

RAYMOND F. LOCHER

of Olive Twp., Clinton Co., MI
interviewed 26 August 1981 by Libbie Spoelma of DeWitt - *Page #013*
Transcribed by Myrna A. Van Epps - June 1992

Today is Wednesday the 26th, August 1981, and I am at the home of Mr. Raymond Locher at 2820 Lehman Road in Olive Township in Clinton County. And Mr. Locher will tell us what he remembers about the interurban. OK, now would you give me your full name?

Raymond Francis Locher.

And where were you born?

I was born on Locher's Crossing on the Locher homestead on May 7th, 1907, and I moved one mile west to the farm where I now reside. The Locher farm is now a centennial farm owned by my mother's banks and Glenn Locher. The railroad run between two houses and the barns; and my grandfather Edward Locher, with the 216 acre farm, agreed to give the use of four acres as long as it was used for railroad, providing the railroad would put in a double siding. There were sidings at Merle Beach, and our siding, three in DeWitt which consisted of one at the grain elevator, one at the lumber yard, and one at the livestock yards which was located south of the river.

Now, this livestock yard that you're talking about, your father either owned or ran or something. Could you tell me about the livestock?

My father and Varney D. Pierce, better known as "Dub," started the DeWitt Cooperative Livestock Association. Livestock was shipped to Detroit and Buffalo, NY. All kinds of livestock was shipped except horses. Of course, livestock was shipped in the other sidings. Our siding was used to ship baled hay to horse owners in Kentucky and Tennessee. It was also used for carloads of cement, tile, and cedar posts for our farm. Sugar beets were also loaded on the sidings and other sidings in the county for the Michigan Sugar Company at Lansing.

Would you mind locating this stockyard for me? Exactly where was it?

The stockyard was located, which now would be just south of the Consumer's Power unit, which is on the southeast side of DeWitt, just south of the river.

Just south of the river?

Just south of the river. There is a Consumer's Power unit there right now, and it was located there. There were scales. All the livestock was weighed, and it was a cooperative shipping association.

Now, was that on a road? What road would that of been on?

It would be on Webb Road, right, just southeast corner of DeWitt. Of course, the sidings were used for DeWitt grain. Lots of grain was shipped out of the elevator, and of course, the lumber yard was used for a lot of coal and lumber; and other commodities were shipped in. For years, baked goods, particularly bread, came from the Lawrence Baking Company daily on the passenger train. The bread was [packed] thirty-five to fifty loaves in large wood boxes. I know, because I worked in a store in DeWitt during 1923-24, and I used to go down and haul this bread up to the store.

Now, you're talking about the bread being shipped in to supply the store?

Supply the store.

And where did the bread come from?

It came from Lawrence Baking Company in Lansing.

In Lansing?

It isn't now. Lawrence Baking Company, it's ceased. I can't tell you what it is at this time. There was also a power house at Merle Beach which had the dynamos for the electric current for the trolley; and also mail was taken daily to and from Schwab's Crossing for the Merle Beach post office.

Now, Schwab's Crossing is located?

Schwab's Crossing was located two miles north of our crossing or one mile north of Alward Lake. Now, even though it's the Merle Beach post office, this building still stands and is now occupied by Mr. Art Courtland as a house. The fare for years was eight cents from our home in DeWitt, 26 cents to St. Johns, and 52 cents for Lansing. These are one-way fares. Wood waiting rooms were constructed early in the period. I can't tell you just when, but they were about 10' by 12', of wood, shingled roof, and were built and donated by local people--both the labor and the donations. The railroad put up the electric lights.

Local people used the railroad to go to and from town. Many neighbors used to put horses in our barn and go to the city for a day. My great uncle Matthew M. Hill, listed in Who's

Who, was a member of the Board of Supervisors and went regularly to the St. Johns Board of Commission meetings. I can remember this very well cause he always brought home a sack of candy for us children. When I rode the railroad to DeWitt High School and St. Johns High School, all I had to do was look out of my kitchen window to see the railroad car coming, and then I went out and got on the train.

