

Interview with Mrs. William P. Lehman (708 Mt. Vernon Ave., Fairmont, W.V.) on 7/24/87. Present were R. Dodds, John Valliant and Kitty Lehman Clovis (daughter).

Mrs. Lehman is the daughter of William H. Valliant and Bro. Company, seafood packers, of Bellevue, Maryland. She talks of the history of the company and life in Bellevue in the Valliant home. (see also Vol. 1 #19,25,28)

Interview with Mrs. William P. Lehman on July 24, 1987. Present were Mrs. Lehman, Richard Dodds, John Valliant, and Kitty Lehman Clovis (daughter).

Lehman:

How 'bout this? Just ask for anything. Real Estate, or... (laughs) ... farming... or a secret.

Dodds:

A little bit of anything.

Lehman:

Any thing you **ask** for.

Dodds:

The Royal Oak Health Center.

Lehman:

We found something that said that Royal Oak was owned by...

Dodds:

I've seen that all over the place, but its entirely based on nothing.

Lehman:

What do you want me to do?

Dodds:

Well, before we look at there, could you tell me a little bit about your relationship with the company. You were living where, at this time.

Lehman:

At a house that is no longer there, in Bellevue.

Dodds:

In the house that was on the corner.

Lehman:

On the corner. That was my home. But the family called the house, for whatever reason, I don't know, it was always as we were going up to the house. And from the office or where you live everybody was going to the house. And I lived there until I went away to school, and crossed the ferry and to go from first grade to high school. No longer there, the high school. That was 1923.

Dodds:

That was 1923. May I ask you a question? Were you born in the house?

Lehman:
Yes.

Dodds:
Yes. In what year?

Lehman:
1906.

Dodds:
1906. Ok.

Lehman:
And my two brothers were older than I, and born there too. And I think that I have read that house was maybe the property of a lady named Ball. And then it was a store. And then my father bought it and enlarged on it grew like topsy [?] It was 13 rooms or so. The porches, the... all around.

Dodds:
It sounds like a nice house. 'Cause I never saw it.

Lehman:
Well, I guess it had a certain amount of charm, and at least we had plenty of company in the summertime (laughter). It was a good place. To come, and the traffic, in the beginning, around that sharp corner wasn't much of a problem, because there was no traffic going, except going down through the plant or occasionally, the ferry, of course was there. They were going across. And at that time there was a kind of a tugboat that pulled a barge at the side.

Dodds:
Ya. That was the old ferry.

Lehman:
But, then as business grew, and traffic grew, that 90 degree corner was a hazard. Accidents, near accidents, happened around there because it was just blind, and you came around there with a car and ran right into the front of something. And then when I was 17, I guess, I went away to school. And from then on I really never lived there. I was always moving. On vacations and part and come home from vacations.

Dodds:
Where did you go to school?

Lehman:
I went to Rattle's Neck[?] and then Lynchburg. Nice girls schools. Very strict. I was kept in line. I didn't need to be kept in line, I needed to be let out and get into more trouble. (laughter) But,

my father saw that I was kept in line.

Dodds:

It sounds like your father brought up the children very strictly.

Lehman:

Yes, I would say. My mother died when I was 3 years old. So we had a very different household, because my grandpa died three months later. They lived at the grape vine house in Oxford. So at that point she and her youngest daughter, who had just graduated from high school, came to live with us, temporarily until my father could make some arrangements to take care of us, but they never left. So, my grandmother was always my grandmother, but I never associated her with as my mother somehow or another. I think my father was my mother and father. Ya, he took me to shop, and take me to Baltimore, and we had a steamboat that landed at 8:00 down in Baltimore; next morning.

Dodds:

Your father was quit a family man. He must have been quite a business man. He wasn't all business.

Lehman:

He had lots and lots of interests. And I think about him looking after people who he wasn't sure could look after themselves. Out at Royal Oak we just grew a lot of food. Just lots of food around, and if there was a family that he could maybe.... He couldn't understand where they were getting any money. Two ladies you know, that didn't seem to have any money that he could think of.... and I remember going out with the vegetables, or anything that was in season, the oysters, or what not, some ham, and just make a family call. "Hi I just brought you something." "Thanks." So that I think about that as a lot of a part of my family. And there were a number of families.... Well I seemed to go along with him. Well, I rode with him to farms. He operated 10 farms at one time. And though there were people on those farms, he would drive around, and check to see what was going on. If he saw some men working across the field and it was dry and it was dry weather he'd just take across the field in whatever car he had, he was hardest on cars because he just didn't pay attention to, just went across the field to talk to them. So that I remember standing a lot of the time with him.

