

ELIN NANNINGA

Interview by Bill Miles
January 29, 1992

TOPICS:

Residential Coop Movement
Frank Lloyd Wright
Architecture
Conscientious Objectors
Mental Health Care
World War II
Home Construction
Surveying
Ecology

Transcription by John W. Weigel
June 11 – December 24, 2000

Q: Testing, one, two, three, four.

[Tape recorder turned off and on].

Q: The date is January 29th, 1992. The time is 1:27. Today we are going to interview Mrs. Elin Nanninga. Mrs. Nanninga is a resident of the cooperative subdivision. Mrs. Nanninga, please state your name and address for this taped interview.

A: My name is Elin Nanninga. My nickname is Ella. A lot of people here know me by "Ella". And my address is 31255 Tawas.

Q: Please give us the name of your husband and any children you may have had.

A: My husband is deceased now. His name was Earl. And I have three sons, David, Nathan and Hugh. They all attended the Lamphere School District all the way through. And saw all the new schools being built. When...when we first moved here, the only...the only school was the one on...where Farmer Jack's is now.

Q: Okay. That was on the north side of Thirteen and the east side of John R.

A: Yes.

Q: Okay.

A: Uh-huh. And...

Q: That was Lamphere Elementary.

A: Lamphere Elementary. [Inaudible].

Q: Okay.

A: And they had to go to Madison District to go to high school.

Q: Oh you're kidding. I didn't realize that.

A: [Inaudible]. But by the time David was ready to go to high school, they had built a brand new one.

Q: How did they get down to Madison High School? Did they...they walked, probably, right?

A: Uh, I'm not sure...

Q: Not a bus.

A: ...and I...I didn't experience it.

Q: Oh okay. Okay. You were selected as...as an interviewee because of your longtime residency in Madison Heights. How long have you lived here?

A: Well...we...we...my husband and I married in '41. And just before get...we got married, we decided that we wanted to be members of the coop.

Q: Okay.

A: And...

Q: Now you were selected because of your involvement with the cooperative movement. Now...

A: Uh-huh.

Q: ...what do you remember about the original formation of the coop?

A: There were pro...I think you can call it two nucleus groups.

Q: Okay.

A: Fred Thornthwaite was the...the coop educator.

Q: Okay.

A: And...and he had a...a coop house going where both young men and women resided. And...

Q: This was in Detroit?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: And they were all single people, and girls were on one floor and the fellas on the other, but they...they did all the household things together, you know, assigned duties and so on. And...

Q: Did you and Earl live there?

A: No, Earl lived there.

Q: Okay.

A: And he...he enjoyed living there.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: They had good fellowship and everything went smoothly. And at the same time there was a...a group living in several...several families of the original group that were living in the Parkside housing project. And they became good friends, and they were all factory workers and had a three-month layoff in the summertime.

Q: Okay.

A: And they were anxious to get into their own homes.

Q: Parkside was...was...it's a big project, right?

A: Big [inaudible] project.

Q: Okay. It was like [Booster? Brewster?] project...

A: Yeah.

Q: ...or whatever we have today.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: At that time it was brand new, though. It was very nice.

Q: Okay.

A: And...so, anyway, Fred Thornthwaite organized a few people, and we met in the basement at the Parkside project.

Q: Okay.

A: And...and they would...then they considered where they might buy some property collectively.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And that they would...they drafted bylaws then...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...and they...they drew up a char...charter, I guess, I think it's called.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...

Q: Did you have money? Did you all have a...a...a small amount of money?

A: Everyone was working, so they just put in what they could and built up their own equity...

Q: I see.

A: ...and then the expenses, of course, were shared collectively.

Q: Okay. Now when they actually bought the piece of land, did they have money from all of you, or was there someone that kind of bankrolled the project or bought the land?

A: Well, the...the land, believe it or not, was selling for a hundred dollars an acre.

Q: Okay.

A: And we bought a hundred and twenty acres. And who...who was bankrolling it, I don't know. I wasn't the bookkeeper at that time.

Q: Okay.

A: I wasn't bookkeeper until a while after the war.

Q: Okay. Hundred dollars an acre, though, wasn't too bad...

A: No. No.

Q: ...to try to come up with a hundred dollars.

A: True enough.

Q: Yeah.

A: And if you were gonna build a home, you know you...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...you had to start collecting somehow. And...so it...it wasn't long before they had a clear deed on the property.

Q: Okay.

A: And then they decided they wanted to collect tools together so that there wouldn't be such a duplicate purchase of tools for everybody.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And on the property there was an old farmhouse and two big barns. The farmhouse had been abandoned for a long time, and the barns were deteriorating. But the one barn was good enough to store tools in. And so they started to buy a tractor and shovels and [inaudible]...

Q: That would be really handy for your purposes [inaudible]

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: And then...

Q: All of this was bought together too, wasn't it? It was...

A: Yes, it was.

Q: ...a cooper....Okay. Okay.

A: They were incorporated at the time the purchase was made.

Q: Okay.

A: And then someone started to steal the tools out of the barn. So they realized they needed somebody living on the premises. And Fred and Faith Hiller had just recently married. And they sectioned off, oh it was just two small rooms, a little porch...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...and there was no water, no toilet. So the first necessity of course was a...an outhouse.

Q: Okay.

A: For the purposes of the total membership.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...and then...and then the men got together and dug a well.

Q: Okay.

A: The first well they dug had gas. And so they utilized the vent for the farmhouse at first. And then...then the second well, they found water.

Q: Did they use anyone to find a spot or did they just do it themselves?

A: Oh I suppose they had their own little devices, I don't know.

Q: Okay.

A: You know. They prob'ly had ideas among them, but I wasn't in on that process.

Q: Okay.

A: And...so...then the water was hooked up. Then they...let's see, when...when they got an indoor toilet, then they had to put in a septic field for the farmhouse.

Q: Okay. They really put in a lot of work in this...on this...

A: Well...

Q: ...building.

A: ...well, they had to make it liveable.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And, actually, they did a minimum, and... and it always was considered a temporary kind of thing.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And I particularly remember the...this use of the...the mattress boxes, you know. As new wallboard, because the plaster was so...

Q: To cover the holes in the wall.

A: ...falling down...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...and the wasps were coming in. It...it was pretty bizarre.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But it didn't take too much work, you know. And...and I...

Q: Did you and your husband move there?

A: Yeah, we were the fourth family to move in that building. Everybody had a little efficiency apartment.

Q: Okay.

A: And there were three of them downstairs, and...and Earl and I took two big bedrooms upstairs. They were so bright, and...and I was a city gal all my life, but I really loved this house [inaudible].

Q: This was a change for you, wasn't it?

A: Oh, it was a radical change. And my parents were kind of, you know, nervous about...about my marriage to Earl, and the...and the primitive conditions I was going into, you know.

Q: Where did your parents live? Were they in Detroit?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: And we were born in Norway, but...

Q: Oh, okay.

A: ...from the age of four I lived in Detroit.

Q: Okay.

A: And...

Q: And you stayed here, how long?

A: Well I could have stayed longer, I guess, but the war came up.

Q: Okay.

A: And in the...in the process of living there...we didn't have...we didn't have water upstairs yet, and I...I remember it so clearly, we improvised everything, you know. Orange crates were our cupboards, and...and just the cheapest kind of sink to work in, you know. And one metal cupboard that was secure from any kind of

mice that might come into the house, because we were out in the country, and field mice, you know, they...in the fall they would want to come in.

Q: Mm.

A: And...but that worked out fine. And...and then Earl had to carry...Earl got a brand new garbage can. [Laughter]. Expense number one. And he put a spigot on the bottom.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And so...and then he carried the water up.

Q: For your water.

A: For our water supply. And...and we had an oil stove upstairs, so that had to be...oh, it had a tank behind it, so that had to be carried up, too.

Q: Now were...you were living here, they were planning on doing something with the land?

A: Yes.

Q: Or were they working on the land at all?

A: Yeah. There was...there was no roadwork or anything.

Q: Oh, there wasn't anything.

A: No.

Q: There was just...okay.

A: And...and...it...it just been farmland.

Q: Okay.

A: And there...there was some roadwork that had...had started when one of the men, a...a Mr. Civic, started to build his house.

Q: He was one of the group?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: And the Van Halas built a...a little garage-type home.

