

VOICES OF LANSING: AN ORAL HISTORY

GENEVA KEBLER WISKEMANN

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Lansing, Michigan

Transcript of an Oral History Interview

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Geneva Kebler Wiskemann

PREFACE

This transcript is the product of an interview conducted March 6, 1990, for the Lansing Public Library Oral History Project, by Joyce Moffett.

Signed, dated agreements of release and biographical information accompany the original cassette.

Transcribed by Patricia Siggers
Lansing, Michigan

July 31, 1990

VOICES OF LANSING

Oral History Project

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8 Geneva Kebler Wiskemann

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This is an interview with Geneva Wiskemann for the Voices of Lansing Project, by Joyce Moffett. It is being conducted at Lansing Civic Players Firehouse on March 6, 1990, at 11:30 in the morning.

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Geneva is a close personal friend, but I knew of her reputation long before I ever came to Lansing. Many people called her the "First Lady of the Capitol," because after the fire at the State Office Building they moved the State Library service center over to the capitol.

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JM: Geneva, we had started to talk about you as the "First Lady of the Capitol": That you, after the fire, provided two years of information there at the capitol to anybody who came in and needed information. It must have been an exciting place there at the capitol with the legislature, and the governor, and everything that was happening around the capitol. Can you tell us about it?

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GW: Yes, right after the fire the only place we had to serve the people of Michigan was a former tourist bureau information center in the capitol. In fact,

if you walk in there now, Joyce, you can see the
32 stain on the floor from the walnut that was in the
wood that formed the counter where we served the
34 people.

It was a great laboratory for learning for me
36 because we served the public. It was the only place
where we could contact the public at first, after the
38 fire. It was where people returned books or picked
up books. We also served state agencies and all the
40 personnel of state government. I was not the only
person that worked there. There were other
42 employees, but I think I worked there the longest.

At first we were open full time there. We had a
44 Teletype there that was connected to other Teletype
systems across the United States, and we were able to
46 get books on inter-library loan. That was the only
way we had, before we had OCLC in the modern
48 technology that we have now.

We opened that Teletype service up to state
50 agencies, too: We moved prisoners by it, we
communicated with the DNR (it was then the Department
52 of Conservation) offices, and served state government
through that Teletype service. It was very unique
54 and novel, at that time. It was one of Mrs. Fyan's
ideas of how to continue to give service to the

56 people of Michigan, even though we were in a state of
disaster after the fire.

58 JM: What year would that have been?

GW: 1951-1952: The fire was February 8, 1951.

60 JM: I love your stories of the fire; how you told how you
had to move entire shelves of books that were soggy
62 from the water from hoses.

GW: It was such a cold day that the water literally froze
64 in the air before it hit the building, and the
building was covered with ice when the fire hoses
66 actually went away.

George and I were up there (quite illegally)
68 about five days after the fire was out, taking
photographs. I loaned those photographs to the State
70 Library, and they have disappeared; which was a
disappointment because they were wonderful 35
72 millimeter photographs of the actual destruction. It
showed one mezzanine floor fallen through into the
74 other with file cabinets in a pit; a pillar burned
off because it was so hot that even the cement
76 burned. It was a tragic thing.

The Historical Commission records were
78 [destroyed], of course -- The Archives was there,
on steel shelving. The materials that were there at
80 that time were still wet. It was all ashes, gray

ash, but they were sculpted out of that ash. There
82 were piles of books, books on shelves, piles of
manuscripts, sculpture; all kinds of things, but they
84 were just perfect in ash.

As our bodies walked by, the currents of air
86 from our bodies would make the ashes fall down, and
it was gone forever. Even the 2 X 5 cards that told
88 what archives were there were completely charred like
totally charred pieces of toast within the metal file
90 cabinets, so we have no way of knowing what truly
burned. Everything that was on that mezzanine floor
92 was destroyed.

JM: I saw just one picture, and I know what you're
94 talking about.

GW: It was a traumatic experience. When I went back to
96 work, I wore a steel helmet and boots. We had
squads; each staff person had their assignment. We
98 were still a Red Cross emergency at that time.

I got a crew of five or six men from Manpower,
100 and they were unusual men: You know, they drank hair
tonic on the job and pinched your behind. They were
102 the men who helped me, and my job was to examine
books for wetness and move them off of shelves and
104 into boxes.

They had steel conveyor units set up so we could
106 move the books out of the building. After we got the
wet stuff out; then of course, as the building began
108 to dry and they turned on the heat -- then everything
molded. Nothing dirtier than books, so whole
110 handprints would show up in yellow and red and green
on the covers.

112 The books swelled. Sometimes you had to use a
crowbar to get them out of the shelving, because the
114 paper expanded. There was a situation in the
basement where we had unique sets of federal
116 documents where the books expanded so much that the
wood shelving that they were in was actually
118 splintered; pushed the wood right out of its
fastenings. It was a tragic area.

120 JM: You were with the State Library for over ten years,
so you saw the change then from what it had been,
122 through what happened in the fire and then on to its
new home.

124 GW: Eventually, I've lived long enough to see the new
building. I didn't think I was going to live long
126 enough to see that. They were in temporary housing
in the 300 block of Shiawassee Street where the
128 Lansing Community College Arts and Sciences Building
is now. It was a very old building.

130 I remember at one time, I would work part time
 there and part time in the Capitol and carry books
132 back and forth, in addition to having deliveries in
 the morning and the afternoon, so that we served
134 people on telephone demand.

 That building was interesting. I remember it
136 had a curly maple floor on the second level, but it
 was so old that if they moved a file cabinet on the
138 second floor, the people on the first floor got up
 and moved away from the area.

140 JM: < Laughter > They weren't that confident that it was
 going to --

142 GW: No. No, it was not built for its use. Of course,
 they were there for a long time before they moved out
144 to East Michigan Avenue, and from East Michigan they
 were able to move to the new building: A whole new
146 world of library science and service now, but
 certainly years of struggle.

