

**CARMEN TRANCHELL**  
**Interviewed by Thelma Jenkins**  
**on September 20, 1977**  
**for the Clinton County Historical Society – Tape #003**  
**Transcribed by Myrna A. Van Epps, December 2006**

**Side 1**

It is September 20, 1977. I am Thelma Jenkins representing the Clinton Co. Historical Society. I am interviewing Miss Carmen Tranchell who lives at 110 Amor Lane, Village Square, St. Johns, Michigan.

Carmen, where were you born?

I was born on a farm four miles northeast of St. Johns.

What township?

Bingham.

Was your father a farmer out there?

Yes.

What else can you tell me about your parents? What were their names?

My father's name was John Tranchell. Mother's name was Hattie. Her maiden name was Hattie Earl.

At what age did they marry?

Dad was 42 and mother was 22.

Twenty years difference!

Twenty years in chronological age, but not in spirit. Dad was always young in spirit. They went to parties together and dances.

Was this a second marriage for him?

No, his only marriage. He took care of his parents. That was a common thing then.

Where was your father raised?

He was born in New York near Niagara Falls. His family came to Michigan 1865. He was always a farm man, grew up on a farm. How about your mother? Where was she raised?

She was born, I think, just over the line in Gratiot Co. Her father died before she was born and her mother had to go out to work. She took mother with her quite a lot.

How did your parents meet? Do you recall their telling you?

Mother worked for her sister in the hotel, the Perrin House, which stood where the Methodist Church now stands in St. Johns. Mother's sister ran it for awhile and mother helped there and Dad was working with someone. He did some carpenter work. They met that way and dad liked her right from the first. She didn't care so much for him, but he liked her.

I think you told me something about that house that sets where the Methodist Church is now.

I gave a picture to the church at the time of the centennial. Maybe it's in that museum stuff in the lounge.

It should be in the parlor there. Didn't you say part of that house is here in town yet?

It was divided into I don't know how many houses, but [Charles] Huntington's house was part of it.

I think over the bedroom doors upstairs in that one part has a place where the room numbers [were]. You can see that.

He came to me one day and wanted to borrow the picture so as to have it blown up. I'd already given it to the church, so I guess he got it from the church.

Yes, I told him about that. What do you recollect about your grandparents?

They always lived there. Grandpa and Grandma Tranchell lived there.

When you say, "lived there--"

Mother went there as a bride and they lived right there in that house. After they died Mother's mother came to us. She lived for several years on the farm. She died there on the farm.

How old was she?

83.

What about your father's parents.

Grandma Tranchell lived to be 88 and Grandpa was five years younger and he lived to be about 83, I think.

They lived on a farm and farmed all their life.

I don't know what they did in New York. Maybe Grandpa was a day laborer or something in New York.

How did they come to St. Johns?

I don't know.

You never heard them say?

No.

You don't know why they came to St. Johns then?

I haven't any idea. I think quite a few New York people came and established Rochester Colony. I think that's named after Rochester, New York. Perhaps they came to be among friends. I never heard.

Your mother's maiden name was?

"Earl."

They never lived any place else than just here?

No.

What language was spoken in your family.

English.

It was always English.

Yes.

Do you remember any special stories in the "old days," your parents' generation?

I used to like to listen to older people when I was little because I was an only child and one thing that they told about was in the early days there was pretty much forest around and forest fires a lot of times. They would go out and fight fire and so they would come into the house just exhausted. Grandma would lie right on the bed with her dirty clothes on and everything, just exhausted from fighting the fire for hours.

Now that was in Michigan here?

I believe that would be where we were, four miles northeast of St. Johns. That's where they settled, where I was born. When they came here, they settled on that farm.

Are there any other stories you remember about that were very interesting?

I can't remember anything special that I know of?

What was your first memory as a little girl then?

My first memory was my brother's funeral. I had a brother two years younger than I and he died when he was three months old. I was a little over two. I can remember some of the things about his funeral. Then I had no other memories until I was about four. That made an impression on me.

That was the only other member in your family then was this brother that died. What did he die from? He just wasn't strong?

