

BILL HUFFMAN

Interview by Bill Miles
March 25, 1991

TOPICS:

Politics

Transcription by John W. Weigel
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[Transcriber's Note: The interview of Bill Huffman is preceded by repeated recordings of Bill Miles describing the Madison Heights Public Library. During these recordings, the first movement of Antonio Vivaldi's Spring Concerto is audible in the background.]

A: Back in...must have been 1955, when I first came to Royal Oak Township, we, to my amazement, I...I go to a township board meetings, and it's...four members are black and four members are white. And did not realize of course that...that the property lines [inaudible] were drawn. And over the years of course the city of Royal Oak and all the other communities...Oak Park had pulled away from the Township and became cities, and so on the advice of the attorneys and the people in our area, it was agreed to try to do the same thing. My first encounter into the political land was when John Michrina came to my house and Ted Krenn and Virginia Solberg and says, "We're circulating petitions to become a city!" Thereafter they had another township election and George Horkey was re-elected and the old Horkey farm of course ran through the entire center of the city with Bill Jahnke, when they owned the farm where the incinerator is today, and the Hudson and K-Mart stores. In any event, after five elections and five attempts, we finally became a city and Lloyd Ferguson was our...elected as our first mayor, with Charlie Edwards and Gin Solberg and John Michrina and Ted Krenn and George Sargeant was on the Council. The majority of all are dead now of course. And I became president of the Homeowners Association, and was appointed to be Justice of the Peace of Royal Oak Township and Madison Heights, which I served one day and resigned. Later then I was offered the treasurer's job and I decided to run for Council instead. I was on the Council a couple terms, and I ran for mayor and was elected mayor. And over the years that we were able to at least widen Ten Mile Road and put some sufficient lighting, water and sewer. I can remember Dick Marshall, city manager, says that we should go up on Thirteen Mile and buy this acreage for potential city hall and library, but we don't have any money. And we can't ask the people for any money, 'cause they wouldn't give us any. The issue...issue would not pass the voters.

Q: Why did they go up to Thirteen Mile?

A: It was...it was all vacant.

Q: Okay.

A: And John R was mud street...

Q: Okay.

A: ...and this was all vacant, and it was cheap property. And thanks to the foresight of Harry Young and...and Dick Marshall, they were able to see what was going to happen.

Q: Okay.

A: So, anyhow, we bought the property on credit and paid so much down. I then was also elected to the Michigan legislature in 1960. And I had stepped aside in behalf of my good friend, Bill Broomfield, who was the youngest speaker of the house. And the congressional seat finally became...we got two seats. George [Dundare?], the congressman for Oakland County for years and years...

Q: He's from Royal Oak.

A: Right.

Q: Right.

A: Now we had enough population, and George was getting old and he retired. We wanted his son to have his job but he couldn't make it. So it was between Bill Broomfield and I. I stepped aside as a Democrat for Bill Broomfield, my dear friend, who was Republican. In any event, a few years later I went to Washington, I says, "Bill, I need...I need about twenty million dollars to cover a big stinking ditch going through the center of Madison Heights known as the Red Run Drain. But more importantly, I need a grant for a city hall and a library," Bill, which you'll be interested in.

Q: Okay.

A: And a police station and a court on Thirteen Mile Road.

Q: This was what, about '62? '61?

A: Must have been well before that. Must have been...I'm guessing now...'58...I'll have to go look at the...

Q: Okay.

A: ...ceiling and when it was built.

