

Northville Township Historical District Commission

Oral History Interview – Conrad & Nina Burkman

May 5, 2006



CONRAD & NINA BURKMAN ORAL HISTORY
NORTHVILLE TOWNSHIP HISTORIC COMMISSION
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JC – John Colling, RA – Richard Allen, CB – Conrad Burkman, NB – Nina Burkman

JC. OK, you can start with that. Is it running now? Yeah.

JC. Do you want to tell us the date and who we all are?

RA. Yes, this is May 5, Friday, 2006 and we are with Conrad and Nina Burkman who John Colling and I (Richard Allen) are here. John Colling has put together some thought-provoking questions. And part of the procedure is that this tape will be transcribed and we will give you the transcription to look at to see if any errors got into it; you might have said something you didn't want to say or things you forgot you want to add so you have a chance to edit it before it goes anywhere. Then copies of it will be kept at Mill Race, and the library keeps it also in the Local History Room. And you're probably aware that the township has finally started an historic commission, and John and I are a part of that, and a copy will be kept there. We are doing people, city and township, recognizing way back when that the township was mostly farmers and the population was not that great. And a lot of the people who have lived in the city for years know heck of a lot about the township because they were here. And you happen to be our first persons that the two of us will work together on so...

JC. Okay, just to break the ice a little, you were talking about the Yerkes family. How do you tie in with that? Most of the people here know that the William Yerkes house is in Mill Race Village. It is my understanding that they had no children.

CB. Right, this is Robert Yerkes house and my mother was a Yerkes. This house was built by my great grandfather.

RA. Do you know about how old the house is?

CB. Oh, exactly. Built in 1869. There is a plaque out on the porch with those dates. It is in the National Register of Historic Places. My great grandfather built the house and my grandfather and his wife lived in Milford and had a mill out in Milford and I never was real clear on whether they just decided to move their mill down here or whether they moved down here to take care of my great grandmother and great grandfather when their spouse passed away, but my grandfather moved down here and started the lumber yard next door, and he ran the lumber yard for all of his adult life and my uncle, his son, took the lumber yard over and ran it until he wanted to retire, and he would have dearly loved me to take it over, but I just wasn't a lumber man. I just didn't like the lumber business.

JC. What did you do for a living?

CB. Well, let's see, back at that time I was working for a finance company in Detroit, and then worked for one in Wayne. And, while I had the one in Wayne I got a little excited one day and said some things to my supervisor that I regretted after and quit. I came home and the phone just rang off the hook for three days. Finally, a carload of 'em drove over here, supervision, and wanted me to come back and wanted me to take the office up in Saginaw. I thought what a great idea that was, and then I found out that it was the pits of the earth. So we moved up to Saginaw for a couple of years and I got in enough trouble up in Saginaw so they brought me back. It was very good up in Saginaw. I won the Man of the Year Award twice up there. They only gave it to me once 'cause the Committee chairman was from my company and he didn't want me to have it because he felt it would be politics and two years later I bought Plymouth Finance. I bought the credit bureau, actually, while I had the finance company and the partners kind of conspired the books on me in the finance company. I bought them out and I got it free and clear. I had the credit bureau. Then I bought the one in Brighton and the one in Howell, and then the one in Birmingham, so we had a few. Finally in most of this time I was publishing a little tabloid called the National Billiard News and my mother got sick so I curtailed my activities. My dad thought I probably wouldn't find another job again. But I fooled him, I did.

JC. Are you still retired?

CB. Yeah, I still own the Billiard News.

JC. Getting back to your ancestors, the Yerkes family was one of the early families who moved in to this area. I've been told that your mother was a member of the DAR?

CB. Oh yeah.

JC. That means that they were in this country back in the 1700's?

CB. I want to say they researched their ancestors and showed actual facts on ancestors who fought in the revolutionary war and I want to say that we had 7 or 8. I was in the CAR for a while, that's the Children of the American Revolution.

NB. When you say that they came to this country, you mean anywhere in this country, not necessarily Northville?

JC. No, I meant, not the US, but if they came to this country before 1776, it wasn't the United States.

NB. How about 1700? Anthony Yerkes of Pennsylvania.

