

## DICK HOWE

**Wayne:** This is Tuesday, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022. I'm Wayne Summers and today I'm interviewing Dick Howe at Howe's Greenhouse. Also present is his daughter, **Kim Sperry**. Why don't we start out by talking a little about maybe when and where you were born?

**Dick:** Born right here, I guess.

**Kim:** I think you were born in Lansing.

**Dick:** Lansing, in the hospital, I guess.

**Wayne:** So, you were a hospital birth, not a homebirth.

**Kim:** Yeah. His mom had a hard time and there used to be an old farmhouse there so this is where he grew up.

**Dick:** Yeah. This is where the farmhouse has been. The original one was up on the hill and then it was moved down this way where the highway is and when they put the highway in, they moved the house back. That's where I grew up 'till I come back here out of the Navy.

**Wayne:** What school did you go to?

**Dick:** Down here, Olive Center.

**Wayne:** It was Olive Center. Do you have any particular memories of going to school there?

**Dick:** Not a whole lot.

**Wayne:** Any particular favorite teachers or games or interesting things that may have happened?

**Dick:** I had a number of teachers. The only one I really remember is **Nita Lapham**. She lived down here about a mile. She was almost right next to the school. Probably I had three or four teachers then. Of course, that's when they taught all eight grades.

**Wayne:** After you graduated from eighth grade, you went on to St. Johns High School?

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Wayne:** What kind of activities were you involved in when you were at St. Johns?

**Dick:** Football.

**Wayne:** What can you tell me about playing football? What years were those, by the way, that you played?

**Kim:** '48 to '50?

**Dick:** I graduated in '50, about '46, '47, I guess. I remember the coach was **Terry Carey**. He come outta Central [Central Michigan Univ.] up there, come right outta college and coaching and teaching there.

**Kim:** Went undefeated.

**Dick:** Yeah. St. Johns, my sophomore year, I moved up to varsity and seem like we was 500. Seem we lost four and won four; and then my junior year, we just lost one; and the senior year, we was undefeated. I think they was undefeated for a couple, three years after that.

**Wayne:** Same coach?

**Kim:** It was the same coach, I think, wasn't it?

**Dick:** Yep. He might have been there a year and then I think he moved up.

**Kim:** I know he was there when you graduated, I think.

**Dick:** He was there and, of course, after I graduated, I went in the Navy for four years.

**Wayne:** Going back to the football, what position did you play?

**Dick:** Guard.

**Wayne:** What were some of the teams that you played?

**Dick:** I don't remember some of 'em, but most of 'em that's whatever that conference St. Johns was in pretty much. I think we played Belding and Ionia. We might have played Ovid-Elsie.

**Wayne:** Were there any particular rivalries, like the big games that you looked forward to or not?

**Dick:** No. Of course, my junior year there was pretty much undefeated, so everybody was kind of shooting at us.

**Wayne:** You're the one they wanted to beat.

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Wayne:** After high school, you said you joined or were you drafted?

**Dick:** I joined the Navy.

**Wayne:** Were you involved in the Korean War at all?

**Dick:** A little bit. I was on a submarine. I went to submarine school up in New London and then after that I got shipped out to San Diego on submarines and we didn't get involved. About all we done was went up off of Russia and watched what shipping they was doing, 'cause they were shipping down there to Korea then.

**Wayne:** Were you always on the same submarine?

**Dick:** Yep, pretty much.

**Wayne:** What was the name of it?

**Dick:** Segundo. It's a reef off of Oregon, I think now.

**Wayne:** What was it like to live on a submarine?

**Dick:** A lot of 'em couldn't take it. We lost one guy. He cracked up. He couldn't take it. We was at sea, and I remember that we had to transfer him to a cruiser out there in the ocean and we had to send him over onto that. We shot the line over to them. We'd shoot a small line and then attach it to the bigger one. Finally, you got to the big hemp ropes that would hold him and we transferred him to a, I think it was a cruiser then.

**Wayne:** Was it because of the tight spaces that he had problems with?

**Dick:** I guess. I don't know. We never did hear what happened to him.

**Wayne:** How much space did you have for your own things on the submarine?

**Dick:** Not much.

**Wayne:** How many changes of clothes could you keep with you?

**Dick:** We had most of our clothes. When we was in San Diego, we could send them out to the cleaners.

**Wayne:** Did they have laundry facilities on the submarine?

**Dick:** No.

**Wayne:** If you were on it for a while, you started to smell like you'd been on it for a while?

**Dick:** Yeah, we did! You might rinse them out or something like that in the bucket, but we had a limited supply of fresh water. We didn't have a lot of extra. When we was at sea, there was no extra fresh water.

