

Marshall Public Library – Oral Histories Project
Mr. Steve Arney
Interviewed by Damian Macey – December 29

Transcribed by Doug Duzan – December 2016

Damian: I'm interviewing one of our local residents, Mr. Steve Arney, who had lived here as a child, moved away and then returned.

Arney: Good morning, it's good to be here.

Damian: Are there any things in particular in your past that you'd like to say about living in Marshall?

Arney: Well, I was a depression baby, born December 7, 1937 on a farm along Route 40 just about a mile west of Casey in Cumberland County. I was the last of five children, and I think it was kind of a surprise to my parents actually, since there was several years between my next older brother and myself. In any case, we lived there on the farm and my Dad worked there at the shoe factory in Casey and also did a little farming. One of the early things I remember from living there was going to the cornfield with my Dad and my three brothers hand shucking ears of corn off the stalk and then threw them in the wagon which was pulled by a horse. My job was to pick up the ears if they missed the wagon and toss them back into the wagon. In any case, we moved from there in October of 1942 because my Dad got a job at Velsicol. I don't remember a lot about those early years except to tell you that I started first grade when I was five years old, there was no kindergarten in Marshall at the time, I was six years old in December. I went to the old South Side School and I remember in the second grade I had Ruth Fredenberger, a long time teacher at Marshall. One of the poignant experiences that I remember about second grade was that President Roosevelt died and she was very emotional about his death, I remember her being very sad. I remember her tilting her small flag at about a forty-five degree angle to represent "half-staff". In the middle of the third grade my parents moved to the north part of Marshall so I transferred to the North Side Elementary and Irene Cline was the third grade teacher there, a long time Marshall teacher also. I continued through sixth grade at North Elementary, and my class was the first Junior High class in Marshall. Prior to that time 8 grades went through the two elementary schools, but the year I was in the seventh grade we moved out to the high school complex, the seventh grade was in a part of what remained of the old high school building that had not been torn down, and the eighth grade was in the north end of the new high school building. I graduated high school in 1955, Marshall was quite a bit different at that time than it used to be, more lively, the Candy Kitchen was in full swing and that's where all the high school kids hung out. I lived at 606 N. 9th St, which is a short street that begins at Spruce St and goes on north past Mulberry St on up into the north end of town. Beyond that, I remember walking to school...to high school, cutting through the Goekler's yard, they lived directly behind us on 8th St...there was a cinder street between Eighth and Seventh Streets past where "Jot" and Virginia Malloy lived and then another block to where the high school was...so it was a pretty short walk. There were no school buses for city kids like there are today. Everybody walked, even if you were little.

Damian: Were there buses then for the country students?

Arney: Yes, there were for country students.

Damian: I wonder when those began?

Arney: It was about that time I think, the country schools were closing, and they all in fact came into junior high, I'm not sure if they all closed at the same time. I remember the first meeting of some of those country students who were my classmates like (unknown) Shirely, (unknown) Meehling, my wife...that was my first meeting with those folks.

Damian: I think they phased those country schools out in a pretty close time together. Those homes that you lived in both in town and the country, have there been major changes from then to now?

Arney: Well, the house on the (?) no longer exists of course, the houses where I lived in Marshall have both been remodeled, the one on the south side has been added onto several times and the one on 9th St has been remodeled also. They're still old houses but they're "newer" old

Damian: As you think about your high school days are there students or events that are vivid in your mind?

Arney: Well, being around...being in junior high at the high school complex let you be around and get to know the high school kids a little better and they knew you and so forth. I was glad to have a better recognition of whose father...of folks who graduated in say the late 1940s and early 50s. I know when I was a freshman the Korean War was going on...there were some Marshall boys who were in Korea at that time, I remember that. I remember that my uncle Vaughn was the music director so he got me started on musical instruments early, I started out on the clarinet and also I took piano lessons for a while. Then he decided I should play the cornet in high school instead of the clarinet so that's what I played throughout high school.

Damian: I remember your Uncle Vaughn very distinctly and also your Aunt Catherine, they were good folks and friends with my parents.

Arney: Yes, Aunt Catherine was the librarian for a while. My Dad worked at Velsicol during those years...worked shift work...he hated to work the midnight shift, he couldn't sleep during the day, six days of midnights made him pretty grumpy towards the end of that shift. Plus he had an ulcer so he wasn't able to eat a lot of things, of course in those days there was no real cure for an ulcer so he just had to watch what he ate

Damian: In years past and since the closing of Velsicol we've heard a lot of comments about "oh what a dangerous place" it was and all that, but was there any feeling of uneasiness about the danger or about the chemicals and such at that time?

Arney: No, not that I recall...just the smell! I remember he would come home with the "Velsicol smell" on his clothes and Mother would make him change on the back porch before he could come in the house. One thing I do remember about Velsicol was that one morning early, the siren went off, two of my older brothers were working there at the time and living with us at home and they jumped up out of bed and hurried out to Velsicol because it was on fire! Fortunately they were able to put it out without extensive damage, but there were a couple of injuries...Charlie Pruiett was burned pretty badly. I have a couple of aerial photographs, I'm not sure where they came from, of the fire which I recently gave to Brad Parker hoping he might be able to do something with them.

