

Henry Huffman

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This program would not have been possible without the cooperation of the many long-time residents of the Village interested in helping to preserve particulars of a fascinating past, and the patience, energy and effort of a small but dedicated group of interviewers, transcribers and typists who share the belief that the past is too important to be forgotten.

Richard E. Thompson

Director

ABSTRACT

Interviewee: Henry Huffman

Interviewer: Briggs Maselli

Date of interview: January 24, 1977

Wilmette 1918

Tornado 1920

New Trier High School

Northwestern Railroad history

Purdue Engineering School

Christmas parties of Mrs. Huffman

Henry Huffman

M: January twenty-fourth. My name is Briggs Masel1i and I will be interviewing W. Henry Huffman for the Oral History Group. Mr. Huffman, would you tell me your name and where you presently live and how long you've been there?

HH: My name is W. H. Huffman. H-U-F-F-M-A-N. My nickname is Heine. H-E-I-N-E. I presently live at 3253 Sprucewood Lane in Wilmette. And have lived at that location since 1962. I was born in Pierre, South Dakota, arch, 1911, leaving that location with my parents the same year to Pekin, Illinois. We left Pekin, Illinois in 1914, moving to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We moved to Wilmette in 1918. My father was in the construction engineering department of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad and his first assignment with that property was at Pierre, South Dakota where he was constructing the railroad from Pierre to Rapid City, South Dakota. When that project was completed, we moved to Pekin, as I indicated earlier, where another segment of railroad was being constructed. Moving to Milwaukee, he was in charge of the construction of the grain elevator for the same railroad and was in the process of constructing another grain elevator in South Chicago when we moved to Wilmette.

Henry Huffman, cont. 2

M: Would you tell me if you have any brothers and sisters? And where you went to school?

HH: I have one brother twelve years younger than I who was born in Wilmette, and my schooling consisted of grammar school from third grade through eighth at the Byron Stolp School, located at that time at Central and Tenth Street in Wilmette. I continued my education at New Trier. And now there are two; but at that time, and at this time, it is now called New Trier East. I continued my education at Purdue University graduating in 1932 with a bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering. And then I received a Master of Science in Civil Engineering in 1933.

M: Now would you please tell me a little bit of your early recollections of growing up in Wilmette?

HH: As indicated earlier, we moved to Wilmette in 1918 and at that time we lived at 1135 Lake Avenue. My early recollections include going to school at the Byron Stolp School through eighth grade and some of the things we did then aren't done today. One of the games we used to play was marbles. Everybody seemed to have marbles. And we'd get to school early and one of the favorite games was one called "ring" where we'd draw with a stick in the playground area, a ring about seven or eight feet in diameter, and

Henry Huffman, cont. 3

then we'd put certain marbles in the middle and then try to shoot them out.

M: So the playground was not paved at that point - it was all just dirt.

HH: That's right. The playground was not paved. It was just a sandy, limestone surface. And another game we played with marbles was %Butt.+And we'd dig a hole into the playground with our heel and then lag the marbles and try and get ~~em~~ in the hole. And we were playing marbles for keeps. This was no just %un+ game.

M: Oh, if you won the game, you got to keep the other guysqmarbles?

HH: You kept the marbles. And I can recall some of the so-called tough kids at that time - lived up around The Ridge - and I happened to be quite proficient at playing marbles and when I'd win their marbles I'd have to head for home on my bicycle or they'd take them away from me.

M: Oh, I see. So you rode your bicycle.

MM: Rode the bike to school. Yeah.

M: Was it fairly well developed in that area at the time?

HH: Well, east Wilmette really hasn't changed an awful lot, in my opinion. There are some new homes. And every time I'd see a new home, I'd be surprised

Henry Huffman, cont. 4

because I never thought there was a lot there, but there were. The larger homes had two or three lots and then a new house was built on it. Actually, Wilmette - well, from the tracks east - was pretty well built up to the way it is today. And from the tracks west, maybe to Fourteenth Street, was fairly well developed, but The Ridge was the end of the world in Wilmette in 1918, 1920. Absolutely nothing but farmland, say, from two blocks - no, more than that - two blocks west of The Ridge was farmland.

M: Would you like to tell me about your paper route?

