

Interview with Robert G. Davis
March 31, 1989
Marquette, MI

INT: Ok, this is an interview with Bob Davis on March 31st, 1989. Could you say your full name?

Robert Davis: My name is Robert G. Davis, and presently we are in Marquette, Michigan doing this recording, and, um...

INT: Can you tell me what year you were born?

RD: I was born in 1925, September 27th.

INT: Ok, we talked earlier about talking about the Second World War, do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was announced?

RD: Yeah, I had just finished washing the dishes from the Sunday afternoon meal with the family at home, my dad was listening to the radio, to some symphonic program, and it was interrupted, and I walked into the solarium where he was sitting listening and we both heard the news that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, and there was consternation at home because at the time I was 18 years old, so it became immediately apparent that I was going to be drafted (???)

INT: How old were you?

RD: I was, well I wasn't 18, I was soon to be 18, I was, um, probably much closer to 16. 15-16. _____ . And then of course the country quickly mobilized and over the next year or two, it had been the, um, the habit of our family because my father was an educator in Detroit to –

INT: You were living in Detroit?

RD: Living in Detroit, yes. And we came into the Upper Peninsula for almost two and a half months every summer, and the way we were introduced to the Upper Peninsula was kind of an interesting thing, it was a German person that introduced to it, uh, the woman's name was Clara Wendtlandt, W-E-N-D-T-L-A-N-D-T, and she was a wife of a police officer on the Detroit police force, and during the year, I think it was about 1937, her husband was killed by the mobs in Detroit, and her son was going to school where my father was the vice principle, East Commerce School, was noticeably upset about the whole thing and became a problem student, so my father invited the mother to come in, so he could discuss the activates of the boy with the mother, which was standard procedure at that time and I suspect still is, um, during the interview with the mother, he learned that the property up here in the Upper Peninsula was visited in the summertime by the boy and his mother, and it was the mother's feeling that probably the quietness of the Upper Peninsula would tend to calm the boy down and, um, make him more able to accept the death of his father. And as my father began to talk further with the woman, Mrs. Wendtlandt, he discovered that she had a cabin to rent on the shores of Lake Michigan, just, oh, about a half hour south of Manistique in the Garden Peninsula, in a place known as

_____. And so forthwith he talked it over with my mother and got in touch with the lady and we rented the cabin. And that was the introduction to the whole family to the Upper Peninsula.

INT: What year was that?

RD: That was 1937. I was 11 years old at the time. Just under 12. And I remember I was not too happy with the idea of coming up here to the Upper Peninsula because I wanted to go to Boy Scout camp that year and, uh, that killed that. My father assured me that I would have all the experiences in the Northern woods that I would have in Boy Scout camp. I wasn't buying it, but it proved to be true. During the ensuing years we looked around and we found property. And about the time the United States got into the war, the World War with Germany, and, uh, the Western Front or Eastern Front or whatever it was, um, we were in the process of planning to build a cabin, and we had learned from the Wendtlandts, and there was another person related to Mrs. Wendtlandt, beside her son, I think the man's name was Frank Fiedler (???), and Frank was a, uh, also a German-born person, as was Mrs. Wendtlandt, and he lived with her and kind of was the _____. And Frank was helping us get the materials necessary to build our cabin, and he knew most of the people in the area that were workman-type, could build things, and so we stayed pretty close to Frank, taking from him the help that he could offer and give to us. At the same time my dad provided employment for him, because we were still in the days of the Depression, and employment and dollars were hard to come by, so as time progressed, we became aware in talking with the Wendtlandts that there was a German Bund organization in Manistique, that it was more or less headed up by a man by the name of Schuester, who had a meat market and in those days just a big grocery store. The Schuester Market eventually became a Red Owl, and that's what it is today, and I have no idea what happened to Mr. Schuester, but he was the person that was more or less in charge of the Bund operation, and they were experiencing problems with the local people because of their German ancestry and because of the way they stuck close together, and it became apparent to a lot of the people that lived in Manistique that something was going on that maybe wasn't in the best interest of the United States, and these were the early years of the involvement of the United States in World War II.

INT: What was it, we're talking actual involvement, so like after Pearl Harbor time?

RD: Oh yes, well after Pearl Harbor.

INT: That they became aware of it.

