

Marshall Public Library – Oral Histories Project
Albert D. Wernz
Interviewed by Maurice Miller – December 2014

Miller: I'm speaking with Al Wernz and first of all I'm going to ask when and where were you born?

Wernz: Well, I was born November 5, 1949 at St. Anthony's Hospital in Terre Haute, Indiana

Miller: Where were your parents living when you grew up?

Wernz: My parents were living in Darwin Township, in Clark County, about four miles down the Zion Road south of Marshall, Illinois.

Miller: And who were your parents?

Wernz: My parents were Wilbur Antone Wernz, my father who was known as "Tony" Wernz and my mother was Ruby Jean Davidson Wernz.

Miller: And you had some brothers?

Wernz: I have two brothers, I'm the youngest, my older brother is Thomas "Tom" Wernz and the middle brother is Danny Wernz

Miller: And have you always lived in the Marshall area?

Wernz: Yep, I've always lived in the Marshall area except for a few months that I was in basic training and officers training in El Paso, Texas. I've lived in this house on East Archer in Marshall since 1973.

Miller: Let's talk about the places that you lived as you grew up. What are your memories about those places?

Wernz: Well, my memories, that's a pretty broad subject. My earliest memories are of my grandparents and my parents. The place where I lived was I consider kinda unique, a German community for the most part. The Millers were up the road, the Finkbiners were there, the Tingle's lived down the road to the south. One thing that I had the fortune of being born in a family with a LOT of relatives. And a lot of the community was related to me. My Great Aunt was a half a mile north, my Grandparents were down the road, the Maurer's that were my relation were just west of us a little bit, so I had a lot of relatives to go see, and family dinners and everything and we'd lived in the community for a very long time. It was interesting growing up in a large family.

Miller: So there were lots of cousins for you to grow up around?

Wernz: Yeah, but when I was born there wasn't too many kids around the neighborhood, several older relatives and so forth, but there weren't many kids. Down the road was the Seidel boys, there were three of those, Ricky, Ronnie and Larry, and I'd ride my bicycle down there and play with them, I was related to them. My grandfather was a Davidson and my grandmother was a Seidel, so several in that area were Seidel's, a lot of that area was owned by the Davidson's, my grandfather's family. My father's family lived down at West Union. My father's mother was a Manhart, there was lots of Manhart's, I think eleven Manhart kids around West Union, so I had lots of my father's extended family around the West Union area when I was growing up.

Miller: Ok, let's talk about some other things that you remember growing up, did you have some chores, how did you spend your time?

Wernz: Yes, I had chores, of course we had a milk cow and I had to get up and milk the cow, my two brothers were about eight years older than I was, and when I got old enough to do other work....yep when I got old enough...I had to go feed the cows, and work on the farm and so forth....and that's what I remember about the time when I was young and had to do chore work. And then later, when I was in high school I was interested in my studies and so I was kind of a studious person...but on the farm, yeah, baling hay, feeding the cattle, pick corn, drive trucks, on and on...

Miller: Do you remember playing...how else did you spend your time?

Wernz: Yeah, well dang, there weren't too many kids my age except my brothers and so it was a little bit lonely for me so I had to play by myself a lot...back in the woods...I had to invent games that I could play by myself...I had six hundred acres that I could roam around on...and all of the cousins around so I had a very large area to play in...and so I would play in the woods and in the winter I'd go ice skating (on ponds and river areas)...but a lot of time by myself. I did have some neighbors halfway my age, the Raisner boys, sons of Wilson Raisner just south of the Zion Church. I would ride my bicycle over there and Kenny and Steve Raisner, we'd play doing stuff...mainly just spending time in the woods, hiking around, playing in the creeks and hunting and that sort of thing.

Miller: Do you have church memories?

