

ALDEN, DOUGLAS, & REX KNIGHT

Wayne: Today is June 2nd, 2023. I'm Wayne Summers, along with Alice Murphy and her husband Pete. We're interviewing Alden, Doug, and Rex Knight at Alden's house in St. Johns. Why don't you start out, Rex, by talking a little bit about the Knight family history and how they came to Clinton County?

Rex: As I recall--Alden may remember more than me--but my grandfather Knight and his brothers--his name was Walter—they immigrated from London, England, when they were about 10 years old or so--young. There was a whole Knight family. Walter was my grandfather. Uncle Fred had a house that Doug lives in today, so he had a farm, and then there was two or three other brothers and a couple of sisters. I don't know what year that would be. My grandfather [Walter C. Knight] was born in '38 [1873-1938]. Grandma Knight [Pearl E. Jury] was born in '34 [1878-1967]. That tells you a little bit about when the grandparents got here. Alden can answer if they all settled on farms out west of St. Johns where we are. Quite a few of 'em did.

Alden: They ended up in Canada. There was a couple of 'em stayed there. The rest of 'em filtered back down into the lower part of Michigan.

Rex: But there was three or four of 'em that were out here: Uncle Arthur and Arthur Jr., Fred, Walter and Tom, and Lucy. That's kind of how it all got started. My grandfather married Pearl Jury and they lived on Francis Road. It was not far from where our farms were.

What happened--again, it's long stories--but they lived on Francis Road for a lot of years. Alden and I were talking about it this morning. The gypsies were pretty prevalent in the area at the time and when my grandfather, Walter, and Pearl lived with my dad, as a young pup over on Francis Road, my grandfather would sleep with a shotgun by him every night 'cause he could hear these gypsies around the outside of the buildings. They tended to come up Francis Road. They weren't afraid of people so they would come and camp right in the yard and spend the night going right around them. It scared my grandparents so bad that they ended up actually moving the house and the farm buildings almost a mile, from Francis Road over to Townsend Road, where they ended up now, to get away from that kind of harassment. I don't know what year that would've been. It's part of what happened to get on Townsend Road.

As we mentioned, you said you had my dad [Oliver Knight] and mother's [Gina Shaffley] high school [St. Johns] yearbook, [19]23. My dad used to talk about playing baseball and basketball. He rode the horse down Townsend Road to town to come to school every day. Somehow his father allowed him to play basketball and baseball so he would practice at night, get on the horse, and the horse knew its way all the way back to Francis Road where the farm was.

Alden: To give you some idea, M-21 wasn't even paved then.

Rex: No, just gravel.

Alden: My dad used to tell about it. It got so wet one year that he said the horse was up to his knees in mud on M-21. Then when he got to St. Johns--it's hard for me to believe, but, of course, high school was the old Central [School] building here in St. Johns. Then he would take his horse all the way down to the foot of Main Street [Clinton Avenue]--there was a horse livery down there--and tie the horse up there. Then he'd have to walk all the way across town up to Central where the high school was and the same thing when he come home, but he went on to tell about some of the terrible roads that were back then. They just wasn't taken care of very well.

Rex: That was amazing. He and my mother had a great support for all of this athletic activity or being on a farm, we'd never get a chance to do this. We were one of the few--Alden can answer this--but there weren't many other farm kids playing when we were. But boy, our parents supported that all the way and probably somewhat because my dad did it way back when he started, you know.

Alden: My dad, Rex, would come out and play basketball with us all the time.

Rex: That's what you said. What you need to know, I was born in [19]41, so this guy is 7 years older. Dale was 9 years older. He's [Alden] 11 years older, and Kendall, who's passed away, is 13. They were 7, 9, 11, and 13 years older than I was. So I was really the--

Wayne: You were the spoiled baby.

Rex: Just ask them. They'll say my mother saved my life.

Wayne: What elementary school did you go to?

Alden: Bengal Center.

Wayne: Do you have any memories, Doug, of going to school there?

Doug: Well, the only thing I ever remember, I wasn't very sharp in school. I didn't like school and I was tall enough and they had rows of seats, some next to the window and some a little bit farther away and they kept going back to the furnace. I always set at the one by Francis Road. I'd set there, instead of listening to the teacher or anything, I'd set in my seat and look out and watch the traffic go by and not pay any attention to what the teacher was saying or anything. Everybody else was about a foot shorter than I was and they couldn't see.

Rex: (Looking at a school picture) Doug's on the left and I'm one of the little fellows on the right. So we were both at Bengal Center.

Doug: I sat there and watched the cars go by instead of listening to what the teacher was saying.

Rex: He should have been a professional basketball player when he was in the eighth grade.

Wayne: I pity the people, the little guys who had to try to guard you. .

Doug: One thing about living out there, we always had the barns and we always had baskets out in the barn and when we would get so much hay out, we'd put the basket up. Down where we ended up living, down the road, my dad bought the farm. In the barn there was a hay mow run across.

Alden: That was about four foot taller than the regular drive in the barn. So our basketball court was about four. And you better take and -?-, if you ever fell over the edge--

Rex: Part of the reason these guys and my brother Dale talked my dad into—when they went down and saw that barn, the barn had almost a hardwood floor, a whole level up four feet off--. Dale drew the foul lines and the free throw lines. It was long enough so that the free throw lines actually just touched each other, He put those lines on each end. I was a little guy, but the teams would come out on Saturday and Sunday and just blast each other on that, playing basketball on that floor.

Doug: We used to have on Saturday and Sunday, people from Ovid and Elsie would come over to our place and played basketball in that mow up there and we did it every Sunday. Yep. And my Grandma Pearl, which lived down the road, after we got through playing, she would fix meals for us. We went down there and one time this guy, by the name of Junior Hettler, used to live here in town and had his own business. He graduated with Dale and he was wild. We sat at Grandma Pearl's place eating dinner, which my grandmother put on. I looked over at Junior Hettler. He didn't want to make Grandma Pearl feel bad. She had a egg there, and he took that egg and put it in his pocket just to make sure that she knew that he ate that egg. I couldn't get over it.

