Charles Altman

Int: July 14, 1989. Charles Altman is being interviewed by Marian Zayti for the Northville Historical Society's oral history department. Charles, it's my pleasure to have you here in Northville I'm doing this interview with you. Tell us a little bit about your life in Northville.

C. A.: My family came to Northville in 1914. How my dad ever found the little town of Northville from the city of Detroit I will never know. Thirty miles of the roughest road you ever saw in your life. The pavement ended at Northwestern High School in the city of Detroit and from there on it was a gravel road all the way to Northville. He found six and a half acres at the edge of town, with a house with outside plumbing, and a pump and that's what he bought. Of course he modernized the house.

Int: Where was that located, Charles?

C. A.: That was down on Plymouth Avenue right on the edge of town.

Int: Which is now South Main.

C. A.: Which is now South Main Street. We had the benefit, my sister and I, of being brought up on six at half acres which was farm life, as opposed to in the city. Of course all the kids thought it was great. We had places to play, we had a big apple orchard, we had grapevines out there, an old farm building, an old barn—I remember the old barn. Of course, my dad, being a city man, he had to try, we had chickens, we had a goat, and nothing worked out. My dad was a hunter and we raised Beagle dogs. It was kind of nice being able to live the farm life, so to speak, and yet being near downtown. We were a long way from school--pretty near a mile from school.

Int: Yes, you would have bus service today.

C. A.: Bus service today. I hear these people walked eight or ten miles to school. We didn't walk that far. Most times my dad would drive us to school and my mother would pick us up. We did walk it in nice weather.

Int: You had a sister?

C. A.: I had a sister who was four years older than I and I was born in '22 and of course went to kindergarten in a house up on Main Street because that's the way it was. The kindergarten was in…the Board of Education was upstairs and I think the kindergarten was downstairs. My kindergarten teacher Miss Cavell which ended up Mrs. Seden who was a State Senator, I believe, or State Representative. State Senator, I think. She was my kindergarten teacher. The Cavells were an old family. The father, of course, was a veterinarian on Griswold Street and the son was a veterinarian, I think, is today, in East Tawas, Ted Cavell. Our school life was just like every other kid's, always problems with the teacher. Mother would take me by the hand when the notes would come home. "Charles will try to do better," and I usually did. I tried to do better. At one time you talked about the band in Northville. Both my sister and I played in the band, and my dad, before he got the job as advertising manager for Eddie Stair's theaters in the city of Detroit, was always in show business of some kind. When he was a kid, believe it or not, he toured with Buffalo Bill's Show.

Int: Fantastic!

C. A.: People think of Buffalo Bill back in the Indian days, well, Buffalo Bill had a show in the 1900s and my dad toured with him until the time that Buffalo Bill took his show to Europe. My dad didn't want to leave the country, and left the Buffalo Bill show and joined Barnum & Bailey's show and was an acrobat.

Int: An acrobat?

C. A.: Yes. He ended his career by a fall. He used to do a running somersault over seven chairs. That was his big thing. We had show bills at home showing this. One time he hit the last chair, broke his kneecap and that was the end. My dad limped, not so people would notice it, but he always did have trouble with that knee. Then, because he couldn't do that he took the easiest job at the circus, which was playing drums in the band (the circus band), and he played drums in the circus band. Somehow or other, I guess, he got to Detroit and he got a job with Eddie Stair, who owned four theaters in the city of Detroit. Back in those days, it was the old Garrick Theater, the old Shubert Detroit, the Shubert Lafayette, and the old Cass Theater. None of them are there today. My sister has an autograph book of all the famous people. I would hope that she still has this book. Marie Dressler, Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, all these people who ever came to any of the theaters that Stair owned. My dad would have an autograph book and he would do that. Eddie Guest wrote a poem about my sister playing drums in the local band.

Int: Can you recite it?

C. A.: No, but it's published somewhere. My dad coming to Northville and being in show business then got involved with the community band. They had the gazebo, right on Main Street.

Int: The Crow's Nest.

C. A.: The Crow's Nest. Back in those days, I think there were… We have a picture (I think we donated it to the Society). When they took some old pictures to *The Northville Record*, we went through and gave *The Northville Record* some old pictures that we had that we could identify. I don't know what happened to them.

Int: They may be at the Historical Society.

C. A.: They may be. I could pick out my dad and that was the only person I knew in this band. There were about six members in this band. Then they decided they were going to expand this band, and about this time they started the Northville Fair. The local business people got together, my dad was one of the original guys in this thing. They sold stock--if my memory serves me--they sold three hundred shares. I think there were three, and I think the stock was $20 per share, or $10 a share. Whatever the original stock, we had two shares. I don't think anybody had to start with too many, Lou Stewart, Lapham, Bill Forney (who was in the coal and ice business in town), all the business people in town, they all chipped in a few bucks and they bought that property and they started the Northville Fair. They called it the Northville Wayne County Fair. It was nonprofit and any money they made they put back in. They needed a band. At that time, the high school didn't have a band. The first band that was formed, I can remember, was called the Northville Community School Band and it had community members, older people, along with the school people. They would play at the Fair, they played concerts on the corner. My sister played the drums in the band when she got to be old enough. I played the Alto, which today is a French horn

(back in those days they called them old Altos). We would have a Saturday night concert and then go to Horton's Drug Store on the corner. We'd all get tickets and we could go to Horton's Drug Store and get a sundae or a soda for playing in the band. The guy at the vanilla factory, Langfield, then got involved in the band and money started to come in. They brought in an instructor by the name of Edwin Head, Mr. Head, came from Redford. I believe he was a teacher in Redford, a band director. He came out and did Northville. He had four kids. He had Glen Head, Sammy, and two daughters, Joyce and Peggy Head, the four kids. And they joined the Northville band and they were almost professionals, their father being a teacher and so forth. Langfield would donate money and, I don't know exactly, I don't remember, uniforms, I would imagine and things like this. He'd pay for trips. We'd go on trips and play places and Langfield was a big benefactor to the band. About that time, when Head came, my dad dropped out of it and it was mostly a high school band then.

