

I'm Francis Durham. I'm a part of the Northville Oral History Project. I'm in the home of Mr. Charles Ely, Senior, who has lived in Northville for a great number of years. We are going to go into more detail about that. He's going to grant me an interview this morning.

Q. Just for checking the volume. Mr. Ely, tell me where you were born, how large our family was and just a little background.

Mr. Ely. On June 7, 1910, a sister and a brother. My sister is still alive ... 1931 I think.

Q. Your sister's name is Ada and you had a brother, Ivan. Let's turn this tape off and see how the volume sounds. Okay, the tape is on again and we're going to continue. I see from the biography that Mr. Ely filled out that he was born in Farmington. You were born in 1910 so that means you're 79 years old. Was this a farm that you grew up on in Farmington, or was this the Village of Farmington, or what kind of a home did you grow up in?

Mr. Ely. My father graduated from MAC, I think 1903, and he came home. I suppose my grandfather was all smiles thinking that here was a son who was going to come home and take care of things. That farm was between Farmington and Orchard Lake Road, and between Shiawassee and Ten Mile Road. So that didn't last long. The first thing you know my dad came in one day, as I recall and heard, and said he had bought his own farm down at Eight Mile and Farmington Road. I suppose that was quite a shock to my granddad. My dad didn't like farming, and the first thing you know he went to town and bought a blacksmith shop on Grand River just west of Farmington Road. It wasn't long before he bought another one just south of Grand River on Farmington. Actually the two blacksmith shops backed up to each other. It wasn't long before a fellow by the name of Henry Ford came out, and I can remember old Henry, he was kind of a tall gangly-shaped guy and always had a derby hat on. I'm positive that it had to be Edsel that was along with him. He drove his own car and sold my dad on the idea of selling Ford cars. It wasn't long before the typical Ford policy – he talked my dad into buying another blacksmith shop down east of Farmington on Farmington Road on Grand River. That building is still there. But so is the one west of Farmington Road still there. It was more or less a drive-way for all the northwestern part of Michigan, because I had an uncle with three or four other men who would take a street car every day down to Highland Park and bring back Ford cars. People from northwestern Michigan would come to Farmington and pick up their Fords. How much he made I have no recollection. But in 1918 a fellow by the name of Olen Green, I can remember my dad saying, "Well what the hell difference does it make, sell one Ford or the whole damn business." And he sold it all and had about \$75,000 in cash money. And took his wife and three kids and moved to Florida. The first year we lived in, huh, I forget where we went, course now where we live was right slam-bang in the middle of Miami, but in those days, it was outside of town. So, the first year we came back, a fellow by the name of Henry Ranus died in the summertime, and that farm was 32 acres where the Saratoga Trunk Restaurant was. There were sixteen acres on each side of the road. My dad and my grandfather Roberts, my mother's father, here were a couple old farmers. They really had fun on that little garden patch. I have to rest my throat.

Q. That's okay. Let's turn this off for a moment. I have turned the tape back on and I was asking Mr. Ely while the tape was off, he had mentioned that his father had graduated from MAC, which was Michigan Agricultural College or what is now known as Michigan State. I was also asking him how his father happened to get into the blacksmithing business, because he told me at MAC that he majored in

animals, particularly cows and sheep. Yet he ended up buying a couple of blacksmith shops and eventually went to work for Henry Ford. Did he do the blacksmithing himself?

Mr. Ely. Oh no. He hired somebody to do those things. As I say, then he sold out and moved to Florida. The first year he came back he bought this farm where Saratoga Trunk is. The next year after he came back, and this is what separated the money from the boys pretty much. There used to be the old Inter-Urban. There were two ways to get to Northville from Detroit--one came off Michigan Avenue thru Wayne, Dearborn, Plymouth, to Northville. The other line came out Grand River to Farmington, out Eight Mile Road to Northville. Down at the corner of Griswold and Main Street was what they called the Y and the street cars would come there and back up town. Right in the middle of Center and Main was what they called a crow's nest. All summer the band would play there for three or four hours, and I really don't know for sure, but the stores would all be open until 10:30-11:00 at night. I bet there was a thousand to two thousand people standing in the streets out on Saturday night listening to the band play. Did you ever hear that before?

Q. I heard that story before. Saturday night was a big shopping night.

Mr. Ely. Oh yeah. It's a cryin' shame that there isn't something like that now-a-days.

Q. I think the closest thing are the live band concerts that are held on Friday nights at the band shell. But, it's not like what it used to be.