JC. The family came here from Pennsylvania?

NB. Was it either PA or NY, Conrad?

CB. Well there was one side of the Yerkes who came from PA and one from New York. I think my side came from PA.

RA. You're unusual, most people from Northville came from New York and that was all because of the Erie Canal. It is predominately New York people here. You're different, Pennsylvania, there're not many of them.

CB. We had at one time over the years my great-grandfather and his brothers and my grandfather and his brothers owned about three quarters of the land around Northville, Northville Township. They all had big farms and had a lot of land.

RA. Some of the records we have gotten into we find the original land grants through the Yerkes family around here.

JC. Would that have included what is basically downtown Northville? This area here?

CB. Yeah, it would have included this area here, but not necessarily downtown. The William (Yerkes) house that is down in Mill Race. That house, that farm would have covered all the area around the racetrack is now at one time.

RA. If you don't have it, copies of the original land grants are available over the internet.

NB. We have some of them.

JC. How about your boyhood? You're my age; you start to become aware of things during the Second World War. Right. How does that affect Northville around here, the Ford Plants I know went into war production.

CB. They went into war production--My father worked at bomber plant (Willow Run), Kelsey Hayes, bomber plant, and I remember, I'd have been 5-6, when the war started. I remember when they tore out the railroad tracks, the interurban tracks. I have no recollection of the actual interurban, but I do know that the tracks were there.

RA. Do you remember where the depot was? I've read several things and have been confused exactly where the depot was.

CB. I don't know where it was.

JC. The interurban actually went out of business before World War I.

CB. Yeah, but the tracks were still there. They tore those out for the war effort, to use the steel for the war. They tore them up all the way down to Five Points where it ran.

JC. Did you have air raid practice here in Northville?

CB. Yeah, sure. Turn the lights out and go to the basement. I remember that. I was pretty young when that happened, I was actually born in Detroit and I moved out to

Northville with my folks when I was about three. They bought a house on top of Fairbrook, a little Greek Revival up there, on the north side of Fairbrook.

RA. Is the house still standing?

CB. Oh yeah, still standing. And, then when my grandmother died, they moved down here to the farm to take care of my grandfather, and I was about 6 I guess.

JC. About the 50's?

NB. That's right, 56.

JC. How did you meet this guy?

NB. We both went to Cleary College, Ypsilanti.

JC. That's right, you mentioned earlier you were from the Upper Peninsula. Now what did you think of Northville when you came here?

NB. I liked it, a nice town.

JC. What was it like at that time?

NB. Oh boy. Well, one thing I liked about it you had all the small stores. You could get clothes, you could get shoes, you could get sheets,...I would say mostly that.

RA. What was the grocery store in town at that time?

NB. We had several then, The A & P was up on Main Street and they had wood floors, and they still had that stuff on the floors. I do remember occasionally going in there.

CB. We had C. F. Smith

RA. Kroger's was where CVS is today, I believe?

N.B. Oh that was on Main St. and Hutton.

CB. Before that it was in the building that is on the corner of Main and Hutton right across from the Presbyterian Church.

RA. The one that is now Main Street Bank?

CB. Yes. Yes. Roger Christianson owned that. He used to have a farm implement supply business there. And when he decided to go out of business, he talked to my dad long and hard about what he was going to do with that piece of land and my dad advised him to build a building on it, and he did and he immediately rented the building to Kroger.

NB. There was an electronics store, uptown too, something called Ellis Electronics. And a hardware store on Center St.?

RA. I remember a hardware store on Center Street that had stuff piled to the ceiling.

CB. Ellis Electronics.

RA. Wasn't Ellis next to where Genittis is?

CB. Ellis would have been right next to the shoe store. So Genittis, no, no that was an old grocery store.

RA. Genittis was the grocery store and there was an electronics store next to it. That was when we moved here in the mid-70s.

NB. Was there a hardware store on Main Street besides the one on Center?

CB. Yeah. Right on the corner, two doors down from the one on Center Street where the Record, the Northville Record building is, that was a hardware store.

RA. My first recollection of Northville was the angle parking downtown and on the north side you had the high curbs to get to the sidewalk? Remember that?