Q: Okay.

A: And that was...that was convenient to the road. But Mr. Civic had to go around farther on what was going to be called Coop Circle.

Q: Okay.

A: And...and when Frank Lloyd Wright came on the scene, Mr. Civic dropped out his...his membership, because he'd already formulated the house he wanted and...and, you know, started on the footings and...and he wasn't about to shift gears.

Q: Okay, before we go any farther, can you give me the names of some of the original families?

A: The ones that lived in the Parkside were...the Br...Brzezinskis, Browns and Novaks.

Q: Okay.

A: I don't know if there were others. I was new to the group.

Q: Just the ones that you can remember.

A: And...and some of the earlier ones, the Meechams, I don't know if they were charter members; the Valentines were early members. The Hillers. Hillers were one of the...

Q: Right from the beginning.

A: [Inaudible] In fact Fred Hiller's mother wanted to have five acres at the time, and she dropped out when she couldn't have five acres.

Q: Oh.

A: Independence. She'd been reading that book Five Acres and Independence.

Q: Yeah.

A: A lot of them wanted kind of a...a small, little farm unit of their own, you know.

Q: Mhmm.

A: And that by the way caused a...a furor in the group, when...when Wright came, he planned it for just one acre, you know. Some of them were an acre and a half.

Q: Okay, now let's get on to Wright. You mentioned Wright. Now how did he get involved in the project?

A: One...one of the men...one of our members, a...a Mr. Roth, lived in the farmhouse, and he was...had constructed a...a cube formation in which he tamped the earth right from our grounds. And...just...you've maybe heard of [Pisee?] houses?

Q: Yes.

A: Well they used straw with that.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: This was just earth. But apparently it was...it was the right texture to form these blocks properly.

Q: Almost like adobe...adobe bricks.

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: And...and he wanted to build...build an inexpensive house, and so he was experimenting with it. Well, Frank Lloyd Wright was visiting a home that he...he had designed, that's on...it was the Aflack house.

Q: Okay.

A: And it's on Woodward. I...I...I believe it's in Bloomfield Hills.

Q: Okay.

A: And...and when he saw this block, he took a strong interest in the coop.

Q: Someone took the block to him to show it to him.

A: Yes.

Q: Okay.

A: He asked to see it. And I guess they had a...a laborious job getting it over to him, you know, 'cause it was heavy. And apparently he was upstairs somewhere.

- Q: Mr. Novak helped carry that block up the stairs, he mentioned that in his interview.
- A: Yeah. And whether he was at the coop house at that time I don't know. But, anyway, he must have become acquainted with Fred Thornthwaite.
- Q: Okay.
- A: And Fred, maybe, wanted to encourage him to have an input in our group.
- Q: Okay.
- A: Although I don't know that for sure.
- Q: Mmhmm.
- A: And...so anyway he did take an interest and...and he came out and talked to the people.
- Q: Actually out to your piece of property?
- A: Yeah, I wasn't there at the time...that time.
- Q: Okay.
- A: But he had his flowing robes on and his...
- Q: Black hat?
- A: ...black...black hat.
- Q: Mmhmm.
- A: And his [jebeau?], you know. [Laughter].
- Q: Yeah.
- A: Typical Wright style. And...and so there...it wasn't long before there was agreement that we should go ahead with Wright, because he convinced them that if we built houses like the Van Halas had built, we would...
- Q: A little garage house.
- A: ...we would soon have a...a built-in slum.
- Q: Okay.

A: And now the...the Van Halas lived in that house during the time that Wright's house was going up. It was right the next lot.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: So they bore the brunt, I'm sure, of a lot of the comings and goings of the membership and...and of the resident architects that came. By the way, the architects also lived in this farmhouse.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: Up...up on the attic level, definitely attic rooms. Ours were lovely, airy, spacious rooms, but theirs were attic rooms, and they just constructed beds in there and...

Q: These were Lloyd Wright's students [inaudible]...

A: Two...two of them were, and one was Hockensferry.

Q: Oh. Okay.

A: [Inaudible].

Q: For the seed company. Ferry Seed Company.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: And he just wanted to volunteer his help out there. I don't think he was ever paid anything.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But...and of course he wasn't...we weren't demanding anything of him either. He just wanted to be part of it.

Q: Did you have to pay Wright?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: A retainer or...or whatever?

A: Well he was paid, but I don't know exactly...I wasn't bookkeeper at that time.

Q: Mm-kay.

A: And I was just glad the bills were paid.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But...but everyone was contributing at the time.

Q: Mmhmm. You actually got to meet Wright, didn't you?

A: Yeah. After Earl was drafted, my car wasn't used that much, our car, and...and during the war there was gas rationing. And it just happened that I was the one who had the gas rationing stamps on hand to make the trip to Wisconsin. And the...the...the on...onsite architects, they had to consult with...with Wright. And...so it was a real privilege to me...and...and Aaron Green was the...the one who drove and...and Dorothy Sundquist accompanied me. And we were instructed to bring formals, and so we were kind of excited about the whole deal. And...

Q: You went to Tal...Taliesin?

A: Taliesin.

Q: In Wisconsin.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: And en route Aaron Green showed us several of the houses in the Chicago area that Wright had built, and also the Johnson Wax building.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And I was so impressed with that building.

Q: The big columns?

A: Oh the...the columns were beautiful, but the brick was all beautifully waxed...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...and...and the elevator was...never before had I seen an elevator that was open. I think it was his idea, with the...the...the bronze bars glistened, you know...

Q: Uh-huh, yes.

A: ...and you could see out of it, you know.

Q: There's a sidewalk or something that leads up that building, too. Isn't there something...

A: Yeah. Yeah.

Q: ...special about the sidewalk?

A: And...and he inserted little brick here and there, you know, in the sidewalks, so that you just gradually get the feeling of being in the building. As an office building it interested me too, because the windows were high, and...above these tall files. And the files were col..colored differently for each department, and the furniture in each department had a separate color. So you knew there were separate departments but there were no walls to separate [in?].

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: And...and these beautiful columns flared out at the top and made a diamond shape, you know, where the circles met. Just beautiful. Then we went to the home of the editor of the Chicago Tribune.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And we...

Q: That was another Wright house.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: And that home has a sunken living room, I remember it, a huge fireplace, very long. And...

Q: He liked big open spaces, didn't he?

A: Oh, everything's spacious with him. It really is. Space is so important. Even between houses, he doesn't think the shadow of one house should fall on another, you know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And the only thing he doesn't construct, didn't construct spaciously was stairways. The stairway in that Aflack house, if you ever get over there, is very narrow. It goes down to the gully below, at the basement level with the gully.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...but that house is very worthwh...seeing. And...and I...I love the feel of the brick on the inner wall, and then this spacious expanse of glass wall to the outside. You felt like you were outdoors all the time, you know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And then the simplicity of the furniture, I like that too.

Q: Straight, clean lines.

A: Yeah.

Q: Angles.

A: And then...then there's another feature in that house, when you come in the loggia, he had a...a construction in the floor that had glass in it. You could open up and it would allow the...the cool air from...from the gully below to come up and it was remarkable, but...

Q: This was in the Aflack house?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: Now getting...getting back to the...the other house, there I noticed the kitchen was open to the living room, and the living room was definitely planned for its guests' entertainment and everything. The sunken aspect of it had floors...steps so that people...big groups of people could sit, you know. And...

Q: It's almost like today's family rooms. Kitchens before were like separate rooms.

A: Yeah, family rooms were not at all common in that time.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: That was early...the early 40s.

Q: Okay.

A: Fifty years ago.

Q: Sure.

A: And...and also with...with Wright I became of...his use of the cantilever, you know, the structural steel so that they could cantilever over spaces. And the...the Falling Waters house is a good example of that. Beautiful, beautiful structure. And...and he designed the...the overhanging eaves so that the winter sun would come in but the summer sun would be shaded. So before that the eaves were, you know, were...were all just eave-troughs on the outside of the house.

Q: Sure, sure.

A: And...so overhanging eaves, I think, were his idea. And then of course picture windows were coming in, but he used it much more extensively. And...

Q: Taliesin [Inaudible].

A: And then that kitchen design so that the woman is free, so it's open to the living area.

Q: So she's not cut off while she's cooking.

A: So she can watch her...

