

Transcript of Taped Interview

with

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Interviewed by

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Transcribed by

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Sponsored by

DeMotte-Kankakee Valley Rotary Club

Oral History Project

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Ron Mosier

THE SETTLING OF THE GRAND MARSH OF THE KANKAKEE  
RIVER

Interviewed by Laverne Terpstra - March 15, 1996

Transcribed by Flo Riley – April 8, 1996

I was born in DeMotte, Indiana on June 8, 1916 to Fannie and George Mosier. My grandfather's family came here from Will County, Illinois about the year 1876. They settled south of DeMotte. Of course, DeMotte wasn't here at that time, but they settled about three miles south of DeMotte. It would be right where State Road 110 is now. The father was a doctor, quack doctor you might say, and there was no place to farm, only on the sand hills, the rest of it was all marsh, rat houses and wild grass.

The rest of the family that stayed in Will County, they fed a lot of cattle. So they'd bring about three or four hundred head of those yearlings and two year olds down here in the spring. They would drive them and ford the river at Momence and then come

right up the old trail similar to Route 10, but it was a little north of that, followed the dividing ridge. And when they'd get those cattle here my grandfather and his brother Sam would herd those cattle all summer until fall. They would bed those cattle down at night, in the evening when they started to bed down, and the boys would come home. Then they'd have to get up when it was still dark where those cattle were because when they started

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getting up they'd have to be there to herd them. Anyway, that continued for several years, I guess.

Wildlife here was abundant. My grandfather said that in the spring of the year especially, when you would flush those ducks, geese and cranes, they would just blacken the sun. A lot of people speared muskrats for a living. That's how old August Schultz got started. He owned the DeMotte Bank at one time. He started out with just spearing rats.

As the years passed they started building fences and making roads and later on my grandfather and my dad graded roads up in this county. Helped make them and graded them after they were made. To make the roads they just cleared the land so they could get through and then used slip-scrapers to make the road bed. They made ditches alongside the road and put that dirt up where the road was going to be. But they were all just dirt roads, there weren't even any gravel roads. Then in later years they made the road from DeMotte to Roselawn, just like route 10 does now. "The Old Coalie" railroad down at Virgie (700 W 700N), they ran a track up to the dividing ridge where Wickers used to live (9771 N St. Rd. 10). They would push those cars over that hump and they would roll towards DeMotte and they'd have to block them to stop them. That's the way the road was made when they rocked it. This temporary track was built just to bring that stone in to build that road and it ran right alongside the roadbed. I have to tell a little story about that too. There were about a dozen guys working on the road and they always sat on the floor of one of the empty cars to eat their

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dinner. Old Luther Frame was working there and was sitting along with the rest of them eating their dinner. Luther had a piece of lemon pie which he had sitting on the floor right beside him. Them crazy nuts pushed a loaded car over the hill and when it hit that car they were sitting in, that pie went right up against the other end of the car. Luther said, "Now boys, I'm going to tell you something. That's the last piece of pie I'm going to miss because I'm going to eat my pie first, regardless of where I'm at."

And he always did until the day he died.

When my grandfather came here, there were no roads and no fences. All there was was a trail on top of the dividing ridge. The dividing ridge means the watershed between the Iroquois and the Kankakee Rivers. This trail is located, if you go straight south of DeMotte about two and half miles, you'll know when you come to it because it's a high ridge (9771 N St. Rd. 10). That trail, at that time, led from Momence to Kouts. This trail was used a lot by horse thieves. Their headquarters was Bogus Island, a high place in Beaver Lake which is located about five miles south of lake Village right on Highway 41. Just off to the west a little bit. You can see it from 41 though. You couldn't get into the island except for one or two places that wasn't so deep and they'd go in with their horses that way. Many horse thieves got hung on that trail. When they caught them with a stolen horse they put a rope on them and hung them on a nearby tree. They took the law into their own hands.

My grandfather and his brother herded these cattle, two or three hundred head, all summer. They had to have quite a little

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territory so they'd have enough grass so they would start where Route 10 and Route 110 connect and go to the southwest. The land now is known as Section 15, school section, all down in there where Dan Sipkema owns (7294 N 1000 W), clear down to Fair Oaks, or practically to Fair Oaks and south quite a little ways. Never went north of the dividing ridge, they always stayed on that side.

My great-grandfather, Ira Robbins, was more of a doctor than he was a farmer. There wasn't anything here to farm except for sand hills. He was the only doctor around in a pretty good sized vicinity. He rode a horse to see all his patients.

