

DUANE DAVIS

Note: During the interview Duane describes various pictures, awards, and other memorabilia he has arranged on the table.

Wayne: This is Thursday, August 26, 2021. I'm Wayne Summers and I'm with Myrna VanEpps and we are interviewing **Duane Davis** at his place in St. Johns. Also with us is his daughter, **Cindy Kindle**.

Duane: I will go back to when my grandpa [**Orin Davis**] was born here in Clinton County on Price Road, just about a quarter of a mile west of DeWitt Road. Of course, it was all woods then. The men had gone to Delta Mills. They had grown a little wheat and corn and they had to take it over there to get it ground by the river. There was a stone mill over there that they would grind it. Anyway, while they were gone, there were some other neighbors close by--they all went together with their oxen and horses. It takes a long time to get to through the woods. They had to go clear up by Francis Road, or a little farther and then take a trail in there. While they were gone, Grandma Davis [**Luella G.(Norris)**] stayed to home in this log cabin with the kids. She was sewing clothes for the kids at a table and had the fireplace going, of course. It was in the late fall. The Indians didn't ever bother 'em then but there was a lot of Indians up to Traverse City. They stayed there and they fished and hunted and got a lot of food and kept their families. In the wintertime, they went to Detroit to get a few provisions there and then, in the spring of the year, they'd walk back up to Traverse City. Anyway, there was a knock come at Grandma's door and five big Indians said, "We stay all night." She didn't try to stop them. They come in and put their blankets on the floor, put their feet towards the fire, and they fell asleep, most of them. One of the Indians watched her. She had a pair of shears and she was cutting cloth for stuff she was making for the kids. When she went to bed, she went up in the loft where the kids were. In the morning when she got up, the Indians were gone and so was the shears. She had another pair of old shears that she used but the next spring, these Indians come back and one of the Indians come to the door and made her realize what he had done, that he took these shears. He wanted something like them but didn't know what they were. So he took the shears to Detroit and bought some like them and then brought hers back to her the next spring.

Then there's the Norrises. Now the Norrises lived on Centerline Road. This was a little later and my dad's mother was a Norris. I know there's a Norris Road over by DeWitt and there was a lot of the ancestors that settled on Norris Road too but there was quite a few of them are on Centerline. **William Norris** was the first settler in the southern part of Bingham Township. At one time, I had a book that told this. I don't know if somebody borrowed it. I didn't get it back. Sometimes your thoughts leave you when you are 95.

Wayne: You don't have to be 95 to lose your thoughts.

Duane: When the Norrises settled there, the old Stoney Creek bed went through just a little ways from them and the Indians used to camp out down there on their way back and forth from Traverse City to Detroit. One day a bunch of the Indians come up to the house and wondered if the Norrises had some straw or some hay. Their pony was sick and they wanted him to lay on some hay and so they give them a little bundle of hay. They took it and the pony laid on it and he didn't eat any. The pony was sick. The pony died that night and they had a little ceremony for the pony down there and they buried it in the old crick flats and then went on their way to Traverse City. A lot of things happened that we don't know about and maybe it's a good thing we don't.

I want you to look at this. **Walter Norris** fought in the War of 1812. This is a copy but the government give him forty acres of property on Yallup Road for fighting in the War of 1812. They didn't give it to him till 1950 [1850] some. So he waited a long time to get his pay.

Cindy: Did you say how you are related to the Norris's?

Duane: My dad's mother is a Norris. I'll tell this: My dad [**Glenn Davis**] bought a piece of property, when I was about eleven years old, right next to us. We lived on Centerline and on this piece of property is where his mother was raised. The Norrises lived right next door. The Norrises come first and settled quite a bit of ground around here. Sometime or other--I do not know when—that the Davises come and they sold Davis this eighty acres. My dad eventually lived on that eighty acres and farmed that eighty acres and then, eventually, my dad took it over in 1930 and we moved from up north to that piece of property. Then he bought the Norris's farm, which is another hundred and twenty acres. On this farm at first, there was a nice barn and an old house. The house was built probably in the 1870's or 80's and it was all timber frame, great big square timbers in it. I fixed that house over. In fact, **Cindy [Kindle]** used to live in that house. We remodeled it. We tore it apart, left the frame up, and then made the modern house out of it and it's still standing today.

