

**Northville Township  
Historic District Commission**

Oral History Interview with

Richard O'Hare

May 10, 2010

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**Long-Time Northville Resident**

May 10, 2010

Interviewers: Richard Allen (RA) and John Colling (JC)

*RA – When we talked previously, you said you came to Northville in 1956 or 1957?*

Richard – 1957. Actually it was just after I got out of my eighth grade in Flushing, so it must have been June of 1957.

*RA – So you came to Northville after Flushing?*

Richard – Exactly. My grandparents had a farm in Flushing and we had races horses. We had an eighty acre farm up there, and in order to be closer to the racetrack instead of shipping the horses back and forth from Flushing-Flint area to here, my father and mother and I decided to move down here and live in Northville. It was close to the racetrack.

*RA – So that would put you in ninth grade here?*

Richard – I started my freshman year in Northville.

*RA – What school building were you in?*

Richard – We were in the old high school right on Main Street--right next to the Community Center where I now work—The Senior Center.

*RA – Old Main. Did you participate in any activities of note in high school?*

Richard – Well, I played football, basketball and baseball for Northville High School. I wasn't real good, but I played all three sports. It kept me occupied most of the time in the evening.

*RA – It kept you out of trouble?*

Richard – It kept me out of trouble somewhat but not completely. During the evening hours when we worked at practice for one of the school sports, we would associate in a few places in downtown Northville. There was old Joe's Pool Hall, which is right where the new Long's Plumbing building is. There were four or five bowling lanes in the back too. Across from what is now Poole's bar, there used to be Paul's Sweet Shop. A guy named Paul Folino opened it up in the mid 50's and we used to hang out there. Down at the corner of 7 Mile and S. Main, we used to hang out at the Belnor Drive In. In fact my mother worked down there for a while.

*JC – That's where the car dealership was?*

Richard – Exactly, that's where the MacDonald Ford's used car lot used to be, right on the corner, right next to the gas station.

*RA – What did you do after high school?*

Richard – I went into the Marine Corp and served for four years, a couple years at Camp Pendleton, California, and a couple years in the Far East and all through Southeast Asia.

*JC – Did you get into the Korean War?*

Richard – Oh no, this was after the Korean War. I was in from 1961 – 1965. I went in right after high school and I saw quite a bit of the Far East and Southeast Asia. I hitchhiked across the country a couple times when I was stationed in Camp Pendleton. I said, “After the last four years, the best place for me was right back in Northville, because it was the best place I found.” I ran into my old high school girlfriend and we got married in 1965, and have been married ever since.

*RA – Very good. After you got out of the Marine Corp, what did you do?*

Richard – I worked for a little factory over in Plymouth called Evans Products on Eckles Road. I took up welding. I worked there for a while, and after that I worked in a little conveyor plant in Plymouth Township called R. T. Sheehan Company. In 1970 I went to work for Foundry Flask and Equipment Company on Cady Street right in downtown Northville. I worked there for 35 years until the place closed down in 2005.

*RA – What did you do there?*

Richard – I was a maintenance welder. I’m probably getting ahead of myself. During that time in 1979, I joined the Northville City Police Department as a Reserve Officer and worked at the racetrack five or six years. In 1986 I transferred to Northville Township and was a Reserve Officer and still serve as a reserve officer.

*RA – What are your duties?*

Richard – My duties currently are as a Reserve Police Captain. I’m in charge of our Reserve Unit. I chair the Hiring Board. I make all the schedules out for the duty reserves. We work one duty reserve 365. I make out schedules for any details, like parade details, things like that. I also work at Township Hall three to four nights a week when we have open meetings. I stay busy.