Int: How old were you when you first played in the band?

C. A.: I was in seventh grade. I believe my sister, too, was in the seventh grade. My dad, being in show business in Detroit, knew so many people that my sister took piano lessons at the old Detroit Conservatory of Music. Of course, all my mother's relatives were in Detroit and we would go down on Saturday to visit a relative and end up at the Conservatory of Music for a piano lesson for my sister. From there we would take street cars or buses down to the Cass Theater where my dad was working and then he would bring us home. Take us down in the morning and drop us off at a street car stop and we'd go to my grandmother's or whatever.

Int: What was your mother's maiden name?

C. A.: Marshall.

Int: Marshall.

C. A.: After the piano lessons, my sister decided she wanted to be a drummer. She could play the xylophone because of the fact that she had had piano lessons, she knew the keys. But she really wanted to be a drummer. So, like I say, my dad knew a lot of people and by gosh, if he didn't get the drummer from the Detroit Symphony Orchestra to give my sister drumming lessons. That man's name was Cooper. She would go down and take drum lessons from Cooper. As a matter of fact, she won a scholarship to Interlochen in drums and percussion.

Int: Fantastic.

C. A.: I used to sit there. I couldn't read music very well. I used to pretend. I'd toot and I'd make my fingers go. Playing an Alto, you didn't have to do too many solos, so it wasn't too bad.

Int: Did you pass that on to your children? Do they have that interest in music that you grew up with?

C. A.: My daughter plays the…Can we ask my wife sitting over there?

Int: We can.

Mrs. Altman: Autoharp.

C. A.: She plays the autoharp and the dulcimer. She messes around with the dulcimer. This is a thing that she plays with and then she takes time off to have one of my grandchildren and that gets put on the side and then it comes out again. What happen then is, out in our area, she goes to the Methodist Church in Oak Grove and we go to Hartland and the choirs don't sing in the summertime. So what most churches do is they have people, "You be the musical entertainment this Sunday." So the autoharp gets brought out and she feverishly practices for two weeks and does a piece at her church. With her two kids, she doesn't have too much time with it.

Int.: Just wanted to hopefully know that this is going, the Altman musical talent, will go on.

C. A.: I can remember them teaching me F A C E, and All Cows Eat Green Grass or something like that.

Int: Or Every Good Boy Does something.

C. A.: That's the musical scale, that's how you read notes. Believe me when I tell you I can't…I know that the blank spaces are F A C E. I can't play, I can't read a note. Then came '39 and we all graduated. We just had our fiftieth anniversary, that fiftieth reunion here and that was really, really a fun thing.

Int: It's good to see those old faces.

C. A.: It sure is. As far as school days are concerned, I probably got thrown out as much as anybody in the class. I was with a bunch of rabble rousers. Jack McCrumb (oh dear Jack), Dale Bray, E. K. Starkweather, Kenny Martens (I think Kenny Martens was probably the worst kid in the school). We had G. V. Harrison, Paul Thompson was our first principal I remember. I think probably he was the first one who gave Kenny Martens and I a day off. Kenny Martens and I palled around together. I think Paul Thompson gave us the first time and then the other principal was G. V. Harrison. I can remember him telling me, "You know, you're never going to amount to anything."

Int: How wrong he was!

C. A.: Oh, not really. He was pretty right. As he sent me packing, I think what happened, we had a skip day. They always had a senior skip day and if I remember right there was Janet Stewart, E. K. Starkweather, Kenny Martens, myself, maybe Lucille Lapham, there were six of us, three boys and three girls. We made skip day a two-day affair. That didn't go over too good with Mr. Harrison. We got put out of school and were told to bring our parents. I bummed around for a week before my folks found out about it and that didn't go over too good. We eventually got in and eventually graduated. We went to Washington on our senior trip, which was a fantastic thing for a bunch of farm kids.

Int: Really, truly a great trip.

C. A.: It really was. Ed Mollema and Miss Giltner were our sponsors, great people, and we had a great time.

Int: Miss Giltner was at your class reunion.

C. A.: Sure was, I'll tell you what, I saw a lot of people walk up and say, "I'm so and so. Do you remember me?" "Well, certainly I remember you," and she would bring an anecdote back. Miss Giltner taught Business pretty much. The only thing I remember about her is her telling me that I'd better leave

the typing class because I was never going to make it. So after about three weeks in, I didn't take typing on Miss Giltner's recommendation because my fingers were too short or something. And I never did learn how to type. I kept thinking when I walked up to her and said, "I'm Chuck Altman." She said, "Oh, I remember you." I'm thinking, "Is she just saying this," and two minutes later, Dale Bray walks up to her and says hello and she says, "Hello, Dale," and she's telling him things that happened back in 1937 in 1938. The woman has a fantastic memory.

Int: She loved her job. She was a good teacher.

C. A.: She had to, to teach as long as she did.

Int: Charles, you're old enough that you probably remember a little bit about the Great Depression.

