

Narrator's Name: Harry C. Phillips
Tape Number: Tape Number 1
Date of Interview: June 17, 1959
Place of Interview:
Interviewer's Name:
For: Oak Lawn Public Library

Q: Would you give your name?

A: Harry C. Phillips.

Q: What is it?

A: Harry C. Phillips.

Q: And your address.

A: 9545 South 53rd Avenue. (could be 9745, please check)

Q: And what is your age, Mr. Phillips?

A: What is what?

Q: What is your age—or don't you want to tell us.

A: I don't care. I'll be 85 in February.

Q: Well, that's marvelous. The names and addresses of your relatives,
your wife and your daughter and your son.

A: Well, my wife is a Hazel—Polkey(?).

Q: That's your daughter, isn't it?

A: Yes, that's the only one we had. See, we lost a . . .

Q: But you did have a son though.

A: Two of them; one of them drown in this lake down here in 1916.

Q: Do you have any other sisters or brothers living in Oak Lawn or around Oak Lawn?

A: Well, my sister lived here awhile, Grace, the only sister I got. She's still alive. She's in Poughkeepsie.

Q: How long have you lived in Oak Lawn?

A: Well, it's about 51 years.

Q: From where did you come when you first moved here?

A: Worth.

Q: With whom did you come, your parents or your sisters and brothers?

A: No, no, we had been married ten years, see.

Q: You lived in Worth when you were married?

A: Ten years, right across the street from the schoolhouse.

Q: Where did you first settle when you moved to Oak Lawn?

A: Well—we bought 9515 Minnick Avenue.

Q: What is the location like today?

A: 9535 South 53rd.

Q: Why did you come to this area? To start a farm or a business?

A: No, my father come here in '47, in 1847, you know. That's the way I come to be here. You know where the new schoolhouse is down in there on 115th?

Q: Yes.

A: That's our farm; that was our farm.

Q: When you moved right here to Oak Lawn, did you start a business?

A: Yes, I was in the carpentry—I was in the contracting business.

Q: What conditions did you find here at the time?

A: Oh, it's pretty hard to describe it to people—none of them that ever saw it is around here now, and they wouldn't know what to think about it. Well, it was all right. We never went hungry. We had plenty to eat, make a dollar and a half a day.

Q: A lot of trees and farmlands, right?

A: Oh, yes, it was all farm except the few houses. There was probably fifty houses in Oak Lawn all told.

Q: Who were your first neighbors?

A: Haasmans(?).

Q: And they're still living in Oak Lawn.

A: Julius Haasman . . .

Q: They're still living in Oak Lawn; the children are.

A: Oh, yes, they're still there—the girls are still there, you know, Ellen and Gertie(?).

Q: Can you remember any humorous or other experiences of those early days like hard winters and hot summers?

A: Well, we had sleighing all winter.

Q: I think you said that the winters were colder then, right, than they are now?

A: Yes, it was a lot colder. Halloween was generally froze up.

Q: And the summers were longer?

A: We had sleighs and used sleighs all winter.

Q: How about your social events? What kind of social events and family get togethers . . .

A: Well, there was a church—my wife belonged to the church. It must be over seventy years now that she joined the church. It was congregating out here.

Q: What other social events did you have out here?

A: Oh, we had barn dances and all those things, you know. Bill Harnew or someone, myself, would take a team, and we'd get the sleight and go out and pick them all up and go somewhere and dance.

Q: I understand you were a caller at these barn dances. Weren't you a caller?

A: Oh, for about forty years.

Q: How about the work then, was it harder?

A: The what?

Q: The work.

A: Well, we didn't have anything to work with, just shovels and such things as that, you know, we didn't have any machinery. We did all right; we was used to it. Ten hours a day, too. There was no eight hour days.

Q: What were the streets or roads like when you first moved here?

A: There wasn't any at all. I've seen 95th Street so deep with mud that you couldn't pull a wagon down it without four horses on it.

Q: What were the main streets at the time?

A: Well, the same as they are now in the middle of the street here,

you know. These streets was all in—1892 was when these streets was put in, these cross streets, you know. Of course, 52nd Avenue was already here, 56th Avenue was here, you know. But otherwise, the streets wasn't even laid out until 1892.

Q: What were the main streets at the time?

A: What?

Q: What was the main street at the time?

A: 95th Street.

Q: Well, how about the other way? Was it . . .

A: There was nothing here—93rd Street, I don't think it was even marked off. I don't remember.

Q: How about Cicero Avenue?