148 JM: You've always played a key role in the community;
 there with the library system, preserving history,
150 but your roots are very deep in the community. There
 are streets named after your ancestors; you've been
152 here that long.

GW: My mother was a Howe, and in Clinton County we have
154 Howe Road, which was named for William R., Great
Grandfather.

156 JM: Then your Kebler roots were the German.

GW: Yes. They came much later, 1854. They moved from a
158 farm in Ingham County out here on Harrison Road, down
to Clinton County in Eagle Township and established a
160 farm home there.

JM: And you still remain in Clinton County, with your
162 farm, which is Howe Road?

GW: Well, we still own a small section of the original
164 farm, but I live in Watertown now, which is the home
my husband had -- his residence when we married; so I
166 still end up in Clinton County. But it's nice living
in the Capital region, because county lines
168 disappear. I'm pleased about that because that means
you can work anywhere. You don't have to say you're
170 from a particular county. You're from the Capital
region. I think that's much more important.

172 I'm so delighted that in the mayor's State of
the City address this year he talked about a regional
174 council for the city which means they would have
representation from Bath, DeWitt, Eagle, and
176 Watertown, and all the townships of Clinton County,
which are so affected by what the mayor and city

178 council in Lansing does. That's the way the money
 comes down; it comes down regionally, and I think
180 that's a step in the right direction.

 JM: I think it is too, because we need representation.
182 We all feel the outcome of what happens in Lansing,
 so we should be represented in that outcome.

184 You were president of the Historical Society of
 Greater Lansing, but again, this wasn't just Lansing:
186 It was the greater capital area historical society.

 GW: Right. That society has used the boundaries of the
188 Lansing Community College School District for their
 boundaries, if they had any. They never really had
190 any boundaries, but we had representation from Ionia,
 Shiawassee, Clinton, Ingham, and Eaton. It was
192 Greater Lansing, and it was the parent of many small
 historical societies: Eaton County's, Clinton
194 County's, Grand Ledge, Eaton Rapids, Mason.

 We were also the parent of the Michigan
196 Genealogical Council because that started as just an
 interest group, a sub-committee in the historical
198 society; but genealogists are more inner-directed
 than historical people. Historical people, you know,
200 are born with their arms wide open. Because they
 grew with their own special interest, then they went

- 202 off like the good child they were and became
 independent and followed their own challenges.
- 204 JM: What were the goals of the Historical Society here in
 Lansing?
- 206 GW: To preserve the history of Lansing and serve as an
 educator, I believe, and make it fun for people. We
208 never intended to accumulate materials, because we
 had the State located here; the State Museum, as
210 poor as it was at that time, and the Michigan State
 University's Museum. There have been several others
212 that flowered during the Bicentennial era, and we
 have even more now than when the Society was formed.
214 We had the public library that was accumulating
 books. We in no way wanted to be competitive. We
216 wanted to send it to established co-lateral
 collections. I still believe in that.
- 218 JM: You managed to save the records of another
 organization, the Chamber of Commerce, and I've heard
220 you talk about seeing those buildings being
 bulldozed. Can you take over from there?
- 222 GW: The Chamber of Commerce had a red brick building. It
 was a classic piece of Lansing architecture, which
224 was bulldozed. It was right next to the old Prudden
 Auditorium. When they took down the Prudden, they
226 soon took down the Chamber of Commerce Building.

228 The records were still in the building; and they
 sold off the woodwork. The woodwork in each room was
 different. There was a curly maple room, and a
230 cherry room, et cetera.

 I know that Rolland Stebbins was able to acquire
232 the bound volumes of The State Republican and some of
 The State Journal that were in there. Many years
234 later we were able to use that collection to fill in
 a gap in the microfilm file that is at the State
236 Library, because we found it there in Rolland's
 basement.

238 The records were actually bulldozed under with
 the house, and one day a man who worked for the
240 Highway Department called me up and offered to sell
 some materials. I asked him where he got them, and
242 he said, "Well, I'm just picking them up from the new
 soil where they're putting in this new state
244 building," which was then -- would be the Mason
 Building.

246 Sure enough, when you walked over there you
 could see papers still sticking up from the surface,
248 blowing in the wind. So he went down at night and
 literally dug up records, papers, and I acquired by
250 gift from him sixteen feet of records of the Lansing
 Chamber of Commerce. That included photographs and

252 scrap books of clippings and some correspondence,
which were really the records of the Lansing
254 Businessmen's Association, the predecessor of the
Chamber of Commerce: Lots of interesting material on
256 the development of The Wolverine Way, the
contributions of Mr. Prudden to the construction of
258 the highway between Lansing and East Lansing, so that
it would be cement (harder than mud).

260 I thought it would be a very valuable collection
that he was interested in selling. Most of the
262 material (I think he probably still has some of it,)
he sold for the letterheads and things of that kind;
264 but we were able to acquire some of it and we have a
finding aid for that. It's usable. Sad that it's
266 only a remnant, but it was indicative I think, (of
the time) of the business community's approach to
268 history.

JM: You mentioned The Wolverine Way: I've never heard
270 that expression before. What does that refer to?

GW: It was the development of the highways. For
272 instance, they went by on old US 16 from Detroit to
Grand Rapids, which is the old military highway of
274 territorial days; but to get that paved, they had a
project called The Wolverine Way. As they went by
276 farms, farmers would give money to the fund to get

278 this made into a passable year-round, cemented
 highway, a two-lane highway.

JM: And we call that highway what, now?

280 GW: It's now Old US 16, or Grand River Highway.

JM: You said something else that I think is important,
282 too. You talked about, you had a "finding aid." In
 your job with the State, you were able to publish
284 over twenty (I believe) of these finding aids to
 different locations. Can you talk a little bit more
286 about that?

GW: When I went to the American University to learn
288 something about archival administration, I saw these
 very usable finding aids that the federal government
290 did, and I really patterned what we did in Michigan
 on those. They were individual monograph
292 publications of a brief history of the agency, in
 respect to the records that were being described. We
294 had a series title; the dates they covered; and a
 unit number which could have been one picture, one
296 reel, one foot, one inch, or a thousand feet, or ten
 thousand reels; and one paragraph succinctly written,
298 giving a brief description of the record, what it
 was, basic content, and the arrangement (just a
300 precise and thoroughly objective description,
 bringing no prejudice whatever to the language).

