

JAN SEPERIC

Wayne: This is March 7th, 2024. I'm Wayne Summers along with Myrna Van Epps and today we are interviewing Jan Seperic at her store in St. Johns. Jan, why don't you start out by telling us, where were you born?

Jan: At Sparrow Hospital.

Wayne: Where were your parents living at the time?

Jan: On Dunlap Street in Lansing.

Wayne: I know your father [Roy L. Dodge] was an author so can you tell us a little bit about that?

Jan: My dad was actually a sign painter and then, as he got more handicapped, he did things that let him sit more, although he did our family genealogy and it took 12 years because it wasn't online or anything. He went out to Michigan State's Library. My mom thought he was gonna leave her, he was gone so much. He did the family genealogy and I don't have a copy of it here today 'cause it's in every state library. You need a copy probably at the archives.* He went all the way back to the Mayflower for me so that was good.

He was in the Second World War and had his leg shot off at the Battle of Ramagen. He had a wooden leg, weighed 42 pounds. This is cute: I didn't know what to do with it when he passed away. He was born on Armistice day. His father came home from World War I on November 18th to the birth of his firstborn son and my dad died the day before his 70th birthday. He was in the hospital. He was always quite sickly 'cause he had shrapnel throughout his body from that. I didn't know what to do with that wooden leg. My aunt and uncle had a farm in Dimondale so I took this wooden leg and I had it in a barn out there. I stopped out there one day and my uncle's St. Bernard had just passed away and he had that thing with the scooper in the front of it, with the St. Bernard in it. He was gonna take it out back and bury it and I said, "Just a minute." I ran in the barn and got the wooden leg and put it in there because I knew what to do with it. So someday they'll dig up the bones of this St. Bernard and think it had a wooden leg. I always laugh about that. You know, a wooden leg isn't something you wanna leave sitting around. It's not decorative.

Wayne: Then he started writing and how was he interested then in local history and historical things?

Jan: He wasn't.

Wayne: What did he write on then?

Jan: He wrote *Ghost Towns of Michigan* and then he wrote another book called, *Ticket to Hell*, which was about lumbering in Michigan in the 1880s.

Wayne: That's kind of historical.

Jan: But he didn't like antiques. They didn't have anything old.

Wayne: How did you get interested in antiques?

Jan: When I got married, my grandma gave me all her old furniture and I loved it. All my friends got their grandma's old furniture and they couldn't wait to get rid of it. I still have it all.

Wayne: When did you first get into the antique business? Was that the Banner Grange?

Jan: Nope, my first store--I bought the Matthews Ice Cream building downtown. I'm not good with dates. I don't know what year. I bought that building and had a fabric store and I would still have a fabric store. That's my love. I've been a dress maker all my life. I sew every minute but Walmart came. I only had it nine years and I couldn't make a living. The *Clinton County Republican* bought my building 'cause back then you didn't used to have an empty building. I had an auction and took what was left out to this house next to South Riley. I was married then and South Riley was in both our names.

When I got my divorce, that was the hardest thing. Took two years to get my name off that land contract-- 'cause the people that we'd bought it from-- I had a better reputation than my former husband. They didn't want my name off from it. That's when I bought Banner Grange and I had that 23 years. When I got my divorce, then I bought the Penney's building and I had both of them open for about six years. I'd hire people to work at one or the other.

When I was 72, I thought I should retire. All of my friends were so I sold the building, had another auction. I was home three months and thought I was gonna go cuckoo. I didn't like cleaning carpets and washing windows. A friend called one day and said, "The cutest little building just went up for sale." They were just putting a sign up out front and I came over here. This was Farm Bureau. I opened the door and there were papers and computers on the floor. They just moved out. I looked and I said, "I can handle this." That's been almost 11 years now. I'm trying to tell myself it's time to retire 'cause I'll be 83 in July but I'm healthy and I love what I do. I don't know, I'm still here.

Wayne: Myrna, you had a question about a place you used to live, I think, or the cemetery.

Jan: She said something about a cemetery but that they plowed under, but I don't know anything about it.