From "cholera infantum," they used to call that. You don't hear of that any more-- "cholera of the infants." I had it three times, but I survived. I don't think he was very strong anyway, from what Mother said.

What were some of your mother's daily activities then on the farm?

On the farm it was cooking meals, and keeping house, and washing and ironing, and sometimes helping in the fields. It was necessity.

In those days, all their food was--

We raised everything. We didn't raise all of our meat, but we raised vegetables and fruit.

She had to make her own butter?

Yes. Had her own eggs, lots of chickens always.

She probably made her own bread too.

Oh, yes. It was quite a treat to have a loaf of "baker's bread," they called it.

Nowadays, it's the other way around. How much did you help around the house, in the yard and the farm when you were a girl?

Not a great deal. Once in awhile I would go out if it was going to rain and shock wheat. It was cut in bundles. Once in awhile if it was going to storm, we would have to turn over beans. Beans weren't harvested like they are now. They would pull them and put them in little piles. Then they'd get wet. We'd turn them over and then the sun would come out and dry them on one side; turn them over again. They'd be turned over several different times. That's about all I did because I got kind of lazy, you know, where I didn't enjoy doing things. Once in awhile I'd get a streak of ambition and help.

Were you born in the home? They didn't go to the hospital in those days.

There weren't any hospitals around here in 1890.

Was your mother attended by a doctor or a midwife?

Yes, and her sister was there. She was sort of a midwife too. The doctor came out from St. Johns.

Do you remember who your family doctor was then?

I believe his name was, Dr. [Andrew J.] Wiggins.

What were some of the home medical remedies of the day? Do you remember when you had a cold or sore throat what your mother would do?

Grease of some kind. I had tonsillitis every winter. Because Mother had been cured of diphtheria with whiskey, they made me gargle whiskey--like liquid fire when it was going down. Then if I was real bad, she would fix a funnel of paper and blow dry sulfur down my throat after gargling with the whiskey.

You didn't have the old goose grease poultices? What kind of fruits and vegetables and things did your mother put up?

Peaches, pears, plums, and apples.

Did you have your own fruit on the farm?

Yes.

There isn't too much fruit raised around here now.

We had three orchards. They were small. We had over twenty different kinds of apples. Mother made applesauce. We stored it and stored the apples for winter.

People used to use root cellars and things like that.

Our cellar wasn't under the house. It was one of those built onto the house.

It wasn't underground?

No. It was all cement, nice and cool. She kept butter and milk.

What kind of transportation, earliest transportation--?

Horse and buggy.

How early was it before you had a car?

We never had a car. I bought my first car myself in 1929.

That was after your family moved into town.

Yes. We moved into St. Johns in about 1907 or 8. I graduated from high school in 1909.

You were about 16--17?

I was going on 18.

When you moved into town?

When I graduated.

You were about 15 or 16 when you moved into town?

Yes.

What were the roads like?

They were gravel roads. I never saw pavement.

Never saw pavement in those days before you moved into town?

Yes. I can remember when I was small, Clinton Ave. wasn't paved, and it was just a mud hole in the spring and fall. In the heavy rains it was all mud.

They didn't put anything down on the ground?

Seems to me the first pavement was brick and then they got the cement like

they have now.

How early was it they put the brick down?

I can't remember. There were those big iron hitching posts all up and down each side of the street. They would come to town and they would hitch the horse to a hitching post.

I understand that they had parking even in the center of the street at one time.

That was in later years.

After cars?

That was not too many years ago, after we got cars.

Going back to your grandparents now, did they go to school, your grandparents on either side?

Not in this country. Grandpa Tranchell was born in Sweden. He wanted to be a sailor. When he was about 14 or 15 his father "bound him out," they called it, as an apprentice to a sailing captain. Grandma Tranchell was born in Belgium of Catholic parents and she couldn't see that way so when she was just a young girl she came to America by herself. She traveled on a sailing vessel. The way they met, she had to housework. Incidentally, they both learned the English language from reading the Bible. She did housework in a family and that man was a brother of Grandpa's sea captain. That's the way they got acquainted.

They didn't meet on the ship coming over?