302 We put those together and did them for the
 censuses, the military establishment records, and
304 some of the social welfare records; the most often-
 used tools. These were very cheap, we're still using
306 them, and I think there's a place for them in the
 services to the public.

308 Since then, when Martha Bigelow came as
 director, we were able to publish a guide to the
310 state records; not local records, state records. By
 then I was at home taking care of my mother, and I
312 didn't have the freedom to do that for her, but they
 used this whole file cabinet of typewritten finding
314 aids that I had done; unpublished, as well as the
 published ones, to compile into this publication. It
316 is very usable. You have to make things available.
 It's no good on the shelf unless people are using it.

318 JM: Right. You were very valuable again in editing and
 writing the forward to Justin Kestenbaum's book, "Out
320 of the Wilderness."

 GW: Yes, I did that for Justin. It came at a time when I
322 was recovering from surgery, and I didn't think I did
 very well with that. I worked hard on it, but I
324 didn't think it was that good. I remember Eugene
 Wanger read it, and he called me up and said it was
326 VERY good. That made me feel better. < Laughter >

JM: I agree with Eugene, right!

328 Then again, you came up as editor of "LANSING:
Capital, Campus, and Cars" so you've been involved
330 in publishing many times.

GW: Well, I enjoyed doing that, because I got to work
332 with you and I was really "historic advisor" I think,
more than an editor on that.

334 One of the things I did when my mother was sick
was to -- I had to be up a lot at night as well as
336 daytime, and I took the names off of an Ingham and
Livingston map (land ownership map) and compiled
338 those and got those ready for publication. Not very
creative, but it's been a usable thing because the
340 map is rather scarce. The one in the State Archives
-- each time you unroll it, more of the map flies
342 away. The pieces fall off the backing, so with that
publication they were able to retire the original and
344 not expose it to such hard use: So there is a place
for that sort of thing, although it's not my favorite
346 kind of work.

JM: You were able to steer us into some really
348 interesting directions to find places not only where
women were instrumental in history, but instrumental
350 in some exciting fields, like flying. You maintain

that contact with people like Babe Ruth and women
352 aviators.

GW: Oh, I love to fly! < Laughter >

354 JM: I picture you with your red hair in those days.

GW: Days like this, I have a hard time staying on the
356 ground.

JM: The stories must be great that you've heard with
358 Babe, too.

GW: Oh, yes. There are a lot of great women story-
360 tellers, and Babe's had an interesting career in
aviation. We do have a tape recording of her in our
362 "Voices of Clintonians," which was an interesting
project I worked on. We were able to get a CETA
364 grant for Clinton County, and we acquired the only
county government or any government supported oral
366 historian in the State of Michigan, to this day.

Before CETA went out we hired a young lady who
368 had experience in English, from Michigan State. Of
course, she was starving to death with that kind of
370 credentials. You know, there was no place for her if
she couldn't get a job teaching; and what else was
372 she to do? So we used her for our interviewer and
transcriber. She got some of them transcribed.

374 We have a good cross section of people
interviewed in Clinton County about how they felt

376 about their county and about their rural life as it
 changed into an urban, even a megalopolis, community
378 that we are going to have. I felt very happy about
 that, because she moved from that right into a job at
380 Michigan State University, and went on: So it was a
 good example of what CETA was supposed to do.

382 JM: Train people.

 GW: Train and expedite people into their most productive
384 occupations.

 JM: I'm glad you mentioned the "Voices of Clintonians,"
386 because the next thing I wanted to bring up was you
 and your role in this. I understand that you're the
388 person who is most instrumental in oral history in
 Michigan. You were president of the Michigan Oral
390 History Council and started our Lansing oral history
 "Voices of Lansing" project.

392 GW: Yes, "Voices of Lansing" actually grew out of one
 that we were talking about at the REO Museum. I had
394 thoughts of that even when I was president of the REO
 Museum. It was to go out and get the unique story of
396 people involved in the development of transportation
 productions in the Greater Lansing area. My problem
398 with that, Joyce, was that I had an interview with
 Scott Radford; and the morning I was to interview
400 him, he died. To this day I've never been able to go

back to that project. I gave some workshops, and I
402 think they were well received, and they were an
interesting audience; but when people found out how
404 much hard work it was and how much time it was going
to take on, you know, a lot of the volunteers fall
406 away. I'm sure that we will get back to that.

With the History Committee of the Chamber of
408 Commerce, we were able to revitalize the idea and
including the Public Library, under the capable
410 direction of Joyce Thomas, we've reactivated this and
called it the "Voices of Lansing."

412 JM: What is the state doing, by comparison? When you
were president with the state; what is happening
414 throughout the state in oral history?

GW: Michigan does not have an Oral Historian; does not
416 have an Oral History Office, as does Kentucky,
Tennessee, or Texas, for instance. Many, many states
418 have either state supported or offices in higher
education. I think of Baylor University as one of
420 the leading places, in Texas. They have Oral History
Centers that receive government funds, but that's not
422 true in Michigan. In fact, the only official oral
history office is a one-man show within the
424 Department of History at Northern Michigan University

in Marquette. Without Russ Magnaghi there, that's
426 it.

That's why the Michigan Oral History Council was
428 formed, was to fill this gap. We had a meeting at
Michigan State University. Maury Crane was very much
430 involved with that. We heard people at the Kellogg
Center throughout the session saying that they had
432 these valuable, wonderful tapes, but no one was using
them. Well, no one was using them because nobody
434 knew they had them and they weren't available.

It would be a great service if we could match
436 the researcher with the resource, and that's the
prime reason for our beginning. We still do that;
438 with an inventory of tapes that are available, and
with transcripts and indexes, and releases. When we
440 first began, we found that people were not getting
those necessary releases. Sadly, we always have to
442 start with that education in our workshops that
without the release, it's a waste of your time.
444 < Laughter >

JM: You've always been my mentor in oral history. Teach
446 me again: Teach me how these could be used. Use
your vision to tell me where and how these could be
448 marketed and utilized.

