

Nan Bohl

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Nan Bohl

What is your full name?

Nanette Amelia Hyer Bohl

When did your family first come to Olathe?

My grandfather came in the late 1870's probably, I'm not sure dates.

Do you know why they came here?

My grandfather Hyer came here to work at the school for the deaf, to teach shoe making and harness making.

Charles Hyer was the founder of the boot company right?

Yes Charles H. Hyer

That is your grandfather, right?

Yes

Can you tell us about the background of the company?

Well, he started with the deaf school and he was only making \$6 a month and he had to augment that with more money. He married a young woman from his home town in Kankakee and they lived in a little house down on Kansas Avenue; and he decided that he need to start making shoes from the home in order to help make a living. Then somewhere along the line, a cowboy came through here (of course you have to remember that this was the Santa Fe trail, that's why Santa Fe is named) came through and needed a pair of boots. And he needed them so that they would fit the stirrup when he rode on the horses in the saddle. So they designed a boot with a higher heel that was deep enough to work in the stirrup so your foot will not slip through and then wanted it high enough for protection. After the design my grandfather made it within a day and then the cowboy went on west and told other people and his business evolved from there. He started a small factory and then years later in 1913 he bought a building that is in that picture there. The one on the right was a hotel and he bought the building and built it into a factory there.

Do you know what street that is?

Yes, it's Chestnut, do you know where the jewelry store is? Warren Hannon's? And you go back behind there and there is still an alley, well where the parking lot is, is where the boot factory was.

And he moved to that location you said in 1913?

I think it was 1913.

Where was he before that?

He had a small boot shop (and I can show you some pictures that are quite interesting) south of the courthouse; and then he had a small shop across the street from this boot factory and then he bought that building. As it grew he asked his brother to come and work with him as a partner.

And where was his brother at the time?

I don't know, Kankakee is where his family was from, so I assume he was from Kankakee. So he came here and worked with my grandfather and later on he decided he was going to go into the grocery business in Chillicothe, Missouri; and I don't know how many years he was up there but he came back and when he came back he was a laborer.

How big was the company at its peak?

How big? You should have given me these questions before you ever came here. I have no idea, I think around 50/75. It's all in the history, but I don't keep it in my mind all this time. That would be quite a few people in 1913, I think it says in there and it tells you that it was the largest cowboy boot manufacturer in the world at the time. That was meaning there weren't many cowboy boot manufacturers, there were individual boot makers like he started out to be. He hired probably about a fourth of his staff was deaf, he hired deaf and were still on the staff when they sold in '69.

How was Olathe and the company effected by the great depression?

Well, I was alive but I wasn't old enough to really know. I do know that during the depression the boot company was making money. It supported three brothers and my aunts and uncles so they were able to sell boots and shoes and make money; and obviously that many people in that picture there had a job. Many of the workers were of foreign origin. I have paperwork there that tells you the age and what countries they came from and they came from quite a few different countries.

And they made it to Olathe Kansas?

In the paperwork I know he went to Chicago to get them once they came into our country. He could go to Chicago and find them, the help that he needed.

Do you know why he did that? Was it hard to find people around here to take the job?

It was kind of interesting, you read the article, and it's the same thing as you hear now: the people here didn't want to do the work. Plus a lot of these men had been trained in shoemaking at that time. Each man had a bench, see this, this is a bench here. Then they had a bench with a tree, it would stand up here like this and they could work each boot and make each boot themselves they were manufactured separately each shoemaker made their own pair of boots and then as the years went by and WWII they went into more of a manufacturing

situation. But before they were individually made. The men would sit up here on the third floor, you didn't have air conditioning, there would be men sitting in front of these windows and they would work all day on boots. This was an office and showroom down here and then of course all of the other manufacturing that went later after WWII. They ran a piece across here. My family owned this whole, these buildings and they moved part of the boot factory into that until you had urban renewal.

Could you tell us a few of the names of the famous people who purchased a pair of boots from the Hyer boot company?

If you want to wait a minute, I'll get something.

I don't know what the date on this is, my dad wasn't born yet, that's my uncle bill. There were that many shoemakers. This one has all my original pictures of the boot company. There's some pictures. I'm trying to find a booklet on it. Do you want to take a photograph of it?

Yeah, if we can.