Wernz: Yes, I went to the church, Zion Church, that was my home church and usually every Sunday we'd go to church. Lots of my friends from school also went to that church. Our preacher for most of the time that I went was Rev. H. V. Johnson. He had a couple of sons, one was close to my age, Benny Johnson, so we would have church socials that I would go to. We played football games at church and so on...Oh and Paul Tingley who was in my class at school went there and we were very good friends and I'd see him at church about every Sunday. Oh...and I think maybe one of the Hawker's went there...Norman Hawker maybe...several boys (from school) went there...the church was a meeting place where socially we could meet our friends. Rev Johnson was a very good friend, he actually married my wife and I. The old church was a German Church...kind of a funny story...my grandfather...we'd lived in the area for a very long time, the Davidson's came over about...oh, in the late 1700s, and into Massachusetts and the Seidel's came in probably the 1880s into the area, the Davidson's came to Clark County in maybe about 1820, so they've been there a very long time...but my grandfather was born in 1874. His mother would send him to church, and at that time the church spoke only German, they'd give German lessons in the church to the English speaking people so they could understand the services which were in German. So my grandfather would skip church and go out in the field and hide until church was over and then go back home. He didn't want to have to take those German lessons and all those people spoke German and the Davidson's were English, of course he didn't want to have to speak German but then he ended up marrying a German girl, Clara Seidel. Grandpa often told me that a lot of the families were intermarried (nationalities) because you could pick your bride from only one or two places, either at school or at church and those were basically the same people...so everyone became intermarried and related.

Miller: Let's talk about school, what are some of your school memories?

Wernz: Oh gee...well, I went to kindergarten in the Ohio Oil Building...then I went to South Elementary School. Between kindergarten and first grade I had polio...a very bad case of it...but I survived and they were a little worried about me being able to walk and so forth. They considered holding me back a year but the doctors felt it might help if I went ahead, with my legs and so forth, I really don't have much residual effects from the polio that I know of over all these years. I went to the "old" South School and during my second grade they were in the process of building the addition to the South School,(the building that exists at this time) then they subsequently tore the old building down. Lots of memories there, playing on the playground...then for sixth grade they sent me to the Jr High building, they had one class of sixth grade there (for space reasons) and Glennie Burger was the teacher. Then the next two years also at the Jr High for seventh and eighth grades. I did pretty well in my studies and I enjoyed school...my two brothers actually hated school. I did sports in Jr High...track, I didn't do basketball. In high school I played football and track. I was pretty good and I lettered all four years in football and track.

Miller: What are some of your memories about the household growing up? Do you have memories about events, cooking and food, things the family did together?

Wernz: Well, when I was growing up, there were several in the house, we also had a hired man living in the house. And also, at that time, people didn't go to the nursing home. So my Grandfather Davidson did what was called, "living around", have you heard that term...if there were several siblings, they'd live with one sibling for a while, a month or two, and then they'd go live with another sibling and so on...so my Grandfather Davidson was there quite a bit. So with several in the household, there were big meals because there were several there. I remember family dinners, and of course holidays, Christmas, and we would have reunions...the Davidson reunion...the Seidel reunion was held at Polly Dean's house which is my grandmother's sister and she lived to an old age, she was nearly...oh 101-102 when she died. She lived just north of us through the woods a half a mile. The Seidel's were

excellent cooks, the Davidson's were terrible cooks (laughter) they were good at business but were terrible cooks. Davidson's would bring some baloney and bread and you'd about starve at a Davidson reunion but the Seidel reunion, the old Germans...Oooo...they were about the best cooks there was.

Miller: Did you have hobbies?

Wernz: Oh...I'd go hunting some, but I was kind of a studious type person.

Miller: Let's talk about after you got out of high school and out into the world.

Wernz: Well, I went to college at Rose-Hulman in Terre Haute, that was a traumatic experience.

Miller: Oh...how so?

