

Mr. Soule T. Bitting, interviewed August 5th, 1974.

B: ...you know I was courting in high school at that time, Milwaukee on the 29th when she went down, all hands and they just found her two, three years ago, nose down...

: And they haven't really examined it yet very carefully, have they? I mean, they still don't know why it went down.

B: No. Yeah, well, the ferry then and that's quite a few years ago, was, one of the cars had gotten loose or a series of cars had gotten loose and gone forward and...all hands. In fact, we were having a Halloween party over there, big white stone cottage over there, my family owned years ago, the bodies all started rolling up on the beach, which was kind of grotesque on a Halloween night, down on the beach, they were all blown up as big as barrels and we all ran to the Coast Guard station, alerted them...

: Which means they floated all the way across, right back to Grand Haven where they had come from.

B: And the story on that I guess, Lake Forest Cemetery had quite a few of 'em in it.

: Yeah. Including Capt. McKay. Incidentally, we've, we've read in one book about shipwrecks on Lake Michigan and McKay was called "heavy weather McKay," for short. Catherine Cavanaugh says that's not true at all, that she knew him pretty well, have you ever heard that, have you ever heard him referred to as "heavy weather McKay?"

B: Nope.

: Did you ever hear the, did you ever hear...

B: I heard it in the Navy several times, but not as an individual, no.

: Did you ever hear people suggest that he, indeed, was willing to go out in weather when it was risky?

B: I can remember and boy, I wasn't, well, let's see, I was probably, '29, I was probably 13...uh, as far as we were concerned, they all ran on schedule. This road wasn't put in until 1931, I think, and so we'd have to come by boat...and outside of George Christmas and the Coast Guard station and John Sautee (?) next door, we were the only ones over here.

: Dave tells me that...you knew something about...what did he tell me, you, something about a cottage down here a ways that, that uh, was once another building.

B: This, yeah, this, on the other side here, and I don't know whether it was the name, George Christmas and uh, _____ Bellwood, they lived up on...Second Street.

: Yeah, at the top of the hill there where it became Lake Avenue.

: Yeah, that's the Christmas House that Mrs....old lady Benhoff (?) told us about. She was born in that house.

B: Well, George Christmas was a carpenter by trade...this was the old Grand Trunk freight house...and he brought it down here probably in the early 1900's before the pier was in, on a barge, style and rollers to put it up...and it was called Xmas Lodge and uh...gee, I don't know how and how old George was when he passed away, but he was in his early 90's. Every morning he'd go up to the Construction Aggregates in his rowboat, pile spikes in those big wooden barges, those gravel barges, in those days, and row back home and fish for three hours out here at (laughs), great old gem (?). But that a, uh, I don't know whether any pictures of it when it was used as the Grand Trunk freight station, freight depot. That was before they put the brick one in.

: Um-hum. Were you born in Grand Haven?

B: Grand Rapids.

: Grand Rapids?

B: Yeah.

: But you did live here.

B: Yeah, my mother died in '31, but we'd keep coming over every summer...in fact, all my grandfather's, uh, grandchildren, he was Judge of Probate in Ottawa County, Grandfather passed away, I think in 1923 at the age of 92...and uh, he bought this cottage along with a mile of the shore, the shore line...was a mile, a square mile in here, uh, for Aunt Julia that raised me, who was a teacher in the junior high school. When my mother died, why we came and lived with her in town and...two brothers and myself...lived on the old homestead there on Lafayette Street all through high school and uh, grandfather bought this for Aunt Julia so she could get away during the summer and relax from her teaching chores...

: Your grandfather's name was Soule?

B: Yeah, Judge _____ Edward Soule...oh, I would say somewhere in the year 1900.

: Seems like I've seen that name in _____ or newspapers.

: I have too.

B: Yeah, he was quite a character in town, from what...all my wife, when she first, well, when I got back from my tour of duty, uh, 1960 when we came over and uh, started refurbishing this place a little bit so we could...it was pretty well beat up and uh, that was the uh, Vancouvering (?) Paint Store and Mr. Vancouvering at that time must have been in his late 80's, he said, "Oh, I remember Judge Soule, he's the only man in town that wore a stove-pipe hat." (laughing)

: Hum.