**Wayne:** What were meals like?

**Dick:** They were pretty decent.

**Wayne:** Did you have to take shifts to eat?

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Wayne:** Assume there wasn't a lot of room for a table.

**Dick:** No, there wasn't a lot of room. We had a little mess room there. Like it was a table with two benches on each side that would take about six to eight guys at a time.

**Wayne:** How many were on your ship?

**Dick:** I think we had close to eighty.

**Wayne:** When you were on the submarine, what was your job?

**Dick:** I was a torpedoman. That's what the bunk was on. You slept right on over the torpedoes. You pulled them out and could sleep on 'em and then during the day you'd push in your bunk and do what chores you do.

**Wayne:** There wasn't a hammock or anything over them? You just slept on the torpedo?

**Dick:** Yeah. Well, it was a kind of a bunk bed that would slide out.

**Wayne:** Oh, the bunk came out over them. Okay, I was imagining you actually on a round torpedo trying to sleep at night!

**Dick:** Yeah. It's about the same width. It was probably about that wide.

**Wayne:** About two feet maybe?

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Wayne:** Was it fairly smooth then when you're on a submarine? I mean, like on a regular ship sometimes it gets a little choppy.

**Dick:** It depends on the ocean. We could be submerged at 150 feet and still rock. You could feel the waves. In a storm, 'cause we went through a couple storms out there, the typhoons. The submarine, we would seal it up just like it was submerged and the only ones on deck would be the officer up there and the two lookouts. You'd ride out there; you'd hold your breath, and the wave would come over you; and then when it settled, when the sub come back up, you could breathe.

**Wayne:** Were you tied on then so that you wouldn't go over?

**Dick:** Sometimes, if it was real bad, we had straps we could buckle on. Yeah.

**Wayne:** Did you ever have to be up there during one of those?

**Dick:** Yep. There you just get wet.

**Wayne:** Was it a little scary?

**Dick:** You just kind of got used to it. You just kind of rode with the wind. You'd see the wave were coming and it would come up over you and you'd hold your breath.

**Wayne:** Did you ever have to shoot or launch a torpedo when it wasn't a practice run?

**Dick:** We fired one just for practice one time when we was going over to Korea. We fired one outside of Hawaii out there at the rocks. We just fired one. We never shot one at a ship. Back then they had war heads and then they had another head that was filled with water but it was a more or less a dummy one 'cause when the torpedo would get to the end of its run--they run by compressed air--it would blow the water out and that torpedo would float and then recovery ship could pick it up.

**Wayne:** You could use them again?

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Wayne:** How many years did you spend in the Navy?

**Dick:** Four years.

**Wayne:** After you left the Navy, what did you do?

**Dick:** I come back here, and we got married out there in California.

**Wayne:** How did you meet your wife then?

**Dick:** Her brother was a shipmate of mine and they lived in Stockton, California. On a long weekend we'd go up there.

**Wayne:** So, you kind of courted her on weekends?

**Dick:** We'd just go up there and see 'em and just got acquainted a few times--

**Wayne:** Then you married her out there and then you convinced her to come back here to Michigan?

**Dick:** Seems like I remember I told her I'd go back and then I'd send for her, and she said, "No way." So, we got married out there and we brought her back.

**Wayne:** She was okay coming with you?

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Wayne:** When you got here, what job did you take on?

**Dick:** I had a number. I worked for a fence guy. We put up fences around Lansing. I remember that 'cause putting up those fences, I'd get in the poison ivy and then I'd all break out.

**Wayne:** She probably wasn't too happy with that.

**Dick:** No. I had to dope up. That's when we had the old house and then we lived there in the old upstairs rooms for a while and then I went out to MSU to a floricultural course. Then we moved. We got an apartment out--I don't remember where. It was in Lansing some place. We lived in that.

**Wayne:** So, the horticulture course, did that lead you into the greenhouse business?

**Dick:** Yeah. It was a two-year course. Six months for training, I worked in the greenhouse up at Ithaca. That's when we was married 'cause we had our first baby when we was up there.

**Wayne:** So, you kind of learned the business both at MSU and--

**Dick:** --and here. Yeah.

**Wayne:** When did you actually start this one?

**Dick:** Well, at my mother had that.

**Wayne:** Your parents had already started this? What's the history behind this then? When did this all get started?

**Dick:** Way back in the 20's, I guess. One Memorial Day like that, she had a few tulips growing around her house and somebody wanted a bouquet. They bought a few tulips for her and then she decided to start raising more tulips. Actually, that field north of the house there, she had one time all tulips. The bulb salesman, he'd come over from Europe and take their orders. It was like Vandenberg's [Vandenberg Bulb Co.] down there to Howell. For the first two or three years, he would come over from the old country and take these orders and then go back over. Then Vandenberg's

grandpa, [Henry Vandenberg], he started. Then she got growing a few flowers. He built her a little frame out there where she could start some garden plants and it just kind of grew from there.