450 GW: Oh! how many hours do you have to hear about all the
uses? They're a great resource as a historical
452 document, because done properly, they ARE a historical
document -- no better than any other traditional
454 source of history: They have to be corroborated and
corroborated and corroborated. They also are unique
456 because they fill in gaps, it's true, but they also
have all the spontaneity and the poetry of people --
458 the sound of their voices, the regional dialects.

The other day on PBS, I heard some people from
460 the Eastern Seaboard, particularly from Vermont, who
were complaining about all the new people that were
462 moving in and how the sounds of their language was
changing. They resented this very much: "These
464 people don't even sound like us." Well, of course
they don't; they're not from Vermont; that wonderful
466 sound! < Laughter > All of those things show up in
the tape. They are very human things.

468 Some people conduct oral history for fact
(whatever that is), and other people conduct oral
470 history for the humanistic aspects, or what happens
to people when they talk about their firsthand
472 experiences with another person -- who also
influences the interview.

Then there's interview for therapy. It's very
474 rewarding, very therapeutic sometimes, to get your
thoughts in order and talk about things. You hear
476 people say things they've never articulated before,
maybe hadn't even known they thought about before.

478 JM: I believe that. I believe that we're always a
sounding board for each other.

480 GW: So it's used a great deal for students and what is
called journalistic/cultural journalism; using the
482 community as a classroom, for great scholarly
research of all kinds, and for therapy.

484 Sometimes I think the interesting thing is that
it's used for reasons that are far beyond those that
486 are anticipated in the beginning; for instance, the
records accumulated by the survivors of the
488 Holocaust. One of the first groups to use those
tapes was the United States Department of Justice,
490 who came in searching for clues to Nazi war
criminals. That was a far cry from what was
492 anticipated.

JM: I could think of another as finding relations between
494 the survivors, helping them find people that they
might have lost; at least know of their past.

496 GW: I have a friend who did interview a survivor of the
Holocaust, and she said she could not transcribe it:

498 She could not hear it twice. She told the family
this, and they said: "Oh, that's alright. We just
500 want Papa to say it, and he can throw away the tape
if he wants to, and throw away the pain with it." So
502 there's lots of different uses.

JM: Good idea. Right; I can imagine.

504 You've always collected books and collected
maps; they're all so much part of your interest, and
506 then you added those interests to your husband's
interests of collecting guns and printing presses.
508 You've got quite a collection now; tell us about it.

GW: I bought my first book -- I think it was a Clinton
510 County History, from Ted Foster. Theodore George
Foster was the amateur historian who hit professional
512 standards. He bought a lot of books, and I bought a
lot of things from Ted through the years, and George
514 bought things from him.

 We knew that family in segments: We now know
516 their grandchildren, but we were friends of Ted's a
long time and after Ted was gone we got to know his
518 wife, Margaret (Peg), very well. She was a great
storyteller. We seemed to know each member of the
520 family individually, which has been interesting.
I've got a lot of things that relate to the Foster

family, and eventually those will go back to the
524 family.

JM: This is the Foster, Swift, Collins & Coey Law Firm?

526 GW: That was Walter, who was a brother of Ted.

George [Wiskemann] collected Michigan-made guns
528 and was an avid reader. His interest in history and
mine fell together, and he began to buy county
530 histories and atlases to find the gunmakers and where
they were. It just kind of went on from there; but
532 buying history materials -- we had a good time doing
that, through the years.

534 JM: One of George's presses is currently at Michigan
State University?

536 GW: No, that wasn't our press. That was a press that was
owned by the Gannett Newspaper Company. It was in
538 the public library. It had been in a parade at the
time of the Centennial of Lansing, I am told, and at
540 that time the toggle which made it an operative
Washington-style handpress, was lost.

542 For a long time it sat in the public library,
right by the elevator, and its main use was to prop
544 up posters. It was Lois and Ev Downing who said, "It
deserves better," so Everett and George traveled
546 around Michigan to find presses that were similar.
George, with his knowledge of tool and die, drew the

specifications for the toggle. Well, he died before
548 he could get it done: But now we have the toggle
made, and we moved -- with the Downings' constant
550 drive over institutional inertia -- we have it out to
Michigan State; the toggle's in place; I gave them
552 lumber, old sixteen foot maple flooring pieces, for
the floor of the exhibit. That's going in right now
554 and their staff is slowly building an old print shop,
where this press will actually be a working press
556 where they can do demonstrations.

JM: Wonderful! Your collection of posters ended up on
558 the front of Justin's book, didn't it?

GW: Oh, yes. We were really pleased that we were able to
560 share with Justin, for his publication on Lansing
history, a lot of ephemera and paper materials that
562 had not been published before. It's nice to use
fresh material, as long as it's available.

564 JM: I won't ask your age, but I'm sure you --

GW: Oh, I'm sixty three. < Laughter > I just had a
566 birthday February 15th. I'm just so happy to have
made it this far, Joyce! < Laughter >

568 JM: You're a kind of post-Valentine baby, just right
after Valentine's Day.

What's your first memory of Lansing, that you
572 can remember? What did the world look like to you
when you can first remember Lansing?

574 GW: I didn't come to Lansing very often. We didn't shop
here. I remember coming to Lansing with my sister,
576 Bette, who was older than I. We would occasionally
come to town and shop. I have one of those dime
578 store pictures of me with my hair all curled up, in a
little peach colored dress. I always had a good time
580 doing things with my sister. Because she was ten
years older than I, she waited a long time for me to
582 grow up to do things with her.

I remember coming to Lansing at night and seeing
584 the Capitol lighted up, back when it was covered with
little, small light bulbs; not flood lights like it
586 is today. It was very distinctive at that time
because the whole dome was strung with lights, and
588 that was very impressive.

