

"Out of Kenilworth" Oral History Project

Look here for details about the "Out of Kenilworth" oral history project that I completed, covering the history of the Kenilworth area and the history of my family and the church my parents started in the neighborhood. These interviews are available for viewing at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library in downtown Washington, DC.

The "Out of Kenilworth" Oral History Project that I directed about the Elmer and Fannie Lapp family, the Kenilworth neighborhood, and the Fellowship Haven Church is now archived in the oral history collection of the Washingtoniana Room at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library in downtown Washington, DC. The collection includes thirty interviews with members of the Lapp family and the larger Fellowship Haven and Kenilworth community. Each interview is fully transcribed, and the archived transcripts as well as the tapes are fully open to the public for viewing/listening and for historical research.

Viewing is usually by appointment. To make an appointment to view the collection, call the Washingtoniana Room at 202-727-1213 and tell them you wish to come in and use the "Out of Kenilworth" oral history collection archived by Joe Lapp.

If you access the collection I would love to know; please email me at lappjoe@yahoo.com.

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Beiler, Arthur - a long time Mennonite volunteer at the Fellowship Haven Church in Kenilworth

Bley, Joyce (Stoltzfoos)

- a short term Mennonite volunteer at the Fellowship Haven Church in Kenilworth

Brown, Tom - grew up in Kenilworth Courts

Butler, Stuart - conservative economist who helped Kimi Gray and the resident management movement in Kenilworth

Davis, Owen - Kenilworth area resident who was the first black deputy chief of police in DC

Dubard-Burke, Lenora - grew up in Kenilworth Courts and attended Fellowship Haven Church

Lapp family - a group interview sharing memories from life in Kenilworth

Lapp, Elmer - pastor/missionary who moved to Kenilworth in 1965 and started a Mennonite church

Lapp, Fannie - missionary/pastor's wife who moved to Kenilworth in 1965 and started a Mennonite church

Lapp, Lois - daughter of Elmer and Fannie Lapp

Lapp, Sandy (Virgin) - daughter-in-law of Elmer and Fannie Lapp, spouse of Tim Lapp

Lapp, Tim - son of Elmer and Fannie Lapp

Lapp-Hill, Eunice - daughter of Elmer and Fannie Lapp

Lapp Martin, Lydia - daughter of Elmer and Fannie Lapp

Matthews, Frank - grew up on and lives on Douglas Street in Kenilworth

McDowney, Walter - grew up in Kenilworth Courts and became a park ranger at the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens

Miller, Harold Dean - a two-year Mennonite volunteer at the Fellowship Haven Church in Kenilworth

Miller, Tyrone - grew up in the Fellowship Haven Church as the son of long-time Mennonite volunteers Andy and Esther Miller

Roy, Gladys - a Kenilworth Courts mother and active in the Kenilworth Courts resident management movement

Roy, Pat - daughter of Gladys Roy, grew up in Kenilworth Courts and became a part of the Fellowship Haven Church

Schrock, Jean Ann (Miller) - long-time Mennonite volunteer at the Fellowship Haven Church in Kenilworth

Schrock, Wesley - long-time Mennonite volunteer at the Fellowship Haven Church in Kenilworth

Sharpe, Cynthia & Cindy - grew up in Kenilworth Courts and became a part of the Fellowship Haven Church

Shaw Watts, Ruth - descendant of Walter B. Shaw, founder of the lily ponds that became the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, shares her memories of Kenilworth as a white suburb

Stephenson, Wil - grew up in Kenilworth Courts

Tice, Lewis - a member of the Mennonite mission organization that sent Elmer and Fannie Lapp to start a church in Kenilworth

Troyer, Gertrude - long-time Mennonite volunteer at the Fellowship Haven Church in Kenilworth

Ulu, B. Clarice & Bertha (Brown) - grew up in Kenilworth and became a part of the Fellowship Haven Church

Williamson, Sharon - grew up in Kenilworth and became a part of the Fellowship Haven Church

Wilson, Naomi - long-time Douglas Street resident

Wilson Woods, Jeanne - grew up in Eastland Gardens neighborhood beside Kenilworth

Wright, Lillian - grew up in Kenilworth and became a part of the Fellowship Haven Church

Yoder, Joanna “Jo” (Hochstetler) - long-time Mennonite volunteer at the Fellowship Haven Church in Kenilworth

Yoder, Oren - long-time Mennonite volunteer at the Fellowship Haven Church in Kenilworth

An Introduction to the “Out of Kenilworth” Oral History Project

written by Joseph Lapp, project director, when project was archived with DC Public Library

The “Out of Kenilworth” oral history project centers around the history of the Fellowship Haven (FH) Church and the lives of the church’s first missionaries and long-time pastor couple, Elmer and Fannie Lapp and their family. It branches out from this theme to include history of the larger Kenilworth area, a small community in the corner of NE DC that lies east of the Anacostia River, including stories of the Kenilworth Courts, Douglas Street, and Eastland Gardens neighborhoods, the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens and Kenilworth Dump/Park, and the original white suburb of Kenilworth.

The name “Out of Kenilworth” is an echo of Isak Dinesen’s collection of stories named Out of Africa. When I first read this book I was fascinated by her stories of African life and her cross-cultural presence there. Later I began to realize the way in which colonial and even racist attitudes inevitably influenced both her outlook and the content and form of her stories. I found parallels between her story

and the story of the Lapp family as white folks coming into, in this case, an African American neighborhood in Washington, DC and making a life there, parallels between both the quaint stories of cross-racial and cross-cultural interaction that she tells and that came from the FH church's experience in Kenilworth, and also parallels in my own questioning of her colonial motives paired with a beginning understanding of some of the underlying pseudo-colonial or prejudice-driven forces at work in the missionary enterprise as it was understood and implemented by the Amish-Mennonite mission boards and the church workers they sent to Kenilworth.

