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McRoy, Burton B Oral History Interview: Longtime Residents of Macatawa Park

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Interview With Burton B.
McRoy

Conducted July 1, 1991
by Joseph A. Kuiper

Hope College Oral History Project, 1991
Subject: Macatawa Park

Joe- Can I have your name and your current address please?

Burt- Yes, I'm Burton B. McRoy, Jr.. The address 2457 Interlake Walk, Macatawa.

Joe- What years do you recall being at Macatawa?

Burt- To the present, now, but the earliest dates that I can remember are probably during World War Two, possibly some special events prior to that, but my parents have been here prior to my living, or my being born, so they were around. But I can definitely remember World War Two times in Macatawa.

Joe- Did you live here at that time?

Burt- No. My parents did not own a cottage at that time, our family was involved in Macatawa in that my parents rented cottages and also rented this particular cottage, Rudder Grange, from a cousin of my father's, Dorothy Hall. So we've stayed here, we've also stayed in other cottages.

Joe- So this cottage, Rudder Grange, is where you first recall staying at Macatawa?

Burt- Yes. Yes, definitely.

Joe- What's the story behind this cottage?

Burt- Well Rudder Grange was built by my great-great-grand father. George and Ada McRoy came in 1892 and built this cottage. Some of the stories being passed on were that it was built and then he bought it and placed it in this location. Where it was six months prior to

this I don't know, but the pictures show that it was a new cottage when he acquired it, and fortunately he had a camera, took many pictures, and enjoyed keeping record books.

Joe- What kind of things come to mind when you think back to your childhood at Macatawa Park?

Burt- The good times only. I don't think I ever had a bad time at Macatawa as a child. The ability to, one might call it today, go free. To be able to go down to Black Lake and put my rubber life-raft into the water and paddle around Black Lake, and, although my mother was probably a little nervous, there wasn't the chance of being run over by any boats. On the sidewalks, of course there weren't any cars around at the time, we could go into the hotel, we could go into the soda-fountain on the corner and play a pinball machine. Of course my earliest recollections were not playing the machines but watching those big boys play the machines. It's all enjoyment.

Joe- How would you describe Macatawa at the furthest point back in your memory?

Burt- Well, the furthest back as a real youngster, I'm not sure that I was aware of Macatawa Park, so much as I might have been in, say, the late forties and early fifties, when I was quite aware that Macatawa was run down. I'm told that there was a time along about then, that you

couldn't sell a cottage in Macatawa. No one wanted to live here and it was falling apart. Our family is involved with two cottages, and I have seen pictures of my father's cousin Dorothy Hall buying her other cottage and that was a mess when she bought it. She, I'm not sure of the year, but she paid five-hundred dollars for it, and I'm not sure it was worth that much at that time.

Joe- Do you recall the Macatawa Hotel?

Burt- Oh yes, Georgie Miller would have been the owner at that time as I remember. I have no recollection of her uncle, Swan Miller, but I definitely knew Georgie, and later on, before she died, and, a very pleasant woman. Quite pleasing.

Joe- What do you remember about the hotel?

Burt- Well the hotel was another nice spot for, I think it was Friday and Saturday nights were dances. One of those nights I know that the, it was a dance for children. I don't remember being old enough to dance, but I certainly stood on the side and looked at pretty girls. But that was the social time, and we cleaned up and dressed up for that. I'm not sure that we put on a tie, but we had to get cleaned up to go to the hotel for the dances.

Joe- Did the hotel play a prominent social role for the cottagers?

Burt- I think it did. And again I don't remember my parents or others, but I've heard people talk more recently about yes we used to go down to the dances and we used to go to the hotel. The hotel was certainly a center for Macatawa, because the guests and, as cars began to show up in the early fifties and late forties, they would be parked in front. And I was a youngster, a grade-school youngster when Charles Sligh Sr. decided to water-ski on his bare feet. And it was always my delight to go down and ask if I could ride in the boat while they were water skiing. And it was a very active sport for the Macatawa area.

Joe- Do you recall the water ski championships that were held at Macatawa?

Burt- Oh, most definitely, yes. As events, I remember the names, like Dick Pope, who I believe came from Florida, but certainly Charles Sligh had several sons and Liz Sharpe who is my age and lives down the street now was active in water skiing.

Joe- Getting back to the hotel, do you remember there ever being conflict between the hotel owners and the cottagers?

Burt- No. Although I didn't own property here until just five years ago, I was never aware of any conflict during the time that Georgie Miller sold the park to the Den Uyl family. Although there were many sidewalk engineers who watched them tear down the old hotel and build Point

West, it certainly was an asset when it was completed and helped support Macatawa. I think all resort areas have ups and downs and you always compare this year with something of the past that you remember. It's comparable to somebody asking you "How is your wife?" and you say, "Compared to what?" But that's, you always compare today to yesterday.

Joe- What do you recall about the social atmosphere of the cottages themselves?

Burt- The social atmosphere in my estimation is headed by the word family. The fact that inside each cottage is a family atmosphere. You gather for meals, you gather for discussions. You can almost feel each cottage living when the families are there. Of course the cottages are close together and the windows are open, so if a young baby is crying, everybody's going to know it. But that's part of family, and it's a positive side. There are several parties every year, social parties, somebody on each street will try and have the big party of the summer, and use the nice porches that are on the front of many of the cottages.

Joe- I understand the beach was quite a big attraction. Did you spend much time there?