*JC – Let’s get back to how Northville and the area was when you first moved here. I can tell you from my own experience that Haggerty and Beck were dirt roads.*

Richard – Haggerty and Beck, definitely. Napier still is and so is Ridge. My wife lived in Novi on Nine Mile between Taft and Beck. That was all gravel too. Practically all the roads were gravel. We moved here in ’57 and that first fall, I had a buddy that lived on Gerald Avenue. He had access to a lot of property and we used to go hunting all the time. I used to hunt all that area behind there, which is Highland Lakes now. We used to hunt across the street on the old Northville Psychiatric Hospital grounds. I know we weren’t supposed to be over there. I marked it out for you guys where we used to hunt in ’57, ’58. We tried to avoid the state property. We hunted all through here which is all subdivisions now between Six and Seven Miles.

*RA – That area was Farm Crest Farms in those days.*

Richard – There was nothing out there.

*RA – It was Farm Crest Farms until the barn burned.*

Richard – Exactly. And back where Highland Lakes is was all gravel pit.

*JC - Were there any gravel operations going on there?*

Richard – No, back in those days, if I remember correctly, they were almost suspended. It was great rabbit hunting back in there—back in '57 and '58. Then we lived on Fairbrook, and I used to see my buddy off of Gerald. Then in 1959 we moved out on Napier Road right across from what used to be Greenridge Nursery. We used to hunt all back in through there.

*JC – And you had more gravel quarries. Thompson Sand and Gravel was operating.*

Richard – Right. The Thompson family used to let us hunt there. I had a buddy who lived on Six Mile and Napier where the dump is now. There was no dump there then. He lived in a house there, and we used to hunt all in that area. To answer your question, “Yes, Haggerty was dirt road, Beck was dirt road.”

*JC – Six Mile was gravel.*

Richard – Six mile was dirt from Sheldon Road west. Five Mile was paved.

*JC – Five Mile was probably paved because of the prison there. DeHoco.*

Richard - Right there at Napier Road it turned into gravel. I think it's still gravel.

*RA – Was DeHoco still in operation?*

Richard – Yes it was still in operation. Matter of fact that was in operation even in 1965, I believe. The wife and I rented a little place on Ridge Road between Five and Six Mile and right across the street was the prison property. They kept all their cows over there. I remember the prisoners used to walk the cows up and down Ridge Road. The prison was definitely in operation.

*JC – How about the county home on Sheldon?*

Richard – Ok, that's another good one. The Wayne County Training School was on Sheldon Road between Five and Six Mile. In my freshman year of high school, 1958, to this day I don't know what happened; I wasn't keeping my grades up properly. I wasn't allowed to play basketball that year. There was a local coach at the high school named Stan Johnson, and he formed a basketball team with the Northville Rec. League, I believe it was, to go out to the Wayne County Training School and play basketball against the kids out there. They had about three teams out there. I was a pretty decent ball player so Mr. Johnson asked me to play on that team. We formed a team and played numerous games against them. They were very competitive, very competitive.

*RA – Is that saying they beat you?*

Richard – No, no, we also were very competitive. As a matter of fact, before we moved to Flushing, I actually grew up on the north end of Flint, so I was pretty used to playing against people of that caliber. Yeah, that was all in operation. I remember across the street from the Training School they had a big baseball field, and we used to play baseball against those kids too. On the corner of Five Mile and Sheldon was the Plymouth State Home, which was for the retarded children, the handicapped children. But the Training School, they weren't all bad kids, they were very competitive, and we seemed to get along good with them.

*RA – Basically, I've learned that the Wayne County Training School kids were disadvantaged children, abandoned by their parents and what not. Where the Plymouth State Home kids were mentally challenged.*

*JC – What else did we have going on in those days? The State Hospital was going.*

Richard – Here's a little story. I told you I had some friends that lived on Gerald, and we used to hunt behind the State Hospital. Once in a while we'd get mischievous, and we'd go on the property back in the dump area at night. We used to take our flashlights with us and shine them on rats and shoot them with 22's. We did that a few times until we finally got run out of there. There was an old dump back there right by the old power plant, I believe. Good Lord knows what's in there. I'm sure we'll find out when we start cleaning it up. No telling what we'll find out there.

