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## Interview with Jim Gibson, Head of Knox County Historical Museum

Sasha Lourie

Jim Gibson

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LAK-SL-A020400.A

Researcher: Sasha Lourie

Event: Interview with Jim Gibson, Head of Knox County Historical Museum, Mount Vernon, Ohio

Place: Knox County Historical Museum

Date: February 4, 2000

My comments and questions are in **bold**, while Gibson's responses are in regular text.

**Hi. This is Sasha Lourie and I am speaking with Jim Gibson at the Knox County Historical Museum. It is February 4, Friday, 2000. This is tape LAK-SL-A020400 tape 1 side 1. So, Mr. Gibson, could you tell me a little about the Mount Vernon Bridge Company?**

Okay. Can you pause that for a second and let me get something? I don't know for sure, I have to find out, do you know the Karl's, Alan Kahrl and Mrs. Kahrl? Alan Kahrl is the, I believe he was the founder of Kahrl and Company Insurance, that's right there on South Mulberry Street just behind the intersection where the Post Office is. They're both, he and his wife, Evelyn, are both past ninety, they're just great people. They've been benefactors of the town for many, many years. Mrs. Kahrl's father was President of the Bridge Company, Mr. Conley. And Mrs. Kahrl's like 92 now, Mr. Kahrl died, her dad died in the 1960s I believe. But if you read my article [in the *Mount Vernon News' Looking Glass* publication published in 2000] he came with the Bridge Company in 1902, he graduated, I think from Denison, and then he went with the Bridge Company as an engineer and was with them, kind of rose through the ranks, and in, I believe 1930, he became president of the company and he was president from 1930 until it finally went out of business in the late 1950s early 1960s. But, anyway, his daughter is Evelyn Kahrl who is still living here in town, and she has pretty good recollections about the company although I don't think she spent, it was kind of a rough and tumble company, and I don't think she as a young daughter of the president of the company was hanging around the plant much. She was in college, and she went to an excellent college, she was well-educated person, so she wasn't hanging around the shop much. But she has good recollections, and her husband does too, because after they were married, he, her husband had some, he didn't work there or wasn't directly involved there, but he was in business himself, and I am sure they had a lot of back-and-forth involvement. Anyway, this is the plant. It's down, the building is mixed in among with the Cooper buildings now, so the building is still standing, but it doesn't say Bridge Company anymore. But it is down in that end of town where Burgess Street runs parallel with West High Street. So if you go down West Burgess down along the River, you'll go right along to the Bridge Company building. But they built just phenomenal bridges, and I wish that I was able to use even more pictures in the article because they're so great. And they were all fabricated right here in that plant, and they just built these huge steel beams and they knew how to design it, and slope it, and do all the things that need to be done so that it spanned the river. And no computers, no calculators, they used slide-rulers and their heads, they were just smart guys. Good engineers.

**So they basically specialized in steel bridges?**

These kind. Just heavy-duty bridges. Again in the article I did in *Looking Glass*, and I found that to be interesting, when you get into something like this, and I always try when I am doing a story like this, to show how one little business in a small town ties into the history of the United States, of Knox County, Ohio of the time. See, when they started, there weren't any cars yet, they were building bridges for horse and buggies, so think of the changes you know they saw take place over the years, it must really have been amazing. And then World War One came along in the middle teens, and they built, began, to build heavier-duty kind of things for war service. After the war was over, then the government saw that the roads in the United States were in pretty bad shape because they had been neglected because of the war, all of the government efforts had been going towards the war effort. So when World War One was over, then they got busy and began building super-bridges and so they began building these kind. And even cars were a lot more common then, people were traveling a lot more in cars, roads were being improved, and as roads got improved they needed bridges to people to. So, this is one of my favorites here. This is a bridge in Mississippi, in Louisiana, that is three of these sections. This section is 608 feet long, so that's two football fields long, and there were three of those units, and they're floating it down to put it in place. They assembled it up the Mississippi River from where it was going to be, floated on these three barges, each of these pieces had been on three barges, floated it down to where it was going to be then they do all of the molding into place, I am sure they started on one side and then the other side they dug and put the middle piece in place. But just imagine the engineering, the thinking that would have to be done with no computers, no calculators no anything, just slide rules and good brains. And these guys sat right up here not more than a mile from where we're sitting and figured this all out, and got it right, you know [no one?] messed them up. They built railroad bridges too of course. Some of these I believe this one, but I am not sure, if it's not this one, there were ones like this that the middle part, I think it was this one, this part went up like an elevator, it didn't go up like that, it went straight up, this whole section went up just like an elevator to let ships go through.

**Oh, like a drawbridge?**

Yes, except it didn't draw, it just rose. Of course they built drawbridges too, but they built this kind as well. And they built quite a few of this kind for railroads, so that when it came back down the tracks had to line up just perfectly so that the train could...

