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## Murphy, Margaret Oral History Interview: General Holland History

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Oral History Interview  
Ottawa Beach Area  
Interviewee: Margaret Murphy  
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds  
November 16, 2003

GR: Margaret, when were you born?

MM: 1911, at Ottawa Beach.

GR: And how old will you be?

MM: I'll be 92 on December 4, 2003.

GR: When did your mom and dad go to Ottawa Beach to live permanently? [following wedding]

MM: Well, my dad—he was born in Canada and just a baby when they moved to Grand Rapids. There were other relatives that came to the Grand Rapids area. After his father died—my dad was about twelve, I think, when that happened—when he found out his mother was going to remarry, he took off for the west. He stayed out there until he was, must have been about twenty-one when he came back. But it was in the late 1890s, I think '97, '98, something like that. Then he got the job of being the caretaker of the hotel and, I presume, that they put this house up for him [lived here rest of life]. It was quite small. Although I really can't recall. I know there was one bedroom, but I don't think there was two. Because eventually we built another house because we needed more room as my brother and I got older, too.

GR: So your dad was the caretaker at the Ottawa Beach Hotel?

MM: Yes, and he stayed there at the beach until he died. He was 87 and, I guess, about three months. And my mother—they died four months apart to the same date, the 18<sup>th</sup> of the month. She was two days short of being 80. It was two days before her birthday.

GR: How did your mom and dad meet?

MM: They were cousins. Years ago cousins married. But they married rather late in life, too.

GR: What was her maiden name?

MM: Her maiden name was Young, that's what was on those other cards. After her folks went way out to western Canada because they could get land if they worked it, you know, get more land than they could afford really. And my mother lived with her grandmother, in Canada. Of course, that was my dad's grandmother, too. When they were going to get married, there wasn't any of great-grandma's family around. Some had gone to California, and some had gone out to British Columbia to live in milder climates. What's the name of that? Well, there were in the part across from Michigan, whatever that is, in Canada.

GR: Ontario?

MM: Ontario. It was cold there. They're farther north than we are. It's bad enough here. So they brought great-grandma here with them, and she lived until 1918 when there was a flu epidemic. I guess that was the year I started school. Everybody had it, and she finally got it but it went into pneumonia. She was about 94—almost 94, I think two months short.

GR: Why did your dad start the boat livery at Ottawa Beach?

MM: Well, it gave him something to do off-season. Although, I guess in the wintertime, he always checked the buildings, went through them occasionally, because sometimes windows would get blown out or somebody would break in. He had to look after it, but he needed more things to do. Nobody else did that around there at that time.

GR: So your dad began the boat livery business at Ottawa Beach?

MM: Yes. And years ago, he did real well because he was the only one. But eventually he had a lot of competition. You know, if you have a poor summer, you're going to have a harder winter. It really got to the point that it was alright if you had other income. But otherwise, you did a lot of work that \_\_\_\_\_. You couldn't save metals? They wouldn't show up.

GR: What competition was there in the area? Were there any other family names...?

MM: Well, eventually the Bakers started. When we had this big houseboat. (It's in here someplace. This is mostly the hotel. I've got more back here.) We had a 160-foot dock. We had a permit from the government to have that built. It [the houseboat] was built over a big scow where you could sit and fish down inside, see, out of the weather. Well, eventually, Bakers anchored theirs out behind ours, and then a fellow over on the Mac side started selling bait. Now, a lot of people buy stuff right as they're coming out of big cities. Some of these places have tanks and sell minnows, also worms.

GR: Your dad built boats, too?

MM: Yes, mostly flat bottom. They used to be these rounded ones, but then later he got flatter bottom boats. They're big enough that you could put a motor on the stern.

GR: So your dad also rented outboard motors?

MM: Yes, he could build most anything. Here's a picture of my mother and—there's two women there, isn't there?

GR: Yes.

MM: I don't know who that is. This is our boathouse [one end on land, rest over water; this prior to floating houseboat]. In the summer, they hired these young fellows and they

slept up there, but my mother had to feed them. There was an upstairs to the boathouse.

Those two boats he had, he put in here.