Rex: One of the things you had to know about my Grandma Pearl--my grandfather Walter passed away before I was born--but Grandma Pearl was one of the hardest working people I ever saw. We used to have threshers come. All the local farmers would come and they'd thresh beans at our place and then, when we were done at our place--Alden did it all the time--they'd go to every farm. Grandma would get up in the morning and be out loading beans, staked beans on a wagon so they could bring 'em up to thresh 'em, and cook at noon for 20 some people.

Alden: One story about that: Back then, they'd always have a case of beer on each wagon and most of the farmers knew how to control themselves. Once in a while, by gol, somebody did go overboard and you'd see 'em sitting in a fence row sound asleep because they had too much to drink.

Rex: What would get me is, Grandma would come back and feed these 20 people. I've seen it. This is like what Doug says, and put a feast on like I can't believe. And yet, before the day was over, she's back out in the field pitching beans again. I never saw anything like that and she did that by herself, God!

Wayne: Did you have animals or just crops?

Rex: Alden worked with my dad for like 30, 40 years.

Alden: **Alden:** We had hogs and everything. We had crops and kind of everything. There was a time my dad and I farmed together and he took care of the hogs and I did the cows and we finally decided, let's get rid of all the animals and just go to cash crop. Our winters will be free to do anything we want, get an outside job, so we got rid of the livestock and I got a job in Lansing in the factory. That was kind of a strange situation too because, come spring--I was at General Motors--I said, "I've gotta take and quit working here and go back on the farm to help my dad." "Oh God, you can't do that!" I said, "I gotta do it because he can't farm by himself."

Rex: You worked with dad for, I don't know what year period, but 50 years or so?

Alden: Oh, long, long time. When he died [Oct. 28, 1985], I told my wife-- I said, "Well, we might as well sell it. I can't farm the whole thing by myself without my dad." So we up and sold it, moved to Florida and lived there for 20 years and then moved back to Michigan. I enjoyed Florida. That was beautiful.

Wayne: Didn't mind the heat?

Alden: Didn't mind the heat that bad. I started working in a nursery down there and I told the guys and the women, I said, "You're gonna want a straw hat," because most of the time they were sitting in the sun. They said, "Oh, we don't need straw hats." Just about three days of that and they said, "We need a straw hat." They had the sun beat beating down on them."

Alice: Doug, you were on the farm here for a long time as well, right?

Doug: Oh yeah. I still live on the farm. The farm that I've got now, my uncle Fred lived there and he was 90 some years old when he died [Sept. 30, 1961] and we've owned it for about 40 or 50 years so it's been in the Knights for a long time. My wife was going to get one of those century farms [Centennial Farm certification] but she never lived long enough to get it. It's an old place out there. I had a guy working on my furnace a couple years ago, an old guy out of Fowler that's retired now, and when he come in my house—I've got those colored glass door handles—and he looked at those and he couldn't get over it. He said, "My gosh those are old," and they're still there."

Rex: That was one of the original farms, I think, that they bought when Knight family came over.

Alden: It sets right on top of the hill. Yeah.

Doug: Alden and I, when we lived over on Townsend Road with my folks, we used to go across 21 and go over to Uncle Fred's place to hunt in his woods for squirrels and rabbits and stuff. We'd just get back there--He always kicked everybody off--and all of a sudden you'd see him coming back. so we'd get the heck out of there. He done it all the time.

Alice: Actually, I belong to Ancestry[.com]. So I looked a little bit of your family up, and I'm gonna leave this with you 'cause you might be interested. Your great-grandfather, Oscar Orlando Knight, left County Cornwall in England in about 1878 or 1879, and with his wife and seven children went to Middlesex, Ontario, Canada. They were there for about just one or two years, long enough for their eighth child to be born, and then they all moved in 1880 to Clinton County so your family has been in Clinton County since 1880. From all I can tell, seven of those stayed in Clinton County, at least for a while, seven of those children, including your grandfather. You know the rest of the story from your grandfather down to you and your boys, and so on. So you're fourth generation here in Clinton County farming, which is pretty amazing. I'll leave this with you when I go.

I asked you about your high school years but I want to mention your brothers as well. I first became even aware of you reading some old Clinton County newspapers. I was reading a May 21st issue of 1959 [*Clinton County Republican-News*] when I came across the article that I'm sure you all know, "After 52 Letters, Knight Era Ends," and it's about the five Knight brothers and how, in their years at St. Johns High School, accumulated 52 athletic letters. That's an amazing number of letters. It is hard to get an athletic letter. First of all, you have to be good enough to make varsity, which is very unusual for a freshman or sophomore to do even today, and then you have to be really good and diligent. You have to show up to all those practices and play all those games. That's an amazing record so it made me interested in finding out more about you, which led to phone conversations with Doug and then with Rex. That led to today interviewing you for this oral history because we just thought you were very fascinating people.

Alden: One interesting thing, way back way back then, they didn't use 2 X 4s to build a house. They just put wide boards in there and put the plaster right on the wide boards so there wasn't any open space between anything there. That's the way Doug's house was.

Doug: That's the way it feels right now. I set on top of a hill and the wind blows. You can feel the wind blowing right through the side of the wall.

Alice: You know, you're getting close to 150 years back in Clinton County, so that's a long time.

The first Knight brother was Kendall, your older brother, who sadly passed away in [June 29] 1987. He graduated in the class of 1945 and was the first to earn letters. He played two years of football and two years of basketball and earned four letters but he was also active in orchestra and band and junior play

and the junior dance and Future Farmers of America. He was a pretty well-rounded boy, went on to go to the General Motors Tech Institute in Flint and worked the rest of his life for General Motors in Lansing, becoming Manager of Manufacturing and Engineering for their Buick-Olds-Cadillac. Quite a heavy position.