Mr. Ely. No, and the stores would be open, that was the main thing. How much business they did, I don't know.

Q. How did your dad go from farming to blacksmithing, and you said he really didn't like farming all that much?

Mr. Ely. As I say, the second year we came from Florida was the business that separated the boys from their money. We came out to Michigan Avenue in order to take the street car to Farmington. There would be a car every half hour from 6:00 in the morning until midnight, maybe longer than that. That winter one of his drinkin' pals, Claude McCann, had died of the flu, and he went to see the widow. She said, "Carl, why don't you buy me out?" And that little store office was there next to Schrader's furniture store just a little building. There was the DUR (Detroit Urban Railway) waiting room, and then there was a tire store and then of course Jim Huff's corner building. He said, "Who's handling it?" Well, it was Lovell and Smith. I can remember watching my dad go across the street to the real estate office which now is a shoe repair store. Then pretty soon, heading back to the street car, I saw my dad wave to Bill Elliot, the conductor, and he'd get his folks and go home in the street car. I would say to my mother, "Here he comes." So we were all ready when he would come over. He'd say, "I'll be over in the morning and straighten up." So, by now he was in the coal and ice business, and he didn't know anything about that either.

Q. Okay, so this friend of your dad's was in the coal and ice business, and the widow said, "Why don't you buy me out?" And that was the coal and ice business?

Mr. Ely. That's right.

Q. And his name was what?

Mr. Ely. Claude McCann. And Vance, his daughter, is still alive.

Q. I heard that name.

Mr. Ely. I just don't know where she's at. That's something else. He kept on wheelin' and dealin' and by 1930, he was just about all done. He was forced into bankruptcy; he couldn't pay his bills, so that's when he took my brother and I into partners with him. I've gotta rest a while now.

Q. Let's turn this off. I was asking Mr. Ely while the tape was off how the family happened to leave Farmington. He told me his dad sold out the Ford business and decided to move to Florida. He lived in the Miami area for about two winters. Then decided to come back up to Michigan.

Mr. Ely. I really don't know what he had in mind. But, I do know that from that DUR, that it stopped in Northville, and that's when he went to see this widow of the man that had died that previous winter. He was in the coal and ice business. Our home was east of Novi on Grand River, and then he built the house in Northville, a brick house at the corner of Thayer and Rogers Streets. 290 was that address. Gee, that was a long time ago. The house was all paid for, but he kept getting into big deals that required cash and by 1930 he'd borrowed \$3500 on this house which eventually he couldn't pay, so they lost it. There was a question of saving the business or saving this house. The house was no good with no business, so the resources he did have he put toward his business. Then he took my brother and I as partners. There we were, just a couple of kids. I don't know why he took us in as partners in a business that was going to go bankrupt. This was about 1932, and in three years' time we had everything all paid up, which nowadays isn't very much money, but it was right around \$20,000 that he actually owed. I was through with Ferris at that time and then in 1940 much to my brother's and my disgust...oh, incidentally, in 1930-31 we had sold thirty cars of coal that previous year, which wasn't very much. In 1940, we had increased that up to 250 cars a year. He sure had luck, fabulous insight, or something, because our coal yards would hold only about twenty cars of coal, that's all we could stock. You couldn't move with any more than that. We had equipment and machinery and we actually hauled more coal from May to October than we did from October to May. As I look back now, we originated the balanced-payment plan. We had people who paid us money year-round. We'd fill their coal bin, and they would pay so much a month. Production would be a lot better in the summer-time than it would be in the winter-time when there was snow and ice on the ground. A big success in the coal business was an old guy by the name of Oscar--a good Irishman--by the name of Oscar Solkowski. Anybody lived in Northville remembers old Oscar. He really took pride in workmanship. When he got a complaint, old Oscar would be in the dumps for two weeks. Along about that time, our dad decided to go into the fuel oil business. He said, "You notice, boys, new houses, they're not putting in coal." So against our better judgment, my brother and I went into the fuel oil business. I've often thought if my dad had run the country, instead of a lot of people, the country would have been in a better shape.

Q. He had a lot of foresight, then?

Mr. Ely. He sure did have a lot of foresight. In 1920 the ice was all put up at that time. That building is where the Historical Society is. The next year there wasn't any ice produced or raised on the mill pond there until, I think it was the later part of March, and it only made four inches of ice. It just wasn't enough. So he had to buy ice from the Detroit City Ice and Fuel Company, and it was a terrible time. He built an ice plant in back of, I forgot what's in that building now. It's right next to Cloverdale.