Out in the barnyard in '37, when my dad bought it, there was a big weed that grew and we'd mow it down and. We mowed it a couple times and it would come back up and get quite big. We mowed it a couple times and this little ad come out in the paper one day about marijuana. Dad says, "I think that kinda looks like that leaf on the marijuana." Sure enough! He took it down to the sheriff. The sheriff said, "Well, I don't know. It looks kind of like it. Let's get the state police out." One state policeman come out. "Holy man," he says. All of a sudden, we had five or six police cars coming down the road. The marijuana was about ten foot tall. Well, they pulled some. They talked to the sheriff and said, "They aren't going to use it, don't worry. They just bought this farm and it's on here." They pulled some and put it in the back of the truck and wrote an article in *The State Journal* about a big find of marijuana in Clinton County. They didn't say nobody was using it. One of the state policemen got very interested in this, where it come from and he'd come out and talk with Dad. He come out three or four times and Dad called his sisters--Dad had three sisters—and said, "Where would this marijuana come from?" The girls knew their mother [**Lucy (Ballinger) Davis**] better than Dad did. The girls told him, "I remember Mother telling that she used to have canaries as a girl." That would have been back in Civil War times. She said, "They had the canaries and they had an old Michigan basement and they weren't the neatest people back then. She'd open the trap door to clean the bird cages and put it down that old Michigan basement. A few years later, they raised the house and they wanted to put a good basement in it, instead of the old Michigan one. They hauled dirt out around the barn." So they found that out and then they said, "The bird droppings must have went out there." So he went back and hunted what was in bird feed back about the year that she was 8-10-12 or such a matter. Sure enough, there was marijuana seed in it to make the birds sing.

Wayne: Why don't we back up a little bit here and tell when and where you were born?

Duane: My folks were married in 1914. They lived here in Clinton County for two, three years and then they moved up north of St. Louis, Michigan, about eight miles. It was in Jasper Township, Midland County, right on the line between that and Isabella. One side of the road was Isabella. We lived in Midland County. I was born August 31, 1926, pretty near 95 years ago. The doctor come to the house to help Mother deliver the baby when I was born. This was my baby picture and here was some of the pictures that we had growing up. I have a brother [**Donald Davis**] that was two years older. I have a sister [**Allene**] that was born down here in Clinton County. Dad was so proud of this colt. That was the barn we had up north. I don't remember much of that. Here's the family we had: I was just little; my mother and dad; my sister was eleven years older; my brother's two years older. Mother has a stillborn child in between there. The doctor did not report my birth until the next day, which was September 1st. So they quit paying-- They said. "That ain't your birthday." The doctor put it in on the first so I have a little trouble once in a while. For medical reasons, I have to use 9/1 when I go to the doctor just because the doctor didn't put it in right 95 years ago.

Wayne: Have you always gone by your middle name?

Duane: Yes, I have. I've always been Duane. They have a little trouble with that now, since the computers come on.

Wayne: Is there was a reason for that?

Duane: No. My sister's was the middle name. My brother wasn't and my sister's husband went by the middle name. Why, I don't know. A lot of people do.

Wayne: Usually it's they're a junior or something like that, sometimes they will go by their middle name.

Duane: Gerald is my first name. My mother never used it. Why, I do not know. Anyway, we lived there until 1930 as the depression was coming. In 1930, in the spring of the year, we moved by horse, of course. By the way, I was born the last year that the Model T's were made. I can always remember when the Model T quit. My dad didn't have one 'til later. We used that to run around the farm with. But anyway, we moved down here in 1930, down on Centerline Road. It was about a mile and a quarter west of old [M]21 on Centerline Road. The depression come and Dad was very ambitious. My brother and I was quite little. Stony Creek had been dredged by then. There was a dredge sometime in the 20's, I think it was or a little earlier maybe, when they dredged Stony Creek out. Stony Creek used to wind around a lot. It was just a crick bed, but they started at Muskrat Lake over here. The dredge back then was a floating dredge. They didn't start down at Maple River. They started and brought the water with them because this dredge they had to float and it was just backward from what they do nowadays but it worked very good. The ditch is very deep. We did not go hungry in the depression and we never had to worry about something to do. My brother and I learned to milk cows. We played together in the crick some. I remember getting stuck in the mud once.