**Wayne:** So, it started with tulips.

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Wayne:** This was in the 1920's you think?

**Dick:** Well, no it had to be the 30's.

**Kim:** He built the greenhouse about when you were born in '32. Aunt Ila [Howe] said she started selling stuff about the year she was born in '23, from her garden. So, the tulips would've been late, but the greenhouse I think was in the early 30's.

**Wayne:** How has the greenhouse changed over the year since 1932?

**Kim:** They got plastic. They don't have to build their own flats.

**Dick:** We used to have to make our own flats in lumber and it was all glass then. You'd make a rack for the glass, and you'd have to glaze the glass in.

**Wayne:** Would the glass break occasionally, I assume?

**Dick:** Yeah, it would break. You'd have to go out there and repair 'em and replace 'em. Then she started a little greenhouse out back of the house and she got more. My dad went out-- it was called an Ore [?] light. We got "the gutter" back here.

**Kim:** We call it the gutter. S

**Dick:** Still got the grandpa's name on it for shipping.

**Kim:** Up till last year, 2020, you still could see the original frame.

**Wayne:** So that was destroyed in the fire? [Aug. 2, 2020]

**Kim:** Just the corner was, but my brother-in-law, he goes, "The only reason we're keeping it is 'cause it's sentimental." There were so many levels that had been built back.

**Dick:** Yeah. It was sturdy. When we had the fire, it took the back half of the greenhouses.

**Kim:** Still got the original. Grandma and Grandpa made those cement benches where they just grew things in there instead of wood. Still got some of them of those.

**Dick:** Back then, I'd take wood and get the old cement mixer out and mix up cement. That's how where made the benches, Grandpa and I.

**Wayne:** And they're still there!

**Dick:** Yep. Some of 'em are. There's one out there.

**Kim:** One is all we have.

**Dick:** In fact, we had hot water boilers down in the basement where they had the boiler and some of those old pipes are still in there in greenhouse. We just left them.

**Wayne:** Do you start everything from seed primarily?

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Kim:** Probably 90% or cuttings or something like that. Everything's from Michigan.

**Dick:** Yeah. We just start from seed then.

**Wayne:** And so, you get started around February-ish?

**Dick:** There was some greenhouse over here. It used to be Walter Brothers over in Lansing there on the east side. They would start 'em and we'd go over there and get the seedlings. Back then they had little flats and they'd just pick 'em up and I'd wrap 'em in newspaper and bring 'em home and we'd divide 'em and plant 'em.

**Wayne:** So, some was purchasing seedlings and some probably were bulbs.

**Kim:** Nowadays, we pretty much start everything. I'm told we're one of the few that still do start 'em all and hand transplant 'em.

**Wayne:** I'm sure there's not a lot anymore.

**Kim:** No, like all automated where they have the big machines.

**Wayne:** Cause I think a lot of it's down by Kalamazoo, isn't it?

**Kim:** Yeah, and Grand Rapids

**Wayne:** Over that in area.

**Dick:** There's a lot of over there.

**Wayne:** I'm sure they're really big operations.

**Kim:** They're pretty amazing.

**Dick:** Now that's where we get a lot of our plants and stuff, poinsettias and stuff. Now we just buy 'em all finished, pretty much prefinished.

**Kim:** Back in the day, we'd get little cuttings in August and--

**Wayne:** Grow your own poinsettias?

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Kim:** And same thing with Easter lilies, get them in the fall.

**Dick:** They'd send us the bulbs. We'd plant 'em in in the fall. They'd have to cool for six weeks, something like that, stay cool so they'd set their buds and we could bring them in. Depending on Easter, you'd force them to try to get 'em to bloom at Easter time.

**Wayne:** --and hope that you guessed right?

**Kim:** Some days you got the heat going on; some days you got them out of the sunlight to keep them cool .

**Dick:** If it was too far along, you'd put 'em out or else where they're too far along, put them out where it's cool, slow 'em down.

**Kim:** Now we just buy 'em about a week and a half ahead of time.

**Wayne:** What other things, besides purchasing some plants, has changed? Seems like you still do a lot of your own planting.

**Dick:** Yeah. We still do a lot of our own.

**Kim:** One thing that's different. We still use--I call it real soil. We get loam soil off the farm where all the bigger places are using the combinations.