This was kind of an interesting thing here. I've got the true folder. There was a man that sent in a pair of boots that were 50 years old for a resole, and my family kept the boots and gave him a new pair; and I have a picture of those boots and an article about it. Oh there it is down there, but it's too hard to read, I think I have a folder on it.

How did many of these people find out about the Hyer boot?

Word of mouth. My grandfather is one of the first to have catalogs that you sent out and did mail order. He measured their foot like this and measured across here and around the instep around the ball of the foot and so on they would send those in and they'd make boots in those days. Wyoming and Montana and Oklahoma and Texas and all your western states, Hyer was very well known and he sent out the catalogs. My earliest day catalog is in the safety deposit box and it's just a little one but it has a lot of shoes in it, very early but as the west grew so did Hyer boot.

How long would it take one of these men to build a boot?

I can't remember all these things. I think it was about two weeks, but it may have been longer. My grandfather died before I ever was around, so I never really knew him at all. My dad was in charge of the manufacturing, he was the mechanical and design person and my uncle ran the office; both uncles did that, but the oldest one died when I was about 10.

What was your dad's name?

My dad was Charles, Charles A.

So he grew up with this? And did he start working right away? When did he start working for the boot company?

Very early, he never finished High School, he went right into it. My uncle Pete (his name was Albert) my uncle Pete was the youngest and he went to college and there were two sisters.

Did their husbands work in the company?

Yes, for a few years before we sold.

Did the company do anything special for Olathe or Olatheans? Did they have any fairs?

Fairs? We went to the American Royal; we went the stock shows and had booths in a lot of the stock shows, Denver, Oklahoma just about any of those. In later years we had salespeople, but in the early days you didn't have men out on the road. Probably in the 20's a man by the name of Gus Massey had a station wagon (as it was in those days) he went around to all the rodeos, but he did it on his own. He didn't pay him to do it he would come and get boots and go to these stock shows and rodeos and sell them on his own.

What is your first memory of Olathe?

Well, I was born and raised here.

What did you do as a kid here in Olathe?

Had a good time. My family home is over here on the next street, I don't whether you have ever been over there. There's 14 acres, a barn and I grew up I always had a horse I was the youngest one of the family so my brothers and sisters were quite a bit older. The next to youngest was seven years older than me so I kind of did my own thing.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Two brothers and one sister. They were both in the boot company at one time.

What elementary school did you go to?

The Olathe school system.

How many elementary schools were there do you remember?

Well, central was down there, down on Cedar; and Washington, which is over where Dillon's grocery store and then they had a grade school for the black children and when they got to Jr. high they came to Jr. high and high school.

What was school like back then?

The grade school was down at Central and of course it was a two story building with the staircases up to the second floor. They didn't let girls where jeans or slacks; they weren't allowed to do that. I was kind of a tomboy, I'd been outdoors and girls weren't supposed to be

doing this. They had snow pants for girls, I'd wear snow pants in the winter so I could play outside and play ball. Even in those early days, women were not supposed to even be married. That was probably a little before me, but they couldn't be married and teach school; so there has been a lot of change that way.

Did you walk to school?

Oh yeah there was nothing to worry about in those days. Our family lived just over here on the next block it's just over here on this other corner. And the middle of the street was town and the other side of the street, south, was county so we lived in the county and actually I was supposed to go to Franklin School, which was clear out on the other side of what is I35 now. It's where there used to be an insurance company as you go under the highway and go south there's a business building right there that was Franklin School so my parents had to pay for me to go to Central—two blocks away.

The dividing line, Cedar Street, one was county and one side was city and that didn't change probably until somewhere in the 40's I think. Because it was a small town downtown you had two theatres, two movie theaters.

What was it like, the downtown, when you were a kid?

It was where everything went on. You had the two theaters, you had three drugstores downtown and you had the soda shop where everybody went.

Where was that at?

Park Street, I have to stop and think what's there now, on the south side you know where Drury's Inn and then just a little east of it and there was a department store on one side and Kelly's drugstore store on the other and some other businesses; and then the Rexall drugstore was down the street. It was Snaps, they had the old fashioned soda fountain with the tables and the wood floors, the whole thing when they closed down.

When did they close down?

Not until probably in the 50's, I think, I would hate to have this written in stone, urban renewal, it went out with urban renewal. It should have been saved, just kind of like the boot factory building and all, it should have been, saved but it wasn't.

Oh, and there was a hardware store Endsley's hardware and you have seen Tim's store, it's not on the TV anymore except re-runs, oh what's the name of it?