JM: I remember one of the first stories I heard was about
590 towers that were in the middle of the streets, where
the policemen stood, I believe, or fire towers or
592 watch towers? Did you ever see those?

GW: No, I never saw that. I remember there were still
594 streetcar tracks: There were no streetcars, but the
tracks were still there in the brick pavement.

JM: Yes, we have a picture of East Lansing where they
596 gradually get cemented over and over, through three
decades; and finally, the street becomes smooth.
598 Then they tore the streets up, and put bricks back
again. < Laughter >

600 GW: Yes, there in front of the capitol, that's what we
did. Brick paving. There's a nice strip of that in
602 the entrance to Grand Rapids. You can still see it;
sometimes it shows through where the macadam peels
604 off. That brick is still there. It was a very
durable form of pavement that was sponsored by the
606 State Highway Department. We got some beautiful
lantern slides of the construction and et cetera in
608 the State Archives from the old Highway Department.
It was so expensive in manpower.

610 JM: One of your special interests, too, is the
Turner-Dodge House.

612 GW: Yes, I remember giving tours to the Turner-Dodge
House when it was a dirty, grubby hole. I always
614 went home with a nasal infection because of the mold.
< Laughter > I remember standing on the back -- what
616 some people call the back (it's the river side of the
house) -- and with people standing in the rain, all
618 the way back to what is now the parking lot.

620 That was not there at that time. In fact, when
they made that parking lot, the people who bid on the
622 job didn't know that a whole Lansing school had been
dumped in there. It was full of huge pieces. We're
624 talking 6 X 8 chunks of cement. I talked to the
bulldoze man one day and said, "Did you know this was
626 in here?" He said "No, I would never have bid on the
job if I had known." I said, "I'm sorry we didn't
628 tell you"; because some of us knew that the city had
dumped along that bank for years, and that the very
630 area where the parking lot is now, to the southeast
of the main structure was a dump.

632 JM: So you've seen the growth from that, then the
Turner-Dodge House, to what it is today?

634 GW: So now people stand in line at Family Christmas to
come in to a renovated house. We just got a \$70,000
636 grant from the [State] legislature for a master plan
for use of the house, which we think is a prime
638 necessity. It will be directly turned over to Parks
and Recreation for that purpose.

640 JM: How do you see it in the future? What will it be
like?

642 GW: The city has never decided what they really wanted to
do with the house. We know it can't be a
644 house/museum because they are so extremely expensive,

and there are so many of them in the area. It
646 deserves to be used as a small cultural center for
the community. I hope to see a reconstruction of the
648 carriage house, which the city tore down; have it
built specifically for an educational center, to
650 serve particularly that North End of Lansing, where
we would have perhaps even studios for artists to
652 work and training centers, and have it take some of
the pressure off the house. Some of the uses that we
654 had in the house were just to keep it a viable thing
for the city to support: They pay the heat bill, and
656 they replace the windows and keep the roof on, things
of that kind. Take some of that out into the new
658 training center. I think there's a great deal can be
done there.

660 JM: We'll take a little break and come back: I want you
to tell me the five locations in the city you think
662 are the best locations of all -- that any persons who
are interested in history should never miss.

664 < Side 2 >

JM: We were going to come back and talk about that
666 walking tour of Lansing; the places that you say are
the most interesting, the most historical, the ones
668 that should be seen.

GW: The Lansing Chamber of Commerce at one time had a
670 Downtown Business Council that Paula Johnson
supervised and she was a very efficient, effective
672 director of that. One of the sub-committees was a
history committee, and one of the things that we did,
674 outside of special events -- We put on bed races,
did all kinds of things; but we created walking tours
676 of downtown area.

Ernie Browne worked with the Scouts and
678 developed the walking tour of the Capitol Square, and
talked about the trees in the Capitol Square that
680 were outstanding because there's a story for each
one.

We got CATA to give us busses to pick seniors
682 up, and we took them on guided tours of the downtown
684 area. We published two different walking tours of
the downtown area. We at one time tied in a walking
686 tour with Turner-Dodge and had a bus that went
downtown and then took in the North Lansing
688 Historical District, ending up at Turner-Dodge. I
think we worked too hard; we did so well that we
690 embarrassed the Chamber. When Paula left for a
better job, the Downtown Business Council ended and
692 so did our history committee.

Those walking tours were done -- the graphics
694 were done by Jack (Walter) Thompson, who was employed
at Michigan State University. Jack did a beautiful
696 job (he's always a joy to work with), and we
published those and got them out free to the public.
698 They're still being used by people, because they were
not copyrighted and people picked them up and copied
700 them.

We have a lot of interesting buildings. Of
702 course, we've got the Capitol and with its complex;
and the new structure now, the Library and Historical
704 Center; many folk houses; really right in the
downtown area.

One of the new things that was done this year
706 (it was in '89), we got to see the renovation --
708 total inside renewal, but outside renovation of the
Women's Clubhouse that R. E. Olds had contributed to
710 the city in the name of his wife, Meta. That is now
law offices, et cetera. Jim Winkler invited me to
712 their reception and opening, and it was most
impressive. They have saved the facade: The outside
714 of the building has been carefully preserved. I
understand that the marquee was not available that
716 night (on a cold winter night in 1989), but it was on
order, and they're going to put a marquee up over the

718 entranceway very comparable to what it was in the
beginning. They've done a very creditable job there.

720 I like the old Temple (which is now the Cooley
Law School), with all its iconography and its
722 imitation marble inside -- but it's good imitation
marble. < Laughter >

724 One of my favorite buildings aside from the
Capitol is the Board of Water and Light Building,
726 which is now up for sale, I understand. The old
powerhouse which has a base of black and the brick
728 gets lighter and lighter as we go from black coal to
the color of ignition, and white heat at the top. A
730 lot of people look at that building and don't see
that, I think. It's very unusual.