CB. Going up Main St. from what was the hardware store, the next thing you had was a big meat market. Next to the meat market was a pool room, and next to that was a Chevrolet dealership.

NB. That was before my time.

RA. I vaguely remember some of the car dealers. I keep trying to remember who was where around town.

CB. Chevrolet dealer was there, the Ford dealer across the street.

RA. The Dodge dealer was where Gardenviews is today as I recall.

CB. No, no that was Chrysler.

RA. Ok, Chrysler

CB. The Plymouth-Dodge dealer was down where the south bank (LaSalle) is. They were in that building.

RA. Chrysler was Gardenviews, with the Gulf gas station beside.

CB. Right.

JC. As a young man what did you do for fun? Go up to Walled Lake?

CB. Oh yeah, Walled Lake? I lived at Walled Lake in the summer.

NB. You were still going to Walled Lake when I arrived.

CB. When I was a kid I roller skated a lot at Riverside over in Plymouth Road (Livonia) is where I skated, and when they closed everybody went up to Walled Lake and skate there, probably not any bigger than this inside of the house here.

JC. Did you just go skating up there, go dancing, go to the amusement park?

CB. The roller rink was at the amusement park.

NB. Did you go to the ballroom up there?

NB. I didn't know that much about it

JC. When I was a little kid, yeah.

CB. We used to go up there when they had the big bands up there. We would go up and listen after skating. But...we never went out there and rode the rides and that kind of thing. When I was a kid I used to make a fairly decent income and hang out at the drive-in in Novi, which is now an auto parts store there now. And I had a pretty fast car.

JC. Novi was basically a four-corners at that time?

CB. Oh yeah. I'd take on all comers. \$10 a gear.

JC. Is that how you first got interested in billiards?

CB. No, I was drag racing. \$10 a gear. One day a Novi cop came up to the drive-in and asked me if I'd go for a ride with him. I said, yeah sure. I got in the car and he had a '50 Ford, boy it was all souped up and he thought it was hot. We roared up over the Novi bridge and he said, "What do you think of that?" He was trying to get me excited and the next day a cousin of mine whose name was Edmund Yerkes, well, he was my mother's second cousin, he came down to the house. He started telling me what he was going to do to me and put me in jail. So if I got in the can and I would never get out. My mother was just thunderstruck and she had no idea what he was talking about. After she said, "what was he talking about"? I said, "I don't know, crazy Ed, you know." Back in those days, course, you could drive from here to Novi, and if you passed someone in the street, that was really something. Same thing going out Sheldon towards Plymouth. You could go from here to Plymouth in four minutes, like nothing.

JC. This isn't my recollection, but I do recall going from Grand River to Walled Lake and there was nothing but woods. Where now its super markets, malls and stuff.

CB. Oh yeah, that's true. When you left here and went down Eight Mile Road, when you crossed Meadowbrook road, the only thing down there was the Country Club. From there to Farmington Road it was just farmland.

JC. A lot of those roads were dirt roads back in the 40s and 50s.

CB. Oh yeah, that was. Sheldon was dirt, Haggerty was dirt. Eight Mile was pea gravel and tar, but most of the other roads around here were gravel roads. Down Sheldon was gravel road from where Baseline ends up here. It was gravel and went down as far as the race track. And as soon as you got to the end of the race track, it was still gravel all the way over to Michigan Avenue.

NB. You mean in town it was gravel?

JC. No, no. From the race track on it was gravel.

NB. I thought you said Baseline down it was gravel.

CB. No, no.

JC. You mentioned the race track? When I first came to this area we had fairs. Do you remember the fairs?

CB. Oh yes, very well. I used to love it. We had fairs when we lived up on the hill. I used to sit out on the side porch all night and watch the Ferris wheel. It was fascinating.

RA. Did you get down there?

CB. I didn't get down there nearly enough. Dad would take me down about three times during the fair and that was about it. But, then of course the race track came in and my Dad was the accountant for the race track for a while. Gee, he did that and he used to work out at the plant, that's when he started. I started working there at the race track when I was about thirteen.

RA. What did you do there?

CB. I had a job that required a great deal of skill. I picked up paper with a stick and a bag.