*JC – It seems to me if you were shooting rats there, they'd like you to do that.*

Richard – They frowned on it. Actually what they frowned on was us bringing a gun on the property. Now that I'm older I can understand completely. At the time I thought they were being picky about it.

*JC – The railroad had a spur running in there.*

Richard – They sure did. Matter of fact, my dog and I used to walk that track all the time. If I'm not mistaken there is a little trestle back there somewhere. We always crossed that when we were heading for Waterford Pond, because we used to hunt in there too.

*JC – That's right behind the pond.*

*RA – The trestle burned if I recall. If you had to cross the Johnson Creek, there is quite a ravine by the pond. The railroad bed was pretty elevated.*

Richard – Yes. There was all kinds of wildlife back there. Good Lord, yeah.

*JC – We had somebody tell us that was a good place to hunt deer.*

Richard – For deer? Oh yeah, there's lots of deer back there. But I was strictly a rabbit and pheasant hunter.

*RA – That's something you don't see anymore, is pheasants.*

Richard – You got that right. Not around here especially. Matter of fact, now you have to go to farms that stock them. Anyway, that's basically the area where I used to hunt in the late 50's. In 1965, we moved to Ridge Road. In '69 we bought a place on Neeson Street off Clement. That's where the wife

and I lived until 1980 and we bought a house in the city. From '69 until '80 we lived on Neeson. The kids grew up there. It was a nice play to live. Nice and quiet back there.

*JC – How about the hospital and the TB San–Maybury?*

Richard - Maybury was in operation in the 50's. They used to treat TB patients. A buddy of mine, Butch Mitchell, who lived on Seven Mile between Ridge and Napier on the north side, his property backed up to Maybury Sanatorium, now Maybury State Park. If I remember correctly, we went on the back of his property and fished on a big pond back there. That was where Foreman's Orchards was. Butch is the grandson of the Foreman's, which is why they lived there. Right behind his property was Maybury.

*JC – The entrance was on Seven Mile, wasn't it?*

Richard – Yes, if I'm not mistaken, right on the corner at Seven Mile and Beck area.

*RA – There was an entrance there and one down off the end of Ridge. In fact, a couple of the stone pillars are still there on the side of the road.*

Richard – As you're going north. I never really trespassed on that property. I never wanted to catch TB. There were places we went and places we were told not to go. I didn't associate too much with that area.

*JC – You didn't think you would catch anything from the mental hospital?*

Richard – We used to call that place, "fantasy island." I don't know if you've ever heard that comment before, but that's what we used to call it.

*RA – Did you have any humorous incidents you can relate when you were a Reserve Officer without getting anyone in trouble? One of our previous interviews, we heard about someone ripping the car doors off so they could go after somebody.*

Richard – No, I'm not going into that. Let's put it like this. There are reasons why I was taken off the road. The laws have changed, and the way people do things has changed. Rather than fully retire from the police department, they asked me to work at Township Hall. I figured that's a good job for an old man. I can't do things like I used to. Put it like that.

*RA – Let's face it, you're no longer a Marine.*

Richard – No, I'm always a Marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine, that's for sure.

*RA – Not from the police standpoint, you're not. No, they'd frown on that somewhat.*

*JC – In the Marines, what did you do there?*

Richard – In the Marine Corp my first year I was just a regular rifleman. In those days I carried the old M1 Grands and the BAR's , Browning automatic weapons, WWII and Korean issue. In 1961, right after boot camp I went to Camp Pendleton and to Okinawa and then to Southeast Asia to Udorn, Thailand. We were a security outfit for an organization called Air America. We found out later it is the air wing of the CIA. They were in Thailand getting everything prepared for Southeast Asia for the upcoming Vietnam War. Our job was security for their helicopters and their airships and stuff like that.