HH: The paper route was a lot of fun. The location where we picked up our papers was on what was called Electric Place and was adjacent to the North Shore Railroad. As a matter of fact, it was very close to where the present Wilmette bank is located. And we would get our papers in the morning at about five o'clock - Tribunes, Herald Examiners, and Auben-Posts, the German paper.

MM: The German paper?

HH: And there were quite a few throughout the village at that time of the Auben-Posts that we delivered. Most of the kids took their whole route on a bicycle, carrying at the beginning up to one hundred papers, which was quite a load. And one had to

Henry Huffman, cont. 5

really discipline oneself to fight off the desire to stop and rest, but we usually made it without stopping for the entire route. Then we would come back to the location where we picked up our papers and wait for calls. For instance, if it would rain, peoples paper would get wet and they would complain about that and so we used to get a nickel a paper for delivering a new one to them.

M: Now you did all this in the morning at five o'clock before you went to school?

HH: Yes.

M: Now, the streets - were they paved?

HH: Most of the streets were as a lot of them are still today. They were brick paved. Some of them, of course, had been widened and quite a few have been covered with macadam, but underlaying the macadam, even on a wider street like Lake or Central, I'm sure the brick is still there.

M: Could you tell me about your recollections of Mahoney's farm?

MM: Mahoney's farm was at the location which is now called No-Man's-Land, and has been, of course, next door to the village. And as a youngster we used to go into this location, cutting through or over a fence, and we'd catch pollywogs. There must have been some kind of a fresh water pond



Henry Huffman, cont. 6

in the area. It might have been even swampy, but we went up there and collected pollywogs and took ~~em~~ home - and then to see how long it would take before they became frogs.

M: Were you ever successful in raising any?

HH: Not raising them, but they certainly became frogs in a relatively short period of time. - a week or so - and their little hind legs would be sticking out of the bodies and they~~d~~ shed their other encasements.

M: What were they growing up at Mahoney~~s~~? Was it a dairy farm?

HH: To my recollection, there were a few cows and there

was a corn field or two. It was, obviously, a

relatively small farm, but that~~s~~ my recollection -

as best I can remember.

M: Was there any difference in having grown up either east or west of the tracks?

HH: As a boy, I don~~d~~ think I noticed it at all. I was active in sports and things of that kind, and with boys it really didn~~d~~ make any difference at all whether you had any money or not, or your folks had any money. It was just whether you were a good guy. And, uh, with girls I think there would have been a difference. As a matter of fact, when we moved back to Wilmette in 1948, I had two

Henry Huffman, cont. 7

girls and a son and the two girls did have a little difficulty because the east side was where the money was all supposed to be. And girls are a little different from boys in this sort of thing at grammar school and high school age did affect what they did.

M: The boys that you played with - the ones that you fought with about your marbles - you said they were from The Ridge. Was that considered the Gross Point section?

HH: Yes, that was Gross Point section.

M: And you didn't notice that there was any difference - at least you said - were they friends of yours, besides the fact that they would beat you up to get their marbles back?

HH: Well, sure, they were friends. It was just that they seemed to have a little group among themselves and because they all lived relatively close together in the Gross Point area and they'd gang up on people. Not that there weren't groups of the same kind on the east side of Wilmette. I just never seemed to have any trouble with them. I did have trouble with those in the Gross Point area.

M: Can you tell me about the tornado?

HH: The tornado was quite an event- Palm Sunday, 1920 - we were then living in our home on Lake Avenue.

Henry Huffman, cont. 8

And as it happened we were just about in the center of the path. Everybody was home from Sunday school and church. To the best of my recollection it hit Wilmette about 12:15 p.m. My father recognized the symptoms and told my mother and I to head for the basement. But we were sort of spellbound because there was an apparent vacuum just ahead of the tornado.

M: What were the symptoms?

HH: Dead, still air - real dead - a vacuum-like - like we were at the core, of something. There was no wind - just absolutely flat and he seemed to recognize this - and it got very dark.

M: Oh.

HH: Got very dark - and - but we - my mother and I didn't move and it was over very quickly and we were looking out the dining room window to the south and a huge roof detached from the house and came floating by like a magic rug. It was rippling and this was really astounding - at least for a seven or eight year old kid to watch. And it was over in a matter of two or three minutes, I'm sure. And when we went out of the house and on Lake Avenue and on Forest and Elmwood many of the huge oak trees were down and across the road. o automobiles could travel, of course, for a couple

Henry Huffman, cont. 9

of days until they got the trees off the roads. And at that time we, my folks, had actually just signed the papers for our new home one week before and nobody ever thought about tornado insurance at that time because there had never been any. We went over to our new home and half the roof was gone.