Home Improvement?

Uh huh. It was hometown. Mrs. Endsley, the only one who could find anything in the store. It was just piled clear to the ceiling, but she knew where everything was. And then later on, there was another hardware store, after she went out; on the corner of Chestnut and Park across the

street from the hardware store. But there was T G & Y, you know different things that moved in and out all those years but T G & Y was there. Two banks, there was a bank on each corner.

You might want to tell them what a T G & Y is, they would never have heard of a T G & Y.

There are still some I think around the country but not in this area.

What was going on in Olathe during WWII? What was the company doing? Did they do anything to help the war?

Before WWII they made military boots, when they still had the Calvary, they made boots and went back to WestPoint. Then WWII came along and of course the Calvary went out and the Navy moved in. I don't suppose you boys know that New Century was a Navy base? Maybe you do?

Um hmm, they still got all the planes out there and stuff.

So this was a small town and there was no place for people to live and they asked the people in the town to take the navy people in; and my parents opened up their home and they had quite a few families that came in there. They were pretty lucky, they ended up having dinner, they became part of the family because all they had was rooms, upstairs, and that's the way all around town. And they really didn't have restaurants or anything for them to go get something to eat.

Did all those families end up staying here? Or did they move away?

Some, a couple of them stayed here, you remember the Lubberts? He was in the navy here and they ended up staying here. Most of them went back after the war. Many of them were from the south. I think most of the people that my parents took, had in there were all from the south and they all became very close friends and they kept in touch for years and would come back and visit.

We were reading up on the Hyer boot factory and I remember reading that a lot of the immigrants that the factory employed were German and your great grandfather came from Germany right? With the immigrant workers during WWII did that cause any sort of backlash?

I understood from my parents that there was some problems with like my family. But I still have the list of the workers here. This is something I wrote as a child, I don't even know where I got the information even, but it tells the background from the beginning of my family. Oh, I don't have it, I mean the list of workers they came, John, oh, I can't think of his last name, from the city has got that information plus a couple catalogs and he hasn't brought them back; and I don't think I have a second list. But it's quite interesting because it tells the country that the workers came from, when they were born and it's about this long. So it's really interesting. He was to bring it back Thursday; he hasn't brought it back. We are also doing things with the city right now.

And you say that your parents did tell you there was some tension about having the immigrants? Do you remember any of the stories?

No.

What did you do for entertainment as a child?

Like I said, I enjoyed the outdoors, so during my growing up and grade school the WPA built us the swimming pool down there where the one is downtown; so, in summer time you spent most of your time in a swimming pool, ride your bike down, come home in time for dinner and go back. But it never opened until after lunch. Then of course you didn't have TV, so I played football and basketball and baseball anything that was around to play. At night we played kick the can and punch the ice box. There was one other game we played. But you know, you spent your time outside. We didn't have air conditioning, so when it was hot, you were outside anyway, so.

Did Olathe have a little league? Like you mentioned playing baseball, did Olathe have a little league?

Oh, heavens no.

So a sandlot? Where did you play?

Well we had a big yard. We played most of that over at our house; we had big trees, we had a big bag swing and my dad built a platform; and this was high school—we did a lot of this, or junior high. We'd take off of the platform on the bag swing and then you let it wait until it was barely swinging and someone would try to hop it. I didn't break my arm doing that, but I did break an arm climbing a tree. I broke my wrist hanging by my knees on a whatever, my dad had built it with pipe, I was hanging by my knees and fell and broke my wrist and then another time I was in a big tree and fell out.

You were a tomboy.

Oh, I was. I had a lot of fun too! When I was not quite four years old, just up the street here, I was hit by a car and had both my femur bones broken. Apparently I grabbed the front bumper when he hit me, he didn't see me. It was the new doctor in town, Dr. Alba (?), I grabbed the front bumper and he dragged me for two blocks until somebody told him I was under there. My heals were dragged to the bone and I was in the hospital.

How old were you when that happened?

I was not quite four, and we didn't have a hospital in Olathe of course, so it was at St. Mary's in Kansas City.

How long of a drive was that?

Oh about 25 miles, something like that, and it was the old Kansas city road, so it took a little longer to get there.

So it was the doctor that hit you?

Uh huh, he just arrived in town.

Were there any social clubs in Olathe?

Oh yeah, lots of 'em.

Can you tell us about a few of those? Women's organizations? Were you a member of any of those?