RA. That's better than what I thought they would have you doing. They might have had you in the barn,

CB. No, the barns, we did have to clean out the barns once a year. We cleaned out the barns at the end of the meet one time. Other than that, they took care of the barns themselves. But, I've done almost everything at the race track.

JC. Was the river paved over like they have it now? The river runs under their parking area, the barn area.

CB. Ah, I never knew that.

JC. Johnson Creek, if you're on Seven Mile, it goes under Seven Mile, it disappears; it goes under the race track.

NB. I'll be darned.

CB. Well, they didn't have that many stables back there, back in those days.

JC. When you were young, was the lake on Seven Mile still there next to the fish hatchery. People tell me there was a big lake there and Seven Mile didn't go through.

CB. Ah, I remember the fish hatchery, but I don't remember, particularly, a big lake there.

JC. Maybe it was before your time.

CB. A lake was in Thompson's Gravel Pit which was just past Beck. In fact, most of that lake was taken up by Blue Heron Point was built on.

JC. Do you remember Thompson Field, a baseball field, on Six Mile? I was a baseball player.

CB. No.

RA. Six Mile and Beck also, they used it for model airplanes. Lapham field, I think it was called at that point. They used to do model airplanes there.

JC. Another question I've wondered about. When you were young, all the institutionalized processes were going on, the psychiatric hospital, the group homes, the training school, DeHoCo, even though it's wasn't in Northville, it was part of this community. Was there any concern about these things in the community?

JC. Not that I remember. And not only that we had Eastlawn Sanitarium, which is now Allen Terrace. We had Eastlawn, we had Maybury, and we had two big TB sans in addition to all the other stuff. But, I don't remember any concern at all. We used to play baseball against the training school every once in a while.

JC. With the school?

CB. No, not the school. This would be the summer league, the American Legion, play against them.

JC. We don't want to keep you out of it (Nina).

NB. That's all right, he knows much more than I do.

JC. What would you say are the biggest changes here since you first moved here in the 50s, other than numerous subdivisions?

NB. Well, it would have to be the subdivisions, but I would say the big change was when they put in the new Eight Mile Road.

JC. Was it there when you first moved here?

CB. Oh, it wasn't there. This was the main road.

RA. It stopped at Sheldon and started up on the other side up by Taft. Because it was blocked by the hill, primarily.

CB. Right.

JC. But there wasn't that much traffic then either.

NB. Oh no, very little traffic, yeah—that's a big change.

JC. Was Parmenter's going strong when you came here?

CB. Yes, oh yes.

JC. They've been here a long time?

CB. They've been here ever since I've been here.

JC. The Parmenter's traffic ever bother you here?

CB. No, it doesn't anymore because they've added a lot of parking area down there. But ten years ago cars would be parked on both sides of the street all the way up to Horton.

JC. Before the 8 Mile was put through there. Did you get their business then?

NB. I can remember it way back then with all the traffic and all the cars before they put in the big parking lot.

CB. They didn't have the horse rides and all that kind of stuff.

RA. Back to the lumber yard, I've heard there is some unique structure in that shed that is next to the railroad, about how thick the walls are were used for something at one point. My son had a tour one day and they were showing how that shed is built right next to the railroad. It was heavy duty; I can't remember all the details.

CB. I wasn't ever aware that it was so heavy duty. The big building in the middle, that was pretty heavy, that was the grain building.

RA. Lumber and grain both?

CB. Right.

RA. It was typical of how a lot of these lumber yards were that way.

CB. Right, it was a grist mill.

RA. OK. Did they do their own grinding there or did somebody do it and bring it there?

CB. Oh. They did it there, and when I was a kid there was a railroad siding; in fact it is still there, and it came right into the lumber yard. I used to have to do that periodically. My uncle and his guys unloaded the boxcars full of lumber.

RA. What did they use for power for the gristmill?

CB. You know I think, back as far as I know, they used electric power, pulleys, belts and belted pulleys.

RA. Way back when everyone was running belts or pulleys. Typical.

RA. What other shopping do you remember in town? We talked about grocery stores, I kind of recall there was a Rexall drug store, but I don't know what else was down there.