732 At the time we were working to get the modern
art deco of cream and blue tile Knapp's Building and
734 some of the other buildings on the State Register,
and some of them preliminary to going on the National
736 Register of Historic Places, the Board of Water and
Light did not want us to put that building on the
738 Register. Their reason was because they felt that
the government would tell them that they had to
740 change the building to accommodate an increase in
stacks, due to the pollution; but now, with the
742 pollution making operation move away completely, then

the open building will be able to be used for
744 something else -- maybe turned into a mercantile
center. I have no idea what's ahead for that
746 building. Very close by to that, was a building that
had R E O over the head and had what appeared to me
748 -- I haven't seen any records that say this, but it
looked like Pewabic tile on the inside. It was the
750 first showroom for the Reo car, on Grand.

We've lost so many things in downtown Lansing.
752 [The Strand]: That went, oh yes. I worked on a
"Save the Michigan" and I remember George had a
754 pencil that said "Strand Alley." He had bowled in
the Strand Bowling Alley.

I have a masters' thesis that was done by a
756 woman who wrote her thesis in historic preservation
on the Strand (before it became the Michigan). We
758 worked hard to save that. It was not anything the
city was behind. That was too bad. We brought the
760 son of the original architect back from Connecticut
and New York, and he brought the original drawings
762 for that theater with him. We had a celebration in
the theater with the theater organ playing, and did
764 all kinds of things, trying to get the people of the
community motivated.
766

In my mind I can walk the city and think of all
768 the things that we've lost, and that's really tragic.
I don't know about these modern replacements. Some
770 of them I hope will fall down, you know, in forty -
fifty years because they're NOT architecturally
772 pleasing. I think they lack style: They lack
continuing qualities that I look for in buildings.
774 Some of the hotels that are coming in now, I think
are very mediocre in their design.

776 JM: What are the changes for the better, that you see?

GW: Oh, there's always changes for the better. The
778 renovation of the cityscape leading to the Capitol is
a big plus, because if you analyze, every avenue to
780 our Capitol is ugly: I see Saginaw Street, which is
a street of ugly signs. It looks like it just grew
782 like Topsy, without any urban development planning
whatever. We see DeWitt Township going the same way.
784 The strip from St. Johns to Lansing is getting uglier
every time I drive it. Small businesses seem to be
786 coming in; it's not because they're small that I'm
against them; I'm just saying that it's just a
788 configuration of a lot of things that are short-
lived. Of course, there are some spots on that road
790 that are so contaminated that nobody can buy them.
They are dead properties because of prior use; that's

792 a tragic thing. People don't talk about that very
much, but we have it within just a few miles from the
794 Capitol.

 I don't see why we can't have beautiful things.
796 Bartholomew, in 1917 - or 1927 (I'd have to look at
the date on it again to make sure); we've had some
798 beautiful plans for the city of Lansing.
Bartholomew's plan [The Lansing Plan, 1920], if
800 followed, would have made the city a classic in
landscape.

802 For instance, Michigan Avenue Strip, which now
includes the "sin district" of the city and on out to
804 the campus; with its lack of [planning]: Well,
we've tried to put in some trees in the boulevard,
806 but the old trees have all been stripped off. All
the charming old houses have given way to used car
808 lots and that type of car-sale building.

 I realize that pole barns are very efficient and
810 effective. Certainly my barn's falling down, and if
I want to build a structure, I may have to put up a
812 pole barn. The average life is forty to fifty years.
Do you realize that I'll have to live to be one
814 hundred before I'll see those ugly things fall down?
 < Laughter >

816 JM: Good! < Laughter >

GW: But they will come down. We can't save it all; we
818 shouldn't. There are a few things that we should
save, and I do believe the Capitol is one of them.

820 I'm not convinced that we're spending too much
money on the renovation and restoration of the
822 Capitol -- it's both. They renovated one side and
restored one side on the second floor. Everything
824 costs more than you anticipate if you're going to do
something to a structure. I know from working in
826 that building and from observing it all these years
that it's had very poor maintenance and very poor
828 housekeeping. If you don't do any housekeeping for
eighty years, naturally, when you decide to clean
830 house and renovate, it's going to cost a lot of money
-- if you haven't spent it all those other years. We
832 know from the work that's already been done that it
is a gem of interior design and decoration, probably
834 unequaled in all the states. So we do have something
very special in Lansing.

836 JM: What do you think of the idea of going back to the
gray color instead of the white on the Capitol, as an
838 authentic restoration?

GW: That really doesn't bother me. The white will become
840 gray if they just leave it alone for awhile.
< Laughter > Pollution in the air will make it gray;

842 all the soot, et cetera. As far as being purist in
restoration, I think that's going to a little
844 extreme. If they do the inside and they preserve the
outside, I am much more concerned about the
846 sandblasting they did to the building to clean it up
and what the deleterious aspects of that was. That
848 is much more of concern to me than whether they paint
over the white to make it gray. Let's be realistic
850 here.

JM: What about the Women's Hall of Fame?

852 GW: I think that's a very good use of a residence that
had potential for use. There's still one right
854 adjacent to it, the Scott House, that's really an
undervalued and underused city property. I would
856 hope that someday that will be as well-used as the
Cooley House is. I think the Women's Studies
858 Association needs a big gold star for what they have
accomplished there, with grant monies and private
860 contributions. Lucille Belen gave the gallery, and
Judge Kallman gave an exhibit area, and there have
862 been many state-wide contributors that made the new
furniture and the new appointments inside; very
864 usable. There are some things that just need to be
seen.

866 Of course, the big Scott House went down because
Mrs. Scott said that she never wanted it to be left.
868 She put it in her will, I believe, that when she died
the house was to be torn down rather than to have it
870 be diminished in any way from the way she wanted it
to be. I approve of that.

872 JM: Do you?

 GW: Yes. I tore down a Kebler house because the renters
874 ruined it, and I didn't really have enough money to
bring it back to where it should be. It was painful
876 to see it go down, but I'm much happier going around
that corner and seeing it in my mind-eye than to see
878 it falling down brick-by-brick and cornice-by-
cornice. This way I still have the cornices out in
880 the barn. < Laughter > George and I wrenched them
all down and saved them.

