

Oral History Interview with  
Harriet Stibbs Meyer

(unedited)

Conducted November 8, 1996  
by Terri Prins

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interview with Harriet Stibbs Meyer  
November 8, 1996  
Interviewer: Terry Hertel Prins

TP: Where were you born, Harriet?

HM: In Chicago.

TP: What area of Chicago was that?

HM: The west side. 4300 West. Born at 4236 Gladys Avenue. It's near Garfield Park and a block south of Jackson Boulevard.

TP: So, that's where your parents lived. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

HM: A brother and a sister, both older than I.

TP: What did your father do, Harriet?

HM: My father worked for Bradstreet, but he also was a realtor and he had a real estate business on the side, and that's what he liked to do; the other was a job that added a little to the income a little.

TP: Bradstreet was stocks and bonds?

HM: Yeah, loads and stuff. They would always look up what somebody had, how much money he has and everything, and Bradstreet had all of those records. He was a reporter for Bradstreet.

TP: Tell me about his Castle Park connection. How did that come about?

HM: That was because he was in the real estate business. He and his friend, Paul Zelinski, on weekends, had a little real estate division and a little building that they built and they were there showing people buildings and selling buildings. He built a

house in Villa Park, too. That was one thing that he built and sold, he and his Polish partner, and they loved it. Those were there weekends. Now, you want to know how we got out of that? In 1922, my father and Paul Zielinski had a chance to trade a large building in Chicago with two pieces of resort property, one was Bass Lake, Indiana, and the other was Castle Park, Michigan: the entire lake front of Castle Park, Michigan, from one sand hill called Robber's Roost to the other sand hill called Crow's Roost. All of that lakefront, and Bass Lake, Indiana. Bass Lake, Indiana turned out to be a polish resort, so Paul Zielinski took, that and my father took Castle Park in 1922 when I was ten years old.

TP: What was the date of your birth?

HM: April 23rd, 1912.

TP: When did you start coming to Castle Park?

HM: The summer of 1922 was our first summer, on the Pierre Marquette Railroad. We didn't have a car.

TP: Were there any buildings on it at that time?

HM: Oh, yes, there were a lot of cottages. The one we lived in was already built, but that was the only one on the whole stretch that my father got. The only one that had a house on it. It was a big white house which is still there, and at Castle Park there was no electricity and out-houses and wells where we had to pump the water. It was all very primitive and we just loved it.

TP: So he owned the lake-front, but there were lots behind with cottages that other people owned.

HM: The whole place, the castle was there and there were a lot of cottages still there. Paul, I'm not sure of his first name, owned the property, and that's the one that they bought it from. We went there the first summer, my father did not like Chicago. He was not a person to love a big noisy city, he loved the old lake and he was very, very happy at Castle Park. I think there was an association, but I'm not sure of that. I would have to look that up, I have it at home on form when they had that dedication of a hundred years.

TP: So, you came that first summer? How many summers did you go there?

HM: We went there every summer. We went there in June and came home in September and, until we had a car, we went on the train and went home on a boat. My father went home on the boat on Sunday night and came on Friday on the train, and until we had a car, the caretaker picked him up and he came on the Pier Marquette.

TP: Was the boat the one that docked at Macatawa?

HM: It did, yes. The caretaker would take him to Mac and then we would all go and hurry back to the cottage and get a lantern lit, and we'd wave the lantern and he could see that from the ship. That was a routine thing to do.

TP: You were a child when you first started coming. When did you meet your husband Fred and wind up settling in Holland?

HM: Well, I'll tell you how that happened. We used to like to take the Interurban to Holland a lot, and go to Meyer Music House and play records, and buy records, because my father was a great lover of music. We loved all popular music that kids were listening to then, and my parents approved of that, and we always could buy

some records, and then we would have all the kids at Castle Park come over to our porch to listen to the records. We would take the Interurban into Holland and then we would go to Meyer and buy records. Fred's father wanted to rent a cottage from my father, and he rented that cottage the summer before Peggy Prins was married. Peggy was married in about 1947, right after World War II. Then, Fred was just about a freshman at Hope, because I was ten, so he would have been eighteen, Probably, because he went two years to Hope and two years to the University of Michigan. He became very good friends with my brother, and that's how this all came along. He would come over and visit with us, and then he and my brother and some of their friends in Holland and some of the young men at Castle Park, formed a group, and they used to go around together and it was very nice. Fred's father and my father liked each other very, very much and they enjoyed that time at Castle Park. I knew Fred when we first used to play records. We would go there and stay forever in the store, but we bought a lot of records.