*RA – Wasn't Air America also a propaganda broadcast system from the US Government to other countries?*

Richard – Yeah, they had different factions to it. They used most of that in the European theatre broadcasting into Communist countries. Radio Free Europe. In my era in '61 when we were in Thailand, they were running troops across the Thai-Laotian border. It was very interesting duty, believe me. Then I went back to Okinawa. The last 2 1/2 years of my Marine Corp career, I was a squad leader. In fact on my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday I made Corporal E4, and they made me a squad leader. I probably would have stayed in if it hadn't been for that stupid war. I had been overseas already and seen enough of Southeast Asia, as I wanted to see. I just figured the best spot for me was right back in Northville.

*JC – I was in the service as well and I wouldn't take a million dollars for my experience, and I wouldn't pay ten cents to do it again.*

Richard – Yeah, that was when I was kind of young and dumb. That was good enough.

*RA – That gives you a good chance to grow up too.*

Richard – It did that. Matter of fact, that's another whole story, but after high school it was highly recommended that I go into the Marine Corp.

*RA – I can relate to that.*

*JC – When you first moved here and I first moved here, there wasn't anything like I-275. That has changed the whole community out here tremendously. Can you give me your reading or opinion on how it grew from when you were first a boy?*

Richard – Every time we went east or west we always used the mile roads. When we wanted to go south we took Ford Road, Canton Center or Sheldon. Or Hines Park. I didn't really drive too much in those days. I didn't get my first car until I was 16—a '51 Chevy. When I did get my car we did all traveling out toward the South Lyon area because we used to go to the Lakes Drive-In in Brighton, and we'd go to Kent Lake. Most, not all, the guys back in those days, all our girl friends were in the South Lyon area. So we'd go pick our girlfriends up and go out to Kent Lake for the day and the Lakes Drive-In and then drive back.

*JC – Did Kensington Park have the same kind of beaches they have now?*

Richard – Yeah, just about the same. It hasn't changed much at all.

*JC – You can go through Island Lake to get to the bottom part of Kent Lake as well.*

Richard – Right. Also we'd go out to South Lyon to all the lakes out there off Nine Mile. In '58 or '59 when we moved to Napier Road, I started working for Tom Heslip, at the Northville Veterinary Clinic, usually on the weekends. If I wasn't participating during the weeknights in football or basketball, I worked for Tom. I cleaned out the dog kennels, washing dogs, or stuff like that. As I continued on, I started going out on calls with him. We would do autopsies on animals that had died like horses, dogs, and pigs, like that.

*JC – I imagine there were more horses and cows at that time.*

Richard – There were a lot of cows and horses. The first time I ever watched a pig get castrated, it scared the hell out of me. They used to take them and put their legs behind them and “zip, zip”. I said, Whoa! I had never seen anything like that.

*RA – In your Reserve Officer capacity, did you ever work at the racetrack?*

Richard – Yes I did from 1979 - 1986. The main reason I worked there and became a Reserve Officer is that I was playing softball at that time. We were playing against a team of officers from Northville City. I got to be friends with them. One time they said they saw me at the racetrack all the time, and wanted to know how come I was always down there. Well, because my dad’s a driver, my brother’s a driver, and my grandfather’s a driver and I was always down there seeing them. They said, “Why don’t you just join the city police department and work there and get paid for being down there?” It seemed like a pretty sensible idea to me. So at the age of 37 I applied for the Northville City Police Department and was hired as a Reserve Officer. They sent me to Schoolcraft College for the Reserve Academy and I graduated from there. Then I worked at the racetrack and got paid for it to see my family. That worked out well for the five or six years I was there.

*JC – Do you remember when the fairs were held at the racetrack?*

Richard – Not the fairs, but I do remember specifically in the 50’s when all the harness racing was done in the summer. It was absolutely a fantastic place to be.

*JC – Did they have all-weather tracks back then?*

Richard – No they did not. They discontinued racing in October, I believe. They did not race in the winter back in those days. Northville was always racing in the summer. We used to stable our horses up on what’s called the hill, which is now St. Lawrence Estates. Back in those days it was all a barn area up there.

