



Oklahoma Bank and

Commerce History Project

a program of the Oklahoma Historical Society

Interview with Carolyn Berry

Nichols and Berry Family Histories

Berry Summer Cottage, Harbor Springs, MI 8/7/08

Interviewer: Michael J. Hightower

Audio taped and transcribed by MJH

(Transcription not verbatim)

MJH: Hugh, from what I can understand, was kind of an invalid...

CB: I think so, for years and years.

MJH: So talk to me about G. A. Nichols...

CB: He was a dentist. I think the first story I remember about him was when he was a young man, and he had no money, and he was in Guthrie. He saw a man driving down the street, wearing wonderful clothes, and a team of horses that were sparkling, and he said to [another] man, "What does that man do?" And he told him, "Well, he's a dentist." And so [G.A.] said, "That's what I'm going to do." So he left for Kansas City to dental school. And that's the first I really remember him talking about himself.

He had a slight stroke in his forties, and so he went into the real estate business and started building houses. He built them on the east side, I think—Lincoln Terrace and so forth. Then he thought of a development, and he bought ranches and farms, and I don't know how many acres from Wilshire Boulevard up to Britton Road, and from May Avenue east to Western. So it was quite large. And he thought of this development, and I don't think anyone had ever thought of winding streets before. Everything was square. And so he thought of this, and he hired an architect, and he had Nichols Hills designed. He built it in 1928.

Of course, the Depression was coming, but it didn't hit Oklahoma until about 1930. Anyway, he didn't sell much during that period. Then, during [World War II], he went into the bus business, and he had buses that went into all of the navel depots, and army things. And that's what he did during the war.

I can remember so many wonderful times there. I moved in with them when I was twelve. My mother and father were divorced, so they were like my mother and father to me almost. Mother was like a sister, and my grandfather and I were very close. And he never, ever got after me. Never. This would have been about 1937.

He absolutely never got after me. Never. [Digression into G.A.'s benevolence...]

He was crazy about horses. He rode every morning.

MJH: Tell me about the stables.

CB: The stables were wonderful, a Mecca of life. He had the show stable, which was his, and then they had the boarding stable, which held about forty horses. And then they had the polo stable, which several of the people were interested in. They played polo, and they had the polo field.

And then they had the mule barn.

MJH: Tell me about the mules.

CB: He had bought a nursery in Texas, because there were no trees on this property—Nichols Hills. So he bought a nursery and had all these trees planted, and they had to be watered in dusty Oklahoma. That was the reason for the mule barn. Every morning at daylight, the mules started out with these tanks of water, to water all the trees that grew and that became the Elm trees that are dying now in Nichols Hills.

There were bridle paths around the country club golf course, which of course he built. He traded what is now Crown Heights where they had the old country club for his new country club in, maybe, 1935...

Anyway, the stables were just full of fun all the time. There was a boarding house there, where all the stable boys ate. It was run by a man called Tiny. I had lunch there every now and then. I've never seen such meals in my life, like huge men would eat every day.

They had an indoor arena that would seat three thousand that he built, just so they could have horse shows there.

MJH: And where exactly was that...?

CB: No, it was...probably, at the most, a quarter of a mile from May, off Wilshire. So there was the show barn, and the other barn, and then the big arena, which was torn down during [World War II] for the steel, because it had so much steel in it.

But we had horse shows there. And they were great fun. And people came—you know, horses came from the Southwest area. I don't know what else I can tell you. It was just a wonderful life.

MJH: Tell me about the trails. My mother says you can still see evidence from the old elms...

CB: You can, particularly on the east side of the country club. I think there are still rows...Wilshire Boulevard was just a little dirt road, just one lane. I mean, it was just small. And there were bridle paths on each side of that. And all through [the area] north of that, in west Nichols Hills. I can remember with my grandmother, we used to jump the creek in a park there, on our horses. The bridle paths went around what we call—it's a newer development—I can't remember the development, but it was the old nine-hole golf course. Who lives there who you would know? Peter Hoffman lives there, in the area that was a nine-hole golf course. And that's the reason our country club doesn't come in at the ninth hole, because that was an eighteen-hole golf course, and the other one was nine, so if you only played nine, you were back at the club anyway. So that was the reason for that.

MJH: Considering the golf course today, where would the bridle paths have run?