**Is that a unique symbol of their bridge engineering?**

Oh, I doubt it. It was probably just bridge engineering of the time. But nevertheless they were good at it. They built the steel structure for Ohio Stadium. And now they're enclosing this side of the horseshoe now, so when, I have seen some pictures recently they have this all roped off so there can do the extension, and you can see the steel framework inside there which is kind of the project use [that they did with] the drawbridge. And, many, most of these are still in operation. The one in Lorraine, this one, I'll show you later we have a really nice slide picture of it right there, it's still in use. People come in and they'll look at the pictures that we have of this... someone was in just a couple of weeks ago and she said, "I grew up about two blocks from that bridge," and she said, "I remember when I was a little kid that there was a big, I don't know, tornado or something went through and ripped out the old bridge that was there, so that's where the Bridge Company built a replacement. Said I remember when it was going up, and the people... [they fought over what type of structure to use]... and it's still there, and it's a

beautiful bridge and everyone comments on how nice it is. And I think, let's see, that's in Waco, Texas, a railroad shot...Anything that had big steel structure on it. This catalogue is pretty much the same. There's no years on them, unfortunately, so I can't...I really have to get somebody that knows to tell me which catalogue came first. But again these are pretty much the same.

**Where were the majority of their bridges built? Were they more national or did they specialize building bridges...**

Well, when they started, and I am trying to find out more that too, just everything takes so much time...I am going to have to go to the County Engineer's Office and just go through their files of all the dinky county bridges that there are, that are just a hundred feet wide or something, and see how many of those are local bridges. I mentioned to you that people steal the [commemorative] plates off of them. So it's hard to tell, but I am sure that the county has records of that. And they sold, especially in their earlier years, they sold small bridges to counties all over Ohio. I have a picture here too, I'll show you...See the company started in about 1880, we're not exactly sure about the year, but it was about then. And it was in business for about 12 years, and then it fell on hard times and it went out of business. It was, sat empty for four years, and so the people in charge of it just kind of dwindled away and they were, and they didn't have anyone working. So they finally decided to sell the plant and the rounds for the factory, but it was thought that there would be a group of local people who were going to go bid on it and thought that it was going to be kept locally. But some guy came up from Columbus, to the auction and bid on it and got it. And he wasn't a bridge-builder, he was just kind of a wild-cat guy, and he had no intention of being a bridge-builder, he just wanted to buy a company that was on the rocks and see if he could out it back in business. So he hired local people to run it, and then after about 10 years, he even died or he sold his interest so it then became a local business again. Anyway, this is a letter on their old stationary from 1884 so this is pretty nearly about the time when the company was beginning real nice. So they were building bridges of that size in 1884 to use on their stationary. It says, "Please give us the dates on which you approve your commissioners as to the auditor of Brown County, Ohio." [In other words] Please give us the dates your commissioners usually hold their monthly meetings and oblige. So in other words, they just wanted to find out so they can bid on bridges in that county. But that's a pretty decent sized bridge. And then this is the copy of the, this is not the original, but it's like a carbon, it's not a Xerox it's like a carbon copy of the original...of in 1930s during the Depression there was a company that ordered a bridge from the Bridge Company and then was unable to pay for it when they got it done. So they had to figure out what to do with it, so they worked out a deal with the county commissioners here. Ag. Society was the essentially what we call the Tariff Board now, which is kind of under the county commissioners, and they're the ones who put on the County Fair and open the [Knox County] Fairgrounds and all of that. And they worked out a deal where they disassembled the bridge and reconfigured it to be the bleachers, the grandstand, out at the fairgrounds. So if you stand and look at the ends of it you can see kind of look at that and say, "Yeah, I see how that could have been a bridge." And they're enlarging them right now, this spring, they're going to enlarge the grandstand but they're going to keep that structure intact, and just add on to it instead of tearing it all up. Anyway, it cost 3798 bucks for the entire grandstand and assembling it and all of that kind of it. So that's kind of neat too, that's a little bit of history. But in

here we just have scads of pictures, and so if you need some other pictures other than the ones...see here's one this is from 1888, again that's pretty and you can see what a whopper bridge that is. So they had only been in business for 8 or 9 years at that point and they were building pretty serious bridges.

**Where did they get their stones?**

Well, there was a quarry in this area, though probably wherever these bridges were is where they would quarry the stones, I suppose they wouldn't haul the stones all the way down there. But this is in Tennessee, Nashville. And I'm guessing there would have been a quarry somewhere in the area that could, they would have subcontracted that out I suppose. But they did all that work, they did the foundation work and built it out to that point. But just imagine, we're talking 20 years before there would be any gasoline motor vehicle that could have hauled, hauled their stuff out. Guys, or horse-drawn ridings had to pull each of these pieces out to the edge, and they just kept adding them on and adding them on and hooking them together. It's just astonishing to me to imagine how they did that. That is...not the same bridge I don't think. These are identified on the back I believe. 1924, that's a railroad bridge that goes up and down, and that's the company.