TP: So, when did you and Fred get serious?

HM: That wasn't until a long time after that.

TP: Right, because there was quite an age difference when you're children.

HM: I was Jack Stibb's little sister. We were married in 1933 in December, but it was about a year before that, that he began to take me out to movies and things like that and we became interested in each other then. Even when he'd have a girlfriend when he would have a date, before he got interested in me, he would take the dates out to Castle Park for something to do because he had such a good time out there, so he'd

bring them out to our place. That was how it happened.

TP: Well, he had good taste, Harriet. That's all that I can say. He made a good choice. So, tell me a little bit about your family then. You and Fred were married, and tell me how it came about that you got your home on Lawndale Court.

HM: First, we lived in an apartment that was called Moore Manor and that was where the Museum is now on 12th Street and Central. That was Moore Manor, and that's where we lived until John was born. Then we moved to 21st Street because we figured we had to have more than an apartment; we wanted a house. Albert started along, and we stayed on 21st Street until August, and Albert was born in October. They were very close together, only 14 months and three weeks apart. Then we moved to 326 Columbia Avenue. I never liked that house, but we moved there.

TP: Why was that, Harriet?

HM: We needed more room. We only had two bedrooms, and we needed to have more room. So, we moved to Columbia, which I didn't like very well. Then we found out that this place on 21st Street was available. I think it was owned by someone related to Fred's mother, I believe. We were there when John and Al were toddlers. We were there not more than about a year. That was owned by somebody and they wanted us to buy it, and we didn't want to buy it, because we would put the kids in the buggy and roll up to where I live now, and that was the house that we wished we could have, on Lawndale Court. Fred, finally said, "I think I'm going to find out if that might be for sale." I said, "I don't know who'd ever want to sell that house." So, he went to the real estate man, and sure enough, it was for sale. We wanted to

buy it without looking at it inside, we liked it so much on the outside, and Fred's father said, "No, I think it would be wise to look inside." So, he and I looked inside and he approved, and that's how we got the house. That was in 1937. We were originally on the corner of 23rd and Lawndale and then we walked up with buggies and saw the other house, and it's always been the home that I can't leave. That's why I am so deeply and emotionally attached to it.

TP: How many years later did Liz come along?

HM: Well, Liz came along eight years later, and she was born in '43. John was born in '34, Alan born in '35, Liz was born in 43, and Bill was born in '47.

TP: You said something the other night about how you loved taking care of babies?

HM: I just love babies. Once I had four of them, I wanted more. I was 35 with Bill and I was just so thrilled. I really loved having babies. I loved having them.

TP: But you helped Fred out with the business...?

HM: I didn't do that for a long, long time. Not while Fred's father was alive. He said, "Don't ever let your wife get into the business at all." He never let his wife; she would have run it. I shouldn't say that, but she ran the family, and he didn't want any interference from wives. He told Fred not to tell his wife too much about the business or let her do anything; don't let the women get into this.

TP: Fred's dad lived until he was ninety?

HM: Ninety-three.

TP: But he was active in the business?

HM: Fred kept him there even when he wasn't. He sat on a stool and Fred said, "Yes, my

father's very busy, he's still in the business, he's in the sewing machine and needle department," They would laugh about it. He called for his father every morning at eight o'clock, when his father was in his nineties, and he took him home at three o'clock. Then Grandpa Meyer would have his lunch over at the drug store at Hansen's. Grandma Meyer didn't like it because he wouldn't eat enough when he got home. He was just a precious, wonderful man, Albert H. Meyer. You couldn't have found a more loving, good, good man. Fred never did anything in that store without the okay of his father. He never would make a change, he always went to his father and talked it over, because it was his father's store and not his and he had great respect for that. He did inherit it, but he had great respect for his father.