C. A.: Yes, I guess we were one of the fortunate few. My dad never really lost his job with the Eddie Stair group of theaters, except that there was not much work. The four theaters that Eddie Stair owned were not movie houses, these were legitimate theaters. Nobody had any money to go to the theaters and so business was bad. When a theater went down they called it the theater was "dark." I tell you what, there were times when all four theaters were dark and sometimes only one theater was operating they would bring people in. I remember them bringing in Thurston, I remember them bringing in Blackstone. Of course, with my dad having the influence that he had, I would get a front row seat. Thurston would say, "I need a little boy," and everybody in the audience would hold up their hand, and he'd say, "I'll take him right there," and either my sister or I usually got on the stage. Something drastic would happen but it was always a bunch of fun. I would say in '33 or '34 the W. P. A. was established and to keep these actors busy they started a thing called Opera Under the Stars. Opera Under the Stars was in Briggs Stadium. Because of the fact that my dad was an advertising man, my dad got the job of doing advertising for Opera Under the Stars, which meant we had to go down to Briggs Stadium. I can remember, as the walkways that the people went to the ballgame, they had cards advertising. My dad used to go down and change those cards every two weeks as the dates would change and then we would go to the ballgame. I can remember meeting these people. Dad would get me down in the dugout and I would shake… This was a big deal, I was a little kid then and I can remember it happening and I'm sure I was introduced to all these ballplayers. I remember being there but I don't remember the players, I was too young. But I remember going down there and going to the ballgames, and my dad got me a baseball that I have to this day, that was signed by all the New York Yankees: Babe Ruth, Vernon Gomez, and I do have that baseball yet today.

Int: You probably want to leave it to the Historical Society.

C. A.: Anyway, the Depression was worse. It seemed like our family was getting along but being as small as I was, they didn't discuss the financial part of the family with me but I assume that my dad had a cut in wages. The work wasn't there, while he went in and was still working, I assume that everybody else had tightened the belt. So my dad had a good friend in the Liquor Control Commission and his name was Bill Henderson. Bill Henderson's relatives today run Henderson Glass Company. Henderson Glass is a big company all the way around. Bill Henderson was one of the original Liquor Control Commissioners, and he said to my dad, "Why don't you put a liquor store in Northville?"

Int: And do away with our blind pigs?

C. A.: Here we were a family of non-drinkers, none of our family ever drank. I guess that's one of the only bad habits I didn't have here in Northville. My dad said, “Oh, I don’t think that a town like Northville,” you know. Bill said, “Hey, you can make yourself a few dollars.” So my dad opened up a store called Center Street Grocery.

Int: And that was located?

C. A.: That was located on North Center Street.

Int: Between Main and

C. A.: Between Main and Dunlap.

Int: On the East side of the street.

C. A.: On the East side of that street. That store, before we moved, was in three different locations. Why we moved, I have no idea. At one time, we were right on the corner and Sam Pickard ended up with his meat market there. But we were there for a short time and then we moved down into the Ely Building. Elys were on one side and we were on the other. They opened up a music store. Cameron Lodge opened up a music store. We were in that Ely Building, Ely had the ice in the back and we were in the front. I don’t know if we were expanding or going backwards. In that same building, that Ely Building, there were three stores, at one time there were three stores: Lodge Music, our Center Street Grocery, and then Dutch Sonenberg had his newspaper stand, that little tiny thing. I can remember, at some point in time, Dutch moved up next to Kenny Radford’s place on Main Street, West Main Street, and I remember our liquor store being in that little building. I can’t put it all together but I know we were in three locations up there, as the business expanded.

Int: It was successful in Northville, then, a liquor store?

C. A.: It was quite successful. My dad always said, “You know, you have to be on the side streets. You can’t go on Main Street, because these people can’t have their ministers watching them go in the liquor store.” That, of course, is a whole different story. We needed an expansion place and my dad was smart enough to know not to go on Main Street back in those days, so we went down the hill. Back against the drug store was a vacant lot. We bought that vacant lot and built the store there. It was still called Center Street Grocery and my dad was still affiliated with the theaters when this store was built. It was a growing business, successful and profitable. It was about this time when my dad got sick. My dad had asthma bad, all his life. He got to be bedridden and we had to hire people to run the store. One of the people who worked for us was Harvey Ritchie, who worked for my dad for years at the store. My mother would keep the books, do the banking and my dad got bedridden. At that point in time, he was no longer affiliated with the theaters in Detroit and the only source of income for the family was that particular store.

Int: Now Charles, was this in the days of scrip or had we passed that stage?

C. A.: We’re past scrip now, scrip was at the early part of the Depression, and as I explained to you, to the best of my recollection (and I may be entirely wrong), I think only municipal employees got scrip, government employees, either Federal government, City, county, state employees. Not the federal employees because the scrip was issued by the State of Michigan.

Int: So then, in ’34, this probably didn’t exist when the business opened.

C. A.: I don’t think scrip was around that long. I think this Depression hit, everybody lost their money in the banks, and everybody panicked, but I think (and of course, I was really small when this happened), I don’t think like in ’29 when the crash came, I think everybody had a bad year. From then on, I don’t think it continued to go down. I think it continued to go up, started up slowly. Everybody was eating oatmeal three times a day, nobody had any money. They were losing their homes. My wife’s father in Plymouth was a plumbing contractor in the building business and was in the process of building homes, mortgaging them, building them and renting them and so forth. Well, when the Depression hit, nobody could pay their rent, he couldn’t pay the mortgage payments, and lost everything. My father-in-law was only one of many. This was happening to people. But I think the whole thing was actually going uphill. By ’33 I think they were turning it around. It wasn’t quite as bad. People didn’t have money yet but I think the governments were on a better footing and I don’t think they were using scrip. I don’t know how long they were using scrip.

Int: It seemed like a short period of time. My father was paid half in scrip. He was a county worker. There were stores, grocery stores, in town that accepted that.

C. A.: And some wouldn’t.

Int: That’s right, no chain store, but the Hills Brothers Meat Market, the E. M. B. Grocery Store.

C. A.: E. M. B. - Bogart’s

Int: Yes, those stores accepted the scrip for food.