Well, I belong to a couple right now that were around; not one of them, but one of them is one of the oldest clubs in town.

What club is that?

Culture class, it was originally founded for women before women had the vote; and the only way they could get any culture or any kind of theater or any, I don't know what to say, but they formed a club so that they could meet once a month and learn new things.

Did they have guest speakers?

I really don't know, we had a 100th anniversary a few years ago and celebrated it and we had a lot of fun doing it. During that time is when women got their vote, so you know it was all leading up to kind of like what's happening in these foreign countries. Women just didn't do anything except stay home and this was their outlet and it's still going. But, it's not the same kind of organization that it was then. But you know there was all the men's clubs and women's clubs, I can't possibly name all of them. Masonic, my dad was a mason like most everybody else that was in town.

Where's the masonic lodge located?

Well the boot factory was where I told you and across the street was the library and the masonic lodge was next to it. Directly across the street from the boot factory was originally where they had the, I don't want to say the stables, but where your stagecoaches (not stagecoaches) but when you still were using horses they would come in there and they could pay to have their horses stay there. What do I want to call that? It's in all the western movies, anyway it was directly across the street. And the story goes (this was even before my dad was) we did make boots for the James brothers and we had two fires in the boot factory; and the first fire burned the 'last' that they would have had. The 'last' are the wooden (there's a small pair on the wall there—oh there's some there that we made into bookends—those are last) and everybody that had a pair of shoes or boots made, had a 'last'; and if they ever wanted

another pair made, the factory knew where to and their orders were all there too. But anyway they burned [the James brothers' lasts] so we didn't have those anymore.

When was the fire?

Oh gosh, that one was when I was in junior high, probably in the 40's, early 40's and then there was another one in the, I don't know, my husband and I were married. It was probably late 50's. There was another big fire; there was one years ago when my grandfather was in one of those small buildings too cause there's a story about how everybody came to help—help him out. But there has been a lot of big fires downtown. To the east of the courthouse there, that block burned where the alley is and to the north, that whole thing burned up once; and then on Park Street where, say the Drury's Inn that area that burned once.

Is that where the Grange store was?

Well, then the Grange store was on the other side. That was before me, I think, even. On that alley where the courthouse is to the south it burned years ago; so there's been a lot of fires.

How many kids do you have?

Our family there's four children, 11 grandchildren.

And you raised them here? You're a lifelong (unintelligible)?

This is where we've lived.

What was it like raising your kids here? Was it different from when you were a kid?

The older ones, we were still in a small town, there wasn't the heavy growth so, you could, they could still go downtown and walk to school and not worry about anything. Central was there and junior high was down on this corner and the high school was over on Park Street until the younger ones (younger Andrew), North was built; well I guess it was built when the rest of them. North had been built by then, but junior high was down here where the high school was for a while, I don't know all the dates you forget all this.

It's too much to remember.

Is there anything else that we didn't cover here that you would like to tell us about Olathe? About the Hyer boot factory? About anything else?

Oh gosh, I don't know, I probably ought to mention that I never knew any of my grandparents; but my mother's side of the family my grandfather Bonet was quite an interesting character and I do have an article about him. This house, and then there's a house here, and the following the one up there, with the stone wall (they just redid that a year or so ago) that was my grandfather Bonet's home. And he's the one that owned the, what they always called the Hyer home, he owned it and my parents bought it from the state when he died. And he raised hackney ponies and show ponies; and his original farmland is from the corner of Parker and 56

highway clear back to where the mall is; he owned that whole plot from, what is that, its highway 169? From 69 to over to Parker or Lone Elm, I guess it is there, but clear back. And there was a Victorian home over there on Parker; they just tore it down not too many years ago, plus there was farm home, and barns over here where they put in all that—about where the 1st National Bank was all his property. And his family came from, he came from Philadelphia out here, and he lived in Salina for some time. He was in the leather...turn off that a minute and I'll go get the information.

I do have one question, because you mentioned it and we've asked a lot of people for their reactions to it and what they thought about it, urban renewal. What's your feelings about urban renewal downtown?

Well, it ruined the town, I think.

That's been a general opinion but I wanted to make sure it was a consensus.

They built that funny thing down on the corner with the water that you couldn't even walk through, did you ever hear about or see that?

We've heard stories, but never seen a picture.

They tore down all the historic buildings except the one; and there were some important people in town that we knew that did it for monetary.