**Was it a fairly large operation for the county?**

I don't know how many employees. I have asked a lot of people that, and there's nearly as I can find out people say there well probably not more than three or four hundred employees, maybe at their busiest. Cooper has had a couple of thousand employees at their busiest so it gives you some idea. But it was tough work, I've talked to a lot of people who say that even in the 1940s and 1950s here guys whose fathers worked said it was really dangerous work and people were hurt, a lot of people were hurt and killed just routinely there. These huge pieces would sometimes fall on everybody in the plant.

They just, they would fabricate them at the plant, they'd, they would buy the steel and then melt it and fabricate it into these girders. And then they had this big crane here that would pick up the big pieces out of the plant and swing them around and load them onto flatcars, I think somewhere we have some pictures. I am not exactly sure what this is, someone is going to have to explain this wheel arrangement to me. It has interesting rollers on it and it must have been something that they could turn, turn something on and I am not an engineer so I don't know exactly how that works. But there are some nice industrial pictures. Oh yeah, this is neat, apparently the guy who ran the bridge you know just kind of lived up in the house which went up and down too. Isn't that cool? I think this is a double exposure or something that they've done...this is when it [the bridge] was down and this is when it was up, I think I am not certain about it.

**That's pretty cool.**

We got these from various sources, and let's make sure they're all right side up too. Again if this isn't the one in Loraine then it's very similar to it. They call them bascule bridges, people who are in that business always call them bascule bridges so I am trying to call them that too. I call them drawbridges, but apparently when they were that big and for steamships and things they would be different structures. But anyway as you can see we've got lots and lots of pictures. These are just beautiful, beautiful bridges, and they won quite a few awards over the years, and that's in my article in the paper too.

**Was having a major bridge company in the county, which did a lot of work for, across the country and even for the government, was it a source of local pride?**

I think so. And they weren't, when you compare, there were some really monstrous bridge companies. The town of Ambridge, Pennsylvania, which is not too far from Pittsburgh. Ambridge, I used to have friends from college who were from there and I used to wonder what the name of that town was from...it comes from American Bridge Company which was based there. It was a huge bridge company, and they built some of the really immense bridges in the United States. But this bridge company was, even though it was small, apparently was very well respected by other companies. And they were very efficient and they bid on bridges just like anybody else did, and they won contracts for them because they could, in some cases, they could build them cheaper and faster you know than the big competitors could. So I think, yeah, it was and there were a lot of people that spoke highly of the company as a place for employment. If you worked there, people seemed to like the company and liked Mister Conely and the other people that worked there. There was another gentlemen that started about the same time as Mr. Conley, and he was a draftsman and designer. His name was Bowman, B-O-W-M-A-N, and his daughter is still living she also about 92, she was in school with Mr. Conley's daughter. She lives in Oregon now, but she comes back from time to time, and I had a chance to talk with her a couple of summers ago, and they were tearing down a house and the donated to us a lot of these, actual blueprints for bridges that they did. I don't believe this is one of the ones that she gave us, but ones like this that are more like rolls of wallpaper that are about this long and all the way up, kind of dirty, they need to be cleaned out. But, anyway, this would be just all of the blueprints and sketches and specifications and so fourth for the bridges. So we do have quite a bit of that, so if this kind of thing would spruce up your report we can always of make a copy of this which could be used. This is a Chicago bridge that they built, it says bascule so that means it drew there and probably that's where it's connected...we have quite a few of these. I've been doing some going through a lot of the books that...we have a big collection of engineering books in the back and might have a duplication of, and we're thinking about, at least we're going to decide whether we're going to dispose of some of the duplicates or not. We just have way too many. And, so this, they look like this, these are just books on, that engineers would have had in their library guys who worked either there [Mount Vernon Bridge Company] or at Coopers and donated their libraries to the museum at one point or another. So I have been very, very carefully going through them, and in this one even though it's a book, that would have been an engineer's book, has nothing to do with Mount Vernon, has a picture of one of their bridges.

**Oh that's cool.**

That's the Frontispiece. And then there's another one I noted in here as well, one in New York, so they used their bridges even though this is a nationally known textbook, they used Mount Vernon Bridge Company bridges to illustrate the book. I thought it was kind of cool. And, you may be sorry that you asked about the Bridge Company, I have so much stuff here.

**It seems to be quite a great area of interest to you these days...**

Oh yeah it is. And these are like annual reports of the company, these are from '62, and this is right about the time that the company was kind of dwindling. In the 1950s it was bought out, and then it was, I think, kind of spun off, and then another company bought it, might have been a subsidiary of the first one that bought it, kind of like goes on a lot now with corporations taking over and all of that. It wasn't so common back then, but

we have a few of these things. We have some, quite a few news clippings that talk about the demise of it, they don't call it that, but they just kind of prepared for the winding down...of this...This is a building that, oh, I have another picture like this, Cooper took over this building and tore it down eventually. But I have another one that says Mount Vernon Bridge Company Offices. It's the same building, it just has different sign on it. I am going to buy one of these Ohio Stadium models, eventually I keep thinking I'll do that, but when we get the new part of the museum [which was undergoing expansion at the time of the interview] I think we'll probably get one of those. So...