CB. There were two drug stores, there was Rexall's on the corner and then down where the Kitchen Witch used to be, that was Stewart's Drug Store. Both of them had soda bars.

NB. How about the soda shop up there?

CB. Oh yeah, Cloverdale.

NB. No, not Cloverdale. On Main Street?

CB. Yeah, but Cloverdale was too, Cloverdale was the original soda shop.

RA. When they tore down the Sheehan building, they came across a thing, apparently, there was an enterprise called The Blue Whale, I believe it was. It was in there. Something that Folino ran.

CB. The Blue Whale, I never heard that called the Blue Whale. It was called Paul's Sweet Shop.

RA. Yeah, but there was another thing that replaced that. Someone actually unearthed the original sign and Mill Race now has it.

CB/NB. Well, I'll be darned.

RA. When they were tearing it down they found some pieces of paper, that their kid's apparently actually signed that belonged to one of the Brasure kid's names was on this piece of paper they found in the building.

CB. Oh, geez.

NB. Whose name?

RA. One of the Brasure boys. They found this piece of paper in there. This was the first we knew of that this other name even existed, and Mary Ware had a contact. It turned out these signs were over in the west side of the state and they brought them over here.

CB. I can remember when it was Paul's Sweet Shop,

NB. That is the one I was trying to think of.

CB. Then down where Rebecca's restaurant is on Center Street, there was a Cloverdale Dairy there.

RA. I remember that. Big lines for ice cream cones there. I remember that.

NB. Yeah, remember when Guernsey was just a little square building like this, down, down the hill, on Sheldon.

CB. Where the UPS store is.

NB. Yeah, where they started in a little teeny building.

RA. I remember as a kid, we used to come and get buttermilk in Novi.

NB. And the bowling alley is gone.

CB. When I was in seventh grade, course back then we had study halls in school. We had most of the grades in the study hall. I sat between two junior girls when I was in seventh grade. They were cheerleaders. Boy they used to just beat me like a drum. I can't imagine ever doing anything to deserve it. (Laughter) But, somehow they took a liking to me, it was just about the death of my mother. They took me to the football games, and basketball games. One little girl had a car and that just worried my mother to death. Oh, she just would have a nervous breakdown every time I left the house with them. But they all took good care of me. They parked me up in the bleachers right where they could see me. I'm a seventh grader at all these away games. You know, and after the game they'd go to the dance, but before they went to the dance, they'd take me out to Paul's, and get me outfitted with a hamburger and a milkshake and then take me home.

JC. Where was the school at that time?

CB. The school was the old high school.

JC. The old high school up on the hill?

CB. Yeah, up town.

RA. The old school down on Main Street? Old Main. Where the Board of Ed office is these days.

NB. Did that house all the grades then?

CB. No, that housed the 7th – 12th. The grade school was next door, facing into the right, which I think is still the Board of Education.

RA. They occupy the whole building, there's a day care or something else on the west end. So the entire grade school through high school was all contained in that one building at that time?

CB. No, just 7th and 8th. 7th grade through 12th was in the old building, and the newer brick building was the grade school, kindergarten through 6th.

NB. Where the Senior Center is now? I'm trying to picture which building it is.

CB. If you're facing the old high school, it's to the right of that.

RA. It's down where the day care is.

CB. Yeah.

NB. That's two buildings? I always thought it was one building.

CB. No, it's two. Now that new building where the Senior Center was, that wasn't even there when I graduated. That was built after I graduated.

NB. Okay.

RA. You were living here at the time there was that big plane crash in town? Somebody lost an airplane... towards downtown, wasn't it?

CB. Yeah, it was, I don't remember exactly where it was, somewhere down there. My cousin set one down there in a field one day and never flew again.

JC. Anything else that you would like to talk about that we haven't discussed? Oh, how did you get involved with the billiards thing? Were you on a national level or international?

CB. Yeah, I played international, yeah. When I was oh I don't know, I guess I was probably 24 or 25 when I played on that pool league? Or, was I older than that?

NB. I think you were older, but I wouldn't bet on it.