Dodds:

Did you get into the packing house at all?

Lehman:

Oh, yes that was ... down there in the country you had to make your own entertainment. And I'd go down there and watch what was going on, and play with the typewriter, and (laughter). And I remember that we had a telephone down there. That was the first telephone

down there. And it just intrigued me to think that he could go on the telephone and talk to a customer and talk to a customer named Rochschambo[?] in Montreal. It was just much; in Canada, and Rochschambo, It just was an intriguing name to me. I always remember that French name. This is where the boats docked. And they had kind of buckets on pulleys, you know, they would run them up and put them on wheelbarrows, and would wheel them into this area that was in bins, divided, so that they could put choice oysters in one bin and ones that were not so choice in another. And then this was where the oyster shuckers were.

Dodds:

They still had the traditional narrow little...

Lehman:

Stall kind of thing. Yes. And then there was a window over here some place that they came to, to check on the amount, to measure them out. And then there was a little place here that housed the cakes of ice. Let me see ...ya there was an ice plant in Oxford and they brought across ice in big cakes. And they had an ice crusher to crush the ice and pack them in. They were put in cans and then ice in barrels. From that area. And then every week, I guess, they were put on a boat. It had a lot of deck. It was called the Anette V. And it went across to Oxford, to the Railroad terminal there, and were loaded on a noon train, noon or one, going into Philadelphia.

Clovis:

That boat was named after your mother.

Lehman:

And then there was a railroad station at Newcomb, and they would go out on a truck going to Newcomb Station. And if the weather was bad, my father would take a crew of his own men out and there, and I think he just had, it was fun for him, I think (laughs) . I always wanted to go too. He never would let me. But Newcomb [?] would go sometimes. And these men with like a wagon sled, and they'd cut the road out all the way so, that they could get the oysters out to the train. And that was what went on in the wintertime. Now there were oysters over here. A lot of the areas were built up with oyster shells, and also mud from the bottom of the river, because they would put bulkheads in deep for deep water, so the boats could come in, and then throw the...

Dodds:

Stuff behind it.

Lehman:

...behind it.

Dodds:

Do you remember any dredge boats tied up at the...

Lehman:

I was just trying to remember the ones that, I think there were three of my father's boats that were tied up or were anchored off during a hurricane, maybe during the 40s. And I'm not sure, but maybe they thought that they had better chance.... Sometimes I can remember them saying that instead of being tied up that they might have had a better chance anchored off, so that they wouldn't be banging. I was not home at that time. But I know that three of them blew up so far that they were never able to.

Clovis:

He had his own dredge and pile driver too. When you were asking about dredge boats.

Valliant:

You're talking about oyster dredge boats.

Dodds:

Ya, I wasn't thinking so much about your father's, but other boats that tied up there, off-loading.

Lehman:

They were working boats besides, in the winter they'd do that, but in the summertime, they would bring empty cans from Baltimore for the canning house. Then they would take back to Baltimore wheat in the hold, that came threshed and put in bags, and hauled down until the boat was loaded. And then they would go up. And they are the main things that I can remember.

Dodds:

Was there any thing else going on. I know you had the fertilizer plant. And, I think, the oyster crushing mill there somewhere.

Lehman:

Yes and it really, He must have had some other way of crushing before that, but this was going to be a bigger crushing mill, and it was gotten so far up, and then the depression hit, and it was never finished. And then he had a lime kiln, you see? there was a kiln there. And they burned oyster shells for a long time, and I guess, sold it to put on the soil. And the fertilizing thing.... In the summer time, when I was a child, they also did crabs, pick crabs, but I guess that wasn't as profitable as the canning business, because they stopped doing that, that crabbing, and picking. And they made fertilizer out of crab pickings, and that was a delightful smell (laughs).

Dodds:

I was about to say, you could probably smell that from a mile away. How 'bout any fish processing? Were they doing any fish processing?

Lehman:

Oh, yes. And the fish offal they also made into fertilizer. The menhaden fertilizer.

Dodds:

The menhaden.

Lehman:

And he canned the fish herring, and fish, in particular herring seemed to be a good item. In the summer time when all this was going on there was not enough help in Bellevue to take care of all this. So, that he would have imports, and it was his white help, they were Bohemians, I think. We used to call them Bagogeas [?] (laughs).

Dodds:

Other people used to call 'em...I heard that plenty of times.

