doing his—

Q: You would be sharing?

A: I laid out his whole area of the side. He just showed me the plans. I laid out the whole footing the blocks to set the house on.

Q: Did all the people that were there get involved in helping or was it just a few?

A: You couldn't. There were too many of us trying to do everything at one time. That was no good because you couldn't. You just couldn't do that. Brown's building his house. John Bryzinski was building his house. This is the first house that I done most of the block work and the thing, but then he had added stone over top of that. Some outfit wired that, put that on there.

Q: Okay.

A: But everything else was block. Even the floors were cement. We built platforms and laid the block across the platforms and then poured the concrete in between the block .

Q: For between the floors.

A: Then when you went down the basement, knocked them forms down there, the floor just stood there. The cement between the blocks held the floor.

Q: So, some of these had basements in them?

A: Yes, one did. The Nanigat (?) house had a basement. And Rodeo (?) I think that house had.

Q: Bill Dale (?)

A: Yea, he had a basement there and that's about all.

Q: There aren't many of them. I know.

A: No, the water line was too high. Well, anyhow that's the.

Q: We got the water. We got the roads. Something else for the co-op. You talked about. You owned a store and a gas station?

A: In Detroit.

Q: No kidding. While you were out here, you owned a gas station there? Was it successful?

A: Well, they couldn't make it go. There wasn't enough people in Detroit that was interested in the co-op. What members we had at Parkside. They just wasn't buying. The competition was just too great. In other words, we had to sell a little higher than the A&P's and the Krogers and them other stores, so they sold it to a private guy, and I attended the gas station one week, next week, somebody else that was a member attended, and I don't know-- The money was-- You'd give the money to someone and run the station for the next week and what he done with the money I don't know what the heck they were supposed to give it over to the group. Yea, we had a fellow that was in charge that used to pay the bills.

Q: You would have been completely self-sufficient because you grew your own food here, right?

A: Out here.

Q: Then, you sold it out there in a store?

A: It was a regular store just like A&P or Kroger.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: It was a regular store. It was right on Mack and Warren and-- Right there by Briggs Factory—Plymouth bodies there.

Q: Okay.

A: It was a regular store. You went in there and had canned goods and vegetables the thing was that help. You see each family was supposed to give so much service. In other words, you would take care of it one week and then somebody else was supposed to take care of it the other week. That's what the co-op was about, and the gas station the same way.

Q: But they weren't doing it?

A: Well, I think that they. It just wasn't run right, and the money that they made they put it back into the gas, buying the gasoline, tires. We sold tires, and you didn't have strangers. You just had. You sometimes would. It mostly was members.

Q: Yes.

A: That belonged to this store and gas station.

Q: So, you could not get big enough to get the thing rolling?
Evidently, you would have.

A: Yes

Q: If you would have had more outsiders??

A: Well, you needed the outsiders for the business, but the idea was coming out here and that's what they were supposed to build was a big gas station and a big repair shop for automobiles and a big. We had big things in mind

Q: Oh, you did want to have one over here?

A: Yes, yes. They had plans. I think Wright had something laid out for that, but I didn't see those. But, anyhow, they talked to him about it, and yea, he they would have wanted to have. They had a big garage, guys that could do the mechanic work. There were some guys interested in mechanics and the big store. They figured, well. But, you gotta figure 120 families.

Q: When you laid your places out, you laid them what back-to-back so that you could go plow one end to the other. You told me something about the way you laid the property lines out. They were like right in a line so that you could plow from one end to the other.

A: Well, yes the streets. I lived on Lloyd, the first street you come into. All right, John's house and I on Lloyd and my house faces Lloyd, but between my house and John's house is almost two acres. The idea, they talked about doing that way was in case of a severe depression or something and you wanted to grow a garden, the rows of all these acres all the way down. Say, you have 30 acres from one end to the other.

Q: All the way in line?

A: Yea, you could plow that all up as a whole group of men, we'd work and put gardens in and stuff like that and self support.

Q: Okay. That's another part of the co-op?

A: Yea, that was the sum of the dreams that they had. People you just can't get them to do a lot of stuff. They talk about it. In fact, we had a school teacher that was name of Zawaski. All he done was talk big. But then come to do anything, he couldn't do anything. You know, he never done any heavy work.

Q: A dreamer?

A: Yea. You required a lot of heavy work if you wanted a thing like that to succeed.

Q: Like my grandfather would say. He was a superintendent.

A: Yea.