C. A.: Back to the party store. My dad kept getting sick and I was a toolmaker at Ford’s. I’d served my apprenticeship at Ford’s and was a toolmaker there for about nine years. Help was hard to get in the store and my mother was just getting progressively frustrated. My dad couldn’t do anything, was bedridden. At that point in time we had to go and haul our own liquor from the City of Detroit to Northville. The Liquor Control Commission rules were so unreal. Only a couple of people whose names were on that license could sign for that liquor in Detroit to bring it out. The Miller boys (Art and Vic) that lived out on Taft and Nine Mile, had a truck and they hauled liquor to the party store for years and years. It was getting increasingly tougher for my mother and I went up there one time and she was just terribly frustrated and I said, “Mother, I tell you what, I’m going to quit my job and I’ll come to work in the store, and take some of this off your hands.” Which I did. So I worked there on Center Street for about three years. The business just kept getting bigger and bigger, parking kept getting tougher and tougher. We had two parking spots on Center Street at the bottom of that hill and half the guys would come in and their cars would end up at the fairgrounds because they forgot to put their brakes on. The town council constantly discussed no parking at all on Center Street. And if they took my two parking spots there on Center Street, I was out of business. So I discussed this with my folks and I said, “I think we better build a new store.” In the meantime I had gone to New York and saw a party store, what a real party store was like. Most of the places where you bought liquor, back in those days, were either drug stores or grocery stores. The state made all of the money on the liquor. The person who sold the liquor to the public made ten percent. It was a sideline, it was like the lottery is today. They put these lottery machines in there, you can’t make a living selling lottery tickets, nor back in those days could you presumably make a living

selling liquor only. It was a sideline and that's why we called the store Center Street Grocery, because you had to have a grocery store first. I can remember dusting the canned goods that we had on the shelf year after year after year. Somebody would want to buy it and we'd beg them not to buy it because we'd have to go to the grocery store, to Kroger or A & P and buy another can of coffee and put it on the shelf. To keep up, back in those days, we had to have $1500 worth of groceries in stock. When I went to New York and I saw a liquor store that was fabulous and it had fancy food and things that today is normal for a party store. I came back and I told my folks, "I think this is the way we ought to go," and we built the Good Time Party Store down on Seven Mile back in 1949.

Int: Seven Mile at South Main.

C. A.: That was our property. Sometime if you want to talk about that property developed and I can tell you about how the Seven Mile cut went through there.

Int: Yes, that must have been through your property.

C. A.: That should be discussed at another time, right now we're discussing the Good Time Party Store. I built the Good Time Party Store, I went to New York to the Fancy Food Show which, then and today, is one of the largest trade shows in the world--The Fancy Food Show in the City of New York. I brought back stuff that I'd never heard of and that a lot of people had never heard of, and we opened up a pretty fancy store. It was the talk of the State of Michigan and we were written up in several newspapers and it was a success right off the bat.

Int: It was the most beautiful store in Northville, I can tell you that.

C. A.: It was and people appreciated the party goods that they could buy there. We had stuff that was imported from all over the world. We were, other than the store in Bloomfield Hills, we were probably the first to really go in to the fancy food business and have a party store.

Int: What year was that?

C. A.: I built it in '49. I worked for my folks for twenty years at that store. My dad passed away, my mother made me a partner in the business and so my mother and I were partners in business up until the time she passed away. I had a sister in New York. I'd worked in that store for twenty years, and frankly, in all that time that I worked in that store, I never had a problem being held up or anything like this. As it got to be more and more, these stores and these liquor stores, were the ones being picked on and being held up. I had a fear of being held up. Eighty percent of the robberies in Detroit are liquor stores. We weren't this far from Detroit, it was not that hard to come out, and I was always afraid of being held up. About this time we moved to Hartland. We wanted more land. We bought ten acres out in Hartland. My daughter wanted a horse and my son wanted horses, so we moved. I was driving back and forth and I found Jim Roth, who was a revelation in the business, because he had the same business principles I did, and kept the store going. Today the Good Time Party Store is one of the top five in the state of Michigan, as far as party stores are concerned.

Int: But there will be those of us in Northville who will always think of it as the Altman Party Store, no matter who happens to be running it.

C. A.: One of the first licenses, when they first started issuing liquor licenses, they issued 1000 liquor licenses in the state of Michigan, and we had one of the originals. Our original license number was 918, one of the first, and this was due to my friend. Everybody was, there were about six or seven applications in Northville for this liquor license. Nobody would admit it because nobody wanted, I don't know if Lou Stewart or Mike Gunsell submitted an application for a liquor license or not. I just know that my dad knew the guy on the Liquor Control Commission and that's how he got it. The property is another story.

Int: Now we're talking six acres.

C. A.: We're talking six and a half acres.

Int: To put it into perspective, tell us now would that take in the Northville Record building?

C. A.: It would take in the Northville Record building, it would take in the old Marathon gas station which is now the Ford dealer's used car place, it would take in the corner, which was the Bel-Nor Drive-In, which would take in the Good Time Party Store, of course, all of McDonald Ford's on that side of the street, and all of the Good Time Party Store now (he owns the north side of the street), then the Clark Gas Station. My old homestead was on that. I think we sold that house to Don Ware.

Int: Don Ware bought that?

C. A.: I think we sold that house to Don Ware. This was a very interesting thing.

Int: You went right up to the park, then?