Some of the motormen for the passenger [train] were Orville Crowner and William Glover. Mr. Glover was known as "Wild Bill" because many times he would let the car go so fast it would jump the rails, and it would have to be put back on the track. Some of the passenger conductors were Victor Williams, Harry Leadley, and Clark Sutton. Mr. Leadley was later associated with the Estes-Leadley Funeral Home in Lansing. Harry was very good to us and a dear friend. Harry daily gave us a paper at 5 p.m. When the interurban would go north at 5 p.m. at night, he would roll a Lansing paper up with a rubber band and give it a throw, and it would come right up to the front porch. I also remember Clark Sutton, the conductor. He would stop the interurban about 50 feet from my mother's kitchen and holler at noon, "Where's my pie?" Mother would take a piece of pie for him and the motorman out, and they would sit there and eat it and keep the train still for a few minutes until they finished the pie. Other freight motormen were John and Sam Brown, brothers. There were of course others. Mr. Crowner and Mr. Williams were Clinton County natives.

You mentioned to me that your father told you about the first steam trains that ran. Would you tell me a little bit about that now?

Well, according to what they told me, the interurban, of course, was a railroad [that] was started sometime in the 1900's; and until about 1907 the steam engine used to go to St. Johns and then back up all the way to Lansing. And my family tells me that they never dared leave the farm because of the buildings, because the steam engine was always starting fires. Another point too that I would like to talk about, that my folks have told me, there was a large camp when they was building the railroad, and they had a full-time cook, and this was located on the Mayer brothers' farm, 1/2 mile south of our farm. This would be half way between the Clayton's Crossing and Locher's Crossing on the railroad.

I believe you said they hauled in just loads and loads of dirt to fill in the low places.

There still is a sink hole that can be seen about 1/4 mile south of our farm (which was on our farm and Mr. Mayer's), and they drew loads and loads of dirt to make this fill.

Now, was there ever any serious fire or damage from the fires that the steam engine caused?

Not to my knowledge. Somebody, I guess, always stayed there, and it was always put out before. There was a lot of grass fires that was started, and of course, the one barn wasn't 30 feet from the railroad.

Now, I wonder if you would describe the early electric trains and trolleys that you remember. Something that was quite interesting--you were talking about all this freight that they carried. And then there was actually a passenger trolley and an electric freight on the line?

That's right. There was always the freight for years, and of course, sometimes they would have 12 or 14 freight cars in back of the freight [engine]. In fact, when we shipped livestock from the cooperative shipping association, they used to always pick those up right at night when the livestock came in. They wouldn't leave them overnight. They were loaded, and sometimes there was three or four carloads of livestock that had to be taken to Lansing, then diverted over on the other railroads, the Grand Trunk or Detroit-Toledo line. Whether it was going to Detroit or to Buffalo, NY, I can't tell you which line. The livestock always went there.

Well now then, there was a freight and also a passenger train separately?

Right. They were separate, separate motormen. Like I said, the double siding was the siding where you could easily meet. Many times a passenger would meet the freight on our siding. These sidings were like the sidings nowadays, with the Grand Trunk Railway. They had the large levers. On the top was a red light. When the frog (We called it the "frog") that put the train into the siding, that was red; and when the switch was shut, that had a green light onto it. So they knew when they came along whether the siding was open or not.

Now, did the passenger train have like more than one coach for passengers?

Generally there was one coach.

And that was just like the trolley with an overhead?

With an overhead; there was no third rail on the Lansing-St. Johns line. In the Jackson line I think they used the same interurban, and instead of using a trolley, they used a third rail, but the farmers were very much against a third rail in this area on account of livestock.

How long did the freights run on the line, and when were they discontinued?

Well, the freight run on the line till the last thing, I believe in the 1930's. I believe it was in the spring of '30 that the line was discontinued. And the freight run all that time. In fact, they ran more freight at the last. They used to go every hour. The passenger, they would go 7 o'clock in the morning at St. Johns and alternate back at 8 o'clock by our farm and the last one went to Lansing at 10 o'clock at night. Now, in the later years they didn't run that hour schedule. We used to call it an hour schedule because you could go anywhere in about an hour, and a lot of people liked that because they could go to town and get back about any hour of the day.

Did you have to buy a ticket at the depot?

No, you could get on anytime that I remember. You could get on anytime without the ticket. They would just take your money anytime.

Did they stop between the designated stops or waiting rooms? Would they stop along the way?