Q: Yeah.

A: ...children and be part of the family.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: Not so cut off.

Q: He was big on the family too, wasn't he?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: And he believed in the individual needs of each family...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...and the home should be constructed for their needs and their interests. And...I think the word is integrity, the integrity of the house, it...

Q: Mmhmm. Sure.

A: ...should be compatible with the person. And the word “functional” was so in his vocabulary too that...there was a simplicity but everywhere you saw the need for that simplicity, you know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: There was...there was a form and function. And...and...and he...he was capable of bringing beauty to the simplest forms.

Q: What was his academy like, his Taliesin?

A: Taliesin, when we arrived there, had a theater, and that’s where we went first.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And the supper was served on a...a tray that pulled down from the seat before it.

Q: Function again.

A: Like you have...like you have on airplanes now.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...

Q: Comfortable?

A: Yes. Very comfortable.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...and we were shown a movie there. And the architect pointed out to me the...the design of the...the lights that were hanging before the movie was shown, you know how they...the lights cast interesting shadows. Because of the...the way they were cut out and shaped and formed. The way the shading was [formed?].

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And he...he was interested in light and shadow as part of the beauty of things. And...

Q: Plants. Did he use a lot of plants?

A: The place was surrounded by, yeah, lots of woods and...and openness and...

Q: How about the interior of the house?

A: The interior...interior of his house, the living room...oh they...they first went in for breakfast on Sunday morning in the break...the room...and...the breakfast room had a long conference table where all the students could be around it, the architectural students.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...and I sat right at the corner of the table and Mister Wright sat right next to me. And...we...we had chatted briefly in the theater but this was a little closer contact, more...

Q: Did you feel special?

A: ...more personalized somehow. And...so I was a little intimidated by the whole thing.

Q: Oh I'm sure you were.

A: I was just young. And I forgot to open my napkin when we were gonna eat. But he graciously said, "Aren't these lovely napkins?" And...and so then I opened mine up and it flopped way over my lap, you know, and I said "They're beautiful linen but my goodness they're man-sized," you know. And so he took his big napkin and...and opened it up, put one...one corner in his collar, the two corners out to the sides and the one corner in his lap, and "functional".

Q: Functional.

A: That...that's all you...all I could think of after...afterward. I was just sort of embarrassed at the time. But...but he was easy to be with because he...he's basically a lecturer. And...and...and he does a lot of lecturing when he...when you're eating with him.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And he doesn't expect much input from the fellas.

Q: Oh no kidding. Almost like a teacher.

A: Yeah. So he...he uses those times for teaching.

Q: Okay.

A: And he's interested in all...he was interested in all kinds of things. World affairs and being Earl was a conscientious objector, he talked on that subject too.

And...our...our very good friend was a student there. And he was a conscientious objector, so Wright maybe had...had some conversations with him.

Q: His name was what?

A: Howard [Temprink?]...

Q: Okay.

A: ... and his wife Ruth.

Q: Did you...you visited them naturally while you were there.

A: Oh yeah. They showed us around the grounds and took us in where the architects' areas were. And each...each architect had their own little bedroom area where they could construct furniture as they wanted it. And...and then he took us where the huge loom was that they making a beautiful rug, with all geometric patterns in it.

Q: He did his houses complete, didn't he? I mean he did...

A: Everything.

Q: ...furniture and draperies and everything.

A: That's right. And everything was so unique, you know, and...and lovely.

Q: You were there for how long?

A: Just that...well after...let's see, I think we left at Monday morning. We...we arrived Saturday evening. And...but Sunday night is worth talking about...

Q: Okay.

A: ...because there we met in the living room, and Mr. Wright's wife came, and that was unusual for her to...to be out when the guests were around.

Q: This was in his living room, or....?

A: His...his living room.

Q: Okay.

A: Mmhmm. And they had overstuffed furniture there, with the exception of some built-in stuff by the fireplace. And...but that might have been her...her desire, you know. That he was accommodating, I don't know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But I really didn't get acquainted with her, but Aaron Green knew that she liked praline candy, so we brought some of that when we came. And...the dinner was just served on these little TV tables. And after that was cleared away...by the way, the students do all the...the prep work, ever...everything, they're taught all the domestic duties, and...so that they have a genuine feel for everything that goes on in the home. And...

Q: That's a fantastic idea.

A: Yeah.

Q: Because so many times today houses are designed without thinking of what people have to do in a house.

A: Yeah. And...and then after the food was taken away there was a program. That's why we wore our formals, because it was a formal evening. And a...a group of the students had prepared a music—I think it was a quartet number---and they had...he had a beautiful grand piano in his living room. And then after that his daughter played a couple selections on her harp, which was fantastic, and...

Q: How old was his daughter? Was she older? Late 'teens?

A: I...I really didn't get to know her well. I think she was older than I, but...

Q: Okay.

A: ... just how much older I don't know. And then after that one of the student architects had just come back from Alaska, had some gorgeous, gorgeous slides. Every one of them was...I...I just thought of them as Christmas...Christmas cards. Every one.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: 'Cause they were...such beautiful country up there.

Q: He really treated you like royalty when you were there.

A: Yeah, he really did. And it...it was a fantastic weekend.

Q: Now you...you...you...

A: And shortly after that I was going to join my husband in a mental hospital. You can imagine the contrast.

Q: Yes. Yeah.

A: It's good thing I had the experience of roughing it in the farmhouse.

Q: Now the hospital that your husband worked in as a conscientious objector was where?

A: There were a lot of conscientious objectors there, because other people were looking for employment that paid a lot of money during the war.

Q: Mmhmm. Yeah.

A: And so they had practically no care in the hospital. They were so vital there, I don't think...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: When...when I worked I was in charge of a hundred patients where there was supposed to be...with no background for it...a hundred patients on the women's semi-violent, untidy ward.

Q: Oh my.

A: And I was alone with them so much, and there was supposed to be one attendant for every eight patients on this ward.

Q: Where was this now?

A: That was in Connecticut.

Q: Connecticut.

A: Norwich, Connecticut.

Q: Okay.

A: Now there were some other people...there was a nurse on the floor, but...but very often I was alone. And that particular ward was beyond me. I...I couldn't tolerate it very long. I don't know whether it was two weeks or two months, and...and I had to ask for a change.

Q: Now your husband was working with another ward...

A: He...

Q: ...at the same time [inaudible].

A: ...he was on the men's most violent ward.

Q: Oh Lordy.

A: And he worked in those wards there, and in Ohio, for four years.

Q: Did you go to Ohio too with him?

A: No. I became pregnant when I was in Connecticut and the last stages of pregnancy I went back to my home.

Q: This was which child?

A: David.

Q: Okay. You...when you say you went home you...

A: To my parents.

Q: ...mean back to the coop. Oh to your parents?

A: To my parents. Yeah. And...and then after David was six months old, Earl was able to transfer to the hospital in Ohio, and he had met a very fine couple there, who were also COs. And he was a civil engineer and had done all...all kinds of great work, you know.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: Oh yeah. Carl Schirmer.

Q: Okay.

A: And we lived with them then, for better than two years.

Q: In Ohio?

A: In Ohio.

Q: Okay.

A: And they became very dear friends. They are still my dear friends. And he became the...the head of the civil engineering department at Ohio University later.

Q: Mm-kay.

A: And...but there were a lot of high-caliber people in the...in the CO group. And I...I really felt privileged to be with them. And...

Q: In the meantime....

A: But they had strong convictions too, like...like back at the coop they...when...when they joined the coop they had strong convictions that they wanted to help each other build homes and...and...because they had the three month layoff in the summer, it...it made sense to use that wisely.

Q: Did you keep in contact with the people here while you were away?

A: Yeah. In fact at Christmas time I remember they sent us a...a box of food, because the food was so bad in those days. And...and...and I remember my mother-in-law sent us canned meat, and oh my goodness you just didn't get meat, you know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: Especially in an institution.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...so anyway, then when I came back...oh when I was with my mother, the...there were several families living in the farmhouse and...and...and...and they brought...bought a baby buggy and loaded it with baby things for me. And...

Q: Oh isn't that nice?

A: ...so they had a shower for me. Yeah. I...I really appreciated that.

Q: So building still hadn't progressed that mu...there still...

A: No.

Q: ...weren't many houses when you were gone.