**How did the local residents view the bridge company?**

Well, I don't, I can't comment too much on that, other than, there have been a few people who have come in, and I try to inquire about the bridge company when I think there's a possibility that somebody might know something about it. I've had a couple of people in whose fathers worked there and they don't, they never say anything negative. I mean it was a real tough place to work. It was dangerous, and there wasn't any OSHA in those days, and if you got hit in the head with a beam that somebody was swinging around on a crane and got knocked out or killed or whatever, then that was just unfortunate. And then they hired somebody else to do that job. That was just the way industry was in those days, and people were happy to work there, I am sure they were well paid for what they did, and I've always read that people stayed, they didn't leave for better jobs, they tended to stay for longer periods of time. And, fathers brought their sons in and they kind of thing. So my impression is that people who worked there were fond of it, and it was very local, and Mr. Conley and Mr. Bowman and a couple of other people that were pretty much the top, you know, four or five people in the company were there for a long time, from the 1920s until the 1950s when they went out of business. So, it was a well-thought of company. It must have been pretty neat, and I wish we had a lot more about it, it's just hard to find anything new about it, and the Kahrl's have given us quite a bit. This is a, the original of this we don't have, but I do have a color print of it, it's a painting that was done by a gentleman who did paintings, local paintings of businesses and scenes around Knox County, so we do have a color print of this, I am not even sure where the original of that is. It's nice. We have a lot of these kinds...just of interiors [of the plant]...it's stenciled "Be Careful" on everything. There's a whole bunch of these, they all say "Be Careful," but they're all pretty much the same. Just of heavy equipment, and things like this where they're moving big girders (?).

**Did they build the steel bridge behind, or off of South Main Street?**

The one behind the Subway?

**Right.**

That's my impression too. I've been told that, and I'd like to know about that for sure. Mr. Kahrl did say that it was his recollection that it was a Mount Vernon Bridge Company Bridge. There's no plaque on it anymore. There are a few plaques that are in the County Engineer's Office that they have salvaged off of bridges, and I believe they're getting ready to give us one from around the turn of the century, I believe. I do have one other one I'll show it to you before you go, that was given to us sometime ago from I think the 1920s I believe. They're very, they're just the kinds of things now that's very collectable now so they just don't survive. They have to be, usually the bolts are rusted and all that, they're hard to get off but people figure out ways to do that.

**If it means that much to people, they just find ways to get something...**

I suppose. I said people collect them. Enough in the Bridge Company now?

**Sounds good . Do you have anything else?**

Well...you know you're welcome to look through these later if you want...this is a news article when Mr. Conley was elected, Mr. Wolverton had died, he was the President, and I think Mr. Conley was Secretary or Vice-President under him, and this is a good news article. There are quite a few things here, that the Kahrl's gave us, that are just news clippings about Mr. Conley...

**That was going to be my next question, whether these were local newspapers or...**

Yeah. That's a Newark paper...

**That one's from Chicago...**

Oh yeah. That's Newark, and that's a Chicago. Yeah, that's him in a cartoon.

**So they were definitely getting a lot of national press?**

Oh yeah, absolutely. They were, they built a couple of monster bridges in Chicago. There's an article, this must be the Mount Vernon paper. Oh, New York, New York State with the Saint Lawrence River railroad bridge. These were huge, huge projects, just huge. Mr. Conley would often, he would go to the site, once they'd gotten that all worked out, he would go out and visit the site and then...I asked Mrs. Kahrl whether he would go when they were constructing it. She said, no, usually he just sat home and paced. Would talk on the phone every night with, you know, people who were there overseeing the construction and so forth. And, he, she said he know all of the railroad routes all over the United States, and he knew what kind of curves in the railroad route. If they were sending something to Chicago, let's say, there might have been two or three different way they could get it to Chicago from here by train. And depending how long some of the bridge pieces were on the train, some would go around a curve that was a certain size, and some would require a bigger arc. And he knew that all in his head, and he said we'll have to ship by Pennsylvania instead of B & O because we can't get around that curve...They must have been fascinated people. I am interested in math myself, and when I think about how they, that book that has the picture, that's a serious math book. And those people learned that kind of engineering design and advanced math, and just carried it all around in their heads, and could do those calculations quickly with slide-rules. Interesting people.

**It was probably a good thing that there were two different railroad divisions, or branches right in town.**

Right it made it perfect because they had, the Pennsylvania had a spur (?) that ran over to Coopers and the Bridge Company, and the B & O railroad, that's the one that's abandoned kind of, it's up by the Certified Station just on West High Street. SO that was within a block or so from your plant, and Cooper used the B & O, I guess, primarily. But the Pennsylvania ran an extra line just down that far just so they could haul things up. Pennsylvania is the one over by the Station by where the retired people set up the Station Break. So, things went up to Cleveland I suppose. Okay.