No, they would only stop at the approximately mile intersections unless it was St. Johns. I think you could get on when they later put the "Y" in it that went down to the end of Clinton Ave. You could get on there or you could get about any block there in town, but otherwise in St. Johns or Lansing, out in the country, you had to go the whole mile.

Where was the depot in DeWitt located?

The depot in DeWitt was located just east of O'Shaughnessey's Chevrolet and the Keck's. It went right along the side of the Keck Appliance Store. It went real close, and just south of the Keck Appliance Store was this waiting room, and at one time it was also the post office. I believe in about 1923 or 1924 it was the post office also.

Can you name streets? Can you put this on a street for me?

No, I can't now. It's the street right by the funeral home and Keck's. It run north and south. It run right along the east side of the present cemetery. The cemetery does own land on the east side, but it run about (which is on the east side) right along the cemetery.

You mentioned to me too that you used to just ride along on the trolley sometimes, especially with Mr. Leadley I believe.

Yes, we used to ride along lots of times with Mr. Leadley

just for the ride. I also used to ride along in the front when there wasn't any of the high officials on the train. I used to ride with Mr. Crowner up in the motorman, and of course, he always used to let me blow the whistle for the crossing. They always whistled at every crossing before they got to it. I used to think that was pretty nice to whistle a crossing.

About how old were you were you were doing this?

I was probably 20 then. It was probably after '18 or '20. It was after high school, I remember that--just before the 30's.

Did the fact that the trolley stopped at crossroads and they had all these designated stops, cause or promote any kind of development or building around the stops where they picked up passengers. Like, did people maybe put up a general store?

Not to my knowledge. The only thing at the sidings was [that] there was a little telephone at the sidings for the train; and at the Schwab's Crossing and at Merle Beach there was a small shed used for horses for the mail. But aside from that, there wasn't any other buildings there. I don't believe that it promoted any on this end. Now it might have on the Lansing end. I don't think it did because there wasn't any stops made unless somebody was out there. They wouldn't stop at a crossing unless you flagged them down or somebody was to get off. They would keep right on a-go in'. They used to sail by our farm because it was down grade for a mile. They used to take the freight (we shipped in a carload of post), and they used to take the post and put on ten or fifteen cars on the siding and shove the head of the train, and they would go six or seven miles north. They had a man in front with a brake, one of those hand brakes, but they'd shove that down there, and they would go for 6 or 7 miles north of our place--eight or ten cars, just a-whooping down through there. It's a wonder somebody didn't get hurt, but I don't remember ever having an accident.

No serious accidents along the line?

The only accident I can remember was where it would jump the rails once in awhile. I don't remember anybody more than getting shaken up, but then nobody got hurt. There was an incident; we had a pair of mules. We had to cross the tracks from the barn. Sometimes those mules were ten or fifteen minutes before they would cross the tracks. Also, on an ice storm, the trolley would shoot fire for miles when that ice storm was on. The trolley hitting the wire on the trolley line, it would really fire balls of fire.

Between the water and the line it would make like a short?

I'd imagine, a short. That's right.

Were you ever delayed because of the ice and the snow? Did you ever get stuck in it?

Yes, the snow they used to come through. Of course, the passengers, they would come through with big snow plows, and they were delayed sometimes in the winter with the large snow storms. They were. Sometimes they were delayed on account of the train jumping the track, but generally when they was running steady, why they run about every hour. You didn't have to have a watch. You knew which way they went and about what time it was.

Now, this snow plow that you're talking about that ran on the tracks. Was it electric powered?

It was a snow plow on the end of the freight.

On the front?

On the front, just about like our county snow plows--the big county snow plows.

Do you know where Drake's Crossing was? Can you tell me what roads? I think that was quite a ways south.

Drake's Crossing was north. It was south of St. Johns, and I believe it was a mile south of the fairgrounds which would be a continuation of Clinton Avenue.

Do you remember any name changes through this area that you are familiar with, of the stops? I know that sometimes they started off being called one thing, and then maybe three or four years later they had changed the name on it. Are you familiar with any of those?

I don't remember of any changes. There was no changes in this area. There could of been from DeWitt to Lansing, but most all these stations were from native people that lived along the line like Claytons (Mr. Clayton's farm); then our farm; and then Alward Lake was of course the lake; then Schwabs; and Merle Beach; and Drakes was a name of a family. No, I don't remember any changes from DeWitt to St. Johns after it started.