A: Oh, Cicero was a one mile section line, you see. It was just as bad as the other streets, though, there was no bottom in it.

Q: What forms of transportation were available?

A: The Wabash Railroad had better passenger service then than they do now.

Q: I understand, Mr. Phillips, that you worked on the railroad.

Will you tell in your own words . . .

A: On the railroad?

Q: Building the Wabash Railroad.

A: Oh, I was just a kid six years old. I went along with my dad
sorting timbers out. (laughter)

Q: What did your father do?

A: He had charge of the hiring of the teams.

Q: And what did you do, just go along as a passenger, or did you help?

A: I couldn't do nothing, you know.

Q: What were the houses like in those days?

A: Well—rather crude, you know. They were not elaborate.

Q: And your main social events were your square dance group and your
movies against the walls, right? And the church affairs . . .

A: When I built my house over there, this one where I'm living now,
Charlie Shultz' wife, the one that died, you know, and my wife, you
know, they had four or five dances in there. We got the first floor
down— we had it firred, and we had four or five dances in there.

Al Brandt—no, not Al Brandt, Slim Brandt did the playing—with a concertina. We had some good times.

Q: What were the dresses like in those days? How did people dress?

A: Well, they weren't so elaborate as they are now, but they were nice, plain-looking—there wasn't much style, I don't think, that I can remember.

Q: What churches and schools were in existence when you came?

A: Well, the Lutheran church is the oldest church, I think, here. It used to be up there where Smith's fur shop is, you know. He bought—he didn't buy the old church, but he bought the land, and he built that, and then they moved down there where they are. But the Congregational church was—well, they had it down there, down there by the creek, you know, that church going up on 54th Avenue. That was the Congregational church. That was new about 1900.

Q: And what schools were in existence?

A: Well, this school was built in 1907. (interruption of tape) They built that.

Q: Did you go to school there?

A: No, I was married ten years, you know.

Q: Oh, you were married, right. Did you go to any schools here in Oak Lawn?

A: Not in Oak Lawn. I went to the Hazel Green School when I was a kid.

Q: What other settlements were close by?

A: What?

Q: What other settlements were close by?

A: The same ones now, Worth, Chicago Ridge . . .

Q: Blue Island.

A: Yes, Blue Island was here ahead of us, you know. That's quite an old town, Blue Island.

Q: You lived here when Oak Lawn was incorporated, right?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Did you vote in the election to incorporate Oak Lawn?

A: I must have cause I came here in 1908. I must have voted.

Q: Do you remember the first officers of the village?

A: Well, Montgomery was president. But I really kind of slipped with the rest of them. If I heard them, I'd know who they are, you know.

Q: Was it a spirited election?

A: Oh, no, no, we just got a bunch of fellows together and then elected them. There wasn't any opposition.

Q: Do you recall what some of these officers were like?

A: Just like they are nowadays, the ones that lived here, you know.

Q: Do you remember what some of the first acts of the village trustees and president were?

A: Lord in heaven, what did they do? It didn't seem to me that they did anything for a number of years. (laughter) I don't think they did. They had no money, you know.

Q: Do you recall any outstanding works of progress since you have been here?

A: Oh my gracious, what hasn't happened?

Q: Do you want to tell us a few of them?

A: Well, everything—just like it was with many villages that are

newly incorporated, you know. They went along and did the best they could. They filled the holes in the road and such things as that.

But I don't remember much of anything important.

Q: Was there electricity and gas at that time?

A: Well, electricity came in—yes, they did. They put electricity in right away. We bought it from Evergreen Park; Evergreen Park was getting it from the cemetery.

Q: Did they put it in a main spot and then each person would have to take it from there?

A: No, they bought it right to the houses, you know. The main houses, you see.

Q: How big was Chicago when you first moved here?

A: Let's see—when I first moved here—well, there wasn't anything south of the stock yards much at all.

Q: How long did it take to get down in the loop from here?

A: Well, it took just about as long as it would now to drive a team down. See, we didn't have nothing but horses, you know. You'd drive a team down.

Q: Do you know any stories about Horse Thief Hollow or Black Oaks?

A: Never heard of it—the last five years somebody—Black Oak, yes;

I can tell you about Black Oak. It was known as Black Oak up until

1892. And they changed it then, you know, and Minnick sub-divided

this 320 acres north and south, you know, and made sub-divisions.

They had wood sidewalks.

Q: Do you recall any outstanding events in the middle years, say from

1920 to 1930?