GR: The two big inboard runabouts? The boats, they had inboard motors, you showed me.

Those were the boats he stored?

MM: Yes, the inboards.

GR: Now that says Hotel...?

MM: Murphy, I think.

GR: Yes.

MM: They put that up there. This is part of that building that's there right close to the road across from where Herb lives.

GR: Oh, the pump house.

MM: People yell about that, but see, that was the railroad track and there was enough room there for the train to get by. Of course, nowadays they wouldn't let anybody be that close to it. This is my dad's old pile driver so he could do work with that.

GR: So he also did work around the lake?

MM: Occasionally, when he had time.

GR: Did your mom just raise you kids?

MM: Yes.

GR: She didn't work? [only in the home]

MM: No. Well, she was a seamstress before she married and, of course, made all our clothes. But years ago everybody else had to make their own, too, you know. One year, in the wintertime, he'd get a crew of men with sleighs and horses and they'd cut ice in the lake. Then they had a big icehouse down at the hotel that they put all that ice in there and

covered it with sawdust and everything. In the summer, that's what they used to put ice in drinking water or something. Nowadays you wouldn't drink any water that had ice like...

GR: So this is how they cut the ice that year.

MM: Well, this one winter it didn't freeze enough to make ice. And so, they finally brought ice on some trains down to the Mac side where the yacht club is now because trains could move right in there. Then the hotel had a big steel ferry in the summer that they'd go over and pick up people that were coming to the hotel and bring them over to our side. That's where they put the cars. So he towed his...see, here is his boat and he towed this big thing over there and they just set the ice along on it. Then when he got to this side, they put it on a wagon of some kind and they'd take it right down to the hotel and put it in there and cover it up. And it would last, being covered like that. Now this is one of the things they sent to people.

GR: Oh, like a brochure?

MM: Yes.

GR: That's really neat.

MM: That's the veranda of one of the floors where people could sit in chairs along there and they're in the shade. Imagine how old this is.

GR: Oh, it's got to be old.

MM: And this is scenes in the...see, that's the lobby. This is in the dining room. And the whole dining room had windows that faced the lake, the Black Lake. See that was Black Lake then, not Lake Macatawa. One of the banks...which one was it?...well, they're

several that had a picture like this, this whole business. This was right across the road behind our house. When people started coming in their cars that must have been...

GR: In the '20s probably?

MM: When the first cars were made. I guess, before World War I, weren't they?

GR: Yep, they sure were.

MM: Well, when they first started bringing cars, coming in their cars, these were steel and they were right across the road behind our house. People would rent them—those that had fancy cars, and people that stayed a long time. One time they had a convention here and then they brought a band. They sat out there and did a lot of playing for everybody to listen to. That's the house that we built later. It was torn down after I sold it eventually. It's where there is a big house at that marina right down there.

GR: Is that where that big house sits now?

MM: It's higher. What's there now is new. It's quite a bit higher than our house.

GR: So they tore your house down?

MM: Yes. Well, supposedly one wall is left in. I'd have to see it. See, now there's cars.

GR: Are they all lined up to go into the hotel?

MM: Yes, you don't see them looking like that anymore.

GR: No.

MM: And see this is, well, the building is gone now. That's what was torn down, too, in later years. But this is the house that we built there. We enclosed the porch finally. But our old house sat right in here someplace. It was just across the sidewalk from where we had been. See, and this shows more cars.

GR: Where would that photo have been taken? It looks like a tennis court or something.

MM: Oh, yes, there was. I don't think there is any cement in there anymore. You know where that walk is that goes up the hill to where that house sits by itself? Well, the tennis court was just maybe twenty feet west of that from what would be the edge of the road back towards the north. At the west end of the hotel, where there was this—well, it was a dock affair. And it had a roof at one time and benches where people could sit. And right down below that—it's all water now; it's all been washed out there—there were two tennis courts down in there at the end of the hotel. When you drive by there, have you ever noticed big slabs of cement? Those were the pillars that they stuck on the top of the ground, and that's what they built the hotel on. Some of them are still...well, they've been uncovered because of the water coming in there.

