

Hila Bross WRBJ Radio Interview

- Steve: [00:01](#) - Views Steve Woodruff, talking to Hila Bross for the July '78 programs in three, two, one. What he was telling me is that you're knowledgeable in the local history of Clinton County. You made a sort of a hobby of it or how did you get involved in it?
- Hila: [00:26](#) I made my home with my grandparents when I was in high school and a little after. They had lived here off and on over the years. He was a minister and he had held three different pastorates here and then they came back here to retire. So over the years they had learned a great deal about people and places. After I was married--my husband's father and mother had both been born and brought up in Clinton County. I just kept my ears open and listened and then later I was in the library as librarian for 11 years and I read all the history I could find.
- Steve: [01:09](#) I sort of get the impression that, you know, Clinton County's sort of a sleepy little area where people don't get too rowdy or anything. Was there ever a time when things were wilder here in the county?
- Hila: [01:23](#) I wouldn't say so except with the two or three isolated instances; for instance, there were a couple of places in the county where counterfeit money was manufactured back in the 1800's. I'd say about 1850 maybe. The men who were instrumental in doing that were arrested and taken to account for it. Then there used to be saloons, of course, everywhere. There are a few stories about that. In the little town of Eureka, for instance, there were so many saloons that it was once just known affectionately as "swizzle town."
- Steve: [02:10](#) Where did all the patrons come from?
- Hila: [02:12](#) I wouldn't think there would have been enough in Eureka to keep them busy but they came from the surrounding areas.
- Steve: [02:20](#) Is there any reason why they all settled in one place?
- Hila: [02:23](#) I don't know why that was. I really don't know that. Across the road from where I live is the Old Stagecoach Tavern that at one time was known as Coleman's Hotel. This is in Greenbush Township, four miles north of St. Johns, and later known as French's. They used to have a tap room and the people passing by stopped in and got the refreshments there.

Steve: [02:54](#) There was a stagecoach tavern. Was there a stagecoach?

Hila: [02:57](#) Oh yes. Yes, the stagecoach at one time went from Lansing to St. Johns and later on up to Maple Rapids, Ithaca.

Steve: [03:10](#) How long ago was that?

Hila: [03:12](#) That probably lasted up 'til about 1900 almost because there was no north and south railroad. There wasn't any point in their going east and west because they had the Grand Trunk Railroad, There was no other public transportation until, well, no public transportation. There never has been, except by bus or stagecoach north and south, except between St. Johns and Lansing when there used to be the interurban after automobiles became common and the stagecoach stopped.

Steve: [03:54](#) What were the roads like when the stagecoach was running?

Hila: [03:57](#) Well, US-27 was not in existence, particularly right east of our house. We live right beside US-27 now, US-27 and French Road. There wasn't any road south of our house because it was all swamp. All through where the muck land is now, it was impassable. So they had to go a mile west where DeWitt Road is now. That was a higher road and that was kind of a main road. It was pretty good but there were many swampy, marshy areas that had to be avoided.

Steve: [04:40](#) What was it like on the old interurban route?

Hila: [04:46](#) It was a marvelous means of transportation. It was fast and cheap. It was a little rocky. I can remember, when I was a little girl, my mother having to take me to the back platform because I would get a little nauseated on it. But it really got you there. And they ran as late as 11:00 o'clock at night. I used to ride the interurban over to Lansing every Saturday to take voice lessons when I was in high school. The people used to go to the concerts and they would hold the last car up until the concert was over to bring people back home to St Johns, that sort of thing. Then many people who lived south of St Johns came to high school on the interurban. It was a kind of a streetcar. It ran on a trolley but it was larger and heavier than a city street car.

Steve: [05:44](#) Was it electric powered then?

Hila: [05:45](#) Yes, with a trolley overhead.

Steve: [05:47](#) What happened to it?

Hila: [05:49](#) The automobile ran out of business. They ran until the 19th of May 1929. I remember the last night. I remember hearing the last car go out. It was succeeded by a bus route but it was a long time before that was very popular. Now there are just a couple of buses a day and no place to board one, really.

Steve: [06:25](#) What other things that have sort of come and gone and the county during the last 100 years, let's say?

Hila: [06:34](#) Trains. We had wonderful train service. You could go clear to Muskegon to the west, Grand Rapids, Muskegon. You could go clear to Detroit or you could go clear to Montreal. You'd have to change a little bit, I guess. We had wonderful train service and excellent mail service by the train. It's just a pity that the railroads have ceased to operate as means of transportation.