A: Well, I don't know of anything happened unusual, if you call it. Oh

yes, well, it was somewhere around that time that policemen come out here

one night to bust up a dance, and we sure did clean them up.

Q: Policemen from where was that, Mr. Phillips?

A: What?

Q: Policemen from where?

A: From the 82nd Street—85th, 82nd Street station.

Q: They weren't Oak Lawn policemen, were they?

A: No, no, we didn't have any policemen then. They come out here to a

dance. They had been to Chicago Ridge the week before, and they busted up a dance down there, you know. Well, we was laying for them when they come in here. There was Will Harnew, Frank Harnew, George Harnew; you know, they were all six foot tall, big, husky kids about 21 years old or 25 maybe, right in there. Well, they sure cleaned up those ten or twelve policemen. They were laying all over the floor, you know.

Q: Did they ever come back to Oak Lawn after that?

A: Sure, they were back for a week, everybody was. The boys—a kid by the name of Herbert(?) took a knife, and he cut the stars all off of them, cut them right out of the clothes while they was laying on the floor. I saw one—do any of you know Eddie Prim(?)?

Q: No.

A: Well, he ain't as big as Cohen(?) down here. You know Cohen?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, he's smaller yet than Cohen, but he was 25, 30 years old, and then Frank Harnew had a fella up against the door, and he was beating him right in the mug, you know. He was so drunk he couldn't stand, but he wouldn't fall. Eddie got a stick of wood—you know we burn wood?

Q: Yes.

A: He got up on a chair and hit him right on top of the head, and he went right straight down.

Q: You lived here in the 1920s, what we call the Roaring Twenties, do you recall any incidents out here?

A: Well, that's one of them. It was right around that time.

Q: Well, how about—I understand the gangsters from Chicago would bring some of their bodies out here and dump them. Is that true?

A: Oh, that was nothing. They dumped a woman out here at 103rd Street one day, they dumped two down on Roberts Road. Well, I can tell you, if I can think of them—you remember, any of you remember back some of them, you read some of the old Times, you remember those fellas? (looking through papers)

Q: Yes, I do.

A: Well, I'll tell you, we were going—I built that, you know that old building up there that used to have—at the airport?

Q: Yes.

A: That big round one, well, I built that. And one morning, we were

going to work. Some of the boys was on my truck; they were ahead of us. And in between us was a car going along. And then a couple of boys and I was in my car behind. They wasn't more than a hundred yards ahead of us, and all of the sudden, we see them throw a guy out of the car, you know. And they shot him four or five times, and threw him out of the car, you know, and they kept right on going, right between my two cars, but the cars probably were a quarter of a mile apart. They didn't rob him because I was the police magistrate at the time, and we picked the guy up and brought him back to Oak Lawn. He had \$1200 in cash on him.

Q: You didn't try to stop the other car or do anything about it?

A: We didn't have no chance to do it. We didn't know what they done.

The minute they threw him out, they drove as hard as they could. He was a little alive when we picked him up, but he was a goner. He had a postal card in his pocket, and we found out who he was. And I called his—I called his wife. The brother, the brother or something was there, and he—I told him he was hurt, and he came out. And I wish you'd have

seen the amount of fellas that come here and wanted that \$1200, too, now there was the fun of it. Every conceivable god danged rough neck you ever saw came in and said they had a note from Mrs.—I forget her name now, for give me the money. And I said, "Now listen, Mrs. what's-her-name told me to keep the money and the diamonds . . ." He had some pretty good stuff on him; he must have had \$1500 worth of diamonds on him.

Q: What did you finally do with the money, Mr. Phillips?

A: I kept it until she got able to come out. She had just had a baby; she just got home from the hospital that afternoon. She had a baby, and she said she couldn't come out, but she said if I'd just keep it, that's all. But if that other gang would have got hold of that, there wouldn't be no money there, I'll tell you that right now. Because we had a terrible time keeping the diamonds from going away. They did get the one off of his tie, I don't know how—they lost it, took it off, somebody took it off.

Q: Were there any noteworthy events here during the first World War or any of your family or your friends in the service?

A: No, I was too old to go to the war. See, I was over 45 years old, you know. They wouldn't let us in on the home guard hardly even. I

was in on it, but nothing that amounted to anything.

Q: Do you recall any of the families that lived here in Oak Lawn? Did any of their families have any outstanding service in World War I?

A: You've got to wait a minute, let me think.

Q: Do you recall the difference in the homecomings in World War—from World War I and World War II, can you compare them?

A: What?

Q: The homecomings of the boys.