**One last thing before we change gears. Would it be possible, you showed me the letterhead of the stationary from I believe 1884, 1884. Would it be possible for me to get a copy?**

Yeah, sure. Glad to do that.

**So, could you tell me a little bit about the Viaduct on South Main Street?**

Okay, pause one more time here...I am far from an expert on the Viaduct. There have been a number of things in the 100 years ago column in the paper (MVN) over the past couple of years pertaining to the City Council wrestling with how much money to allocate to the construction of the Viaduct, and who built it and about the contracts and all of that kind of thing. And those I can track those down for you, but I don't have those handy right here. But there has been a fair amount in the paper, so if you went to the newspaper archives, I am not sure how it is...have you looked in the library lately? I don't know how recent...

**I was in the library on Tuesday.**

Okay. If you look for the *Mount Vernon News*, you can see. Do they have up to a year or two ago?

**You know, I am not sure, I didn't get that far. I dealt with, I was reading about floods and so I looked at 1913 and 1959.**

It would be fairly recent. It would give you, or you could. The better thing to do would be to go back to 1900, 1899, 1900 Mount Vernon papers and just look for articles about the construction of the Viaduct, because that would be when it was going on, and that's when they were trying to get the contract. So that would be useful to you. As far as...It was covered at one time. Certainly prior to that, let me show you one other thing...This is the booklet I did on the Knox County fair this past spring. We used for the cover of this, we used an 1870 map of Mount Vernon. This is where the fairgrounds was, this would be where your going. You go up to Chestnut, Chestnut, then you drive off going to Wal-Mart, and...Right here is where Chuck Flynn's guitar store would be, if you know where Flynn's Guitar Store is. That's Division Street that goes through there, and there's a little triangle that's connected right between there. Here and here's connected with the little street. So you wouldn't want to see people wanting to pull out. This is where Flynn's is, and Pleasant Street School would be there, Round Hill, Curtis Mansion is right there. So, the fairgrounds is right section there. This is Clinton Street which is still there, this is Ridgely (?) which became Park, and they connected it up to there, so that's Park. And that's where the traffic light is that you kind of wait for all of the cars to come out.

**We, my friend was trying to go back to school, and he got all turned around, and we ended up back here. So I am very familiar with all of these roads now.**

So, in other words, Park goes through there, and right here is where the traffic light is. So there where Flynn's is. That's the race track and so forth for the fairgrounds, and it was there from 1858 until '82. But anyway, here's a picture of the Viaduct, I'll give you one of these. The very edge of this map includes the Viaduct when it was covered, so it's a pretty nice picture. They call it the Vernon River because, I understand Philander Chase the Kenyon founder, preferred calling it the Vernon River to Kokosing, and so a lot of people called it Vernon River at that time. And it was called the Kokosing as well, they called it Owl Creek sometimes. But this is a pretty neat map of the town, because, that's the congregational church up on North Main Street. The steeple is no longer on it, but otherwise it looks just like it. The Presbyterian church is right there, and that's the parking lot for the Living Center. Living Center would be right down here, this is Mulberry, Square's here, and so this is South Main Street going down to the river, and this is where Buckeye Candy is now, there were some other factory there that made steam

engines. And then right over here, there I guess, Owl Creek runs right up into there, that's where the Steel Bridge is.

**Over by Subway?**

Yes. So, anyway, this is, I'll show you one more thing of interest. This was a wonderful, wonderful house called Maplehurst. You go out Gambier Street, and then it jogs slightly to the right, and there are some apartments in here, there are a lot of condos and things right in there. There's a little island right in there, people that live right along there have a little street that goes in front of this little triangle. These houses, this house is still there, that one is still there. But Maplehurst was a wonderful, beautiful mansion. It had crowns and trees and all, you know, this whole block was part of that. And it was torn down in, before I moved here, I think it was in the 1960s I believe. And you go along the apartment and so forth, but that was a wonderful home. That's a pretty good likeness of it. I'd love to know who did this map. I know the company who did it. Some individual sketched these houses and buildings, and they are very accurate I mean they look correct. I wonder what vantage point he had in 1870.

**Pretty amazing drawing.**

Maybe a balloon, a hot-air balloon or something. I think people used those in those days. They'd go up just a reasonable height and sketch them and come back down. That was a fairly ordinary thing to do in those days. I don't know how else they could have gotten, I mean it looks like you're looking down from up high there's no vantage point that tall you could have gone up to look at.

**There are no really tall buildings around here**

40 years before airplanes.

**They had hot-air balloons during the Civil War, so that it makes sense.**

Right, and there's a couple of other paintings by the same man who made these. These are the Fairgrounds, the bleachers by the Bridge Company, you can use those if you want, the grandstand that the Bridge Company built. So you can have that. So I know that the Viaduct was covered in 1870. I don't know exactly when it was originally built, but that's findable. Have you unearthed anything about that?