Wernz: Oh, well, ya know I was very good at math and science at Marshall High School, but you go over there and you are immediately put up against "the best of the best", one of my friends there had scored 1600 on his SATs and tested out of about his entire freshman year! Everyone had brains hangin' out their ears over there. About 300 started and 150 graduated, that was typical so the likelihood of either flunking out or just not liking it and leaving was a real possibility. So I had to really buckle down and study, study, study...there was no playing around...at...all! To make it through. I was in aerospace engineering. I graduated there in four years, after I had made it to my junior year, I figured I'd make it so I slacked up a little and actually did have some fun. I joined a fraternity over there, subsequently when I was a junior...at the end of my junior year, I got married. At that time it was known as Rose-Polytechnic Institute and was all male.

Miller: With all that pressure and you getting married your senior year must have been really hard.

Wernz: Well, it wasn't too bad, like I say the pressure was off somewhat after you'd kind of learned to manage your time and what you had to accomplish in order to pass classes...seems they weren't so hard on you after you were an upperclassman. When you were a freshman and sophomore it seemed like they were trying to get rid of ya. So the last two years the pressure was kinda off.

Miller: After college?

Wernz: After college...so...well I was in ROTC in college, and so the Viet Nam war was going of course. Everyone at Rose had to take ROTC for their freshman and sophomore year. Oh, and as a side note, I was in the last class to graduate as it was known as Rose Polytechnic Institute, I was there in the auditorium when Tony Hulman came in and gave all the money to the college and so now it's Rose-Hulman. So then at the beginning of your junior year you had to decide whether to advance and continue the ROTC program, I'm not sure how it is now. They were beginning what was known as "the lottery" for Selective Service, the draft. They hadn't conducted the first one yet, but I had to decide whether to continue the ROTC about two weeks before the first draft. I thought, well, I'll probably hafta go anyway and if that was the case I'd rather go as an officer so I signed up. Subsequently, my number was 315 and I wouldn't have had to been drafted and wouldn't have had to go but I'd already committed to go. Between my junior and senior year, for the summer I had to go to Ft. Riley, Kansas for six weeks basic camp. Then I completed my senior year and after graduation I had a year's extension before I had to go to military. So...not too many places were interested to hire you because you were going to have to leave in just a year. But Eastern Express Trucking Company hired me as an engineer for them, they were a pretty large company in Terre Haute. After I'd been there my year with them I went to El Paso, Texas for 3 months officer's basic training, and that was interesting. I had a good time in Texas, it was good and also I could take my wife with me. We stayed in an apartment complex that had three swimming pools so I thought that was pretty good, we didn't have to stay on base. When I came back, I worked for Eastern Express for a while. Then I took a job... 'course I was an aerospace engineer, "rocket scientist", (laughter) and so they had landed on the moon in 1969, and after that in about 1971 they had decided not to go back (to the moon) when I had graduated and all the aerospace engineers were out of a job! So...I could do mechanical engineering because I'd had all the courses...so I was offered a job down at the Heath Candy Company in Robinson, Illinois, so I worked at Heath for about two years and I was their manager for all the distribution and order processing. Then I decided to come back to the farm, that was 1975, I liked that better and I've been there ever since.

Miller: Ok, let's just talk about some things in general, as you look back on your life, were there particular persons that made a big influence on your life?

Wernz: Oh...some of the teachers in school, several of them influenced my life. Probably math and science I probably learned more off of Ted Kallas than anybody else I'd say...(much laughter)

Miller: You're probably one of the few people that would say that

Wernz: Actually in my class I had Steve Crumrin, he's a very smart guy, and Tim Cork, those guys were pretty studious, and we could really get Mr. Kallas...and so he liked us and so we learned quite a bit from him. My Grandfather Davidson, who lived with us would tell us about the old times, being born in 1876 he lived to see the first automobile and also to see a man walk on the moon! His particular life span was amazing. He remembers the old stuff. He was in the first jail and courthouse in Clark County (Aurora Bend) and he took my brother Tom down there and showed him where it was, and we found the field actually. It was owned by the McClures and then by Alfred Seidel. That was interesting to know where that first jail was because I don't think many would know that. It was located in the town of Aurora Bend before it was moved to Darwin. It's kinda funny because my grandfather, being born in that era told my brother Tom that "I know where it was because I was in the building", that was pretty straight hand information. Maybe 25 years ago we were farming that field and struck a rock, we dug it out, and we actually have a rock of the foundation of that first courthouse. That may be something that should be given to the county to put on the courthouse square because that's the only thing that's left of that first courthouse. My grandfather would tell me stories about loading corn on all the riverboats that came to Darwin. There was actually a wharf on our family property where they would load riverboats in the spring. They used the river in the spring because it was typically high in the spring of the year. They would shock the corn and stack them up on the riverbank then carry them on the boats, he'd tell me stories about that and they would also load boats further downstream at Darwin.