Steve: [07:16](#) I guess the automobile probably killed them off. What was it like to get around by car, say in the 1920's, around the county?

Hila: [07:25](#) We went a lot of places and we drove quite fast. There wasn't a great deal different. I guess there wasn't nearly so much traffic. There wasn't any such thing as a four-lane highway and everything was two-way.

Steve: [07:43](#) Were the roads paved?

Hila: [07:44](#) Some of them were. The road between St. Johns and Lansing was paved about 1925, I imagine, or '26.

Steve: [07:56](#) Was that the DeWitt Road then?

Hila: [07:58](#) No, they changed the route. The main road to Lansing used to be on the DeWitt Road. You would go south on Lansing Street until it comes to an end at Parks Road and then go west one mile to DeWitt Road and then on around through DeWitt. That was a village then, and into Lansing. You'd come into Lansing on Turner Street. When they paved the road, they chose to pave a road that came in on the east side of St Johns. It came straight in on Scott Road until it got to State Street at first, didn't cut off through Whittemore as it does now. I've understood that was because there were some pressure brought to bear to because at that time. It was profitable to operate businesses beside the highway.

Steve: [09:07](#) It's the old political shell game again .

Hila: [09:10](#) They had to go through the Chandler Marsh and I guess it wasn't very easy. For years, every once in a while, they'd have to fix that road too as it goes through the big marsh there, you know, about five miles out of Lansing.

Steve: [09:26](#) Can you give me sort of a thumbnail sketch of some of the more colorful people in the county's past? The people that really, well, maybe politicians? They always seem to be the ones that get the most renown and possibly, I don't know--were there any famous criminals from Clinton county, these kinds of people?

Hila: [09:49](#) Of the politicians, the men who were in government, we have had some distinguished ones. We had one man who was an Undersecretary of the Treasury in Washington, D.C. That was Colonel Albert Spaulding who lived down on South Oakland Street and was a lawyer and was a colonel in the Civil War. Then he served in Lansing in the legislature and finally, as I say, was appointed Undersecretary of the Treasury and lived in Washington, D.C. for a number of years.

Speaker 1: [10:32](#) Who was president at the time?

Hila: [10:37](#) Oh, I wish you hadn't asked me that.

Steve: [10:42](#) What years was he there?

Hila: [10:43](#) It could have been Roosevelt, maybe. I mean Theodore.

Steve: [10:46](#) Teddy, yeah ah ha

Hila: [10:48](#) or McKinley. A number of other people have served in the legislature and Coleman C. Vaughn was Secretary of State one time, of the State of Michigan.

Steve: [11:05](#) And he was from St Johns?

Hila: [11:06](#) Yes, he used to be the editor of the *Clinton County Republican News*.

Speaker 1: [11:13](#) So there's hope for us journalistic types too then, huh?

Hila: [11:17](#) Yes, oh let's see if I can think of anybody else. Zachary Chandler did not come from Clinton County but he was a United States senator. He owned that vast tract of land through that same marsh that I spoke of a few minutes ago, known as the Chandler Marsh. So he was a landowner in Clinton County and was a very prominent political figure. There've been a number of men who

had served in the legislature from here. George Hunter did. Henry M. Perrin did in the old days and Porter K. Perrin served in the legislature.

Steve: [12:10](#) Can I ask you how the county has changed, particularly St. Johns over the past, let's say since the turn of the century? What was the town like back in 1900?

Hila: [12:21](#) Well, of course, I can't remember back that far.

Steve: [12:24](#) You, as the librarian, maybe have come across some sketches to give you an idea of what it was like.

Hila: [12:29](#) The streets, Clinton Avenue was once paved with bricks. To go back even further than that, there was a time when Clinton Avenue was full of stumps that they burned in the evening for fun and to try to get the place cleaned out so they could have a street there because it was all forests originally. Then it was at one time mud in the springtime and dirt in the summer. Then the first time it was paved, it was paved with brick. State Street was paved within my memory. It was paved in the late 1920's, I believe or even later than that, The streetlights have changed several times. We used to have some lights that I thought were much prettier than the ones we have now. They were like have lampposts that went up and down State Street. There used to be a bandstand on the courthouse lawn and a public drinking fountain and watering trough that they had on Clinton Avenue by the courthouse. In the very early days, long before my memory, there was a fence around the courthouse square. Before it was the courthouse square, it was just a public square. Eventually they did win the county seat away from DeWitt and did eventually build the courthouse, started in 1868. And so they thought from the beginning that would try to have it the county seat and did. At one time that was all fenced in. And I have seen a newspaper story warning people--this would be back in the sixties, seventies--not to allow their horses to chew on the fence around the public square. They were demolishing it. "Please feed the horses so they wouldn't chew on square when they were tied up."