**No, I've kind of struggled to find anything...**

1850s and 1860s I would guess. There had to be a bridge across there probably some kind of bridge fairly early on because the river would have kept people in town. They had to get across, so they must have had some kind of structure across fairly early, but I can't answer when it was built. And there might be something in Lorrie about that, and you have access to the other books.

**END OF SIDE 1**

The buildings that have been around the Viaduct are kind of interesting. I have talked to people who described to me what it was like just on the other side of the Viaduct from South Main Street. There was a mill there at one time, a hotel where the Station Break is or very near to there. There have been a lot of different businesses along there, where Columbus Road goes off to the right, that was always a main, early road out of town. So Columbus Road goes there, so that made kind of a 'V' when you went across the Viaduct and you went to the right and you went down Columbus Road, or you went straight and went towards Zanesville. And the road to Zanesville, I'm not sure when it was built either, but that's been a fairly prominent route out of town for a long time. So the town

was kind of built up, at least just on the other side of the river, but probably not too far out of town at that point. There were homes out there where the Nazarene College offices are in that beautiful old house is right along the highway, where the administration offices for the college are, Nazarene College. That was Columbus Delano's house, he is a prominent political person here, and he was in Lincoln's cabinet, he was the secretary of something, I'm not sure, in Lincoln's cabinet, and was a pretty prominent person. That was his home, out Poplar where the Naz. is, so there were residences at least that far out of town. So those people had to get into town, so there had to be a bridge of some kind. I can't tell you much about it before the one in the fair picture.

**When was the bridge uncovered?**

Can't answer that one either. I'm guessing sometime between 1870 and 1900, and I'm thinking when they did all that construction in 1900 when they [sic] the contracts. They must have torn the old one down and just started over and made a bigger bridge, more sturdy bridge. And that's the one that's there now....Do you want to pause that for a second.

**Back to the Viaduct.**

So my guess is that it was probably uncovered around 1900.

**And they just left the bottom half?**

Well, they may have rebuilt. They may have really done a major rebuild at that point because there had been a flood, that was news to me too, in the 1890s,

**1898**

That may have damaged it or at least scared them sufficiently. And I think back then the Corps of Engineers may have come in and they might have dredged the river and done some serious flood prevention activity at that time. That's my guess anyway. Since that's when the flood was and right after that is when you're talking about when the city's issuing the rebuild. Probably that's when it was. You see, cars weren't here yet, but they were not far away, so they needed to be ready to handle that too.

**That's a pretty sturdy bridge.**

Oh yeah. It really hasn't been, to my knowledge, had any major repair.

**It's withstood three pretty significant floods in the last 100 years.**

This one was something. [1913]

**Do you know where the stones came from, for the bridge?**

No. I don't. There is a quarry, of course the one over on Gambier there, but I don't know whether they came from there. There's other quarries up around Millersburg, Loudenville, up in that area in Holmes County were a lot of stones for some houses around here had been brought. So possibly from there, but I just can't answer that.

**Okay. It's a pretty significant landmark at least for the town these days**

Oh yeah. And it's one of those bridges now that you don't really notice that you're going across a bridge so much when you come into town. First few times I drove in and out of town and somebody said I was crossing the river, I would have said 'I don't recall that.' If the river's low you don't really notice it. It's cause its got low sides on it, and it doesn't look like a major bridge, but it is. It does its job.

**Do you think it has any significance in terms of locals identifying with it as a landmark?**

Well, people will refer to it. They'll say, something's across the Viaduct or near the Viaduct, you'll hear that a lot. But no, I would have to say it's probably more taken for granted. One of those things that people from outside of town would notice more than who live here.

**Especially with the floods and everything, everyone, the pictures from each of the floods that I've seen with people standing on the Viaduct, seeming to indicate...**

Yeah, when you look these up here [images from the 1913 flood] you can just imagine that. I would think people would have been pretty nervous then that it might wash away and yet they were out there looking at the water, and they may not have gone just because somebody were taking pictures. But obviously they were out there to see the action.

**Yeah, I think that if the Viaduct hadn't withstood the floods it would have been a disaster for the town.**

Yeah. And in fact they did. And after it was over, people probably said 'wow we did a good job building it.' I have looked at news articles from the 1959 flood, you have probably found those in microfilm, and there was a just a year ago, in January of 1999, would have been the fortieth anniversary of the 1959 flood, and there was some interest in that locally. There was a fairly big article in the paper in January and they did a big thing on the radio about it. They had some tapes and some interviews about what they did back while it was going on. They played those. That was a major flood, and it was because of snow melt more than it was from rain. Just snowed a lot, and it got warm and it all melted at once, and the town was really under water and the Red Cross and all those organizations jumped in. It was one of those things where everybody in the town jumped in and pulled together and had shelters and all that sort of thing. So, that was kind of a neat story. I've read about Lorey's account of the 1913 flood, and of course a lot of Ohio was flooded then. I don't know how much of Ohio was flooded in 1959 other than Mount Vernon, but Columbus was in really serious trouble in 1913. Have you looked at other cities?