Did you go to Lansing quite a bit?

We went to Lansing. Well, for a city, that was a big city; and Lansing and St. Johns, that was kind of a treat; and of course, for 52 cents each way, it was cheap according to nowadays. Transportation today, I guess maybe we need that back.

You mentioned in the warmer weather the open trolley that they ran on excursions. So can you tell me a little bit about that?

On the excursions, or particularly the Clinton County Fair which was held south of St. Johns for years, they had these open cars like you'd see in the city. Just a cover over the top and seats, and no sides on them whatsoever. And of course, you could get a good view of the countryside when you were riding in that car. Generally, there was two of them--two coaches, I'd say. When they pulled one of those generally for the fair or excursions, they had two coaches. And they had probably other excursions that I don't remember that connected with the Grand Trunk in Lansing and St. Johns. I'm sure they did. We used to take it and go to the connection of the Grand Trunk in St. Johns and go to Pontiac and Detroit on the Grand Trunk when I was young, but I don't remember going on any excursions.

How did you feel about the interurban being discontinued?

Well of course, we didn't want the interurban to be discontinued because we had this siding that we used for baled hay, and other items. It was just a convenient way to travel. For one person you couldn't travel with horse and buggy to Lansing to St. Johns. It was very economical at that time.

Do you think it had much effect on the economy of the county, of St. Johns and DeWitt?

Oh yes, I wouldn't know about St. Johns, but [in] DeWitt, we don't have any coal any more, very little lumber, no shipping association for livestock, of course. It certainly did effect DeWitt and the countryside. It certainly did.

Were most of the people disappointed when it?

I think most people were disappointed when it stopped. Of course, the Consumers Power had provided the line, every power line down through, and that still stands. But most of the land on the Locher homestead, of course by the agreement, went back to the farm which was four acres, and most of the other areas I think Consumers Power did transfer the land back to the farms.

Let's go back to you and your family. You said your grandfather owned that land, originally, the Locher farm, the homestead. Do you know when your grandfather came into the area?

Sometime between 1840 and 1860.

And where did he come from?

He came from Grass Lake. They owned a farm at Grass Lake,

Jackson County, the old homestead there, and he came here; and my grandmother taught school for years; and my grandfather was treasurer, township official, for years too.

Now what was your grandfather's name?

Edward Locher.

And your grandmother's name?

Elma Locher.

And who was she before she was married?

Elma Locher was---

We could look that up later if you don't know that.

I should know that.

We'll come back to that later. They came from what state?

They came from New York state which was right in New York city. They had a fruit farm right in the heart of New York City. Now I don't know just where, but they told us about it.

Where did they come from in Europe? Do you know--when they came to America?

Yes, my great grandfather from Europe was a rug salesman before he came to New York and then to Grass Lake; and my grandmother was--they both were Swiss. They come from Switzerland but they were German. They were Swiss-German I guess you'd call it, because they came from Switzerland. We have some of the old letters dated from Switzerland way back--my sister has. So we know there was a family and about the time they came, but I can't give you that.

Did your father come from Switzerland too?

No, my grandfather was born in Grass Lake.

I mean your great grandfather. Where was he born?

He was born in Switzerland.

In Switzerland?

And my grandmother was born in Switzerland; and he came to New York many times as a rug salesman and finally decided he would buy land in New York; and for years they packed apples in barrels for New York for the trade, and then he

bought this farm in Grass Lake and raised fruit, particularly apples, on that farm which was a gravelly loam of about 190 acres. Then he used to pack the apples there and send them back to New York state. They used to "ring-pack" them. I don't know whether you know what is ring-packing, but that's facing the apples all so that when you open up the top of the barrel, a bushel, all the apples look nice on the top. They call it ring packing.

Then, was your father born in this area?

My father was born on the Locher homestead, right, and lived there all his life.

And what was your father's name?

My father's name was Francis Jay.

And your mother's name?

My mother's name was Mina Bixby. The Bixbys were an old family in the county too.

And then you lived on that farm until you came here?

I lived there till 1940. Then I got married and moved over here in 1940.

You were married in 1940?

Married in 1940.

And who was your wife before you were married?

Brownie Berlin from Riley Township.

And her family is Clinton County native too?