TP: Grandpa Meyer played the piano, too?

HM: Oh yes, I think that's so sweet. And he loved to hold the babies. The youngest was always his favorite. He would say to his wife, "William is his favorite grandchild." She didn't like that. "Now Al," she would say, "They're all nice children." He would respond, "William is my favorite grandchild." He just loved to hold babies. Grandma Meyer, she wasn't the kind of person who snuggled babies. She was a very good grandmother and she loved her grandchildren, but life was a stern duty, and her housework and all that. If she was doing curtains, she had to tell you how many she got on a rack each day. Her husband would say, about her housework, "She's just like a little wren." I don't know if the others would remember all of these things, but I remember, because I loved them so much. Because I do remember these things that touched me so. The love in that family. It was really wonderful. I had it in my own

family, because my brother and sister and I were very, very close, and we were taught to be close, and I married into a family that also was that way.

TP: You came from a family of three, and Fred actually came from a family of six?

HM: Yes. Fred's father and my father liked each other very much.

TP: So, Fred ran the business after his father died? Well, he really ran it before.

HM: Yes, he ran it, but he always asked his father about any changes. His father was happy to sit on his high stool near the sewing needles and just greet people, because everybody loved to see him. Grandpa Meyer also loved our boys so much, and they worked at the store. Well, he worked with John in the summertime making this furniture polish. I think I still have a bottle of that some place. They found out later that it was toxic and so they couldn't make it anymore. But, they would make up this stuff and bottle it in the basement and then he would take John out, John was always the skinny one, and feed John a big meal, because he thought he should eat more. Then, Albert came along and he worked in the store, except Albert got a job with a sporting goods store that he liked very much, although he did work for the store, too. Not as much as John did. Elizabeth tried it out and she didn't like it, so Fred gave her a choice of working at the store or going to Hope Summer School, which she took and she took a course in French. Then, she went to Michigan and passed right into the second year of French. She liked studying. Then Bill worked at the store, he worked more than anybody else at the store. He worked off and on after he got out of school. He was there the one time when we went to Europe. After a while, he got so that he didn't want to live in Holland. He told Fred that he didn't want to

take over the business. Fred said that he was glad because full music stores are not going to remain, they're going to lose out. He sensed that with the mall starting. He said, they're going to go downhill and they aren't going to make much money. You better go out and find your own way, and that's how Bill got out on his own thing, because Fred didn't want him to go into the store.

TP: You owned that building until just recently, but the Meyer Music House actually continued until when?

HM: The reason for that was, in 1982 we had a trust made. Fred Meyer Family Trust and Harriet Family Trust. We divided what we owned, and the businesses went to Fred, and the buildings went to me. They were in my name. We went to a lawyer in Grand Rapids. I am the trustee for Fred's trust, so that I manage that trust, but when the buildings were sold, that was my money. When the business was sold in 1984, the year before Fred died, he sold it to Richard Vanderbunte. That was selling all of the inventory, and we had all kinds of things like adding machines and the counters and the furniture and such. But, the rental went to me and the same with the Mole Hole.

TP: Then, you actually just sold that building just a couple of years ago, isn't that correct?

HM: 1993. I'd have to look that up, but I'm quite sure that it was '93.

TP: You were born and raised somewhere else, so what were some of your first impressions of Holland?

HM: Oh, we loved it. We loved coming in. In Chicago we would ride the elevated, ride the street cars. We did have fun, because my parents were always with us. My

father had Saturday afternoon, if he wasn't in his real estate place, it was go to the park and have a picnic. He was always reading to us in the evening and doing things with us. We didn't have anything like the lakefront at Castle Park and the swimming and all that. We absolutely loved it. We had all kinds of friends. A lot of those people are still alive. Some of my friends, I found out from one couple last year, that two of my girlfriends are still alive, about my age, but a lot of them are gone, too.