Q. Cloverdale Farms?

Mr. Ely. Yeah.

Q. There's an unfinished furniture place there next door to your place. I've forgotten the name of it, but they have unfinished furniture.

Mr. Ely. Oh, not that place. I'm talkin' about town.

Q. Oh, you're talking about Cloverdale.

Mr. Ely. Yeah. In 1935 Detroit City Ice and Fuel got him to put up a little storage down in a building that's gone now; it's down there where the unfinished furniture is and that little coffee shop. It's just a little storage. It held sixteen ton. They'd bring out, Detroit City Ice and Fuel, would deliver ice, and they would bring out sixteen ton. Twin Pines Dairy started out where Zayti's Trucking Company is now. They bought ice. We would handle about thirty ton a day from the first of July to the middle of September, and the little place only held fifteen or sixteen ton. You sure had to keep stuff moving. I've seen the time a lotta times when we'd had the whole dock just filled with ice at 100 degree temperature with ice sitting outside. Starting at about this time or a little bit before this, we'd ice sweet corn. Corn is a carbohydrate, and the minute it's picked it starts what they call "a heating process". If you allow sweet corn to dissipate the heat, it starts in on this process and it becomes tougher than hell. If you take twenty-five pounds of crushed ice and a bag of five dozen ears, it would dissipate that heat in fifteen to twenty minutes, and sweet corn will never get tough. Did you know that?

Q. I did not know that.

Mr. Ely. See, you're learning something. They would take five, six, seven, or eight tons of crushed ice a day. They would come in the night...

Q. Farmers you're talking about?

Mr. Ely. Yeah. They'd come in at night, take their bags of crushed ice, we never knew how much crushed ice they took, but they kept track of it themselves, that was the way to do business. We kept our ice tonnage up. For seven, eight, ten years after everyone else's ice business was gone, Clancy, my son, delivered the last fifty-pound cake of ice that was ever delivered to Northville.

Q. When was that?

Mr. Ely. Approximately 1960.

Q. It hasn't been all that long ago.

Mr. Ely. Maybe it was before that, because he graduated from Ferris in 1956, it was probably along in there instead of '60. Course the race track, that was going full blast. They would take three to five of ice a day. Actually, it wasn't much of a retail business at that time but a commercial business.

Q. Restaurants, and that type of thing?

Mr. Ely. Yeah. Now, what do you want to know about?

Q. We're going to back up a little bit now and go back to your earlier childhood and growing up in Northville. You had a sister and a brother and you moved several times since living here in Northville. How much difference in age? Let's see, your sister is 84 so she's five years older.

Mr. Ely. Four years. Some of this information isn't quite right.

Q. Okay. Now your brother, Ivan, was two years younger and he passed away when?

Mr. Ely. I think it was 1961.

Q. Where did you attend school?

Mr. Ely. Here in Northville.

Q. What school was it?

Mr. Ely. We only had one.

Q. Well, that's what I wanted you to say. There was only one school to attend. This was really like a country school.

Mr. Ely. It was right down here at the end of the street.

Q. It had several grades in one building, didn't it?

Mr. Ely. It was the building that burned in about 1936 or '37. It was called a grade school, and the high school started in on the fifth grade-- that was the youngest--from the fifth to the twelfth in the building that's there now.

Q. Okay, in the high school building?

Mr. Ely. Yes.

Q. We're going to jump ahead, because you indicated in your biography that you never completed the twelfth grade at the Northville High School. Do you want to tell us about that?

Mr. Ely. Yeah. There was only one person-- What happened these two boys were going out for football. This was in the fall. Their locker was underneath the steps leading up from the ground floor. Underneath that down in the locker rooms, the light bulb had burned out. They wanted to get dressed. Instead of getting a hold of their clothes and taking them into another part of the room where there was light, I sat on the floor lighting newspapers so they could get dressed. A fellow by the name of Gene Palmer, the janitor, course it smoked like hell burning those newspapers, he opened up the door and he could see me sitting there on the floor lighting these newspapers so these two boys could get dressed. Remember this was in the fall. He looked in there, and I was accused of trying to set fire to the school. It was not until about March or April that I was politely told to "get lost". I never had a chance to rebuttal or give my side of the story or nothing.

Q. Neither one of those two fellows stepped forward in your defense?

Mr. Ely. No. They didn't know anything about it.

