

Personalities and business in Spring Valley, Illinois
an Oral History

Michael Bender, Interviewee
Of Spring Valley, Illinois

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A: I am Michael Bender with the recording on some of the events and personalities that I observed in Spring Valley as sports editor and Spring Valley reporter for the "Daily News Tribune" for twenty-three years, managing editor of the "Spring Valley Gazette" for thirteen years, and two years columnist for the "Bureau County Republican," forty-three years on the Spring Valley Library Board -- many of those as president -- and six years on the Starved Rock Library System Board -- two years as president.

PAUSE

Spring Valley has a colorful history and much of that history has been written by very colorful men. Without making any effort to put the personalities down in order and making a haphazard review of some of the men that I'd like to talk about who had much to do with the writing of Spring Valley history. Comes to mind colorful John Doyle, who was mayor of our city for many years, and a barber of very great talent. We newspaper men enjoyed having him as mayor because he was always available -- we could drop in on his barber's shop anytime for a haircut or for just conversation or tidbits of news about the city and the city administration. One of the most memorable things about John was the fight he put up to buy the city's first modern fire truck. Speaking of fire trucks, we can't help but think of old Tom Huffman, who was the last, I believe, of the colorful figures who managed our fire horses with the wagons and -- well, enough of that.

PAUSE

Q: Okay.

A: Speaking of mayors and barbers (laughs) it's odd that we should have another one of our barbers as one of our very active and progressive mayors. And that was old Bill Burnell.

PAUSE

We stop a moment to talk about George Hoffman. George Hoffman was the operator of the Hoffman Trunk Factory and he was also a publisher of the "Spring Valley Gazette" or the "Spring Valley Democrat" -- pardon me -- and owner and manager of the Hoffman Trunk football team. In old Spring Valley we had very fine football teams -- of course, these were the days before we could commute to Chicago to see the Bears so we had our Wildcats; we had our Hoffman Trunks; we had the -- the Navajoes but Hoffman Trunk Factory was one of the finer teams. And among our fine teams and fine players there was the inimitable "Goat" Doig who left the -- the prize ring behind him and became a great football center for the Spring Valley Wildcats. And the Spring Valley Wildcats were on a par with the Rock Island Independents and the Benld team. Some of the greatest ball-games of history were played between Benld which is down in southern -- in central Illinois and the Spring Valley Wildcats. The Spring Valley Wildcats even at one time -- and I recall this very distinctly -- took on the Chicago Cardinals. They brought the Chicago Cardinals down to play in old Hicks Park. I remember that game very well because big Lou Gordon, who --I'm sorry to say -- recently has had a bout with illness. Lou Gordon with his three hundred pounds was playing in the Cardinal's line and I remember being head linesman and called him off-sides and he came prancing over to the sidelines where I was stationed

and lifted me up by the collar and said, "Who, me?" And in -- timorously I said, "Yes, you," and he says, "Okay, I just wanted to be sure." The Wildcats had many colorful set-tos particularly with the _____ All-Stars and LaSalle, and that game was quite infamous because the score was nothing to nothing and the second half -- out from behind the LaSalle stands came trotting several Chicago players, including "Duke" Slater. And the game went on and it was -- resulted in a nothing-nothing tie if I remember rightly. And there was a lot of money lost by the LaSalle fans who had bet heavily on their team, thinking that they would be a pushover with the help of the Chicago players. Speaking of players, we have in our memory Pete Turinetti. But Pete was also a past mayor but Pete was better known for his baseball, and also he served as manager or co-manager of the Wildcats. But enough of the football for the moment. Well, we could depart here for a moment to baseball and think -- tell of the days that we had John L. Murphy, who was the owner and manager of the House of David -- the House of David baseball team which played -- which trained at St. Bede and played outstanding teams of the area. This was in the day when baseball was a primary Sunday sport in our area. Oh, it's supposed -- it's Lou Murphy -- rather -- he was the son -- the son of John L. Murphy. I'm sorry. It was Lou Murphy.

Let's stop now to talk about a few of the business personalities we have had in Spring Valley. I recall the name of Alex Wimbiscus, who was the son -- the father of Judge William J. Wimbiscus. Alex operated a business on Dakota Street and a couple of the doors away from the store that was operated by my dad. My dad ran a general food store. And Alex Wimbiscus and my dad became great friends. Incidentally, in

that connection I can recall having in Dad's store when Dad began business it was the Bender and Bertash store. Bertash being Anton J. Bertash who was talked into going to school by my dad and he went to school to Valparaiso, Indiana, to become -- to become an engineer but -- and one of his professors, realizing he had great talent in chemistry, he said that you should become a doctor so he became a doctor and he became a very prominent doctor, physician, and surgeon on Chicago's south side and is now retired and living in Light House Point, Florida. Up there on Dakota Street, right between the Wimbiscus establishment and the Bender Meat Market there were two -- two buildings and one of them was operated -- was occupied for many years by Max Miller who was a tremendous Jewish baker, and many a fine loaf of bread that we had from Max Miller. The Millers, however, closed the baker shop and went on to Chicago. In the same area there was Mike Majcina. Mike Majcina ran a tavern where -- on the corner where (Pause) Dom Rochetto now has his service station and garage. Mike Majcina was the father of a long series of sons who played outstanding football and basketball for Hall High.