No.

That was your grandparents on your father's side.

I don't know much about Grandma Earl's background.

She was born in this country?

She was born in this country, but I don't know where.

Did you ever hear anything about her school days?

No.

Not much education?

None of them had a great deal of education.

Where did you go to school?

I went to Parker School. It's on what is now Krepps Road. I went to school there through the eighth grade and then I came to St. Johns High School.

Did you have further education after that?

I had a year of County Normal and following that I went to Lansing Business University one year. They asked me to stay and teach which I did for three years.

What other employment did you have?

Before going to business college, I taught a year and term in the country. I taught a term in Rheubottom School out southeast of town, and then I taught a year in Parker School where I went to school. Then I decided to get a business education and so I went to Lansing Business University.

When you taught in the country schools, did you drive back and forth, or did you stay?

I had to stay.

You stayed in the community.

Yes.

Going back to when you were little and on the farm, did you have playmates to play with?

Not much. The nearest one was a quarter of a mile away. So I had trouble. It was a real treat. I'd get out all the playthings I had. We'd play and I'd get so tired that I didn't--

Who was your playmate, do you remember? Your neighbor?

Neighbors out there.

You don't remember any special names, people you knew?

There was a Sanford family, and a boy in the family.

Are there any people living in St. Johns that used to be your neighbors in the country?

There is one neighbor that lives out there. Charles Lapham lives on the Lapham farm. I grew up with him and we went to school together. That's a centennial farm now.

What do you remember about your school days, your teachers?

I always had good teachers. We learned the fundamentals when I went to school. We learned reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar and language, geography and spelling, physiology.

There was no fooling around.

No fooling around!

What was the discipline like?

The teachers were pretty good disciplinarians. We got wonderful training in the fundamentals. That's why I'm appalled by some of our modern educational system. You see people who go to college reading at about a sixth-grade level. We had regular reading classes.

In those days, they stressed spelling more?

Spelling and arithmetic. We learned multiplication tables.

Did they have spelling bees between the country schools?

Yes, spell downs once in awhile on Friday afternoons.

Those were the fun times. What were some of the social events that took place in your community as a girl?

Not too many when I was real young. After I came to high school, we used to have Pedro parties Friday nights out in the neighborhood. The neighbors would all gather someplace and have a Pedro party and refreshments.

They had barn-raising parties and that sort of thing?

Yes, barn dances. If there was new barn being raised, they would have a barn dance.

Threshing time was quite a time of getting together.

I always kind of liked threshing time. I had quite a thrill to have all that crowd around. I wasn't old enough to be much help to mother.

Did you have to help cook?

No. I wasn't hold enough to cook. I'd go out and get in the wheat bin or oat bin and let them cover me with the grain. I had fun doing that because I had to play alone so much of my time.

But you probably had pets because you always had animals on the farm.

Yes. We always had cats and a dog, that's all. Once in awhile we'd have a pet lamb. If the mother sheep would disown the lamb, we'd have to feed it with a bottle.

Did you have any interesting experiences with animals?

Not unusual that I remember.

It was quite wild around here then, I suppose. Your father was a hunter?

No. He never hunted.

Do you remember any of your teacher's names, who your teachers were?

One was Edna Hugus. She made a great impression on me. Another one was Bertha Keys who became Bertha Livingston, and her grandchildren live out north of town. Alden Livingston was her son. I had Maude Leak. Some of the teachers stayed two or three years.

Did you have any men teachers?

One. His name was Elmer Simmons. He wasn't a very good teacher.

Do you recall any poems or recitations or readings that you used to learn.

I used to remember quite a lot of poems and I liked to, but I can't recall them now.

Even in my generation we used to recite and learn more poems. We became familiar with all the prominent poets--Longfellow and so on. What funny things happened to you and your friends when you were small? Do you recall any funny things that happened? Life was pretty serious in those days but you certainly must have had---

I can't remember anything unusual, no.

What kind of games did you play?

In country school we used to play Pom Pom Pull Away, Anti Over (throwing the ball over the school house). Those were about the most common things I think we played--Hide and Seek.