TP: Holland, when you moved here, was a real Dutch community, and you come from an English background?

HM: Oh, we laughed about it. In the stores, the storekeepers were still speaking Dutch to one another, and we heard a lot of that. We loved to hear that. That gradually went away. It was very, very Dutch.

TP: But you didn't feel that this was an imposition on you from a different culture....

HM: Oh, no. We always got along just fine. I had the kind of father who taught us to love others and not to be prejudice. He was that kind of person. We were brought up not to be thinking of ourselves as too good. We're all just human beings. He had respect for all religions. He wouldn't call himself very religious, but in his own way he was, and I told him so one time. I said, "You have more faith than anyone I've ever known." But, he was a good man, a very moral person.

TP: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in Holland over the past fifty to sixty years?

HM: A lot of it has retained. When I went to Hope College, we couldn't dance, we couldn't play cards or anything like that. We could go to a movie in Chicago on

Sunday and nobody thought anything of it. Except at the church we went to, they were very proper, you couldn't even go to the store and buy a candy bar. That was the Calvin Presbyterian Church in Chicago. They were very, very restrictive. My brother was the best friend of the minister's son and they bought candy one Sunday and my brother got all of the blame for it. We were all baptized in that church, but then my sister and brother dropped out of the Presbyterian church and went to the Episcopal church because they had dancing and parties there. That was a big temptation. That's alright, too, because now that's changed here. It took longer, but it's changed.

TP: What do you think the causes are of some of the changes in Holland?

HM: Because so many other people have come in that aren't Dutch. I think there's a lot of racism here, which I don't like that. I don't think we have any right to be racist. I'm against that. There are still a lot of people that think that Holland should be for the Dutch people, but the Dutch don't own the world. That is a negative thing that bothers me very much. I don't know how much difference there is between the Reformed and the Christian Reformed, but there shouldn't be any difference. In my mind you should respect anybody's faith, as long as that person is a good person, and not think that that person has to think the way that you think.

TP: That's the Harriet Meyer philosophy.

HM: That's right. Respect, but not hate, religions. All religions are attempting to do the same thing, trying to figure out why we all got here, and they do it in different ways. Everything from the Greek with Minerva jumping out of Zeus' head, which we can't

believe because it's impossible. I took a course, Wilma and I, from D.I.

VanDykstra, one of those Ford courses. He explained that better than anyone that I had ever heard. He said, "All people, when they are born into this world, life is a great mystery. They don't know their relationship to other men, they don't know their relationship to the universe, because we still don't know much about the universe. In order to figure out something, they make religions and they make them according to what they want to believe, and that's how you get so many different religions." He was a very broad-minded person, D.I. VanDykstra was. He didn't feel that you had to be even a Christian to be a good person. If you had your own religion, you should have respect for that person's religion, unless it is a religion that is an evil one. That's different, the cults. He was a very brilliant professor, and Wilma and I thoroughly enjoyed it. We took a couple of courses from him.

TP: You and Fred were never actually involved in any church or denomination, is that right?

HM: Oh, I've never joined a church here, but Fred was. He was first in First Reformed, the one his folks went to, but I never joined a church. But, Mark DeVelder says it's just the same as if I had, so I figure he knows how I feel and he thinks I have a good faith. But, when you have a certain feeling, you can't always describe it.

TP: Do you think that Hope College has changed over the years?

HM: Oh, yes. It's become a lot more open and broad-minded. Some of those movies we've seen at the Knickerbocker. But it's a fine school. It has changed a bit.

TP: Any controversies that you sensed or issues that you feel in the community?

HM: If someone tries to convert me, I flare. I say, "You have your religion and I have my faith. I have a very strong faith. My faith is as strong as any faith that you could have, but it's my own, and I don't want anyone to try to convert me."

TP: When has that happened? Any particular group like Jehovah's Witnesses at your door?