She still owns the homestead. That's about a centennial farm too. Her grandparents were the Hamiltons.

Now where did you go to grade school?

I went to grade school right here on DeWitt Road, on the corner of DeWitt and Chadwick Road which is a church now.

And what was that school called?

Brown School.

And do you remember what district it was?

District No. 4, Olive Township.

And now we have the Olive Township Grange, just out around here. Was that there when you were a young man?

Oh, this Olive Grange has been there since I can remember. Of course, that was on the old DeWitt - St. Johns road which was the main artery between Lansing, St. Johns, Alma, and Mt. Pleasant. I was a grange member for years. There was a grange hall at DeWitt too for years. That's now the dairy which is just half of block north of the main [inter]section in DeWitt.

The building is still there?

The building still stands, right, approximately across from the Masonic Temple. That was a grange for years; and of course there was the South Riley Grange in South Riley too.

Was the grange very active then?

The grange was very active. There was South Riley (very active), the DeWitt Grange, the Olive Grange, the Bingham Grange on US-27 which is near the packing plant down there, where the school is on the east side of the road. That still stands. That hall is practically the newest one around, the Bingham Hall.

Were they as strong politically back when you were a young man as they are today where they are organized and have kept going?

Yes, I would say they were. Particularly, the state grange was real organized. The county granges or the local granges weren't so politically activated as the state grange and the national grange.

Did they try to promote legislation through the state grange what would benefit agriculture?

That would benefit farmers and agriculture. They always done that, right. They were somewhat on the neutral side when it come to go for any politician. They kind of stayed on the neutral side.

As far as favoring one party?

Yes, I think that's been traditional in the national grange too though some of the other organizations are not.

(side 2)

Did you ever hear your father talk about the Agricultural and Horticultural Society (that was a Clinton County society)--if you ever heard him mention that. That would have been before you would have belonged.

Yes, I do remember that there was a society, and I think when I was young I can remember that. My great uncle, M. M. Hill, and my grandfather, I heard them talking about it too. I can't tell you anything about it though besides I think they used to hold meetings at least two times a year, at least annually.

And was your mother a Hill before she was married?

Was my mother?

You said your uncle was a Hill. His name was Hill.

My great uncle was Matthew M. Hill, right. He was known in this area. He was supervisor for years.

How was he your uncle? Whose brother was he?

Mrs. Hill was my grandfather's sister, and they came up here from Grass Lake with the family.

Do you remember the fairground ever being anywhere besides in St. Johns, except, of course, in later years over at Ionia. Do you remember the fairground being anyplace else?

No, the fairgrounds, to my knowledge, was always located in the same place, south of St. Johns about a mile. It was always there when I was young. It was a big fair too, a big agricultural fair.

You mentioned Merle Beach back when we were talking about the trolley. Wasn't there an inn or dance hall or something there for many years at Merle Beach?

At Merle Beach there was a dance hall for many years. It was located on Merle Beach Lake. The lake is still there. It was about 1-1/2 miles west of the station.

On out toward the lake; Really that's Muskrat Lake.

It's really Muskrat Lake, now owned by the state of course.

Did you ever go there?

Oh yes, my wife and I both went there to dances. [For] local people that was a kind of a Saturday night dance stuff.

Who did you have to play music for you there?

Some of the local people played music. I can remember Arnold Stevens who plays now, and there was others too. Arthur Gage--I remember Arthur Gage playing with Arnold

Stevens.

What were some other things that young people did for amusement?

You mean there at Merle Beach or other places?

Anywhere.

Ball games, Fourth of July celebrations.

Tell me about a Fourth of July celebration. What did you do?

Generally the Fourth of July fireworks was the main attraction. But they did have other attractions too. Fireworks at night was always the main attraction.

Did people give parties and play games?

Oh yes, parties and play games, and have parades.

What kind of games did you play at a party?

Oh, when I was young, I guess it was Hide and Seek.

Now we're talking about little kids' games. I mean like teenagers.

I guess they played cards and I don't remember what else. Guess that's too long ago.

Now, I have one other question for you too. As I come out DeWitt Road here to your house, there is a big curve, kind of an "S" curve. A big brick house sits there, a great, big brick house. Can you tell me whose home that was originally or anything about it? It would be on the west side of the road. You go right around the curve and that big house sits right there.