Miller: So Darwin must have been recognized stopping area?

Wernz: Oh it was, (inaudible)...Illinois. In fact, we owned a part of the oldest business in the county, the Darwin Ferry. It's probably as old of a business as any business in Illinois I would imagine. It's been running since 1818, and Marshall wasn't founded until 1835, so Darwin was it (the place for commerce at the time). The first crossing was at Vincennes, and then I think Ft. Harrison at Terre Haute, Darwin, Hutsonville, all about the same time, there wouldn't have been anything away from the river much. The town of Aurora was first, and then Darwin...which was called "McClure's Bus"...Alfred Seidel married Goldie McClure...Alfred Seidel was my mother's first cousin...the McClure family owned the town of Aurora and then they owned Darwin...then they moved the county seat to Darwin in 1820 something...Marshall founded in 1835 and they moved the seat of government there. Early county history has nothing to do with Marshall, it was all in Darwin. The original north – south roadway came through Darwin, past our family farms, forded Big Creek and on to Ft. Harrison. Before Illinois Route 1 was ever considered.

Miller: Some other things you might address as you think about things that influenced you, maybe national events or historical events that might have left an impression on you?

Wernz: Well....for several years I was the Republican County Chairman, I was interested in politics at an early age...I remember when (John F.) Kennedy was assassinated...I never was impressed with hero worship, ever, ever, ever,...I wouldn't let a president or anyone cut in front of me in line at McDonald's, they just work for me, so many people "hero worship" them. Give me a break, that's my feeling, if you don't like 'em kick their butt out in four years, they seem to have a God complex and that's too bad because I feel the people are important. My political convictions are pretty strong.

Miller: My next question is going to make it sound as though you're really old...(laughter)...but you have lived a good long life and I'm wondering just what inventions that have come along in your lifetime that surprised you?

Wernz: Well, now that's kinda an interesting subject because...being a technical person I was closer to it than a lot of people...by education, not by vocation necessarily. When I went to Rose-Hulman we had the latest...being an aerospace engineer...we had the latest IBM computer, calculating machines were just starting to come around. The actual calculating machines...we had the computer, you know with punch cards, I was taught programming, so I

could write one program and knew how they worked, take your blank cards and type 'em out. But the calculators were the big old calculator machines, that would grind out mechanically the numbers. They had just gotten in one of the Wang in, an electronic calculator. Texas Instruments had just invented the integrated circuit...that allowed them to make miniaturized circuits to go into regular calculators that everyone has so that was amazing, they didn't have very many of them, we were all using slide rules...in 1967 we were all using big old slide rules to do our calculations. I was there when it started happening. Also they were starting to make video tapes, they were starting to make them smaller like the Beta and the VHS. They had a brand new one at Rose-Hulman and they taped the Apollo 11 launch, brand new technology, that was interesting. I think electronics (innovation) was the big thing. Technologically from the time I was born, they'd already had the Hydrogen Bomb, the Atomic Bomb and that existed but I didn't witness that, most of what I witnessed was the electronic revolution...and the miniaturization of everything, TV sets, the mass production of TV sets to make 'em so much cheaper, the invention of liquid crystal sets, LEDs, then later on after school the invention of the internet. Technology and breakthroughs in energy development, they're still trying to develop fusion which they just can't quite get. Still, technology has allowed the development of cheap, cheap, cheap energy. Nothing is cheaper than atomic reactors but it's so dangerous and radioactive material to store after it's spent. There's nothing simpler than placing objects close together and get unlimited energy, that's awfully simple to do but the problems with it...if they could just get the fusion thing done but that technology isn't here yet. Satellite technology, you know, launching all the satellites, I remember the first one launched, 1957 witnessing those things of course being an aerospace engineer that was very interesting to me. And watching Werner Von Braun doing all this stuff, that was very interesting to me.