CB: They would have run where the first hole is, on around the fairway, down to 63rd Street, across, and back on the east side of the golf course...And it also went around the nine-hole golf course, which ran on east.

MJH: What kind of surface were the trails?

CB: Just dirt. Nothing would grow, with the shade of the elms. They were, I don't know, twelve feet—three horses wide. You could comfortably ride. I just remember dirt. I don't remember any grass. And remember—those were dust bowl days. It was really bad.

MJH: As a young girl, were you aware of the dust bowl?

CB: I can remember standing in the yard, and seeing the red dirt coming our way. It was terrible. It was just awful. They just cleaned all the time in there.

MJH: Did [the dust bowl, Depression] change your lifestyle?

CB: I can remember (don't even mention this!) at one time, my aunt, during [World War II] moved into the big house. And I can remember she had a party out by the pool, and my grandmother was having a ladies' party in the drawing room / library, and my mother was having a bridge party down in the basement. So I mean, it didn't bother anybody; they just kept going, because everybody had dust in the air.

It was always an active house. There was never a dull moment.

MJH: House would you characterize G.A. Nichols?

CB: Very gregarious, maybe. He was a fairly large man. He was probably six feet, six one maybe. Heavy—yes, you would have to call him heavy. Energy galore—never stopped.

MJH: Did he do his banking at First National Bank?

CB: I'm not sure of that. I'm sure he [worked with several banks], but I don't know. But everyone had something to do with First National. I remember everyone thought, "Oh, this is the rock, it will never go down."

MJH: How well would G.A. have known Frank P. Johnson?

CB: I don't know. But I know my grandmother knew Mama LaLa (Aida Allen Johnson). But I think [FPJ] died when he was so young. I don't think they were ever intimate...[Some confusion about generations...]

MJH: How about your grandmother? Parties?

CB: Yes, she and Aida Allen were pretty good friends. My grandmother had the first swimming pool in OKC, and they lived on 17th Street and Hudson... [discussion of other, current neighborhood residents, including the Urschells]. Anyway, she had a swimming pool there, and everybody—I guess it was the craze—among women...I don't think Mama LaLa did, but Aunt Mary went over there all the time. Aunt Mary and Mummy (CB's grandmother, G.A.'s wife) were great friends. And Aunt Mary was a little different than Mama LaLa.

MJH: How so?

CB: Well, Mama LaLa was more the tea party type, and Aunt Mary got out and just had fun. I don't know that Mama LaLa had an awful lot of fun. Now, she and my grandmother Burwell were more alike. They weren't party people... [digression into grandparents].

Anyway, they loved to swim. I remember that very well because they'd swim almost three times a week.

MJH: So your grandmother...

CB: Oh, she loved to ride...she was a free spirit. She didn't drink—you'd give her a drink and she'd almost fall down. She couldn't drink, and didn't. But she'd stay up til two or three with the best of them. Oh, she was fun. Great fun.

MJH: And she was a great friend of Aunt Mary?

CB: Oh yes.

MJH: Do you remember anything about Hugh?

CB: I never knew him. I can remember hearing that he was an invalid. Now I could be way off here, but...something like fifteen years. A long time. And Aunt Mary would go out in the daytime, and do everything, but I don't think she ever left him at night. I mean, I think she was wonderful to him.

MJH: My mother suggested that he had asthma.

CB: Now, I never heard. I don't think I ever heard anyone mention that.

Aunt Mary—You should have known her! Talk about a pistol! [Digression to my age, 21, when she dies...] She absolutely entertained every age in Oklahoma City, and when I was a young girl, before I was married, Aunt Mary, once a year, would have the biggest dinner for my age, at her house, and she'd be the only lady we'd refer to as "grown-up" in the place. But she'd do it every year. She was just amazing.

MJH: Did Aunt Mary ride horses?

CB: She swam, but I don't remember her riding a horse. I can't remember that.

MJH: So having a private pool, that was really a novelty.

CB: Well, yes, because people just didn't have them in those days. And of course, if you did have one—they didn't have filters, and they drained them once a week. And that's the way they were. They were pools of water! (laughter) So you know, at the end of the week, it was time to drain them, and they'd start over again.

MJH: More questions about the stables, arena seating for 3,000...

CB: And I remember we'd work the horses there. I'd be at the stables in the summer, by seven every morning.