GR: So the hotel sat right on those? The hotel sat right over the water on those? The water was...

MM: The water wasn't up that far. There were times when the water was high in big seas and it kept washing in there and there was nothing to stop it. They had to bank up a lot more sand to keep it from going to the point that it'd go away from the road and the road would have caved in that we had there. Now, there's that old steel ferry.

GR: This is the one that they used to get people...? The Ottawa?

MM: Yes. It was a red ferry. The first time that I went up to Mackinac...have you ever been up there?

GR: Yes.

MM: You know where Shepler's are?

GR: Right.



MM: Well, Bill Shepler, before he started that, spent one summer at Ottawa Beach. Walter Idema—I guess he was one of the founders of...what's the name of that place? It's a company in Grand Rapids. It got to be a great big thing, but now it's \_\_\_\_\_ down. There's talk of it...

GR: Oh, like Steelcase furniture?

MM: Yes.

GR: One of the furniture companies?

MM: Yes, this Walter Idema was one that started this. And he had a little, I don't know what it was—a thirty-five-, forty-foot boat—and he hired Bill to be the pilot because they wanted to take some cruises up around the north. Bill was a licensed pilot. The next year, I think they started their business up at Mackinac. When I had vacation, I went up there and I stayed there for three or four days, whatever it was. They had these speedboats then that they took people over, and then finally, oh, about the size of a small yacht, with just seats instead of a cabin and everything. When we pulled in over at the Island, Bill said to me, "Does that boat look familiar to you?" And I said, "Well, I was thinking that." I said, "I don't know any boats up here." He said, "Well, that used to be down at the beach at the hotel." I said, "Oh, that's the red one." They had enclosed the front of it, so that when they cruised up around the \_\_\_\_\_ Islands, if it was rough, they wouldn't get the spray. So I don't know if it's still in existence.

GR: Oh, I don't know either.

MM: But that a way back in—oh, it was before the war I think, or just before the war.

GR: So the old Ottawa went up to Mackinac.

MM: Yes, the old Ottawa.

GR: And this is some of the crew? Or is that your family?

MM: I guess so. This is the way it looked down there where it's all washed out.

GR: Oh, there's the tennis court you're talking about.

MM: Yes, see, you can see the tennis court. And this used to be a wooden pier. One time, when either the North or South was going out, banged into it. But, you see, they didn't do anything to this stuff and eventually it just got washed out. These two guys were in there painting. This is in the dining rooms, and this is looking out of the window toward Macatawa Park.

GR: Were these local people, these painters? Was this a local person? This guy here?

MM: Yes, I think so. I think that was a Bosman. They had built a new building for the laundry and everything down below the one that was way up on the hill. There were rooms in that where some of the Negro help that they brought here from Chicago stayed. But all this was being done. They resingled the place on the hill.

GR: What's this big iron drum here? Is that a furnace or something?

MM: Yes, they put new boilers in.

GR: Do you know when that might have been, Margaret? What year they did all this renovation work to the hotel?

MM: Well, it was just before it burned. So it must have been...

GR: In the '20s?

MM: I think '22, the fall, or was it '23 that it burned?

GR: I don't know for sure. Do you know any of the people in this photograph, these carpenters and...?

MM: I think some of them lived in the country, down not too far from the beach. But I don't know where they got them all. You know where the Coast Guard station is now? We used to drive from our house right past that, down toward the lake and then you were on Black Lake Avenue. Then you came out onto the main road, or you went across it rather, to (what is that?) 168<sup>th</sup>, right near where OBI is. It was railroad along there where the railroad had been, and they put that all in.

GR: So this is them tearing up the railroad and putting a road in? [Rails were already gone. I have no memory of seeing rails.]

MM: Yes, down there, and they put cement in there and we didn't go around the Lake anymore. Sometimes there was water over it.

GR: So this was Ottawa Beach Road being built? [just from 168 ended to hotel location]

MM: Yes. This is not too far from the Coast Guard station. But that was done...there's no date on here, I guess.

GR: Now here's the Ottawa Beach Hotel, looks like a livery truck.

MM: Yes, when they went to town to get stock or get stuff, they would use that truck. But these, I think, were people that lived not too far from the beach.