A: Oh, it was similar, just about the same thing, you know. They had a big time at Blue Island, you know. At that time, you know, everything happened—we went to Blue Island, you know.

Q: You went to Blue Island to get your supplies of food and clothing and hardware.

A: Pretty much, yes. We used to buy them from Barrens, and a fella by the name of Crandin that used to keep store—Bishop.

Q: What stores were here at the time, outside of the three that you . . .

A: Well, there was the Bishops of Worth . . . See, when down there, we bought most of it there. But when I come back here, August Kerns(?) was running the store here, and we traded mostly with him. And Brandt, we got our coal from Brandt.

Q: Mr. Phillips, everyone that we have interviewed have kind of steered around these Halloween pranks that they used to pull on you. Now will you tell in your own words these different pranks . . .

A: Who ever said that?

Q: Well, a couple have talked about the outhouses.

A: Well, I'll tell you, I was building houses, you know, and they used to—it was a lot of sport, you know, they'd take them and dump them over, you know. Well, you get seven or eight houses and have to fix them up, it was quite a job. So I had to dig one where they couldn't get around it. It was between two places, you know. I just moved it ahead seven feet, put nice little brush around there, a little stuff, you know. Freddie Burns(?) and—wait a minute, I'll tell you, Louis _____ fell in. (laughter)

Q: I think Mr. Gunther was in on that, too, wasn't he?

A: What?

Q: Louis Gunther.

A: I wouldn't be surprised. I guess he was with them, but whether he got in or not, he kept it quiet. (laughter) I wanted to tell everybody.

There was never a word out of them; it's no wonder they didn't tell it.

And then ten years afterwards, I went in a saloon over here one day here around, say fifteen years ago, I guess—shut that off a minute now.

(tape stopped)

Q: Mr. Phillips, will you tell us about your bear?

A: What bear?

Q: Your bear. I understand you had a big bear.

A: Oh, yes. Huffman(?)—let's see, that was . . . George Huffman's brought the bear here, I forget his name now. He's alive yet, and he's got a brother older than him. And he brought a bear here, and I gave him ten dollars for it. But it was a little fella then when I got it, about like a good sized dog. And I kept him until he weighed four hundred pounds.

I must have had him seven or eight years.

Q: Well, what did you do with this bear? How did you keep it?

A: Just feed him and play with him and everything else, you know.

I could take her out and lead her all around.

Q: Did you box with her?

A: Well, I would wrestle with her, you know.

Q: Did the neighborhood children like the bear?

A: Oh, the school kids, yes. You know, I had her on a round tree right

north of my house. And that was about a three foot tree in there, a

great big tree in there, you know. She used to go up that tree, sleep

there all the time, you know. But the kids were there every day.

They fed her. Gee whiz, she ate up a tomcat one day out here. I got

rid of her then. It's a wonder she didn't—it's wonderful that she

didn't hurt one of them kids. Cause the kids used to feed her, you know.

And she just sat there and take the feed. They did come there with their

lunch. They would give it to the bear.

Q: What was the bear's name; do you recall?

A: Tricksy, we called her.

Q: Who did you sell the bear to?

A: What?

Q: Who did you—did you sell the bear or give the bear away?

A: Yes, I sold her to Hearn(?) up there where the golf club is, you know, that big . . .

Q: Evergreen Park?

A: Evergreen Park, yes. I put her up there. His mother just came home from Europe, and she brought nine police pups with her, oh about— bigger than a cat, you know, pretty good sized dogs. You know, they kept wondering where their dogs was going to, you know. Finally, they caught her eating the last one. She'd pull them right through the cage, you know. I saw her pull a tomcat through here—ther was a fence running along here and the cage come pretty near to it. A cat could walk between the fence. The bear caught him on the sly one day, she pulled him right through and sat right down and ate him up.

Q: You mentioned before that you were in the contracting business. Do you recall any homes you built, any places you built . . .

A: Well, I built about 150 altogether, I guess, you know.

Q: Oh, 150 homes.

A: You know where Wiley Hunt(?) lives?

Q: No, do you remember the location.

A: You know where he lives, 98th, that flat building—I put all of them, you know. The first five or six houses on 52nd Avenue, I built them, on the west side of the street. The third house I didn't cause they just put one in there a couple years ago. You remember?

Q: Right.

A: All the rest of them, the first six, clear down to . . .

Q: What about any buildings on 95th? Did you build any of them along there?

A: Yes, that little old house that Harker lives in now was on that lot that I bought on Minnick Avenue, see. I moved it over there, and I put it on—I put it there, sold it to a lady in Chicago.