*JC – Do you remember the sulkies coming down from there?*

Richard – I remember that very well because I used to ride one of the sulkies across Seven Mile to go onto the track because I used to help my parents train the horses. Low and behold when I worked for the city police department, I found myself working on Seven Mile and Sheldon, directing traffic allowing the horses to go back and forth.

*RA - I always remember seeing the horses on a winter night and watching the steam coming off them. It was amazing.*

Richard – I’ve seen them racing on a winter night at 0 degrees. They still raced. Northville was a wonderful place to grow up. When you think back now I never realized how innocent things were back in the ‘50s and even in the late ‘60s. Things really changed in the late ‘60s when I got out of the Marine Corp. What a nice, nice place I was fortunate enough to grow up in.

*JC – Did the amusement park still exist up in Walled Lake?*



Richard – Exactly. Right on the corner. You take Novi Road all the way straight ‘til it dead ends at the lake. The amusement park was on the right-hand side.

*JC – And you never went there?*

Richard – I used to go up there quite a bit. There was also a place called the Walled Lake Casino. My wife used to go there quite a bit. They had all the oldies dances, all the popular musicians playing there. I wasn’t too interested in dancing. I used to go to Groomes’ Beach out there too.

*RA – Groomes’ Beach was at Whitmore Lake, wasn’t it?*

Richard – Yes. Groomes’ Beach—you take Seven Mile all the way west.

*JC – Now they’ve moved the beach down a little farther out. But it used to be right there at the southwest corner.*

Richard – Other places we used to hang out in the ‘50s, I think I mentioned Joe’s Pool Hall, Paul’s Sweet Shop, the bowling alley was right there.

*JC – Was the sweet shop kind of a soda fountain?*

Richard – Yeah, exactly. They had cherry cokes, and all that stuff. Angie’s was the bowling alley, and that was right at the corner of Cady and Center Street—down in the hole there. Now it’s Main Centre.

*RA – When we came here the bowling alley was at Cady and Center. There was a beauty parlor on one side of it.*

Richard – Yes, and right across the street was Guernsey’s Dairy that is now right on Novi Road.

*JC – The type of businesses have changed as well, haven’t they?*

Richard – Oh yeah, big time. I remember the dime store, Brader’s Department Store, Lapham’s, Freydl’s—they were all there on Main Street.

*JC – There was a sporting goods store there too.*

Richard – That was later on. The post office used to be right on Center Street. Ramsey’s Bar was on Center Street. There was an old used car lot on the corner of Dunlap and Center.

*RA – It was Allen and somebody else’s used cars in front of the Methodist Church.*

Richard – Yeah, and I remember across from city hall (W. Main) there was Cal’s Gas Station and Phil’s 76, right on the corner there.

*RA – Another interview we put together with Bill Asher, his son put together a map, and in the ‘60s there were thirteen gas stations in Northville and how many car dealers. Bill told us the city passed an ordinance that you couldn’t have a gas station open on Sunday. He was the first one to violate it because his contract with the oil company said he had to be open on Sunday.*

Richard – Asher's has been there forever. Even where the Pizza Cutter is (S. Center), that used to be a gas station.

*RA – There was another gas station just north of Asher's. There is a house in there on S. Rogers that was an old gas station that still has the look of it, about three or four houses north.*

Richard – That was before my time.

*RA – I remember as a kid virtually every car on the road had a dealership in town.*

Richard – Miller's had a Dodge dealership right where Bank of America is. Rathburn Chevrolet was on the corner of Seven Mile and S. Main.

*RA – The Ford dealer was where the Northville Square is today. (W. Main)*

Richard – There was another dealership, too, right across from the well too. It was a foreign car dealership next to the Wagon Wheel Bar.

*RA – Anything else John?*

*JC – No, we've covered quite a bit.*

Richard – I hoped I helped out. Thank you very much. It was a pleasure to be here and talk to you guys.

Approved by Richard O'Hare

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Transcribed by Patricia Allen on June 19, 2010.