C. A.: I want to tell you, if you could envision this piece of property, it's just an orchard. Just a piece of property, the house was at the Clark Station and the rest was a field. We cut a little lawn there, we had twelve rows of grapes one hundred feet long. We used to have a little fruit stand out front, just for kicks, because we had an orchard. I'll tell you how smart my dad was. When it comes to farming, he knew absolutely nothing about farming. We had pear trees, peach trees, cherry trees, and apple trees—all these beautiful trees there. All these trees had to be trimmed. You know what my dad would do? He would call up Ralph Foreman and say, "Ralph, I need some help. I gotta get these trees trimmed." I would presume he paid somebody, but Ralph Foreman would send somebody down and trim the trees. My dad wouldn't trim those trees. There was an old guy, I wish I could think of his name, I think I do remember his name. I think his name was Brown. Now, there were two little houses that were right past where the VFW hall is now and an old gentleman there by the name of Brown. I'm sure his name was Brown. I remember he wore (I was fascinated) because he wore a beard like Grover Cleveland, a big moustache and a beard. Mr. Brown would come down and trim those grapes. You just can't just walk in and cut grapes, you gotta know how to do this. He would come down and do the grapes. That I remember Mr. Brown doing. Then when the fruit would come, we'd all go out and pick. My relatives would come out from Detroit and we had a little fruit stand. We had a couple of bushel baskets and set a board on it.

Int: I remember that.

C. A.: We'd sell apples, and cherries, and things like this. Anyway, there was this property, Kenny Rathburn, at this point in time, needed some property to build a garage. It was kind of a thing where he needed a big piece of property for a car dealership and there just wasn't any property around where

Kenny Rathburn was. I was not involved in the deal. My mother and my dad talked about how Kenny Rathburn came down and wanted to buy some property. I don't know how much be bought, but it's the building where the Northville Record ended up. That was the first piece of property of our six and a half acres that was sold.

Int: That would be the end of the property going towards South?

C. A.: South. That would put it very close to the city limits.

Int: Correct.

C. A.: The next house, there were two houses past there and one of them, the last one, was owned by people by the name of Palmer, Lee Palmer and his mother. Lee, unfortunately, had epileptic fits and back in those days they couldn't control them. When he would have a seizure, which is a better name than fits, I should say.

Int: Yes, but that's what we called them.

C. A.: That's what they called them. He would just lay right down any place. He would walk up town and it would happen halfway between uptown. Everybody knew it; they did everything they could to bring him back. They had a refreshment stand out in front of their house. I don't know how many people remember that. They'd sell ice cream and things like that. We had a path from our house through the field up to that refreshment stand. We would beg our folks, "Let's go see Mrs. Palmer and Lee." We didn't want to go see Mrs. Palmer and Lee but we wanted to get up to the refreshment stand. Because we knew that if we got up to the refreshment stand we would even get penny candy or an ice cream cone or pop or something like that. That piece of property went too (it's north of the funeral home now and Allen Memorial is in there). Now we've got the piece of property sold to Kenny Rathburn and my dad still had his fair stock. He was very loyal to the fair but by now it was Northville Downs racing in there.

Int: I hope you still have that stock.

C. A.: Oh no, we sold it. We sold it to Margaret Zayti. About this time, the races were going on and a lot of things were happening in Northville. One of the things happening in Northville was a cut-off called the Seven Mile cut-off, for lack of a better name. Because of traffic going through town

Int: It ended at South Main.

C. A.: Seven Mile and South Main. If you wanted to go up to the Maybury Sanitarium, which was functioning, or anything, Foreman's Orchard out Seven Mile Road, you had to come through downtown. They had talked about the cut-off for years and years and years. So about this time the engineering studies, I believe, were being done. The county contacted my folks about selling the right-of-way down through there and everything was in the talking stage. Now enter Northville Downs, who needed more space for barns. Now you've got to understand that Northville Downs is surrounded by park property, Wayne County park property. Where the present barns are now, where the creek is, was all Wayne County park property. Northville Downs wanted to expand their barns and so they approached Wayne County on buying this lot. You can't sell county park property. This was Edward Hines Park property. Can you imagine what would happen if the County had said to the racetrack, "Sure, we'll sell you this

piece of property"? The people would have been up in arms so they couldn't sell it. At this point in time, I don't know who put the deal together. I would presume Dr. Snow was involved. I would think the Dr. Snow was very much involved in this. I'm not sure that Orlo Owen was not involved in this thing. I really don't know all the people from the racetrack who were involved. Somebody got the bright idea of coming to my folks and saying to my folks, "Let's trade the County your right-of-way through your six and a half acres for the swamp." Here again, this was between my folks and our attorney, who at this time, was Dunbar Davis, who ended up as Municipal Judge. My mother and Judge Davis' mother were very dear friends and Mrs. Davis says to my mother, "My son has just got his license to practice, if you need an attorney sometime." And consequently my folks went to see him and I think they were one of his first clients. When the racetrack deal came up, of course, Dunbar, being the family attorney, took care of our end of it. My dad, in effect, what really happened was my dad traded the right-of-way for Seven Mile Road to go through our six and a half acres

[End of Side 1]

I think there are people today who do not know this. I believe that the paddock is sitting on top of that creek or close to it.

Int: Probably, because it must have been your property that, to get into the Northville Fair, we used to walk across the tiles so we didn't pay admission.

C. A.: I remember that, that old tile across that creek. Yeah, that was on the other side of River Street, though. That was next to Fred Wendt's house and Mr. Scipio's house.

Int: So that wasn't on your property?

C. A.: No, that tile was not on our property but this is the property that we're now all talking about. You walked across that tile? You weren't a Bealtowner. I thought only the Bealtowners

Int: No, but we knew how to get to Bealtown.

C. A.: OK, because that crock, to get into the Fair for free, was strictly for Bealtowners. About this time, Ann and I had (this was before the cut-off went through there), Ann and I had got married and the property ran, of course, the West end of the property was River Street. So at the end of River Street

Int: The south end

C. A.: The south end where River Street ended at the Rouge River, Ann and I built a log cabin and we were living there when the Seven Mile cut went through. Of course, that was bad.

Int: It was sad to lose your home.

C. A.: It was sad, really, and the moved the log cabin and I understand the log cabin is out on Seven Mile someplace. It's still out there.

Int: I think at Napier and Seven Mile. I could be correct, I'm not sure.