I have chosen the name, "Out of Kenilworth," then, to intentionally reference the colonial/racial fragilities of the FH church's outreach to the Kenilworth neighborhood while also seeking to triumph over them. Unlike Dinesen, I, the narrator-like interviewer and compiler behind the scenes of each story, was actually born into the neighborhood and cross-cultural situation that I survey, and so have a claim to belong there. And unlike Dinesen's one-sided stories, this is an oral history project, and as such each participant — black or white, from Kenilworth or from an Amish-Mennonite rural enclave — gets to tell their own story in their own words and with their own thoughts and assumptions displayed. Thus, no single narrator exists to load their own racial/cultural view willy-nilly onto each and every story.

When Elmer and Fannie Lapp did indeed move "out of Kenilworth" and retire back to their home area in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 2001, it was the end of an era both for the FH Church and for the Kenilworth neighborhood. It is my hope that this oral history project will function not only as an ode to the lives of my parents and the church's work in Kenilworth, but more importantly as a multi-voiced record of the differing viewpoints, thoughts, and feelings of a generation of conservative Mennonite whites and urban blacks who came together for a time at a small church on Douglas Street in Kenilworth, DC.

To understand this project one should first know that I, Joseph Lapp, completed this project solely of my own motivation, with my own funds, and on my own time, and that Elmer and Fannie Lapp are my parents. After completing a B.A. in English at Calvin College in Michigan, I wanted to find a story that I could attempt to shape into a first book. Growing up hearing repeated stories of the heyday of the FH church and youth group in the seventies and early eighties, I realized that the interaction of white, rural Amish Mennonites with black, urban, public-housing-complex dwellers could make for a rich trove of stories highlighting themes important to me, themes like cross-racial and cross-cultural interaction, African American and Amish-Mennonite spirituality and life, black history, and the triumphs and perils of the Christian missionary enterprise. Accordingly, in February of 2003 I moved back into Kenilworth, renting a room in the basement of a house on Douglas Street still owned by the FH Church. For better or for worse, my idea of interviewing a few people and working their stories into the larger creative nonfiction manuscript I planned to author soon turned into a full-fledged oral history project.

My parents, Elmer and Fannie Lapp, moved from rural Lancaster County, Pennsylvania into the Kenilworth neighborhood in 1965 along with three small children. Sent in cooperation by two conservative Mennonite mission boards representing a growing Pennsylvania and Midwest Amish-Mennonite constituency called the "Beachy" church, the Lapps sent their children to the local public elementary school and began to get to know their neighbors. They soon began holding children's activities, and so many children from the surrounding area came that more workers were needed.

Capitalizing on the popularity of volunteer service terms for Beachy young folk, a trend started by the need for non-resistant young men to do alternative service during the Vietnam draft, the mission boards recruited and sent a series of young Amish-Mennonites to help with the mission effort in Kenilworth. The mission soon began holding church services in a basement of one of the four houses that were eventually bought on Douglas Street, and a church building was built in 1975. The church took firm root in the community, continuing to attract a large number of neighborhood children for programs like summer Bible school and two weeks of summer camp and forming a small but vital youth network out of teenage converts from the surrounding area.

The church and voluntary service unit thrived into the mid-1980's, when changes in the larger neighborhood and a split with the Beachy mission boards began to create decline in both numbers and unity within the church. Founded as a dynamic new work and flourishing as such, the FH missionary enterprise was unable to create the critical mass of neighborhood church-goers necessary for the church to grow as a self-supporting body with local leadership. By the time of this oral history project, FH church attendance was down to a dozen or so people on a Sunday morning, with a small group of loyal members still dedicating themselves to two full weeks of summer camp for community children but offering little else in the way of community outreach.

While this collection revolves around the story of the FH Church as outlined above, other area stories found their way into the narrative, especially as I became increasingly interested in the broad history of the Kenilworth area. The history of the Kenilworth Courts public housing complex is prominently featured as a vital African-American, low-income community in the capital of the United States, a place representing a broad network of black family life yet often separated from the power structures that operate just across the Anacostia River in downtown DC. Stories from such "project" communities are often left out of the historical record, which tends to be dominated by the cares and triumphs of the dominant ethnicities and upper classes. Thus I took great pleasure in chronicling a bit of the creation and decline of the Kenilworth Courts neighborhood, along with a community renaissance led by the dynamic Kimi Gray, a welfare mother who got the ear of the Reagan-era Republicans and turned her neighborhood around.

Also finding their way into the mix are stories of the Douglas Street and Eastland Gardens neighborhoods, communities formed in the early 1900's by middle-income African Americans seeking a place to own a home, have a garden, and rear their families in peace; stories of the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens National Park, a water gardens started as a

commercial operation in the late 1800's by a Civil War veteran; stories of the Kenilworth Dump which once burned all the city's trash and is now a park; stories of changing transportation infrastructure and its effect on the area, most notably the place of Kenilworth Avenue in the community's history; and a few stories of the original white suburb of Kenilworth founded in the late 1800's and surviving into the early 1950's.

Having grown up between Kenilworth, DC and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, all the time integrally involved with the life of the FH church and, obviously, with the life of my family, I am necessarily an interviewer with a position that is perhaps, for some, way too close to my subject for anything like historical detachment and accuracy. Yet I hope that users of this collection will be able to sort through and adapt to the particular nature of my relationship to my subject and my interviewees, and for every moment where the assumed knowledge that passes unspoken between myself and interviewee leaves the researcher confused I hope there will be two or three places where my unique relationship with the informants yields information much richer than any outside observer could have elicited.