**Wayne:** It's not real soil.

**Kim:** No. Then they have to keep adding fertilizers and stuff to it. There's no nutrients in it.

**Dick:** Lot of the big greenhouses have a watering system. It may be a hundred-foot-long greenhouse and they have the benches. They'll be all level and then the water comes to the bench, and they flood the bench to water the plants. They flood and let it set there for a while and the plants take up the water and then they drain it.

**Wayne:** How do you water your plants?

**Dick:** By hand.

**Wayne:** Go around by hand with a hose?

**Dick:** Yep. With a hose.

**Kim:** We got too much iron. It's the good old country water.

**Dick:** We don't have a lot of room. I did for a while try to put up plastic pipes with little sprinklers, but our water's so hard that it would lime up and then it would plug up the little nozzles. One would spray this way maybe and one wouldn't work and so I just finally give up and hand watered 'em. That's about all I do out there now is weed and water. The girls do the rest.

**Wayne:** I take it the iron in the water doesn't harm the plants at all, no problem with that? It's just the pipes it doesn't like.



**Dick:** Yeah. Now even, we shut down some of the greenhouses for winter and then when you start up in the spring, you turn on the water and it'll plug up the faucets with stuff 'cause they got that lime. It'll pick it up and it'll all come and plug up the nozzle.

**Wayne:** Have you had any unusual things or unusual customers maybe that you've had to deal with over the years?

**Dick:** Some of 'em are kind of fussy or picky!

**Kim:** There's some that want something special. Usually, it has to do with sympathy, like where I had to do an arrangement with a sewing machine, so I made a little quilt out of flowers—

**Dick:** We still have one or two, they want certain varieties. They'll buy the seed and bring the seed in, and we'll start 'em.

**Kim:** We have a Laos community, probably do 300 flats for 25 families or so.

**Dick:** We got going with the Asian peppers. In fact, we've still got a few out there yet. A couple of them they that haven't picked them up yet.

**Wayne:** So, this is how they get their vegetables that nobody else grows in the area.

**Kim:** Well, some of it, it's still the seeds or the original that they brought back from their home country.

**Dick:** They're fussy, some of them gals, some of them Asians!

**Kim:** "They're not big enough! Want big."

**Dick:** "I want big." They'll steal from each other. Oh, they'll steal like mad.

**Kim:** If somebody else's look better, so we have them color coded.

**Dick:** "Her plants look bigger. I'll take 'em. She won't care."

**Kim:** We remedied that. Everybody gets a color because their names are so similar. They have a tag. That's what they get.

**Dick:** We started coloring the tags and they come in with their tag and we know which one it is.

**Wayne:** What Asian country did they come from?

**Dick:** They come from Laos.

**Wayne:** Is there any other special things like that besides this community that you grow specifically for them?

**Kim:** Part of it is cutting down a little bit just 'cause Dad can't do as much, and I can't do as much. We're trying to figure out what we can focus on 'cause we're getting more people in the community that are fighting us.

**Dick:** We just don't have room.

**Wayne:** Your business is changing, I assume.

**Dick:** Yeah. Actually, this spring this one greenhouse was pretty much all Asian peppers.

**Kim:** Well, one and a half benches were Asians. Last year, we grew for a girl for a farm market, and we had somebody else. It was all that. It's like, okay, we can't do that. We need room for ourselves.

**Wayne:** You have to have room for your own things or else you have to add another greenhouse on or something which is more work.

**Dick:** We aren't doing that anymore.

**Wayne:** You're not gonna add any more?

**Dick:** No, just replacing, we gotta -?- house out there. My son from Texas come up. He put that up for us.

**Kim:** We cover the soil.

**Dick:** It was for the soil. It was placed where there was an old garage that we had on the back of this. That's where I dumped my soil in for the winter and that burnt in the fire.

**Kim:** That's the only thing we didn't get replaced that first year.

**Wayne:** Did you have insurance that covered most of that?

**Dick:** No.

**Kim:** The community was amazing.

**Dick:** A lot of it was homemade greenhouses and they wouldn't insure.

**Kim:** Now everything's up to date and it's insured.

**Wayne:** I guess the good thing is that you have more modern facilities, if there's any good that comes out of things like that.

**Kim:** Well, part of it was just seeing what you meant to the community. The first day Dad and I are like, "Oh, what are we gonna do?" By that Friday, people had come, and everything was completely cleaned up.

**Dick:** Neighbors and a lot of our customers come to help clean up. They'd come in say, "can we help?"

**Kim:** They'd say, "You gotta stay." They'd bring in 100 bucks or 500. I only had to borrow a little bit. My cousin gave me a 0% so everything's paid up now.