Your parents did their shopping in St. Johns?

Yes.

They raised most of their food, so their shopping was--

We had to buy meat. Mother would bring eggs and butter into town and change it for other groceries, staples. Where the superette is, there's always been a grocery store since I can remember.

Did they bring their milk to town?

No. We didn't have but one cow at a time, and mother made the butter.

You didn't have cream?

Mother made butter out of it herself, used the cream. No we didn't sell milk.

You only had one cow. What type of farm was it then, mostly produce that you raised?

Mostly produce. Dad didn't want to spend a lot of time with stock. He'd rather do farm work.

You had to have horses though.

We had just one team of horses at a time.

Did you buy a lot of your clothing, or did your mother make it?  
Mother made some, but we had to buy coats and things like that.

Did you sell your wool from your sheep, or did you use it?  
We didn't do any carding wool or anything like that. We just sold it.

Did your family ever take vacations and go on trips?  
Very seldom! One time we went to New York back to where dad was born in Youngstown, near Niagara Falls.

You had relatives still living there?  
No, we just went back to the old neighborhood and saw some old friends and remarked that they seemed to be aging. It didn't occur to him that they would be getting older. Then another time we went with some other friends to Bay City for two or three days. Those were the only vacations we had when Dad and Mother were living.

How did you go?  
Train. When we went to Niagara Falls we went to Detroit and took the boat to Buffalo.

That was interesting. How old were you when you did that?  
I think that was after I started teaching business college.

That wasn't when you were a little girl?  
No, we didn't take any vacations when I was a little girl.

Getting back to the stores again, what other stores in particular do you remember?  
There was a Hicks store for years.

That hasn't been gone too long.  
There was the Chapman's Dry Goods Store where the Penney store is. There was Chapin's store.

What was Chapin's Store?  
That was a dry goods store. There were some variety stores and grocery stores.

Has there always been a theatre here as long as you can remember?  
I can't think of a time that there wasn't some kind of theatre here.

What do you remember about the Steel Hotel? Can you remember when that was built?  
No.

That was built before your time?  
I think so because I can always remember seeing it. We shopped there on the corner right across from the hotel.

That was really a beautiful building, wasn't it?  
I guess it was considered quite a hotel when it was built.

Wasn't there quite a few social activities there? They had a big ballroom---  
I imagine so.

You don't recall any?  
I never went to anything there.

Do you remember talking with any very old people when you were small and any of the stories that made an impression on you?



I didn't talk with them so much myself, but when they would come to our house I would sit and listen. I was interested in what they were talking about.

Can you remember some of the things that were of interest?

I don't remember.

Can you think of some of the differences between growing up now and when you were a child?

We didn't have everything like youngsters do now. I think we appreciated what we did have, probably more than youngsters do now.

When you were a child what did you expect to do or be when you grew up?

I didn't think much about it. Mother always wanted me to be a teacher. It turned out I was for a time. I got more interested in office work.

Describe a typical Fourth of July. Do you remember your earliest Fourth of July?

They would have celebrations in town. We didn't always come to town on the Fourth of July, but from our farm we could see the high fireworks like the sky rockets and so on. Sometimes we could see them. We didn't always have a celebration, but sometimes if it was something special we would come into town.

You didn't have family get-togethers or picnics?

No, we didn't.

There were no lakes around here, so you weren't any hand to go to the lake on a weekend, were you? You just visited friends maybe?

Northeast of town, over around Rochester Colony, Maple River, I don't remember but once some of the people around took a picnic over there. We had to eat on the ground. They spread the tablecloth on the ground and we all sat on the ground to eat. One thing that happened at one of those picnics, after they got through eating they put a cloth over the food that was left. They didn't pack it away yet. We got to playing and running, and I ran across the table and stepped right into the lemon pie. Charlie Lapham followed me and he stepped into a cake. My cousin made the lemon pie and Charlie Lapham's father thought she made the best lemon pie of anybody he ever knew. He kind of always held that against me because I stepped in that lemon pie.

What are some of your earliest memories of Christmas?