882 JM: What feature of the community is the most rewarding
to you? We talked about all these significant homes
884 and locations, but I think we're talking here more
about people; personalities.

886 GW: I think the thing that makes Lansing so important is
the center of government, what goes on in government
888 -- an exciting, interesting place. I realize you
can't have a meeting on Monday and Friday, because
890 everybody's gone home -- that sort of thing, but

there's the old corps that's been here a long time
892 that sustains the community, too. So it's an
exciting place from the standpoint of what the
894 government contributes, but the services are so rich
in this area, and the fact that we have such
896 wonderful libraries. We have the Library of
Michigan, where I really grew up and that I use most
898 frequently. You've got Michigan State University,
and you have Lansing Community College which is a
900 beautiful, computerized library, designed to serve
the particular audience they do. When I want up-to-
902 date, modern information, I can get it there. They
actually do database runs for students, at no
904 expense. LCC Library will run database searches for
me. The Library of Michigan doesn't do it if I'm not
906 a State employee or working for the legislature; and
I have to pay for it, a considerable amount of money.
908 One credit at Lansing Community College entitles you
to every service of that library: Free inter-library
910 loan, free database searches. They really do a good
job down there, and they have a staff that has
912 service-minded philosophies.

JM: LCC also has that computerized registration. They
914 are way ahead of -- It could be five years before
that comes to Michigan State.

916 GW: Right. I registered Friday for a class, by
telephone.

918 JM: What class?

GW: I'm going to take a class for fun this time. I
920 always end up taking a course in law - paralegal,
introduction, legal writing; or linguistics. Why
922 did I take that linguistics class? < Laughter >
This one's going to be an art class, just for fun, in
924 handmade paper making. I made some paper once in a
class at Western Michigan University. They have a
926 very outstanding curriculum for the paper industry.
This will be for fun; I always meet interesting new
928 people in every class, as well as learn something.

JM: That is a big asset.

930 GW: And you can take off from here and go anywhere.
My mother used to say she never wanted to live any
932 further north than M-100 and US 16 and once, I
thought "My, that's a strange thing for my mother to
934 say," because she never said anything that smacked of
that kind of thing: But I knew what she meant. She
936 meant that she could get in her car and go -- to
Grand Rapids, Detroit, -- north. She could take off
938 in every point of her compass from her door. That's
what she was talking about, and I like that: Yes,
940 because I can go to Detroit Public as I did last week

in an hour and fifteen or twenty minutes, and I'm
942 there.

JM: That's why I moved here.

944 GW: You're in the hub of things, and yet four hours gets
me up to Traverse City: Five - six hours and I'm in
946 Rogers City at the Huron Shores Writing Institute.
You can take off and do things, here.

948 JM: What are your suggestions to residents and business
people for the future?

950 GW: Living on a hundred and forty-seven acre farm, where
I see the Capitol out my kitchen window; where in our
952 township there are very few parcels even of that
size left to be farmed, urbanization is creeping out.
954 We're going to be part of the megalopolis that covers
all of Southern Michigan, at least south of the Bay
956 City line, in 2000.

I think there are great challenges for business
958 and industry and government. I think the one thing
that we need to do is plan constructively, without
960 thinking always of the short-term return. I talked
about the ugly street and the lack of planning:
962 There's no long-term planning. Zoning does not,
right now in this area does not take in green
964 spaces. We're not zoning forty acre parcels and ten
acre parcels. We're not controlling the kind of

966 development based on the soil, the land. It's based
 on what people want now, and what they will pay for,
968 and how much people will make off of it. There will
 be a day when that philosophy is threatened. It may
970 already be, and we may have to turn to a little
 different philosophy.

972 JM: You refused to sell property because you felt it
 wouldn't provide a tax base for your community.

974 GW: Oh, yes. I had some property that had a good sound
 offer on it from a church, but I said that I think
976 churches should be taxed: They're in business like
 anybody else, in most cases. They do not pay taxes,
978 and they would not bring anything into the township,
 so I had a hard time with that. Not that I was
980 against the church or that particular denomination,
 but I just feel that way about it. You know, they
982 run wineries and factories and all kinds of things.

 JM: And investments?

984 GW: Right. I think they should pay their tax like
 everybody else. That's not a very popular opinion,
986 but I have a lot of opinions that are not
 particularly popular, but that doesn't make them any
988 less mine. < Laughter >

 JM: You've seen the community go, too, (speaking of
990 Lansing) from the original settlers to a new type of

landholder. I know you've been doing some research
992 on who's holding the land in Clinton County and
Ingham County these days.

994 GW: You see a lot of people that stay on the land and
it's interesting that our Clinton County Historical
996 Commission right now is following up on a heritage
conservation survey we did in the early '80's. We're
998 taking just the Village of Westphalia, and we're
taking everything (old and new). To meet the common
1000 eye there's not much old there because they modernize
so much, but if you look a little harder, there's
1002 interesting houses and interesting buildings that
have been there a long time.

1004 What's interesting about this community is, it's
German Catholic and it's preserved its ethnic flavor
1006 and its ethnic values, and its strong religious
cohesion is very obvious. We see that practically
1008 every building trade is represented in that
community, except the brickmaker. Of course that's
1010 interesting, because the first thing they did when
they got there was to make brick on the site, for the
1012 church.

It's an interesting community, and there you see
1014 fractORIZATION of the centennial farms, as you do
throughout the county. When we do our update on

1016 centennial farm ownership, we see that people break
off one to five acres for each of their children or
1018 something. In Clinton County the Registrar of Deeds'
work has increased each year, bringing more and more
1020 revenues for the fractORIZATION as the big farms
become small. You have this roadside development of
1022 new houses with small land.

JM: One of those farms was the Clark Farm?

1024 GW: That's a Sesquicentennial Farm. We celebrated that
as the first farm to be celebrated in the
1026 Sesquicentennial, as being in the family for a
hundred and twenty-five years. It was not the oldest
1028 farm, because there were some down in the
southeastern part of the state that were earlier; but
1030 the Clark Farm in Clinton County, Eagle Township, was
the first one we celebrated. We had a great day.
1032 I'm very pleased we did that because of the three
sons that were alive then, there's only one remaining
1034 now. Time changed things very quickly there, but the
farm is still owned by a descendant: One of the
1036 grandsons owns it.