Cindy: Didn't Grandma bring eggs to town to sell?

Duane: We had the cows and pigs and steers and I had sheep later. We milked the cows. Then we'd take it in and separate the milk and you keep the cream. Mother had a churn in the basement where she took the cream and made butter out of it. She had customers in St. Johns. I used to ride with her every Saturday. We had chickens. She had customers she sold butter to, eggs, and she baked bread and sold bread. Then after she'd done that, she'd go to the old Byerly Store on Main Street [in St Johns] in the first block and she'd buy the groceries for the week. We didn't really realize—my folks did. We were too young to realize that it was such a hardship in our nation that people were hungry but we weren't, not a bit. We were busy.

At 9 years old, I drove a tractor. My dad bought a old 1020 probably in '34, '35, an old 1020 International. He always had horses, at least four to six horses. He had them well trained. They'd whoa and they'd stop. When he got that old 1020. It was big enough to remember what he was doing. He was out dragging with this old 1020 because the tractor wouldn't get tired like the horses. When he went to make the corner, that old 1020 didn't have brakes on it that could help swing it around and he got the drag caught in the fence and he hollered, "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I can remember it yet. It was kind of funny but eventually he stopped. It didn't hurt the fence much.

Cindy: I remember you telling grandpa had the first thresher in the county or what was the first farm equipment he had in the county?

Duane: Oh, I'm just going to get to that here in just a minute. In 1935—I wasn't very big--I drove this old 1020 on a binder cutting wheat and oats and then it was shocked. We had to haul it. The threshers would come with the big threshing rig and a bunch of farmers would all get together. They traded help that way and it was during the depression. They was lucky that most all the farmers noticed the depression because you'd take wheat to sell it, you wouldn't get enough to pay your taxes.

Wayne: What school did you go to?

Duane: to county school? County Farm School.

Myrna: Who was your teacher?

Duane: **Doris Yallup** was my teacher for seven years and then she had to quit. She had a child and had to quit and then we had another one later.

I drove a Model T when I was 9 years old. We had old Model T to run about on the farm and I would take water to the threshers in '35.

In '36, Dad bought an Oliver combine. Oliver combine come in. It wasn't too modern a looking thing. He had to pull it with the old 1020. That wasn't too great, but he got by and he used that for quite a few years.

By the way, we had no electricity. We had lanterns and lamps in the houses. We didn't have electricity until 1940 before that. As you know, there's an old interurban track. There was an electric car went from Lansing to St. Johns and back again. This one stopped when the Model T's come out and the Model A's, people wanted to drive to Lansing. They didn't want to ride in an electric train. Anyway, that quit and Consumers Power bought the right-of-way. There was a right-of-way that the electric train had bought. That was just a little ways from us and Consumers bought it and put in a huge line, three big wires. Right then, all St. Johns had was a line coming from Owosso and they needed, in case a storm would knock that line out, they had no way. So Consumers built that line from Lansing to St. Johns. It was a huge line and then later they put another line under it. They put that line in 1940 and got electricity and this kind of thing.

I was about 10 is when I started in 4-H. My brother and I am went to over Mr. **Shafley's** farm and joined their 4-H. A couple years later, we started our own 4-H club. My brother started it and then I got into it too. Eventually, it got bigger. It was the Stoney Creek 4-H Club and we were probably one of the biggest 4-H clubs. We expanded it so that **Alice Heibeck** was the leader for clothing and we had a leader for handicraft that done it. I forget who was handicraft [leader]. **Dale Kingsley** was livestock. All of us worked together and we had quite a big club and we met a couple times a month in the summer. In the wintertime, I let the leaders do what they wanted to with the handicraft but they went by Stoney Creek also. We had quite a big club.

Wayne: When did you get involved with raising sheep?

Duane: Oh, when I was in 4-H, probably in '40. My dad had a few sheep. I also bought a couple dairy cows. My brother had beef. I had dairy and sheep. He had beef cattle and hogs. I got Shropshire sheep and I bought them down by Ann Arbor.