MJH: Who were some of your best friends at the stables?

CB: Emmy Jo Beard. Joe Beard was an old oil guy. Rough—he was one of the rough people. And Phyllis [Hightower]. I was in her wedding... And when I was in Finch at school, they called me and told me that Phil had died, and, oh, that was a terrible blow.

MJH: Do you like telling these stories?

CB: I think about things like that off and on. I think many times about growing up, because it was so wonderful. When I look back, I've never known a happier time than that. Because it was just fun. All of it was. They just made it fun. There was never any generation gap, because no one was treated that way, in our household. We were just all happy together. I mean, that's a pretty amazing thing, for the skip in generations. And mother was always like a sister to me. She never corrected me either—it's a wonder I'm not out there hanging on the trees of something.

MJH: So it was a rich social life...

CB: There was always something going on. And it was fun. I can remember one time—I knew Bill then, he'd come back from the war—he was a prisoner on Corregidor. And the

general that was left on Corregidor was General Wainwright (McArthur had left). When Wainwright came back after the war, I mean, he was a big celebrity, everybody knew Joe Wainwright had saved the troops. Anyway, he came to Oklahoma City, and Bill asked me to go to this banquet for general Wainwright. So I did, and I don't know how this entered my head—I was about twenty or twenty-one—and I said, “I wonder if Joe Wainwright has something to do after this banquet?” And Bill said, “Well, I don't know.” I said, “Well, go to General Clark up there—he was the head of Tinker—and ask if they'd like to come out to the house for a drink afterwards.” So Bill went up to the dias and asked General Clark, and he said, “Well yes, that would be fine, we'd love to come to G.A. [Nichols]'s house.” Then I said, “Bill, go back up there and ask how many to expect.” Well, they said thirty-something, thirty-two.

Well, you don't think that put a spark under me. I jumped up and went to the telephone. It was about 10:30. I told Daddy Doc [G.A. Nichols] (that's what I called him), “I'm at this banquet, and General Wainwright's here, and I've invited him for a drink, and there are going to be about thirty people.” He laughed, and he said, “Well, we'll get ready for them.”

We had three servants living in the house at that time. He got them up, got the bar set up, and we had huge spotlights all around the house—Nichols Hill wasn't that developed in those days—so they were shining. And about forty minutes later I heard sirens at the entrance, we could hear them coming, they were motorcycles, and they were leading this parade of these people. And they all came in, and the help was all ready for them, and everybody had a good time. And about an hour and a half later, General Wainwright stood up, and that was the end of it. When he stood up, everybody stood up, and they left.

That's the kind of household we had. That was great, for a little kid to do that. That was wonderful, and it worked! 10:30 at night, with forty-five minutes warning. Nobody cared—everybody got up, everybody got dressed, and it worked.

MJH: What's different now?

CB: I don't think you could do that kind of thing anymore. I don't think many households could do that. [Laughter...] I mean, sure, you could have them, but it would be pretty helter-skelter. It wouldn't be like you planned something. I just don't see where many people could handle it.

But that was a different life then.

MJH: Was there kind of a graciousness about it that's a little harder to come by now?

CB: Well, Michael, they partied a lot harder than we do now. I mean, I must say, to my mother's generation, three or four in the morning was nothing to them. In our younger years, I guess we did that, but after thirty years it's appalling to even think of 12:00. Til the end, they partied, partied, partied. So it was a much more carefree, or different life. It meant more to them to party. They didn't do much in the daytime.

MJH: Of course, Prohibition wasn't repealed...

CB: I don't know when it was repealed. They had bootleggers though. An Oklahoma didn't vote wet...So we carried bottles of liquor in brown bags. We just didn't have the variety. There were more or less two things to drink in those days: bourbon and scotch. You didn't go into all those other things. So you didn't have to carry so many bottles.

MJH: Did you know R.A. Vose very well?

CB: No. They had a Christmas party down there. But no, I was young, I didn't know him very well. You kind of knew Mr. Vose and Mrs. Vose, but no, you didn't know them very well.

MJH: Didn't people call him "Mr. Owl."

CB: His children call him "Owl." I don't think they said "Mr.," I think they just said "Owl." But I never knew him that well, to say "Owl." That would be Yvonne and Lyda's grandfather. ..

End