Burt- Yes. In that the beach is an excellent spot for gathering and swimming, cooling off. Every summer there's always been at least one week, if not three to four, in which

the temperature goes up, and some of those weeks there won't be a breeze, so that ten, eleven o'clock at night, on those warm, humid evenings, many people will go down and walk on the beach, and walk in the water until you're cool and then come up and go to sleep. There was a time in my life that, in fact every one of the generations in our family have been away from Macatawa. When we didn't use the cottages. And we'd be off doing something else. Whether my parents had retired from work and moved to Mexico, or in my case I got involved in sailing on Lake Michigan and was gone several summers without being at Macatawa. It only means that when you come back there are a few more changes that you can observe.

Joe- Do you recall there ever being a problem with beach erosion?

Burt- Yes. In my lifetime I have seen the beach go from large to nothing, and actually at the highest time that I know the water was under the lakefront sidewalk, the cottages of Tamawaca and the two north of that cottage were actually threatened by the water, the sidewalk was gone. But at that time they would hire from the state, or bring destroyed road cement slabs and dump it in front of the cottages so they could try to save them.

Joe- Can you recall any big events, annual celebrations, such as Fourth of July and things of that nature?

Burt- Well again, Fourth of July is family time. It's more or

less, many families getting together. If you look on the beach during the summertime and especially during the Fourth of July weekend, you will see the age groups sitting, running, moving, or sun-bathing in packs. And there is a pack of college-aged people. There's a pack of adults. There are the senior citizens sitting on the park benches up on the sidewalk. Then you see the infants and several young families with their infants crawling around in the sand. And of course the young teenagers who are just noticing and beginning to recognize other teenagers, they are off in there section. The beach is large enough and there are enough families that every element of socializing is there on the beach. The evening of Fourth of July usually has fireworks from some source out on the breakwater, and the cottage owners and the people from Holland will come out and sit on the beach and watch the fireworks. It's a pleasant evening.

Joe- Are there any other such celebrations that come to mind?

Burt- No, not that I think of right now. Mostly, you can hear and see family reunions, individual families, but I don't think of any annual events. The season is definitely Memorial Day to Labor Day at Macatawa. Some of us, as we have just done, are using their cottages year round now, and there's more and more of that happening. I think there are four families on

Interlake Walk who were here last winter. And that's an increase from previous years.

Joe- So as a child you only spent summers here?

Burt- Most definitely. The cottages then at best had oil heaters, some didn't have that, and we had a fireplace. We had bottled gas for cooking or additional heat, and our water came from a well which was on the back porch. And the sewer system was strictly a septic system on every cottage.

Joe- By what means would your family travel to Macatawa?

Burt- By car. I have ridden the trains many times and, in the past, with my father as a youngster, but most of the time in early childhood that I remember was in a car. Train service today, 1991, is excellent to Chicago - one of the easiest ways to go to Chicago.

Joe- Do you recall there ever being any parking difficulties?

Burt- Oh I think there's a problem, but when you come to Macatawa for a summer vacation you don't think of these issues as problems necessarily. But the Hotel Macatawa had a sand lot in back of the hotel that they'd oil, or put salt on, every summer to keep the dust down. But you had to walk in the sand and your shoes were full of sand and you had to carry your luggage in a wagon, and I always remember that when I'd return to home in the suburbs of Chicago my bed was full of sand from Macatawa. It was in between your toes and all over.

Joe- The Hotel Macatawa was torn down in 1956. What were your feelings at that time?

Burt- I wasn't here in 1956. I didn't see the destruction of the hotel, and that was a period of probably five to six years that I didn't come around. You always, I enjoy the past, I would keep an antique over a brand-new anything as long as the antique was operable. But I can understand that the fire hazard and that; probably better that they tore it down before it became another major Macatawa fire. It would be a shame to lose the cottages because of any fire.

Joe- Was the fire hazard the reason that you recall for the hotel being torn down?

Burt- Yes. As I understand it it was. The cost to put sprinklers and protect it to state standards would be too much.

Joe- Did you miss the hotel after it was gone?

Burt- No, in that only if you'd drive around and see the space. All of the social amenities were still available - restaurants and places to entertain. Holland's a wonderful area.

Joe- What other sorts of things did you do as a child for recreation?

Burt- Bicycle, find more friends, paddle a boat around in Black Lake, or Lake Macatawa as it is now. My parents took me sailing for the first time and I probably enjoyed

sailing from that day on.

Joe- Did you sail in regattas at Macatawa?

Burt- No, interestingly enough I sailed out of Chicago and later in Wisconsin, and did a lot of racing, but I never sailed my boat into Macatawa. It was just, irony.

Joe- Do any particular people stand out in your mind when you think back on your life at Macatawa?

Burt- Well there are current people that, the Van Andel family is here, and they're certainly prominent with their corporate background. My father's cousin Dorothy Hall is reportedly the, has an attachment from her name to the Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. I do know from my father and our family, that Dorothy and my father, as two cousins, lived with their grand parents in Chicago. And those grand parents were the same age as Frank Baum's parents. They all traveled to Macatawa in the same boats and would come over here in the early days of the late 1800s and early 1900s. As to the details or timing, it's not a story that I can give you precisely. But Dorothy tells me that she can remember clearly sitting on Frank Baum's lap and listening to childhood stories that he would tell. Dorothy's father owned a cottage (that she later acquired) just within sight of the cottage of the Frank Baum family.

Joe- Today when you look back on Macatawa Park, what are the things that you think of?

Burt- Oh, enjoyment. Enjoyment. Probably privacy in the term that there is ample space to enjoy your family, the beach, the cottage, and the amenities of the area. The fact that even today there are no cars near each cottage down on the flatland of Macatawa - up on the dunes where the roads come right next to the cottage that's different - but down here there's a central parking lot and children can be up and down the sidewalk on bicycles and you don't have to worry about automobiles. It's a unique characteristic. And I think that is the real enjoyment, and again that word "family" is the key to Macatawa.