

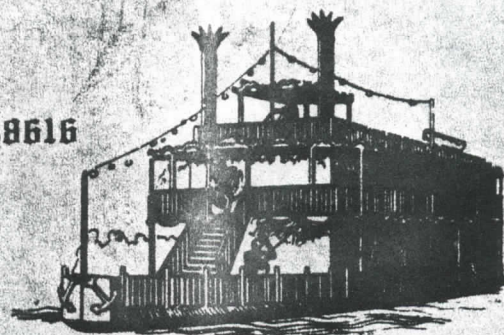
Matell Babion
Life & Times

Opera House p 5+6
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Chesaning Public Library

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I have been asked to participate in the Chesaning Public Library Oral History Project. I have agreed to a tape recording between a library representative and myself. I take this opportunity to assure you that these recordings are the property of the library and its historical collection, for use as the library sees fit, and I agree that no monetary consideration need be paid me.

Mabelle A. Babion
6-7-76

Witness:

John Frank

c.1
I think we should start with your name, Mrs. Babion.

Well I was born the 28th of July in 1888, and was named Mabell Ann Waldron. My grandmother's middle name was Ann also, and it carried back in the family on her side for several generations.

Where were you born?

I was born on the Centennial Farm a mile north of town, now owned by Amy Waldron, my sister-in-law, and I had two brothers but no sisters. I was the youngest one of the family.

Tell us your brothers' names.

Charles Wellington Chapman Waldron and Edward Chapman Waldron.

Well, the name Chapman seems to be quite prominent in your family, was that a family name?

My grandfather was Wellington Chapman, who came from Massachusetts with his brother, George W. Chapman, in 1842. They each bought property one mile north of town. Grandfather bought it one mile north of town and his brother bought one mile south of town on the Shiawassee River. They stayed here just a short time and then they went back home and brought, grandfather brought his first wife and one child with him.

Was there a house on the property when he got back?

No, there were squatters on the property, they had a little shack built there, but he put up a small house and painted it with red paint, and we called it the little red house. That was finally moved down back of the, or on the flat land back of the barns.

Well how many children did he have?

Wellington Chapman had, when he brought his wife here, they had one child and he was the first male child born in Northampton, as it was then named. And he lived ^{for} a good many years here in town.

Did he have other children?

No, just my mother. My mother was born, they went back to Connecticut. Grandfather was a railroad man, and he built lines for the railroad and they went back to Connecticut and continued building their lines after they stayed here a year. And then during that time my grandfather's first wife died and at the same time a small child. Then my grandfather a year later married my own grandmother, Sarah Ann Dickman and she came here with grandfather, and they moved to Ohio and were there for some time building railroads and their experiences were quite varied, I believe. They came back here in 1859. Mother was 10 years old at that time.

And they stayed here then?

They stayed here then. She never left here only just to visit back in the East ~~only~~ for a month or so at a time.

How old were you when you went to school?

Mother always said - we lived a mile from town - and mother said that the walk to town was too hard for me to take when I was five years old so she wouldn't send me until I was seven, and I started in the first grade. The first grade and the kindergarten were in together, but I never^{did} go to the kindergarten part of it.

Can you remember any other experiences of school days that you really enjoyed?

Well of course, all the Holidays were great events in those days and the teachers tried to have a Friday afternoon off for special occasions or for special entertainment. Sometimes she'd read to us, sometimes we'd have a Spelling Bee and sometimes we would have a program with songs and recitations by the different pupils.

Did you have Christmas programs?

For Christmas and all of the Holidays, Thanksgiving time and all of them, we had very special occasions. We sang special songs for them and at Christmas time we had special treats and had an exchange of gifts. Valentines was the same way, we had an exchange of Valentines.

Did you go to High School?

Yes, I went to High School and I stayed in High School until the last half of the eleventh grade. Then it was in the winter time and I decided that I was going to stay home the rest of the winter, so I didn't go back to school, much as I am sorry now that I didn't.