Q: A supervisor.

A: Yea. Too many supervisors and not enough workers. Well, that's what happened with the co-op. We had a lawyer that used to come out and sit with us till 3 o'clock in the morning talking housing. But he never dirtied his hands. But he learned a lot and what he done. But he went out and bought land and he had unfinished houses. And then people bought the unfinished houses. He made a fortune—millions of dollars.

Q: Now, this idea you had—this co-op idea. You had this before you got into Frank Lloyd Wright philosophy, or did you know that he did this that's why you went to see him.

A: It was before I ever knew about Frank Lloyd Wright. The thing was going out into the buying the land and then going out and building your own home. That was our—

Q: And then you heard about this person who agreed with that philosophy.

A: When this Mr. Smith, who was supervisor at General Motors, some place in. He was a friend of this ____ from Birmingham and this ____ had this house built there and somehow they liked that house so much, you know, they

Q: You met Wright, didn't you? You took him a block?

A: Yea, I took him this Peezee block I carried down those wooden stairs there – 12 steps you had to go upstairs and they had him up on the part of the upper floor. I think there was a basement and then a first floor that had a kitchen. These cooperators. I guess they rented this house. Like I said we took that block and dropped and carried it up those stairs. He had a following. He had men that always traveled with him, and I can't recall. If I searched those books, I probably would find who some of those guys were, but I recall that he sent out here Aaron Green for the Peezee house. He was the one that had the most knowledge in building a Peezee house.

Q: So, he's the one that actually started what to do and how to...

Q: Was he a young guy?

A: One of his students.

A: One of his students, but he was more the type of architect that liked him and sent him out to work with us. Another thing, he lived in the farmhouse, and we fed him.

Q: You were feeding everyone in that farmhouse?

A: One day you would make something and the next somebody else would and somebody else would. That's the way they lived. But they weren't paid nothing because the farmhouse was free. The farmhouse was in pretty good shape. The only thing was some of the walls were banged up.

Q: How about Wright. How did Wright get paid. Did you have to pay him for...

A: First of all, he made his first design of the house, and I think the first bill was \$600 and some dollars. Oh yea, we had to pay. If you didn't build the house, he wanted all the blueprints back. Everything had to go back to him. He didn't want nobody copying.

Q: What did you think of him?

A: Well that first meeting—Was he a personable guy. He didn't talk too much. They say he done a lot of talking. In other words, these architects didn't agree with his type of construction. Like the Johnson Wax Building, he built these pillars out of glass, and they mushroomed out, and all the architects met in Chicago. They told him that they didn't like the glass pillar that it wouldn't carry no roof or carry the ceiling or anything. That it would cave in. So, he had to go to Chicago. He had one glass pillar made, and he put a platform on top of it, and he brought that-- Some cement company brought in 2-3 sacks of cement, and they started piling it on top of the platform, and they put on so many tons on it. And they all said that's enough, that's enough. Give him the money from Chicago from some bank for that building. So, they said let him have all the money he wants. That glass block has held up tons of that cement bag, you know. They thought it was going to cave in.

Q: But, it didn't?

A: No.

Q: He was a good designer, then?

A: Well, that was Wisconsin, the Johnson Wax Building. That's what the pillars are out. They come up and the roof fits on top of them.

Q: Maybe a little bit of a dreamer?

A: Well, he was-- Yea, I think he had a lot of students, and he had a lot of foreign students, too, that had ideas. You know that some day that. He built a tremendous amount of buildings that were of that type. If you look through his books there, you. Anyhow, as far as I'm concerned, he did, at the end said forget about the Peezee. Let's make it out of cement, and that would have been ideal,

but then the group was complaining about this and about that. We could have built that same house only made it out of cement.

Q: With (inaudible) like you do a basement.

A: Yea, it would have been a beautiful structure. You could have finished it inside. You could have made it out of wood, you know—But somehow, they didn't want to buy for plan it again. But anyway, they went into their own individual—The two young guys I was telling you about from Chicago that build this solar house—sun house is what they call it. They were working in this house. The carpenters had these glass walls in the front, you know. They were working with (inaudible) and they to shed a lot of their clothes because the sun at that time from the East. The way they had it laid out the sun in the spring warmed that house up, and they didn't have to put a furnace in.

Q: Like an early energy-efficient house?

A: The (inaudible) all had to be done, but they didn't need no heat. Then somebody got a hold of them and that's what these 3 houses are supposed to be.