A: That's...that's right. Well, Wright's house became a real problem during the war because they couldn't get any materials

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And the fellas were all being drafted.

Q: Or were working long hours?

A: Or were working long hours. And it was just not a very constructive period, that's for sure. And...but...but windows and piping and...for instance, we were supposed to have a sunken garden outside. The...the...the walls were...were...the exterior walls were built up within forms, and then they graded the ground up to the window level, which was prob'ly about four feet up.

Q: Almost like one of these earth-sheltered homes they talk about...

A: Yeah. Mmhmm.

Q: ...today. Okay. They go overhang.

A: And then it...yeah, big overhang and...and massive pillars at the entrance. And...it...it...I would have loved to have seen what they could have been. You know, it was more primarily a flat-roofed house. So a couple layers to the roofing now. And...

Q: Then it was never finished.

A: It was never finished. It...the rains came and the winds blew and...and knocked the house down, you know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And Mr. Brzezinski, I understand, salvaged a lot of the wood in its...in the roofing. For the construction of his house. And I don't know whether Fred Hiller's house was the first that was constructed. Fred didn't try to incorporate much of Wright's ideas. In fact I don't know what in his house could be accredited to Wright's ideas. But Brzezinski did, and he put in floor heating and pipes, and picked up big...big expanses of window.

Q: That was a novel idea for then.

A: And it...it was a tri-level house.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And he had a good-sized family, and they had a basement area, you know. And adequate space for their family. And...and a...a gar...not a garage but a shelter, what do they call it?

Q: Carport.

A: Carport, yeah.

Q: Okay. That house is which one? The address.

A: It's at...at the corner of Wright and Tawas now.

Q: Okay.

A: And they had newspaper coverage. Perhaps I can get you a picture of that.

Q: Okay.

A: And...oh, but when...when the Wright house was being built, we really had newspaper coverage too.

Q: Did you have a lot of people?

A: Oh it was a swarms of people came out. But they were interested in low-cost housing, you know? And they...and they knew Wright's name, you know that...I don't know how many of the people were architectural engineers that came out. But I remember sitting there with the plans spread out so everybody could see what it was and explain what was going to be happening, and...

Q: It was going to be a large house, wasn't it?

A: Well, it was only for Mr. Worth and his wife. So there were only the two residents, and they were...they were chosen the first to be built because of their age. And also they were going to turn the house over to the coop when they died.

Q: I see.

A: And...but of course they had to make other plans then.

Q: You don't remember which year they started the...the Wright house, do you? By any chance?

A: Uh...

Q: You must have still been there. You weren't...you weren't with your husband yet.

A: We moved into the farmhouse in '42.

Q: Okay.

A: And, you're right, he wasn't on the scene maybe until the end of that year, I guess.

Q: Okay. Earl went into the army...

A: Earl was drafted...

Q: Or into co-o...conscientious objector.

A: Yeah. He was drafted in about August, I think.

Q: Okay.

A: Of '42.

Q: So they did...they must have started building the house before you left, because you saw the people coming and all...

A: Oh before I left....

Q: Yeah.

A: ...they were going at it good.

Q: Okay.

A: But there was no roof on.

Q: Okay, now you came back...when...when Earl came back, do you...do you remember what year that was?

A: What was that, '45?

Q: '45, '46?

A: Yeah.

Q: And then you started to build your house.

A: Oh no, we didn't...we didn't start right away.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: Oh my goodness, what...what all did we do during that time? I...he...he had so many skills, I know that he was busy all the time, helping somebody doing

something. And there were still roads to be put in, water lines to be put in. And they dug the...the second well, the water well.

Q: Because there was nothing out here.

A: No.

Q: Nothing.

A: So, to...to accommodate Brzezinskis' house, they had to dig the well. And at that time they just dug with shovel. The whole line was dug by shovel. And then they tried to hook up...well, Hillers' house had to be hooked up too. So there was a lot of hand-shoveling, and I remember the little children, my kids in particular, we got sand buckets for them and little shovels, and they were out there doing their bit.

Q: When you say cooperative, everyone cooperated.

A: Uh, yeah. And...and...and we used to have good times together, too. The...the potlucks were real fun. And we'd sing around the campfire, and the hoot-owls would hoot. One of my friends from the city came out and asked me, "How can you stand that hooting?" you know. But too me it was nice, you know, the country.

Q: You had animal...did you have farm animals then?

A: Eventually we had quite a few.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: We experimented with quite a few.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: We...we...the...our boys really learned to...to do their chores, by feeding chickens and rabbits and ducks and geese, and in their turn we tried a little bit of everything. We even tried to raise pigs with the...with the skim milk that Twin Pines was just dumping, you know, the return milk. And...and then we had a cow that was fenced in by an electric fence, and...and was totally oblivious to the poke it got, if it got one at all. And wandered out onto John R one day and...

Q: Oh Lord.

A: ...and out...out through the...out through the ditches and the mud, and everything chasing that poor old cow. So that was about the end of our cow experience. And the...the Van Halas lived in the farmhouse at that time, and they had a horse.

And the Van Halas had a goat that they were milking, and they raised a lot of chickens. They had their own eggs. And...I got to take this hat...and...

Q: You said Earl...?

A: The...the others didn't go in for any of the wildlife...the farm life.

Q: You said Earl had a lot of skills. He was a...he was a very socially conscious person, wasn't he?

A: Yeah.

Q: In addition to just this cooperative idea.

A: Well I...I think it probably started when he was fourteen, when his father died. And...and there was no welfare system, so he realized the importance of the community, you know, to the welfare of their family. He was the eldest of four...

Q: He was the man of the house.

A: He was the man of the house. And it was a very poor house. And he still remembered it with embarrassment because it was so...they were quite well off before his father died. But it during the Depression that the...the...everything was sold for peanuts, so they hardly had money to buy this parsonage. And it had been built a hundred years before, so it had just had simple light fixtures in the center of the room. Just one light, you know, and the plaster was going to pot. So he learned to...to do wiring in that house, and...and eventually he put in...well, it wasn't until after we were married that he installed the...the water pipes...

Q: Plumbing.

A: ...from the well, and...and interior plumbing.

Q: Hm.

A: And...and he also put a basement under the house after it was standing there, you know. And...so he became confident through the years, just by, as a child, picking up parts for the bicycle. He was so proud that he got one bicycle together...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...with stray parts and...But then when he worked for Twin Pines, there he was...he signed in for maintenance work. And he really got a lot of licenses during that time, to do all kinds of work. And where now in factories every man just sticks to his own skill, it's hard to find a well-rounded maintenance man.

Q: Mhmm.

A: So when Twin Pines folded—he worked there for twenty-five years—he was employed by Parke-Davis. And they needed a foreman at Parke-Davis.

Q: My Dad worked for Parke-Davis too.

A: Did he?

Q: Yeah.

A: In Rochester?

Q: No, he worked down in Jefferson. He worked at Rochester...

A: Oh.

Q: ...before he retired.

A: I see. Uh-huh. Well your Dad might have known my husband.

Q: Very possible. Yeah.

A: Earl was the afternoon foreman.

Q: Okay.

A: And...and by that time he had licenses in refrigeration, boiler-operating, welding, you know, all...I don't know what they call all these licenses, but he could do electrical and plumbing...

Q: He was really interested in worker's rights, wasn't he?

A: Yeah, he was. When...when I first met him, we were working at Johnson Milk Company, and the...and the working conditions there were so bad for the...the men; it was fine for the women but the men were treated shabbily. And they couldn't count on their days off. There was no overtime pay. And they were expected to work long, hard hours.

Q: Carry heavy loads.

A: Carry heavy loads to the point where one man dropped it when he was...was bringing in, I think it was four cases he was expected to carry, full of milk. And...and Mr. Johnson had no heart for that condition at all. And...so there were three men that decided they wanted to form a union, Earl was one of them. And

Johnson immediately fired them when he found out. But he was ready to take a gun to them, he was threatening with a gun, you know. It was a serious situation for them. And gradual...eventually, he did...he signed up the whole plant in another union.

Q: Really you're kidding. Oh no kidding.

A: And I was working in the office at the time, and I didn't particularly feel any need for joining the union, you know, 'cause we were getting along fine in the office. But...

[End of Tape 1, Side One]

A: But when...when he found out that...that I was going with...seeing Earl...

