Transcript of Taped Interview

with

Henry Boezeman

Interviewed by

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Oral History Project

THE SETTLING OF THE GRAND MARSH OF THE KANKAKEE RIVER

Interview by Laverne Terpstra, Transcribed by Shirley Zeck
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I was born in August 1906 in Lincoln Township, Newton County. After I was six months old, then my folks moved to Jasper County. And I have been here ever since. I will be 87 in August.

I lived four miles over there by that church where Ann DeFries lives (9121 N 1000 W), then four years on the Dean Farm on SR 10. But I've been here 78 years (11051 N 1200 W). This

house was made out of oak. These kids today don't know what that is. They don't know what a sawmill is. Dad had these logs all cut and Jungles had a sawmill. All these farmers around here, Cap Belstra and all of them, all had lumber sawed.

Anyhow, then Ott DeYoung's grandfather and his Uncle Bill, they stayed with my folks on road 10 and they got $2.25 a day and feed for a horse and their board for being carpenters. This was oak lumber and no electricity in them days. No electric saws or drills, like that, see. But they were good carpenters. I know Ott DeYoung's grandfather, he was a very good carpenter.

And after the tornado in '76 my big barn and everything went through here, them big trees flattened. But this house, all the doors worked perfect. I had nine windows broken out of it,

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holes in the roof. I had a milk house, 10x16 made out of oak, my big barn was gone, but there stood my little milk house.

Grace Jabaay lived over there in a mobile home. She was going to have company from Lansing that afternoon and she went out to get some hailstones. Just then the wind blew and took the tree over and threw her underneath it. And her trailer went in the woods in a hundred pieces.

Then that company came looking for that trailer and looking for Grace. I said go down there to Hoekstras. They didn't know that tornado went through here.

But this old road here, when we moved here in 1915, we had to walk to the Miller School, it was a mile west. At that time the trustees would get together; whichever school you lived the closest to, that's where you went. And then later they changed that and we went to the Morning Star over here (10201 N 900W), and then they changed that.

Then I started driving the bus to DeMotte when I was 14 years old. I drove with a horse, Grace Seegers remembers that see. Anyhow, that was okay. Then I did that two years and they quit with the horses and John DeFries got them the Model T Ford. Abe DeKoker's father-in-law was trustee then.

My wife and I were in a shoe store in Lowell quite a few years ago. And the clerk in there said to the other lady, "I used to live near DeMotte". I thought, boy, I've got to find that out. I said to that lady, "where did you live?" Here she was Roy Shepherd's daughter, she lived a mile and a half east. Well, I said "I declare." She rode on my bus and I said "Hazel was too young

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to go." She said "I'm Hazel and I'm 65 years old now". How about that?

That Fall, you might remember Any Moolenaar, his wife Della and two of the girls come here to visit. Andy Moolenaar lived on DeKocks, and their girl rode on my bus, see. We had a little stove underneath. I had two rows, twenty eight kids and the door was in the back. There was a rope underneath the ceiling and I operated that rope so the kids couldn't open the door. There was a register in the middle of the floor and I burnt coal in there, started a little stove.

But the kids in them days, they had long underwear—they were dressed for cold. And you put twenty-eight kids in a little compartment with a little heat. Well anyhow, they came in the back door. I had two little doors in the front for me but not for the kids. There was a little divider there. I, more or less, sat by myself and had the lines and the windshield. I could open up and see. I put them in the livery barn.

Later on we rented a different barn, right where the DeMotte Library is now. Cliff Fairchild owned the livery barn and I rented stalls there and put them in. I was allowed to go down there at noon to feed them. I took feed along and there was a pump there, I would water them. Then I was allowed to get out fifteen minutes earlier to hitch up.

Ben Hoffman would drive the bus in the morning. He came in from the southeast. Then George Hoffman, he would drive it in the afternoon. We'd get parked in front of the school that way see and away we would go.

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I was coming home one evening and right south of Lillian Fritts' (11510 N SR 10), the front axle broke. And so I drove the bus to one side with team and I had all the kids follow me and I walked to Gabe Muschs' on that corner (10990 N SR 10). I borrowed his box wagon. I took all the kids home in that and everything. The next day my brother John went along with another team and we got that school bus over to the blacksmith shop in DeMotte. He fixed the axle and one thing or another. But today with all this traffic, you couldn't do that see.

That's just like when they put that cement road through DeMotte in 1927 (Halleck St.). The kids were supposed to walk a mile and a half. When I drove with horses Clem Fritts and his sister Marie rode on my bus, I took them along.