A: Ken Creedy has and George Valentine has one and Brown had one but the thing was that the plan. These guys changed their ideas. The building was okay, the length and width of it, but there had to be some small changes in the roofing. It didn't jive the way they had it planned. So, the Brown house, we built his roof different than George Valentine built his and Ken Creedy. It goes right up to the ceiling. See, there's no ceiling. The ceiling is the cantilevered roof inside of the house.

Q: It looks like one of those houses out west.

A: It goes right up to the thing. That's the way Mr. Brown and I worked on the house. Then, he put in hot air traveling through the floors. We had a furnace in Pittsburgh that built this type of—or they built the pipes for that—great big pipes, two great big truckloads of stuff and then you lay these big pipes. You start from the furnace and they're larger and then they go around they get smaller, then they come through the floor. They come up into the floor, the tile on the floor meets, one butts up against another. The hot air travels through them and goes back into the furnace. That's radiant heat.

Q: I was just going to say—that's radiant heat?

A: That heats everything in the house. The furnace there and everything stays the same heat all the time. Well, Brown put that in. I'm telling you that was not an easy job.

Q: Does he still have that kind of heat?.

A: Yea, well he don't own it now. Somebody else does. Anyhow I forgot the guy's name. George Valentine, he's got radiant heat pipe. He's got baseboard heat.

Q: Hot water heat.

A: Yea, hot water, baseboard heat. And Ted Creedy, he had the radiant heat in the floor. He had pipes copper tubing in his floors and then it goes off the furnace into the pipes and then returns and circulates the whole house, but he had trouble because by the time it got from one end to the other, it was getting cold. He had some chains down there. I don't know what he did. Fred Hiller done some work for him.

Q: They sound like they're fairly comfortable houses, most of them? You guys have been living there for a long time. The house that you live in—

A: Well, I built mine all together different. I just got hot air, you know. I got pipes. I got pipes circling all the rooms and then I got leads coming from them pipes back through each room and back into the furnace. The hot air comes out of the vents, goes up the ceiling. The vents take it off the ceiling, send it back through the furnace, and the furnace heats them back up again and sends them through the pipes through the floors. I got vents in each room. You open a vent and you get hot air. But, it's not the best heat. At that time, when you're working on a budget, you don't—

Q: You can't do everything you want to do?

A: I was glad to get a guy to do that for me because I just couldn't afford. Base rate was quite expensive at that time. Now, John Brzynski's house, he put radiant heat in those floors but what happened was, the war, they used all the pipes for the war. He had to buy pieces, 4 ft., 5ft, 10 ft., and then he had a welder weld all this together and make one big pipe. It cost him twice as much as if he had the long pipes. Put one big 10 ft. pipe in and tie it across and tie it into the thing and tie the rest.

Q: More places to break too.

A: Yea, although the guy was a good welder. He had short pieces. He had long pieces. He welded them to make one big row. L That took a lot of extra time and energy for that, but that's water over the dam. They told us at Parkside we had to get out. When the war ended, we were making more money than what we made when we lived at Parkside, we were paying \$17 a month and when we were working on war work, our wages were double. We were making fair money and they knew that so they wanted lower income families to move in. That's how I got in. Heck, I was only working 3 days a week at Packard's, and we made \$.37 an hour and you had to have a little place to live. So, I got married, and we had the one kid so-- That was nice. You met a lot of different people.

Q: You met a lot of people that brought this idea out here?

A: Yea.

Q: You would have never met them if you hadn't lived there.

A: Yea. Then, they got interested in coming out here. By talking, we'd meet out on the lawns and talk and discuss coming out and we'd tell the guys. Come down to the meeting. We're going to try and build our own homes. They had to do something because they knew they were going to get thrown out of Parkside because it was a government project and if they made too much money, they had to go. I was told to get out at a certain date, and I lived in the garage part of my house. I put everything I could in there. I had a hot water heater. I had a small burner stove, fuel oil. I had a shower. We had a couple of kids. I built an addition on. I had bunk beds for the boys. We had a bed in the corner. We even had a television. I think we had an old Muntz.

Q: Were you ever sorry you moved out here? You like it, don't you?

A: Yea.

Q: Everybody that still lives there seems to like it.

A: Yes.

A: It's like living in the country. It's like your not being in the city. It's like your some place completely different. There's nothing wrong with it. It's just that we're being squeezed out. They built a bunch of factories just north of us.

Q: You get an original 120 acres but then you sold some of it for something.