Myrna: Oh, you said, at French's Corners there was a gravestone in the yard. Would you tell that story again, about the little girl that --

Jan: I don't know if it's a boy or girl. It's the Steel lady married the French. I had that information at home on something. I think they had six children and one of them passed away and it's buried out there. It was just a baby.

Myrna: It was fairly normal then, I think.

Jan: I think you could do that then.

I do have all the papers from my dad writing all of the things that he did and I am gonna take it down to the archives. I didn't know what to do with it, all the photos and all the papers. He never got Clinton County published. I have all his information. The ghost town books were in three volumes. The publisher just kept nagging him to get--

Myrna: We have them at the archives.

Jan: You have all three of the originals because then.

Myrna: We'd like whatever you have.

Jan: I thought I still owned the rights to the books but patent dates of books run out 19 ½ years and the publisher republished and combined them into one. I'm just glad. They're still being published. My dad's been gone 40 some years.

Myrna: We refer to them from time to time.

Wayne: So you said that he had another book that was--

Jan: *Ticket to Hell*.

Wayne: I thought you said there was a Clinton County section or something that he had been working on that--

Jan: That would've been in the *Michigan Ghost Town* books?

Wayne: But it was not in it but you have--

Jan: I have the papers.

Wayne: So that would be interesting to get because we could then kind of preserve the part then we could preserve what would've been in the next book.

Jan: Isn't that funny? I think, when he wrote the books, I didn't live up here anyway. Maybe I just moved here. I lived in Lansing, when I was first married, on Hollywood Street out by the airport .

Wayne: How did you get involved with the formation of the Clinton County Historical Society?

Jan: When I moved up here, all the beautiful houses, old, old houses, and I would talk to people and no one cared or had any history. It was hard to find anything. I didn't know if the Archives was there 60 years ago. I don't know. So I got to thinking about it and I thought, well, maybe some other people would be interested. I ran down to the reminder one day and put a \$1.50 ad in, that said, "Would there be anyone interested in history of all the beautiful homes and businesses in St. John's? I'll have a meeting." I think it was a Thursday evening and twelve people came. I was so excited twelve people cared. They've all passed away. I didn't know that and so that's how it started.

Myrna: Did the Bicentennial coming have anything to do with it, getting ready for the Bicentennial?

Jan: No, it was before then. I was the Bicentennial chairman. I had everything. I don't know how I did all I did. I had three kids. I don't know how I did it all. I had 400 entries. There was just one old Model T car. The rest were horses, oxen, goats pulling wagons. Oh, it was wonderful!

Myrna: This was the Bicentennial parade you're talking.

Wayne: That was what, two years after?

Jan: Bicentennial was 1976.

Myrna: You were meeting for the historical society before that.

Jan: I think almost two years before we really decided we needed to form a legal group.

Myrna: I think the state was urging the counties to do that. Is that correct?

Jan: I don't know. I'm not very legal about things like that. We did have officers. We used to have 50, 60 people at every meeting. Every month we had a meeting and we met upstairs in the Municipal Building. I would make homemade gingerbread and get whipping cream. Sometimes I had to make 10 gingerbreads. It was so fun. It was just a different time.

Myrna: Were they doing genealogy at the time too?

Jan: It was just people that liked the old things that were together and could talk about it. Also, once a month I had a meeting. I would find people who collected. One time it was people collected wooden, like pestles and wooden bowls, and made arrangements for us to go there so they could talk.

One time, the people collected ironstone and I think I had three vans. This is hysterical: I know where the house is out on Francis Road and we got there and I knocked and knocked. I could hear people yelling inside. Finally, I opened the door 'cause I had all these people in the vans--and I won't say their name 'cause they're divorced and moved--but the people were in there. They were throwing these ironstone plates and dishes all over. It was horrible. I had to calm 'em down long enough to say, "I have all these people out here waiting to come in so you can talk about this." Well, they went upstairs and continued their fight. We went in and just looked at what was there but there was one of those registers and you could hear 'em up there fighting and swearing and yelling. They shortly after got a divorce but that was one of the things I thought, "Oh, how did this happen to me?" Of all times for them to get in a fight.