Lehman:

That wasn't very complimentary, but.... You had to watch 'em or they'd steal everything. I remember they stole a doll off of my porch, that I never forgot (laughter). Anyway, that's where they lived, down in those houses there. And, somehow, they, the road, now here's the ferry wharf, and there is that dock that came around, and people dredged and sold their oysters to him, docked their boats free of charge, been there for years. And then there was a road that went down and right around through here. I remember there was an incline. It had to be built up, because there was ... to wheel the canned goods across here on a board walk into these warehouses where they were labeled. And sometimes he would get labels, for instance, from the A&P store to put on that. His label was Valliant's Delight (laughs).

Dodds:

That's pretty good. I think we have a copy of one of the labels here.

Lehman:

Now yesterday I tried to find some things, but I wasn't very successful. But, I could find a few things. He was a great innovator. He's got some kind of a thing that took oyster shells up to the top of the oyster pile, as the oyster shell pile built up, they would put a board walk down, some boards to wheel the wheelbarrows up. Then he had some kind of contraption that looked like a scaffolding, I don't know how it worked, but they put that up and take 'em up and drop 'em up along the top. I think that there's a picture of it all bent up from after a storm. Is there

anything else that I.... I can remember the big steam kettles here. And also in this area boilers. Old Horace Murray firing the boilers.

Dodds:

A pretty hot place.

Lehman:

Wasn't it though? On a day like today? I'm sure it was just a hot job. And this was the board walk. The little wharf there, but enough to wheel oysters, or any produce, going over here to this wharf where the steamboat stopped, and put it on board the steamboat.

Dodds:

Where were the offices?

Lehman:

In this little area right here. And someplace, maybe right there. there was a window that they opened on pay day. They would stand out, someplace out here, and my father would stand inside and the window was kind of a frosted window with a "V" on it, and they'd lift it and ... the pay.

Dodds:

Was it once a week payday?

Lehman:

I think, yes it was once a week. And the family, my grandmother or someone, always used to be afraid that somebody was going to hit my father off for.... He'd come in through the long woods there. they know that he had the day's pay, payroll, and she was afraid that somebody was going to waylay him and hit him on the head for that. Because I suppose that it got to be a good deal of money at times. At the height of business.

Dodds:

Did he put you to work when you came in?

Lehman:

You know I don't believe he ever did (laughs) somehow. I don't remember doing very much. Maybe sorting things. But I don't remember him putting me to work.

Dodds:

It sounds like you had a good position. You were in the family. You could come and go as you pleased, and watch all the activity.

Lehman:

Yes there was always lots to do. They would, as a child, ride on

the tomato truck going out to the farm. And that's where I learned to drive an actual truck (laughs). The colored fella, you know, he had to get down off at the back, and put 'em up, and then move them back, and if I could move up, then he didn't have to get up so many times. So that was where I learned to drive at 13, in Goose Neck tomato field. And then I almost got in trouble. Frank Burke was a very, very reliable black man and I guess I begged him to let me get on the road. Y' know, I wanted to shift those gears, and so forth. So, Wednesday at 11:00 was bank meeting day. So, I finally persuaded him to let me drive this load of tomatoes in. It was a little after 11:00. Papa certainly did himself. but he left some thing at home, and came back to get it, and here he came down the road returning to Easton, and there I met him, face to face. He went on by, and I went on by (laughter) and he never stopped. But at least he didn't fire Frank. I don't know if he even scolded him. We had a model T Ford, and you know you had the three pedals, and then they were really hard to drive then, and to shift, because you had to get that ... the one pedal in the middle is the ... the one on the left you had to have it down just so far, and then.... It was tricky to drive. Anyway, I guess that he thought that if Frank had taught me the route, he ought to teach me to drive a Ford. So he got busy and taught me to drive a Ford, so that when I was 16 I was able to get a license.

Dodds:

Were you around much when the company was winding up?

Lehman:

No. I was in West Virginia. I was aware of what was going on over here. It was a very sad.... Because it had been such a good prosperous business. And the people who were working for him, they never called him Mr. Valliant that were working for him, most of 'em called him Captain Will. He was never captain of anything, but it was out of honorary respect that, instead of sounding so formal, Mr. Valliant, it was a friendly relationship.

Dodds:

It sounds like the relations within the company were pretty good at that time.

Lehman:

Well, I think they were. I know that he was a hero himself. If he heard a noise down at the plant, he'd take his flashlight and go down there, and see what was going on.

Dodds:

Was he a big man?