Here is some pictures: That was here when we moved to St. Johns. Here's another picture that shows you the barn and there's my first day of school. I kind of forgot them. Here's a little certificate I got, I think, signed by Doris Yallup for *didn't miss a day of school* in the third grade or something.

The war broke out in '41 and here's some more rationing books. Some things we used to do. I was not in the service but I was ready to go in about '45. If Truman hadn't of dropped the atom bomb, I would have been in the invasion of Japan but, as it was, I got my physical and they never called me. There's a church camp.

We'll get back to 4-H here. My sheep project I probably liked the best.

Wayne: I believe you won some state championships.

Duane: There's some 4-H camp. That was in '41, I think back of it says '42. This one's '42. That was at the State 4-H Fair and I had first place there. They had the State Fat Lamb and Beef Show in Detroit every year and I went to that until I got too old I couldn't. This one's in '46. I got \$5.00 a pound. That was right after the war and I guess the people wanted to spend their money.

Wayne: You were happy to take it.

Duane: I was happy to, by all means. This here was in the paper. This was in '44. I had Reserve Champion Lamb in '44. It was a lot of fun back then. **Morrie Hill** was our 4-H county leader for the extension work and Morrie Hill was a good livestock man. He trained a bunch of us to judge in general livestock. That was beef, pigs, sheep, and draft horses. None of us knew too much about draft horses, I'll clue you, back then. We had to know it so he trained us to do that. In 1944 this was the bunch that won the State Livestock Judging Championship. That's **Laverne Silm** and **Stuart Sleight**--you know, Stuart Sleight was a veterinarian. He went on and he taught in Michigan State--and Laverne Silm and myself. Anyhow, we had a good time. He taught us how to explain. We had to judge them and then tell one of the instructors at Michigan State on why we placed them that way. We couldn't just do it. We had to explain why. Morrie Hill had resigned and went on to something else but **Einer Olstrom** come into Clinton County in 1945, that was. He come into the county as 4-H Club Extension Club Director. Morrie was here three or four years, and then Einer Olstrom, and then **Don Walker** come. Don was here quite a while. Don come I think before you was born. We got into more things and we went to 4-H Club Week, and that was a bunch of them.

In 1945 I graduated from high school and this is my diploma. Mrs. **[Esther] Oyer** was my eighth-grade teacher and that was that one and there was my high school diploma. There was a picture of the eighth-grade graduation for part of Clinton County. That was in spring of '41.

Cindy: It looks like your church. It looks like it was taken at the church.

Duane: It was the in old Bengal Church up on Parks Road. Here was my high school graduation. I was a Future Farmer of America. I'm not going to bore you with all these but I got busy myself, not only with farming, but I also got into leading in the 4-H club. I kept that going. In '42 and '43, I was nominated in Clinton County for the Outstanding Young Man of Clinton County.

Wayne: Was this because of your work in 4-H?

Duane: 4-H and I was Area Director in 4-H Extension down in Saginaw. We'd have three, four meetings a year and I had the leaders and the Extension Director would go for agriculture and the home ec people would go plug the 4-H. That was in the spring of the year, if I remember rightly. Then they have a state-wide person for Outstanding Young Man for the State of Michigan. There's myself and my wife. We got that. That there kept us busy for a while.

We was in the Service Club. The 4-H Service Club had this organization. You had to be voted in on that and you worked at the 4-H fair. It give you a chance to work there. You had to be known and be doing stuff for 4-H to get in that. There was quite a few of us but we all were busy. What's her name I mentioned? **Janet [Staub]**, she was in that. I can remember we used to have husking bees in the fall of the year. There was a fellow over by the South Riley Bar, not there, but up the road a ways to the north, that raised his corn and he put some red ears in there. When you got a red ear, you're supposed to kiss whoever you're shucking corn with. So we just had a lot of fun, I'll tell ya. Then I got involved in more 4-H in the county and in the state. For a couple years, I was in the State 4-H Council and we met over to Kellogg Center and our state leader, **A. J. Kettunen**, was the head of it. Sometime after that, I got the honor of 4-H Alumni Award. That there was kinda nice to have. It was a long time ago. This thing's faded. I don't know what the kids are going to do with all that crap. They can have a big fire.