Nothing special. I never had a Christmas tree. I was the only child. There was never any great fuss made about Christmas like there is in a family with children.

Where did you attend church?

When we attended church it was always here in St. Johns, the Methodist Church. We didn't attend church regularly until we moved here because it wasn't always convenient to come in from the farm. After we moved to town, we began attending church regularly.

The Colony [Rochester Colony] wasn't close enough then from where you lived?

It was about the same distance, but because we shopped in St. Johns, I suppose that's why.

What was the effect of the Great Depression?

It didn't affect us too much because we never had a great deal anyhow. We didn't lose any money because we didn't have any money to invest.

You didn't go without like a lot of families did?

No. During the depression, I was working in Lansing for the state. I went over there in 1917 and worked on (It was then.) the Industrial Accident Board. Now it's now the Workmen's Compensation Commission. I lost my job, a change of administration. They were political jobs, no Civil Service and when the Democrats came in I lost my job. I came home in August. I got a job in the CWA office about December, I think.

What year was that?

1933-4, right at the height of the depression. My father was gone. I had my mother to take care of. I belonged to the wrong political party so I got fired like a lot of others did.

You worked in Lansing and lived here.

I travelled on the interurban. The interurban went right by our house when we lived on Wight St., and I rode that for about thirteen years until it was taken off. Then I had to buy a car.

When was it taken off?

I think about 1929.

How long did it take you to go from St. Johns to Lansing on the interurban?

I don't know exactly. We left at 7 o'clock, I know that. I had to be to work at 8 o'clock. I always got to work on time unless there was a bad snow storm. Then if there was a bad snow storm, the interurban couldn't get up Clinton Avenue. It would interfere with the traction. They'd get snow on the wires and on the track. I'd be late sometimes in a snowstorm, but other times I wasn't.

It just had trouble here in St. Johns? It didn't have trouble after it got out in the country in a storm?

Not so much. One time coming home we got stuck. There was a place over by Merle Beach that they called the "sinkhole," a low place that was covered with water one time. It got into the motors and shut off the power. We sat in that water for a little while, but not too long.

How did they get it going?

I don't know. I'm not a mechanic.

But sitting the water?

We were in the car you know. The most outstanding memory I have of riding on the interurban--I don't remember the year--but the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of March we had ice storms. The power went off and the first time it went off it was on a Thursday night. The interurban had to go over the high trestle. It's about where the big bridge is just north of Lansing, across the railroad tracks. They couldn't get traction and they couldn't get across so some of us went back and stayed at the Kerns Hotel all night without any luggage or even a toothbrush. The next day I remarked to the girls who rode on the interurban that if it was storming I was going to start home on an earlier car. The cars came then on Washington Avenue. We got out just north of the Gladmer Theatre and the power went off again. It was about 2 o'clock in the afternoon and it never came

on again til midnight. They finally got us across so I got home at 5 o'clock in the morning the first day of April. That ice! Then on top of that it snowed. That's the most unusual experience, but we had fun. Those of us who were on the car made the best of it and we just had a lot of fun out there. The conductor and motorman fixed us a bed. They took the cushions off the seats and put them across the back of the seats and made us a kind of an upper berth. We climbed up there, but we didn't sleep much. It was warm in the car because we were on Washington Avenue and the lights from the city were on. We were all right. We were safe. Kind of an unpleasant experience and yet we had quite a lot fun in it too.

When did your family first have electricity and inside plumbing--  
Never, until we moved to town.  
or telephone?

We had a telephone on the farm. I don't remember what year. We didn't have inside plumbing. Even the first place we lived in St. Johns, we didn't have inside plumbing. Later on we did.

Did you always live on Wight Street?

No. When we first moved to town we lived on West Cass. Then for a time we lived on Baldwin Street, just in the first block east of the old Central School. We lived there for a year or so til we bought the home on Wight Street in 1910.

You lived there for from 1910 until last year.

'Til 1975, 65 years.

In one house! That's a long, long time. Do you remember anything about state or presidential elections?

We were always interested! My dad was always interested in politics. He never held an office or anything like that. I've been going to political meetings ever since I can remember. He was a very staunch Republican. Going to country school I would kind of get in fights when I-- The McKinley-Hoover election I remember.