Where was the new home?

MH: On Maple Avenue. And it had moved about four or five inches off its foundation. So that was really something. And then, of course, immediately after the wind, there was a tremendous downpour. So anything that was exposed - like the roof being gone from a house - the whole house was soon saturated with the water from the storm. So it was really a messy thing for my folks. As a kid, I enjoyed it - and enjoyed walking around the seeing all the damage and which didn't bother me any because I was not going to have to pay for it. But straws driven through trees and unusual things like that you find with a tornado. To the best of my recollection, the only person killed in Wilmette was the crossing flagman located at the Wilmette Avenue crossing. And his shanty and he, himself, were picked up and carried about eighty to a hundred feet in the air and then dropped. But to the best

Henry Huffman, cont. 10

of my recollection that was the only person killed. And it could have happened twenty minutes earlier - everybody would have been on the streets coming home from church.

M: Yes, that's right, too, the time was just right. But they still had a crossing guard in a little shack at Wilmette?

HH: Well, they had them at every location on the railroad. This, of course, was long before any mechanical gates or signals were in place on the railroad, so at each crossing of the tracks there was a crossing gateman or flagman and he mechanically lowered the gates and mechanically raised the gates.

M: And he and his little shanty were -

HH: And he and his little shanty were picked up by the tornado. One of the other activities I remember in Wilmette during my last year, say, in grammar school and the first two years in high school, were activities in the Boy Scouts and the Sea Scouts. To the best of my recollection, I was a charter member of the first Sea Scout troop which was established either in 1923 or 1924. At that time two of the scoutmasters had a yen for sailing and selected ten boys in the Boy Scout troop to be Sea Scouts if they so desired.

Henry Huffman, cont. 11

M: Do you remember who the Scoutmasters were?

HH: Yes. I just happen to remember who the Scoutmasters were. By last name, at least. One was Cook and another was Shaw. Cook was the Scoutmaster at Troop Two and Shaw was the Scoutmaster of Troop Five in Wilmette at that time. So these two fellows went to the fathers of these ten boys they selected and said they did not have enough money to buy a boat, but they would pay half the price of a boat if the ten fathers would donate one tenth to make up the other half. And it's unbelievable, they bought a boat for six hundred dollars and it was a thirty-six foot yawl.

M: Good grief

HH: (Laughter) And we had more fun on that boat - Of course, as soon as I got in to Sea Scouts I dropped Boy Scouting because I had so much fun on the water and we would take trips in this boat and we wouldn't take all ten, of course, but it would handle half of the boys on one day and then the other half would go the next day. And we went into races like the Michigan City race. I recall distinctly because we dismasted halfway across and had to be pulled in by the Coast Guard. There was a boat called the U.S.S. Wilmette which was a Navy boat, which was patrolling the course, and when we dismasted

Henry Huffman, cont. 12

they threw us a huge line about four inches in diameter and were going to tow us to Michigan City, but as soon as they started up they had so much free board against our little boat that the bow went under the water. So then this huge line, this four inch line, became wet - no way get the knot out - so I chopped it off and the boys on the boat almost had a fit because I chopped off the end of the line, so it all unravelled. And then we got picked up by the Coast Guard and that was the only time I was ever sick on a boat in my life because we had to get below in the Coast Guard boat and there were six or eight foot waves and that was too much for me. And they hauled us to Jackson Park Harbor and we had coffee and I think that was the first time I'd ever had coffee in my life, and I didn't like that, either.

M: How did you get home from Michigan City?

HH: From Jackson Park? Well, we had to get a new mast and re-fit the boat at Jackson Park and then sail home.

M: Oh, you sailed it home?

HH: We sailed it home. A week or so lapsed from the time we were hauled into Jackson Park and the time we got it refitted.

M: What happened to the boat?