RD: Yes, and it was after United States was at war with Germany. And I well recall on several occasions my father becoming extremely irritated with Mrs. Wendtlandt because of the way she spoke of the Jews. She was most unkind in her remarks towards the Jews, Frank didn't say very much, but Mrs. Wendtlandt was quite, uh, quite vocal in her cutting them down, and my father was an egalitarian and he didn't go for that, he was kind of a spiritual guy who felt the world belonged to everybody and everybody should live freely in it. And that was the beginning of the split between my father and the um, and Mrs. Wendtlandt and her nephew. But during that time we were, as I said, we were in the process of building a cabin, and the cabin we were building

was on P _____ Bay, which was further south in the Garden Peninsula than _____, and my parents had discovered this piece of property during the time that they were staying at the Wendtlandt's, that we were all staying at the Wendtlandt's, and we were put in touch with a stone mason, and I can't recall his name, but he had a gas station on the corner of US-2 and M-36, I believe it was, that could be checked, but it is known as Garden Corners, that particular corner, and this was an interesting gas station in that it was made of stone and rose up in the air at least two stories, if not three, there was kind of a parapet up on top, and it was very artistically put together and it was one of the, the sights to be seen –

INT: Kind of an architectural novelty?

RD: Yes, an architectural novelty, uh, in the heart of the U.P. that was hardly even known as the U.P. at that time, and we learned later that the man had an aerial that ran along side of a 90-foot tree and that he stood on the top of his parapet with binoculars or a spy glass and observed the shipping going out of Escanaba, and his job for the German organization was to report what was going on, in terms of the number of ships that were leaving with ore and that sort of thing, from Escanaba and going in various directions to help with the United States' war effort, but the Germans were interested in keeping tabs on how we were getting our steel and our... Um, but he was a very interesting man, he helped up lay the foundation for our cabin and, um, he sang a lot and told us a lot of stories about his life in Chicago as a young man, and, um, we had no reason to believe at that time that he was involved in any surreptitious activity at all, um, we just took him at face value and worked with him and we got the foundation built, carrying gravel and sand from the beach up to this long field to top of the bluff and laying the foundation, and one of the things that impresses me during that time was that rationing had started and was well, was well-entrenched, and in order for us to, as a family, make the trip from Detroit to the Garden Peninsula, it was necessary for Dad to save all his gas stamps, so that during the year or the six months preceding coming up to the woods, we didn't hardly go anywhere! Because we were saving gas stamps for the long trip north. Dad was very much in love with this place, it was his hideaway, his getaway, it was his camp, um, subsequently we'd found local people that would help us do things, they would help us, um, with their meager crops and share them with us, which we had to pay for of course, and interestingly enough, one of them was an old Russian by the name of Bartus, Joseph Bartus –

INT: Do you know how that's spelled?

RD: No, excuse me, he wasn't a Russian, he was a Polish person. It was B-A-R-T-U-S. Joseph Bartus. Strange man, he lived probably eight miles from the nearest town, which was Garden, Michigan, and one cold winter night he went in town to get drunk and came back and was too drunk and froze all the toes off his feet, so he walked in a very funny manner, and, um, the thing that I remember so clearly about Mr. Bartus, we'd go get his gnarled potatoes and his crooked carrots and things like that which he would dig up, you know, for us, and that was our fresh vegetables and that was ok because fresh vegetables were very hard to come by in the Upper Peninsula at that time. He declared, at the time the Russians came into the war in alliance with the United States, that United States was making the biggest mistake it would ever make in its life, and, um, he went into a real tirade against the Russians and, um, the kind of people that they

were, what we could expect of them, and talk about the voice of prophecy, just about everything that man said way back in those days when we thought we had an ally come true in terms of our having an ally, and, um, so getting to know him was an interesting thing and, uh, he gave us all cause for wonderment when he took off the way he did verbally against the Russians, but then one might suspect he knew what he was talking about because he was born and raised in Poland, so he had first-hand information on the character of Russian people and Russian leadership.

INT: Were you getting, like, the kind of thing we think of as propaganda about the Russians, like in papers and stuff that they were our friends?

RD: No

INT: You weren't getting any of that?

RD: Well, we were over the radio.

INT: Yeah?

RD: We were hearing of the wonderful things Franklin and Joe Stalin were doing together to, um, form an alliance and let the United States help them take care of the Germans from their side of the picture, not realizing at all the problems that would develop later, and of course Mr. Bartus was probably very much aware that those problems would evolve, and was not at all hesitant to tell us about it. So, the, other things that we might have learned about the German Bund organization kind of dissolved as my father terminated his relationship with Wendtlandt and Fiedler, um, because they were feeding this information in kind of a stout, proud way about what they were doing for the Fatherland, and that really just did not sit well with my father.

INT: This was during – while the war was going on, and it was quite open?

RD: Oh yeah, yeah.

INT: Everybody knew about it, so it's not like something you found out like two years after the war.