We think in terms of business men in that area and we think of Ralph Berliner. Ralph Berliner operated down on Spaulding Street and he was a butcher -- a slaughterer and he slaughtered beef for many of the butcher shops in town. This of course was in the days when a large percentage of the beef sold across the counters of our butcher shops was home-killed or home-butchered. Ralph Berliner was cross-eyed and it was amusing to see him get out in the country to shoot an animal. I remember very well one day on the Bender farm he was -- he was assigned to butcher a steer for us and we kind of cornered the steer in a corner

of the barnyard, and Ralph put his rifle up to his eye and looking almost one direction and aiming the other because of his cross-eyes, I remember Frank Sharkey saying, "Well wait a minute. Let me get out of here before you pull that trigger."

PAUSE [Inaudible voices in background]

Let's turn our attention down to St. Paul Street and some of the business personalities there. And foremost is -- in our minds is the Thompson Rexall Drugstore. This is a business which has been in the family for generations -- started by Gilbert Thompson in Tonica and then his son, George H. Thompson, established the Thompson Drugstore here and to the -- from that beginning we step on down the line to two of George's sons -- Ed and Dean, who are now operating the store, and one of Ed's sons is also a pharmacist. It's unusual in any business that you have a progression of sons on down in to the business. Next door to the Thompson Drugstore, we still have the old Boston Store, operated by Maurice Bernstein. Maurice is the last of the Bernsteins to remain in Spring Valley. He's up in years now but he still operated the business. His brothers, I think, one in Chicago; one in Iowa come to visit him occasionally. Across the street next to the bank is the Steinberg Store which is also a store operated by a progression of sons and daughters. Harry is no longer real active and he is leaving much of the business in the hands of his son Nicky. We have no longer have a Rosenzweig Store or Rosenzweig establishment in Spring Valley but one of the Rosenzweigs -- Morris -- is still about. The H. J. Zand Store right nearby Bernstein's is still operated by two daughters of H. J. Zand.

PAUSE

We think in Spring Valley very much of our great St. Margaret's Hospital and in talking personalities of men who built Spring Valley -- helped build Spring Valley -- one has to think in terms of some of the doctors who contributed so much to the building of St. Margaret's Hospital. And the first of these, of course, was the great Dr. J. H. Franklin, who was the -- practically the founder of the medical services which made that institution grow from a small building to now a great complex. Perhaps one of the surgeons who had contributed -- who served in a contributing capacity to make St. Margaret's attractive was the late Dr. George E. Kirby, who has been dead now these several -- several years. With Dr. Kirby in practice for a while were Dr. R. E. Davies, also deceased, and Dr. Gerald S. McShane, also deceased. Apart from these, another one of our original doctors who was very important in the building of medical practices was Dr. James J. Moran, who incidentally was -- is revered by many people because before he became a doctor he was a schoolteacher. He taught in the old Douglas School and later in Marquette. The name of Dr. Hyslop also comes to mind in speaking of -- of the doctors who built our hospital -- to say nothing of Dr. R. E. Miltenberger. Dr. Miltenberger was one of the first surgeons on the surgical staff of St. Margaret's. We think, too, Dr. Hyslop, who was notable for his treatment of heart cases.

Let's depart for a moment to go into a retrospection of some of the other businesses. Can't help but remember Pat Frain -- Frain's Newsstand. Pat was one of the city's first insurance underwriters but he also operated a newsstand, and I remember as a boy going in and getting magazines at Pat Frain's Newsstand. And as we talk about the newsstand and the news business it's important that we think of P. M. or Pat

Mahoney, one of our earliest and perhaps the most important man when it comes to considering the "Spring Valley Gazette." Pat operated the "Gazette" for many years as the city's leading weekly newspaper. Pat also had a hand in the establishment of the Spring Valley library back in 1912. Our newspaper world in Spring Valley at that time consisted of two newspapers -- the "Spring Valley Gazette" and "Bureau County Democrat," and the "Bureau County Democrat" was the brainchild of George Hoffman. But it folded -- oh, quite some years ago. Down the street in Spring Valley, no longer occupied as a business, there's a building has a nostalgic place in the hearts of many of us because it is the old Gunther Ice Cream Factory, operated by William or Bill Gunther. Bill Gunther was a pioneer in the making ice cream and for many years his ice cream was notable for its rich quality and was advertised as the best ice cream in the Illinois Valley and it was truly the -- not overly advertised -- it was the real thing. And it was -- after Gunther passed on the Nestler -- one of his helpers took over and even Nestler's son before it yielded to the competition of the mass produced ice cream of the day.

Q: I was trying to think. . .

PAUSE

A: We are basking now in Spring Valley in the -- shall we say the reflected glory of having an elected state representative in Richard Mautino, but Richard is the third Spring Valley man to go to the state legislature -- the first being Michael Barton, who was cashier of the old Spring Valley National Bank who represented our area in the 1800's; and there followed William Hollerich but Bill's life ended all too

quickly, all too soon from a serious illness. The Holleriches seemed to have an ill wind blowing in their direction for Bill's son -- brother -- Jack was killed in an airplane crash enroute home from Florida. Of course Pete Hollerich was and is in the hearts of many the Spring Valley bank in quotes because Pete was so very active in the management of the bank before his death. Of course C. N. -- Mr. Democrat to so many of us was very, very, very much in the hearts of all Spring Valleyians as being a great attorney, a great friend of the city, and a great judge. We should take a moment to reflect on some of the great school men who have served our community. Comes to mind the names of Ernest L. Bost, Clifford L. Sarver -- who died fairly recently in Indiana -- Allen C. Tyler who came to us from Granville as an instructor at Hall High, became a principal at Hall High and went on then to greater things in the world of education as a -- an instructor for Le Torneau in Peoria and finally wound up in Texas. And then there was the name of Irving Munson, too, who had a long record of years as a leading educator in Spring Valley.

PAUSE

Speaking of businesses in Spring Valley we now have no full-fledged bakery as such but we do have Vallerio's Italian Bakery which specializes in -- in -- in Italian bread. But there was a time when we had not only the ~~Miller~~ the Max Miller Bakery up on Dakota Street, there was the Mark Cavaletto Bakery, the Harry Marcus Bakery, Peter Oettinger, Elizabeth Sittler, and John Slack. Even the Slack building has disappeared from view although the old residents of the Slacks is still existent.

PAUSE

One of the businesses of note in years ago was Demacey and Bertrand.

_____ Demacey who had a very, very common expression,
"I fix. I fix." He has passed on but Louis Bertrand is still with us. . .

PAUSE

In Spring Valley at one time we had the -- quite a notable lumber yard -- the Hunter Doherty and Company Lumber Yard. The Hunters or Henry people who were in partnerships with old Charlie Doherty in the operation of a lumber yard. The business here in Spring Valley now is in the hands of Charlie Doherty's son John.

PAUSE

Recalling former Spring Valley days there are vivid memories of old Hicks Park, the pavillion there that attracted such name bands as Wayne King, Coon Sanders, (Pause) and Kay Kayser, in fact I remember the very first time I went to a big time dance, it was to Wayne King. And Guy Lombardo even played at Hicks Park at one time.

PAUSE

Hicks Park was run by old Jim Hicks and they operated a tavern on the corner. The tavern, of course, has gone the way of all former old buildings and is no more.

PAUSE

Memory recalls the name of Anton Tony Faletti who was one-time mayor postmaster for many years and operator of the only hotel that the city now owns -- now claims as a hotel.

PAUSE

On St. Paul's Street we had one of the very few harness shops and canvas shops in the entire area. The old threshing machines that used canvas

carriers were a source of much business for C. A. Mason. C. A. Mason Harness Shop and Saddlery Shop -- it is now a service station and they harness, and business has gone out the window, of course, but leather crafting is there done by Micky Mason who is the son of the former owner.

PAUSE

Spring Valley has always had a -- one junk yard or junk business for many years operated at 221 South Greenwood Street by -- it was established by Charles Buckman and is now being carried on by George Buckman. George is quite an enterprising young man has enlarged the business even to the extent of a small operating -- small manufacturing business in the manufacture of washers. Speaking of washers, we have one of the biggest suppliers of washers in the country located right here in Spring Valley. It's Frank Evanowsky who is owner of the Evans Washer Company. Frank sells washers on a wholesale basis to several of the large hardware chains.

PAUSE

One of the businesses no longer existent in Spring Valley is the express business but in the background we think of the name of John Norberg who operated the -- the railway express agency for many, many years starting with the horse and wagon stage. He operated on St. Paul Street for many years and at -- his helper in the office was Miss Irene Norberg, and then upon his retirement she took over and she became the only known woman express agent in the country. Irene is still very prominent in the work of the United Church of Christ.

PAUSE

A name prominent in Spring Valley history is that of the Keegans. The

Keegan Brothers were known for their transfer and baggage lines business on operating on Spaulding Street. Mike Keegan operated the livery; William Keegan the undertaking establishment which is known as the Keegan Funeral Home. Also Marty Keegan came into the picture as a part of the business enterprise. The Keegans have all gone on with the exception of Mrs. Bertha Keegan is still living. It is too bad that the Keegan name has passed out of the picture from undertaking standpoint. It became

_____ it was operated many years by. . . (Pause)

It was operated many years as the Keegan Funeral Home by Eugene Mahan who later changed the name to the Mahan Home for Funerals. But Eugene passed away a few years ago and we -- and the business was transferred to a. . . (Pause)

Q: Half an hour.

A: The Mahan Home for Funerals became the Kenny Norris Home for Funerals but Mr. Norris fell upon poor health and had to yield the business so -- well, we are now left in town with only one establishment the Barto Funeral Home.

PAUSE

It might be well for us to review briefly the roll call of physicians and surgeons of yesteryear in Spring Valley. There is the name of M. J. Coveny along with Dr. Franklin, and John W. Hosier and A. S. Rummell and F. B. Shirts. I remember very well the Hosier name because when I was a child I partook quite a lot of Hosier's ^ucroop medicine. I was addicted to croop and Hosier had a croop medicine that he bottled and I partook of quite a bit of it in my time. Dr. Rummell can be recalled for having built a beautiful home up on a knoll on Second Street which stood for

many years until it gave way to the -- to a modern residence that was built by a (Pause) Dr. oh. . .

Q: Lenz.

A: . . .by Dr. Lenz and later became the property of Dr. Kirby.

PAUSE

Looking over the business scene in modern Spring Valley we have three-- or four rather -- two major markets -- Bi-Rite Maloey's then Panizzi's Grocery and the Fourth Street Corner Grocery. But there was a time when we had -- say 1913 -- meat markets listed in a directory were the names of Frank Baladenski, Michael Bender, Tom Gumuskis, Alex Massock, John Muir and Son, Joseph Pachankis, William Secting, Emil Smith, J. H. Stedman, and J. J. Wilkaitis. That numbers. . . (Pause) That numbers ten meat markets as compared with your situation today. The Wilkaitis' market incidentally was operated by J. J. Wilkaitis whose son. . .

Q: Edward.

A: . . .Edward -- whose son Edward be -- was one of the greatest football players in the history of Spring Valley went to Illinois briefly but got into knee trouble and he entered -- he re-entered the meat business as a salesman for Swift and Company and for many years he provided the restaurants and hotels in the -- in the Miami territory as a specialty salesman but he is now retired.

PAUSE

The Spring Valley fire department withingthe last couple of years have lost a couple of their most valued members. They were retired at the time of their deaths but the history of the fire department includes many of their exploits. I'm speaking in terms of John Preezy -- John

Breezy Perino and Joe Tarro. Perino, incidentally, was quite a football player, too. He was among the greats of Spring Valley Wildcats. Mr. Tarro operated a -- one of the small meat markets -- one of the last small ones to give in to the chains and to the supermarkets but even after yielding his own market he continued in the art of making pork sausage for the Bi-Rite Market.

PAUSE

One of the professional men who passed from the scene recently was Dr. Fred H. Rathton, who was an optometrist in the Valley -- Valley Theatre Building. He was the son of I. H. Rathton who operated -- who founded and operated a pharmacy here for many years before Fred went into the optometry business. Fred was an outstanding member of the Rotary Club; he served for many years as its secretary. Quite a traveler, too.

PAUSE

Speaking of traveling, brings to mind the fact that we had an inveterate traveler in Edna M. Thompson who was a teacher at the High school for many years and who traveled quite extensively during the summer vacations. It was probably all in line that her death should come on board ship when she was on one of her trips.

PAUSE

One of the pillars of our community for many years was John J. Sweeney, justice of the peace and notary public, sold fire insurance, real estate, and steamship tickets sold to and from all parts of Europe. John was postmaster for many, many years. He came to Spring Valley in the publishing business -- the old Spring Valley -- the Ottawa -- he came from Ottawa where he served on a paper and became associated with

small Spring Valley paper and then became a partner of Pat Mahoney in the "Gazette." He was -- had one arm but he certainly made the most of the other one. He was the father of a very fine family of daughters and sons both.

PASSE

Recalling some of the cities old businesses, there was among our many grocery stores in the town one operated in -- on St. Paul Street in the center of the block where about the -- where about the Abraham's house -- the Abraham's businesses are located today was the Pearson Grocery Store, and Mr. Pearson's son Lloyd who later became associated with the Spring Valley bank is still active although -- he's still retired -- he's retired, but a very active around his home on Cleveland Street.

Janet Kankaala
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(INTERVIEWEE)

(for _____)