

Northville Township Historic District Commission

Oral History Interview

Don Thomson

August 19, 2014



Northville Township Supervisor, 1978 - 1980

Thomson Sand and Gravel

Choo Choo Car Wash

August 19, 2014

ORAL HISTORY – Don Thomson

Interviewers: Richard Allen and John Colling, Northville Township Historic District Commissioners

This is Tuesday, August 19, 2014. I am Richard Allen, and John Colling and I are conducting an oral history interview with Don Thomson.

RICHARD: Don, just as a matter of introduction I know that you have lived in the Township for a long time. Can you give us your background coming into the Township, where you lived, and what businesses you were in?

DON: I came to Northville in the summer of 1948, but my father had been here approximately 12 years earlier in the mid-30s. We all are originally from the Grand Rapids area. I came to Northville as a freshman in high school, and I finished school in 1952. We lived on the Starkweather farm, and my dad made a deal to buy the land from Mr. Starkweather in the 30s for \$50 an acre. My father asked Mr. Starkweather where he wanted him to start buying the acreage, because he owned frontage on practically all four roads in Section 8, Town One South, Range 8E. There was a little gravel quarry there owned by John Waskin called the Northville Sand and Gravel, but at the time that my dad started buying the land, the gravel was sold to only one company in Detroit called Standard Builders. So that quarry was a supply line to Standard Builders somewhere near Wyoming and Fenkel. When my dad started to get a surveyor to find where they might start buying the land, Mr. Starkweather said he could start anywhere he wanted. So my dad immediately started buying land that was adjacent to the Northville Sand and Gravel Quarry, because he thought that maybe in a year or two he might be able to buy enough land from Mr. Starkweather so that someday if Northville Sand and Gravel Quarry ran out of gravel, they would have to go through my dad before they had to talk with Mr. Starkweather. About 10 years later, that's exactly what happened.

My dad didn't have the money in the 30s and early 40s to actually go into the gravel business, so he farmed it and helped Mr. Starkweather farm it. During the course of when he was buying the acreage abutting the Northville Sand and Gravel Quarry, my dad would come home every Saturday night and go back to Northville on Monday. We illegally had a little chicken coop in the backyard in the city limits of Grand Rapids. My dad had about 26 or 27 chickens, and anytime a chicken laid an egg, he'd put a little green paint on it so he would know who was laying and who wasn't laying. If a chicken didn't have any paint on it after a couple of weeks, he was usually the Sunday dinner. One weekend he came home and told my mother he needed one more purchase of \$50 and he would have enough land so that he could block Northville Sand and Gravel Quarry from coming over and talking to Mr. Starkweather. He said he didn't have \$50, but Mr. Starkweather had six hired hands. He asked my mother to gather up some eggs and he'd kill a couple chickens that didn't have any paint on them. So he returned on Monday morning with seven-dozen eggs and three dressed chickens. Mr. Starkweather was waiting there and asked if he was going to buy another acre that morning. My father told "Starky" he didn't have the money this week, but he brought his wife some nice

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chickens and eggs to help feed the hired hands. Everybody ate in the Starkweather house together, the hired hands and my dad. After all the hired hands had left to sleep in the barns, Mr. and Mrs. Starkweather told my dad that that was a pretty nice thing to do, bringing those eggs and those chickens. They were going to give him an acre for it. So I can't ever remember anybody getting an acre of ground cheaper than my dad that day. That's just one episode.

RICHARD: You moved here in 1948 and you graduated high school in 1952. Did you run the gravel pit yourself after your dad passed away?

DON: That's another story. I went into the Marine Corps right after I got out of school. My youngest sister and her husband more or less ran the gravel pit. Her last name was Sorenson, and her husband was Charlie Sorenson. When I got out of the Marine Corps in 1955, my dad put me in charge of the scale house. I weighed all the trucks.

JOHN: Before we started this interview, you mentioned Thomson Field, which a lot of people my age can remember. How did that come about?