Q. They didn't know that you had lighted these papers?

Mr. Ely. Sure, they knew it, but there was nothing said about me trying to set fire to the school. Not one word said about it. I suppose they had school board meetings, and it was discussed, but it wasn't common knowledge.

Q. Probably, that kind of thing they would want to keep quiet. They wouldn't want to publicize that kind of thing.

Mr. Ely. As I look back now, that's correct. These two boys never had a chance to come to my aid.

Q. There was never any public record or discussion of it?

Mr. Ely. That's correct.

Q. Where you on the football team?

Mr. Ely. No, I played in the band.

Q. You played in the band and they were on the team and getting dressed for practice? Okay.

Mr. Ely. My mother knew it, and she said there would be a hearing or something. But there never was.

Q. You said that happened in the fall of your senior year?

Mr. Ely. That is correct. I wasn't kicked out until March or April.

Q. It's kind of funny that it would be hanging all that time.

Mr. Ely. All that time.

Q. All into winter and into spring.

Mr. Ely. That's right. I've thought about that lots of times.

Q. And here you are almost ready to graduate and you say they tell you in effect, "Get lost". Did they ever offer you a way of getting your high school diploma?

Mr. Ely. Nope. I was just expelled, period.

Q. That's unusual, that's unusual. I happened to have been in the school business myself. I'm a retired high school assistant principal.

Mr. Ely. Then you probably know more about the ramifications of what led up to it.

Q. That wouldn't happen today. Today, there would be some kind of a hearing or given an opportunity to speak in your own defense, but that's kind of getting off the subject. Now here you are a seventeen-year-old...

Mr. Ely. Yeah, the smartest boy in Northville.

Q. Now what happened? You're seventeen years old; you can't go to school, so what happens then?

Mr. Ely. My dad told me to put the car in the garage, I was all through with that, and I started paying my mother \$10 a week room and board. I walked all over Northville, everyone knew the smartest guy in Northville. I just forget, it was around in there sometime, but I worked down to the old Globe Furniture Factory, nine cents an hour. But I come to find out they were on their last legs and they didn't need a boy. My dad paid my wages down there.

Q. Was this while you were still in school? Were you working there part-time?

Mr. Ely. I can't recall. It could have been the summer that I came back from Ferris; I was there for three years – one year finishing my high school and two years of business administration. It was along in there

sometime that I worked down at the Globe, and I did find out that my dad paid my wages, because they didn't need me.

Q. You were doing janitorial work then?

Mr. Ely. I know one day I came back and said, "Well, Dad, I worked in the office today." He was all smiles but he came to find out what I was working in the office for, I was washing the windows.

Q. That's what you mean by working in the office? Here you are seventeen years old trying to find a job. There weren't any jobs available in town and you have to pay your mom room and board. Your car has been put up because you lost that privilege? What do you do now?

Mr. Ely. That's when I got this job at Walt's Garage. Along about the first part of May he said, "You tell Mr. Tuck to get himself another boy. You're coming back, and we'll take you up to Big Rapids, Ferris Institute, this fall."

Q. Okay, Tuck was the owner of Walt's Garage?

Mr. Ely. Oh yeah, Walt Tuck.

Q. What kind of work did you do for him?

Mr. Ely. Just what a boy would do.

Q. So you weren't actually doing maintenance work then?

Mr. Ely. No, you mean repair work? Oh, no, I didn't know much more from a screwdriver from a pair of pliers. I'd keep coal in the furnace and see that there was coal in there to bank it for that night, keep oil cleaned up from the floor, and just picking up tools and stuff like that. One time Walt Tuck got mad at me. I was having my lunch hour. I cleared off a spot on the counter on the desk, and it was on the east side of the building and the sun was shining in there. I'd have my lunch and then I'd take a little nap. He tried to get me to do something on my lunch hour and I wouldn't do it. I always had to have a nap. I sure had a lot of nice relationship with Walt Tuck. So I asked him if he had any boys (he's got two boys and now they run the place). When I told him that I was going to quit in two weeks because my dad was sending me to school. He said, "I'll do that. You don't have to do that." I said, "I'm tired of this working." I think one of the main reasons my dad wanted me to come back home, I had seventeen blind pigs on my ice route.

Q. You had seventeen blind pigs?

Mr. Ely. Sure, we'd take care of them twice a day, up and down Seven and Eight Mile Road and over to Five Mile Road across to Farmington Road and in Northville. I could make them all in the same day, were it was a little difficult to get other men to be able to do that.