Q: Okay.

A: ...and Earl was coming to my house. When he found out where I lived, then he started cruising the neighborhood. And...

Q: This is Mr. Johnson?

A: No, this is...this is Earl.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: 'Cause he had time off when he was fired, you know.

Q: Okay.

A: And one of the milkmen knew which depot I went to, so he just hung around there until I came out. I was so surprised to see him. But...but it was company policy not...for the girls not to mingle with the plant men. So I told him, "Well I...I can't be seeing you, you know." And...and then he...he wanted so much to...to be...to be with me, and...so I said, "Well, you can come to church with me. He can't object to that." And so for a while we went to church together; it wasn't long that it wasn't enough. So we...we got married August. It was about a year and a half after. And we had forty-eight years of good marriage....

Q: That's terrific.

A: ... before he died

Q: That's great.

A: And we raised our three sons. And had five grandchildren. So we had a good life all that time. And also, we...we built our house without borrowing money.

Q: And he completely designed your house, didn't he?

A: Well, it was mostly my design.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: And he...he was reticent about starting. Because he had this idea that he wanted a sandwich-type concrete wall, with insulation in-between the two layers. And it was a solid in...insulation. So he probably had to have time to...to organize his own thoughts first.

Q: Think about it.

A: Yeah.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...and how he was gonna install the windows, and all the reinforcement rod that had to go into concrete. And...and...

Q: It's poured.

A: And then for the electrical he had to have tubing, you know, in...in the concrete. And...and...so there was a lot of forethought that had to go into it. And when I got the basic layout in mind, we...we wanted to be able to move in the earliest possible time, so basically we just were interested in getting the outer walls protecting us...

Q: The shell.

A: ...and getting a roof over our head. And...

Q: Did you put any of Frank Lloyd Wright designs in your house?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: Things that are similar to things that he might have done?

A: We tried to catch the spaciousness, and our...our living area is all along the south side of the house because the sun makes a big difference to me, in having light in our house.

Q: You can see it from Thirteen Mile; the big picture window is what, your living room?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: Now we didn't built...have as much picture window as some of them later had, but it was a big job for Earl to mount that by himself. And that was one...one thing that really scared the wits out of him. And...but we do have nice overhanging eaves, and we do have that openness between the kitchen and the living area.

Q: How about the ceilings?

A: And the cathedral ceilings give more spaciousness to the room.

Q: Okay.

A: And...and also that made the construction simpler. And basically the...the disadvantage with our house is that it has a central wall...central hall going the length of the house.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But it gives access to the bedrooms to the north, and the bathroom, and then to the south we have our living area.

Q: How many bedrooms?

A: We were gonna have four, so we put in four doors, but they turned out to be so small we just made three out of it.

Q: Okay.

A: When we saw how...I...I...think we just had become accustomed to spaciousness. And, you know, it just didn't make sense to cut it up any more. But those walls at first, we had...we had no partitions for that, see. We used furniture to separate the rooms then and we had a...an upright piano that separated the living room from our bedroom and...and then the dresser separated the bedroom from the boys' area. [Laughter]. The only room that was finished off was the...the...the bathroom, as far as the...the wallboard.

Q: Now how many children did you have at this time?

A: Three.

Q: Three.

A: Mmhhh. But in the process they...they were very interested in what was going on...

Q: What year was this?

A: ...they had a lot of exposure to their father's work. David was born in '43 and Hugh was born in '48. And Hugh was about...I think he was about three years old when...

Q: About 1950, 51?

A: We didn't move in until '53, so....

Q: Okay.

A: ...the building process probably started about '51 or '52.

Q: Okay.

A: And Earl dug his own basement with a coop tractor.

Q: That was a job too.

A: Sure.

Q: Poured...the whole house is poured...

A: Yeah.

Q: ...concrete.

A: Yeah. Yeah. The basement level, of course, the...they poured the concrete on the basement level, with the mixers, you know.

Q: Mmhhh.

A: But on the...on the upper level, that had to be poured by hand. And we had our own cement mixer because it was a...it was a slow...slow process. We had to do it slow. And I remember mixing that stuff myself, you know. And...and I had a...a constructive part all through the years, but we saw progress all the time. Every week there was something new that had happened. And when I think of people just paying off debts, I feel so sorry for them, you know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: I really do. And...and they want their houses so fully furnished, and...and go into debt for it, you know. Well, when we moved into our house we were debt-free, so we took a nice vacation out to visit my parents out on the West Coast. We had a new car and no debts.

Q: Oh is that terrific.

A: So...so...we...we were blessed, there's no question about it. And Earl had good health and strength, and...and the children were healthy, and so was I. And, you know, when you're...when you're young, things are possible that aren't always possible in your old age.

Q: When did you become the bookkeeper for the coop?

A: That was after the war, and...and when the Wright house failed, there were...there were addit...when...when Wright came in, there were some members who dropped out.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And they started paying them off. When...when Wright project failed, there were some members who dropped out. And so we were kind of at a bare-bones state then, and I...I don't know just how we survived. But anyway, the one who had been the head bookkeeper then pulled out.

Q: Do you remember the name?

A: Well, then it was Mrs. Smith.

Q: Okay.

A: But they were living in the farmhouse at the time.

Q: Okay.

A: And...and they...they pulled out their equity in a rather disreputable way bec...it was...it was theirs, but we were spacing the payments so everybody was being repaid something, you know, all the time. And...

Q: Earl was on the board at this same time, or not?

A: Not at that time, no.

Q: Okay.

A: In fact, the first time I...I worked on the books, they'd been turned over to Mr. Van Hala, because the Smiths had moved out. And...and he wasn't a bookkeeper and...a businessman, but not a boos...bookkeeper. And...so they asked me if I would audit the books, and I audited them at my mother's house, I was still there.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But then when Earl came back, then I was...I...I became the bookkeeper. In fact it might have been before that.

Q: Did you do this at Johnson's Milk? Is that how you got...?

A: I did the...yeah...I

Q: Oh, I see.

A: ...bookkeeping was my favorite subject...

Q: Oh, I see. Okay.

A: And I've...I've done bookkeeping for nonprofit organizations at two different churches. One Christ Church Cranbrook. And I've really liked working there.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...and then I...I worked for a credit union, and...but my job at Johnson Milk gave me confidence. But I knew I was a good bookkeeper when I hired in there, but I wanted to work in the store. But in no time at all he had me in the office. So anyway, yeah I did have a background. But when the coop started, they had a very capable accountant by the name of Bill Jermand.

Q: Okay.

A: And his bookkeeping was beautiful to look at.

Q: They actually had an accountant.

A: And...yeah. Well, it...he was a member.

Q: Okay.

A: And...

Q: Did he...did he build a house?

A: So...no, he never did build a house. When Wright came on the scene, he dropped out.

Q: Oh, no kidding.

A: And...and that's when Ms. Smith took over. And she was capable too. And...but there were lot of funds going. You know, if you wanted to put your...well...there was kind of a basic guideline for equip...the equipment fund, you know, if we wanted to buy a...the tractor. They had to contribute to the...the...the equipment fund. But...but it was added to their equity.

Q: Did you talk about this at meetings? Did you get together and say "we need a tractor; let's..."

A: Oh yeah. Yeah.

Q: "...we'd better get some money, and everybody's portion will be..."

A: Yeah. The road was one of the original things that they felt they needed to put in.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: And one of the men worked at a factory. And because...a foundry, rather...and the slag that was thrown out normally became the base for our road. And it...it's still a good solid area and...fifty years later. And it's never been paved since then. So...but the city did put a...a coating on it that...that really lasted long. But we didn't have too heavy a traffic going over either.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And right now there's twenty-two homes. And right now we...we...we are no longer an incorporated coop.

Q: When did it break up?

A: Well, let's see, we realized that we had to break up when...

Q: Legally break up.

A: The...the incorporation, you mean?

Q: Yeah.

A: The liquidation procedure.

Q: Right.

A: I don't the exact date. But it's quite a few years ago now.

Q: Okay.

A: And...but the taxes got prohibitive for some of the people to keep up with, you know.

Q: For this whole big area?

A: And...yeah. And we were paying the taxes on all the unsold acreage besides our own personal property.

