

Interviewed by Thelma E. Jenkins  
Transcribed by Myrna A. Van Epps, Oct. 2018

I am interviewing Hila Bross for the Clinton Co. Historical Society. It is May 17, 1979. Hila, you have been a very active person, not only in St. Johns, but in all of Clinton Co. for many years. When did you first come to St. Johns?

I first came to St. Johns during WWI. I was quite young then, you'll have to believe, and I came to visit my grandfather and grandmother Northrup. He was a retired minister. He had just retired and had come here to live because he had been the minister here two or three times before and felt that this was more home. Over the years while I was growing up, we would come for Christmas and I would come during the summertime and visit them. Then, in 1926, I came and stayed with my grandparents and attended my last three years of high school here.

What was your parents' names, your maiden name?

My maiden name was Axtell. My father was **Manly E. Axtell** who came from Kalamazoo Co. and I was born there in the little town of Vicksburg. My mother was **Mabel Northrup**. They met when my grandfather was the minister over in Mt. Morris [MI] near Flint.

Your grandfather's name was?

**Rev. G. S. Northrup.**

Was he the minister of one denomination?

He was a Baptist minister and he had been the minister of the First Baptist Church here in St. Johns three different times. When he got ready to retire, he had lived so many places, but this one seemed the most like home so they came back here and built a house.

You graduated from high school here in St. Johns?

Yes, in 1929, 50 years ago this June.

Tell us some of your life then after you graduated from high school. Did you remain in St. Johns for a while?

Well, the on other side of my family, my father's family were in show business; in fact, in the tent show business. As a child, I traveled around with my parents and took part in the theatrical production and then would either go to boarding school in the winter time or then I came here to St. Johns, then went to school, as I said. The year after I graduated, I was with my father and his sister whose first name was Hila. She was the one who I was named after, and they were in show business. About this time radio had become very big and talking pictures had come in. So the legitimate theatre suffered as a result of that and business got poorer and poorer. You will remember, that in the fall of 1929 there was the big stock market crash. So we finally closed the show and I did come back to St. Johns.

When did you meet your husband?

In the fall of 1930, I came back to St. Johns and I met him [**Hiram Manning Bross**] then. He had come here from the state of Oregon where he had grown up, but his family were

old St. Johns people so he had lots of relatives here. He was a singer and I as a singer, of sorts, so we had lots in common in that way.

Was there plays put on in St. Johns at that time?

Yes, there were lots of home talent shows and that is actually how I met him. There was a show that was put on by the American Legion. He was the hero and I was the "shero," so to speak. He got to taking me home after the rehearsals and that's how it all began.

When were you married?

We met each other during the depression and my husband went to school to become an optometrist. So we went together almost five years. I worked for the J. C. Penney store during that time and directed a choir and picked up a nickel here and nickel there as we all tried to do in those days. Then we were married in June of 1935.

Where did you first live in St. Johns after you were married?

Actually, we did not live in St. Johns when we were first married. Manning, my husband, had established an optometry practice in Ludington up in Mason Co. [MI], so we lived there the first four years that we were married. In 1939 we came back to St. Johns and built a little house out on a farm four miles north at French's Corners [French Rd. & US-27] on a farm that my husband's father and mother owned at that time.

Is that the house that you presently live in?

No. His parents lived in that house which we now call, The Salt Box House. This is another little house that we built next door.

Was your husband in business?

Yes, He practiced optometry here in St. Johns.

How many years was he in business?

Oh, almost 20 years here in St. Johns and then we sort of lost our minds and went into the restaurant business. We fixed up the old house out on French's Corners and started calling it the Salt Box House and had sort of a tea room type restaurant there for 10 years. Later he went back into optometry but he worked for a large company not located in St. Johns.

I remember the Salt Box House. Everybody enjoyed going out there, I'm sure. You have a family, I know, and we'd like to hear about that.

We have one son, Dan [**Daniel Bross**], and he is married and has 2 children. His wife's name is Sue. She was **Susan Parks**. She's a descendant from a very old family here in Clinton Co., a family that first came to Dallas Twp. Sue lived near Traverse City. They have 2 children, a boy and a girl. The boy is 9 and the girl is 11.

What year was Dan born?

In 1941, just before we got into WWII.

Hila, you mentioned that you graduated from high school here. What year did you graduate? 1929, which is 50 years ago, and our class is going to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary on June 16<sup>th</sup>. We're going to have a Saturday noon luncheon at the Congregational Church. That was where we had our Baccalaureate services. They don't have those any more. Then during the afternoon we plan to go up to Rodney B. Wilson School which is now the junior high but that was the high school when we graduated. I know some of the people who don't live around here would enjoy walking through the old building again.

We're also going to have the [Paine-Gillam-Scott] Museum open for them and then let them walk up and down the street and see some old, familiar sights.

Has the Rodney B. Wilson School changed a great deal since you first remember it?

Yes it has. We had two study halls, large study halls that were the length of the width of the building. They were called, Study hall A and Study Hall B, one on each floor. Those have since been divided into smaller classrooms but that does give it a different look. Also Rodney Wilson School was added on to in the late '50's, I think, or early '60's. The gymnasium was made a great deal larger so that room will not look familiar to our old classmates.

What are some of the other activities that you have been active in through the years, organizations that you have belonged to?

I've always been interested in music and have been quite active continually in choir directing and playing the organ for church services. I'm still doing it. I began when I was a senior in high school. I have been active in the Woman's Club and in the St. Johns Morning Musicale. I still belong to both of them. I'm a little more active in the music club right now, I guess. I belong to the DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution] and I manage to keep very busy.

You might tell us about the library and your interest in that in the last few years.

In 1965 I became the librarian of Bement Public Library here in St. Johns and was there 11 years. They were very rewarding years. It was a job in which I used all the brains and all the energy and sometimes all the patience that I had. I just loved every minute of it. I retired from that in 1976 which, of course, was the big day for the Bicentennial and it happened to be my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday on July 4, 1976. I had the pleasure and the honor of riding in our big Bicentennial Day parade.

I understand you are a charter member of the Clinton Co. Historical Society. Would you like to tell us about that?

Yes. In 1974, while I was still in the library, I was one of the group of people who decided that it was time that our community had a historical society, so we called a meeting which was held in Feb. 1974 in the ballroom of the Municipal Building. That happened to be the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organization of the old Clinton Co. Pioneer Society. We felt that we were sort of the descendants of that organization which sort of faded out in the 1930's.