Q. You were a hustler then?

Mr. Ely. Yeah, it was clear up to the Fourth of July, and I kept telling Mr. Tuck that I had to get back to Northville and sell ice, but he kept stalling me off, stalling me off. He paid me \$25 a week at that time. They week of Fourth of July (I think the Fourth was in the middle of the week, he hired a boy the week before. I told him, "Now, the week that you have this boy coming in, I'll work for nothin'. You don't have to pay me that week. I'll be showing him what to do and how to do it." It came to the Fourth of

July, and he and Jim Travis, his right-hand man, had planned on big doin's on the Fourth of July. I get there and there would be no mechanical work because I wasn't capable of that, but they'd be oil changing and pumpin' gas and fixin' tires. This boy never showed up. In desperation, I called my brother and he comes up to help me. We worked all day on the Fourth, I don't know how much money we took in. But come the next morning, Walt says, "How did you make out?" "Just fine." Course, the boy was there that day. "Everything was just fine." Come Saturday morning, I said "Good-Bye, Mr. And Mrs. Tuck". He said, "Just hold on a minute there." So they gave that boy his check (I don't know what that boy's name was now), but through the week, he'd ask me how much money I was makin'. So he gets his paycheck and it was \$10. Well, the boy said, "I'm not going to work for that much money." Walt says, "Forget it then." So I said, "Well, goodbye". He said, "Just a minute, here's your pay." I said, "I told you I was going to work for nothin'," He said, "I know what happened, your brother was up helping you. This boy here wasn't even there and you didn't say a word about it. Here's \$5 for your brother," and he gave me three weeks' pay, \$75, more money than I had ever seen in my life. That's the end of that. He said, "I've got somebody comin' Monday morning so go ahead. This boy's father has been after me for a year to give him a job, and I knew he was no damn good." But we sure did a lot of nice business with Walt Tuck in later years.

Q. Is he still alive?

Mr. Ely. Oh no. He died two or three years ago.

Q. His sons run the business?

Mr. Ely. Oh yes.

Q. Is it still called Walt's Garage?

Mr. Ely. Novi Auto Parts

Q. Okay, that's the one. Novi Auto Parts is what used to be Walt's Garage.

Mr. Ely. Walt Tuck came from New Hudson.

Q. You feel like talking a little bit more?

Mr. Ely. Yeah.

Q. Your dad wants you to come back and go into business with him. You mentioned your two brothers went in with your dad as partner. How old were you then?

Mr. Ely. About 20-21, maybe. I got married when I was 23. I met my wife at Ferris, that's where I met her.

Q. So you were up at Ferris three years?

Mr. Ely. Yes, that would be 1928, '29 and '30.

Q. Did you get some kind of degree, associate's degree or something?

Mr. Ely. I think I did.

Q. Okay, so the first year was to complete your high school education, and the next two years were...



Mr. Ely. That's right, Business Administration. Clancy, I knew from the day he was born where he was going to go to school and what he was going to take up. He has a much better education than I have. He has a degree in higher accounting. Never worked a day at it. I think he had a fair education.

Q. Clancy's your son and you had a pretty high regard for Ferris then?

Mr. Ely. Oh yes, I still do. Course it was known in those days as a school for druggists, I would say 90% of the druggists in the state of Michigan at that particular time graduated from Ferris Institute.

Q. Now it's Ferris College, I believe. I think it is considered to be a college now.

Mr. Ely. Oh yes, I know it's a college. It's a university.

Q. I think it has a four-year program. I don't know that they have any master's programs. I really don't know. Is Clancy running the business now? He's the head honcho?

Mr. Ely. That's right.

Q. I'd like to get back to a comment you made earlier, that you had a number of blind pigs on your route. Were the police aware of these blind pigs and they just overlooked them?

Mr. Ely. Well, sure. About once a month, they'd come in and smash hell out of everything. But it was illegal. You know what a blind pig is? These people that were running them, someone had to take care of them. There was no such thing as welfare in those days. The King's Daughters would take care of things. The City of Northville would do things, but these people became self-sustaining, and if they didn't cause too much problem, they let them go.

Q. Because it was a source of income for them? To keep them off welfare?

Mr. Ely. Yeah. That's about right on the nose.

Q. So it was just something that was kind of allowed to exist and don't make too much noise about it.

Mr. Ely. But, those were the good old days. It's kind of a cryin' shame. Maybe you better turn that thing off.

Q. We've been talking a little bit while the tape was off, and I mentioned to Mr. Ely that I wanted to get back to his early days in the Ely Coal and Ice Business. How old were you when you first started working for your dad in the Coal and Ice Business?