Every month for about two years, I would find a place that collected something and then--and I won't say a name--someone got involved in the Historical Society, the wife of someone that was involved. She told me that I wasn't the right class to be involved in the Historical Society. I'm not a very brave person and I just said, "Okay, then I'm done with this." That's when I stopped. We also had a museum back then, not this one, but the cute little brick house next to the ambulance down by the hospital on Oakland. Yes, and that was really fun. A lot of people gave us things to put in there. I think that must have happened about the time I backed away. I don't know what happened to everything that was there.

Myrna: Then they got the brick house.

Wayne: They probably moved the items over.

Jan: Yes, but it was a lot more fun back then. We had a lot more interest. Now, you know, they might get 10 or 12 people to show up.

Myrna: We hope to fix that.

Wayne: We're working on it. Were there some projects that you helped get started during the early days?

Jan: I did. You know the signs that are on houses that say, "I was here in 1876"? That was my project. You can still buy those and have them. Yes, because I thought that was good. I wanted people to know about my house. During the Bicentennial, I needed a money maker project. I couldn't get any volunteers to clean up all the horse and oxen poop. I could get volunteers for everything else. I couldn't get that so I had to hire someone and there were no funds available to me. Nothing. I had these cardboard fans like this cardboard fan. The Steel Hotel's on it. It's red, white, and blue and says "The Bicentennial." I'd walk through town and we sold those for a quarter a piece and I had enough money to pay the guys that cleaned up the doodoo. I can't think of any other projects.

Wayne: So you organized the, the parade?

Jan: Yep. I was on the phone all the time. The phone that's on the wall at home that I can still find, where I'm always losing this thing. I still have my land line at home. I remember, when I first moved here, my number was 4473; and then they added the 224; and then they added 517; then they changed it to 989. I had a big billboard on the highway and it was \$1,200 to have that vinyl changed, when they changed the exchange. When you live someplace that long, things stay the same.

Myrna: If we're done with the Historical Society, could you talk about the South Riley Store? What could you tell us about that? It was a post office. Was it a house and a post office?

Jan: The house next door is part of the property, but it wasn't always. That house is like a 1940s house and South Riley's been there since-- I don't know dates. I don't remember.

Myrna: So the post office was in what is now the store?

Jan: Some part of it. I don't know what. I used to know the people that we bought it from.

Wayne: You owned the store at one time, correct?

Jan: Yes. I had nothing to do with it. It was just my name. I don't drink. I don't care if you do. I hate alcohol. My oldest daughter also owns a bar. It's just, I don't understand this. I only had to work there twice when my former husband, George, got called into court for something and, of course, one of those times the power went out and there were people in there playing pool. I didn't have a flashlight or anything. I remember them finishing their pool game holding their Bic lighter to see what they were doing. It would have to have happened to me. I didn't even know how to get the beer out of the thingy. The people, they'd come behind and do it themselves.

Myrna: Wasn't it a grocery store too?

Jan: . It was a nice store. Two people before them. A man and a lady, they had a meat market. They cut meat and it was a really, nice grocery store, but there always was that little bar on the side that you had to walk through, that tiny little door. They vote. I don't know if it's every year, or whenever they vote, and you can't sell alcohol, only beer, in that little side. The township, or whatever it would be always vote. They sell alcohol by the bottle in the grocery store but no alcohol in the little bar. I don't know why.

Wayne: Must be the licensing. So they had gas too. Did you have gasoline pumps?

Jan: Used to, yes. They were out behind the house when we first bought it. I think it was Sunoco. Yep. It was kind of cute. I did the banking, even though I wasn't there. I would take the money to the bank and when I'd go out to pick up the money, which he'd put all the money in a brown grocery bag and roll it up. That place was a gold mine. Sometimes there'd be horses tied up out front, or tractors. Grandpa would be out plowing and I guess he got hot and needed a cold beer and down he'd go to South Riley. It was a funny little place. I think still, snowmobilers go out there. Everybody says the food is wonderful.