GR: They did the roadwork?

MM: Yes, that they worked on it. Because they had to smooth it out and widen it.

GR: Did you like having an automobile road to town when it was built?

MM: Well, it was a lot easier to drive on than going past cottages, because that was narrow. They realized that when people started coming to the hotel with cars, they needed...

GR: A road.

MM: It was getting more traffic. Of course, we didn't go all the way down at that time. We went up 168<sup>th</sup> to Lakewood and into town that way.

GR: So you could take Lakewood and then down 168<sup>th</sup> and get into the...?

MM: Yes, you can't go that way now.

GR: So all the north-south roads ran into the lake and people would just...

MM: Now, these were all taken after the hotel burned.

GR: Were you there when that happened?

MM: Yes.

GR: What was it like?

MM: Scared to death.

GR: Did your dad see the fire first?

MM: Well, my dad wasn't home. We've always been of the opinion that that was no accident. But you can't go around saying that if you have no proof. As far as who might have done it, I don't know. But I don't think it was an accident.

GR: Where was your house in this photograph?

MM: Well, our house wasn't there. It was away from us. Thank God.

GR: But could you feel the heat from the fire?

MM: Well, see, it started about five at night. And this part, where the dining room was all along the front, there was an area there that you could walk through the building. It was open to go to the lake or to go up to that one up on the hill. In there, there was a place where there was a barbershop and a beauty parlor in the summer. There was a fellow that lived over on the Mac side had come across in his rowboat and he was hunting rabbits down at the back part of the State Park—that's where my dad went to shoot them too.

Coming back, he was at the back of the hotel, and he just walked through there because his boat was straight out tied to the wooden deck along there, along the lake, see. And he had his boat tied up. When he walked through there, he saw the fire in one of those rooms. It was enough flame that he saw it, and he came running over to our house and told my mother and she called the Holland Fire Department to come with their pumper. By that time, our phone went dead and our lights went out. My grandparents were with us at the time. Early that morning, my dad had gone with some friends from Grand Rapids up to...oh, what was the name of that lake? [Houghton Lake]...well, up north quite a ways to a lake.

GR: Reeds Lake?

MM: I can't think of the name of it. They were going to hunt ducks. He was only going to be gone a couple of days. He would not go until the men were all through working with that new addition, because he went through the building to be sure all the doors were locked and everything. Not too long ago, there was something in the paper that maybe a painter left a rag around that, with paint in it. Some of those will sometimes ignite.

GR: Self-combust? Yes.

MM: But nobody had worked in the place. They were through with the work. And so when he was satisfied that everything was locked like it should be, then his friends picked him up early in the morning—I don't know, four o'clock or something like that, they drove way up north. What's up there? A big lake, I can't think of the name of it now.

GR: So did you guys leave the house and get out?

MM: My mother was alone with us kids and my grandparents were there, too. But when you're in a house that you can't see what you're doing and when they found out what was

going on, people we didn't even know came and came into our house and picked up everything and took it out of the house. They thought for sure our place would go, too, because that was quite close to that big store building next to us. If that had gone, we would have. But before it got that far, the wind switched more to the north, to come from the north. Carried great big timbers, burning, across the lake and wherever they landed, they started a fire. I know that by the time everything was down, after the end of it, it wasn't out yet.

GR: Why did your phone and electrical service go out, do you think? Were you still using the...? [power lines burned and were on same line]

MM: Right after this fella came to tell us. So now, it must have had a darned good start inside where the wiring... When my dad left all those in that big building, everything, you know, where they have these big things they pull them down so there's no current in the building...

GR: Circuit breaker? Yes.

MM: Every one of those, he said he pulled down. Somebody must have put them up, if they used electricity to start it some way. I don't know how it got going.

GR: What did you dad do after the fire? That was his job, right?

MM: Well, he didn't have any job. Then he started putting more time in on the other. Consumer's Power had that big brick building there, and they furnished water to all the cottages, besides electricity. My dad ran those pumps during the day to keep...there's a big reservoir up behind...well, it's Mount Pisgah's here, and the place where the big reservoir was, was sort of down back of that. You couldn't see it without going way up into the woods. He did that, but that was only six months out of the year, a seasonal job.