DON: After my dad passed away I was involved with a lot of softball in Northville. I was on the Recreation Commission and a few other commissions too before it was all over. At that time I was wrapped up in softball, and they played all their games at Ford Field in Northville. They had more players than they could hold. I talked to my mom about that property on Six Mile. I told her we could build a nice little field there and lease it to the community and it would help the Recreation Department. We invested \$75,000 to \$90,000 putting that field together. Everybody loved it, and they played there for eight or nine years. But then one spring day in about 1979 or 80, my mother came back from Florida on the anniversary of my dad's birthday which was the 26th day of March. She walked all the way from her house on 7 Mile to the ball diamond on 6 Mile. It was still really cold out. She found that someone didn't turn the water off the previous fall and all the lines froze, all the commodes froze, all the sinks froze and burst. She came back to my sister's house and asked her on Monday morning to call the Recreation Department and tell them they didn't have a field anymore. So that was the end of Thomson Field. That's how it happened.

RICHARD: Was the field located at Stinson Aircraft Field?

DON: It butted up to Lapham's property, which was the old Stinson airfield—Eddie Stinson. Before the development of new homes or condos on Stinson Field, I used to walk my dogs through there. And the old hangers were there—the footings and the old block—as late as 1980. Charlie Lapham might be able to tell you more about that field. During the time the U.S. was offering a big hunk of money to the first person to fly across the pond, Lindbergh was building a plane in San Diego called the Spirit of St. Louis. I heard there was a man at Stinson Field building an airplane, and he was going to get into that race. He heard that Lindbergh had left San Diego and was on his way to New York, and the last port of debarkation was Labrador, I believe. This man hurried his plane

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and he took off. He got to Batavia, New York, crashed his plane and got killed. And that's the last I heard of that story.

JOHN: In other words, it might have been possible that a fellow from Northville would have been the first man to cross the Atlantic.

DON: Oh, absolutely.

RICHARD: I never heard that story.

DON: I had a class reunion the other night and told a few of them this story. Well, my dad started buying the Starkweather property in 1936, and along about 1940 Mrs. Starkweather got to be very good friends with my mom. One day she asked my mother, Helen, if she would like to come into her home and see her china cabinet. She said she would and went inside. On the top shelf of the cabinet was a really little, itty bitty, small copper teapot with a spout and handle. Maybe I can illustrate the size by showing this penny. Mrs. Starkweather held a copper penny in her hand while she was telling my mother this story. This copper teapot was so beautiful and so small. She said her brother made it for her out of a penny. My mother said it was so beautiful and couldn't believe somebody could make something like that from a penny. Then Mrs. Starkweather told her that her brother didn't get much notoriety from making that teapot, but he made something just recently that millions and millions of people will see until the end of time. "My golly, what did he make?" my mother asked. "Did you ever see the movie the Wizard of Oz? My brother made the tin man right here on this farm." He was paid \$300 to do it and he should have taken it out in stock instead.

RICHARD: Your family owned the gravel pit until what year?

DON: 1989. We sold out to two developers. The people we actually sold to went bankrupt and from what I understand, Alexander Hamilton was the backer who got it back and sold it to two or three other developers who built Lakes of Stonewater.

RICHARD: The Stonewater subdivision is located on the former Thomson Gravel Pit property and the lakes (22 ft. deep) were an outfall of the gravel mining operation.

JOHN: It's located between Beck and Ridge and Six and Seven Mile.

RICHARD: After that point you got into the car wash business?

DON: I built the car wash in 1967. It had a cute name of Choo Choo Car Wash because it was next to the railroad tracks. I didn't own it a year. On the corner there used to be a small little fruit stand, and that corner lot was only 100 ft. wide. I built my car wash on the property that was owned by the King family. June King was a graduate of Northville High School in approximately 1955. I paid \$20,000 for that property and within a year after I got the car wash going, I was outside one day and there were two people standing on the property where the fruit stand was. They yelled at me and asked if I wanted to sell

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it. I said, “No, I just got here.” They asked if they could make a deal because I wasn’t using the north end of the property. “I said that is where everyone comes in and goes out. If I sold it to you, I wouldn’t be able to get my people in there unless you want to go to the south and pick up so more property and we could make some kind of a deal.” Well, there were three lots going south for a total of 165 feet. I talked to my bookkeeper who advised me not to sell it to them or buy the other property. She said I should tell them to buy the property, and we’ll just trade. We did and I picked up 95 more feet of frontage on the south end of the property. As it goes south, the property goes deeper so it was a good deal for me. It was good for them too because they got a gas station on the corner, and there’s been one ever since.

RICHARD: At one point in your career you were Township Supervisor. Just for information sake, can you remember who was on the board with you?

