

## JOHN FOX

- Wayne: This is Wednesday, November 10, 2021. I'm Wayne Summers with Myrna VanEpps and we are interviewing John Fox. Also present is his daughter, Jane Motz. John, why don't we start out with maybe when and where you were born?
- John: I was born in Fowler, Michigan, on the 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> of January 1928.
- Wayne: How far back does your family go as far as here in Clinton County?
- John: I think my great-grandfather, Johann, came over in 1840 and he brought three of his sons. A year later their wives also came over, so the initial landing is in 1840.
- Wayne: Do you know how they got here, the process?
- John: I think they came on Lake Erie. I'm not sure what the process was.
- Wayne: Did they land in New York and then take the Erie Canal, do you know?
- John: I think that's what they did.
- Wayne: When they got to Detroit, did they come over land?
- John: I am not sure.
- Wayne: You grew up in Fowler, I assume?
- John: Uh huh.
- Wayne: Where did you go to school?
- John: I went to kindergarten at Sutton School, and then to Holy Trinity Grade School, and then Fowler High School.
- Wayne: Do you have any particular memories of those times, any stories?
- John: Nothing that stands out.
- Wayne: What do you remember about Fowler back when you were young, some of the businesses maybe or things that were happening at that time?
- John: Well, my two oldest brothers were in the International Harvester implement business and I recall going in and out of their place and --- in there.
- Wayne: Do you remember the opera house?
- John: Yeah.
- Wayne: Did you attend anything there?
- John: Yeah, we used to go to Friday night dances at the Opera House.

Wayne: The old theatre, did you go there too then, the movie theater?

John: Yes, for a short period of time. That was not high on my list.

Wayne: I believe you entered the service then. Was that after high school?

John: Yes.

Wayne: Could you talk about that?

John: I enlisted in the Navy V-5 program in February of 1946 and shortly thereafter, they cut back on the V-5 program. The war had ended so I was discharged and later on became eligible for the draft and I was drafted in 1946 and went to Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Illinois. From there, I went to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and took my basic training at Camp McCoy in Wisconsin. Up to that date that's pretty much the way things were transpiring.

Wayne: Did you go overseas then as part of the Korean War?

John: Yes. I was shipped over to Japan. I was in Japan from 1950 until 1953.

Wayne: Did you serve on a ship there?

John: No. I was landlocked.

Wayne: What was your job?

John: I was a supervisor in their topographic engineering department and we made maps for the Air Force.

Wayne: After you got out of the Navy, what did you do next?

Jane: Went to Michigan State on the GI Bill?

John: Yeah. It seems like there was a short lapse in between them but I think that was basically it.

Wayne: What did you study at Michigan State?

John: I took business administration.

Wayne: Do you have any particular memories of your time at State?

John: There were a couple of professors that I was not happy with.

Jane: You lived in marital housing.

Wayne: So, you were married at the time?

John: I got married while I was at Michigan State.

Wayne: Where did you live before you were married and then where did you live after you got married?

John: Before I was married, I lived in a private house on private property and after I got married, we moved to the university housing. We were located in, what at that time, were army Quonset huts. There were four units in each building.

Wayne: Do you have any particular memories of what it was like to live in the Quonset huts?

John: Yeah, there were four couples and two of the couple's wives were named, Shirley, so when anybody hollered for Shirley, there were usually a couple of answers.

Wayne: I take it the soundproofing wasn't that good.

John: It wasn't that good!

Wayne: There were no private conversations?

John: Not that I was aware of.

Wayne: Going back to Fowler, do you remember any stores like grocery stores?

John: Byerly's and (Chaf?) Fox.

Wayne: Where would those stores located?

John: Becker's sold shoes and groceries.

Jane: Shoes and groceries!

John: Byerly's was a grocery store. It was right on the corner of Main Street. They used to show movies on the back side of the Byerly store, free movies.

Wayne: This is outside?

John: Yeah.

Wayne: When would that have been?

John: Not really quite familiar with the exact timing on it. I remember them playing the movies but I don't remember what the timing was of them.

Wayne: Do you remember the names of any of the movies?

John: Most of them were cowboy shows.

Wayne: Do you remember any other celebrations or special events?