Tell us about when you were married.

Well, my sister-in-law, Amy worked in the Post Office for her Aunt, or her Uncle, who was Postmaster then, and she came up here from Saginaw and during the time of a big party that was going on in town she introduced me to one of the mail carriers, Albert Eabion, and we continued going together off and on for quite a few years, and finally we were married in 1909.

Did you have a little trip, or honeymoon?

We had a month honeymoon, and we thought we were really some punkins. He had saved up his time from the previous year, 15 days, and he had 15 days coming for the next year, so we took off and.... first we asked a friend of ours to come here from Detroit to visit us, and he married us on Monday morning, the 12th of October in 1909. And we took him with Mr. Cantwell's car to Corunna to take the train back to Detroit, because we were going to Detroit. The next day was a big exhibition ballgame between the Tigers and some other ball group, and we both intended to go to the ballgame but the next morning when we got up it was so terribly cold that I wouldn't go, so he, with a cousin of his, John Bowden of Detroit, went to the ballgame but he left me in the hotel. So we had quite a time. Well we

stayed there several days, and then we went down to Painsville, Ohio where an Uncle and Aunt of mine lived. He was a very favorite uncle of mine, and all kinds of cousins, and we spent two of the ~~very~~ ^{among} happiest times of our lives ~~with~~ those relatives that we had there. They were so good to us, and we went into Akron to visit another cousin that was there, and then we decided that we'd come home. So we came in by Saginaw and we had to stay all night in Saginaw at the hotel because there was no train through after we got in from there - we had come in from Detroit. And we got home a month later.

Mrs. Babion, where did you live when you came home?

Well, I lived with my mother. My mother and I had moved to town the year before, and we had rented a place that we wanted because we couldn't find a place that we liked to live, ~~and~~ We wanted it on the riverbank, and mother couldn't find a place in town that she would buy, and of course Ed and Amy were married the year before that in 1908, and so we couldn't stay on the farm with them, we had to come to town. So she and I moved down town to the house that's right across the street from the present Baptist Church, corner of Pearl and Saginaw Streets. We stayed there until the first day of May, and then just before the first day of May mother had bought the place that we now live in on Front Street, and so we were moved into that house and I have lived there ever since.

Then in other words, you and Mr. Babion lived here with your mother?

Yes, that's it. She couldn't live alone, and we didn't want her to live alone.

Well, did you have a car at that time?

At that time he was still a mail carrier, but he was working mornings and evenings for Adolph Greenebaum in the clothing store. Later on we decided, a couple of years after that we decided that was too hard work altogether. He was going to get a job in town, so Mr. Greenebaum decided that he would put in shoes, add shoes to his stock, and so when he did that we gave up the mail route entirely, and he came into town to live. We had no car until about 1915 or 16 and then he managed to buy a car, and we enjoyed it very much. The dirt roads made it hard to travel, and I never thought I could learn to drive, but I did.

Why, tell us a little bit about the hours that your husband kept when he worked in the clothing store.

The hours were a perfect joke. When he was on the mail route he was through about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, but when he got into working in the store he went to work at 7 o'clock in the morning, got the store opened up, got the fires built, and everything going, and was home for meals of course at noon and at night, and then he went back in the evening and he

stayed until 9 o'clock, and at 9 o'clock if no one was in the store they closed up. If anybody was in the store, even visitors, why they stayed and visited with them and sometimes it was 10 o'clock when he came home. Well in those days we didn't have Thursdays and ^Fridays as big days, we had Saturday as the big day, and everybody came to town on Saturday. Many of them parked their cars or their wagons or the buggies along the street, and they would sit in the buggies and watch the people go by until about 9 o'clock. And about 9 o'clock or maybe 9:30 they'd ^{begin to} come in and wonder if they could get a pair of shoes. They were awfully tired, but they would try to get a pair of shoes, and of course we'd try to sell them. Sometimes we got home at 11 o'clock, it was often 12 o'clock, and once in a great while it was 1 o'clock before we could get our store closed up and everything put back in order and leave for home.

Mrs. Babion, when did Mr. Babion go into business for himself?

Well after we were in business with Mr. & Mrs. Greenebaum for several years he finally, Ed Rehmann came to town and Ed was our tailor, and a very good tailor. So as a young fellow he did work and he had just come from Germany. He came to town and he had quite a few relatives here around the town during the next few years. Well then we put in the shoe store next to the corner store where the Rehmanns are now in, and the second store was where Albert had his shoe store, only we didn't own it at that time. We were still in partnership, and later on we bought the Greenebaum share of the business and we put in our own shoes. Then long after that Byron Coryell had started a small bank in the building that we moved into, and that is where the Arlene's Beauty Shop is at the present time. I think it's 123 West Broad. Then we decided, that had been a bank - Coryell had had his bank there but he failed - and so through some maneuverings we were able to buy that store. At that time everything was tied up in Chesaning. We already owned one store in the western part of the block, but we didn't want to move up there so we bought this other store and then later on we sold the one that we owned up in the west part. We remodeled and during the remodeling, the big safe had to be taken out of the basement, not the safe but the underpinnings for the safe had to be taken out, and that was no small job. They put horses, a pair of horses and a (block and tackle?) Well I imagine that's what it was, down in there and they worked at that. During this time Albert came down with pneumonia. I hired Julia Scherer to come here and stay as a nurse for him. Mother was in the house doing the housework and I had to stay at the store, and I was there for all the rest of that fall, or spring; it was in the spring that we got it, the spring and all the summer. Father Babion came up here and stayed at our house with us and did the carpenter work on the inside

getting the shelves up and things like that for Albert to take care of, but it was weeks before Albert was back on the job again. That was the worst siege that we had in our whole life, I think.

Well, it seems like those things happen all in a bunch, don't they? Now, how long were you in the shoe business, or when did you close out the shoe store?

1951, no 1955 I think we closed the shoe store, but we didn't close it. We turned the shoe store over to Waldron and Margaret and Ruth and Bill and they worked at it from the time Albert had his stroke in 1951 until 1955 I think. I think that's right.

Well, ^{now} the librarian has a note down here about World War II shoe rationing. Was there rationing of shoes in World War II?

Oh my, we had a terrible time with shoe rationing. We had to be so careful ^{about} of every shoe that we bought; we had to get tickets for every shoe that we sold, and once in a great while they would have a special sale on some shoes that we wanted to dispose of or that we felt that we could dispose of and we'd line them all up and we'd have duplicate copies, or triplicate copies of every bit of business that we did during that time. It was a horrible thing. I still have a lot of the papers and things that went along with that, the advertising that went with it, and at that time we were saving lard, oils of all kinds. Maude Hill was the chairman of that oil group. We were saving tin cans, and Nora Volkmer was the head of the tin can group. I was the head of the newspaper group, or the paper pick-up group, and we had a small paper press in our basement ^{that could} to bale paper, and I kept the three men in our store busy with that baler, baling the newspapers and the scrap paper that we got from up and down the streets from the different stores. We had quite a time with it.

You know, we have not mentioned your children. Would you tell us how many children you and Mr. Babion had?

Well we had three, Beatrice Ruth, now married to William Morse; Hortense Pauline, married to Donald Fuoss; and Albert Waldron, who married Margaret Stolsen, who has since passed away.

Do you remember anything about the old Opera House?

That was one of the momentous occasions. The old Opera House was located in what is now the parking lot to the Reiber and Schwartz Garage, facing the house that is just north of us, Niles Nixon's home. It was a huge building and it was used for years and years, and when it burned it was the most awesome fire that anybody ever could imagine because there was a strong wind that night and they took good sized embers of burning wood right over our house, across the river, and clear over as far as Liberty Street.

Well tell me what sort of programs were in the Opera House.

Well, the Opera House was built for Drama and Concerts and things, even Graduation Exercises from the schools were held in the Opera House.