My grandfather was given the job as Road Commissioner in the north end of Jasper County when they got enough roads so they could grade them. He had that job for over fifty years. My dad worked with him in later years. They did all of that with horse drawn equipment. They had a big grader they used, pulled by four horses. They had a maintenance drag which was also drawn by four horses. That lasted a good many years. They tried to plow snow, when it would get deep, with an old Lee plow with six or eight head of horses ahead of it. It never panned out. When they got in deep snow the horses had enough to get through it themselves without trying to pull that other thing along. I remember one time right straight south of DeMotte, a mile and a half (that was after I was able to work), it was a school, milk and mail route and for three quarters of a mile there

was a drift that was four feet deep. We shoveled that whole thing by hand. Didn't have anything to plow it with and the

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horses couldn't get through. That was the worse I ever got into. I was just a boy but I had my shovel and I helped. From horses the Commissioners bought them an old Republic truck with hard rubber tires on it. It rode worse than a box wagon, but they manipulated around and made a homemade snow plow for the front of that and that's what they used for their work. They hauled their rock and graded the road then with that truck and pulled that stuff behind it.

My grandmother was a very good woman. Her and my grandfather took me to raise when my mother died when I was about two and a half years old. They were like a mother and father, probably better than a mother and father, to me. They both were good workers in the Methodist Church. My grandfather was custodian for years without any pay. My grandmother was very active in the Ladies' Aid. They quilted and also sold lunch at sales or wherever they could get the job to sell the lunch. That quilting and serving lunch more or less supported the church. She was president of the Ladies' Aid for years and years. The Methodist Church was located where the fire station is located now (1000 Halleck St. SW). It used to sit in a clump of maple trees, a pretty good size group of maple trees. My grandfather and some of the men of the church planted those trees. They had a kind of tough sledding, but they made it.

I'm going to try to tell you a little about the DeMotte fire, which pretty nearly wiped us off the map. It started behind Mary's Restaurant (816 S. Halleck). It was a real windy day and they were burning trash behind the restaurant and it got into that

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building where Konovsky's had their doors, windows and all the trim (809 Almond SW). It was just a wood frame building and of course with all that dry windows, doors and trim, it just went like hotcakes. DeMotte didn't have a fire department, just a bucket brigade. When the fire got started and they saw it was out of control, they got to calling other departments in and all of us young guys went to carrying things out of stores that were just east of where the fire was. We carried them across the street and put them on the steps and on the sidewalk over there. It wasn't long till everything was afire. Burning shingles were flying through the air and they went as far as clear over to Ben Hoffman's place (934 Orchid St. SE). We had a wood roof on our house (10<sup>th</sup> & Begonia), and there were burning shingles falling

all around and on it. I got another guy to go with me to my place and we kept that from burning down. In the meantime Sam McGinness' barn and house both burned. They were just a little way across the road from us. The wind was so bad they could not control the fire and it was a mystery where it stopped. It burned all the west side of the street down to the old Coffee Shop (824 S. Halleck St.), which was owned by John Terborg. It was a wood frame building. The others were practically all partially brick. There was just a very narrow space, just wide enough for a person to squeeze through, between the wood building and the store next door. That Coffee shop was right where the Consolidated Insurance building is now (824 S. Halleck St.). The wind was out of the northwest. On the other side of the street it left the old hotel, where the Veterans Memorial now

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stands (231 & 8<sup>th</sup> St.), didn't burn it nor the Konovsky house next to it, nor the back, but it cleaned the rest of it. All but the old Cale Cheever's house (833 S. Halleck St.), it didn't burn it either, but it did burn all the rest. I think that was all the buildings that burned down on the east part of town too. Just that set of buildings of McGinness'. But it was a bad day and big clean up job.

The clean up of the fire was tremendous. It looked like it would be a never ending job. They had guards there at night to watch over things so people wouldn't steal them blind, what was left. They brought old Roy Odle in. He had an old rig rigged up that they called Old Jumbo. He hooked on a big chunk of concrete and was going to pull it out of Herman Osting's basement (820 S. Halleck St.). He had plenty of power but he wasn't strong enough and when he started up and the cable tightened there were gears and chains flying everywhere. Everybody started to laugh and old Roy, he was pretty sober, and he said, "I'll be back in three days boys and I'll pull that out of there." And he did it. In three days he had that old bird all rigged up way stronger and hooked onto that thing and pulled it right out onto the concrete, right out on the road. As I said, this cleanup took quite awhile to do it. There wasn't much in the way of machinery. Most of it was all hand work besides what Roy done with his Old Jumbo. You might wonder what we did with all the junk, but some people wanted fill so they got bricks and concrete. The big pieces of concrete we just hauled off to wherever they would let us dump it.