Then in the spring they gave me $5.00. That was my spending money, boy. They were good kids. Clem is dead too, already. But anyhow, everything worked out okay.

But then like Toots Cheever once said, "with all that new traffic a coming, its better to haul these kids later with the buses than to let em walk on the highway, you know." It's

dangerous on these highways.

I didn't have too much trouble with the kids on the bus. If I did, I'd go to Maggie Marshal. She was an old maid, red headed principal. She was strong, boy and I'd go tell her. She'd call them boys in and them boys would be so nice the next day.

Dina Overbeek, over there on the corner. They had the one girl. She was the baby and the kids kind of picked on her. While I'd get the boys straightened out, the next morning Mrs.

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Overbeek showed her appreciation – they had a big orchard and she would bring a bag full of apples to take home, see. That's how she appreciated that. But it was okay.

We used to trade at Roselawn over there and the prices are in this book. We bought one gallon of kerosene a week, it was ten cents. Coffee was sixty cents and sugar was a dollar. They didn't even have any slips at the grocery store in them days.

My folks when they lived on SR 10 lived a half mile east of I-65. See that pretty gate post there, right east of there. There was a big two story house and a barn and everything. Later on, it burned down and Dad had 600 acres. When I was eight years old Rumpke Sipkema had all that land where Andrew Sipkema built his house by that ditch. Rumpke had all that. His cows would get through that ditch into my Dad's corn. My Dad had that where Ed Kingma lives (9510 N 1100 W). Anyhow, Dad wrote a little note and I had to deliver that on horse back. I rode to Sipkema's on horseback (eight years old), I delivered my note all right. The next day Rumpke fixed his fence, see.

Dad didn't much like us kids to have a saddle because if we fell off, we'd fall in the sand, might get caught in the saddle, see. We kids could ride a horse without a saddle. Walk, walk, walk, walk to school. Then walk over here. One year I didn't want to go to Thayer, so I went down here to the Morning Star.

Jungles lived back here on that forty, a mile where Ronnie Siplema moved that house (11150 W 1100 N). That's where Jungles lived. They moved over there for a year or two and then

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Sig's John, he was born in this house. Not this house but on that location.

We went to the First Reformed Church at that time when we were small. The American Reformed broke off of the First Reformed. We had a Model T then. We did buggies down here. In 1917 we bought our first Model T. We went down to the brick church.

My sister Bailey and Pete Nannenga lived north of Shelby,

Ed Sekema's, they lived four miles north and a mile east of Shelby, that's where Kewey was born. And Dora was helping Renee. Watson Terpstra had a date with Dora. He drove thirty-five miles that night on a horse and buggy all the way from Terpstra's place over there, all the way down and back and clear on back home to Dora that one night, see. That was horse and buggy days.

When Pete and Bailey lived north of Shelby and over the hill Rich Grevenstuk had eighty acres there. They came to the First Reformed Church every Sunday morning. They never missed a Sunday. George was a little baby. They made it n those days.

In 1915 we could only go a mile north here (1200 W 1200 N). There was no other road, all marsh. In the Spring when you'd get across that railroad track, me and all the boys would go down there fishing. Lots of fishing.

It was all water, no roads. The old timers when they wanted to go to Indian Gardens they came in from the North. And that all got drained in about 1920 when they straightened the Kankakee River. Indian Gardens is where Cameron's big

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house is (600 E just south of the river). Cameron bought all that. The Land Company had just drained it. In 1925 he bought 1400 acres. He got dredge boats and then flooded it. That's when that big house was built.

My brother Bert's wife had died that Spring. He lived here with the two boys. He worked there for a while. That's how I know that. Mr. Cameron, he is older than I am. He is in Florida. He doesn't come out here. He's got a boy over there part time.

In about 1920 they drained it. Farmers had quite a time, they had so many insects in that old bull grass. But they got it. When my folks lived on the Lion Farm, that's where Annie DeFries lives, where that church is, Dad sold two horses to Casey DeKock in Chicago. Casey had a food market.

Everything was horses. My brother Ralph and Sig rode them horses to Chicago. They filled their pockets full of sandwiches Mother had made and started out real early in the morning. They rode to Chicago and got there around six o'clock. They sold their horses in Chicago. Then the next morning they put their saddles on the train (Monon) and they came back to Roselawn.

Later on when we were going to my sister Rose in Highland, we took my brother Ralph along. He said, here's where we watered the horses, in St. John, this and that. That's how long my folks knew Casey DeKock.

My sister Tenie was born on that placer in 1908. Tenie's

going to be 85 next month. And Jim was born there. Peterina was born on the Dean Farm. And talk about transportation, my

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sister Peterina was born on the 25th of July on that farm and they had Doc Rice from Roselawn. Something went wrong with her. My brother Sig was out with Reke Hoffman. He came home at 10:30 whatever. Dad said now you've got to drive on to Thayer with that horse and buggy and get Doc Tate out of bed. He had a horse and buggy. By the time Doc Tate got back here it was daylight already see. But my mother got better anyhow. That's how they traveled.

In them days we put up a lot of hay. My Dad and George Nannenga, they each furnished two teams. We put up hay for six weeks. They call that the Hay Land, where Pete S. Walstra lived (13114 N 600 E). Somebody from Lafayette owned it. Henry Misch was the boss. That farm where Henry lived on that same McCoy outfit. Frank Wolf used to live way back there.

Anyhow, we would bale that and haul it to Forrest City (one mile east from Walstra on 1200 N heading north). There was a switch in there. There was a lot of hay went out of Forrest city to Chicago for packing. They all made a couple bucks. They had about a six foot tall flag, real light, with a hollow stem. It was good packing, but it was no good for feed, see. They baled it and that old marsh could produce it. They had a separate machine for that. They baled with bale wire, pulled it around with horses. They had a gasoline engine on it to operate the machine. They were square bales. They always called that a farmer's friend, a piece of bale wire.

I didn't help clean any of the marsh ground. We had good binders and planters. My Dad had all new tools. Young Mulder in

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Roselawn sold implements before DeMotte did. Cap Belstra drove all the way to Roselawn once. His Dad gave him some money to get a new walking plow. That was a big thing in its day, see. My Dad had good tools.

If you worked hard all day with a team of horses you could plow two acres. If you worked all day with a team they allowed you $4.00 a day. I worked for Newton County with a team pulling brush out of the ditch and mowing weeds. I got $4.00 a day. Bert Robbins, he was the road man here in DeMotte. He paid $4.00 a day.

Then this old forty back here, Marie Osting lived there. Marie Osting, when we went to school over here she would come across and leave her rubber boots here, put on her shoes and the

Jungle boys would come and Wagemans, they lived on Ed Sekema's. Anyway, we all walked to that school.

Then later on some people from Chicago lived there. They were Germans. They had to have their garden plowed. Dad sent me over there with a walking plow. I was just a kid. Boy, right away they had to bring me lunch and we always had tobacco pails or syrup pails for lunch. They had a fancy one. They had coffee in their lunch. I didn't know how to work that, so I tipped it over. I watched where that coffee was coming from. I got that top off and had my lunch all right.

In them days, too, you didn't charge people. They would pay you back. That makes a big difference. We had people around here too. You've got them right in DeMotte. If you did a turn for somebody you would get it back twice.

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This lady, my sister-in-law Gertie, you know, her aunt was a midwife when I was born. Then later on when she was a widow, I remember when my dad would butcher, they'd bring her the head, etc. She had a mortgage on her house. She didn't know how to get on welfare, so I bought the mortgage. I let her live there another three years for the rest of her life. I didn't charge her anything, but it paid out.

When I was born, she said to my mother "let me have that boy, you've got so many of them, I don't have any." That boy's worth just as much as the rest of them.

There was a lady on the other side of Roselawn, Dick Hanley's mother. When she had the last baby, she had thirteen. Her sister said let me have Ide. I don't have any, you've got so many. No, he is worth just as much as the rest of them. That's the way they used to operate.

John Doe had threshing done. We'd go down there with a team of horses and wagon. We ate a big dinner there. If I helped there all day today, and we only had a half day the next day, we didn't make any difference on money. Later on, maybe we helped him a half a day extra.

We would do a lot of that and they'd have about six wagons and two grain wagons and three pitchers. And those women would work their heads off to cook that big dinner with a cook stove, no electricity. Later on when the farmers started getting modernized, getting combines. Then just like the silo-filling, we got tractors. Then everybody went home to their own house.

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They'd jump in the pickup and there you'd go. That was so much better for the women, because boy they worked their heads off.

Otis had the big cattle ranch. My brother Sig was a foreman there and the cowboy. He rode a horse everyday. And the tenants had from 75 to 100 milk cows. And Otis, the landlord, furnished all the cows. Every week a car load would be shipped back to Chicago. Watson Terpstra was one of the tenants, also his Dad. Anyhow, there's where they all got their start. Them old farmers done all right there.

They worked hard too. You take a bunch of milk cows in hot weather, there were no fans, no electricity, they'd have to haul it with horses. Like over here, they hauled it with horses to Roselawn, Dan Sipkema and John Walstra.

John and Sam Walstra took theirs to Fair Oaks. But where Jake Hoffman used to live, and Dan Sipkema and them, they had to go to Pembrooke. Some went here to DeMotte, Bert Hanaway and Terpstras, Albert Hamstra, they went to DeMotte.

Nobody shipped any milk out of Forest City. They would ship cabbage and hay out of Forest City. Forest City was a great place for the farmers. They bought manure in Chicago. Those stock yards had so much manure and Chicago had so many horses, they had to pay $30 freight to get a carload of manure out here. They didn't have to pay for the manure, just pay $30 freight. And then farmers would do it all by hand.

Casper Bovenkirk was telling me in 1910 they built the gravel road from a mile north here to the Holland Church (600 E to 1000 on 1200 N). The Holland Church did have a gravel road

from there into DeMotte. This here was built just before 1910 into Thayer, all with horses and shovel. I wasn't involved, I worked on the farm.

When my folks lived in Kalamazoo, Michigan, my Dad worked in a factory where they made wagon wheels. The time keeper came along – your name – when Dad told them, Boezeman in Dutch, they just made it Bushman. My Dad said it didn't make any difference, just as long as he got that check. See, the next ones caught on, that was so much easier to say. When we went to school in DeMotte and got transferred, my sisters wrote it Bushman, I wrote it Boezeman. One day the teacher asked me if I was any relation to them girls, and what the difference was.

And then later on, that caused a lot of friction. My brother John went by that name to keep my Dad's name as John. He wrote it Bushman. Well, a lot of monkey business, I, myself like my Sad and Ralph, we stuck to our own name. We were told once in Rensselaer, be sure to always do that. You never know you might inherit some money from Holland.

The first six letters of this name in Holland means the

reservoir or water around the windmill.

My parents came from Holland in 1895 in October. They landed in Thayer by Harry Van Wienen's mother. His mother then had her first husband. His name DeFries. They were neighbors in the old country. Well, things were getting crowded over there and she kept writing "Come on to Thayer, we've got wide open spaces."

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So they came, a young couple you know, with four kids. Ralph, Sig and Rose and Bert were born in the old country. Then they were here for a while, there were two other Dutch couples, the three Dutch couples, they were going to go to Minnesota. The Land Company there was going to develop all that and send them milk cows. They went.

They went to Iowa first, worked here a while. They went to Minnesota, built a log cabin, had a dirt floor. Them big shops didn't stick to their promises. No work, in the winter time Ralph and Dad would walk two miles over there to skin a horse. They would get $2.00 for that hide and they bought beans with that.

Then they had a friend from Holland that lived in Kalamazoo. The said "Come on over here." "How can we get there?" Well, they rigged up a little money and they got in a box car and they went. Dad said "I don't even have a house or nothing in Kalamazoo." "Never mind that, we'll take care of that."

When they got there, there was a house, plates on the table, food in the house. Help yourself John. They paid them later on.

When in the winter time Dad had to walk six miles, walk four miles then ride six miles on a wagon and saw ice (cut), and same thing at night.

Then Dad and another man bought a horse and wagon and they got the contract there for the city to clean toilets, outdoor toilets. They did all right with that then Sig and Rose, that summer, took that horse and wagon and they bought vegetables

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over there and sold them. Then the old horse died of a heart attack and that was the end of their business, see.

Then Dad went on a farm west of Fort Wayne. They lived there quite awhile. John was born there. Then they came back to Thayer. Mrs. Van Wienen said "Come back to Thayer. It is so nice here." Well, they went back. That farm had been sold.

They was just in Thayer and they got a letter from the new landlord. "Come back here, I want to keep you there." My

mother said "No, I've traveled enough." So they stayed in Thayer and then that spring, in 1904, they moved over here on Spitlers.

Then in 1905, Alice Peterson – Belstra, were living over on Bensons on the Oleta Sons'. They wanted to get over here on John Hamstra's place. Okay, so my Dad rented that. That Spitler place was pretty wet, all that marsh. Anyhow, Ike Peterson then John Woudema's sister, Mrs. Boedman and her husband were living there. They were going to move to Montana, but their schedule had got mixed up. They stayed here a week longer than they had figured on. But old Alice had to be born. So, Peterson (good talker) Mrs. Peterson got in bed then Alice was born.

Then George Nannengas, they lived over here on Kenny Sekema's. So my Dad rented that, $125 a year for 80 acres, but you had to pick a lot of pickles for that see. Then in six months, my Dad moved to Keener township. That's in the First Reformed Church book about George Nannenga, he's got a Thayer address. That's where he lived. Preacher Swart would drive to that Miller School with a one horse, two wheeled cart to do the preaching.

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He was a student then when he was first developing the school. Times have changed.

In them days just like Watson Terpstra, he cut a lot of fence posts for the Otis, or anybody. He got from three to four cents a post. My brother John and I, we cut a lot of posts over here in Newton County where John's farm was. We got five cents for a black oak and six cents for a white oak. We did all right.

The farmers, everybody had a lot of woods. They picked out the best trees.

Years ago we had so many of these black hunters who came out from the north end for squirrels. We were loaded with squirrels out here. Watson Terpstra, he had a bull. The hunters shot and killed him.

Then there was a hunter over south here, one hunter's gun went off and shot the other hunter's hip off. By the time that man and his buddy came down here to get a car, my Dad and I went with him. We helped carry that black man out on the road. They took him to Gary hospital. He had bled to death, but that was an accident.

There were liquor stills over there too.

Watson Terpstra didn't see the hunter shoot the bull, but he found the bull later on out in the woods. He asked me, "Is my bull over to your place?" No, so he started looking. He found it then, see. Those negroes were just scared. They thought, nobody is going to know who killed down there. They didn't

either.

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Then later on we had a lot of mushroom pickers. But since the subdivisions and the highway, we don't have hunters, no mushroom hunters.

There was a young couple moved out there way back in the woods. She works in the store where we trade. She said "Oh, it's lovely back there. We have wild mushrooms." Now my house insurance has gone up again.

In the thirties over here in Newton County, in the big woods, there was a big still. They made moonshine that went to Gary. I know people that lived on that road and thought boy, that road south on the county line must be a bad road because we've got a lot of traffic going in here. They didn't realize what was going on.

But a farmer over there said "My so and so is building a new chickencoop, I can hear the carpenters. After it was all over with I took a walk through the woods and you had to look close. They had it camouflaged with green shingles and green brush around there. But they got caught from an airplane, so they say. They didn't last long but they did have it in operation.

There were different bootleggers around too. You had one in DeMotte. They brought it in from different places. A prominent lawyer from Kentland once said "There was a certain automobile that come from the south parked near Kentland and blink it lights. There would be another car there. These drivers would exchange." That liquor would all go into Chicago. That went on for quite a while. All those good things, just like the

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people that are stealing, you finally get caught. It doesn't pay off. That was in the 1930's.

We had a good sheriff's department, but their transportation and communication. A lot of people didn't have a telephone. We were one of the first ones out here to get one.

My nephew, Ed Rouse lived in Roselawn, my older sister's boy. When he was out of school he worked for Ross Thompson. They built a telephone line from Roselawn to DeMotte. They would hire somebody, a farmer to cut some trees to make the telephone poles. Then later on Charlie Summers bought that out. First it was Roselawn, then later on it was transferred to DeMotte, about 1920. We got our electricity in 1942, NIPSCO. They are good. A little higher than REMC, but they are good.

Millard Halls from Shelby, he is dead now, but his folks and

his family wanted to move from San Pierre to Shelby. So they bought a coal barge, made a little house on there and traveled down the Kankakee River from San Pierre to Shelby. The father would walk into a town if they needed some supplies. Otherwise, they ate fish every day and frogs, things like that and cut wood for fire to cook on.

When they got down here by Shelby by the river bridge, they couldn't get the boat through. So they had to park a little ways east of the river bridge where the bridge is now. And they lived in there for quite a while, on the river boat. When they finally got a new bridge they got their boat through and they dissolved.

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It took them about two months to come from San Pierre to Shelby. Later on, Millard worked on that dredge to straighten the river. That was in 1920.

Now my sister Bailey and Pete Nannenga, they lived north of Shelby. They were married in 1918 or 1920. He worked for Grevenstuk. Well, Pete and Bailey would drive their horse and buggy up to that bridge and leave it there by a little farm. Then they had a walkway across the bridge. They would walk across the bridge. Then we would, or sometimes Herman Osting would be here. He was single then. Whoever had a car would meet them, take them to George Nannengas.

They would eat dinner there and go to the First Reformed Church. Then they would head back home. Later on when the bridge opened up they came with a horse and buggy. Every Sunday morning, rain or snow, they came here. Now a lot of times the people today say "Oh, I can't make it." That's thee way the transportation was then you know.

This concludes the interview with Henry Boezeman.