He found it out the next morning, up where he was, up north. He ran into somebody and she said, "Weren't you home last night?" And he said, "No." She said, "Well, you won't find things the way it was." They had been down at the beach. And, I guess he thought something had happened to my mother. She said, "Oh, no, the hotel burned." She told him she had seen my mother and that we were all right and our house was not touched. Well, they came right back home. He was home that night. But, you can't accuse anybody or say it was done this way or that way if you don't know. So you just know that it didn't look right. And this was the way it looked the next day. Where there was sawdust, it kept smoldering for several days. But I know that I was scared stiff. Nobody thought our place was going to get out of it.

[End of side one]

MM: The porch of that house that sits all by itself, you know.

GR: Okay.

MM: It was called the Pantlind Cottage. And this is where the annex was. See, there was nothing there. Now, I saw this for myself. This wooden bridge from the annex across, it was up high. People were coming in our house, trying to help. Of course, a lot of things got broken. Pull your lampshades and then they break, you know. But at least most of our stuff was alright. But it was sitting all over the sand, down the road. I forgot what I was going to say. That's the trouble with getting old.

GR: What happened to the walkway you were talking about?

MM: The what?

GR: The walkway between the annex and the hotel.

MM: I think my mother told my brother and I to go across the road and just stay there until they got out. We could see that there was fire starting on that bridge part, and it just shot across there. Now normally a fire isn't going to do it that way. You just thought it would have burned it off and the whole thing would have fell and then maybe the annex wouldn't have burned.

GR: Oh, so that's why the annex caught on fire, too.

MM: Yes. But when it went down, it was all ablaze and so was the place on the hill. All the firemen could do was keep water on the roof of this store. This is next to our house. And you could see where the heat had done to the shingles.

GR: Is this building here now, Margaret?

MM: Well, now, let's see. When did they tear it down? I don't remember just when it was.

GR: And that was a store for Ottawa Beach?

MM: Yes, somebody bought it and took it down, piece by piece. The inside was all pine, what do they call it? Boards that fit into each other, inside

GR: Tongue in groove?

MM: Yes. They could use that wood to build something else.

GR: What's there now? Just a lot?

MM: Just the sidewalk. I don't know, maybe they set some boats in there, I guess, now, with canvas over them for the winter.

GR: But it's all gone now?

MM: Yes. This is that little store that is there. This is the way it looked when the hotel was here and it was all scorched.

GR: Yes, you can see that the burn.



MM: They kept that from going. That's about all the firemen could do. The other had such a start, they couldn't begin to get at it

GR: Is this building still there?

MM: Yes, but after this, somebody who bought it...See, they had quite a bit of roof out for shade. They pushed the walls out to the very edge. This is one of these deals where they owned the building, but not the ground it's on. So he couldn't go any farther with the thing. Just this fall it's been all worked up again. It looks quite different with an entrance right in the middle that sets back in. I understand this...oh, now what is this guy's name? He's a realtor and he lives north of town in here someplace. I understand he has bought the building and is going to next year serve breakfast from probably seven till about two or something like that.

GR: So this building is still there?

MM: Yes.

GR: Right across from Herb Pollock's? Or near there?

MM: Where?

GR: Where exactly would that be? That building?

MM: Where is it?

GR: Yes.

MM: Well, you know where the marina building is?

GR: Yes.

MM: It's just to the west of that now.

GR: Okay. It's like a little hotdog stand or something.

MM: It's a small building. But years ago the train came in and this was their depot. There were like two rooms in there, and one of them...no, that was later, I guess, when the train didn't come in there, that there was two fellas from some foreign country and they imported beautiful linens and stuff like that. They would be there all summer and sell that stuff.

GR: What building is that?

MM: This is that house that's up on top of the hill. The way it was at that time.

GR: The Pantlind Cottage.

MM: And it was all scorched from the heat. But, fortunately, it didn't go because it wasn't really that many feet from where the annex was. But the wind was blowing the right way.

[End of interview]