Steve: [14:39](#) What was the business district like? Was it where it is now or has it shifted position at all?

Hila: [14:44](#) It was mostly on Clinton Avenue in the three blocks. There were a number of hotels at one time because this was a railroad stop and there were many salesmen going around. They had to stay someplace besides. Before the Steel Hotel was built, there was a house called the American House on that same corner and

there were a number of others. That was called the St. Johns House. The American House was over on Oakland Street. There was the Farmers Hotel and the Commercial Hotel. The Perrin House stood where the Methodist Church building now stands and it was quite a sizable place. There used to be a stream that ran right along there on the little short street that's called Linden Avenue, between the courthouse and the Methodist church, there was a little stream--a bridge across there--ran across the lawn across the square and went down on Spring Street which gets its name from the fact that there are natural springs along there.

Steve: [16:01](#) How did St Johns come to be where it is? Why was there a need for a town here?

Hila: [16:06](#) Some men who were working in Lansing, one of them named John Swegles who was the auditor general of the State of Michigan--I forgot him when I was mentioning politicians--they heard in Lansing that there was going to be a railroad built across this part of Michigan. There were already towns where Owosso and Ionia are and they heard that they wanted a place about halfway between Owosso and Ionia to have a station. So when John Swegles and a man named Mead and one named Higham who worked for the railroad, I believe, and one named Kibbee, Walker--a number of the streets that we have were named after these men--they got together and formed a company and came over here and bought some land. There were already some people living here but it was a farm. For instance, a man named George Washington Estes lived at the top of State Street, State Street and Clinton Avenue, on the east side. He was made the first postmaster. They bought his land and some other land and just deliberately planned the town. It's one of the few towns that really was planned.

Steve: [17:31](#) Why did they name it St. Johns?

Hila: [17:34](#) They wanted to name it after John Swegles. They wanted to name it Sweglesville and he didn't like that and they said, "Well, how about Johnsville or Johnstown?" And No! Finally somebody said, "St. Johns" and he said, "Well, maybe." There was a Baptist preacher among the group and he said, "Amen." So our name never had an apostrophe in it, but the Episcopal church was the named St John's church with an apostrophe in it and the Lutheran church is also St. John's church. At first the Catholic church was St. John's Church but they changed their name to St. Joseph.

Steve: [18:17](#) Was there ever a different type of industry in St. Johns, maybe that has come and gone?

Hila: [18:27](#) Well, there used to be the Triangle Truck Company and there was a large firm called the St. Johns Manufacturing Company that built buildings and they made furniture and lots of things like that. The furniture part of it moved about 1904 or 1906 to Cadillac. It is still called the St. Johns Table Company though it's located in Cadillac. Let's see, what else? There used to be a mattress factory. There were a couple of casket factories at one time. They manufactured coffins and more monument places than there are now. There used to be mills, a flour mill and a sawmill, as well as feed mills. There used to be a feed mill out here on our farm where we live.

Steve: [19:35](#) Where did the people come from who decided to move into the central part of the county?

Hila: [19:42](#) Well some of them came from the southern part of the state. John Swegles did. He had already settled in Hillsdale County. A couple of those people came from more southern counties, but many of them came from New York state and some from Ohio, but many from New York state. Some of the towns, for instance, Ovid, is named after Ovid, New York, and Greenbush Township got its name from a place in New York named Greenbush. Most of their ancestors just lived in New York for three generations and they had come from New England.

Steve: [20:31](#) What is the large German population that came here? Did they come originally from other parts of the U.S. or did they come directly over?

Hila: [20:37](#) No, they came from Germany but they came later. Westphalia was an earlier settlement, however, than Fowler, as far as the German population is concerned. They came and the 1830's about '37, I believe. I don't have my book in front of me but quite early in Westphalia. They named their township and village after the part of Germany that they had come from. They didn't move into Dallas Township until about the '90's.