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As soon as we got it cleaned up they started rebuilding

right away. I believe there were four groups of bricklayers working on DeKock's Grocery (814 S. Halleck) as soon as we were through cleaning up. I worked there mixing mud and carrying bricks for them. It didn't take too long to build it back after they got started.

I never saw so many strange people in automobiles as there were the Sunday after the fire. The street was just jammed. There was a narrow place where they could drive through, but most of the road was covered with debris. We had never seen anything like that before in our lives. Most of the people were from out of Chicago. Thousands of people.

Starting on the north end of town the buildings that burned which were on the west side of the road, off the road a little ways was Konovsky's building (809 Almond St. SW) which is where the fire got really started good. Then Bill Swart's Grocery Store (804 S. Halleck), Lageveen's General Store, Mary's Restaurant (816 S. Halleck), then an old building that DeKock's kept feed in next to that, then a Barber Shop, then DeKock's Grocery and Hardware (814 S. Halleck), Herman and Marie Osting's General Store (820 S. Halleck), Otto DeYoung's Implement Shop, the Post Office and that's where the fire ended. Terborg's Coffee Shop (824 S. Halleck) was next and it was nothing but a frame building but they kept it from burning. Curtin's Restaurant (915 S. Halleck) was next to that, then Cheever's Garage (834 S. Halleck) and Ed DeBruin's Grocery (834 S. Halleck) was on the corner.

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On the other side of the road, again starting on the north end of town, the old hotel (corner of 231 & 8<sup>th</sup> St.), Konovsky's house and the Bank didn't burn. Then there was another restaurant, I forget who had it, Mike Merritt's old battery shop and John Bunning's house. These all burned. An office building that belonged to John Graves at one time, but John Bunning had it, and that's where the fire ended on that side (the east side) of the street. Neil Sekema's garage and Cale Cheever's house (833 S. Halleck) was on that side, but they didn't burn. Then Sam McGuinness' house and barn burned three blocks east off the road (231 & 10<sup>th</sup> St.).

There was an old attorney who lived in DeMotte. His name was John Graves. He owned forty acres where Prospect Hill is located. At the time he owned it, he offered to sell it to my grandfather for either \$400 or \$500, I forget which. It was so thick with brush, briars and grapevines that a rabbit could hardly get through it. Now look what's there!

This is as much as I know about the Troxell Hotel (713

Halleck St. SE). An old lady by the name of Mary Troxell owned and ran it. When she got to where she couldn't handle it they rented it out as two apartments. Dick Barker and his family lived in one part of it and a guy by the name of Stine and his family lived in the other part. That's about all I know about that.

I'm going to try to tell a little about the pickle factory. It was owned by the Claussen Company (8<sup>th</sup> St. & Carnation). I can remember when the wagons would be backed up for two blocks from the factory waiting to get unloaded. It was wagons pulled

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by horses. When they would unload by the factory they had a grading machine that was something similar to shakers on a combine. It had holes just so big, the little pickles would fall through first and go down a spout and so on until they got to the cukes and that's the way you were graded and paid. A lot of times they'd be there until dark and after dark. They had to have a lantern hanging on the tongue of their wagon to go home to keep from getting run into. That lasted for years and years. It really helped the economy of Keener Township.

Each farmer had a small herd of cows. A few had big herds but everybody had at least a little herd of cows. Then you had the pickles and raised a little grain, enough to feed your stock. That was before asparagus came in. Asparagus took the place of the pickles, pretty well. I remember that.

I'll try to tell what I know about the marsh. It was one of the greatest wild life habitats in the world. They came from all over the world and of course from all over our country to hunt there. There were several hunting camps built. The greatest one, I think, was the Granger Camp, old Hank Granger. He had everything, guides and boats and the works, to take care of any hunters that came. It was just like a hotel, he fed them there and everything. But there were a lot more of those such as the Diana Gun Club that was right off of French Island which was located where Harry Dyke used to live (in the field approximately 925 W & 1500 N, about 24 acres). Then there was a big gun club at Shelby, or rather at Water Valley. Then another down where Hanford's live and I don't remember the names of thee last two.

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But they were up and down the whole river. In the spring or fall of the year when something would scare the birds and they would fly, they would darken the sun.

The people who were hunting for the market would ship to South Water Market in Chicago. They'd have a car load a lot of days. Cranes, geese, ducks, plover, rabbits and other smaller

wildlife. When they put the ditch through it, why that ruined the marsh. In order to make a few thousand acres of farm ground they ruined the greatest hunting preserve that there ever was.

This concludes the interview with Ron Mosier.