## **Side 2**

Do you recall any famous politicians coming to town?

William Jennings Bryan, when he was running against McKinley, came and talked. He is the only one I remember.

I heard that he gave a talk from the balcony of the Steel Hotel. Is that where you heard him?

No, he was on the court house lawn that time. They'd had a parade.

He was supposed to be a great orator of his time. What other organizations in town were you interested in?

My father and mother were charter members of the Rebecca Lodge. The Rebecca Lodge and the Eastern Star started about the same time. They were the social centers. They had the parties and so on, dances and socials. Dad and mother were charter members and I was the first baby born after the lodge was

instituted in 1890. I was taken to the lodge the first time when I was six weeks old, Mother said. Isn't that something?

Have the Rebeccas always met in the same place it does now in the IOOF Hall?

Yes. We used to be on the third floor. Now we're down to the first floor because we can't climb the stairs any more.

What other organizations have you belonged to?

Senior Citizens. Our Senior Citizens group was the first one started in Clinton Co. There are now sixteen or seventeen, I think. There are two or three right here in town. They have them in Ovid, Elsie, Maple Rapids, DeWitt, and Fowler.

You've belonged to the Methodist Church how many years?

Sixty-eight.

What were some of the offices you held in the church?

I taught a Sunday School class for a short time. I was made superintendent of the primary department before it was departmentalized. I was there seven years. The night I resigned from that I was elected secretary of the Sunday School. I held that job for about twenty-eight years.

You were secretary in the church office.

I was in the church office not quite two years when Rev. Price was here. I was a member of the official board for about fifteen years. I was secretary of the official board for ten years. I've been the parish visitor for about twelve or thirteen years maybe longer. First I took Rev. Wade around. He was the parish visitor and I took him after he couldn't drive any more. When he could no longer do it, they made me Parish Visitor.

Are there any other things in the community that you recall that you belonged to or had part in, or any outstanding events that took place? Seems to me you were honored at the Seventh Day Adventist Church for something not too long ago.

Oh yes, the Community Service Award at the Adventist Church about two or three years ago.

You received a plaque in the church. Who presented this plaque?

The minister.

That's very nice. Is that another plaque?

Yes.

This is a plaque from the Chamber of Commerce? What was that for?

They had a banquet at Daly's [restaurant]. Gladys Hetzel invited me there as her guest one night and I didn't know anything was going on. They called the names of some of the citizens who had done things. They called me and I almost dropped over because I was so surprised.

What was this awarded for? Let me see. What is it? "Presented for long-standing cooperation with various community agencies for the advancement and success of activities beneficial to all."

I think it was the next week that they had my name in the clock down there at the bank.

They were honoring different ones in the community. "St. Johns Area Chamber of Commerce Certificate of Appreciation presented to Carmen Tranchell, Oct. 5, 1971."

Carmen Tranchell

Interviewed by Thelma Jenkins

20 September 1977

That was nice. You had a lot to do with this senior citizen's place where you're living.  
[Clinton Area Care Center]

Here's the picture of when they turned the first shovel full of dirt. You can see when they started this.

May 2, 1975. Carmen is right in the middle of the picture lifting the first shovel full of dirt, and Rev. Hankerd, Mayor Ebert, Mrs. (sic) Tranchell, Hugh Banninga.

Wasn't Les there?

He's here, but they have him listed as Lester Lake.

I remember that.

Lester Jenkins; J.D. Robinson.

The Committee. The Fedewas invited the five of us over to Jeanne's [Jeanne Rand].

So now there's a building here named after each one on that original committee.

Yes.

It was well worth all the effort, wasn't it Carmen?

Oh yes.

You've lived in your apartment here in Village Square two years now?

I came in December '75.

So it will two years this coming December that you've lived here. That's good that you've been able to enjoy some of the fruits of your labor.

I do.

It's been real nice visiting with you, Carmen.

I appreciate your coming, Thelma.

I thank you for all information you have given me. On behalf of the Clinton Co. Historical Society, I thank you.