A: We sold 80 acres of it to Oakland Community College for a Police Academy.

A: They were supposed to build a Police Academy and a shooting range and all that stuff and that didn't go through the-- They decided to sell it to the factories over there. They're really not factories. They're more tech stuff.

Q: Okay.

Q: Engineering.

A: Yea.

Q: They get Aero Detroit. Is UPS part of your—

A: No, they're up farther away.

Q: How about the water park. Is that part of your area?

A: That was a terrible looking thing down there. Forty feet deep. They filled that all in.

Q: Now, this was interesting because even when you sold the land. Even that was a cooperative thing. You took the money and you put it into your houses.

A: Yes. It help because I didn't have a lot of stuff I needed for my house—inside carpeting and cabinets and stuff like that. We struggled in the beginning. We were without that stuff. Then, the money that we derived from that. We moved ahead and a lot of people did. I had siding put on my house, stuff like that. It helped.

Q: What do you think as a whole when you look back on the whole thing. Do you think the cooperative was a success or not?

A: I don't think it was a success. It just couldn't get. People weren't—

Q: People weren't interested in the cooperative idea.

A: People just don't want to work. It required a lot of work. When we first started, I doing block work for Hiller, but we had a lot of other people that never came out—never done nothing, and yet they were part of us. You couldn't get them. You got newcomers who came in after that that started to build their houses that bought the land, bought a share into the place and then they started building their own places and they didn't have the knowledge. We were already pulling away from the co-op idea because nobody was interested. If we could have got more carpenters or more brickmen or more plumbers or something like that or more electricians in the group. That would have been ideal because then we could have worked. This guy do this job and the other guy do the other job. It would have helped out. In East Detroit, when the war was over, they started off with a bang. They started the same kind of thing as we did. The only thing is they had the modern equipment, good lumber, good brick. They had several guys that were enthused so that they built, they framed in six, seven houses. There was the carpenters, then the brick guys came in and bricked it, but the first guy that they started to debate. They started fighting. The one guy says he was the original thing. He wanted the first house. He wanted to move into the first house. So, what happened was, they got fighting and he moved into the first house. The other houses were left. Nobody wanted to do the work. So, they had to sell to private contractors to finish those houses. That's what happens when a few people are doing the work and others are just in to see their house built. We had the same problem with the Peezee house. When we started to building the Peezee house, we had a meeting. We said, well, Mr. So and so. They were an old couple

in their sixties or seventies. So, we said the first Peezee house is going to go to them. All that sounded good at first. But when all the work came. These guys started thinking. Oh, wait a minute. Why should they get it. I'm doing all the work. I'm the last guy on the totem pole. That ain't no damn good. That's what happened. Brown and I done most of the block work and the-- and just imagine 2 o'clock at night had the car lights shining through the opening, and we were laying those floors for hot air to travel through the build his fireplace. I received nothing. I didn't get a damn cent for anything. One of the guys, Zawaski, that guy's a teacher, I told you. I borrowed a trowel from him, about a \$6 trowel. He says I'm collecting my tools after I laid out his whole footing and built his walls for him, three blocks high to set his house on. He says well, I'm checking on my tools. I'm taking an inventory. You got my trowel. Yea, I said, I got your trowel. I said here you can have it. I could have said I done \$300 worth of work for you. What are you going to do about that? But, you see, I'm not that kind of a guy.

Q: So, the individual was the killer.

A: Yea, I mean that's the kind of-- There's too many different people that have-- You don't get everybody the same as you would want, you know. But as far as Fred Hiller, he was a good guy Fred and I worked. I built his garage. He done some plumbing for me which was very good. I didn't have to go out and hire a plumber. He was a pretty good plumber.

Q: What do you think. Do you think it's going to stay in one piece, or do you think it's going to get re-developed?

A: In a different area?

Q: You say you're getting squeezed out. I know it upsets you because you don't want to leave.

A: No. Neither did my boys. They wanted to stay. Eventually, they're going to sell out again. They need the land. In fact, we had that guy who built those apartments

Q: Condominiums.

A: Those are apartments. He was interested. But he wasn't interested in the house. He was just interested in the land. He was more interested in buying the land.

Q: Yea, because he would have had to bring water in there. Right?

A: Well, see they offer you a price, but then what they do. They don't give you the inner cost. They tell you they'll give you so much for an acre of land, but then

later on they tell you there's water lines, sewers, and plugs and all that stuff has to be put in and then you take that away from your land.