DON: Oh yeah: Clarice Sass was the clerk; Jim Nowka was a trustee; Lee Holland was the treasurer; Bill Zapke was a trustee; and Dr. John Swienkowski was a trustee.

RICHARD: What really brought this opportunity for an interview forward was that you mentioned you had information about the Underground Railroad.

DON: I originally never heard it from Mrs. Starkweather and neither did anybody in my family. I’m going back 20 years now. After playing golf at the Salem Hills Golf Course I stopped at the little store in Salem that’s been there since the 1830s and noticed a book about the history of Salem. It mentions the name of Ruth Starkweather and said something about the Underground Railroad regarding Ruth Starkweather. That’s when I started asking around and I can’t remember how it came about. I found out about the barn that was in the middle of that farm. In 1837 (the beginning of statehood) the Starkweathers owned all the property in Section 8. Then I found out why farmers put one barn in the center of a section because it would be convenient for them to bring all their wheat, oats, and crops in from all the corners.

In 1943 there were about 12-13 barns out by 7 Mile that burned down. That’s a good story too. My dad happened to be in the area, and the local fire department came out and they didn’t have much water at all and there was a pretty good wind. My dad got ahold of Bill Foreman who owned the orchard up the road the other side of Ridge Road. My dad asked Bill to come with him to the Starkweather’s. There’s a horse trough there. He pumped and I started throwing water on the back of house or the house would be lost. He could see the way the barns were burning. I threw water on the house till after 3:00 in the morning. But I saved the house and because of that a good thing happened a little later in life. That fire happened in 1943... In 1949 Mr. Starkweather died in the first week of February. We were still living in Grand Rapids. My dad came home that weekend, and it was cold and snowy right after Mr. Starkweather died. Mrs. Starkweather called and asked dad if he was coming down that week. He hadn’t planned on it because it was cold and there wasn’t much going on with her husband gone. She said she didn’t think he was coming, but she got a phone call from a gentleman from Allegan, Michigan who wanted to buy every acre of ground that she hadn’t sold to us. My dad asked his name, and it was

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Harry Pickett, and he said he had heard of him. He was a very, very wealthy man and could probably pay a lot more than my dad's been paying her. She said that's why she was calling, because she wanted my dad to be there at 9 am tomorrow. Mr. Pickett was coming at 10 am and she didn't want to sit there and be alone with him. So my dad said he'd be there. He got up at 4 am and came down. This Mr. Pickett didn't know my dad was in the house when he came in, and the three of them sat down and she introduced him and thanked Mr. Pickett for being there. So the story goes, because my mother told me the story. Mrs. Starkweather looked at my dad and asked if he would take care of her if she got feeble now that her husband's gone, and see to it that he would put her in the Blue Star Home in St. Johns, Michigan. If so, she'd go to the ends of the world with him. (The Starkweather's had one son who was killed in World War II so she didn't have anybody.) My dad said he couldn't beat that price. Mrs. Starkweather thanked Mr. Pickett for coming all the way from Allegan, but she would take her chances with my dad because if he hadn't saved her home by throwing water on it six years ago, she wouldn't even have a home here. That's why he got the rest of the land. He didn't pay a tremendous amount for it, but he always took care of Mrs. Starkweather. I remember in the 50s when we were really rocking and rolling and selling lots of gravel and making lots of money, I asked my dad why he didn't pay off Mrs. Starkweather. He said he was only going to pay her what he had to pay her because she was living on the interest. Whatever happened to Mrs. Starkweather, he was going to take care of her before he took care of anybody.

JOHN: Let's get back to the Underground Railroad. It's well known by historians that this area had an underground railroad.

DON: The only things that I know about and I might be off a number, was that there were three barns of the Underground Railroad in this area: the Number 16 Barn (on the Starkweather farm), the Number 15 barn was in Dixboro, and the Number 17 barn was around Haggerty Road and Pontiac Trail heading for Port Huron. They hid the slaves there. A couple of years ago I went to the new Stonewater subdivision and at the bottom of the main drive down the hill where you come to the new stop sign, you look off to the left a little bit. There's a gazebo there for shelter; if it's raining you can get out of the rain. It's got a beautiful view of one of the lakes, and I couldn't believe it. It was really beautiful the way they did this whole thing. Then I got to thinking about the barn, so I went up to the top of the hill where the Blair's lived. They used to have a post stuck in the ground, and that thing is within 10-15 feet where that original barn stood. I could tell by the stakes of the other property. If that gazebo isn't on the very spot, it's close enough to where the original barn for the Underground Railroad stood, and if someone could put a sign there stating that, a lot of people would appreciate that.