Q: You had a total of a hundred and twenty acres?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: And...and so it...it became evident that we should sell. So...some of it anyway. And then when the...when the college was looking for property...

Q: Oakland County?

A: They were...they were...Oakland Community College...

Q: Okay.

A: ...was really looking for property. And we thought we'd love to have a college by us. And...and when they purchased it, it was one outright sale. And in the meantime, then, our attorney drew up papers transferring all the...let's see...yeah, we formed what...what was a...a...a water trusteeship, because we were gonna continue to use the water system. And so they elected a group of men to be trustees for the water.

Q: Okay.

A: And then everything was transferred to them. And it...it took an active trust and faith, you know, for everybody to do that.

Q: You...you don't remember the original men in that board, do you?

A: I can get that name for you, but I...I...I...his name escapes me.

Q: The attorney?

A: And he...and he was a great attorney. He...

Q: Then how about the men in the original water board? Did you remember their names?

A: Oh yeah. That...Earl was the main one because he had the skills to maintain the well.

Q: Okay.

A: And I think John Brzezinski was one...

Q: Okay.

A: ...and probably Hill...Hiller...

Q: Fred Hiller?

A: ...I'm pretty sure. Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: So it was...and then I...I kept the books for the water. And...so when we...when we liquidated, part of the hundred dollars equity was transferred to...to the...the trustees...and...from each member. And then the balance was distributed among the whole membership. And it seemed like a windfall to us, and it seemed like such a relief to get that done. We'd had the...we'd had the property appraised, but shortly after that, when it was rezoned for, you know, light industry, the price skyrocketed where the city wouldn't have given us that zoning, you know. They had to make to make it political. So...so anyway...but...

Q: Did you have trouble figuring out your boundaries when you do this? Did this land have to be...

A: Oh we had....

Q: ...divided in some way?

A: ...we had a lot of problems with surveyors. We had five professional surveyors for...in various times.

Q: Mhmm.

A: And they all came up with different answers. And when Madison Heights did it, it was worse than ever. But see what...what the original property deed called for was a quarter acre and a half acre and...no, not ha...quarter section and a half

section. And so it was three-quarters section, really. And it didn't actually have a metes and bounds description, you know, the angles and all that stuff...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...on it. And...so this...this whole mile square here was relatively unplatted, you know. And so each time it seemed to start off from a different point and get a different answer. So twice our...our deed was changed. Once just to accommodate our septic field in the back. And the next time everything was moved forward. No...everything was...no, how was that? Anyway, we were left with...with...without the back area, so they added a few feet to us on the back. And then this last time they had to add a few feet on the front...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...because they had crowded into our driveway.

Q: Now your holdings probably weren't getting any bigger, were they?

A: No.

Q: Little by little they were eking...eking the pieces away.

A: Yeah, it's just the weirdness of the...the surveys [accented second syllable].

Q: Mmhmm.

A: It was really disgusting. So when that last survey was done, I said, "Now how can we be sure that these are gonna be permanent?" Because that constant juggling was nerve-racking.

Q: Is that when you got individual deeds?

A: Oh no. We had...we had deeds before that.

Q: Okay.

A: And everybody knew where their lot lines should be. Well, when the assessor's platt came, that was supposed to describe each...

Q: Parcel.

A: ...parcel. And...and...it was...they were just out lot so-and-so, or...or rather lat so-and-so. Ours is Lot 18. And...but the strange thing was that on our...where...on the west...west side of Tawas the property descriptions moved back. On the east side of Tawas they moved forward. And not just a little bit, but

considerable. And we were accustomed to having a foot or two, you know, as...as variance, but...anyway. So, I...I...I demanded, "How are we gonna know that this is gonna be permanent?" And then he said, "We put down ma...steel marker, steel monument." So I know where my steel monument is. And you have to find it with one of those metal detectors, but it's there. And, so anyway, that part, I think, is over the hump. And it encroached on our property much more than I anticipated, but...

Q: Mhmm.

A: ...in the front, out on the roadside.

Q: Did you have a hand when...when the incorporation was broken up? Did you have a hand in setting up the deeds, or the...?

A: I...I was bookkeeper at that time.

Q: Okay.

A: And...now...now...now there was such a massive amount of deeds that it was done by the attorney...

Q: Okay.

A: ...in his office.

Q: Okay.

A: At...because they...let's see...they didn't have to turn over their personal deeds, though.

Q: Okay.

A: But there was...there were a lot of legal document.

Q: Mhmm.

A: Everybody had this agreement how the water situation was to be handled. And there were things about that that we should have changed, because they called for monthly billing and if we had billed them monthly it would have been fifty cents, you know....

Q: Mhmm.

A: ...for almost everybody. So most of the time it...it would run twenty-five dollars a year.

Q: You're still using the same well, aren't you?

A: Yeah. We just have the...the electric expense...

Q: Water still good?

A: ...it's constant. Yeah. Water hasn't changed. And...and it's tested regularly every month for pollutants. And then for other things it's tested by the state occasionally. And so far we've been doing fine.

Q: Do you call someone out to maintain the pump on a regular ba...or the...?

A: No, our men ha...had the ability to do that...

Q: Okay.

A: ...but...but it's gotten to the point now where we might have to call outside help.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And if the su...submerged pump...we bought a standby submerged pump in case that goes, because that's been down for quite a few years. But it's still functioning beautifully, so we're not about to pull it up.

Q: City wanted to put water in, right?

A: Yeah. We're the only area in Madison Heights that doesn't have sewer and water. But because they're acre sites, the...the septic fields are adequate. And some of the houses are having some drainage problems when the frost is in the ground. In...in the spring, you know. And...so the one family that wanted to build were turned down. But...but they had it tested at the wrong time, you know. And...so anyway, I've...I've learned so much through this whole experience, and...and relations with people.

Q: What was the family life like in the coop?

A: Uh...

Q: It must have been a good place to live.

A: Yeah, it was. And we had quite a few Catholic families, and their children went to the Catholic school, but the others went to Lamphere on the corner. And so they would walk together and fool around the creek together, you know, and we had a big sandbox by the farmhouse when we lived there. That was a joy and a torment, because all the kids would gather there, you know, and we soon got

away from cheap toys for our kids. We had the...the tractors and the trucks that were good heavy duty ones, you know...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...and...and the children...I...I think they had some really valuable experiences because the...the adults had to get along and the children had to get along. And we mingled so much in the potlucks and everything, so we all knew each other. And we knew each other's children. And so it was a safe and secure area for them to be in, no matter where they went.

Q: You would say the cooperative idea was work, then?

A: Oh I...I value those years very much. I really do. I'd...I'd like to see more of that kind going on. Now as people moved out, there was less and less. And...and when...when we dissolved the corporation, we had no need for meetings, and the water didn't give us that much problem. And with new people, then, they hardly knew what the water system was about, you know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And so they don't have the interest that the old-timers had. And...and it bothers me that when I walk down the street I don't know who's living in that house. I...I know that we've got their name on the water register, but...

Q: You don't know who they are.

A: No, I don't know them personally.

Q: You had plans for an area...

A: On...on...on the other hand it's a friendly community. I can get acq...

Q: Still?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: So I...I can approach people and...and make myself acquainted with them.

Q: Do you still feel as if you're in the country? Or not as much?