RD: Oh no, no, no, the two were running in tandem, and, um, the Wendtlandts were not well-educated people, but that's, you know, neither here nor there. The son who originally we were trying to do something to help him, uh, never did turn out to be anything but a big lout, and, um, it was about, to a certain extent, what was going on in the summertime with his mother. Eventually he, um, Mrs. Wendtlandt moved and lived full time at _____ with her nephew and, um, of course Manistique was the town where we did all our shopping on a weekly basing, and we used the high school library to get our books and, the whole family was a bunch of avid readers, so that was part of the weekly trip was to go in town and get books for everybody, but so far as, beyond those isolated incidents is about, uh, hearing about what was going on with the German community in Manistique, one can only extrapolate to a certain extent and believe in all probability that Manistique was not unique, that there were other German colonies and groups that were alive, too, the Manistique group, of course this is just conjecture, but it seems reasonable. And during the years of the war there didn't seem to be a great deal of hardship on them because they seemed to have an "in" in terms of getting food and things like

that that the average citizen didn't, and that may well be because Mr. Schuester had his own market, so....

INT: But do you think maybe that's the reason why, you know, they could be so open about it and nobody seemed to be too bothered by it?

RD: I think that they were reasonably clandestine in the Manistique area. But Mrs. Wendtlandt, knowing that our family was from Detroit and weren't involved in any way with the local people in Manistique, and with a great deal of pride in her commitment to the success of the Fatherland, she was a little overblown in her discussions of it in front of us, which was the cost of the friendship then.

INT: Did you maybe think she was just a kook when she started about it?

RD: No, there was no question that she was not a kook, that she was committed to what she was doing, um, what they did do I never did find out for sure, you must remember that I was pretty young, um, I was 16-17 years _____. And then as the, as time wore on, I went into service in 1944, January, and, I was 18 at the time, then I didn't get back to the U.P. until after it was all over with and at the time I didn't have the presence of mind to be curious about what the Germans did in the U.P.

INT: What happened to them, yeah.

RD: Obviously they couldn't have done too much except scratch each other's back and make themselves feel important and good.

INT: Yeah.

RD: Do you have more questions?

INT: I'm trying to think, I can't think of any right now. I just, I find it astounding that this was done out in the open and that people didn't seem to be too bothered, or bothered enough to do something, I guess it's, was it reported to anybody, or?

RD: Well, certainly it was common knowledge. It was common knowledge that this gentleman with the gas station had an aerial and was out observing the passages of ore boats from Escanaba, that was common knowledge because somebody laughed about it once and we, well, we asked in later years what ever happened to him and that's when we got the story about his long steel aerial that rose to the heavens alongside a big old pine tree, with his radio and his binoculars. But so far as personality is concerned, the man was very pleasant, laughable, warm, generous in his work. We enjoyed working with him.

INT: But there weren't any qualms between the German community and the rest of the - ?

RD: I believe that there was some. There was a standoffishness, I believe that I just vaguely recall Mrs. Wendtlandt saying something about the other people in town not approving of their _____ they had in the county. I think this is all very interesting because I think that in those times it was a very natural thing for, well, they were immigrants, to get together in favor of the Fatherland, you know, they didn't know what Hitler was doing, they just

knew that some successes were coming through and there was a lot of hullabaloo and it made them feel very impressive, involved, and important. So I think that's about the extent what they could've accomplished in the U.P. to help the war effort, and so far as Germany was concerned, it staggers the imagination to figure out what it might have been, even recording the movement of ore from Escanaba doesn't seem very important to me, but I think it does tell us one thing, that there was a, um, an organized effort on many, many levels in the United States by the Germans, and not necessarily the Germans who lived in the United States, but outside German influence to pull these people together and strike pride into their hearts for the virtues of the Fatherland as Hitler was reshaping it and got them involved, and I think that the history of German bunds at that time in the United States is, um, will support that. There were a lot of them, I'm not sure what they call themselves or what they call them, the similar organizations that operated locally, and maybe it was just to get together and listen to the BBC, clap, _____, I don't know.

INT: What about, what year did you say you started coming up?

RD: We started coming up here in 1936, and we stayed at the Wendtlandt place for '36 and '37, 1938, then we started in on staying in our own place, so this would be about 1939, which was, um, previous to the entry into the war by the Germans as against the United States, maybe then before the United States got into the war, well it was, um, I don't recall history that well, it's not my thing. So, the cabin foundation was being laid about the time we came into the war, so it may well be that the activity of the people, the German people in the Manistique area, was well ahead of our getting involved in it.

INT: Was it a common presumption that there would be, that the U.S. would be involved in the war?