C. A.: The other little corner of the property, we sold to Hoffmans. Now Henry Hoffman was a star high school basketball player and his father was a horseman who had horses, who had the stable on South

Center Street. Where they're parking those cars right now, McDonald's is parking his used cars, and the racetrack uses for a parking lot there.

Int: And they rented out horses, didn't they, to ride?

C. A.: Yes, he had a stable, he trained horses. He worked for the Kaiser. When he was in Germany, Mr. Hoffman worked for the Kaiser as a horseman and that's where he learned the trade. And of course they came here, I can remember Mrs. Hoffman and the German stollens we got every Christmas. She was a redheaded woman and Henry was redheaded. I graduated in '39 and Henry had to graduate '35.

Int: Benny's class, see him at the class reunion

C. A.: A year in front of my sister. He was a basketball player and I often wonder where he is now.

Int: California.

C. A.: Oh, is he?

Int: But he comes every five years to the class reunion.

C. A.: Fantastic. Then of course, once they put the Seven Mile cutoff in there, that opened up all this property and I built the Good Time Party Store right there. We had sold the corner to Velma for the Bel-Nor Restaurant, we sold the old homestead to (and I say "we," I mean my mother) Don Ware and there we were. Across the street from the Good Time Party Store was a vacant field. Then a lady from Livonia came and wanted to develop the corner across from the Bel-Nor Drive-in. She wanted to put a gas station in there, so we sold that. I don't know if the Marathon was the first gas station that went in there or not.

Int: It seems to me it was Marathon.

C. A.: It was a Marathon when it went out of business.

Int: I only remember Marathon.

C. A.: So now we got this other piece of property there and the log cabin was there. Across the street was the log cabin and I sold that cabin to a man by the name of Leroy Brooks, who worked for me in the Party Store for many, many years. So about this time (and I can't tell you the year, it had to be very close to 1950), John Mack had bought the Ford Garage uptown.

Int: The old Bunn Building.

C. A.: The old Bunn Building, yup, and it is my understanding that Ford Motor Company is saying to Mr. Mack, "If you want to be in business, do something." All the Ford dealers, the old Ford dealers that you see in every little town, you can go in little towns Up North and see that same Bunn Building. They are all the same. You know it was a Ford dealership. There are lots of those buildings still around. Anyway, he had to expand his business or lose his franchise. George Clark, I think, was John Clark's real estate man and they came down and there were two sites that were available. One of them was out where Guernsey Dairy is today, out near there, and the other site was ours. With that log cabin there it was tight. They needed more room. They wanted more room. Back twenty years ago, it would've been sufficient if he could've got the log cabin. So they got an option from Brooks on the cabin and by this time, my dad had

passed on, so I negotiated a deal for the property for my mother. John Mack bought that property and that's when John Mack Ford was built.

Int: It's still the Ford dealership today.

C. A.: Today, and of course, they bought the corner now and I don't know if they bought Velma out or are renting, but they're using that whole thing, plus the whole fairgrounds parking lot.

Int: When the races aren't in there.

C. A.: When the races aren't on. That's the story of the Seven Mile Road cut.

Int: That six acres has a history.

C. A.: Yes, it really does. I can remember there's a swamp across the railroad track right due east of this whole thing. There used to be, I haven't been back there in years, and they had a crock running underneath that railroad track and it came out. And then it got to the road and it went down and that crock used to run across our field and it drained that whole swamp in there. Now they built that whole thing up in there and I don't know where that water's going. I don't know if the swamp is still across the street there or not. I don't even know the name of the street that runs in the back of the railroad track.

Int: Gerald Avenue

C. A.: Gerald Avenue. I guess it's pretty well developed now.

Int: Yes, it is, we have businesses back there. We used to go only back there to pick pussy willows that grew on the hillside of the track there.

C. A.: We used to cut from there and we'd walk all the way over to the lake.

Int: And go swimming where you weren't supposed to?

C. A.: Where we weren't supposed to, and that was called Curtis Lake.

Int: Curtis Lake, and now it's in the Highland Lakes subdivision.

C. A.: Oh is it? Well, I'll tell you what, Dell Campbell used to live on that lake.

Int: Correct.

C. A.: Del Campbell used to put a shanty on that lake and Del Campbell and I got to be pretty good friends. I've been a fisherman all my life and I'd sit in that shanty in the wintertime and look down that hole and there'd be fish that would come through there that would scare you, too big to spear.

Int: And that lake was deep, correct? We used to call it bottomless.

C. A.: Back in those days they didn't have all the depth finders and things they've got now but you could put a rock on a rope and when it hit the marl, you'd never know you were on the marl bottom. I presume at some point in time you'd hit something solid but it was deep.

Int: Good cold water.

C. A.: It was spring-fed.

Int: Good fish

C. A.: I was always told that that spring system was part of the old Silver Springs system.

Int: Probably would be, in that location.

C. A.: It's easy to point the finger. I remember the old Silver Spring building in the back. I remember when they used to bottle the Silver Spring pop back there. Cream Soda was my favorite. You can't buy cream soda like that anymore. They have cream soda on the market but it's not like that Silver Springs cream soda. We would go back there and I remember the front door of the building, you walk in and as you walk in, there was a round railing. You could look down and see the water coming up, the spring water. That was the original Silver Springs and the overflow was coming out the spring down there. That was my first business venture. Harvey Ritchie and I used to sell cups down at the Silver Springs. We almost made a million dollars.

Int: Now how old were you then?

C. A.: Small.

Int: And sold cups a penny a piece?

C. A.: Penny a piece. We'd pay 40 cents a hundred, $4 a thousand, $40 for ten thousand, whatever it was. We'd pay less than a half cent a piece for them and sold them for a penny, so we made a pretty good profit on this stuff. We'd sell 100 cups, 150 cups there on a Sunday and we used to do that. Well then we expanded the business. We got a little pot and put ice cream in it and that's when the railroad stepped in. Boy, I can't remember that guy's name up there in the depot, but he didn't like us too well and we couldn't sell there anymore. They moved us across the street.