**Just from the front-page accounts. I didn't bring them with me, but there were stories about Dayton, Newark.**

Yeah, we have, this is a Columbus one, and we can make copies of any of this is that would be useful to you. [We're talking about two published books of photographs from the flood of 1913 that the museum owns. These images are do not include the Kokosing River, rather they focus on the Ohio River and the major cities in the state.] There's one on a postcard here, but in 1913 most of Ohio was [damaged]. There's a fire, horse-drawn fire-wagon, and then this one includes Dayton as well, it's Ohio, Indiana cities. So, I've never seen these before. Columbus really got it, as you can see. So, you'd be welcome to make copies of any of these if you'd like to, or I can make passable copies for you, but if you want to make better ones we can take care of that. But the whole state was really in terrible trouble in 1913, I can't comment much on 1959.

**How were the floods interpreted by local residents? What did they see as happening?**

Well, again 1913 I haven't, there's nobody around much to talk to that was here for it. 1959 we can get lots of people to tell you stories about that. As a matter of fact, there's one person that I'll see if she'd be willing to talk to you about that. Mrs. Zerkowitz, do you know her? Howard knows her, and she was, she and her husband owned the radio station at that time, and they were very involved in getting messages out to people. As a

matter of fact, I myself told her not long ago that I would like to sit her down and do a taping with her about the 1959 flood because she still has a lot of really good stories about that. So maybe we could do that together.

**Yeah, that'd be great.**

What kind of timeline do you have?

**We are trying to get all of our fieldwork done by the end of this month.**

Okay, so you have all of February?

**More or less. We need to get everything done and organized.**

Let me see what I can do. We might be able to figure out a way to get together with her, and that would help me too because I'd really like to get a taping with her.

**Definitely, we would both benefit from that, for our project and the archive back at school.**

I think this flood, the 1913 flood made the town aware of how much they needed to prepare. 1959 is when they built the little dike, after the 1959 flood I believe is when they built the dike in the West End of town. So, that was just a kind of a flash flood that caught everybody by surprise. It was sort of a fluke, but nevertheless then they got busy and did that and its, the dike has been a big help in saving. Just a year ago, there was water that came up,

**1998**

Yeah, came up pretty near to the top. And the dike held up okay for that. But, I don't know, people, again, forty years is well a long time I guess for a lot of people, and lots of people who would be 55 or so they probably would have too much in the way of recollections. Helen might know some other people too that could tell stories as well. I know a couple of people that are just now getting to the place where their memories aren't so good and they were people that were real active at that time too.

**I'd definitely like to get some of those names from you. I tried to track down just anyone who remembers the flood of 1913, and I've been having a tough time. I went to a nursing home the other day, and things didn't quite work out as much as I had hoped.**

Oh yeah, see, that's tough. Yeah, see you'd be talking about people who would be well along in their nineties, and that would be tough.

**Yes. Because it is such a significant event.**

Did you have a fairly good prospect and then it just didn't work?

**Yeah. She had agreed to talk with me, and was having a bad day and didn't really want to talk about it at all.**

Well, you just have to kind of keep after that, and don't let it just slide away because if you can catch a person when they are in a better mood it maybe well worth it.

**So people definitely relate to these floods.**

Oh yeah. And in the 1959 one, people do talk about it, and when they had that fortieth anniversary, you know there was kind of a flurry of interest in it at that time. The newspaper was planning to do a fairly big spread about it, and then for some reason didn't do nearly as big a thing. But the radio did.

**I didn't really know about these floods. I mean I knew about the one in 1998 because I was here, I was going to school here. But for the other two floods, I didn't really know very much about them, but the more research I have done and people I have talked to, it's really something that people connect with. [Something like] 'Oh,**

**I remember back in the flood of 1959,' or when the Viaduct was flooded. The Viaduct that I've seen, is one of the biggest symbols of that flood.**

Please hand me that album there. This is very near to the Viaduct. This is was Weisner's Restaurant, I think was, this was Gambier or Ohio Street, the Viaduct would be right about here. So you're pretty close to it. And then this is, oh, that's Buckeye Candy there. So you can see the little curved entrance way there.

**So this is standing...**

So you'd be up right on the Viaduct. There's the trolley tracks, and so you'd be just about looking at. See there's the Square and that's, you can always see that steeple. That's that Congregational Church I was telling you. They've taken the steeple off of that now, but it was a nice reference point. That's the monument in the middle of the Square there. So it was pretty far up South Main Street.

**Oh yeah. There was a ton of water.**

Just pause a second.