I was going to tell you one of the nice things that I enjoyed. Our county every year would have trips,[for] people doing an outstanding job. One trip I chaperoned. We'd have a woman chaperone too. That was the Chicago trip. We dared to go to Chicago then. That was one of the years that was on the train. They would take us to Grand Rapids. We'd get on the train in the morning and the train would take us right downtown Chicago to Grand Central Station, they called it then. We always went out to the stockyards. We'd have Swift & Company. I would call them ahead of time. They had a representative that would meet the kids and then take them into the plant and show them how they butchered the cattle and take them in to see how they

hang in the coolers. One place that was very interesting for the kids and me too: They took us in and showed us some beef that was hanging and it was covered with very light cheese cloth and there was mold all over them. He says, "This looks like you'd probably throw it away." But he said, "We scrape the mold off from it, take the cheese cloth off, wash it good, and that's the meat that is your hundred-dollar dinners." Very tender! Anyway, the kids really enjoyed that.

That there's a certificate from Kettenun. It was a leader's award for twenty-five years or something.

On Sunday morning, I used to take the kids to church and we stayed at the Conrad Hilton Hotel. Four boys and four girls always went. I was with the boys and the woman leader was with them. This is a bunch I took to Chicago once. I called the church one time and told them that we were coming a certain Sunday or wrote them a letter, I forget which. I got this letter back from the pastor. The church is on top of Conrad Hilton Hotel, clear to top of it. They got this building where the old church is and it's quite a large place. They was having a special deal that way. He wanted us to come early and we were introduced to all these people in Chicago. The kids really enjoyed that, I'll tell ya.

In 1948, I'd married **Barb Fuerstenau**.

Wayne: When did you get involved with the St. Johns Co-operative?

Duane: I always sold my stuff there and went to their meetings. We had meetings in the co-ops. They would have a meeting for the farmers every winter. They elected directors and I was elected to Director for three, four years and that was interesting to get in that. The city owns it now.

We always went to the State 4-H Fair, which they don't have anymore. This is a bunch that went. I was a chaperone and they went to State 4-H Fair. My wife always went. Her and about three other women were in the dorms. They would place the kids. As they come in, they would place them in what room where they were supposed to go? She worked for each department on putting kids in rooms to stay for the 4-H Fair and 4-H Club Week and that kind of thing. She was quite involved. In later years she was elected Clerk of Bingham Township and she learned a lot by that, by being clerk. It was just the township.

In 1945 my dad bought a new combine, a 12-foot. He got tired of the old one. We had that for quite a few years. That's the fall of the year I had the champion lambs. Well, you went to Detroit in December. Livestock show was in December and then in '47 I went to MSU, short course.

Anyway, life was going on. Sometimes ups and downs but I've had a good life and have four kids. I have quit farming quite a while. You know what happened to farming. I could not get any bigger than I was and you couldn't make a living on that anymore. So I sold the farm, part of it on a contract, part of it not.

Wayne: When was this?

Duane: I started selling it in the 70's, '75, '78, '79, sometime in there. You get to the point you had to have a thousand acres. My tractor was getting old and you didn't make enough to replace it. My wife worked for Federal Land Bank and she come home one day I'll remember. She says, "Can you believe? Today, we made our first million-dollar loan." Now, this was back in the 70's. Today, there isn't any farmer that's big that's still making a living at it. There's a lot of farmers that's still farming but they got another job to support them. They borrow five, six million dollars or more nowadays. They have to because the machinery, the tractor that I bought in '55 was around twenty-five hundred dollars. It pulled a four-bottom plow. That's a garden tractor now. A tractor now is three, four, five hundred thousand. We had a chopper. We filled silos. These choppers they make now-- I know one guy that's got three choppers. He's milking 6,000 cows and I don't know how many acres he works, thousands of acres. The chopper cost a million and a half and it's over a thousand horsepower. In order to support that, you've got to have six thousand cows. That biggest one he got

last year--ours chopped one row---this does fourteen. The other two he's got, about ten or twelve rows. You can't afford that.