Henry Huffman, cont. 13

HH: I can't answer that. I've asked questions and nobody seems to know what happened to that boat, but it was a tub, in a sense. It was very seaworthy and never capsized, I'm sure, or anything, and so it was a beautiful training boat for young kids. It was a gaff-rigged boat. And it had two full sails, a jib and then it had a topsail that made it a gaff-rig. And, of course, it had a mizzen sail and a mizzen topsail. So there were all kinds of lines to handle when you tacked and so it required four or five people to run the boat.

M: How long were you in the Sea scouts?

HH: About three years. Then other interests, you know. But it was just great. In high school at New Trier I was relatively small. I was about a year younger than most people in the same class and I didn't start to grow until the latter part of my junior year and through that summer, so that by the time I matriculated for my senior year, I was big enough for varsity athletics. Duke Childs was the athletic director and a fellow by the name of Ashenbach, a Dartmouth graduate, was the football coach. And Duke Childs coached basketball together with a man by the name of Grater G-R-A-T-E-R who later became athletic director at New Trier. Duke Childs had a camp in Canada - Ontario, Canada - that was



Henry Huffman, cont. 14

a wonderful experience for small boys. And he had ~~em~~ from a relatively early age through high school. The counselors were former campers who came back and went to camp after they were through their vacations during their college careers. And we had wonderful canoe trips and wonderful education for anybody who loved the outdoors at this camp. And as far as I know, it was called ~~%Duke~~ Camp+for many, many years and it probably wasn't sold by him at all. It was probably part of his estate when he died.

M: Would you tell me what you remember of your mother's Christmas parties?

HH: My mother started having Christmas parties again as far back as I can remember, actually after we moved to our second home in Wilmette. She loved to cook and she loved to have people eat. She was a farmer's daughter and, therefore, knew what it was to feed a lot of people, and so these Christmas parties became really a tradition in the area where we did live. All of the neighbors without any being ostracized from the party, were there and many other friends of hers from the garden club and the church groups where she was very active. As far as I can remember, there wasn't too much in the way of hot foods, but I can recall her cooking . baking

Henry Huffman, cont. 15

cookies for weeks ahead of time, and there must have been fifteen or twenty varieties of cookies and tarts and cakes and brownies and things of that kind that were stashed all over the pantry in our house prior to the time of the party. And I know I was forewarned many times to stay out of this jar and that jar because those were for the party. I think that's really about all I can remember.

M: Was there a big tree?

HH: Yes, we always had a large Christmas tree that was put in the sunroom so it was out of the way of the people who would gather mostly in the dining and living areas.

M: Where did you get this Christmas tree from?

HH: To the best of my recollection, they were in lots as they are today, and I know we picked up a few trees and I did myself after I moved down here from the north woods. I had them shipped down, and having lived in Escanaba, Michigan, as one of my locations in the field for the railroad. And after moving to Wilmette for several years, I had my friends ship me a tree from the north woods.

M: Can you tell me the story about the railroad development here?

HH: I can - by hearsay, of course. When we moved here

Henry Huffman, cont. 16

the two tracks were in. One southbound and one northbound through Wilmette. Originally when the first track was built, naturally it was a single track, and most of the population in Wilmette and other towns along the North Shore was east of the tracks, and therefore the depot was put on the east side so that when people came to take the train, if there was inclement weather, they'd have some protection. Then, when additional railroad traffic dictated a second track, it was installed on the west side in order that the depots would not be destroyed. And, therefore, the Northwestern became a left-handed railroad, in the sense that we think of always driving on the right-hand side, the Northwestern is left-handed going to Chicago, and, of course, coming back the same is true. And that's the only reason and not British money or influence, as many people talked about, as to why the Northwestern is a left-handed railroad. It was only because the depots were constructed on the east side of the track.

M: And it's still the only left-handed railroad?

HH: And it is the only left-handed railroad in the area. I started to work with the Northwestern during my first summer after my first year at Purdue in 1929, and worked for them continuously after graduation

Henry Huffman, cont. 17

until retiring in 1973. The first twenty years of my career of railroad engineering were spent in various division points on the railroad. For instance: Madison, Wisconsin; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Escanaba, Michigan; Boone, Iowa; Sioux City, Iowa; North Fork, Nebraska; Huron, South Dakota. After twenty years of field experience in railroad engineering, I came to Wilmette and continued my career with the railroad, being in the general office from 1952 until retirement. At the end of my railroad career I was a vice president and chief engineer of my department, with the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad.