**...It [a steel railroad bridge pictured in a 1913 flood postcard] was in operation. Do you know how that was in operation for?**

No I don't know. I'm guessing, see the railroads went through here you know 1850s or 1860s, that's when the railroads were established. So I'm sure that's when these bridges were built about that time. See this probably says, that's probably a number of kind, but you can probably relate that to the Bridge Company records if we had that and figure out when it was built, and for sure whether the Bridge Company built it. That would be interesting. And this is I think looking toward the Viaduct up the way looking back toward the Viaduct. Excuse me again.

**I basically have one last question for you. Could you just tell me a little about the relationship between the Kokosing and some of the bridges that cross over it?**

Well, you may know more about that than I do. Have you done the trip up to where the Kokosing began?

**You know I haven't been up there yet?**

Okay. Well you know Howard had a class last summer, I think that did that trip. I have not been there either, but it starts up like in Marion County somewhere like that. It's an interesting river, and when you think about. Oh let me give you a little example here. I'm interested in Johnny Appleseed. Johnny Appleseed spend a little time here in Mount Vernon. When he went back, this just kind of thing just amazes me. When he needed more appleseeds, he went back to Pittsburgh to get them, that was his main supply place, and he walked there from here. Driving to Pittsburgh on freeways now would take about 4-5 hours. So you can imagine walking from here to there. And if you cross the river at Wheeling there's wasn't any bridge probably there. He was here in 1803, 1804 or 1805. I doubt that there were bridges over the Ohio River at that time. So he had ferryboats or something like that. He walked back and he would get maybe two canoes filled with bags of appleseeds plus another one with himself in it, and he'd strap them all together. From Pittsburgh, he'd go down the Ohio River past Wheeling to Marietta. And from Marietta he'd come back up the Muskingham River to Zanesville. And then the Walhonding, I believe, joins another river at Zanesville to form the Muskingham. So then he branched off to the Walhonding which came up toward Coshocton and then where the Kokosing joins the Walhonding near Coshocton he would jog off on the Kokosing and come back to Mount Vernon. Just imagine that. I mean that's like a year's

project I would think. It apparently wasn't, but it was a good long time. So, that gives a nice example of how important the Kokosing was to this area. I have read also about people, so of the really early wonderful, beautiful homes, the 1830s era, when they began building what we would consider more mansions in town. Were furnished with very, very nice furniture and numerous floor-to-ceiling mirrors and so fourth. And those were brought to up the Kokosing River from Marietta or Zanesville or some place like that. If they had the canal system, after they had the canal system in and the canal went through Zanesville, so things could come back and out of Zanesville, and then they came up the Kokosing to Mount Vernon from there. So you can see what an important waterway it was at that time. It's not a really huge river by any means, but it was an important link with commerce, that's how they got anything that was of any consequence here. They had that long before they had any decent roads. So, it's the reason the town is where it is really. When the people that settled the town settled it because they wanted to be on a decent river that was navigable and would be a source of commerce for them. So, whether today it's really more of a recreational enjoyable kind of facility rather than a commercial one. But, if it hadn't been for it than Mount Vernon might be a town somewhere else. But it wouldn't be where it is today. So, I guess when we think about the history of the river. I talked with somebody else a few months ago about this very question, and it just strikes me that it was the first seventy-five years or a hundred years of Knox County that the river played the most important role. And since then, it's been lesser and lesser because of cars and airplanes and trains and so fourth. And the canal which didn't come through Knox County but came close, and made the river itself less of an important facility but it's early part in the settlement of the town is really great. So, I'd like, I don't know if there are trips you can take, ask Howard about that whether there are canoe or boat trips of any kind that you can take from where it starts to Coshocton. **What we're doing with our project, I don't know how much you know about it, but we've decided to do a driving tour accompanied with the booklet and an audio cassette. And it's going to start up in Waterford and it's going to follow the river basically all the way down, stopping in various sites, you know farms on the river, mills, reservoir. I'm doing the Viaduct it's a symbol of the river in Mount Vernon. And then it goes all the way down through Howard and ends up in Greer.**

Yeah, that'd be great.

**So, that's what this project turned into.**

Okay. Keep me posted about that. I want to know more about it when it gets done.

**It should be out by the end of May, or by the beginning of May.**

Okay, well I will definitely talk to Helen about the 1959 flood to see if we can set up an interview for that because that's worth doing. And, I don't think of anybody right off that would be helpful to you on the 1913 flood.

**That's a tough one I think. I'm trying to get in touch with the editor of the *Mount Vernon News* to see if she can put in an author's query of something like that.**

Oh, that'd be great. She's a good person and she's very interested in local history so I'm sure she'll help. Okay, anything more?

**Terrific. I think that we've covered all. Do you have anything to add?**

If you want to point out some things here that you'd like to, I'd just put a little sticker or something on and make better copies for you. As I said, I can make ones here that would be passable, but if you want better ones I can care of that. Okay?

**Good deal. Okay.**

**End of interview.**