RD: Um...I think there was, yeah. My father was pretty certain that I would go in to war because that was a dismal thought for him, because he had missed World War I, by which he which he was _____ he was right in between, and as it turned out I did go.

INT: So you started coming up like in '36 and '37, I'm wondering if in those few years before the war and then looking at the years you were up there during the war, was there any really big change or did things seem to go on the way it was?

RD: Things seemed to move ahead pretty much the way they were, and I'm trying to remember when the cleavage was between my parents and Mrs. Wendtlandt, and I think that probably was sometime after 1940, because they were fairly close to her _____

INT: I'm wondering, you lived during the whole war like during the winter and school time you lived in Detroit.

RD: Yes.

INT: And I'm wondering, there in Detroit was there a real sense of the war, that it was going on and there was big war effort?

RD: There was a real sense of the war, probably from three standpoints. One, we were deeply involved in rationing by that time, with red stamps and green stamps, um, I recall not what that

represented now, but meat was red and I think green was sugar, and of course there was the gasoline ration, so that we were aware at our dinner table that there was a war on. In addition to that, there was a lot going on at the high school that I went to in Detroit, Cooley High School, activities and scrap metal drives, where great mountains of scrap metal would find themselves in front of the school as a result of all the kids in the school, some 4,000 of them, contributing scrap metal. There were paper drives and I well recall that the skirts that the girls wore kept getting shorter and shorter until they scantily covered their bottoms, all of this, and the guys, the material was needed for the boys over sea.

INT: Of course as a teenager you –

RD: As a teenager I was _____, yes. And then, too, Detroit was a Mecca for war activity in terms of the retooling and the changeover from automobile production to tank production, gun production, and the variety of other things that the war machine required, so that just about everybody in the Detroit area who was a blue-collar worker was involved in the war effort. And also at that time, there was a great influx of females into the work force to replace the necessary, uh, replace the men who would've been doing this sort of job but were out doing a job of greater necessity, shooting at the enemy. So there was this turmoil, picked up songs like "Rosie the Riveter" and, of course, there was a lot in the music area, too, songs that were being written, and I remember the radio, when we would listen to it, we were continually exhorted to buy United States war bonds and stamps. I remember one that _____ this was a Polish station in Detroit, WJBK or CKLW, I'm not sure which, but you'd hear this talk going [imitates speaking Polish] "United States war bonds and stamps!" So I'd rock back and just laugh my head off at that, and I used to tune into it just to hear that stuff, because I couldn't understand a bit of it except "United States war bonds and stamps."

INT: It just seems from what you talked about when you're in the U.P. during the summers at this time that it was a totally different sense of –

RD: There was no sense of the war in the U.P. There was a sense of, in terms of our having to save stamps to get up here, but other than that we lived in the woods, we were supplied by the woods quite often with our meat, there were a couple of old wood cutters that were an acquaintance of my father he had employed them occasionally, and we were never without venison during that time, to keep our table _____. And we didn't get to town too often, or often enough to see any of the ramifications of the social activities that might have taken place, like war bond drives or things like that, we just, we were out _____

INT: Yeah, but when you did come in contact with these people was that like the talk, were people always talking about the war, or was it just...?

RD: I just don't recall that, that there was any talk about the war except the discussion with Mr. Bartus. And he talked about it all the time, whenever we were over there, and that wasn't too often. And of course the talk with the Wendtlands during the time that we were associating with them, which as I said must have been before the entry of the United States into the war and, um, and certainly the bund organization was in full swing by the time we got into the war, that's a certainty. They were planning ahead. And it may be that they were just supporting with pride the

activities of the Fatherland, I don't know, but they did, in a sense, segregate themselves from the rest of the community in Manistique, I suspect in some of the other German communities

INT: But it seems wrong if you say that it was almost war, they had more of a cultural identification with, I mean, more cultural than specifically, like, Hitler and what he was doing.

RD: Right, they were closer to that I think that's true, yeah.

INT: So they weren't, like, they weren't Nazis or anything...

RD: No

INT: Maybe, but I mean it wasn't a political type thing, it was more of a cultural attachment that-

RD: Well yeah, I would say it was a cultural attachment with political overtones, but basically cultural, even the political overtones, uh, certainly didn't meet the criteria for being a real political organization, just, uh, would pop their chest buttons in pride.

INT: Yeah.

RD: So, that's about what it was.

INT: Well, I can't think of anything else.

RD: No, I think that about does it.

INT: Anything come to mind?

RD: No.

INT: Sticks out?

RD: No.

INT: Well, thank you.

RD: You're welcome.

INT: I enjoyed it.

RD: Yeah.