Mary Springsteen at that time still owned the
1038 Joseph Eddy Farm, one of my grandfather's, which was
bought in 1834. He owned a section or so back there

1040 and was buried on the bank of the Looking Glass
River, on the Tallman/Ginter/Galvin Farm.

1042 She was not well at that time at all, and she
had no immediate descendants. We just couldn't carry
1044 on any celebration there, you know.

 I see a lot of consistent use and respect for
1046 the land, and I see a lot of change too. The hundred
acre field across the road from me, in the last year
1048 has changed from agricultural to light industrial.
We have a Meijer's truck transfer unit on it. The
1050 trees are now gone where the old house was. Michigan
Piano Company is building a warehouse-retail building
1052 there. Another house where Mr. Nichols, who was
known for being a builder of barns; the house was
1054 picked up and moved away. They saved the house --
but all part of the Grand River corridor, and it
1056 means new development and change as the city spreads
out. I just plea for reasonable planning, and not
1058 for the quick dollar.

 JM: How would you like to see your farm changed if you
1060 were to sell it?

 GW: Well, it's a beautiful farm. It drains north to the
1062 Looking Glass and south to the Grand. On the master
plan it's zoned for residential, so as long as I have
1064 a renter who farms it, it is agricultural. I'll keep

1066 it that way as long as I can, but I think the time is
1068 very short before water and sewer and all of those
1070 services (which we have to have) -- You can't hold
 off on sewers until people have hepatitis. It's
 unrealistic, and the county has been very slow in
 maintaining their drains.

 They haven't done anything on the drains for
1072 eighty years. Now they're having this great spurt of
 storm sewer, et cetera. When I went to the hearings
1074 over in Watertown and they talked about drains, I
 thought they were talking about DRAINS! What they were
1076 talking about was trenching -- old fashioned, just
 trenching -- without putting in tile. I couldn't
1078 believe my ears, to be so backward in this day and
 age.

1080 They put big tile across the road from me this
 winter here. Huge tiles went in there, to
1082 accommodate the new development along Grand River
 Avenue (US-16). When they changed the surface of
1084 that field across from me on the south, I got a
 two-acre pond that we hadn't had before. Before the
1086 winter was out they put the storm sewer in, and I
 noticed that it took care of the pond. But you see,
1088 one change triggers another and it seems to be
 mathematically progressive. < Laughter >

1090 JM: What if this were to have homes eventually? Can you
think of a good name that you would like to see it
1092 named?

GW: No, I wouldn't want to even think about that. I
1094 don't go by the Madison Street House very often, and
sometimes I don't like to look at the corner where
1096 the Kebler House was. If I sold it, I probably
wouldn't drive down this street very much.

1098 JM: What were George's hopes for the farm, do you know?

GW: He always was more realistic about change, I think,
1100 than even I was. I was amazed at him, being as
adaptable and flexible as he was. He realized, as I
1102 do, that we only keep it for a little while and try
to keep it as well as you can and leave it in good
1104 shape, and hope that you've educated the next
generation a little so that they'll do a good job
1106 too. That's all you can do, just educate and hope.

JM: Because you're not going to have any say in it at
1108 all! < Laughter > Anything you WOULD like to have a
say about, if you could tell the future about
1110 Lansing?

GW: Future of Lansing? My, that's such an important
1112 question, I ought to write a book about that. I
think government's going to become more metropolitan.
1114 I believe that if I lived to be a very old woman, I

would see Watertown become a municipality, a
1116 township.

I think township government is one of the most
1118 expensive things I pay for. I know it works in some
places, but I also see in Clinton County there are
1120 townships where governmental incest exists. The
township supervisor is cousin to the clerk, and the
1122 in-law, related to the husband of the treasurer.
People don't want to run for office because they
1124 think "what's the use" -- that kind of attitude
toward government. I think that's very expensive,
1126 and I think it's got to change.

The township government in the southern tier of
1128 our county doesn't have much to say anymore. County
government does most of their decision making and the
1130 State does a lot of the county's decision making. In
some cases they should, because I see some terrible
1132 incompetence in people that are on boards and
commissions making decisions that affect other
1134 people's lives.

I think we have to educate people better, more
1136 thoroughly, to become more effective citizens. I
think it's a real crisis that's already hit us. Talk
1138 about cultural lag; that's an example of it. We
stayed with the old system too long.

1140 JM: What changes should be in the new system?

GW: I think more education in how government works, and
1142 the role of the individual, and how each person is
responsible to take a role of some kind. It's
1144 complicated, it's expensive, it's time-consuming, but
it's very, very necessary I think.

1146 JM: You know two examples of people who want to take a
role; and yet, guessing that probably because of our
1148 age, we can't. I think that one way a society could
become more responsive, is to allow people to remain
1150 productive.

GW: Yes. I haven't run into that too often, except when
1152 I apply for a job. < Laughter > People always let
me work hard for them because I work for nothing. I
1154 seem to get a chance to do a lot of different things,
but you're right.

1156 I think the era of the youth cult is waning;
that respect for the older people and people who've
1158 had experience is going to increase. It's all part
of our responsibility for education -- such
1160 opportunities there.

JM: Any changes George might like to see, if he were able
1162 to voice them?

GW: Oh, I don't know. I know he was very concerned about
1164 use of the land. I really can't say. < Tears >

JM: You've been a joy to listen to, to talk with. I know
1166 that there's going to be a lot of things that we're
going to want to add to this, and I hope there's a
1168 way we can still do it.

GW: We've covered an awful lot. Given enough time, we
1170 could make over the whole world. < Laughter >

JM: Right! Thank you for talking with us, Geneva.

1172 GW: My pleasure.

1174 < End of Interview >

1176

Transcribed by Patricia Siggers

1178

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