I drove a bus for a couple of years, but then I had a chance to be the transportation supervisor. **Steve Bakita** was their superintendent and he hired me to do that. In fact, he hired me to drive bus. That was in earlier in the 60's. He come out and he said, "Duane, can you drive bus tonight?" I said, "Steve, I ain't even got a chauffeur's license." "You don't need one tonight. No, just come and drive!" Then I got a chauffeur's license and he hired me. Then later, I become mechanic and then a couple years later, the supervisor. I was in that for 25 years and enjoyed that very much, got acquainted with a lot of people in the state.

Wayne: Did you have anything unusual happen on the buses during that time?

Duane: Oh yeah, it does every day! They cut seats and all that kind. I can remember, one kid was cutting seats and he had a great big knife. We had radios then and the driver called me up there. I told him he couldn't ride the bus anymore and I called his parents and had them come in so they pick him up that night and take him to school for two weeks. It didn't seem to bother him none. So parents come in and the father says, "My son don't have a knife!" I reached in my drawer. The knife blade about this long. He wasn't very bright. He said, "That's my knife!" I said, "Well, somehow your son got your knife." They didn't argue about it. They paid for the seats. When he went to go, he said, "Can I have my knife?" I said, "You ain't doing a very good job of keeping it. Why don't I keep it awhile?" I done something you wouldn't get by with nowadays. I kept his knife. Anyway, a lot of things happened.

After I retired, I stayed on and drove a little bit, mostly trips, but I did do some interim work. I went to Howell. Some people down there knew me. I was supervisor at Howell for, God, about fourteen weeks. They give me that. We had thirty-two buses. Howell had a hundred and two.

Wayne: Did you drive back and forth every day?

Duane: Yes, they paid me for it.

Wayne: That's a long drive.

Duane: Yeah, it's only fifty miles. It wasn't that bad. You get up a little earlier.

Wayne: Except when it's snowy and icy.

Duane: You said something about happening. We used to have to call school off once in a while in the winter when it was snowy or something like that. I got up quite a few mornings about two o'clock and get in my pickup--I had a four-wheel drive pickup--go out and travel the roads and see how it was. One morning it was icy. It was terrible and I called Steve. I says, "Steve, we gotta call school off." "What's the matter?" I said, "It's icy." So he come down to the bus garage. He said, "It is a little icy." I took him out on the road. I stopped the pickup on DeWitt Road and it slid right over in the ditch. He said, "Let me out of here. I gotta call school off." I said, "Steve, sit down." I put it in four-wheel drive and drove it up out of the ditch and out back on the road. When we called school off, we had a way that we could call Grand Ledge and Eaton Rapids and, just sometimes, East Lansing. We'd all get together and talk. We had a little network that we talked together and 'cause it was a little early in the morning. We wouldn't do that until about five o'clock, but we'd call school off.

After that, I come home and done some other stuff around. I was retired, drawing retirement. People down in Charlotte called me and wondered if I come down to help them. I was down there for two years, drove back and forth every day. That wasn't quite so far. I got well acquainted with a lot of people down there and I knew some people in Charlotte anyway. I'd went to short course with them over to Michigan State and there was this **Marilyn Johnson** and I knew her husband. After I was there a couple years and got acquainted with

a lot of people down there---. My wife died in November '02 and I got stuff settled up. I was setting to home. I lived on Taft Road then. They said, "What are you doing?" We was all retired and they said, "Why don't you come down to Gulf Shores?" That's where they were. "You can stay with us." So I did. I drove down there and stayed with them for a couple weeks.

Down there we do have the Michigan Club. There was about 1200 members in the Michigan Club down there. You wouldn't think there was that many but they have meetings, two in January, two in February, one in March, and then the picnic. We use the Civic Center and that holds seven hundred people. A lot of the people join the Michigan Club so they can golf. If you're a Michigan Club member, you can golf at a cheaper rate down there because you're guests. So they'd join the Michigan Club for that. One year I was president of the Michigan Club and had a lot of fun doing that. We have programs and talk, very good programs, a group that sings, or whatever. We get a lot of people and then they give away a lot of things from different organizations and that.

I cannot complain about my life. I've had some bad times, some good times. My kids, I love 'em. They had a party for me here for my birthday. They had to do it a little early because they all wanted to come.

Wayne: Thank you. Thank you very much for...