B: This uh...we love it over here, we're trying to...winterize it a little bit so we can spend, you know, from April through November, something like that, we did spend one, the first year of the Depression...from Cleveland, Ohio, we were in sixth grade then...I was a freshman or sophomore in high school, in 1931...and we stayed here until the ice was_____, and then we couldn't row across to get to school, cause _____. Are you all from around the Grand Haven area?

: Yeah, I'm from Muskegon and Ron is from Holland.

B: Yeah.

: Well, were there quite a few people living here, who, in order to get into town, had to row boats across the channel, the river?

B: Uh...there weren't any, actually. Now, George Christmas would go back into town probably right after Labor Day. And the John Saukey (?) family that lived in this cottage were from Grand Rapids...and they would disappear around Labor Day. And they were great fishermen, they would have 15 people living in that old cottage. Every night around 6 o'clock they'd go walking down the pier and they'd come back with two or three hundred perch. I remember they had an old rowboat they'd turn upside down, that's what they'd clean the fish in. And what happened to them...they disappeared after the, at the start of the war. Seemed like everybody was gone at this time. But grandfather, who stayed, owned the only three cottages, two cottages on the north shore out here. Big stone cottage and Windy Dune, which was in the Andrews family. They were a family from St. Louis and _____ finally bought that. We didn't wear a bathing suit till we were 12 years old...we had a parking, parking spot right _____ cottages over there. We'd blow three times on the horn and somebody'd run down to the rowboat and dash across...we had...an icebox that held a 25 lb. chunk of ice and we'd get 50 lb. and by the time we got it over here it was down to size. (laughs)

: And, of course, the channel wasn't as it is now, or was it?

B: Well, the, this concrete pier down here, they, uh, they refurbished it about 1962 or 3, they put sheet piling on it, but the original pier is still there. On the other side was all wood and the section between that you can see that's down there by the Coast Guard pond, was wood. And uh, I've got a picture in here I'll show you, it was 1926...now this is that pond you can see, was just east of the Coast Guard station right down here, where that Martin House is?

: Yeah.

B: That was the old wooden pier...and they put that pier in over there because all the wooden timbers went through there and we as kids used to make rafts out of 'em and push around with poles and...

: And there are some of them?

B: Yeah. So you can see this wooden pier is still...that's the section that framed (indecipherable)...

: And that's, is that the boat you took back and forth across the...

B: No, that was an old clinker boat, made in Spring Lake years ago. And George Christmas's grandson had that and we'd row around the pond in it, make like we were the Coast Guard...

: Who was the other lady we talked to, who had a great deal to do with the Episcopalian Church, she lives in Spring Lake?

: _____ Johnston.

: That's right. From Johnston's boiler work.

(End of Part I)

B: ...story about the girl who was lost in the bushes over in Central Park cause they couldn't be seen openly talking to the boys (laughs) so they'd hide in the lilac bushes...(pause) That's a great, great spot...

: You attended Grand Haven High.

B: Three years.

: Today parents are complaining a little bit about, about the behavior in the school. Maybe you've been reading a little bit about that, I don't know. Do you think, perhaps, it's worse today than it was when you were there, or, or do you feel there was a good deal of prankery in those days too?

B: No, I'm, the university now, so probably I'm a little hardened to pranks that go on at a university, for instance, as compared to a high school and uh, no, I think basically...things haven't changed. I remember...oh, let's see, 30, 3, 32, yah, 3 and 4, 33, probably, we had a great influx of Chicago people, because of the Depression could live cheaper over here than they could in Chicago. Well, Warner and Julia Baird came over with their family...they owned a big home in Spring Lake, Orchard's Point. And there were two or three other families...came over and...boy, we thought they were...wild. We couldn't believe what we saw half the time, you know everybody had the, the Model A Ford with the cut-down windshield, the uh, uh,...they openly had a say, a,...I can't remember having a drink, even a beer...through high school. And they would show with a silver flask or something and let a batch of turtles run loose through the room, we thought this was out of this world (laughs). Gordie Wilkinson, does that ring a bell with you?