Mr. Ely. Probably twelve years old.

Q. And you were involved in the delivery of coal and ice?

Mr. Ely. I didn't do much. My first recollection was in the spring when I was sitting on the ice wagon seat holding the horses, because they weren't se to standing while my dad was delivering the ice. Sometimes depending on where it was, he took longer than he should have, but that's something else. It would take a couple weeks to be there to hold the horses, and then I would go back to doing what I was doing at that age. Along about when I was fifteen or sixteen, these fellows I'm talking about, didn't know anything about driving a truck. My dad would start out buying old Model T's, and I knew how to drive a truck. I worked all that summer and I don't ever recall being paid for it. I probably got something.

When I got to be seventeen or eighteen, I would have an ice route of my own, and that's when I would go to these blind pigs.

Q. The ice was originally cut from the mill pond. Where was the mill pond?

Mr. Ely. It's still there, and the ice house where we put up the ice (I think that's the expression) is where the historical village is. There was a little bridge going across the creek. That first year my dad was there that ice was all put up, but the next year that was just no cold weather and they had a hell of a time.

Q. Then you had to go out and buy ice from another source.

Mr. Ely. That's right. They used to call it Absopure. Is that still in existence?

Q. I think it still is. I'm familiar with that name, Absopure.

Mr. Ely. He built his own ice house, and produced ice until 1930, and then Detroit City Ice and Fuel could sell him ice cheaper and was a better product than what he was producing himself. In 1935, we moved down where the Donut Scene and unfinished furniture is. He had a little plant there. Not a plant, just a storage. I forget, we built that building that is there now through the War. My brother was in the Navy and it was for him we got an electrical franchise, Norge. Norge Franchise. When he came home, we had it pretty well stocked with everything in there, and he wanted no part of it. All he thought about the four years he was in the Navy was coming home, peddling ice and ... (tape suddenly became too soft to hear conversation.)

Q. Let's turn the tape over. You moved from the storage area?

Mr. Ely. From the little building to the new building, we started operating everything from there. When my dad started talking about moving down there, that's in 1935, my brother and I fought tooth and nail. We were partners, but he was still the boss. We said, "Look, Dad," when he first started talking about it in 1932, we said, "Look, people are not going to walk from Orchard Heights clear down there, pay for a ton of coal, buy an ice block, or do something." He said, "Hell's fire. In five years nobody's going to be walking."

Q. That's true. So he could foresee the transportation then.

Mr. Ely. That's right. We had our own parking. He was a great believer in parking. People would go regardless of where you had your business or building if you had the parking. I said, "We won't get enough business from the north side with people walking back and forth," and that's when he said, "In five years, nobody's going to be walking."

Q. Were you ever involved in actually cutting ice out of the mill pond? Did you ever do that?

Mr. Ely. No.

Q. I imagine that was rough work.

Mr. Ely. I know. Russell Banks, God bless his soul, ran a dairy, milk delivery out in Novi. He found out that we had this old equipment, so he came down to get the saws and said, "Where is the other handle?" I said, "Here, Russ." The reason there's no handle on both ends of this saw is that there is a guy underneath the ice that keeps pulling the saw back and forth, and he puts I on after he gets down there.

Q. That had to be rough work, cutting that ice out in that cold weather. Besides the building that is down there by the unfinished furniture place, you must have had some storage area for your coal.

Mr. Ely. That was down by the railroad tracks.

Q. So you had a railroad siding? Where was that located?

Mr. Ely. Almost up to the railroad street bridge, you know those old railroad tracks? In the road back there, that was quite a facility there, at least we thought it was. The coal business was actually my first love.

Q. That was what you were in before you went into the oil and ice business?

Mr. Ely. Oh yes. I know I worked two or three years there and we got down to about eighteen to twenty cars a year. We had a couple of contracts. We hauled all the coal out to St. John's Seminary from the time it started until it quit. Sparr's Green House, Twin Pines. Old Albert Holmes that started that dairy up there where Zayti's Trucking Company is on Beck and Eight Mile Road was taking fifty lbs. Of ice every other day. But he wasn't buying any coal from us. I kept bugging him, and my dad didn't give me too much encouragement, he said, "Albert Holmes, that's just a wild dream of his, he won't be in business very long." That very well could be, but while he was there, in business, I wanted to sell him coal. Finally one day, I said, "Mr. Holmes, I'm going to get through here a little early, I'm going down to bring you up some coal—just try it. The coal that you are buying is a beautiful piece of coal but you're not interested in it lasting, all you want is steam. I've got the product." I went down and got him 70-80 lbs. Of coal and three it on the pile. Well, he wasn't stupid, and he could tell that it was a better piece of coal for his purpose. He wound up there, before they moved to Detroit, taking a carload of coal every forty days.