Damian: Velsicol was a major industry for so many, many years...

Arney: Yes, it employed a lot of people, it sure did

Damian: In your schooling you mentioned your graduation...what happened then, Steve?

Arney: Well, what happened was that I got a scholarship to DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. But unfortunately I wasn't really ready for college...starting school when I was five years old kinda put me in the wrong class actually, maturity wise, and looking back I determined this. Really, I had it easy for high school, I didn't really have to work very hard to get good grades, but that wasn't the case at DePauw. I spent much more time in recreational activities than I did with books... and I had to maintain a high grade point average to keep the scholarship and unfortunately I came under the guideline by one tenth of a point. So...I got a letter saying we're going to suspend your scholarship for the next semester but if you'll get your grades up, we'll resume it. Well unfortunately it was too much to afford, full tuition and room and board for that one semester so I transferred to Indiana State, lived at home and went to Indiana State for my second year. I was very uncertain at that time about what I wanted to do with college...what I wanted to major in...what direction I wanted to go in and so forth. So...I was talking to Dick Poorman...he was a couple years younger than I and had just graduated high school and he wanted to join the Army. We talked about that and I decided well, I'll just join the Army too. So we both enlisted for two years and left in July of 1957 for Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri. I spent two years in the Army and was fortunate to get assigned to Germany after basic training, I had a very good duty assignment in Germany.

Damian: It had to be better than Ft. Leonard Wood!

Arney: Oh yeah! It was over 100 degrees in July at Ft Leonard Wood. I spent two years in the Army, got out, came back and resumed going to Indiana State and got my degree Business Administration in 1961. I still wasn't sure what I wanted to do... I got a job with J. B. Pfister and Company in Terre Haute, who was in the real estate business primarily and was also getting started in the insurance business. They had a three person staff in the insurance business, they were wanting to expand and so I signed on with them and worked about nine months with them. The company at that time was operated by four brothers. I got called into the office one day and they told me that unfortunately one of the sons of one of the brothers had failed at Indiana University and they deemed that he could do my job. That was about the time that John F. Kennedy had made his inaugural address about "doing something for your country instead of waiting for your country to do something for you" so I thought well maybe I should go to work for the Federal Government. So I applied, sent in my application, and sure enough went to work with the Social Security Administration. I spent 35 years, and so it was during that time, until I retired, that I was away from Marshall. So during that time, what was going on in Marshall wasn't something that I was aware of all the time.

Damian: So your time with the Social Security Administration, that was not in Terre Haute was it? Did you have several assignments:

Arney: Yes, I worked in Springfield, Illinois; Indianapolis, Valparaiso, Muncie, Indiana; and then I was in Chicago for about the last 25 years.

Damian: I think somewhere in there you acquired a wife, didn't you?

Arney: Yes, I did, I married Carol Lewis, a local girl, whose father worked at the Simpson-Goekler Chevrolet dealership as a mechanic for a time, he also operated a couple of auto service stations and the last part of his career he was a mail carrier at the US Post Office. (L. B. Lewis) He did that for quite a while, walked about 15 miles every day, they didn't have those little vehicles like they do now. Carol and I got married in 1963, so she was along for the various towns we lived in. I kept track of Marshall because my parents were here, well my Dad had passed away but my Mother was still here, Carol's folks were here. We kept informed reading the Marshall paper, whichever one it was, of course that changed over the years from the *Marshall Herald*, *The Clark County Democrat*, I think both of those papers existed at the same time for a time. We took one and then the other until they both went out of existence. The McCammon's came and started *The Marshall Choice* and so we kept up on what was going on in Marshall. One of the things that impressed me about Marshall during those years, was some efforts by some folks to update Marshall, to keep it going, keep the buildings in good shape and so forth. Programs like Marshall Main Street and Marshall in Motion told me that people in Marshall were progressive and were concerned that their town wouldn't fall down like some other small communities had done.

Damian: The Marshall Main Street organization started mainly as a "feeling" about what might be accomplished in about 1993. It became official and was chartered in about 1997, but the idea began in the very early 1990s.

Arney: Well in any case, that was one of the deciding factors that influenced Carol and I when we decided to move back to Marshall when I retired instead of somewhere else. Say, like Florida or some other "exotic" retirement locations. So we thought we'd move to Marshall, and maybe have the opportunity to help out a little bit if we could and also look after her parents and my Mother who was living at home at the time.

Damian: That decision, to move back to Marshall, has there been any concerns that maybe "Gee, maybe this wasn't the right decision"?

Arney: Well, I know it has been in my mind from time to time, I don't know if it has been in Carol's so much, when we visit friends, and we've done some traveling to other locations and other parts of the country, there are some nice places to live in the United States. So yeah, I've kinda thought it would have been nice, you know to live in say, San Luis-Obispo in California.

Damian: But Marshall won out?

Arney: Marshall, yeah, it did.