: I heard, I've read that name in the papers.

B: Gordie was a great mechanic; he could take a Model A Ford apart in three hours and tune it up. Where he came from I don't know but he was in that group. George Pardee (?) _____ Jack Olsen, I don't know whether Jack Olsen's still alive or not. (pause) ...it was a great day when I arrived with Capt. Walker and have him stop for cherry pie. They had a mess hall out there, boy they was, they had a cook out there who would cook up about 15 cherry pies (laughing) I think we used to have about one apiece, and he was a great old guy. He was some shirt-tail relative of George Christmas. (pause) Even the fishing is changed, you know the, I walked down there tonight to go casting but there wasn't a day that went by

we couldn't catch one or two bass right out of the river, big ones, 3 or 4 lbs., black bass. If you did that today, it'd be a miracle. (laughs)

: Yes, it would.

B: ...Corps of Engineers worked that little sound including that one on the outside of the pier...uh, I donated a sand dune, oh, just the other side of the lilac bush. And uh, was a guy had a big end loader and he was moving a little sand for me there, he was hauling it down there, he'd come roaring through here at 7 o'clock in the morning, worked till 5 o'clock at night filling it in cause, in 1962 the water was down 10 feet below, now we've got a little lake right where I had to put that little bridge in. But he uncovered...we began to find the stems of clay pipes. And we sent them up to the archaeologist up in Mackinac and he came back with a very interesting report, that uh...in the late 1700's, put a date on 'em because of the scroll and the...

: Right over here?

B: Yeah.

: That the house?

B: Yeah, right out there. We were just, after he...after he moved that sand dune the wind hit it for about...uh, and then we began to find these stems of these pipes. We got one with the complete bowl and stem on it...but uh, so we think that uh, or he indicated in his letter that uh, it was probably an Indian trading post...George Robinson was running his canoes between here and Saugatuck and Muskegon.

: That's interesting, because George Swart was...

B: He was a great guy.

: Hunter Robbins?

B: Yeah. And uh, he told me one night he was over here one night, having a drink with me...he says, "Bill," he says, "you know when I was seventeen I worked on my daddy's docks for two days and I didn't like it and I haven't worked since." (laughing) That area, Spring Lake, when we uh, I remember when there was a, the whole shore line was with these edgings, you know, from the lumber mills, after they'd trim the bark, they'd all be sticking out of the water.

: ...freight, depot, freight warehouse.

B: Yeah. (pause) A fellow by the name of uh, an old Swedish carpenter in town, uh, Carlson? (static) ...concrete blocks, and a central heating system.

: Well, that thing's been all refurnished, uh, refurbished and...

B: Yeah.

: ...remodeled, hasn't it?

B: Yeah. But it was just great as uh...kids in there because it was just one mass of living room and upstairs was six or seven bedrooms.

: Yeah, well, I, I misunderstand. Was that there all the time or was it moved there from another location?

B: It was moved from downtown.

: The other side.

B: Yeah. George brought it down on a barge and I couldn't tell you the exact year, but I would say in the early 1900's, before the pier was in.

: Hey, that's a big thing to move in those days.

B: yeah. On wooden rollers, you know.

: I wonder if George Keeho's father-in-law, Palmer, did the moving? Did you know him?

B: No.

: My neighbor, George Keeho, his father-in-law, George is 80, 84, his father-in-law was in that business of moving buildings. George still has some of the pulleys...

B: We as kids thought so much of George Christmas, you know, he built this stuff for us, some fish poles and we thought he did it all by himself. (laughs)

: Where was this stone cottage now that...

B: Uh...I think you can probably see, see where that light is over there, not the street-light, but, it looks like there's a fire there now.

: Yes.

B: Right in there.

: Oh.

B: And that was, the original structure where the Ackley Hall summer camp was. As you can see, with no road out here how quiet it would be in the summer.

: Yeah.

B: Well, thank you for stopping by.

: Thanks for having us. Goodnight.