Q. Was he the fellow that started Twin Pines?

Mr. Ely. That's right.

Q. What was his name again?

Mr. Ely. Albert Holmes.

Q. Albert Holmes founded Twin Pines Dairy, and used the steam to process the milk.

Mr. Ely. I know nothing about producing milk, but it takes steam.

Q. Okay. Where did you get your coal from?

Mr. Ely. Well, there was Kentucky, Virginia. Kentucky for the high volatile coal. Anthracite from Pennsylvania. Coke from either Ford or Wyandotte on Zug Island. Each piece of that coal had a purpose.

Q. So you had some for residential, that would be one type of coal?

Mr. Ely. Primarily, that was all there was for homes. We promoted the industrial as fast as it came in.

Q. Let's take the Ford Plant, the old Ford Valve Plant. Was that a coal burning plant?

Mr. Ely. No, never was. That's an interesting thing. That was built in about 1935, 1936, that first building that's down there. All of a sudden everything came to a halt, and the front end, the big part of

the front of that building was left open. I'm going to say it was W.E. Woods was in there and here for a month or so the building, everything, came to a screeching halt. The front of the building was open. What was found out, the wonderful thing about the Ford Motor Company, somebody forgot to include a heating system, a chimney, and a boiler. All of a sudden, they were ready to put them in and no provisions had been made for them. The prime contractor got paid as to each segment of the building was completed. If it wasn't completed, then he didn't get paid. He wants his money. So Ford Motor Company says "Get it completed". He says, "Okay, I'll complete it." Which he did. Three days later, they ripped it all out because the boilers had to be put in.

Q. Somebody goofed.

Mr. Ely. They sure did. That water wheel was all installed around in back.

Q. It was a different location than it is now?

Mr. Ely. Oh yeah. Old Henry came out and said "That's no good, nobody can see it from there." So they moved it all in front, and there was a small problem of getting water to it. But that was no problem because they could pump the water up there around it. Is it an under-shot or an over-shot wheel? It's an over-shot wheel.

Q. I think you're right, because the water is coming down this way. It's an over-shot wheel.

Mr. Ely. But the water has to be pumped to it. Actually, it produced enough electricity to run that light bulb there.

Q. So it did produce power through water to operate that plant?

Mr. Ely. No, one light bulb, that's all.

Q. That's all?

Mr. Ely. Yeah. He wanted that water wheel where people could see it.

Q. We've talked about a variety of things here. We've talked about how the family happened to come to Northville, the kinds of business your dad was in, and then you went into the coat and ice business working for him. Eventually, fuel oil was added, because coal was declining in popularity as oil burning furnaces were put into houses. What's the primary business today?

Mr. Ely. Fuel oil. While my brother and I enjoyed a seven-million gallon a year oil business, Clancy now is down to a million gallons. He's making more money on a million gallons that we ever did on seven million.

Q. Any other product at all or strictly fuel oil?

Mr. Ely. Mobil Oil which we've always been. Incidentally, when we got into the fuel oil business that was something new in the oil business. Standard Oil, Mobil, Shell, Gulf, they had what you called a local agent. They furnished the tanks, took care of the billing. The fellow that owned it would run the business. All he was was a kind of a commissioned agent. Then we came along, we owned our own equipment, took care of the billing, we did everything.

Q. So, in effect, you were independent then?

Mr. Ely. That's right. That was something new. Mobil came out one day, a couple of big shots. They were talking and all of a sudden my dad said (I didn't realize just how the conversation was going), "You mean on the door it will say 'C.R. Ely and Sons, Local Agents'?" I think they wanted to sign a contract. My dad said, "Hell's fire, I've been in the coal business thirty years and I never had any contract." He said, "I'll tell you fellows right now, you told me it took you about an hour to get out here. Why don't you take the next hour and get the hell back down to Detroit because I'm telling you right now that as long as your product and price is what I want it to be, I'll continue buying from you. Otherwise I'll just buy it from somebody else."