Anyway, when I was in the eighth grade, we sang, our grade sang the Annville Chorus and the four of the young people that held the main part, ^{and} the boy who was singing alto got mad at the teacher and told her off, so she put me in to sing with the quartet as the alto, and I was real happy. They used that at the time. Then one time ten people, five couples, entertained at cards for practically the whole town, and they borrowed card tables from everybody and they took them in there and set them up and an aunt of my husband's got the first prize for playing cards, and she hadn't played cards in years and years and years and we were all so delighted about it.

You said it was built for Drama. Were there opera companies that came to town, dramatic societies?

They did. They came with their trunks, and the scenery all packed. They were met at the depot by a dray with horses. It was brought down here and carried into the back of the Opera House and put up. Later on there was more scenery put up in the Opera House itself so that they didn't have to bother carrying so much. But at first they didn't have very much scenery, I guess. The first Opera House was over the store now occupied, or owned, by Neu-Rich, but it was a different store with an upper story and they had a very narrow stairway that led up to that in the back and it was hard work for them to get their opera companies up and down there. The dray man, was a special, that was all he did around town was to do draying and he met each one of the trains as they came in every day and brought down the mail, and brought down the other things that had to be brought in. Trunks, often men that were traveling for the shoe companies would have their trunks full of shoes, and they would bring those down to the store, and bring them into the store and display them for us and we would get some idea of what we were going to have for the next season. The Hotel had a bus that they ran back and forth with two horses and this carried the passengers that were to stay at the Hotel. When they had the Drama group here they had to have some place to stay and so they stayed at our Hotel Central and it made it a very good place.

Would you like to tell us a little bit about the Study Club? What do you know about the beginning of the Study Club?

Well, I was working in the store full time when the Study Club started. It was an afternoon meeting, and I couldn't go. I just couldn't get away from the store because that was the time when we were usually quite busy, along about 3:00, 4:00, and finally Anna Nason prevailed upon me

to come on up to her house to a meeting one afternoon, and I decided I'd go. Maybe I could make it ~~some way or other~~, so I went and during that afternoon they put me in as Secretary of the Study Club, and I was glad in a way, but still I didn't know how Albert was going to take it because he needed me there at the store he thought. So I took the job and from then on, oh for several years, I was the Secretary for the Study Club. The Study Club books are^{all} now in the library's vault. They're all over there.

Why, about what year would that be, have you any idea? Can you place it? Oh dear, no I wouldn't dare say.

What was the purpose of it in the first place?

Well, they read plays in the afternoon, and they had just a lot of fun doing it, and then they began to broaden out and they began to talk about different subjects, and pretty soon I kind of wheedled them into doing it at night. I said, "Of all the evenings before us, why can't we meet at night?" And I finally persuaded them to meet evenings instead of the afternoons. It was pretty bad to go for the afternoon, so then long about, golly I can't tell you the dates, they're all gone from me.....

Well, it doesn't matter, just go ahead and tell it anyway.

....Geneva Harmon was Vice-President of the Study Club and I was President and we had before that, oh^{maybe} three years before that, we had talked about having a library in town. We had the girls from the NYA that worked on this library board, and they worked for a library. They had taken that project up and studied for it, so we really wanted a library. But I couldn't get anyone interested in it in particular, so finally Miss Frisch, who was a Saginaw County School Commissioner sent a group of books out here and gave Helen Walker Bessinger the privilege of becoming the librarian, and that is if someone would sponsor it. Well at that time I was President of the Club, so I said, "I will take it over", because I had to see that she went to work at a certain time and spent that time in the library each week, so she came to the store and got the key and then she went to her work and when she got through she brought the key back and left it and went home. Then at the end of the week or two weeks, however it was, I wrote out a check for her from this NYA Funds that were turned in toward the library work, and that was really the way our library started here in Chesaning.

Well, I'm coming back another time and we'll go into it a little more because I know there was a lot more.