RICHARD: That's something the Township Historic Commission could bring up and see if it's worthy to meet with the homeowners' association. They have more money than we have.

DON: I'll bet a lot of them don't know it.

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RICHARD: You're right. Probably most of them have no clue. That's the only way they will find out. We'd have to sit down and talk with them first. We have to get our act together first.

DON: I would like to say one thing more about that same situation that day. Another person came up and I told him about this spot. And then who comes but a lady that was black. She sat down and I asked her if she lived here. She said she didn't, but takes care of some kids here. I told her the story about the Underground Railroad and told her she may be sitting right here where the 16th barn was. She had a tear in her eye when she left.

RICHARD: Your reference was the Starkweather book that you purchased in the Salem Store?

DON: That was the history in the Salem book. But one of the Northville books has a picture of the Starkweather farm on the second or third page. It shows a bunch of the Starkweathers in the front and that book says they owned 12 or 13 barns and one of the barns hid the slaves. It was that back barn where we eventually moved near. When my dad came down here, he bought an old garage from a man on Plymouth Road and Telegraph. They were bringing this garage out, and when they got to Five Mile by the seminary, the park drive, and Northville Road, all three roads came together like a "V." When that truck that was carrying the garage made the turn onto Northville Road, a car was coming down Northville Road, and the truck decapitated the whole top of the car. Guess whose car it was? The father and mother of our old U.S. Congressman, Carl Pursell. That garage was placed near the barn, and that's where my mother and dad and I lived for four or five years. I lived in that home when I was going to school in Northville, and we didn't even have running water. Ma had to bring the water from the well.

JOHN: You said you went to high school, was it that building on Main Street?

DON: The old school on Main Street, that was the last class to come out of that school. Or maybe the '53 class.

JOHN: When you were supervisor, do you have any recollections of big things that happened then? I know I-275 wasn't built then.

DON: Oh yes it was.

JOHN: That's when the township really started growing, population wise.

DON: Actually, the previous supervisor, Wilson Greer, got some kind of grant to build the township hall that is now the police department.

RICHARD: As I recall, there was some kind of land trade with some developer.

DON: The old township hall used to be in the old Wayne County Child Development Center. I don't know what they paid the county to use the building, maybe a dollar a year.

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Probably nothing. But they got this grant to build a township hall and dedicated it in 1977, I think it was. Wilson Greer was only there for one or two meetings, and then he had to leave because I ran for the position and I happened to win.

RICHARD: Can you think of anything else township-wise, that would be significant?

DON: Lots of things happened. I'll bet there are people who don't know much about the history of Northville. Another thing I thought of while driving down here from Brighton today, I'll bet lots of people don't know that there's a hill... if you come down the steep Sheldon Road hill to the race track, there's a signal light there. If you turn right and drive on Edward Hines Drive, just as you drive over the river, you can see it plain as day...

RICHARD: Yes, we have pictures of it.

DON: You mean the ski hill? That's where they held the trials for the 1914 Olympic games. There was ski jumping there. It was held in 1913.

JOHN: When that was built if I'm not mistaken, it was the biggest ski jump in Michigan.

DON: Well, I don't know. There's a bigger one in Ishpeming.

RICHARD: I walked it one day with Junior Hicks, Laura's husband. They've been residents here forever. He told us where it was. The time we went there, he was in his mid-80s and proceeded to climb up the hill like it was nothing.

DON: It's a good size hill.

RICHARD: If you go to the intersection in the winter when the trees are bare, you can see it.

DON: You can see the silhouette. Northville's come a long way. Mainstreet 78 just set Northville on fire with redoing the downtown streets and putting up the cute little lights; everybody wanted to live in Northville after that.

JOHN: When I moved here 40 years ago it was a much smaller community. Haggerty was a dirt road; Beck road was dirt, and Six Mile past Sheldon was dirt. Do you recall if anything happened to get them paved?

DON: Not really. I was living on Beck Road when they paved it. The year before, they closed it down between 7 and 6 Mile because they had to redo the bridge over the river. I was living in the old DeJohn house right by the river and I found out a little. I lived there about four or five years. I bought it as an investment. That house was built in 1824. That was 13 years before we became a state. I remember that summer; it was peaceful down there. The next year they paved it, and now there are 50-60,000 cars a day going down that road.