Lehman:

No. Sturdy, but not tall, but he had lots of muscle. I was so small

that I don't remember, but I remember my grandmother saying that she was so relieved when he'd come back in, and knew everybody's OK. This in the case in one period, you see there was a night watchman down there. And some of these things were two windmills that pumped water into storage tanks, and I think that's indicated there, and a light plant.

Dodds:

Right, your own generating plant. Its quite a complex, and its strange that most people driving down to the ferry today wouldn't have a clue, off in this area, what was once there. There is really nothing.

Lehman:

Now I have a son in law who, of course never saw it, but he looks this and he says "What?" "Where was all that stuff?" "I can't relate anything to it." Of course those storms damaged the bulkheads, and then they, it just began to wash away and deteriorate. He was civic-minded. I am sure that somebody's family told you furnished all the telephone poles coming from....

Dodds:

No, I didn't know that.

Lehman:

First telephone lines from Royal Oak to Bellevue, he furnished all the telephone poles. And the road was oyster shell, and he furnished a lot of the oyster shell, and after it was built, finished, it had to be repaired. Each winter, he would have a minimal charge for the county. I don't know if he would have his own men put it on, or if he just sold it to the county at a minimal price, because it was important to him to have a road that was passable there.

Dodds:

He was the area's most prominent citizen, I'd imagine, back then.

Lehman:

Well, I suppose that he was. As I look back, Bellevue was like a little company town.

Dodds:

Because you had a store.

Lehman:

We had a store and he was the Postmaster, but somebody tended the store, and handed out the mail. He was the agent for the steamboat.

END SIDE 1

Lehman:

And the village was made up of very few people that didn't work for Valliant's or weren't related to Valliants, really.

Dodds:

Were all the people living in the village, were they black?

Lehman:

Not all, but a great number of them.

Dodds:

Even then the majority were.

Lehman:

There were a number of white families there on what we called Begonia Avenue. There were some white families down there across from the store. But, when I was a little girl the store keeper lived at our house, too.

Dodds:

Quite a household.

Lehman:

We did. We just had a tremendous household, because there were two of my father's cousins, and it was too far for them to walk, so, they lived at our house, and worked at the office. So, we really had quite a menagerie. we had to have a cook, with that many people eating three meals a day. And my grandmother soon after she came to live with us, she began to have arthritis, so she wasn't really able to cook. And then one of those cousins went to Baltimore, and Aunt Mary took her place, so she worked in the office, And so, we had all those people for three meals a day, plus old Joe Meyers who fired the furnace and tended the bar and milked the cows; and old Lewis who did the gardening, he was one-eyed, but he was a good guy.

Dodds:

Did everyone sit at the same table at these meals, or was it separate?

Lehman:

All the white people, you know, sat at one big dining room table; and then the cook and old Joe sat in the kitchen. Now Lewis, I can never remember him sitting at the table out there. I think that just designated he really wasn't entitled to be there. He would sit on the kitchen steps with a plate.

Dodds:

He was at the bottom of the hierarchy there.

Lehman:

That's what it seemed to me. I mean, I didn't think about it then, but later on I thought "You know I never saw Lewis sitting at the table." He was always sitting over there on the kitchen steps with a plate on his lap. It was quite a household, and because it was such a household, there was plenty of food. I think that anything that was in season, that Lewis brought in, the cook cooked, whether we needed that much food or not. If someone came to see my father and it came mealtime, he just said "Come on up to the house." We had dinner in the middle of the day. And you know in those days we had all that family and no washing machines, what the washing would be. So that we had napkin rings. We didn't have a clean linen napkin every meal. We put them in a napkin ring. But if we had company, well my grandmother would go around and see that we had clean napkins, and laid a clean tablecloth, even. It was a very scheduled routine, except that my father, sometimes would be late for meals. We'd get ready to eat, and he wouldn't come, and the rest of us would get hungry, and maybe we'd get impatient and sit down, but my grandmother never sat down to eat until my father came. It was a great relationship of respect there. And she didn't correct, well she'd correct us, but as far as any discipline, it was my father who did....

Dodds:

It sounds like it was a very nice childhood.