Q. So that took care of the contract right there?

Mr. Ely. Any right to this day, we've never had a contract with Mobil. I think Clancy buys about seventy-five percent from Mobil. He said, "Just to keep you honest." Mobil does not want to monkey around with low-barrel stuff, low-paying stuff. They called Clancy one day and asked him if he would like that business. He said, "Sure." It's a big part of his business, right today.

Q. Explain what you mean by that?

Mr. Ely. A lot of people just want a barrel of oil and Mobil wants no part of that. In order to maintain his status, he buys about \$2,000 a week of various and sundry products that Mobil makes. If you notice, a lot of your little machinery recommends a certain type of oil or weight or one thing or another. Mobil, they all do it as far as that goes. Mobil was more aggressive than a lot of the companies. It is a big part of his business. He delivers about twenty barrels of some type of oil to the city of Detroit every month. Mobil calls that little piddle stuff. They don't want to fool with it.

Q. Are you in the kerosene business also?

Mr. Ely. No. We tried that for years to sell kerosene and did, but there's so little use now that it's not worth fooling with. Zantop Airlines up in Alaska there someplace, they buy a little five-gallon pail of some kind of oil. That little pail of oil costs over \$200. Over at Mettetal Airlines in Plymouth, somebody picks it up.

Q. They fly it up to Alaska?

Mr. Ely. Yeah. Some kind of grease or oil that they require for that part of the country.

Q. That's unusual. You'd think they'd find a source closer to the west coast than buying it from the state of Michigan.

Mr. Ely. I was down there and answered the phone one day, and a company from Canada, Windsor, had called Mobil in Detroit, and Mobil had turned them over to Ely's. There was discussion about sales tax. He said, "Do I have to pay sales tax?" Actually, I didn't know. I said, "I don't care. I don't think the state of Michigan cares who buys this or where it goes, but they want sales tax."

Q. Even though it's Canadian?

Mr. Ely. That's right. Last fall, what's that ski outfit, Highland Lakes?

Q. Highland Hills?

Mr. Ely. Clear up there someplace. They have snowmakers. They use a fire hose. They produce synthetic snow, I'd call it, all over that damn thing.

Q. What do they use for fuel for their snowmakers?

Mr. Ely. I know they use about a barrel of oil a week. Now what is the primary? Huh, I don't really know.

Q. But they do use oil in the process of making it?

Mr. Ely. Yeah. I know it's off up there the other side of Plymouth.

Q. There's a lot of little ski places, down-hill ski places north of Clarkston and that area.

Mr. Ely. Yeah, up there someplace. That was the biggest piece of machinery that I ever saw, and noisy? If you can visualize a four-inch hose, something's got to produce power to blow that stuff all over that damn...

Q. The pressure, sure.

Mr. Ely. That's a big part of his business.

Q. Does he have children?

Mr. Ely. No, no children. That's a cryin' shame.

Q. What happens to the family business then? Who knows?

Mr. Ely. Who knows.

Q. We've been talking for quite some time now while the tape is off and Mr. Ely just made a comment that I think is worth putting on tape. What he said was, "Northville has been awfully good to us." Do you want to elaborate on that?

Mr. Ely. Not really, but just to the extent that Northville has been awful, awful good to me and my family. We've tried to do a good job. I don't know of anything that I'm ashamed of that we've ever done. The fact is I'm quite proud of it, but there's a lot of things that peddling ice... I know one time in particular I was delivering ice; I always had a lot of girlfriends. This time in particular, a woman was married, raising a family. She was bent over the washing machine or doing something and her husband came home. He gave her a little love pat. (That's a new whistle.) She said, "Fifty pounds, Chuck." Well, that fella went right down to Turnbull's and bought a mechanical refrigerator. I was thinking about another time, I was delivering some coal to one of my old girlfriends. I didn't have any enemies that I knew of. I heard a little baby. I walk in, figuring I was getting a cup of coffee (by gosh, for the life of me I don't remember who this was) and here's this little baby crying a little bit. 'Course I had a family by that time and the baby's diapers were wet. So I changed the little girl's diaper. Along about twenty years later, the mother and daughter came into the store and I knew something was happening. She said, "Don't bother him; he even changed your diapers." But that was my recollection of Northville. Down in Sarasota, Bradenton, when they have the Northville Reunion, there were close to one hundred people come. I'll see more people down there than I ever do in Northville.

Q. A lot of them moved down there and stayed close together then?

Mr. Ely. Yeah.

Q. That's great. You do have a place in Florida?

Mr. Ely. A little tin house south of Ft. Meyers.

Q. It's great to keep up those friendships and have those reunions. I certainly appreciate this interview.