Q: I understand you built the old Congregational church, right? The one that was torn down.

A: Yes, I built that—1915 is when we built that.

Q: About Cook Annex(?), did you build that or . . .

A: Well, everybody built that, you know. But we went up and took them down and brought them home. I helped do that.

Q: Those were school portables, weren't they?

A: Yes, there was two portables that we put together. We give—I think it was \$25 a piece for them from the city. And that block, you know, in back of the Covington School(?)?

Q: Yes.

A: I had that whole block there, you know. I didn't build quite all them houses, but I build fourteen, I think.

Q: Mr. Phillips, were you instrumental in organizing the police department or the fire department?

A: I didn't have anything to do with it. See, I was around 45, 50 years old at the time, you know.

Q: But you probably helped make some of the money to start it.

A: Oh, I helped. We had these blow-outs and things.

Q: Mr. Phillips, when did you retire from active business?

A: About twelve years ago, in 1948.

Q: And how long have you lived in the home you're living in now?

A: For 49 years.

Q: Mr. Phillips, do you have any photographs or clippings of Oak Lawn that we might borrow?

A: Well, I got that one I showed you up at the railroad track, you know. I didn't think of it, or I could have given it to you.

Q: Well, we'll take it . . .

A: I had a 1904 Oldsmobile and something went wrong with it right at the railroad track, and I had it opened up and was working on it there. And a fella come along, Hazel and Bud was there, you know. Bud was a little fella about four years old. Hazel was about seven—in 1908 that was. There was nothing up there—you could look anywhere you wanted, you couldn't see a house cause it was nothing but cattle guards, you know, those guards they build around like at the crossings. I don't think they build them anymore, but they used to have them so the cattle couldn't get out in the road onto the railroad, you see.

Q: Well, you built a lot of homes here, would you say there was a—when you were building these homes, was there a boom at that time like there has been recently or was it just . . .

A: Oh, no, there was no boom. I just—well, I don't know how I did it. I don't know where I got the money to do it. I just did it. Well, I had a friend that would give me a loan on any house I wanted to build, you understand?

Q: Yes.

A: Whenever I got a chance to buy some real estate, he'd furnish the money, and we'd split the profit at the end.

Q: There wasn't anything . . .

A: No boom at all.

Q: No take up a track of land and put a row of homes on there?

A: I tell you, I had 75 feet there, $37\frac{1}{2}$ is under the barber shop, Hoffman's Barber Shop, and the other $37\frac{1}{2}$ is under Harker's house.

I paid \$75 for that on 95th Street. I bought this property here one day for \$900.

Q: What property was that?

A: It's where they built the restaurant.

Q: Oh, right on 95th here off of Cook.

A: I sold it the same afternoon for \$2700. So I thought I was doing pretty well, you know.

Q: How much did it cost you to build a home in Oak Lawn in say the early years, in the early 1920s or before 1920? Do you recall?

A: I don't know. See, I built that one I got in 1908.

Q: Well, just as an example, how much did that cost you?

A: This one?

Q: The one that you built in 1908.

A: Oh, I don't know. I can't tell you—I built that great big house, I sold it for \$4000 and made some money on it. It's a great big house on the alley over here on Minnick Avenue.

Q: That is an enormous place.

A: Where Mann(?) used to live, you know. But where I am there, that's a tile house, you know.

Q: Where you're at now?

A: And I bought the tile off of the telephone company. I bought a carload of tile for fifteen cents a piece, on the carload over here. And they were—you know the long telephone sections, telephone tiles, well that's what I made the basement out of and then the top of it is tile house. I don't think that house cost me \$3000 that I'm living in.

Q: It's worth considerably more today.

A: I've refused \$30,000 for it.

Q: You offered \$30,000 for it?

A: Well, I was offered, yes. Sandeman(?) tried to—wanted it for to make a . . .

Q: He wanted to turn it into a funeral home, right?

A: But I'll tell you, we're getting \$5500 rent off of it, and that's ten percent on \$50,000. I would be foolish to sell it.

Q: For sure.

A: Right now we get about \$540 a month out of it.

Q: Well, thank you Mr. Phillips . . .

A: No, we get \$5400 and something a year out of it, that's it. All of that's, see, combined. We live in it, too. We have a flat in there, a nice flat.

Q: Do you have anything else, Mr. Phillips, to tell us.

A: No, I don't believe . . . About the little house next door, you know, I put it in . . .

Q: Yes, I know you did. Did you have anything to do with the building of Cook Avenue School?

A: No.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW