

People and places in LaSalle, Illinois
an Oral History

Burton Confrey, Interviewee
Of LaSalle, Illinois

Interview Date: April 21, 1975

Oral History Tape Number: TC OH 5 CON
Tape Number: 5
Number of Transcribed Pages: 14

Subject(s) Covered: La Salle

Starved Rock Library System History Collection

Digitized under an Illinois Historical Records Preservation Grant
Awarded in 2013 to the Peru Public Library
1409 11th Street, Peru, Illinois 61354

Narrator's Name: DR. BURTON CONFREY
Tape Number: 1
Date of Interview: APRIL 21, 1975
Place of Interview: LASALLE PUBLIC LIBRARY, LASALLE, ILLINOIS
Interviewer's Name: FLORENCE CLARKE
For: STARVED ROCK LIBRARY SYSTEM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

A: So closely have Miss Clarke and I worked together in researching city history that I hereby acknowledge her persistent, highly competent contribution. Unfortunately, human interest facts have to be omitted.

It's only 80 years ago that one could get ten jawbreakers for a penny. I was always for justice, and when the grocery clerk reached his fist and grabbed a handful of the candies and he asked, "Will you take what I have in my hand or shall I count them?" I wanted the full count, only to see that he still had plenty of them in his hand.

I could begin with the naming of Sterling Street because I knew Tad Sterling, at one time one of the earliest editors of our local newspaper. He lived with the Charles W. Leonard family at Eleventh and Crosat Street, across from the Grant, known then as the Fourth Ward School. Mother Leonard kept a boarding house for office employees of the M & H Zinc Company [Matthiessen & Hegeler], among them Joseph Brenneman. Charles Leonard married Eugenie O'Hara, who taught at the Fourth Ward School when Kate Mullen, later Mrs. Dr. Burton Applington, taught there. Jean's [Eugenie] father was a tailor, and lived on the southwest corner of Eighth and Joliet Streets. This property, just north of Mayor Phil Conlin's livery stable, was much lower than street level and was festooned with currant and gooseberry bushes. Throughout her life, for years after she and her family moved to Pueblo, Colorado, Mrs. Leonard's closest friend was my mother, Mary Mullen, widow of John Confrey. In their girlhood they enjoyed after school time among the berry bushes in the fruit season. Then they'd go to Mary's house to play, Mrs. O'Hara, Jean's mother,

A: a Yankee, would say, "Tell your mother to please send Jeannie home." To no avail--Jeannie was an only daughter, her two brothers were younger and with her didn't count. Only Mary had an interesting family in Jean's eyes. Her grandmother lived with her, and there was no housework for Jean, who just stayed out of her way. After Jean became a teacher her friendship with my mother persisted. A cloudburst tragedy blighted Jean's life for years, but she'd come to LaSalle to visit Mary. The contrast between the two young women was remarkable--Jean was outspoken, cracked at anyone she thought needed it, the schoolteacher in her. At a sacred concert she thought the organist, a blight on the parish for years, played too loud. She told her so. Said the organist, "No one from the Atlantic to the Pacific can tell me how to play." Just the same Jean persisted, "We went to hear a soloist and you drown him out." My mother's comment was, "You shouldn't have told her." In their time Mr. Moller was principal of the first LaSalle High School. In a long room on the upper floor near what was later, upper floor rear, of what was later to be the Jefferson. Professor T. C. Coleman succeeded him, shortly before the new high school was built, and just before the turn of the century. At a class reunion at Mrs. Leonard's in Pueblo in 1902 Miss Mary Price, who taught at the Lincoln School, LaSalle, her cousin Mrs. Welch, and Mrs. Leonard's daughter were killed in a cloudburst, the bodies never found. Nan Leonard sued to borrow neighbor Shkirk's team and coal wagon to go to St. Mary's Hospital just for, to collect Katie Meaghan, little blind old _____ woman, bring her down to Leonard's for the afternoon and return her before dark.

A: On the southwest corner of Seventh and Crosat, according from Uncle Rob Mullen, of which my home has been a part of almost ninety years, Grandpa Chapman built the house now occupied by Bowies. He lived upstairs and rented the first floor to Morrisons. Mrs. Morrison was Margaret McKay. Her children were Nina, Findley, William, Christine, and Margaret. William Morrison had a livery stable at 1139 Eighth Street. Grandpa Chapman, an insesent devourer of peanuts, used to lower his pint milk can from his upstairs window. Jacobson, and at one time Dale, drove right up under the window to make the delivery. Grandpa Chapman owned the east half of the block where St. Roch's school now stands. And the water from the north side of Seventh Street and the west half of the block between Crosat and Tonti drained into what was known as Chapman's Pond.--the southwest section of the Chapman property. Grandpa built himself a small house, the siding of which ran from ground to roof, the cracks between the boards covered by narrow strips of wood. The swarming of wild geese and other birds who stopped at the park on their seasonal flight to the north and to the south was always a thrilling sight. What I have been asked for particularly was homely occurrences that recall the past and circumstances forgotten or unknown today, human interest appeal was to be the criterion. Like everyone else in those days, we had a pass book, a charge account for groceries. We kids enjoyed paying the bill because the grocer gave us a sack of sugar candy and a can of peaches. His sister, the bookkeeper used no carbon paper. She copied every item in the pass book into her ledger and her brother's scribbling was very hard to decipher. Once a month my

A: mother would go to the store to have a visit with this perfect lady who would recommend anything new they had that she thought my mother would like. My mother never took advantage of kindness or generosity. Before she'd send for Uncle Doc Applington she'd try her best to ease the physical difficulty of the sick child. "Why didn't you send for me sooner, Mary," he'd ask, "I'm always glad to come." Once when I mentioned interruptions in my mother's life--and mother's life was all interruptions--she said, "Look on them as spiritual detours." She must have been able to do that because she stood the constantly hurried pace of family life and the interdependence with neighbors joys and sorrows admirably. Like Brutus, she could come in off the battlefield and resume reading where she left off. She knew that we all have an instinct for immortality, the awareness of the natural law and a spiritual worth comes from within. She escaped the anguish of living with those who don't believe that truth. In the ups and downs of a challenging everyday life any truths of Christianity which ever seemed theoretical in her youth she met in the most concrete and practical form. A neighbor once told me that my mother had been present at the death of thirteen members in their family. Day or night, she said, I just had to rap on your mother's window for help and I'd get it immediately. One very gentle Yankee finally could bear no more and confided that her husband, when drunk, would get his Civil War musket and threaten to kill her and the family. She was terrorized. My mother told her that, "You drunken bully" and so forth. The poor woman reported that when she said, "Warren, I'm not a gonna stand your drunken bullying any more," he put

A: down the gun and said, "Well, who's been giving you lessons?"

He never tried that act again.

A barber at the University recalls Sunday visitors and all that and he told of Gert and his wife's sister who came for dinner, overate, and then lay on the couch rubbing her sides, while Gert did the dishes. Bill never failed to interrupt these ineluctable reposes by taking her by the hand and yanking her off the couch with the stern admonition, "I furnish the good food, Gert cooked and served it, now you do the dishes." More in-laws imposed on Bill, Gert's mother lived with them, she had no home of her own. Gert's brother moved in, then brought a bride. To hear it from Bill, "Get your own shanty." The mother-in-law had a black dress and five hundred dollars in the bank for her funeral. She threatened to give the five hundred dollars to her son if he and the bride had to leave. Bill was firm, "The money is yours, do what you please, but he gets his own shanty."

My mother never railed against the grasp household duties had on her, on the mother of a large family, all of who lived past middle age. When there was no refrigerator, things were kept cool in the well. A grappling hook was essential because a child sent to get butter might let go of the rope on the bucket when raising it. With no running water or sewage disposal, no plumbing or electric lights, no gas stove or hot water heater, lamps and their chimneys were cleaned and filled daily. A mother could get up in the morning dizzy from nursing the baby.

For a picnic she must bake and cook extra on Saturday. She had to watch the children as they played on the hillside or in the creek. If someone yelled, "Snake", a nervous child flew into the air over the embankment and was fortunate if he didn't break an arm. On the way home, overtired children whimpered and wanted to be carried. A precise child could mortify you. When Jean announced that her daughter was crying because she lost her hose, a boy who thought hose could only be stockings amended, "Frank sand her pants with a rock when they were floating in the water." Think how early a mother must rise on Sunday to get to first Mass, see that the children got to Mass, feed them and then dress them a second time without their best clothes and make sure nothing for the picnic was left behind. No wonder the adage which my mother repeated often, "Man works from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done." The motto on her coat of arms might well be, as the French say, _____ "In spite of everything." Imagine everyone of us children in turn being soothed at the end of a plau full day, in the same rocking chair. Each of us fell asleep peacefully listening to a favorite song. Mine was, "Poor little Joe, had no place to go, no mother to love him. . .and so forth." We might slow down on these next itmes so that the readers mind can shift from one to the entirely different one which follows. The Towpath was the road which the--on the south side of the Illinois-Michigan Canal--for the mules who towed the grain boats through the locks. Grain warehouses were between the Canal and the Rock Island tracks, at the conjunction of Marquette and Joliet Streets. Such were built by Bennett Blanchard who lost a fortune on the Chicago Board of Trade. Canal flat boats carrying grain and so forth were on

A: the I & M Canal. The hulks of two sunk near Split Rock used to be visible. Interurban car barns, now a bowling alley, were at Third and Creve Couer Street. Spring Dell was east of Split Rock. Supposed springs within the city were really city water pipes. At the southwest corned of Fourth and Lafayette, another at Eleventh and LaSalle Street, now Peru Street, one at the southeast corner of Fourth and Joliet at the old library, was a refresher for everyone going up or downtown. It's now covered by--Confrey's spring, at Fifth and LaSalle--is now covered by the L & P Stadium [LaSalle-Peru]. My paternal grandfather never lived to see the color of a grandchild's eyes, as our ethnic group expressed it. Grandfather Mullen I remembered only as a very old man, it seemed to me. He had miner's asthma and was spry enough when taking us to the railroad yards to see a circus unload. He had built a seat in a tree that overlooked the ball park and the race track where circuses often displayed. We were taken in turn to use the seat even though we might not understand much of what we saw except the movement, the colors, and the band. It was having a free seat perched in a tree that was adventurous. That made us unique among youngsters. Grandfather had a garden of sunflowers, the seeds attracted gold finch, wild canaries. We children who had only one grandfather were delighted with the stories he told. He favored Powhatan, his daughter Pocahontas, and Captain John Smith. He had cardboard pictures of them which he got from the package of McLaughlin Four X Coffee.

My Brother, Augustine, was named after one of three brothers from St. Louis, who located a glass factory south of the Rock Island depot.

A: My mother was a close friend of his wife. It has been suggested that anyone can read the history of LaSalle, Marquette and earlier explorers of this region. Books--pamphlets--on LaSalle discuss, for instance, the Christian Brothers Roch's School at Third and what is now, what was, what is now Peru Street. It was then called LaSalle Street. But no one knows such personal interesting items as that the glassmaker's wife gave my mother, for a wedding present, the carpet for her front bedroom. Each year as long as the carpet lasted, tacks were removed and fresh straw or newspapers provided for padding. Reminiscences fill the air.

The tunnel was the name given a deep swimming place where the Little Vermillion turned south after a west course in Schmidt's Grove. The tunnel on the Rock Island got its name from the Split Rock east of LaSalle through which trains from Chicago came. When the bridge which carried the Interurban cars over the canal was demolished the roof of the tunnel was blasted off. Think of the thrill youngsters got to be in the tunnel when a train came through. The old Kentucky shaft was across the IC tracks at the Red Hill, it's dump was opened by the M & H. The stone house at the southwest corner of Sixth and Bucklin was the depot for the IC when it ran up the ravine, now Lafayette Street. Before the IC bridge was built the IC came across the Illinois River on a ferry. Under the IC bridge the aqueduct carried the I & M Canal across the Little Vermillion River. Ice cutting on the big basin recalls Callahan's Ice House atop a hill about the Rock Island depot, now the Wagner Home Center. Corrigan's Ice House was on the south side of the Q bridge and the big basin. The first building of the

A: Alpha Cement plant was Elliott's Brewery across the Little Vermillion from the city water works. The Union shaft was just inside what is now Peru, formerly LaSalle Street. Experiments on how to reprocess the shale on the dump have been tried. Gunn's Addition is still marked by the old Elliott House near the head of Creve Couer Street. We recall also Bull's Addition to the north end of the city and Cowhey's. The home of Sadie Hughes, a brilliant teacher in LaSalle schools, who with two sisters became recluses, was at 846 Bucklin Street. They changed the framed picture in their front window every day. A plaster siding for a house before the days of cement was Herkey's on the northeast corner of Fifth and Sterling. It's the only house in town built directly north and south. Cemeteries include St. Vincent's which was moved from Edwards Avenue. The circle of evergreens surround the plot of priests and sisters graves in the old consecrated section on the avenue. The only vault in Oakwood is Hochstatter, built by a man so he could see his dead daughter daily. He lived at the southwest corner of Seventh and Tonti. He suicided. Honest John McLaughlin, state representative and county supervisor, poor master, lived at what is now about Twenty-third Street and St. Vincent Avenue. Shippingsport Bridge, the IC, and the CB&Q are well known. At one time, one could take a trip down the Killgovern shaft at LaSalle County Carbon Coal Company. There were shutes for coaling IC trains near the north end of the IC bridge, below First and Union Streets. An escape shaft still exists in a field north of the M & H. When cousins from Connecticut visited us they were enchanted by a trip down the mines. There are no wells for drinking water today,

A: nor are there cisterns for the fire hose carts. The one at the northeast corner of Seventh and Crosat on Uncle Rob Mullen's property, was filled in about 1950. They were covered by large flagstones and a big granite boulder.

Rock houses had flat uneven rocks laid on like some cellar walls. The one on Third and Lafayette, across from McNamara's, was built next to Packy Byrnes. He was a stone mason as was his brother, Harry. Their father built it, Packy built next to it, later these houses were plastered on the sides, even painted. There's a two story example on the southeast corner of Ninth and Lafayette. Hegeler's mansion is built of stone. Blocks from sandstone, like those in St. Patrick's Church, made the Coughlin house on the northwest corner of Seventh and Sterling, and another in the southwest corner of Eighth and Joliet, built by stone mason brothers. Mrs. Collins' grandfather built the rock house on the northwest corner of Canal and Crosat, razed a few years ago to built Barratta's Monument Works. Collins had a blacksmith shop on the southwest corner of First and Crosat. He built the stone house, McBranes, at 720 Sixth Street, the best example in town. Ponds include the Eleventh Street pond, at Eleventh and Bucklin, which was filled in. Cook's, south of the Q tracks, on the bottom road became a dumping ground. They were great skating places. The terraces in front of the former Mayor Locey's house, just east of St. Joseph rectory suggest how much higher that property was than that at the corner of Fifth and Tonti, where the funeral home now stands. So large was Locey's pond that there was a bridge instead of a sidewalk, at the corner. On the south side of the street,

A: Kirkpatrick's, east of St. Joseph Church, shored up their property with stone walls on the north and on the east. Remnants of these walls still remain. My brother, John and Chug Stewart stopped at the pond to catch frogs for Miss Gale's zoology class at the turn of the century and were late for school. They reported to T. C. Coleman after school and gave their excuses. He said, "It's commendable that you should save the cost of lab specimens, but hereafter collect them after school hours." Miss Gale was the sister of the head of the science department at the University of Chicago. He had married the daughter of Dr. Cook, head of DeKalb Normal. Miss Gale got a teaching position in her hometown of Naperville for Ida Leonard, who I mentioned in connections with the name of Sterling Street, and who was buried by sand in a Colorado outburst when her mother had a reunion of Professor Moller's last class at the old LaSalle High School in 1902. Miss Clarke researched the names of every city street, most of the following results are hers.

Airport Road--LaSalle once had an airport on this road.

Applington--after William Applington, Jr., who had died in World War II.

Argyle Road--named after the Campbell's of Argyle, Scotland. The Campbells were early settlers in LaSalle. Alexander Campbell, first mayor of LaSalle, owned land in this area and his family laid it out into streets. They lived on the hill at the northeast corner of Fourth and Bucklin Streets.

Baker Avenue--is named after three Baker brothers who owned land east of St. Vincent and north of Eleventh Street, later made into lots, blocks and streets, one of which is named Baker.

A: Balbo Road--Marshall Italo Balbo, famous Italian aviator in World War I, led a squadron to the United States in the 1930's and visited Chicago.

Bartley--after Lt. Bartley, an aviator killed in World War II.

Blackstone Street--Timothy Blackstone was an engineer who built part of the Illinois Central in LaSalle. He was mayor in 1854. He later built the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago.

Buck Street--George Buck was mayor of LaSalle 1860-1862.

Bucklin Street--James Bucklin was an engineer employed in building the Illinois-Michigan Canal.

Campbell Avenue--Alexander Campbell was first mayor of LaSalle, afterwards representative of this district in Congress, and a close personal friend of Abraham Lincoln.

Canal Street--parallels the I & M Canal.

Centennial Courts--this project was completed in 1952, the centennial of LaSalle, which was chartered as a city in 1852.

Central Street--is near the Illinois Central Railroad.

Chartres--Fort Chartres was built in Illinois by the French. The original town plot shows it as Cartes. When the new local high school was built Superintendent McCormick sent to Chartres, France for its coat of arms, a replica of this appears above the Chartres Street entrance. Piety Hill in Jonesville is well known, but Chartres Street in LaSalle was known as Piety Hill for a number of years. It was particularly when I went to high school in 1920. Not one person with these Irish names lives there at the present time: McNamara, Murphy, Byrnes, Haskins, McGraw and McGrath, Roach--R-O-A-C-H and R-O-C-H-E, Hanley, Cauley, Hetherington, Duffy, Woods, Confrey, Kerns,

A: McNerney, Cleary, Quigley, McLeigh, Noonan, Reidy, Dalton, Burke, Quinnigan, McGuire, Lynn, Callahan, Riley, and McDermott.

Cleveland Street--was named after Grover Cleveland, president of the United States.

Creve Couer--LaSalle built Fort Creve Couer near the present site of Peoria. The word means broken heart. And both names appear on the original town plot.

Crosat--was sent to Kaskaskia in 1712 by the French king to develop the territory. He brought many men with him and dreamed of great wealth, but after a few years he became discouraged and returned to France. Another account says Crosat was granted a momopoly of the trade in Louisiana Territory for a term of eighteen years, but he never came to Louisiana.

Donaghue--John Donaghue a lawyer may have plotted this subdivision. He was the son of Tim Donaghue, a coroner for many years.

Edwards--Ninian Edwards was governor of the Illinois Territory. At one time this street was known as Winter's Lane. The family name of Mrs. Aaron Gunn was Winter and the street was named for this family, and not the Winter's family who owned a nursery in this area.

Elm--a number of streets were named for trees because of the influence of the Womens Club. This club donated and planted many elms in the city.

Garfield--James Garfield was president of the United States. Also a James Garfield and a E. M. Garfield appear on the poll books in LaSalle in 1850.

Gooding--William Gooding was the chief engineer for the I & M Canal Commission. The canal books show four Goodings in the employ of the canal.

Mr Grant--named after Ulysses S. Grant, president of the United States.

Gunn--named after Aaron Gunn one of the early settlers, 1830.

Haley--Capt. Patrick Haley was an aviator killed in the Korean War.

Hennepin--after Father Hennepin a Franciscan missionary who accompanied LaSalle and Tonti. At one time the street was known as Matthiessen Avenue.

Illinois--named after our state.

Jenkins--after Harry, born in Jonesville.

Joliet--Louis Joliet was a Frenchman, explorer, who with Father Marquette came to the Illinois Valley.

Kilmer--Joyce Kilmer wrote the poem, "Trees".

Lafayette--after Marquis de Lafayette a French nobleman who aided the colonies during the American Revolution. The street was formerly called Berlin, but during World War I because of the strong anti-German feeling, the name was changed to Lafayette. The early town plot shows the street as Beelin, not Berlin. I know a family of Beelin's in Cleveland. There was an engineer on the I & M Canal named Beelin and since it follows Bucklin, Gooding and Wright, all names connected with the canal, it is logical to assume that the original name was Beelin.

LaHarpe--after Bernard LaHarpe who led an exploring party into the southern Mississippi valley in 1720.

END OF SIDE ONE

END OF TAPE