CB. I kinda of got trapped on pool after I saw *The Hustler*. I started playing up in Saginaw. Oh yes, I was older than that, sure I was. And, when we moved back from Saginaw I played in a league at the Cushion and Cue, now called Snookers; it's down on Inkster Road and the Expressway. Part of the deal with playing in the league was that you had to referee this pool tournament every year, act as a referee. So there was a fellow there by the name of Joe Farhant who had driven down from Lansing to see this and he ran a lot of tournaments in Lansing and afterwards he said, "Well, you know, you're a pretty good referee. How would you like to come up and do my tournament in Lansing?" I said, "Well a, sure." And the next year the United States Open was in Lansing, and I did the Open also. The first match I drew in the Open was Irving Crane and Joe Balsis. They are two Hall of Famers, and I was just scared to death. After the match, Crane walked up to the tournament director and he said, "That fellow is the first fellow that knows the difference between a safety and a foul. I want him to do all my matches." And as it turned out he was in the finals with Balsis. They had local television there, that's local in Lansing, and so I was the referee. The next year it was in Las Vegas, the Sahara, and ABC's *Wide World of Sports* televised it. They said, "We've got to have a referee that has some television experience." I said, "Well, here I am." So I did all the ABC *Wide World of Sports* telecasts until they stopped running. But, I was well liked regarded by the players.

JC. Obviously, they wouldn't have you doing what you did.

CB. I never played favorites; I didn't care how big the guy was, no matter how kind of great player he was. Either he fouled it or he didn't? I really enjoyed it. I kinda lost interest in it when they switched from straight pool to nine ball. They don't call fouls in nine ball. You can work ten tables at once.

NB. Do you play pool?

JC. I have in the past but I never got beyond a pocket pool table. Actually, I was pretty good for a while.

RA. Yeah, amateurism at its worst, that's me.

CB. Then, from there I started running professional tournaments. I'd be the head referee and run the tournament too. Ever watch pool on television?

RA Once in a while.

CB. Girls? There's a girl, a very pretty girl, Eva Lawrence; she's from Sweden. When she first came over here, she married a friend of mine. They were having a little tournament in Milwaukee and they were having it in an old high school gymnasium,

where they had a stage on one side of it, you know. They converted the stage into a coffee shop, and I was the head referee for this tournament. I was sitting in the coffee shop and was talking to Eva. She had this little shiatsu dog called, Rocky. We were chitchatting for about ten minutes. All of a sudden they called out over the PA system "Report to table something, something". She said, "That isn't right. I don't play until 3:00 this afternoon." I said, "Eva if they're calling you, you'd better go because they'll forfeit you in 15 minutes." "She said, "Oh my gosh, here take Rocky." She dumps this dog in my lap. So there I'm sitting, drinking a cup of coffee, talking to Rocky, and I got a call go to the floor. Make a call and a hit. I looked around and there wasn't one soul on that stage. So I just stuck old Rocky under my arm and walked there on the floor. This girl's name was Gerry Engh. I said, "Go ahead." "She said, "What is that?" I said, "Oh, this is my seeing eye dog, one bark is a good hit, two barks is bad. (laughter) I think she missed that thing by three feet and never forgave me for that and she doesn't to this day!

NB. Well, you've been in Northville a long time, haven't you?

RA. We came in '74.

NB. I thought it was back farther than that. Maybe because your wife is so interested in history or something.

RA. We moved here in '74. We had a family cottage in South Lyon, so we used to pass through Northville regularly headed to South Lyon. I remember some of downtown Northville when I was a kid.

CB. You must have been one of six in South Lyon?

RA. We were farther out than that. To get to this place, the farmer owned the land. He leased the land the building sat on. It was a mile drive through his barnyard to get down to the house.

CB. Oh boy.

JC. Well is there anything else anybody could add?

NB. When did you move into the township?

JC. Let's see, I turned 40 here, and I'll be turning 72 this month, so that's 32 years.

NB. That's a long time.

CB. Oh, you're a good deal older than I am.

JC. I'm 71 right now, and you're 71. I won't be 72 for another couple of weeks.

RA. I've got both of you beat. 74.

JC. OK

Transcribed by Patricia Allen, July 2006.

Edited and approved by Conrad and Nina Burkman, September 19, 2006