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JOHN: That might have been the first house. There are thousands of homes along there now that weren't there then.

RICHARD: And most of them are coming and going to and from Novi.

DON: It's a main route. One of the county guys told me that someday Beck was going to be a big road because there's no town to stop it.

RICHARD: It's the only connection between two freeways.

DON: I-94 and I-96

RICHARD: There's a little problem by Blue Heron because the berm is partly in the right-of-way. When they built that they had a problem because the lake was too close to the road, and the county gave them permission to build the berm.

DON: What was the old gentleman's name that lived up the top of the hill near Seven Mile on the east side? He was a big county engineer.

RICHARD: I don't know. Anything else you would like to tell us for the history file?

DON: There are lots of stories I could tell you that a lot of people don't know. What I wanted to let you know is how people end up in certain places. My dad had to quit school in the 6th grade because his dad had a stroke. He had to run the farm in Caledonia, and take care of his dad who was really, really bad and was practically a vegetable for 10 years before he died in 1921. Along came Kent County who wanted to buy some gravel and wanted to know if there was gravel on our little 40-acre farm. My dad said there might be some up in the woods. They went up and found a beautiful vein of gravel, and took it out for almost a year. They gave my grandmother a check for \$4,200 in 1913. My grandmother told my dad not to tell anybody about the money because his two older brothers and sister had already married and moved away. She was concerned about my dad because he had to take care of her and his father. She wanted him to promise not to spend this money unless it would make him a big, big return. She said it would be easy to take \$350 out of it and buy a brand new Model T and then buy something else and something else, until it was all gone. She made him promise to never spend it until something big came along and he would know when that happened. It didn't happen until 1936.

But before we go to 1936, after the county bought the property and gave my grandmother that money, they put it in a box and hid it in the barn. That started my father thinking that there must be money in gravel. Since he only went to 6th grade, he knew how to read and how to write and how to hook a horse up to a buggy and go to town. He went to the Caledonia library and studied the glaciers and how the land was deposited two million years ago. He went twice a week for about a year and half. One day he found a book that told about the Fort Wayne Moraine, a vein of gravel that came from Fort Wayne, Indiana, into Michigan then turns and heads right for Oxford, Michigan. There's a quarry there

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that's been operating for 100 years and is one the largest deposits of gravel in the world. In 1912 he took that book that showed where the Fort Wayne Moraine was and marked every town it went through in Michigan. Lo and behold in 1936 when he worked in the junkyard for 20 cents an hour or \$1.60 a day, he was getting ready to have his lunch. He looked in the corner of the place where everybody ate their lunch, and there was a tube about 3ft long with two rubber bands around it. He looked at it, and it was a drilling report done by American Aggregates, which still operates in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin. He saw a drilling report dated 1932 at the Starkweather farm. How it ended up there in a junkyard in Grand Rapids, he never found out. He asked the owner of the junkyard, Mr. Brody, if he could take it home and study it. He said he could keep it, as he didn't know how it got there. My dad looked at his papers from 1912 and found that Northville was in the Fort Wayne Moraine. The vein was as wide as five miles wide and as skinny as 50 yards wide in some areas. Gerald Taft, which Taft Road was named after, had a deposit of gravel at 8 Mile and Taft Road. He had good gravel in front of the barn but was solid clay 20 feet down in back of the barn. He went over to Ridge Road. If you go to Ridge south of 7 Mile there's a little subdivision in there. This is where Bill Taft's dad, Gerald, came over with a crane and dug test holes and hit clay 20 ft. down. He missed the Fort Wayne Moraine by less than 50 ft. If he had drilled 50 ft. to the southeast, the whole Thomson family probably wouldn't be here. But because of the vein and the Fort Wayne Moraine, that's the way it happened. My dad hit the jackpot. He got it really reasonable for \$50 an acre. He paid Mrs. Starkweather more as the years went by, but he didn't pay \$75 or \$80,000 for the whole farm

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RICHARD: Thanks for giving us some little known history and background on the Underground Railroad that has been discussed for many years.

Reviewed by: Don Thomson Don Thomson

Date: 9-22-14

Very happy to sign this page
of history of Northville, on my
80th birthday

Transcribed by Patricia Allen on: September 15, 2014