Int: Almost ruined your business.

C. A.: They did. About ruined our business, but when Manning and Locking went in there, I think digging the gravel pits (my own personal opinion), I think they dig it all out and lower the water table and that's one of the reasons we have this problem.

Int: We lost the spring. It's true, that can happen. It filled the holes they made, turned them into lakes. Charles, your story's been great, your memory is fantastic, and I happen to know your age, younger than mine. Now tell us your family, who you married and what year you got married and about your children.

C. A.: Oh goodness, now you're asking things…the year I got married? You gotta be fooling me! My wife has left the room.

Int: We'll ask her. Hold on just a minute. *(Tape stops.)* And when were you married, Charles?

C. A.: June 26th, 1948 and that just happened to be the first day of bass season so I went fishing before. We didn't get married until 4:00 in the afternoon. My wife about had a fit. They were looking for me and

looking for me. They called my house and my mother said, “Well I don’t know, but I think he was fishing.” And I think I was fishing with Junior Hicks and Gill Perry and Mark Gunstellar. I remember the fishing. I was married in ’48.

Int: You married a nice Plymouth girl?

C. A.: Married a Plymouth girl whose father didn’t talk to me for about five years after we were married. I remember him saying to me, I said, “We’re going to get married.” And he said, “Have you got any money?” And I said, “No.” And he said, “Well, where are you going to live?” And I said, “Well, I hadn’t thought about that yet.” And he just got a funny look on his face and buried his nose back in a newspaper and he didn’t talk to me too much. He did come to the wedding. He did give her away. But after a while, you know, we built the log cabin and I was working. I remember what I said. I said, “We’re going to get married.” And he said, “Have you got a job?” And I said no. I was laid off at Ford’s. That didn’t go over too good. Of course, I went back to work tool-making and tool-makers were pretty well-paid. We built the log cabin and everything was hunky-dory. I treated her well. She worked for a couple of years for Tate’s Cleaners from the time she was in high school. We decided to have a family so Susan was born first. Susan is today, 35, and then ten years later Roger was born.

Int: It takes time.

C. A.: It really did. We decided we should have another one. Susan was just so wrapped up in horses all of her life. Remember, we moved to Hartland so that Susan could have her first horse. She got her first horse when she was a freshman in high school, so this was like ten years after we moved. My wife came back to Northville and ran into Susan’s kindergarten teacher (can’t tell you her name).

Int: Grace Pollack? Ann Chizmar?

C. A.: No, Grace Pollack was, I believe, Roger’s. Anyway, I don’t remember who it was, but it was Susan’s kindergarten teacher and Ann walked up to her and said, “Do you remember me? I’m Ann Altman.” She said, “My daughter was Susan.” And this teacher said to my wife, “Did Susan ever get her horse?” Now, you can imagine what an impression a five-year-old girl made on a kindergarten teacher when the kindergarten teacher, ten or twelve years later says, “Did the girl ever get her horse?” So she must have been pretty horse crazy. So we got a horse and being as interested as my daughter was in horses, she did well. I was a 4-H leader in Livingston County for fifteen years and you could tell the kids whose parents said, “We’d like to have you show horses,” and you could tell the kids who said to their parents, “I want to show horses.” The kids that want to show horses were all good and the kids whose parents were pushing, they could care less.

Int: What kind of horse did she have?

C. A.: Appaloosas. The only thing we ever had were Appaloosa horses. Of course, then Roger came along and here’s big sister showing these horses. Nothing but what he’s going to show her. He showed at the Michigan State Fair when he was five years old. He won the class and went on. Now today Susan went to Alma, graduated, and became a school teacher, taught school for about a year and a half and hated every single minute of it, got married, bought thirty acres and built an indoor arena. Now she gives riding lessons and her husband is an electrician who wires robots on the robotic machinery and does the wires on

computers. They have a big indoor arena. She gives lessons. She is just so happy. She's teaching, she uses her teaching skills and yet she's doing what she wants to do.

Int: Fantastic.

C. A.: My son is a pipe fitter. He installs fire protection sprinkling systems in ceilings of buildings. Today, every commercial building built has to have it so he's busy. He runs a crew in the daytime and at night, would you believe, he trains horses, he gives lessons, he is a licensed judge, he judges horse shows all over the state, he's got like fourteen or fifteen horse shows to judge. He's just going all the time. He really uses the pipe-fitting for an ad vocation. Sometimes he doesn't get home—he rides until 12 or 1:00 in the morning training horses. But he enjoys it. The kids' training and horses has always been good to them and they enjoy it. 4-H kids, as a rule, as a group, have less trouble than the general population. They have less problems, they teach. Boy Scouts do this, too, don't get me wrong, it's not only 4-H, but my kids were involved in 4-H. We had a club, they went through as officers in the club, they were involved with the horses, and we never had any problems with the kids. They learned responsibility. I'm not trying to be funny or facetious with you, but twenty years ago when I first got to Hartland there was a big controversy about sex education in the schools. When you'd go to the school board meetings and they say, "Are we going to teach sex education or are we not going to teach it?" An old farmer stands up and says, "My kids know where those cats come from."

Int: That's right.

C. A.: You're not going to teach this farm kid much about sex education. But anyway, they learned responsibility, they've got their animals, whether it's horses or cows or hogs or whatever and they do have a certain responsibility and I think it taught them a lot. I remember that my daughter, when she was a senior in high school, got invited to the senior prom and turned the kid down because she had a horse show the next day and had to wash the horse that night and get it all ready. That's a true story.

Int: It's priorities.

C. A.: She went to college and I'll never forget when I took Susan up there the first day. She was a scared little kid. She had visions of going to Michigan State College and went to Michigan State College on a 4-H project for three days and that was the end of Michigan State College. It was just too big. Too big, she couldn't handle it. She ended up at the little school of Alma and I remember when I took her up there, I said, "Now Susan, you got to understand that you're not being sentenced to prison or anything like this. If you want to come home, you got a problem, you call Dad. You know, you're here because you want to be here, I hope. If you don't want to be here, call me up." Knowing that this psychology was going to work, you know. About three months down the road at about 10:00 at night, the phone rings and it's Susan and she says, "You remember what you said to me?" And I said, "Yes." She said, "I want to come home." Oh my god, she wants to come home and she's crying. And I said, "Susan it's 10:00 at night, I can't come up there now. I'll be there in the morning. Your mother and I will be up there in the morning, 8:00 or whatever." So we go up there and we pick her up at that dorm and we go to Elias Brothers, and we're having breakfast and she's homesick. She's lonesome but that wasn't the whole reason why. The reason was, she'd gotten a letter from the Appaloosa Association with a list of the horse shows for the next year. The first two shows were in April, two shows in May. School didn't get out 'til May. She's going to miss four horse shows and she couldn't handle it. This was breaking her heart. So I said, "Well, Susan," I cut

her a deal, “I’ll tell you what. We’ll go to the horse shows. The horse shows are always on Saturday and Sunday. We will go to the horse shows. You don’t want to miss these horse shows. You stay in school.” She said, “But who’s going to get the horse ready?” “Your old dad will get the horse ready. I’ll wash the horse, I’ll trim his whiskers. I’ll do this.” Which we did do, it worked out very fine. We’d pull into that dormitory with our motor home and the horse trailer in the back. Friday night we’d go pick up Susan. We had Roger with us because he was showing too, and two horses, and we’d drive to Muskegon, to Sault Ste. Marie, to Timbuktu to the horse show, get her back to that dorm Sunday night and then we drove home. It was only four times.

Int: A family who loves horses stay together.

C. A.: Well, you know, when we show horses, when you go to a horse show it’s on Saturday, as a rule. We had our motor home, we had the horse trailer, and the horse shows were all over Michigan pretty much and all over the country. We showed in Columbus, Ohio, we showed in Wheeling, West Virginia, we showed in Kansas City, we showed pretty much all over. We went with the National Appaloosa Association Show. The point is, that most of the time that we went, it was in Michigan. We would go to the shows in Michigan: Muskegon and Ludington and that area. But the whole point of my story is that when that vehicle pulled out of the driveway it was the whole family. It was Roger and Susan and Chuck and Ann. And Ann would get the clothes and take care of the food and I would take care of the horses and the kids would show. They loved it. They weren’t doing it because of us. I’d beg them, I’d say, “Are you sure you want to go to the show this Sunday?” And they’d say, “Well yeah, we need the points. We ought to go.” Ok, fine. Don’t get me wrong, I was enjoying it as much as they were. That was horse showing. I, today, am a member of the Mounted Division of the Livingston County Sheriff’s Posse and I ride in probably six parades a year. They call us up, next week I work the Fowlerville Fair. I’ll be on the dispatch desk for the whole week of the fair as a member of the Livingston County Sheriff’s Department. So I ride.

Int: Still in the business, that’s great. I assume, by now, Charles, that you have retired, as such.

C. A.: You’re touching a sore spot. At this very minute I’m not working but I am actively seeking a job. I recently had the misfortune of having my company, which was Heel and Tackle Company, was bought by an outsider in Yakima, Washington and they moved the whole operation to Yakima, Washington and put fifty-five of us right out on the street. So I’m without a job. I’ve been in the fishing tackle business for about the last ten years. I worked for Ed Edinger for ten years, really, and been in the fishing business longer than ten years. Ed was a dear friend of mine as well as my boss and I was his plant manager. We’d go fishing together, we hunted together, we fished in the Arctic Circle, and I fished many many places with Ed and it was an enjoyable job. Unfortunately, about three years ago, Ed died of cancer and I went to work for a company called Heel and Tackle which makes plant fish and they were bought out by a conglomerate here in town, a company called Sedco, which was owned by Valassis Printing Company. These were money people. They bought the company as an investment and didn’t have a fish person, per se. They had a president of the company, they had a controller. They didn’t have anybody who could build and run the factories and they had three factories. So they hired me as the general manager and I had three factories that ran and I had three plant managers, which were very knowledgeable in the business and I just sat back and fished. How many people you know that get paid to go fishing? But, of course, I guess we did too good a job for them because we turned the company around and made it very profitable and they sold it. So next week I go to the tackle manufacturers’ show and I’m going to be looking for a

job. If it happens, fine. If it doesn't, I'm not going to worry about it and I guess I'm going to be retired. When you get to be my age and you apply for a job, people kind of look at you. But I want to work. I've been off since March and I'm serious when I say I just can't hack it. I fished, I fished until I can't fish anymore and I fought with the wife until I can't (she wins all the cases) anymore.

Int: So what you need is a place to spend your energies.

C. A.: Well, you know, I had a bypass Christmas Day last year and I feel great right now. I've just got to have something to do. I can't hack retirement. When I sold the store, I tried retirement twenty years ago and it didn't work then. I'm just very antsy now, whether I find something or not.

Int: I can say that we here in Northville hope if you do find something, it'll be in our area and we'll have an Altman back in Northville again doing something.

C. A.: Well, that would be nice.

Int: Charles, I want to thank you for taking the time to drive to Northville from Hartland and making this tape for the Northville Historical Society, my own personal enjoyment out of listening to you today, I know will be magnified many, many times, and I want to thank you for taking part in our project.

C. A.: It was my pleasure.