Second in line is Alden, who is with us today. You graduated in the class of '48. Correct me if I'm wrong with any of my notes.

Alden: Looking back in time, I played saxophone, tenor and alto.

Alice: Oh, did you? Was your family musical?

Alden: One of the managers down the Ford garage--he was a manager of it--and they said, "Would you get a group together and play at my wedding dance?" I said, "I'll try. I don't know if I can find them." But I found enough and from then on we were playing wedding dances just about every weekend.

Alice: How exciting. Was your family musical growing up?

Rex: My mother was really. She was piano. She taught piano lessons. I saw in '23 when she graduated, what she was in high school. It said something about opera. I don't know what all she was even involved in.

Alden: She was a great music lover. She got me started one time tap dancing. Can you imagine? I said, "I don't want to do tap dancing." "Oh, just give it a whirl." There was about seven or eight guys when I started and they finally give it up. I recall dancing at the St. Johns Theater and I was the only boy with about eight girls tap dancing but that soon ended.

Alice: That sounds fun. Anyway, you won eight letters: four in football, two in basketball, and two in track, where apparently you were a dash man, so you were fast. Did you have a favorite of those sports or did you just love to play anything?

Alden: I think track. I ran the 220 and I held a record for it about half a year, I guess it was, but then somebody else beat my old record.

Alice: Hard to keep track records.

Wayne: Was this like a local record?

Alice: You always played with either an older brother or younger brother on the team. How did you enjoy that? Did that affect your play when you played, always having a brother on your teams?

Alden: I was a good friend of my coach and I said, "You're missing a bet if you don't get my brother, Dale. Get him to try out." I said, "I think you'll be surprised." He had him try out, by golly, and started him out at center. To make a long story short, he ended up playing at Michigan State and played in the Rose Bowl out in California.

Alice: He was really good.

Rex: Alden has said about Dale a few times that he was one of the strongest guys. We can all relate to that. Dale picked up Kendall once and threw him over the couch in the room. Kendall was much bigger and older and rolled Kendall up, I guess. So everybody knew Dale was strong.

Doug: Dale was a strong person.

Alice: How did you boys get to and from school? Did you have your own car? Did you get to and from school on your own?

Alden: I rode the bus for about two or three weeks, but the thing is we were out in the country. I had sports and orchestra practice, so I had to stay after school. So I started walking home, which is 5 ½ miles, and that was not gonna work. No, had to hitchhike.

Unknown speaker: Did you get a car when you were in highschool or not?

Alden: I saved my money. I bought a brand new '49 Chevrolet, two-door with just a radio. You'd never guess what a brand, new Chevrolet '49 cost back then --\$1,175.

Alice: But that was a lot of money back then. So you must have been a mechanic to be able to keep it running.

Alden: Well, the first week I had that thing, my God, I ran over something in St. Johns and ruined one of my tires. Wouldn't you know?

Doug: My neighbor was Dale Henning and we used to hitchhike home 'cause he played football and basketball and stuff. After we'd get through with sports, we'd get out on 21, hitchhike out there, and people would pick us up and they'd let us out on 21. Then we'd have to walk a mile and a half to get home every day after practice.

Rex: By the time I came along, I got a car when I was in high school. My mother used to come and pick me up a lot after practice. I don't remember what year Grandma Pearl helped me get a car to drive back and forth. It was that when you're staying after school for practices, all that made it difficult. It was even complicated for my dad, except he had a horse that knew its way home, you know.

Alice: Well, Alden, I have to ask this question. I looked at the yearbooks for all of you boys and Kendall's highschool senior nickname was "Kissy," and your nickname was "Kissy, Jr."

Alden: Why did you have to bring that up?

Alice: I had to ask this question. Where did that name--

Alden: Good question. I couldn't tell you.

Alice: Well, I've seen pictures of all of you five boys growing up and you're a handsome lot.

Alden: One thing that I can recall: Five boys. Well, who's going to teach you to dance because you don't dance with your brother? My mother tried to teach me how to dance and she wasn't very successful.

Alice: Well, anyway, you boys were all a pretty handsome lot and I'm guessing that the girls were interested in all of you when you were going to school. Maybe that nickname ties in there somehow. I wouldn't be surprised.

Rex: Kendall was a character. I don't know how to express a character but nothing surprises me about Kendall.

Alden: Kendall was a super bright person. He ended up being head of the mechanical engineers at General Motors.

Doug: We used to sleep upstairs in the house at home and Kendall would sleep in one room and the rest of us would sleep in the other room, and at night Kendall would start telling these stories that would scare the daylights out of us and he would just keep going and going and going. We were scared to death with what he was talking about and he knew what he was doing.

Rex: He could really needle people.

Doug: Kendall was one smart guy.

Rex: They knew him as K. O. Knight over at Oldsmobile. They said, "When K. O. Knight tapped his pipe on the table, everybody would get ready 'cause they didn't know what was coming."

Alden: He took me over there one time. He invited me over there and his office was on the very top floor of General Motors. My God, it was twice as big as this house. You had a view up there. You could see forever. Any time they had trouble on their production line, who would they call? Kendall, because he could figure it out.

Alice: Any memories, Alden? Did you and your brothers go into St. Johns, which would've been the closest town to where you are, movie theaters, the ice cream parlors. Did you enjoy doing that in high school? Did you go to the theaters?

Alden: Yeah, we had a theater back then. I can remember--I couldn't tell you the year--we had one theater here in St. Johns and on the weekends, by god, they'd line up all the way down a block and over a block, waiting to get in the theater, but then, all of a sudden, they started showing the movies in Lansing. Then the kids went over to Lansing. That kind of put the theater out of business in St. Johns 'cause nobody ever went after that.

Alice: Well, I'm gonna move on and then we'll come back to general questions later. The third Knight brother was Dale, who sadly passed away in 2017 [Oct. 15]. He graduated in the class of 1950 and won 14 letters: Four in football, three in basketball, three in baseball, and four in track. During three of his years in football, St. Johns was undefeated and I believe some of his school records are still unbroken, the yards that he managed to run. He was an outstanding player and he is known as the best football player ever to have graduated from St. Johns Highschool. He won a football scholarship to Michigan State College, played under Biggie Munn, who was a big name, and was on the team when they won the national--

Alden: Not changing the subject, Chalmer Young was our coach, and I told him, I said, "You ought to take and see if you can't get my brother. I think you'll find out that he can hold his own. He did and, sure enough, that was the beginning of him going a long ways in sports.

Alice: Oh, he certainly did.

Wayne: Did you all go out to the Rose Bowl that year?

Doug: Nobody went, couldn't go. Folks didn't go or anything. Nope, they didn't have the money. They didn't go.

Alice: It was 1954.

Rex: There's his football. Dale sitting right next to the right. Number 93 was Dale's number in MSU football there? He was on the front row. We used to watch WJ[IM]. Channel six is what it was. We had him on TV a lot during that time when he was out in Pasadena. I remember one time Dale was telling us--I don't remember if we saw it on television or not--but they took the players out to all of these special events. He actually had a chance, one evening at a meal, to set and have a real good conversation with Bob Hope. Bob Hope was out there at the time and he was sitting next to Dale and he told about that. We would set here and see what they were doing on the camera at Lansing, looking for him. Once in a while we would see him, of course, but they had the whole team on at that time 'cause it was pretty significant event here for what was going on in East Lansing.

Wayne: What position was he?

Rex: He played end. He was an end at Michigan State. You guys chip in if I'm missing--but in high school, of course, he was a center first year and then he started in as running back. He went crazy as a running back for St. Johns and he was pretty fast. By the time he got to MSU--they had a national championship team that year. Leroy Bolden and Ellis Duckett came from Flint, a couple of fellows that were really fast, and Dale would play. They ended up moving him to offensive end, at least is his position. I was not very old at the time. He's 9 years older than I am, but he would come back home on every weekend from practicing all week and playing. Dale's forearms were that color[bruised?]. They used him a lot on, apparently, travel squads. You know, he was playing the other team's offense a lot. He was playing against all the top players they had, just took a beating, that guy did. I don't know how and yet came out of it, just loving it. He didn't play a lot, but he did play. He got into the Rose Bowl game and all that.

Alice: After he was at MSU, came back to St. Johns as a football coach and phys ed teacher and eventually became principal at Central School and then at Rodney B. Wilson. I met him there because our three daughters went to RBW. I didn't know him well but he was a nice man.

Brother number four, Doug, is with us and you graduated in 1954 with 15 letters. Unbelievable, Doug! Four in football, four in basketball, four in baseball, and three in track. First of all, how in the world did you get those letters in baseball and track when you were performing both of those at the same time?

Doug: You would first play baseball and then the track team would be right there beside of us running track. After you get through playing baseball practice, you'd go over there and run track.

Rex: Didn't you tell me, even in a game one time, you were playing a baseball game--and I don't know if it was during the game--you had to go over and do an event in track and come back and --. Did they let you do that? Gee whiz, I don't see how they would.

Alice: Back in the day, if I'm correct, the track and the baseball diamond were all out at the city park where the baseball diamond and track are now and so they were right next to each other and you could go back and forth.

Doug: In track, in the regional meets, if you place in the top four, you get a letter. In my freshman year, we was up to Mt. Pleasant and we was in a relay. We took second place in our heat and there was another heat after us so I figured I was gonna get a letter of that there. In the next heat, every one of the teams were ahead of us so I would've had 16 instead of 15.

Alice: That must have really bothered you.

Rex: At the time, he probably had no idea where he was --.

Alice: Well, I'm wondering if anybody in the history of St. Johns High School has 15 letters. I doubt it. Which event did you enjoy most, which sport?

Doug: I enjoyed basketball.

Alden: He was a excellent basketball player. At the time there was nobody any better.

Alice: I read that, at your peak, you were scoring 30 points a game. That is amazing.

Doug: After I lost my fingers, that dropped down to 19.

Rex: If he holds his right hand up, you can see why. He was both-handed.

Doug: Yeah, I got a picture at home. My Karen made it had it framed and everything and it shows me at the Hall of Fame [ceremony] up here. They had to take me in a golf cart out in the middle of the field and it showed me holding my hand up like this. Somebody said it looks like you was them giving a finger.

Alice: Both you and Dale are in the St. Johns High School Hall of Fame. Well deserved.

Doug: Yeah. Thanks.

Wayne: You were a center, I'm assuming, in basketball.

Doug: Yeah, I was a center and then we was in the quarter finals over to Jenison Field House. Tom Beechler, I was playing with him and he was 6'8" and he was a year behind me. We lost one of our guards so I went out and played guard and then Tom Beechler come in and we got beat by a couple points or so but that one year, my freshman year, I think we were 16 and 0. We had Albert Sulka and Bob Boling. We had probably one of the best teams that ever was in St. Johns. I had a cartilage go out so I had to have it operated on. When I could play, it was just play a little bit and we got beat in the districts over there by East Lansing by two points. Otherwise, that was the best team we ever had.

Alice: I think that team is in the St. Johns Hall of Fame as well.

Doug: Yeah. I believe.

Alice: I know in your junior year you had a serious car accident. Can you tell us about that?

Doug: Well, I don't know whether I want to. I was wild. That's what I was. We'd play sports and a bunch of us would get together and drink beer and it was three o'clock in the morning and I was on the way home. I passed out and I hit a cement abutment. When I hit the abutment, it out knocked me unconscious. Instead of falling over the steering wheel, I fell over to the seat and the blood, evidently, was rolling out of my mouth. I didn't know what I was doing and at three in the morning, a minister from Grand Rapid saw my car there. He stopped and got the ambulance out there and that's the only way I ever made it.

Alice: I wasn't so much focused on the accident but the fact that five weeks later you were playing basketball again.

Doug: Yeah, I know it.

Alice: How in the world did you do that? I heard that you had some sort of protection to allow you to do that.

Doug: My coach was Dwane Wirick. I wish he was here now 'cause he was one of the best coaches. Dwane Wirick, when I was in the eighth grade, he went to the state athletic board to see if I could legally play city league basketball up here, play against guys that had already graduated. They had a city league and the athletic board said, "Yeah, he can play. It won't bother him when he is in high school." So in the eighth grade, I was playing against guys that were outta high school and that helped me a lot.

Rex: You saw that picture, you could see how tall he was.

Alice: Yes. So you had some sort of protection?

Doug: I had a mask. My coach, Dwane Wirick, had a mask made that covered my face so if anybody hit it with their elbow or anything, it would protect it. I played with that within a few weeks. That's the same way with my hand. Dwane Wirick went to somebody over in Lansing and told 'em what they needed and they made a hand up for me. It's metal with tape on so I couldn't cut anybody. I still have that out to the house.

Alice: So you had a prosthetic hand that was built for you so you could play.

Doug: When you shoot a basketball, instead of letting it roll off your fingertips, you're letting it roll off of this artificial hand.

Wayne: It's amazing that you could still shoot.

Alice: His game went from 30 to 19 points a game.

Doug: I shot left-handed. I could shoot both hands. Now I couldn't shoot left-handed, but it I got so at times, I wouldn't use my artificial hand. I'd just go with what I have.

Alice: Well, you were good with what you had, obviously.

Rex: After he had the accident--I was small at the time--but what happened is the steering wheel on that '49 Ford just kept bashing him when he got in the accident and his teeth ended up in his cheeks. They really smashed his face up. I remember going to visit him. Dale had gone to get a football helmet because they couldn't figure out—his jaw was broken so bad--put a football helmet on him to hold his

jaw. Of course, everything's wired together here, you know, 'cause you could only take liquids. But how he went from there to playing basketball that quick--I mean, honest to God, he looked like his head was as big as a watermelon. Honest to God, he got hit so bad there.

Doug: They had to knock these teeth out and for about six weeks or so, I had to use a tube with liquids. Otherwise, I had these teeth but now they're false teeth.

Alice: So you had to use this straw to drink, but you were still on the court playing varsity basketball.

Alden: Yeah. He wouldn't quit playing basketball.

Alice: Unbelievable!

Fifth, but not least is Rex who graduated in 1959. You won 11 letters. My understanding is that by the time you came along, the school did not allow ball players to play baseball and track at the same time so you had to choose one or the other and you chose baseball. You won three letters in football, four in basketball, and four in baseball. You were good at everything. You were scoring 19 points a game in basketball and I know you were good at baseball. You were a pitcher, is that right?

Rex: Yeah, once when St. Johns had a double header, I won the first game and then we got into a second game. My brother Dale, was he my coach? I don't remember for sure. They put me in the second game and I ended up winning that one too.

Alice: Well, Dale did coach.

Rex: I don't remember. That might have been when I was a freshman. That's before I knew any better.

Wayne: Well, they didn't have pitch counts back then?

Alice: You were also an academic. You were very high in your class: National Honor Society, senior class president, Boys' State. You were quite a leader back in high school. What was your favorite sport?

Rex: I think baseball was at one time because I started as a little kid in little league and I was big for my age like Doug was, scared everybody to death that's playing with me until I got to--but basketball, I like a lot too. I really enjoyed it.

It's interesting you mentioned Dwane Wirick that Doug had for a coach. Doug probably doesn't remember this. At halftime in your games--Dwane Wirick had a son called Jackie Wirick. I was brought up on sports. I would go out and shoot baskets with Jackie Wirick one time at halftime at one of his basketball games, 'cause Dwane was a coach. I don't know why they asked us to do it. I remember doing that. Kind of a long story, but Jackie and I played basketball. He was a year behind me and we played together all the way through and he was very good. It was the two of us were kind of a combination.

I graduated in '59 went on to Alma College and was playing up there and got this word that Jackie died in a accident here in town [Aug. 21, 1959]. He was putting in water lines right in front of my brother, Dale's house. I didn't really understand the fullness of this until I got talking to Dale once about it. Jackie was working on putting water lines in and it caved in on him. If I understand this right--correct me if I'm wrong--but Dale was there and he heard what's going on. They didn't dare dig him out. They tried thinking about digging him out with a backhoe and Dale went out with hands and shovel and he was the

one who actually found Jackie Wirick, but with his hands. When you think about the trauma that Dale had faced in his life and he just loved Dwane, loved Jackie, loved all of 'em. That was a tragedy 'cause Jackie was a good basketball player. He wasn't a big kid, but he just grew up on it like I did. How could you help playing the stuff. That was our game sport.

Rex: That was it. Everybody was playing sports.

Alden: I'll never forget a feller at Fowler, Class D School. and of course we were [Class] B. They had a city league over there. So they called me up and wanted to know if I'd come over and play guard on their city league team. So I went over there and played a few games but there was nobody I knew. I said this, "This isn't gonna work." So I finally quit.

Rex: Fowler had this fellow. You may have heard that name. George Fox was his name. I noticed he just died here recently, passed away about a month ago [Apr. 24, 2023]. He was an outstanding basketball player at Fowler. He coached Magic [Johnson] when Magic was playing at Sexton. Fowler had--it was funny. They were Class D. They used to win the state every year, didn't they?

Doug: They won it one time. I've told this over and over. They always wanted to play St. Johns when they had that good team 'cause they figured a small school could beat St. Johns, and my coach, Dwane Wirick says, "I told them "No," because what advantage would it be if we won?" If we won, it wouldn't make any difference. If they beat us, it would've been quite a thing. I know that Alan Thelen used to play center for them. He's been dead quite a while now and he was quite tall. Yeah, they had a good team. I remember Albert Sulka played with me as a freshman and we would call time out and we would go over to the huddle. Instead of the coach saying anything, Albert Sulka would talk the whole time. He would tell the coach what we're gonna do and everything.

Rex: How many years, Doug, did Fowler take the state championship?

Doug: Just the once. They were in there all the time, but just the once.

Rex: I told you the story about the fellow, when Georgie and I were down--

Alice: Tell the story again.

Rex: Georgie and I we used to go to South Padre Island for 17 years in the winter. After we retired, we went down there and, we were at a condo in South Padre, like up on the ninth floor one night and the sunset was really pretty so we went out on the balcony and we're looking at the sunset and there was another couple standing there and looking at it. So we got to talking to them a little bit about, "Where are you from?" "Oh, we're from Michigan." "Where in Michigan?" Oh, they're from Hastings and I said, "Oh, Hastings. How old are you?" He graduated in '59. He went to Hastings to high school and he said, "Yeah, I went to Hastings." I said, "I graduated from St. Johns in '59." We used to play Hastings all the time in sports, in basketball and football. He says, "Oh yeah, I was a tennis player but I knew all the basketball players." I don't know how we even got into this conversation because we got to talking about sports and he says, "You know, I used to talk to these basketball players. They talked, when they played St. Johns, there was a guy from St. Johns. They never could figure out how they could stop that guy. They kept plotting against him." I said, "Well, who was he?" The guy looked at me and he said, "Oh, he was Rex Knight." Georgie and I just about flipped over backwards. We've known the guy since then, quite well, actually. Don? Anyway, "Here we are in Texas and you remember my name from high school?" That had to be 40, 50 years ago.

Alice: You were obviously good.

Rex: I don't know, but to be talked about, I guess.

Alice: You had four older brothers including your brother who was coach. How was it like playing ball with--?

Rex: With my dad, I had five of 'em. I mean, that's why I love basketball because you can play the game. Then you can go talk about it for hours. I'd come home right after the basketball game and all four of these guys and my dad were there. We would replay every shot, every pass.

Alden: What helped us a lot is, with the five boys, my dad loved to play sports and he'd get out there and play basketball with us. That got to be something else.

Doug: It was something how we would have chores to do and all the time that I was doing chores, I would always go out in the hay mow and shoot baskets with him for probably a half hour or so. A few times my dad says, "You're gonna have to change that." We used to shoot all the time out in the barn.

Rex: That's all he would say. He wouldn't crack the whip on you or anything.

I know I told you the story about I talked to our neighbor, Otto Thurston. We used to come back and go hunting all the time and I saw Otto not too many years ago. This is after dad had passed away, I know. This is before I was there. These guys were younger. "You know, Rex, I'd look over at your farm and your dad had just cut and baled a whole field of hay and he'd be out there. He's on the tractor with a wagon behind him." And he says, "There's four boys, just horses, throwing bales up to each other, and loading on the wagon. He kept moving the tractor. They'd load the bales." He said, "I was watching there one day." And he said, "It's almost like somebody made the mistake of throwing a football out there because it's all short hay and all that." And Ott said, "All of a sudden a football game broke out and your dad just sat on a tractor watching the passing, running, going every which way. The haying stopped for a while until they got tired of throwing a football. Football goes down and they go back to throwing hay." He said he couldn't believe what he saw. Oh shoot, that kind of tells the story.

Wayne: You still got the chores done.

Rex: He had the patience of Job. Yep.

Alice: Memories of St. Johns itself: Did you and your brothers go into town, ice cream parlors, special places you enjoyed?

Rex: We didn't do so much in St. Johns town. I did have a car and, as Alden mentioned, or Doug, riding with someone else. There was a group of us, when we were playing football, even though I had a car, we shared driving to school. Maybe two days a week I'd drive and somebody else would drive the rest. We rode with each other but we didn't stay in town very much. We were there to practice and then home we went. We didn't do a lot of city activities. I wasn't in a band or doing the stuff like this guy was.

Doug: I played basketball with a guy by the name of Dave Gasser and his dad owned an ice cream store downtown. We used to go in there 'cause I played basketball with him and we were in there all the time. It wasn't Richards Dairy, but it was Matthews.

Alden: It was Matthews.

Doug: He owned his own store.

Wayne: Did he get a discount on the ice cream?

Doug: If you got an ice cream cone that had a star on it, you got a free ice cream cone and I'll be darned, most of the time when I went in there, mine would have a star on.

Alice: Well, you were a star.

Doug: I would get a free ice cream cone, mainly because I knew who the guy was that owned the place.

Wayne: A complete coincidence!

Alice: St. Johns had a big centennial in 1956 so you would've been in school then. Did you attend the celebration? Do you have any memories of the centennial?

Rex: I don't remember anything specific about it. I remember that St. Johns Centennial, yes. Seems like there were events up at the playing fields. I was so involved in school and sports that there wasn't anything else in life.

Alice: One other question: My husband and I are both train fans and I've just wondered, do you have any memories when the passenger trains were going here in St. Johns? Did you ever ride the trains, enjoy the trains, any of you?

Rex: I never did. Did you guys?

Alden: One thing: We had four kids and I knew that the train was going to go on its last ride, the passenger train. So my wife and I got tickets for the kids and we took 'em to Fowler and they went to Ovid and got off so they could say their rest of their lives that they did ride the last train.

Alice: That's wonderful. I wish we could have done that.

Alden: I'll never forget. Where my wife and I were driving along at 21, you could look over there and see the train. I said, "Well, they're getting the last ride on the passenger train."

Alice: We've missed that era.

Rex: I remember one little thing. It is just in playing football. We were playing at Hastings and it was during a terrible snowstorm and it was snowing so much. The snow must have been, not quite a foot, but it had accumulated during the game. I remember one time that they handed me the ball. I got through the line and I don't think the defense could even see me.

Alden: You know what they did back then, Rex? The snow was about five, six inches deep, they shoveled the line markers.

Rex: That was it, 'cause I would run. I remember getting through and the next thing you know, I knew I was past everybody. I knew which way to go. I couldn't even see the goal post, but I headed for the end of the field. As I would run, the snow would build up on my cleats until--I don't know how deep it was--

and then that'd go of. I was having more trouble trying to stay on my feet from the snow, but I could hear this breathing coming behind me and I knew there was a whole herd of them. It wasn't just one. So I thought, now I won't know when I cross the goal line so I headed for the goal. I finally could see the uprights and I went right through 'em to the picket fence. Those guys chased me all way to the picket fence.

In the same game though, I remember we had a quarterback by the name of Ralph Krumm. It got so cold and so wet that night, and he was a good passer. I was always receiving from him all the time. I remember one play for another touchdown that night. I got behind everybody. I can't hardly see where the players are and it's snowing so hard I couldn't see the ball 'til all of a sudden out of the snow, here comes the ball, right to me, beyond everybody. That's how much snow it was. We had these ankle wraps with a little metal clip that tied the wrap to your ankle. He taped one of those facing out on his index finger so he could pass. That night he actually had enough traction to get ahold of the ball. I couldn't believe when I saw the ball. I'll never forget that because, how did it get there? It's like God himself put it in my hand.

Alden: In my senior year, we always had football helmets, but they weren't leather. You could move 'em anywhere you want. And I'll never forget, I was an end, but reached up and caught the ball, but at the same time, this guy hit me, just bam, and my helmet, oh, it just caved in and just knocked me right out.

Alice: I just have one statement that's just about Rex before we go on, just so you are aware. He went on to Alma College where you got a degree in chemistry. What sports did you play there?

Rex: I played football, basketball, and baseball, all three for two years, and then at the end of my sophomore year--I went there on an athletic and an academic grant--and the whole league decided not to have any more athletic grants after I was there for the second year. It was a big difference playing football and basketball in high school and college, especially football. I mean, we took a beating in football. If you didn't get paid for it, it wasn't worth it to me anyway. A lot of kids still went on to play it. Central Michigan, they were in the league where they kept giving financial help. I played with Jim Northrup there in baseball.

He was baseball. Well, actually I got a little story about baseball in college. We were playing against Alpena Junior College, which was just a little school, and we had a good baseball team at Alma. Jim was pitching that that day and had a no-hitter going through seven innings. Our coach, Bill Carr [William Eddy Carr] was his name. I was a freshman and I don't know what grade Jim was in. Anyway, he took Jim out of the game and put me in as the pitcher. Northrup was a little bit of a hotheaded guy anyway but he absolutely lost it when that coach took him out. I don't care if it's a no-hitter against Timbuktu. He'd taken him out of a no-hitter! He got kicked off the team. He was kicked off our baseball team, of all things. What he did, we had a little gymnasium there on Alma College campus. That winter, I remember walking by and Jim was in there all day, every day, with one of these pitching machines. He ended up going with the Tigers and he played in the World Series and did all that, but here he gets kicked off the baseball team in college.

Alice: You went on to an illustrious career at Dow Chemical as a chemist and then head of their medical division. I just wanted to make sure that you're aware of that.

My husband was mentioning the Sugar Bowl downtown, which is gonna be fixed up by our next door neighbors, by the way. I don't know if you're aware of that. Did you ever go to the Sugar Bowl in downtown St. Johns? It's a little ice cream parlour downtown.

Rex: It was interesting. Doug, I don't remember if he was there at the time yet or not. It wasn't Mrs. Smith, who was actually in that picture I showed you at our Bengal Center. I think Doug was gone, but then Mrs.--- came and there was a little guy on there--his name was Jerry Bashore--in our school in our class. Jerry was a little younger than me. A real rebel is what he was, when he was a young kid. Mrs. S? came, who was a new teacher, was a quiet sort of a lady, and Jerry was always acting up. Mrs. S came over behind him one day when he was --I don't know if you can see our desks or not. These are these little wooden desks all lined up in a row but this was an individual desk. She came up behind Jerry and I don't know what he had done. Who knows? We didn't realize how much it upset her, but anyway she grabs Jerry under the shoulders and picked him up out of the seat, but he didn't come out of the seat. The screws came out of the floor. We should have had that on camera because, when she got him up like this--. He was always in charge until this came about. That ended that process. It was just amazing what you ran into in those little red brick schools. The poor teachers that had to deal with what they had. Like Doug said, at our school--we were on Francis Road--and it got so every time a car went by, all the heads would come up looking out at the road. Now, how would you like to be a teacher?

Doug: A teacher we had--There was Maurice Myers out there going to school with us, and he was a character and a half. The teacher always took him in the room and said she was gonna spank him and everything and they would come out of the room and he would be all smiles and then the teacher would be crying. It happened all the time.

Rex: It seems as though we were always afraid there would be a district principal or somebody that would come through the schools at the time. Boy, when that fellow came to the school, it was, "hang on!"

Alden: Rex, thinking about the old country school, there was a benefit to it because you sat there in that seat for eight years, but you could hear the teacher teaching the younger ones, over and over and over again.

Rex: You're right. You're getting the same lesson over and over and over. You asked me about this. I went to school all eight years at Bengal Center with one other fellow in my class, David Zell. David and I shared the class. We were the only ones.

Alden: I was the only one in my grade for eight years. My older brother, Kendall, I don't know whether he had any bearing in it, but I went from only student in my class for eight years. Then I went to St. Johns. In our freshman year there was 183, and what happened? They elected me president. Your freshman year? Why, I have no idea because I'd never been head of any--, but it was very embarrassing to get up in front of 183 kids and try to have a business meeting.

Rex: David Zell's brother, Gary, wrote about the farming place out there. That is really an interesting--. I think I showed it to you guys one time. I even have his handwritten version of it but Gary wrote about farming and growing up. He just lived around the corner from us, you know. He's in that picture, a little bit younger than I was. He does a good job of writing about the farming situation. I think you're mentioned in his book, Alden, because you were farming with Dad at the time he wrote that.

Doug: We had some pretty good experiences. At one time, Dale taught driver's training here in St. Johns and I was farming. After I got out of high school, I was working for my relation out there on the farm. I was farming out there and Dale had a drivers' training car with the person that was in that drivers' training. He was taking her out there and pulled in and he come in the barn and talked to me. Then he pulled out and I looked out there and this, whoever he was teaching, went through the ditch and Dale never stepped on the brakes. She went through the ditch and come out the other side and

Dale just set there. I talked to him the day after. I said, "How in the world did you set there?" And he said, "Well, I figured she was gonna make it." I would've panicked if I would've--. I mean, he had the brakes right there to put on the brakes but he didn't do it. He let her go through the ditch and come out the other side.

Rex: One thing I think about--it's not a pleasant story at all--but my mother and dad came up for meal. My wife fixed a meal and we sat there and visited. My mother was a school teacher in DeWitt. The next morning it was real foggy and I saw her go by. I said, "My gosh, she shouldn't be driving by in this fog, you know. That's dangerous." I was working with Dick Johnson. He bought timber back in my grandmother's woods and I hadn't been back there too long. About nine o'clock, I look over on Francis Road and here comes two guys walking across the field. I thought, well, why are they coming over? It was Sam Searl(?) and my brother Dale, both taught in St. Johns, and they informed me that my mother had got killed on her way to teach school in DeWitt that morning. [Jan. 6, 1966]. That was a shock.

Doug: She run a stop sign.

Wayne: Was there like a foggy morning?

Rex: "She shouldn't have tried it."

I'll end this on one, one. I got one more funny one to tell. It's a good story and it's about this guy right here. I wasn't born yet. They told me about this but this tells you what my mother had to deal with on the farm with four boys. Kendall and Alden were always playing outside and my mother says, "In the house comes Kendall by himself." She thought something's wrong. Why is this? And she says, "Where's Alden?" And Kendall says, "Oh, Alden's up in a tree." "Alden's up a tree?" "He thinks he's a bird. He's up in the tree." Why does Alden think he's a bird? Well, Alden took the blanket out of the loft door in the barn where we used to put hay up and put it in the barn and he tried to parachute to the ground using a blanket as the parachute and somehow it didn't work because when he hit the ground, he hit it so hard, he hit his chin on his knee and knocked it. Then he said, "He had the composure to get up and go climb a tree but he thinks he's a bird." My mother's listening to this so she goes out. "Get Alden outta this tree!" He was still out. This guy got hit so hard on his chin when he came out of the barn. Oh, he parachuted but the blanket didn't work. No, didn't do the job. So anyway, this is what Mom had to deal with.

Alden: You imagine being a mother of five boys?

Wayne: The only thing that might have been worse would be to have one girl. That would have been worse, wouldn't it?

Rex: Well, I had to tell that one, I heard that one.

Unidentified speaker: None of you guys said how much they were also involved in 4-H, major.

Rex: Alden can tell you a lot more than I can 'cause I wasn't there but when my grandfather Knight passed away in '38, it left my grandma Pearl alone. Alden was chosen from the four boys to live with my grandmother and he lived with my grandmother across the road from us.

Alden: My mother picked Kendall. Kendall went over there and stayed three days and he said, "I can't handle it." Then, who was appointed? I lived with her for 13 years until I got married. That's right. I had

to live with her because she had a hired man there and she didn't want to be in the house with a hired man, alone.

Doug: I remember in the eighth grade out there every morning in the wintertime, I would get up before school started and walk down the school and start to furnace, put wood in, put coal in and stuff. Then I'd go home and when the teacher got there, it would be darn warm. I did that every day in the wintertime too.

Alden: Those were the good old days, huh?

Unidentified speaker: Their parents, my grandparents was awesome.

Doug: Gina and Oliver. I used to eat over at my Grandma Pearl's every night. When I got through eating, it would be dark out and I'd run like all get-out to get home 'cause I'd was scared to death. And I always remember, it seemed like every night that I ate over there, she used to have hot dogs in lard in the refrigerator and here the hotdogs were in the lard, froze, and she'd just take it out of the refrigerator and heat it up and I'd eat it just like that.

Wayne: And you're still alive.

Rex: One thing I can remember, just comes to mind, that we had a St. Bernard. Do you know what a St. Bernard dog is? Standing, they're a huge dog, but by gol, that dog would not let any of us five boys walk across the road unless he had his jaw over our --, not biting down, but he would lead us across the road to Grandma's house, make sure that we weren't going to get hit or anything. It was unbelievable. You wonder how a dog ever figured that out.

Doug: Well, thank you very much for listening to us.

Alice: Thank you. It's just been a delight to us to hear your stories.

Rex: You probably thought, there's not another family like it.

Doug: The way I get around and stuff, I'd like to be able to go back to that and play basketball and do that over again. It's like I keep saying in my prayers, that young people ought to enjoy what they're doing because they're gonna get older sometime and it's gonna be just like what I'm looking back at now.

Alice: What wonderful memories you have to look back on!

Rex: It's been an honor. We were lucky. We said many times how lucky we really were.

Doug: What these young people, I hope they realize that someday they're going to get older.