A: Yeah, I...I appreciate the city that's grown up around us and the facilities we have so readily available, you know, but I think of...of the oasis we're living in. It's

- really...with everyone having that much land around them, it's just a fresh air spot [inaudible].
- Q: Very uncommon. Yeah.
- A: And...and I...I just think, gee, that's the way people ought to live. You know, this compact city life is not according to right.
- Q: You even had a...plans for another area off of Thirteen Mile, didn't you? Nursery...
- A: Oh yeah. The park area was...was supposed to have a coop gas station, a coop grocery store, and a coop nursery.
- Q: That never came about, though, did it?
- A: No, mm-mm. When Wright was out the...the plans were out. And after the war--where they intended to help each other build houses--after the war, the families were more demanding, family life was. And...and people had pretty much crystallized their own plans for their own house, and...and a lot of them had money to go ahead on their own. Some of them hired a lot of the labor on their house, and just did a little bit themselves. And...and...so it was a totally different picture. But...
- Q: But still cooperatives?
- A: There was...there was still a...a good community feeling. And we would have...we would have get-togethers on holidays and stuff. But that has sort of petered out too. With all the influx of new ones.
- Q: What was this area out here like?
- A: Now see a lot of the homes are being bought up by single people.
- Q: Now?
- A: Now. Yeah.
- Q: Not as many children.
- A: I don't...I don't know if it's being manipulated by the realtors or not, you know. because they...they still would like to see it turned to sewer and water, you know. And whether the state has any input there, but I know that when the state inspector was...he was a Mr. Laneer, was a very lovely man, and he used to come to my house to...to get the state sample of water. And...but he wanted to know how many residents there were. And...and he was concerned, because we don't

- meet the code, the state code for our...our well. But under the grandfather clause we're...we're entitled to keep it.
- Q: Because you're already there.
- A: Yeah.
- Q: Yeah.
- A: And it's functioning well and there's no...no real cause for alarm, you know.
- Q: You had the opportunity to be developed not too long ago, right? Someone wanted to develop that area.
- A: Oh...
- Q: Or you could have sold...
- A: Yeah. And we...we got together as a group, and they've talked it over to a considerable extent.
- Q: Mmhmm.
- A: And there were quite a few who were kind of eager to move at this point, you know, up in years....
- Q: Mmhmm.
- A: ...and health failing and stuff. And...and the homes, some of them were too big for the...with the family gone, and so on.
- Q: Because they are large homes.
- A: And...so everybody could sort of rationalize moving. And then if...if they got a good price for it, you know, then they...
- Q: Make it even better.
- A: ...were willing. But to find anything comparable, that was a different story.
- Q: Mmhmm.
- A: And...but anyway they...they did agree that for the good of the city, it might be well. We couldn't stop the city from growing. And there are...there are some lots that are inaccessible for...for building now. They won't allow them to put septic fields on it. And...and so these people are...can't build on their lots, too, I

- think. And...and so for concern for them too. You know, we had to think about everybody. And...so they drew up a...an agreement that everyone would be compensated first for double their...the assessed valuation, and then everything else would be divided on a footage basis.
- Q: Footage of the house?
- A: Footage of the...each property.
- Q: Okay.
- A: And e...even the Nazarene Church was going to sell out.
- Q: Oh, you're kidding? Oh.
- A: Yeah...yeah. And if that new house at...on Thirteen and...that....
- Q: Right by the Water Park?
- A: Yeah, that isn't...that isn't a...a member even. They were...they were thinking of selling.
- Q: So that would have been quite a large parcel.
- A: So...so...yeah. And also, when the...when the assessor's platt was drafted, we were offering the city two acres for doing the work under the...the plan. And it was for their benefit primarily, so that they could assess us, you know. And in the process they gerrymandered around like you wouldn't believe. And...and then they wanted four acres. So they had to have four acres, big enough for a football field. So four acres of city property were then gonna be involved in this sale also.
- Q: Mmhmm.
- A: So the city had an interest. And one woman wouldn't sign the...the agreement because she didn't have a house, and she felt the whole total amount should be divided equally. I could make some private comment on that. I don't want it on record. But...
- Q: Okay. So when you have...when you've run into the opportunity where you...where you could sell, you all agreed...
- A: Mmhmm.
- Q: ...you had one person that was a stumbling block.
- A: Mmhmm.

Q: So it didn't through this time.

A: So it didn't go through.

Q: You're not anxious to have it go through, obviously, if you like living there.

A: I...I...I love living there.

Q: Yeah. And quite a few of the people do.

A: And even in the winter, you know, the snow sparkles for such vast areas around you, you know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...I don't know...when the trees get the snow built up on them, they're so pretty and the...and the ice formations, you see such a vast amount of it, you know. It...it's really spectacular. And...and then in the spring, when ever...everything starts to blossom out, our fruit trees all have different-colored blossoms, you know [inaudible].

Q: Yeah, you've got quite an orchard.

A: Yeah, we do. There's...

Q: Grapes?

A: I...I think there's seven different kinds of apples, and five kinds of pears, and fifteen varieties of grapes. And...and we have black raspberries...

Q: All bearing fruit.

A: And we had a lot of red raspberries, but they're...they're gone now. And the...the blueberries aren't doing so well. But we had a sizeable area for a garden, and I'm not too sure what...what's going to happen with that now with my husband not on the scene. If I could find a rototiller that would be easy for me to do...

Q: Your house looks very nice.

A: Did you ride by...

Q: Yes.

A: ...the place?

Q: Very nice.

A: I was so pleased with the freshness of the paint.

Q: It looks very good.

A: Yeah.

Q: The blue is striking.

A: Yeah. And that...that grape vine is from Earl's vines.

Q: See, I think the...I think the green dated it a little bit...

A: Yeah.

Q: ...but the blue is really stri...you even put a new light on, a brass light?

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. It looks good.

A: Yeah. I...I like it. It...it was a real uplift to me to get that done. And my son helped me on the high part of the house.

Q: Well you indicated that some of the people had let their property go a little bit because they were under the impression it was going to be sold.

A: Yeah. And...and it was supposed to go down to the ground, you know. Mhmm. That would have been a traumatic time for me.

Q: Now when I went through the other day, everything looked very nice.

A: Yeah.

Q: People must have been doing...they must have been working on their houses recently, because they all look very nice...

A: Yeah.

Q: ...really.

A: Yeah. Yeah, thi...this...you know, they were just holding back. What's the point in investing thousands of dollars if you're...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...if it...if it's gonna be knocked down?

Q: You told me about...we talked about all the different types of people that lived in the coop subdivision and how it was a good place to live. Tell me something about the...the children. How did some of the children wind up? That lived there?

A: Oh yeah. There...there was a group called "Quest." They were...they wanted to cooperate to a fuller extent than...than the bulk of the people did, in that they wanted their children to have the same care, you know. And...and they wanted to do more things together. They all went to the same church.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...which was Central Methodist Church downtown. And had an excellent minister there, renowned. I've forgotten his name now, but anyway....And the McClanahans kind of spearheaded the Quest group. His...his interest was keen in coops. And...and he continued to follow the credit union coops through the years. And they've...they've moved....since they moved from here, they've gone to the Appalachia area and started coops there, you know, and really brought those poor people up. And...but in the process too...oh...oh they've been in many states.

Q: You were part of a movement that was actually starting up right about then.

A: Yeah, that's right.

Q: Okay. Coop gas stations and credit unions...

A: Yeah. And...and Fred Thornthwaite, who started our coop, is the one who...who started the senior citizen building on Edwards Avenue.

Q: Oh no kidding.

A: And he was the manager for that for quite a while. And he was...he was the one that took all the government financing headache, you know...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...and all that stuff. And...and got people coop-minded. And...so he was...he was a good organizer. I don't know just what his health might be, but he was considerably older than I was. And he's an uncle to a young Fred Hiller, who's...well, he was...he...he was a brother to Faith Hiller.

Q: Okay.

A: And had a lovely mother. And...but getting back to Quest, the...the program they had at the Methodist church down there was fantastic for character development. It...it...that was a stro...strong thrust. In fact, they were trying to develop a character education program that would be suited for the public schools.

Q: Oh I see.

A: And it was very scientifically done. The people who participated in it had to examine the work that was...the studies that were ahead. Tell how their children related to that theme. And then at the end, to make a comparative study at the end of a quarter. And then they found out which lessons were effective in doing something, and where the family responded and where the children responded. And so it was hard for the teacher. It was hard work for the parents.

Q: And many of you were involved in that, right?

A: I...I was involved in it for a while, but I was alone with my children so much, and Earl had to work Sundays, and taking them down there was just overwhelming to me. Hugh was just a toddler at the time, and not even potty-broken. So it...it was too much of a chore for me. But...

Q: As a whole, though, the children from your whole area...

A: But...but...

Q: ...came up very well. Okay.