Lehman:

Yes. You know I never really thought about it until, oh, talking about it in the last two or three years, some of my friends said "I tell you, why don't you write a book about your childhood?" And going across the river, and this something that I'm sure just haunted him at night after he had done it. But in 1918 we had a very severe winter, and that river, the Tred Avon, was frozen over for months. And my brother and I were in Oxford, staying with relatives, going to school, and weekends we'd come home. But it was 20 miles around to get us by car, and it was a mile across the river. And I don't know how it got into him, but one day he decided that he would just come across the river in an ice boat. The wind was blowing in the morning, so he called over and said for us to be down on three o'clock on the shore, and he would over in an ice boat to get us. Well about three o'clock the wind had died down. There was no wind. So, he decided that the river had been frozen over that long.... He had a model T Ford, you know, the kind, I saw some of these that had those canvas tops, and he took the top down, put an extension ladder across, and roped it on, so that if it broke through, hopefully it would hold it up long enough for him to scramble out. You wonder where the strange quirks come from

(laughter). And then he tied this, like a sailboat with no sail, way back way back behind, with William on it, the oldest son, with the instructions that if the car should go in he should roll off the ice immediately so that he would not be pulled down. Well, Newnam and I were down on the shore, and saw this thing coming across the river, and you know it looked like a bug way over there on the shore. Finally it got a little closer, and we decided it was a car. We couldn't believe it. It was a car coming across the ... and, well, there my father got across the river. And I sat, I mean I stood.... Do you still have them here? You know, they're made in a triangle, and this one just had up at the angle across, some boards, slats. Down here at the angle here was some slats where you can sit. So, they loaded their suitcases on that, and Newnam on one side in the back, and I on the other, and William up front. And we started back, still with the same instructions. If you go in, roll off right away. Get away from the hole. But we just whizzed right along, and got over there, and got all that stuff untied. And then along the flats he took the boys in this model T Ford, and just ran down, you know, in shallow water, and put on the brakes and, vroom! (laughter). But, I have heard him say, you know, after he did that he realized how absolutely stupid that was, and dangerous, because the tide could undercut the water. But that was the only man that ever, I'm sure, on a ice boat.

Valliant:

Tell Richard where the red balls at the end of the lane came from.

Lehman:

He was the director of the Easton National Bank at one time. When they remodeled, I guess that he was still there when they remodeled, but anyway, the decorations on that Easton National Bank had different sizes of red balls on it. And my father, he was a great one, he would get these ideas where he could use things.... That's where I got, you know I'm a pack rat, and I guess I got it from him, he could always figure out something that he could use those things for. And so he bought them and used them as gateposts. He then had farms that you could always identify. Different sizes. The ones he liked the best he'd put the big balls in front of (laughs). They're made of cement. He cut marble pieces to insert, because he was very proud that he could finally buy that part of the original Valliant brand. Bought in his name in 1919.

Dodds:

I was intrigued by that. I took some pictures of it. These are just the xerox. They look very grand there at the entrance.

Lehman:

When I told Robbie, John, where they came from I think he was so disillusioned, he was just ... (laughs).

Valliant: That ball with 1919, that's what that date is.

Lehman:

People from Longfield were there. Then he bought it. And then it really wasn't used regularly. For some time it was rented in the summers as a summer home. And people from Baltimore named Hall came down here then.

Valliant:

Well then he didn't build the house that I'm living in?

Lehman:

Oh, yes. But I say that where Newnam lived, people didn't live in there, except in the summertime, as I remember. But as soon as your father was married they built that house. Now when did your mother and father marry ... Well, I was graduated in 1923, and they were probably married probably married in 1920.

Valliant:

My grandfather.

Lehman:

I get to so that I can't remember them all. They blend in together. The generations get kind of confused. But it was built soon as your grandfather was married. They lived in Oxford for a while. Rented it. And I don't know if my father still had an oyster house in Oxford, and he worked over there, or whether he came back and forth. You know that he had a boat named the Rowdy Sam.

Dodds:

Rowdy Sam?

Lehman:

The Rowdy Sam. He went across the river. That's the way he ... he never dated on the Bellevue side. He always dated in Oxford. And in fair or foul weather he went to ... and my father would listen for that boat. He knew that engine, that motor. Foggy weather, bad stormy weather, you could hear that boat start up over on ... and he would be so relieved when it would finally stop over at Bellevue.

Dodds:

Well, why don't we have a look at the photographs. They look at some interesting photographs. I'll turn this off for a minute.

Interruption in Tape

Lehman:

Your grandfather's porch was down there one summer evening, and we heard a crack down toward the factory, and it turned out to be a joist under the canning plant. And that was the end. They knew that. And you know if pop was 10 maybe 15 years younger, he'd get out of this. He'd work himself out of this, but its too late. But now this...

Valliant:

I was showing her my picture with the governor so...

End of Recording