**Wayne:** Sounds good. Now I understand you also got involved in some township positions.

**Dick:** I worked elections quite a lot.

**Kim:** His dad and grandpa were on the school board.

**Dick:** Dad [**Myron Howe**] was director of the school, old Olive Center School, back in there. The other guy there was the treasurer, and they'd hire the teachers--

**Kim:** I remember Uncle **Lester [Howe]** got paid a quarter a week to get the wood stove going before school or something like that.

**Wayne:** Did he have to bring the wood in too for that quarter and provide the wood?

**Dick:** They'd probably bring it in, I guess.

**Kim:** People would donate it or something.

**Wayne:** I always wondered; how did they get the wood in those days? Did it just magically appear?

**Dick:** Somebody would have carried it in by hand.

**Wayne:** Or if different families volunteered to bring a cord, you know, their week or something. I'm not sure. You got involved just mostly in elections, you said?

**Dick:** We worked elections for a number of years.

**Kim:** Probably about 40 or so.

**Wayne:** 40 years?

**Kim:** Probably in the 50's or 60's--. When did you start? It's probably been 10 years now--

**Dick:** That's when **Neil Harte** was the [Olive] township clerk. Back then, we'd have to get the ballots around and--

**Wayne:** Everything paper. Then you had to manually count them up.

**Dick:** Counted by paper.

**Kim:** Couple times it was least 3:00 a.m. before you guys got home, getting everything to balance out.

**Dick:** All night before we got 'em. We'd have to stay there till we got done.

**Wayne:** If there's a lot of things on that ballot, it could take a while to count.

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Wayne:** More than one time.

**Dick:** Probably make sure paper ballots--You know, some of 'em wouldn't vote straight party. You'd have to sort them out, the ones that was all Republicans and all Democrats. You could sort them out and then you'd just count 'em. Back then you could just write in how many there was of the straight ballots, and you just have to count the ones that wasn't straight.

**Wayne:** When you did a straight ballot back then, were you allowed then to go off the straight ballot and also vote for somebody else like they can now?

**Dick:** Yeah.

**Wayne:** So, you had to pay attention to that too, I assume.

**Dick:** You'd have to write 'em in. They'd write in the votes. 'Cause we'd have put them in down the end of the book or someplace. There'd be a place where you could put the write-in, who they voted for, and how many write-in votes they had.

**Wayne:** When did you start going to voting machines then?

**Dick:** The last couple, three years that I worked on them 'cause it did make a big difference.

**Kim:** Especially for the presidential ones.

**Wayne:** Were these the ones that you had little levers inside that you had to flip?

**Dick:** Yep!

**Wayne:** So, then you got away before 3:00 a.m. on those days?

**Dick:** Yeah. Sometimes. Sometimes you'd get done--

**Kim:** Make sure everything balances out.

**Wayne:** I also work elections and I always hope to get away by 11:00 but then everything's computerized and tabulated. It makes it go a little faster.

**Dick:** Now the tabulators, they've probably upgraded them since I've worked on them too.

**Wayne:** We still occasionally have problems where you're out of balance and you have to figure out where the mistake was made. Is there anything else that I missed here?

**Kim:** I did have the history of the greenhouses in a Howe book that's at the Archives with some pictures and stuff too.

**Wayne:** So, the Archives has a history of it?

**Kim:** Yeah. It's in with our Howe family.

**Wayne:** Oh, so it's in that. It's not a separate book.

**Kim:** No.

**Wayne:** That's one of those things people have to know.

**Kim:** Yeah. I know somebody said I should do that.

**Wayne:** Once in a while, **Julie [Peters]**, director of the Archives] finds things that, "I had no idea we had this!" as she's looking around and runs across things.

**Kim:** When I was doing that, I remember you saying you got a penny for every pigeon that you got in high school from one of your teachers, crows or something, the science teacher.

**Dick:** Sparrows out in the barn. We'd get paid, take the heads in.

**Wayne:** And the teacher would pay you?

**Dick:** Yeah. I forget who it was.

**Kim:** I know you told me his name. It was one of your teachers. I can't remember.

**Wayne:** Pigeons, I could understand. I've had some bad run-ins with pigeons. They don't like me, but sparrows?

**Dick:** Yeah. The old barn up there, they just went in the barn. You go out there in the back yard and check the power line. I think they fixed it, but some dumb kid back there tried to shoot a bird on the power line out there and he hit the wire. It broke the wire, one of the strands, 'cause those wires are stranded. I think they fixed it when they was doing some maintenance work. They seen that so I told them so dumb kid tried to shoot a bird up there.