I'm sure that both of those brick houses on the corner, particularly that one, was the Dills family; and there were two families: in the brick house at the end of the road as you go south and that one on the west side. Then later it was owned by Mr. Mankey; at the present time the farm is owned by Don Seyfried.

Did you people go to church out in this area? Your parents, members of what church?

I'd say DeWitt. I think at one time my mother went to the church north. When they was children, I think my mother went to the church which was on the corner of Price Road and US 27.

What church was that? What denomination was that? Do you know?

No, I can't tell you.

And your mother's maiden name was?

Bixby.

Bixby. I thought I had asked you and then I had forgotten. And then I did ask you about your wife. I didn't ask you how many children you have, if you have youngsters, and how many you have?

We have two children. We have two daughters. One, Nancy Ann Limer. Her and her husband are school teachers in Bay City, and they have two grandchildren, one boy Jack and one granddaughter Jodie. And my other daughter has worked for J. W. Knapps for years as a buyer and she lives in Lansing.

Is she married?

They're married.

Her name is what?

Her name is Dalton.

Now are you sure there isn't anything else that you have there? There are some other things that I'm sure you could tell me about. One thing that I'm particularly interested in is cattle--people raising cattle. Did your family raise cattle?

Yes, my family always had livestock, lots of horses. Of course they farmed with horses and cattle. We always had beef cattle, and we always had sheep--one hundred head of ewes each year for the lambs.

And you were telling me how these things were sold at the stockyard.

At the stockyard they were all taken in and weighed. The lambs and the calves were all marked so the farmers actually got whatever they brought in Buffalo or Detroit, minus the cost. But the hogs were all weighed in, and then they were all shipped to Detroit or Buffalo, and then they were pro-rated back according to the weights and according to the grade.

The beef and the other cattle were sold according to pound.

They were sold as marked.

The way they sell it today, usually by weight.

Right, it was all sold by weight.

Did your family ever raise sugar beets?

I raised sugar beets, and I think my father did once. I did raise sugar beets, but by the time I raised beets it was on this farm. We trucked them into Lansing. Of course, there was a lot of sugar factories around that are now gone.

Was that a successful operation. Were you able to make a profit on the sugar beets?

We made a profit generally with the government subsidy. Without the government subsidy sometimes you just broke about even because the labor was so high.

Do you remember anything about problems with drainage, with wetlands, with swamps, and how these lands might of been turned into profit for the farmer?

[On] most of the wetlands in this area we used to raise peppermint, and most of the land that was wet areas had sufficient drainage. For years we raised peppermint for peppermint oil which was very profitable.

And where was that sold? How did you sell this peppermint?

The peppermint oil was all contracted ahead of time before you stilled it. You stilled it just like any still.

You distilled it on your own farm?

No, there was stills here. There was two stills at Alward Lake and one of the original stills is on the Crosby Farm on [US]27. It's just two miles out of St. Johns. That's one of the original stills. There was other stills around over in Riley. But you cut them in either by hand or by mower; pitched it on by hand; and then you put it by hand in those vats; packed the vats; and then [it was] steamed; and then it was distilled. At one time it was interesting because they put the mint in the drums and then those drums they put in the bank vault over the winter --in the bank vault because they weighed three to four hundred pounds and at \$7 a pound they were very valuable, so they put them in the bank vault during storage.

Now what bank are we talking about? Anywhere, like maybe St. Johns or DeWitt?

It was St. Johns Bank. I know the DeWitt bank didn't [store it]. It was St. Johns Bank.

Did you ever raise peppermint?

Oh yes, I raised peppermint for a long time. That's the way I got my start to buy some of my tools.

I think that's something we'll have to get into later.

OK.

Someday I would like to come back on another tape just to talk about peppermint farming and how you managed that. The only other question I'll ask you now is, what do you think is happening to the small farmer? Do you think he's going down?

No, I don't think the small farmer will go out of business because the high price of labor and the high cost of everything, particularly if a small farmer can survive. The family farm or the family labor is so much cheaper than the hiring. I don't think they'll ever do away with the family farm. It may not be too profitable, but it will still stay.

OK. Thank you very much, and then maybe sometime later we can talk again if that's agreeable.

OK, and I'll get my wife and get my grandmother's name.

I thank you then.