Q: Okay, well this was built in '6...finished in '64

A: All right. Bill, being a good friend, went to work and got us the first grant in the state of Michigan. For to build a municipality's library, city hall and a fire station. He got us two and a half million. We then put the vote to the people, and the people turned it down. Turned down the library, city hall and the fire station. Twice. So I then established a building authority, which is short for circumventing the...the vote of the people. Sometimes people don't really understand...it's...it's a terrible thing for a politician to say, but since I'm retired I can say it now. Sometimes people do not really understand the issue which they are voting upon and can see ten or twenty years ahead. Not that I was a great visionary, but other people around me were great visionaries.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: So Lamphere School then had about forty-five, fifty kids. But we knew they were going to have to have a library in the...the city. 'Cause Royal Oak Township took our library and all of our books. And the water fountain and the police cars and the chairs. And we were...we had a...we had a net worth of about a dollar and a half when I was running for the Council. In any event, Bill got us the money, Bill Broomfield. We sent it to the Building Authority. Over the objections of the mayor and the council. Oh, I was mayor. Over the objections of the Council, and over the objections of everybody else, and we finally got [the show?] to start. We then would lease and rent the library back to the city, and the city was making the payments indirectly. It's a subsidized lease is really what it was.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: But it was in the best interests of the people. We had a population then of about ten, twelve thousand, and it was growing leaps and bounds, and we had to have these services for the people.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: So it turned out very well, and we got all the facilities. And...and then I devoted most of my time to state and national politics. I'm very please with the repor of the...of the...Madison Heights had a turbulent career, and I was a lot responsible for that. I did some bad things, and we were always in a turbulent society. And the last five or ten years, as you know, we've settled down very, very well.

Q: Settled down.

A: We have a stable community now and a stable mayor and a council. Nobody's throwing snowballs anymore. And it's really quite peaceful. And you can really now begin to see the results of this continuity of the mayor and the council and manager and so forth.

Q: Okay.

A: I was instrumental in hiring Dorothy Lents as Assistant Clerk. Now she's a city manager as you know and has done a magnanimous job. Albert Green and all the other people that were involved with her. Pete Connors. And that's what you get when you have a responsible mayor and council and the politics, so to speak, has been...

Q: Put on the side a little bit.

A: Yeah, put on the side.

Q: Yeah.

A: So considering the turbulent start, those were bad...bad days, the early township days [in the city?]. We were pressured by the unions not to incorporate 'cause they wanted to organize and unionize all the employees and what have you, and we had to resist that. And as such we had a regular war out here between the unions and the local politicians and state politicians. I...I can recall having turned a governor of the state of Michigan around and not allowing him to come into Madison Heights because of the...some of the things that were happening at that time.

Q: No kidding.

A: City income tax.

Q: No kidding.

A: My good friend today, Don Swings.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And this was...these were very turbulent years. It's always like that when you're starting. And, of course, Madison Heights was the whipping boy because you couldn't find anything bad about Birmingham or Southfield or Oak Park at that time, so it all had to be about Madison Heights and Hazel Park.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And...but they did...done very, very well. Both the communities have got themselves well established now and, thanks to John Michrina. You might wonder where the name came from, Madison Heights. John Michrina went to Lansing to register the name. And it was already Madison, Michigan, so he had to add on the word "Heights", and somebody says "Lows", "you should put Madison Lows". For a swamp. It was a swamp at that time.

Q: Okay.

A: And so John Michrina is primarily responsible for the name and contributed enormous...John Michrina was the first city manager, treasurer, librarian, police chief and fire chief, and building inspector. He did a lot of jobs with no pay. Son later went upon our police force, Bernie...

Q: Bernie.

A: ...Michrina.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah. And Ginny Solberg contributed enormously. She had the only restaurant in town, Eleven Mile and [Greig?]. She made the only doughnuts in South

Oakland County. And it was the meeting place back then that Mayor Tom Welsh, Mayor Art Miller from Warren and Mayor Bill Huffman, Madison Heights. And Mayor Johnnie [Kazarn?] from Hamtramck. That's how I got into politics.

Q: [Inaudible]

A: And of course [Kazarn?] died and his son's now the mayor.

Q: Mmhmm. Yeah.

A: John, Junior. But we would all meet there at Ginny's doughnut shop. Ginny's and Art's doughnut shop.

Q: Mm. Okay.

A: All the various people that over the years. We...we failed to get the schools involved. We...we tried to consolidate back then, with Madison and Lamphere School District, which would've really been in the best interests of the people. And naturally two superintendents didn't want to give it up, and it's...it's just extremely hard. But one of the...the pitfalls of the...my political career was trying to explain to people who live north of Twelve Mile, "We'll give you ten thousand to educate your child; if you live south of Twelve Mile, you only get five thousand." And sooner or later the state will consolidate those two districts. They...they have to. But it should have been done years ago when there was [inaudible]. And we did not pay enough attention to the schools, and assisting them, until later we got in the legislature and to Dr. Wilfred Webb, and Dr. [Val Valad?], we were able to do a lot of these things.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: I remember the two Myers boys when they were playing high school football...