Damian: Well, I feel like it's a pretty good place, I know that's what we found when we moved back. During your professional career time, was there a person that you consider really helped steer your career, with some of your decisions that was really an influence?

Arney: Well, actually yeah. I wanted to go to the University of Illinois, when I graduated from high school. My Dad was an influence NOT to go there. He had gone there for one year at the start of World War I. He had just graduated from high school. So he went there for one year and unfortunately got ill with rheumatic fever. He could have gone back but he told me that was just "too big of a place for a small town guy", he said I'd just feel lost and wouldn't be content, so yes, he influenced me in that way. I've actually always regretted that, I would like to be a graduate of the University of Illinois. Ummm....Evan Portis (?) the pastor at the First Methodist Church at the time, he encouraged me to go to DePauw, it's the Methodist affiliated college and he highly recommended it. Beyond that I can't think of any one individual who influenced my career path.

Damian: You mentioned a couple people, Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy, is there a particular event that just really stands out and is just a very vivid memory?

Arney: Ahhhh...that's a difficult question....Well, I can remember the end of World War II, I can remember the dancing out in the streets, and the reactions of the playmates in my neighborhood. I had two older brothers who were in the service during the war and I remember them coming home and that was a very happy and joyous time. My mother was so proud of the fact that there was the banner in the window with the two stars on it. Also, my sister, who was the oldest, and her husband was killed on Okinawa. It was May of 1945 I think, I remember my Dad waking up my brother and I in the middle of the night and telling us that we needed to get up and go to Casey, that Rosemary had just gotten a telegram that he had been killed.

Damian: We've talked a little about modern conveniences, what are your thoughts on some of those?

Arney: I can remember when we lived in the south part of town, I was just a little guy, the heat was a coal stove. I would pull my wagon up to Newberry's (area south of Archer and Michigan) and get a gunnysack full of corn cobs which we'd use to start the fire with.

Damian: Did you soak 'em in kerosene or as we called it "coal oil"?

Arney: Well, yeah, probably, they didn't let me handle that, my job was just to go get them. I also remember that my mother had an old Maytag washer and it had a motor on it, and to dry the clothes we'd hang 'em on the line outside of course. The washer had a hand crank wringer on it, two rolls that the clothes would smash between them and get as much water out as possible, and that was my job, to turn the crank on the wringer. Another thing I remember is that you didn't go to the store and buy a chicken, you had your own chickens, you'd cut the head off the chicken, let it run around to bleed, then boiling water to soak the chicken in to loosen the feathers.

Damian: I remember as a youngster I can't think of a more "evil" smell than those wet chicken feathers.

Arney: Oh yeah, I hated to pluck the feathers off those chickens. But that's the way it was, back in those days everyone had a job around the house, chores to do...I'm not sure it's that way anymore with all the conveniences that people have.

Damian: You mention some of these things now and kids will just stare at you and say, "what're you talkin' 'bout"? You've mentioned several things that you remember and I think that's the purpose of these interviews, one of the things you said is that, "Marshall used to be a lot more active and lively place, and that's kinda what brought you back was the revival of Marshall maybe, how do you think the downtown...maybe the whole community compares to when you were a youngster?"

Arney: Well, the town is very attractive I think, compared to...umm...as a result of the efforts of many people, such as yourself, the City Council, the City Administration, to seek the funding for improvements, sidewalks and

streets, nice lamp posts and so forth, so it's a very attractive town. Unfortunately there's not a lot of business downtown, and that's partially a result of Walmart, which in one sense is good in terms of sales tax revenue, i.e.: people coming here from out of town to shop. But it's not been a good thing for the downtown of Marshall. There's just not a good way to make a living with a storefront business on Archer Avenue right now.

Damian: You are very much a part of a project called Harlan Hall, being involved in some of the physical work and also serving on that committee for development, would you care to elaborate on that just a bit?

Arney: Well...Harlan Hall was quite a project, I think that it's a great thing that it happened. It was very controversial, there was a faction in town that thought it should be torn down, that it wasn't worth the effort and the money that it would take to refurbish and renovate the old structure, to revitalize it and make it what it is today. I'm glad that I was on the side that could support the project and help to achieve what it is today. I'm also glad that the current administration shows interest in keeping it going, I had some doubts about that at the time of administration changes, but so far it seems to be working out reasonably well. I put in some hours, not as many as some others, but I'd like to mention specifically Jim Schwartz who...I think if we hadn't had him, it may not have happened, because of his leadership ability and skills just played a tremendous part

Damian: Steve, let's just say you're in another part of the world and you're trying to tell someone about your community of Marshall, what would you tell them?

Arney: Well, I would tell them that Marshall is a pretty little town with lots of history, with lots of late 19th century architecture, many old homes that have been maintained and add to the character of the town. Lots of trees which add to the attractiveness of the town. It's a town that has a very attractive courthouse, a city bandstand where the city band plays every Friday night and has since 1875. It's a town that I think Illinois can be proud of actually. Illinois kinda gets a bad rap as far as politics and things like that, Illinois can be a nice place to live and certainly Marshall is a part of that

Damian: Steve, I'd like to thank you very much for participating in our oral history project.