Miller: I have one last question and it's about Marshall,

Wernz: You didn't ask me about my hobbies....

Miller: Ok, tell me about your hobbies?

Wernz: I'm a walker, I do walking. My wife and I love to travel so we take a lot of cruises, we cruise all over the world. And my son walks with me, and so we backpacked across Europe. He and I walked the Camino de Santiago, we walked 500 miles! Thru the Pyrenees to Santiago, a very spiritual and uplifting journey, we did it over a two year period. The first year we started outside of Leon because I didn't know if I'd ever go back so I wanted to make sure to make it to the cathedral ([Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela](#)) and it was a holy year when we went, when they swing the big incense burner and all the special stuff for the holy year, we made it to see all of that. When we went back we went to the Pyrenees and Pamplona.

Miller: I have a friend who did that when she was 70

Wernz: Well, I'm gonna do it next time it's holy year and I'll be 71, I think it's in 2021. My son goes with me, and his daughter is gonna be 11 or 12 and we're gonna take her before I get too old to do it, so hopefully when I'm 71 I'm walkin it again! In 2001, Aaron and I backpacked around India and Kashmir and thru the Himalayas to around 18,000ft...went up and down the Ganges River...Taj Mahal...mingled with the locals. So that's what I like, I like to see the world.

Miller: Ok, I'm gonna bring you back to Marshall...If someone from someplace else came and visited you how would you describe Marshall and what would you tell them about why you lived here?

Wernz: Well, I'll start with the last question first, I'd tell 'em I lived here 'cause I was born here...(laughter)...I've stayed here because I've been many places, I've been to every state in the USA and been to many countries, and I love to go to those places...but I've never found anyplace I like better than Marshall. It's kind of a unique situation too, I've got a nice life here myself, plus I live here on main street, I work out in the country, I've lots of places...I've room...which many people don't have. They live on some street in New York or whatever, I've got a lot of room. I love Marshall, the people are nice. I was on the city council here, and on kinda that same subject, we had a committee that was to increase the commercial appeal of Marshall, to bring industry into town. I was kind of naysayer on that, I would tell 'em, you know, you think you're wise if you do all this development stuff to help the economy around here...but you almost need an anthropologist before you do all this around here. And this anthropologist

will tell you that...how the people are in Marshall, before you start trying to...it's so easy to grow a community - they thought I was full of crap when I was telling them this – by increasing your population and bringing industry in, everybody does it. The hard part? The hard part is to maintain a stable population of 3,500 to 4,000 and increase the opportunity and living standard of the people who are already here, without increasing the population, that is difficult. More opportunity, same population. We have a high school with 100 kids per class which is absolutely ideal. That's about the maximum size and still be able to know every other kid in your class. The schools are nice, the crime rate is low...you start bringing in industry, you start bringing in other people to your town...they accused me that, “well, you just don't want other people coming to our town”, and I said no, think about it, what is Marshall? Why is it such a nice town? How are we going to preserve that? We're a bedroom community and if you want industry, move to Terre Haute, leave it to Paris up there they get lots of industry in Paris. It's interesting that a lot of people live here and drive there to work! There's nothing wrong with being a nice bedroom community. We have a lot of poor people in Marshall, we got all kinds of people with little homes down here, just because they're poor doesn't mean...it's not a disaster. They don't have to be rich, I mean we don't want 'em to go hungry...but you got a mix of different people that seems to get along and that's why I like Marshall.

Transcribed by Doug Duzan – August 2016