HM: No, no. Just friends. Not many, but I don't want someone to try to change my mind on something or convert me, because I have my own faith, and it's a very strong faith. Fred would back me up; we've done a lot of talking together. Our children were brought up in the church with the idea that when they grew up, they could think as they wanted to think. It was up to them, not to us, after they became adults, to believe as they wanted to believe. You've got to resolve it all by yourself. Everyone of us. It's like that copy of the golden rule I have. My sister found it and I think it was her daughter that sent it to her, her daughter that lives in Portland, Oregon.

TP: It has quotes from a number of different religions and Christianity, "Is therefore all things whatsoever be that man should do to you, do ye even so unto them for this is the law of the prophets." That's from Matthew. There is one from Buddhism, "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." From the Talmud in Judaism, "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow men. That is the entire law; all of the rest is commentary." There are number of other things, and you said, Harriet, that you are going to put that on your door here. Harriet, right now, is living at the Warm Friend. She comes here during the winter and then goes back to her beloved Lawndale Court home during the rest of the year, and so she's going to

have that on her door which is her philosophy and her faith.

HM: I think the golden rule is almost number one, because the world would run right if we followed it.

TP: After you finished raising your babies, were you involved in any clubs or organizations?

HM: Oh, yes. I was in the Literary Club when the kids were still around. I was a volunteer in the Hospital Coffee Shop for about twelve years. I was in the Garden Club working with Special Ed children for years. I did quite a bit of volunteer work; I liked it. I got to love the retarded children to the point that Special Olympics is one of my favorite donations. I love those kids.

TP: How old are you?

HM: Eighty-four... and a half. All the little children love to add that half. WE get to be our age and we like to leave it off.

TP: Is there anything else you would like to add about your family or anything....

HM: Well, it was just a wonderful, wonderful family. It was very fortunate that my family and the Meyer family respected each other very much. I don't think anyone ever had a better marriage than I had. It was a wonderful marriage, and we had good kids. Fred's father would be asked, "What would you like for your birthday, Dad?" "Good children," he'd say. Fred would say to me every once in a while, "Don't we have great kids, Hattie?" He was one of the few persons who called me Hattie, not all of the time. I was very blessed. When you have a wonderful marriage, you handle the separation better, and my doctor told me that, too, than if you had a miserable

marriage. Those are the ones that are hard to handle. When you're pulling along together, I've always felt that part of me went with him and part of him stayed with me. I have that feeling that in a spiritual way, he's still with me, because he left an impression upon me, and I made an impression upon him. I was very, very blessed, and he felt the same way about me.

TP: Thank you very much, Harriet, for sharing.

HM: I think it did me good, too, to talk about it. I think so much about Marguerite, my sister-in-law, and I know she's ready to let go, I think. Maybe she'll surprise us. But she's been a wonderful person, and she and I, we're so very, very close. Pete, her husband, was just such a wonderful person. He was what I would call a pure Christian, in the right sense of the word. He was a good, good man. We all went with our problems and talked them over with Pete. He always was there to listen to us. He worked in the store with Fred, he and Fred liked each other so much, and he was a wonderful, wonderful man. He and Marguerite had so much to give with their travels and in the talks. He did all the picture taking, and she did all the talking.

TP: Actually, then, Marguerite was 17 years older than you, but you had a wonderful relationship with Fred's sister, but also with Wilma...

HM: All of them. Helene I didn't see as much of. But even Jenny Nichols, the child of Fred's father's first marriage, she and I were very close. Helene, who lived in California, didn't see much of her. But Marguerite and Wilma and Nella and Fred and Harris. Although I wasn't close to Harris, we did get along fine. As he got older, he and I really got very fond of each other. Especially after his wife dies. He

had a very happy second marriage with Eve Halprin. That was good for both of them. So it was a good life.

TP: And still is. I would like to get some photographs to go with your interview, we'll make copies of some things, because I want people to see what a beautiful woman you were and still are, with your family and family home and so on.

HM: My brother and sister and I were extremely close. My parents were just like that, and always went together. I've got some nice album pictures.

TP: Shall we wind it up? I'll get out of your hair.

HM: I feel better now, I got that all out of my system. Maybe I needed to talk.