Q: Jack and Jim?

A: They both made all-staters, you know.

Q: Yeah.

A: They both made All-Americans, you know. And I've been very impressed with the family all these years. Helen Hennesy taught school there forty some years.

Q: We did an interview with Helen.

A: Did you?

Q: Yeah.

A: Helen was my neighbor.

Q: Okay.

A: Our babysitter. We love her. And Mrs. Jackson up here taught here forty-seven years, and that's her son, Lon Jackson, a prominent attorney...

Q: Yeah. Right.

A: ...in this area today. You know, his mother taught here forty-seven years when they only had one school on Thirteen Mile Road. Had thirty-two or forty-two kids back then.

Q: [Inaudible].

A: But it's been a good community, and we've...we've done a lot of good things now, we've had all the roads widened...

Q: When did you start doing roads, basically? You became a...

A: Well, we got some state money and we finally widened...Ten Mile is the first road we widened, because back then we had all the enormous race track travel...

Q: Okay.

A: ...and we received no revenue from it.

Q: Okay.

A: So we finally got some money through our legislatures and congressman for the Ten Mile, then we finally got the money to widen John R, then put modern some lighting; of course now it's really done properly.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And that was about when I...I went to Lansing. I was instrumental in getting money to widen Thirteen Mile Road and Dequindre, and the parks that you have over there, and the golf course.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: Back in the old days we had pork barreling. As chairman of the Appropriation Committee, I was able to bring a lot of money into Madison Heights. I got tremendous grants for the library, for the city hall, for the golf course, the swimming pool, the parks. I brought the park for Lamphere School District, which is now located on Thirteen Mile Road.

Q: Madison Woods?

A: Yes. [The whole acreage?] And...

Q: No, not Madison Woods. Suarez Woods.

A: Right.

Q: Yeah. I'm sorry.

A: It was named after George.

Q: Yeah.

A: George has been a very good mayor. He's stabilized the town. The council is very dignified today, and that...that's the way the people want it. It's the way it should have been twenty-five, thirty years ago, but...

Q: When you're growing, it's like a little kid, I mean...

A: Well, we used to have a hundred people run for every office.

Q: Yeah.

A: Now I noticed the last time it was hardly anybody running.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And it's...I don't know if that's good or...I think you need to have a little competition now and then. As good as the library is in Madison Heights, I think it...every five years they ought to have a rejuvenation.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: John [Wilders?] taught me this. What have I done good in the last five years and what can I do to improve it?

Q: Mmhmm.

A: And how can we get a decent money's...how can we get these learning materials, these books into the kids hands in our schools, 'cause the schools' libraries...

Q: Yeah.

A: ...as you know are...are...

Q: Less than what they should be.

A: Yeah. Thank you very much. But we...we need to re-evaluate ourselves. And we've been a city now, let's see, what, about thirty years?

Q: Yeah. About thirty-five I think.

A: Thirty-five. Whatever it is. And...we ought to have a re-evaluation. This book that you're doing here, every elected official past and present should be brought into this. Our school administrators and...Our school superintendents now, Jim McCann and Larry [inaudible] both cracker-jack guys. They're sharper [than hell].

Q: Mmhmm.

A: Very bright. And they should be brought into this re-evaluation. What can we do to improve the Lamphere schools? What can we do to improve [inaudible] hall and the court system and all of these kinds of things? And improve our services to the people in...in a manner, which they would appreciate?

[tape recorder turned off and on]

A: Okay.

Q: This interview featured Bill Huffman. It was made on the 25th of March at approximately 10:00 a.m. in the morning. Thank you very much, Bill. I appreciate it.

A: [Inaudible]. Thank you sir.

Q: Okay. We'll see you.

A: Let me know if I can help you. Sometimes...

END OF INTERVIEW