John: They used to have what they called the "Fowler Field Day." It was a day once a

year when farmers and anybody who could afford it would come into town and do their shopping and make their presence known, basically kind of let loose a bit. They had the Fowler picnic at the church. I believe it was on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September.

Wayne: What's the significance of the 15<sup>th</sup> of September?

John: I'm not sure what it was.

Wayne: Wondering if it was an anniversary date or something.

Jane: Opening of squirrel hunting, that's all I know.

Wayne: After you graduated from Michigan State, then you went to work for?

John: Federal-Mogul Corporation.

Wayne: What did you do there?

John: I was a management trainee and I would spend a couple months in each of their departments becoming familiar with their processes, with their personnel.

Wayne: Then after the training period?

John: I was transferred to our one plant in California.

Jane: We went to Van Wert, Ohio, first.

John: Yeah, I missed Van Wert.

Wayne: You went to Ohio; then you went to California?

John: Yeah.

Wayne: How long did you live in California?

John: Off and on for about 40 years, I guess. It was a total of about 40 years.

Wayne: Where in California was this plant located?

John: The first one that I was assigned to was down in Downey, California, which is in the Los Angeles basin area. From Downey, I was transferred over to Redwood City.

Wayne: Near San Francisco?

Jane: We lived in Sunnyvale.

Wayne: That's a fancy place now.

Jane: Back then it was in apricot orchards. It was growing.

John: Cherry orchards.

Wayne: Now it's all Silicon Valley. When did you come back to Michigan then?

Jane: We went to Massachusetts for a year. We moved from California to Massachusetts in '70 and Massachusetts to Michigan in '71.

Wayne: When you came back here, did you work in St. Johns?

John: Yes. I was plant manager at Federal-Mogul here in St. Johns.

Wayne: Was that something you had requested or is it just lucky that you happened to come back home?

John: Just lucky. I guess, it would be lucky.

Wayne: Are there any particular stories that you've talked about that you want him to tell? You mentioned about maybe writing a couple things down.

Jane: His mom passed away when he was six and, at that time, he had seven brothers. They had quite a lot of stories from living on the farm, basically running amok. They had housekeepers but otherwise they'd just be--. He told me a story about when he was eight and his dad said, "Hop into the truck," because they had a farmhouse out on Forest Hill. They had, actually, two farms that were kind of a mile apart and his dad told him to hop in the truck and go get something from the other farm and he didn't want to tell his dad that he didn't know how to drive and he was only eight. So he hopped in the truck and when it came to coming around the corner, he didn't quite make it, hit a tree, I guess. Remember that story, Dad?

John: I remember that story. Yeah, not quite as bad as it sounds. I just kind of brushed the trees.

Jane: No major damage.

Wayne: Do you have some other stories from those times?

Jane: When they drove the tractor out of the barn?

John: Oh, yeah. That was really not my story but my younger brother--they were putting up hay in the barn. The process was to drive the tractor into the barn, unload the hay, and then transport back to get more hay. In the process, my brother, who was kind of in command of the situation, he apparently left the tractor in an operable position and so when my younger brother went out to start it, it made contact and started and shoved him about ten feet down to the concrete barnyard.

Jane: Out of the barn door.

John: Apparently, when he landed, he must have just instinctively jumped to the side and that probably saved him from some serious injury.

Jane: 'cause the tractor came down after it, right?

John: It took the front end out of the tractor. That was pretty much it.

Jane: How old were you when your dad married Martha? Grandpa remarried one of the housekeepers. Martha, your stepmom said that your dad one day said, "Martha, what do you think about making this a permanent situation?" That's how he proposed to her. She had thirteen brothers and sisters that she was taking care of in her own house so she thought it was a great deal, come over here, get away from that and they proceeded to have five more kids, twelve of them all together. They lost one brother at birth.

Wayne: Were they mostly boys?

Jane: Three more boys and two girls.

John: Yeah, three more boys. First eight were boys.

Jane: One of those passed away and then they had three more boys, so ten boys and two girls.

Wayne: Any other stories about growing up in a large family?

John: Oh, we ran a few pitchforks through our extremities. We had a few what we called, "runaways." Dad used to buy horses from out west and these horses were generally not broken so we used to have some rather wild chases trying to keep up with some of these teams of horses that were not totally civilized.

Wayne: These were work horses?

John: Yeah.

Myrna: Can you describe the process for putting loose hay in the barns?

John: Yes. They have an apparatus. It's like a big fork and it is fastened to the roof of the barn and when they want to remove the hay, they lower that fork and that grabs a bunch of hay and picks it up and puts it in the hay mow and that's the process, basically.

Wayne: What kind of crops did you grow on your farm when you're growing up? Was it animals and crops?

John: Yes. It was just about everything. We had beans, sugar beets, corn, soybeans, any and all. We had cows, horses, had a pretty good variety, sheep.

Wayne: What were your chores, or did it vary?

John: Pretty much varied with wherever you were needed, it seemed they would find you.

Myrna: You must have had a big garden.

John: Yeah. I was not involved with the garden. That was something I was apparently exempt from.

Wayne: Did the housekeepers do all the cooking or did you guys have to help out some?

John: I would say probably, initially and eventually, housekeepers did most of the cooking.

Jane: His mom was kind of in and out of hospitals from what I understand, right?

John: Yeah.

Jane: She had severe depression. They think now that was probably baby blues because she had eight kids in ten or twelve years.

Wayne: That's quite a responsibility.

Jane: If she got really depressed, they'd take her to --. Did they take her to Detroit, Dad?

John: I think it was Kalamazoo.

Jane: That's when the housekeepers started coming?

John: Yeah

Jane: Do you remember how old you were when your dad married Martha though? Are you ten years older than Rosemary?

John: Yes.

Jane: Maybe you were twelve or so? I think your older brothers were already out of the house by then, right? Don's dad, Mark, and then his brother, Paul who is the oldest of the brothers.

Wayne: What were typical meals like at then?

John: I can't think of anything that was that I would consider typical, although I do know that for lunch for school, we had lard and sugar sandwiches, which is very cholesterol friendly.

Wayne: My wife, who is a dietitian, would probably be groaning right now.

John: It wasn't a pleasant experience.

Wayne: You didn't like them?

John: Not at all.

Wayne: You ever trade?

John: I don't think I ever found anybody who would trade.

Wayne: Did you have a lot of potatoes, for example?

John: Yes. We planted our own potatoes and harvested them. Potatoes were high on the agenda.

Jane: You ate a lot of meat though too. They always had beef.

Wayne: Pork? This was meat that you raised? Did you slaughter them yourselves or send them out?

John: Yeah, my dad slaughtered hogs, cows, lambs.

Jane: Did you have chickens?

John: Yeah, forgot the chickens.

Wayne: With all those mouths to feed, you would need a lot of food.

Jane: Didn't you used to kind of eat dinner at noon? They called it dinner and then supper at night. Their biggest meal was midday.

Myrna: What was your typical breakfast?

John: I would suspect eggs played a part in that but I am not sure specifically what else, probably ham at some time or other.

Wayne: Did you sell any of your animals or produce?

John: Yeah.

Wayne: Where did you have to go to take them to sell?

John: It was in the Detroit area where we sold the animals.

Wayne: Did you truck them there or did you put them on a train?

John: They were trucked there.

Wayne: You trucked them or did you hire someone?

John: We hired someone to truck them.

Wayne: Down to the Detroit slaughterhouses probably. Any vegetables or eggs? Did you sell those locally?

John: I think it was primarily for our own benefit.

Wayne: Other stories that you are aware of here?

Jane: You once shot a gun off in your--What did they call that cement room?

John: Powerhouse.

Jane: Was that where the furnace was?

John: No. The furnace was in the basement. The powerhouse was on an extension to the



side of the house.

Jane: You had a mud room. Was that part of it?

John: Yes.

Wayne: Where was this house located?

John: You mean what road?

Wayne: Yes.

John: On Forest Hill Road.

Wayne: Is it still there?

Jane: Yes. My cousin lives in it.

Wayne: How many bedrooms were in this house for the twelve kids?

Jane: Four?

John: Yes. The twelve kids never lived there at the same time. As the younger ones came along the older ones, retired into some other—

Jane: Got married.

Wayne: So they were spread out a little bit.

John: Yes.

Jane: I remember there was another house that my grandpa and my step grandma lived in in Fowler and they had these holes in the ceiling where the forced air would go up and she would yell at them, "Get up!" When we moved back to Fowler in '71, we moved into the house that they lived in on Forest Hill Road. That's why I knew there was four bedrooms because each of us kids had a bedroom upstairs.

Wayne: Your own bedroom?

Jane: They were really small. We all had our own bedroom. They packed, probably at some point, maybe ten kids in there, maybe nine, but they still had the holes in the ceiling where you could yell upstairs.

Wayne: How big were these holes?

Jane: That big around, Dad?

Wayne: Someone could fall through them?

Jane: Well, they were a grate. They used to scare me. I walked around them but I suppose

you could walk on them. You could write your name on the inside of the window with your fingernail when the frost was there. I remember sitting there many nights going, "Do I really need to go to the bathroom or can I wait?"

Wayne: Did you have indoor plumbing?

John: Yes. When did we get indoor plumbing? I'm not exactly sure.

Wayne: When you were growing up, did you have an outhouse that you had to go to?

John: Yes, one that was not totally stationary.

Jane: You mean it wobbled?

John: It moved around, particularly at Halloween.

Wayne: Where did it sometimes it move to?

John: About three feet back.

Wayne: So if you didn't watch where you were walking—

John: You could have an unhappy circumstance.

Wayne: Did that ever happen to you?

John: No. Thank you.

Wayne: When you finally got indoor plumbing, did you have just one bathroom inside?

John: Yes, but when Shirley and I got married, we installed a second bathroom.

Wayne: One upstairs and one down?

John: No, they were both downstairs.

Wayne: For taking baths. I assume you had some kind of a tub or something that you brought into the kitchen?

John: I don't recall exactly what process was for that.

Wayne: I'm assuming that you were bathed occasionally.

Jane: There must have been a tub of some sort somewhere.

Wayne: Did you ever go on any trips as a family, like to a lake or--?

John: About once a year we'd go to Navin Field, which at that time was Briggs Field. There were really about four activities a year that we looked forward to. One of them was the Labor Day picnic at church; and go to the zoo in--I think it's in Hamtramck or Dearborn,

or that area; and the Fowler Field Day. That was basically our entertainment for the year.

Jane: Parish picnic.

Wayne: Going to a Tiger game?

John: Yeah.

Wayne: Did you play any sports in school?

John: I played football, baseball, and basketball. We didn't have track.

Jane: You and Mom used to go up to Crystal Lake to the Palladium and listen to bands play. They had a carousel too, didn't they?

John: Uh huh.

Wayne: With the rings that you had to catch?

Jane: I don't know. It had horses on it. It's in Dearborn in that Henry Ford Museum.

Wayne: They moved it over there?

Jane: Yes.

Wayne: Then, I guess I've probably seen it.

Jane: You probably have.

Myrna: Where in Germany did your family come from?

John: The town in Germany was Langenfeld. It's a little town in the area of Germany, bounded by the river and no other landmarks that I can think of right off hand.

Wayne: What was the reason they left Germany?

John: Apparently, because of the tightening down of their ability to move from one place to another and the imposition of the German government.

Wayne: Looking for more freedom?

John: Yes.

Myrna: You named a couple stores in Fowler. "Chaf." What was that?

John: Chaf (?) It's a store that's still there. It's an all-purpose grocery and clothing store. It was right on corner M-21 and Main Street.

Wayne: Is that where Becker's is now?

John: No, Becker's is up across the way where the bank used to be. It used to be the National Bank.

Wayne: Is that the pizza place?

John: No, it's not the pizza place. I think that's about midway down the street. I think the wedding parties go to. I'm not sure what they do. I've heard that they have people come up now, looking for a wedding gown, come by and have lunch with them or something.

Myrna: Do you remember the Fowler Hotel?

John: Yes. They used to have--I may have mentioned it before--Friday night dances at the opera house, which at that time was the--

Jane: We should probably get headed out. We gotta go to church.

Wayne: Thank you very much.