Wayne: I know people who go there.

Jan: George is very ill. He was given six months to live but that was up in November.

Myrna: George, who?

Jan: My former husband that owns it now, George Seperic. He has five kinds of cancer but he's still moving around, not walking, I guess.

Wayne: There have been some renovations there. Not too long ago, they kind of redid at least the outside.

Jan: It's a dive!

Wayne: I haven't been inside. I've only looked at the outside.

Jan: Oh, it's so dirty inside. You look up and there's cobwebs hanging and the place is full of people and everybody's happy. It's just the place where everybody goes.

Myrna: It's there. It's convenient.

Jan: It used to be the place where married people went to meet people they weren't supposed to but that's kind of gotten outta that. Not my thing. It's just not my thing. Banner Grange is the only building I wish I hadn't sold. I love that building and it's still doing really well. The people that I sold it to, it was more an adoption than a sale.

Wayne: It's nice when you see some of these buildings taken care of so they don't collapse and fall down.

Jan: Oh yes, but it's so expensive to do everything.

Wayne: It can be millions of dollars to fix some of these up.

Myrna: So the Banner Grange is a home now? It's not a business?

Jan: No, it can't be a home. I sold it to someone. It's on the Michigan Register of Historic Sites. I got it on that.

Myrna: What's it used for?

Jan: Two girls that bought it-- I say "girls" in their sixties and one of them passed away last year. So the other one hasn't gone out there. What they used it for, they had jamborees. I tell ya, the property is like two yards short of an acre so there isn't room to put whatever they do to get water or sewer or something.

Myrna: Drain field.

Jan: Yes, I'm a city girl. So I don't know what that that is. So it can't ever be a home and that's why I worried about it being destroyed and so I got it on the Michigan Register of Historic Sites.

Myrna: It's a picturesque corner.

Jan: Yes, it's number 1894 [1240], it seems like, on the Michigan Register of Historic Sites. It's a beautiful building. Upstairs had the most beautiful floor. It was the dance floor, and the piano was still up there and the old kerosene furnace. It was so pretty but I thought I should move on.

Wayne: You downsized a little bit.

Jan: The Grange, as far as retail, people, that came out to it, didn't wanna tell their friends about it. They wanted to be their own secret little place to go. You have to have sales in order to survive so that's why I

thought, well downtown. I had vendors downtown where the Grange was like here, all my stuff, and that made good money. Then, like I said, when I was 72, I thought I was gonna retire. Silly girl!

Wayne: You're not the retiring type.

Jan: I guess not. I like what I do. That's why people are going on cruises or going on vacation. I never wanted to. I like where I'm at.

Wayne: You said you've never been more than a hundred miles away.

Jan: My parents retired at Harrison and that's as far as I've ever been.

Wayne: So you've never been to Chicago or Detroit?

Jan: No, nor the[Mackinaw] Bridge. Every year at a class reunion, when they start, they always say, "Janice, did you make it to the bridge?" "No." I think that was built when we were in the 10th grade. I've seen pictures. Why do I need to go there? Traveling isn't in me and Michael--We've been together 25 years. He's been all over the world so he's done with it. So he's okay.

Wayne: You should have him take you up there sometime.

Jan: I wouldn't like to. I wouldn't like to waste the gas and when I'd get there, I would say, "I've got postcards of that and I've seen it on TV." I don't like the smell of water with fish in it so I'm just not an up-north person, I guess. I love where I live and I love what I do, so why go away? I told you I'm boring.

I wanna tell you something about my dad that I think is so cute. Holt, Michigan, is where I lived from the first through the ninth grade and so my dad was a sign painter there. There's a bar in Holt called the Crystal Bar, still there. It was there in the forties till now and there's a sign on the corner that says, "Holt is too small to have a town drunk so we take turns." My dad made that first sign in 1944. Of course, it's been repainted but they always repaint it and put it back out. I just think that's so cute, .

Wayne: Thank you very much for sharing some stories with us.

*The Archives has a copy.