Q: And, it's not worth a whole lot. So, they're giving you the rock bottom for having to develop it.

A: That's how they make their money.

Q: And, they're going to take your home away for that.

A: And, they're going to tear the house down.

Q: But, it's your place to live. It's your home.

A: I'd rather just not do it. But, see, there's another group here where we got people who want to sell and some want to stay. We have meetings. They were for selling here a couple months ago.

Q: You still have meetings here in the library? Yea, I see them on the calendar. Is that what you talk about? Like what's going to happen?

A: Yea, we had a buyer, fellow, land developer, or some damn thing. I don't know what he was. Yea, we had several meetings here.

Q: What do you think the split is? Is it big enough to where it's going to go over?

A: Well—

Q: Or, are there still enough of you guys around to hold on to it?

A: If the land is valuable, then we can ask—

Q: What it boils down to is the question of are you going to get your money.

A: That's right. Say, I sold my acre and I got \$150,000. If I went out and bought a house, you know, \$100,000—

Q: A house with a little backyard.

A: You're not getting very much for \$100,000 any more, and that's the whole deal. You have to come out even or better. You know, a little better.

Q: It's not going to be living, the way you're used to living with the birds and the animals, land and all that kind of stuff.

A: Yea, because, what the heck, we built these houses. I think I built my house \$12,000. That wasn't too bad.

Q: I've got a question. I've ridden with you out there I don't know how many times now. The roads—there was like one road that had a rock in it where you couldn't get through. Did the roads kind of like cut off in places or stop, or did you make roads that went all the way through around all the houses.

A: No. One mile of road was built around the whole thing where these factories are. Part of the road was up in there.

Q: Okay.

A: Then, it came back down towards the-- I don't know if you know any of them people down there. The fellow who lives on the corner down there Lasure. Did you know Lasure?

Q: No.

A: Well, this fellow he's in moving business or something. He's improved it. He tried filling in building that road around a sort of u-turn. I forget his name. He's a new guy that bought that place. The way the road comes now. If you come in one end and back out the other end, that's just part of the road. The road went back up Tawas and then it went towards them factories and then it came back the other way.

Q: That's why—

A: There's 80 acres back there that the factories bought off of us.

Q: Were there houses on there or not. So, you never developed the whole 120 acres?

A: No, there was just the fields out there, but we built the road for the Frank Lloyd Wright. Each family could get to the road, but then there was other roads had to be built too because 120 homes. You had to put in a lot of roads. So, the people were buying the land on the road. We all bought where we thought the roads—

Q: You didn't want to travel too far to get to a-- A big piece of land like that.

A: We built the roads and then we showed these people. Here's an acre here, here's an acre here right on the road. You had to get to your place where you were building it. You had to have a road, but then there was a lot of extra acreage back in there. They didn't know what they were going to do. They had to have other roads back there.

Q: Well, I think I've taken up enough of your time. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

A: Yea, if there's anything.

Q: It's a fascinating subject. It's fascinating to us not to you. You lived there. Tell me about all the people who used to come and look at the place.

A: Well, at one time, when we were building the Peezee house, John R from 13 Mile Road. Our place clear to John R, cars were parked all along the road.

Q: Taking pictures and looking at it.

A: A couple of guys were gouging. I said what the heck are you doing there. Sticking it into the wall. I said you can't do that. This is first stuff. We had just taken the forms off.

Q: You never knew you were going to be famous, did you? And, you didn't even want it to begin with. You didn't want the fame.

A: But, it would have made Madison Heights. Of course, that was Royal Oak Township.

Q: Yea, because this was back in the 40's.

A: It put Madison Heights on the map, I'll tell you that.

Q: Well, it has even today. We still get people calling and asking, even today. That's why this is so important. We have nothing on it. You are the first interview. You are the first person that has talked to us about this. Thank you very much.

A: Well, if I come up with some other stuff. I've been trying to. If you want to know more about Frank Lloyd Wright, get a hold of Mrs. Madigan.

Q: She was the first Secretary-Treasurer or something like that?

A: She was the Treasurer. She handled all the monies.

Q: Okay, I'm going to call her next.

A: Yea, call her and see if she'll. I'll come with her if she wants.

Q: Okay, that's great. Excellent.

A: There's a lot of things that she knows that I probably forgot. You know, I'm 92 years old. My mind is not functioning. My mind is on golf all the time.

Q: It's functioning well.