A: ...the best children now, all five of them are...One...one's a brain surgeon, another is a doctor, a holistic doctor. Another one operates a father's steel business, the grandfather's steel business in Pennsylvania. They're all over the country.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And another one is on the West Coast doing ecological study in the Seattle area. And boy that place...I was out there and I can't get over the changes that happened there since the World's Fair was there. He said that they've stripped down so...people saw the greatness of that area, and it's just been such a massive influx. And...and the houses are becoming bumper to bumper, you know, all these condos and apartments, and...It's a totally different picture. And the trees are disappearing. The climate is really changing.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: When my mother moved there—that was back in the early forties—just right after I got married...and my father retired and they moved out there. And the rainfall then...they called it rain, but it was just a beautiful mist. You could walk out in it, and it was just refreshing. And...and when it snowed, they didn't have any salt on the roads, they didn't have ra...any road-grading equipment. And it's mu...it was mountainous areas, you know. But they just closed down for a day. By that time, it would have disappeared.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: Now they have heavy snowfalls and heavy rains, and...and now you maybe heard about that one lake that...where the water rose so much the floating bridge was...

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah. And that was a major thoroughfare, you know. And so it's definitely a climatic change that the world has to be aware of.

Q: Mmhmm. People overdoing and overpopulating.

A: Yeah.

Q: And...

A: But it was...the transition started to happen when they had the World's Fair there and people got exposed to it, you know. And...but my...my...I have two brothers that live out in that area and I was just...visited last year. I was dumbfounded.

Q: You told me...you told me a story the other day that I think sums up the cooperative spirit.

A: Before we...we get off...off ecology...

Q: Okay.

A: ...I often think of...of the good farmland that was here.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And it troubles me that the dense cities are built on good land. And we have so much sub-marginal land. Why can't they be out there, you know?

Q: Yeah. It is something, isn't it?

A: But...but leave the farm country so we've got food for the table, eventually, you know.

Q: And farmers are actually going out of business now because they're not making enough money to...to keep going. Selling off their land bit by bit. That's a shame.

A: I...I don't know. I think the...the national planning for conserving the land...they're very concerned about wetland right now...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...and they're legally they're doing things about that.

Q: And that's a good thing.

A: And yeah, it preserves some of the wildlife.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But whether that can be converted to farmland later, I don't know. Maybe it can. But anyway...and anyway, we're...we're definitely changing times. Now getting back to the children, they...not only were the McClanahan children great, but the...there was one young man that is now a...a chaplain in a prison.

Q: Okay.

A: And one is a Catholic priest.

Q: Okay.

A: And one is a Methodist minister. And...and one is a school teacher, and...

Q: Your boys?

A: No...no they're his friend. And my sons, one's a metallurgical engineer. And one is very much into auto mechanics. From the time he was in high school he was working on the school buses.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: That...that's what kept him in school. He didn't want to continue school. But they let him work on the school buses, and...and...but he was very adept at that kind of stuff. And...and David is in plumbing, and has built his own home. Two...two times now. His first home was one that was moved to make way for the expressway when [Interstate Highway] 696 was coming through, and he...he

utilized one of those houses. My husband helped him dig a new basement. And...and we established a new house then.

Q: Sounds to me like some of the values of the coop were definitely transferred to the kids.

A: Oh definitely. Yeah.

Q: It was a good place to live.

A: Yeah. And even those that went into the medical field, you know, the kids used to monkey with chemistry together. And I had chemistry stuff there that I think about, and it kind of made me leery, but they seemed to know what they were doing. But one time—I don't know if you heard about young Freddie Hiller—he built some kind of an explosive thing. Could've been really serious, but it was...it was minor. [Laughter]

Q: Now you told me the other day...

A: Oh and...and then also when the slag was on the road. It that what you're thinking of?

Q: Well, tell...tell us that story too.

A: When the slag was on...laid down first, the kids of course were attra...attracted to it, so they found it was hand-sized so they could throw it. And...and when they were having a free-for-all, well one slab hit David in the fa...in the head and...and he came into the house a bloody mess, and [laughter]...But it was just a...a little three-inch ga...gap. But...oh not even a three-inch, about an inch and a half.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But they had to take stitches in it to close it up. So that was...but there was very little of that hazardous kind of play.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: They...

Q: Just good fun.

A: Yeah. Yeah. And then they had so much construction going on all the time, you know, and things to learn. And...and...and bits of wooden stuff to...to play with. And, you know, they saw the use of the materials, and...Now when a house goes

up it's pretty much forbidden territory for kids, but not when we were...not when we were building.

Q: You told me the other day about a...a gentleman that had a problem, and the people in the coop got together to help him. Tell...tell us about that, because that to me...

A: Yeah, it was...

Q: ...embodies your cooperative spirit.

A: Yeah. Because they...they were...they were socially minded, you know. They wanted to build up...do what they could to build up the nation, really. In their own little spot, you know. And this family in Detroit heard about the coop somehow, I don't know who...The Jasper family this was. They lived in Detroit and in a rough area, and had two children. And so we just thought we were doing them a great service to help them come live in the farmhouse inexpensively and...and...

Q: Get out in the clean air.

A: ...get out in the...yeah. And they were very happy at first. Then she started to get some grandiose ideas you wouldn't believe. Totally unreasonable. And I...I think it...it caused their marriage to really go downhill. It was beyond what he could cope with, you know. And...and she was very difficult for us to get along with. She...she could have one friend very solidly at one time. And nobody else counted. Just that one buddy-buddy.

Q: Mhmm.

A: And...and she sort of circulated through the whole coop. And...and became intimate friends with each one in turn. And I remember when she took on me, you know, and she was pregnant at the time, and so I wanted to help her sew some...some of her own dresses to save money. And I helped her get...get going on it, and I loaned her my sewing machine. And she sewed those dresses and benefitted in...in a lot of ways, but eventually I needed my sewing machine back. And...it was...it was...I had my own knitting piling up. You'd think I had asked for the world. And that was the end of our friendship. So she was a hard person to...for even the adults to deal with. And she was actually cruel with her children sometimes. I...I don't even like to tell what she did.

Q: Mhmm.

A: But it got to the point we couldn't stomach it any more.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

A: Her...her little infant child, just...just learning to walk, was going to the car. And she was faking it all...all along the way. And the toddler could hardly walk. And another time I saw her throw her child across the room. I...fortunately, it was the couch. I don't know if she was aware where she was throwing the kid. But she just had a wildness about her that we...we were really at our wits' end.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And it didn't seem like safe people to have in the community. And the provisions of the...the constitution was such that we could...if people didn't pay their bills or...or they were undesirable, we could vote them out. We could pay them off and vote them out. And that's was the one case that we did that in.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But we did have to pay back a lot of people who wanted out, you know.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: For one reason or another. And one...one was the...a man who wasn't suited for building his own house. And they didn't have the money to hire...hire it done.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And I think that caused the lot of marriage breakdown, a lot of trouble in their family. They just had a roof over their head, and...and things just weren't going well. And...so he became an alcoholic, and...I...I got to know the family reasonably well, because I took the...their little girl to Sunday school with me. So I had some contact with the family. But as time went on, then, his wife was going to get a divorce from...and his drunkenness, it was...he had no money. And...so he was drinking to the point that he had bleeding ulcers. And then we at the coop saw that he got in a hospital and was cared for. And then when he was discharged, he came back, and when I called at his house, he was just sitting huddled in the kitchen, with just the cook sto...the stove to heat the house. And no food. And it was really pathetic. So I wrote a letter. I knew the community didn't want that to continue. And it said that the children would be coming around with their wagon and...and bushel baskets to fill with food. And...and the cooperation was beautiful, and he was so grateful, and somebody else came and filled his oil tank. And then we contacted the wife, and she was on her way back. And the whole family got back together again, and things really reshaped. Just how it was all handled, I don't know, 'cause I didn't know them that intimately.

Q: This is what cooperation can do, though.

A: But, yeah, it can really transform them. Oh I...I had the minister counsel with him.

Q: Oh my.

A: And when he told me that he'd been reading Sunday school papers to his daughter, I...I...that encouraged me.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...so the minister prayed with him, and he went...got relocated in Hazel Park, and went to a church right close to their home. So, you know, that was ready to shout "Hallelujah", you know. But then somebody else bought that house. And...and that's where the music teacher lives now, Yvonne Schilla and she's a very desirable neighbor.

Q: Mrs. Nanninga, this has been a thrill. This...this interview has been one of our best, and I want to thank you for coming out today to do this. We appreciate it. And the time is now 3:05.

A: Is it really?

Q: Yes it is. Thank you very much. The time has gone by so fast.

A: Yesterday and today.

Q: Thank you.

A: I shouldn't mess [laughter, inaudible]

Q: Thank you very much. We appreciate it.

A: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW