

Northville Township Historical District Commission

Oral History Interview – Dr. John Romanik

November 9, 2006



Pediatric Physician – Maybury Sanatorium

JR – Dr. John Romanik
JC – John Colling
RA – Richard Allen

This is Wednesday, November 9, 2006, and we are here to do an oral history interview with Dr. John Romanik. I am Richard Allen and this is John Colling. Each person will say something so the transcriber can recognize voices.

JR. I am John Romanik.

JC. And I'm John Colling.

RA. Okay. Basically, what we do is tape-record it, my wife is the transcriber, and we'll give you the transcription to proofread and edit as you see fit. Then four copies will be made: One for the Township Historical Commission, one for the library, one for the Historical Society Archives, and one for you. The tape will eventually be duplicated and be in the Archives and the library. Tape duplication comes later.

We know that you had quite an involvement with Maybury Sanatorium in your career, and maybe you can give us a little bit of background and when you came to Northville and how you are tied in with Maybury.

JR. As I was driving up here, I was thinking, I moved here in December 1964. I was wondering where the Township offices were then. I didn't have any business with the Township offices, but I had no idea where the Township offices were in 1964. But anyway, I came out here because I had just left a very well paying job of residency at \$125 a month at Henry Ford Hospital. I had three kids and a partner and we had a new business. As all startup businesses, we had no money. So we went to Maybury to look and see if they needed anybody, and fortunately they did. That started in 1964. I was Director of the Children's Building from 1964 to 1969 when it closed. A whole lot of stories might develop as we go along, but that's how I got introduced to Maybury.

RA. Your specialty is pediatrics?

JR. Oh, yes. That's all I took care of was children. Wait a minute, that's not all I took care of. When I was on call I took care of the whole institution. But my primary responsibility was the health and welfare of the kids with tuberculosis. It is important to remember right off that children with tuberculosis are not ill from their disease 99.9/100% of the time. I took care of their chicken pox, their colds, their measles, their mumps, their appendices, and all the other things that go wrong with people while they heal their tuberculosis.

RA. Maybe you can tell us a little about some of the facilities that are on this site. I know there were residences there. What kind of medical facilities were available?

JR. Maybury was a huge place compared to Northville, in relationship to Northville. I think there was a time when the patient and employee population of Maybury was comparable to Northville somewhere along the line. Maybury opened in 1921, and over the years it went up to nearly a 1,000 beds, and it had 550 employees, many of whom lived on the grounds and many commuted. One of the beautiful parts

about this job, I lived in the houses on Beck Road. Those five houses on Beck Road were built by the Workmans Progress Association, WPA. It was a gorgeous place to live. Maybury was a self-enclosed unit. They burned 160 carloads of coal a year to make electricity, wash their clothes, and cook their food. They had their own fire system. It was a self-enclosed unit, primarily because society probably demanded it back in those days.

JC. You had a farm on the grounds, didn't you?

JR. Yes, we did. We had a farm which is now the Maybury Farm barn and yes, they grew various vegetables there. When I was there, they didn't have a dairy farm, but they had various vegetables.

RA. Didn't DeHoCo also farm part of that land? As I recall DeHoCo came all the way out to Eight Mile Road.

JR. Yes, they did. They'd come over and do my garden. It was really pretty funny. I had a garden maybe 30 x 30 feet, and DeHoCo would bring their tractor over there with a six-bottom plow.

JC. We probably should say that DeHoCo was the Detroit House of Correction that was down on Five Mile Road.

JR. I've got a story about that. They were doing some farming over there, and were fooling around with the tractors a little bit giving the guys a joy road, and they knocked a whole bunch of prisoners off wagons onto asphalt. Of course, they got asphalt all ground up into them and so forth. I'm a rookie, and we got called over to help them out. Everybody's not hurt seriously at all, just bleeding all over the place, and I'm taking care of them. All these prisoners are promising to pay me in chicory. I had no idea what chicory was, and finally went over to one of the guards, and asked, "What's chicory?" He told me it was their tobacco they gave them on a weekly basis. I wanted to make sure what chicory was and make sure it wasn't illegal.

Now to go back to Maybury. When Maybury was built, about 100-120 Detroiters were dying per 100,000 every year from TB. You think about the news media now. The news media would have a field day on that. It went progressively down, but when it was built it was built because of the death rate from TB. It had a great enough effect that it closed in 1969. It closed because of the new drugs. But that's how many people were dying from TB in Detroit when Maybury was built.

JC. Were only Detroiters allowed to come into the hospital?

JR. At first, but then they took them from elsewhere. We had prisoners too; the state's prisoners were over there too.

JC. You were dealing with the younger ones. What age range was that?

JR. From infancy to 15, but they were primarily four and five years old.

JC. And they were separated from the adult section?

JR. Yes.

RA. What was the average length of stay for those children?

JR. Six months. We kept those kids over there to make sure they got six months of medicine so that in 2006 when they are now 45 years old and they are grandparents, they don't get TB and give it to their Grandkids. That's why we kept them there. Prior to drugs, let me give you an example of how this works. If you took 100 two-year-old kids in 1910 and you infected them with TB, one year later, 22 of them are dead. You could write that on the wall. Nothing much happened until adolescence. You still had 78 of them. Is my math right? In adolescence, because of rapid growth and so forth, a few more die, maybe six,; so now you have 28 dead. These people in 1910 would, of course, be almost 100 today. Let's assume they are alive. They're going to get cancer or tuberculosis and that inactive TB they've had that's been sitting there living a peaceful coexistence with their body, suddenly becomes active and they infect another 10 of their great-grand kids. And that's the cycle that drugs broke.

RA. What were the drugs they were using?

JR. Isoniazid—you see it on your cereal box as a close relative to it every day, Vitamin A. The other one was PAS called Para aminosalicylic acid. You say, that's a big name until you know that aspirin is aminosalicylic acid, a brother to aspirin. There were others, but those were the two major ones. The thing about it is, we took these kids and gave them drugs, and we essentially sterilized them from a tuberculosis germ so they didn't grow up and get something else and infect another group. We stopped the cycle.

RA. What percentage of the total population were children--you had adults in there also.

JR. Maybury had a capacity of 850 and we generally had 100-125 children, so approximately 10% of them were kids.

JC. When they came there, I heard one gentleman say not too long ago that he was one of the families that lived there, he wasn't a patient, but he wasn't allowed to play with the patients. Did you keep them separated from other people who were living there? A lot of employees lived right on the grounds, right?

JR. Correct.

JC. This one gentleman, whether he was correct or not, said he grew up there, but he wasn't allowed to play with the kids. Were they segregated to keep the spread of the disease from the locals?

JR. I believe you heard that story from Keith Mueller. Health officials recommended isolation of all adults and children with active TB in that era. He represents that era. After drugs it became a different story. I was a helluva lot safer at Maybury than I was at Twelve Oaks, because there is no way that I could get TB from an adult on drugs. I don't know who's not on drugs at Twelve Oaks with active TB. Kids are generally, on the average, most of the time, infrequently, infectious. They have a different kind of tuberculosis. Tuberculosis in kids is primarily a disease that affects the brain and blood. It's not a pulmonary disease. It's doesn't cause holes in your lungs and spitting out blood and bacteria. It's not very infectious in kids, but that's sort of a complicated story.

JC. That would probably be a fear of the kids' parents rather than reality?

JR. Correct. His grandfather was the Medical Director of Maybury for years. Let's face it, fellows, everybody thinks that drugs saved the world from tuberculosis, but that's really a falsehood. Remember when I told you that 120-117 per 100,000 population were dying? By the time drugs came along, that number was down to 45 per 100,000. Why? Better food, better sanitary conditions, better knowledge of how it's spread. That's a 100% decrease.

RA. You mentioned you lived in one of the houses at Maybury. Are those the houses that are on the Beck road today that are now the park headquarters?

JR. Yes.

RA. Let the record state it's right across from his house.

JR. Right across from my house. Yes. It's scheduled to get knocked down, my house, the one I lived in.

RA. Yes, that's the northerly one, I understand.

JR. The most southern one.

RA. Okay, but the one on the north side they're supposed to take down too.

JR. Well, they're probably scheduling more than anything else.

RA. I understand that one is essentially abandoned and in a state of deterioration.

JR. Yeah. I tell you I got a lump in my throat as big as a pumpkin moving out of that house. We had a 4 x 4 kitchen with five kids in it. We loved that house.

RA. You could walk to work every day.

JR. I biked it some days. I was not an employee. I was an independent contractor. I was in private practice too. I took care of the kids, but I was in private practice out in Farmington also.

JC. As you know 'cause you were there, they dedicated a little educational, historic trail over there that shows the location of the various facilities. It's so hard to imagine now with it all gone. With the children, weren't there cottages for the kids as well as the main place?

JR. The children's story gets a little confused, and I'm not sure I can give you the straight one. You remember the gate at Seven Mile, don't you? That Seven Mile gate was the main entrance. It started at Seven Mile and Beck and it had a big arch, and allegedly Maybury plowed it. You went up that road and right over here on the right were a whole bunch of buildings with a whole lot of nursery rhyme characters on it. The Detroit Times would bring kids out there to try to prevent them from getting TB. They did not have TB. It was a summer camp. Right next to it was the Children's Building, it was called Flag Pole Hill, the highest point in Maybury, 800 and some feet above sea level. That is where the kids were before my time. That's where they had the kids, the school, and so forth. The whole theory was to keep them a couple of miles away from the adults. All right? Now I don't know what day

this happened, it was before my time, they moved the kids into what was called the Men's Annex. I should have brought the book to show you where that was, but I didn't.

RA. We can't tape record the book! (Laughter)

JR. That's where I worked and where I took care of the kids. The children's building was a huge building; it was there when I worked there. I went through it. It was an abandoned building. I don't know where the money came from to build the camp next door to this abandoned building. I don't know who paid for the kids that stayed there. I am sure with a little research it could be found.

RA. Didn't they feel getting out in the fresh air could cure TB?

JR. Well, that was certainly the theory before Maybury was built. That was from a guy named Trudeau out of New York. That was the whole thing, fresh air and sunshine. Maybury was more on a bed rest. The whole theory at Maybury was to try and stop the movement of lungs by laying the guy down, not to do anything, and then you did various things to collapse his lung, namely: put air in it, cut his ribs up so they would flop down, I mean these have various technical medical names, you know. But the whole theory was to collapse the lung, let it sit there for years and heal up. Actually I never use it. When I teach about tuberculosis and I do still teach physicians about it, everybody calls it inactivity. I call it "building a fence around the buggers." All you did was build a fence around it. The higher the fence the better, and that fence usually came down when other illnesses struck. The open-air theory was not so much at Maybury anymore.

RA. Okay. You've been in the Township for forty plus years, do you have any particular memories as to how it's progressed good, bad or otherwise,

JR. I was thinking coming down here about what I wanted to tell you and I still hope this happens. I don't need it anymore, but I hope this happens. When we lived down at Maybury, we had two kids, and then we finally ended up with five kids. My wife would go to Braders and there was a lady working there by the name of Bea and all I knew was she was called Bea; I didn't know what her last name was. But my wife would tell me that I had to watch the kids, and she would go to Braders and she'd bring home this pile of clothes and try them on the kids at home. The ones she wanted to take back she took back and the ones she wanted to keep, she kept, and then she went down there and paid her. This happened for years.

RA. Small town atmosphere.

JR. It happened for years. I remember walking down Main Street one time, my mother-in-law died. There were a few merchants opening up their stores, and of course the banks at that time you know back in 1965, they opened up noon at best, and I'm being facetious. The only problem was the plane was flying at 10, and I'm going down Main Street. I needed to buy a ticket to fly in this airplane since my mother-in-law died. Charlie Lapham was out there putting his clothes out on the sidewalk. I said, "I need to buy an airplane ticket, and I don't have any money." I wonder if he still remembers this. He had just come from the bank, I guess, because he had a pocketful of money. So he must have run over to the bank to fill up his cash register. He peels off...and he says, "How much money do you want?" Now I met this guy at best twice before that. Anyhow, I don't remember how much money he gave me really, obviously he gave me enough for a ticket, but I remember going back later and paying him with a

check. That was really amazing. Another thing, I always used to go down to John Mach's. Do you remember when John Mach Ford was in town? Course when you have five kids, you need a station wagon. Nobody knows what a station wagon is anymore. That was a big car. I would go down and we'd see a station wagon in the back and we'd say, "It looks pretty good." I would call John Mach from the office and tell him I wanted that station wagon. He said, "We'll get it ready for you." That guy would stay in his office, cause I didn't get out until 6:00. He stayed in his office until 6:30, quarter to 7; I'd give him a check for a car and drive off with a car. I hope they still do that. I don't have any reason to check it, but I hope they still do.

RA. There are some that still do. And there are some that don't. (Laughter)

JR. But, I was trying to think of where the Township Offices were in 1964.

RA. At one time they used to be in town. I think there was a building, if I recall, where city hall is today or close to it. The Township and City shared a building.

JR. They shared that.

JC. They were in the church building for a while. They were over on Franklin Road where Meads Mill School is. There was an old one-room schoolhouse for the Township. I don't know the dates, but I know they were in both those two places. So it's probably the one in town.

RA. I think they were in town when we came here, but shortly after that they moved down to the Child Development Center.

JC. The church is now at the historical village. It was Township Hall for a while.

JR. The other thing that I thought of was I drive up my driveway now at 8:30 in the morning and I can go through three religions in a hurry. These kind people won't let me get on Beck Road. I can remember when Beck Road was closed from Monday through Wednesday with a snowstorm and nobody knew the difference. No problem. Now, I'd like to close it from Monday through Thursday just to see what would happen. (Laughter)

JC. It was a dirt road a few years ago, a relatively few years.

RA. I have neighbors who complain about the noise from Beck. I look at them and say, "When we moved here at 5:30 in the morning during the summertime, you could hear the double-bottom gravel trucks going down the road to Thomson Gravel Pit, hitting every pothole on Beck Road, clanging, banging down the road.

JR. You could hear them start up in the yard too.

RA. Just don't tell me how noisy Beck Road is.

JR. I know in 1966 we had a storm that closed that road from Monday through Thursday. It just didn't bother anybody. Now, I can't even get out of my driveway now.

RA. The problem is, it's the only connector between two freeways.

JR. Yeah, now that they've got M-14 pinched off, it's the only connector.

JC. Between Haggerty Road and Pontiac Trail, it's the only north-south highway that goes through.

JR. Yeah. All the rest of them don't go south.

RA. I don't use Beck Road at rush hour; I don't go out there.

JR. Give me another question, I'm about run out of ad-lib here.

JC. When you're dealing with a bunch of, you said, five, six, seven year olds, my experience as a parent is that they're a pretty active bunch. Did you have problems keeping them from running around, dancing, and playing, getting into trouble, or were they pretty good?

JR. Okay, John, I suppose you were in the newspaper business, and therefore, you were making a living, and were just like I am. You did not raise your kids. By that I mean, you gave them paternal supervision that society demanded at that time, but I'm talking about everyday raising them, you know. It's the same way with Maybury. I would walk in there like you did at home, you know, in the morning and the night, but the nurses, the teachers, everybody else would take care of the kids. So I really can't answer your question honestly; I really can't. I can only remember one time going over there for discipline reasons. One time, and that is when the kids got the racial thing going among the employees. You know, Mrs. So-in-So said something about you. (Laughter) All right? It got to the point when Mrs. So-in-So wanted an explanation. But as far as discipline, no, I had no part of that. My primary responsibility was medical care, so I would go over there in the morning, and I would see all the children who were ill. If you had 100 kids this time of the year or March, 10 of them would have a fever. So you had to check them to see what was wrong with them,

JC. Did the nurses steer you to kids who weren't feeling good?

JR. Oh yeah. They kept a real hospital record on them. Oh Yes. I would get a write-up on each child. Each child had a write up every day; in other words, temperature, medicine, etc. Did I look at that chart? I don't remember looking at it too much. I would walk in there and they would tell me who needs to be seen and so forth. Then I would try to do gastrics on them. In adults you collect sputum, they spit. In kids, you can't get them to spit. They'll swallow these organisms if they are producing any. So you go down into their stomach in the morning, not every morning, but once every two months and you aspirate their stomach to see if you can grow any organism that they swallowed through the night. That wasn't a very nice procedure; they didn't like that. I got awful good at it, to put a tube into them. At least I thought I was awful good at it. Then I'd talk to their parents. I would talk to parents when they would call, certainly. But also once a month I'd see them in person and report on how their child was doing.

Oh I know one incident I forgot to tell you about. Remember I told you that TB stays arrested? First of all, back in 1800s they thought tuberculosis and what was known as consumption, were two different diseases. They had the idea that once you got TB it was a progressive disease. They didn't know it went all the way back to childhood in some cases. Like for example, we have a wonderful analogy. If you

had chickenpox as a child, you still have chickenpox in you and if you haven't had it already, if you live long enough, you will get shingles. All right? You have been living in peaceful coexistence with chickenpox in this particular spot; your immune system has been keeping it corralled. But if for some reason your immune system falls down on the job, some of them will get out. Well, this lady was taking care of the Hansel and Gretel nursery school in Garden City. Another thing that will let your immune system drop is medicine. One of which is steroids. She was getting this medicine (steroids) and working in this nursery school and she developed active tuberculosis, which was very silent because of her steroids, and she infected about 28 kids. I had a boss at Maybury. His name was Dr. Howard. He didn't say much, but, damn, he was smart. On a weekly basis we'd have about ten kids come in. We'd have to look at their films and so forth to see how extensive their disease was. First of all, we're dealing with white kids from this school. I can tell by looking at the x-rays which ones are of the black race and which ones are of the white race because of the amount of tissue reaction in most cases. Anyway, my boss said, "These are white kids, why is their disease so extensive?" I didn't think anything about it. That was Week 1 and apparently the word got out at the school, and they tested everybody. Then Week 2 hit, and boy, we got another 10-15. Same thing. It was Dr. Howard. He said, "Boy, whoever found that is pretty sharp." It was a guy, a routine pediatrician, who did a skin test on this kid, just suspected it, and found it positive and then they checked it all out and found it related back to this employee at this Hansel and Gretel nursery school. I had about 28 of those kids out there. All did well. None of them had anything-bad wrong with them, but it got me on Huntley-Brinkley. That was the 7:00 news, NBC, 1966. It demonstrates how this cycle would work. An adult would break down, all these kids get infected. Now if you didn't have drugs, now you've got 28 kids for the rest of their lives are a walking bomb. Unless you give them medicine, it will diffuse the bomb.

JC. When was the polio vaccine?

JR. 1961. Just a minute. 1960.

RA. Two or three. We got married in '62 and I remember my wife and I took the sugar cube, so it had to be after '62.

JC. So was that sort of the beginning of the end for Maybury when the vaccines became...

RA. You're talking polio, this is TB.

JC. Oh TB, I'm sorry, Ok.

RA. Cancel that remark.

JR. I wish I'd brought this book. It's called the Maybury Manual because these were papers written on Seven Mile by Maybury San. doctors and personnel. And you ought to see the way these guys are writing. First of all this manual that I'm talking about was written in 1940. They're writing these articles for a magazine. Nobody wants to mention the war that's coming up, but you can read between the lines if you know any history and know that they mention Hitler once. The guy who found TB was caused by a germ was Koch in 1882. He saw it under a microscope, and at that time, if you implied the source of a disease was anything other than the Almighty's wrath, you were in trouble. Most diseases were God getting even with you. This guy says, "This is baloney. I've got the buggers right here, right under the mic." So he was scorned something fierce. Sixty years later, in 1940, a physician at Maybury

said, "There is somebody in this big world sitting around, and he is going to come up with a vaccine." We're not talking drugs, but a vaccine, and I'm almost certain he won't be scorned at all if he finds a solution to this problem." It's an amazing insight when you know a little bit of history.

RA. This book you're referring to, if you ever feel the need to put it into history, I'm sure the Northville Historical Society would love to add it to their archives.

JR. The answer is, somebody is going to get it. I think they have one.

RA. I don't know. They may. I have to put a plug in for the Archives, or I'll get shot.

JC. One last thing, the gentleman whose name is on the place, Mr. Maybury, who worked very hard, I understand he died of TB there at the hospital. Do you know anything about that? That was in the '30s. Course that was a long time before you were there.

JR. No, but I heard a lot about it. It's one of those stories when you know how things progress, you just wonder how valid they are. No. 1: Maybury worked for Couzens, James Couzens was the mayor. He's one of the mayors that Maybury worked for. He was in real estate and he became reasonably wealthy. He was one of those "dollar" guys. He's working for the city for a buck. He allegedly dies in a farmhouse called the Whipple Farm. It is not the house where the Maybury Barn is. When the state took over, they knocked that building down. When you go into the entrance from Eight Mile Road, it was right across the road from the other side of the buildings that are north of Eight Mile. It was a little house and he allegedly died there. I don't know if he died of tuberculosis, I doubt it. But wait a minute, I know how the story gets started by me saying, "I doubt it." Write it down here. The answer is that I personally question the TB story very much. I think it was fabricated...history.

JC. Some things take on a story of their own sometimes.

RA. They have their own life.

JR. Yes, they gather moss.

JC. I'd heard that talk by somebody years ago.

JR. There's a story that he allegedly hooked up a team of horses with a plow and plowed the furrows that the roads were being built on. Seems plausible. Whether it happened or not, I don't know. The thing about it is, you can go to that Children's Village, there's a big pine tree right in front of it, and my kids introduced me to this. You can climb up that pine tree. Not on a day like today, most days, and you could see downtown Detroit big as life. Really well.

RA. I was talking to George McCarthy who is head of Friends of Maybury. I kind of recall when they first opened up the trail where the horse stable is that goes over the dam, there used to be some springs down there just short of the pond. I kind of recall water coming out of the ground.

JR. There sure was. That's where we got our water from for those houses.

RA. Cause George wasn't aware of it. I think it somewhat dried up. The last time I looked I could hardly see it in there.

JR. No, it got buried under that lake.

RA. Did it? Okay. Are there any more questions?

JC. No.

JR. No, thank you!

RA. Thank you, sir! Appreciate it.

JR. Okay Doke!

Transcribed by Patricia Allen on January 8, 2007.

Edited and approved by Dr. John Romanik on February 5, 2007