

# YOUNGSTOWN-COOPER SCHOOL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## INTERVIEW WITH BERNIE JMW FLEMING

March 3, 2008

Edited March 24, 2011 by Bernie Fleming

The narrator is Bernie Fleming.

The interviewer is Judy Bentley.

The interview occurred during HIS264, Pacific Northwest History, a class at South Seattle Community College.

Names mentioned: Madelene (Mimi) Lefavour, grandmother; Zady Evans (mother, not mentioned by name); Frank Lenci, Frank's Auto Wrecking; Louie (last name unknown); Oscar Frederickson.

JB: Today is March 3, 2008. My name is Judy Bentley, and I'm interviewing Bernie Fleming. [comments about whether the tape recorder is working and setting it up] ... about how your family ended up [on a houseboat on the Duwamish River].

BF: Actually we migrated from Idaho. My grandmother originally moved here, Madelene Lefavour, during World War II.

JB: Could you spell that?

BF: Lefavour—L-E-F-A-V-O-U-R. She was the first one in the houseboat community, down the riverbank, which originally, before they built the First South bridge there was a little green bridge that ran across; it was a two-lane bridge, one of those steel-type bridges, you know, with the triangles and stuff, and that went to Boeing Plant 1, which was across the river from us. Our address was 6201 First Ave. S., Seattle, Washington [eventually to become 6309 1<sup>st</sup> Ave. So., Seattle, 8, Wash.] These are the original sale papers for the houseboat moored there, and the reason why they got the houseboats was because they were a federal waterway, and therefore there was no property tax. So you lived there basically for free. All you did was tie up a houseboat there and you were in business, and, uh, we called my grandmother Mimi, Mimi and Mom started a stenographic business in the houseboat where they did mimeographing and writing and typing and things like that. At that time electric typewriters were a brand new invention, this was in the 1950's, to the best of my recollection, because I was born in 1948. They got there before us, and in fact when we first got there, there wasn't any railroad there; there is a railroad now, running through the property. We watched them build the railroad. We used to switch the tracks on the trains.

JB: Switch the tracks on the trains?

BF: There were five little boys, and we were all the same age, and we all figured out how to move that arm so we could switch the tracks and immediately set the train to go down the wrong tracks until they figured out who was doing all this stuff and then they put padlocks on all the switching stations so we couldn't change the tracks anymore.

JB: How long did it take to discover?

BF: Oh, it took them—oh, I can't remember. We smashed a lot of pennies before they figured that one out. But we used to walk from there, where the First South Bridge is now, to Georgetown Elementary School—that was the grade school that we attended. And that was what we called projects and the projects were...when we first started the projects were still lived in, but then they gradually were abandoned and that's where Consolidated Freightways area is now. That was all government workers who worked over at Boeing Plant 1.

JB: So the projects were for government, for Boeing workers?

BF: Yeah, then eventually they became low-cost housing, but during the 50's ... they even looked like military housing.

JB: Were they built during World War II?

BF: Uh-huh, for the people who were building the B-17-bombers.

JB: You said your mother came during World War II. Did she come to work in war industries, or what brought her? Why did she come here?

BF: Dad was employed overseas. He was one of the first people in the military prior to World War II, and so he was already a sergeant in the army air corps and retired as a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force [1959], but he was stationed in Europe most of the war, so she was by herself, so she came home and stayed with Mimi, her mother, in the houseboat. I wasn't born until after the war. They were there during World War II, and then Dad would stop and visit when he was able to come back and left .... stuff. The houseboat originally started out as a captain's houseboat, built around 1900 as I understand, and they added rooms onto it, including a deck all around it, and we lived in that houseboat, off and on because we went to Japan in 1951; we lived in Japan for a year with Dad when he was stationed over there with MacArthur, and we lived in that houseboat from about World War II all the way to 1960 when it was bulldozed in as part of a landfill. It was on logs. It wasn't a boat like what people call a houseboat. The way they built a houseboat in those days was you had a bunch of big old logs



and you built a platform on the logs and then you built the house on the platform, and that's what we lived in.

JB: So the logs were floating in the river... attached to the side? [See above explanation.]

BF: No, we had a pier two or three pieces of posting sticking up like this, and you tied the houseboat to that, and the waterline just came down to the gangplank. And you didn't have any sewer (laughing).

JB: Except the river.

BF: That was it. That's why we were chuckling about the super funding because in those days everybody living on the river didn't have a sewer. Everything went straight into the river, including our garbage. And when they said we couldn't do it anymore, then we ran out at night and dumped the garbage off the end of the deck

I have a picture here of the landfill. This is what they were dumping into the river next to our house.

JB: Talk about that landfill.

BF: It was toxic. We once.. [passes picture around]. That's me standing there.

JB: On top of the garbage

BF: We found a 16 inch naval round down there. We tried to open it up with a hammer until my stepfather found out and told us to get the heck away from there. It was blown up down in Fort Lewis. One time my brother poured a bottle out and it had sulphuric acid in it. He burned his foot with it. I had two stepbrothers, one real brother and a half-sister—all the boys were within two years of age.

JB: So he pulled that bottle out of the landfill?

BF: Out of the beach; we'd go down and play in the mud.

JB: And this is right near that green bridge that became the First Avenue Bridge? [was removed]

BF: The First Avenue Bridge you see now, the first stand was the second stand that was built later; the traffic that you're taking southbound was the original first stand, and that had four lanes of traffic going two directions. Before that was built was a little green bridge down at the foot of it further north, maybe a couple hundred feet north, and that's where the little steel bridge that they took out and

the foundations for that were there for years and years. I don't know if they're still there or not. But when they put the First South Bridge up, we were right across the street from that. That part of First Avenue South became semi-abandoned; up until that point that was the main road to Boeing plant one. Then we watched them build that bridge, too. All the houseboat community was in that little inlet right there. That's where these pictures were taken and so on. Originally that inlet had a little stream running into it that this concrete company kept pouring concrete into until they finally strangled all the salmon out of it because the salmon used to come up and spawn even with all the silt that was in that river.

JB: What kind of salmon?

BF: I have no idea. I was too young to know at that time, but they were really big.

It was kind of weird because we watched the neighborhood die. We watched all the houses that sank. One time Louie Themopolus [sp?]-I can't remember his last name—he was a Greek fisherman—by himself. He died; they took him away, and his houseboat was abandoned, so we went in there and just took everything. I still have the brass bed that he had. It says made in Tacoma in 1912. That's the way it was down on the riverbank. When people abandoned places, they either sank or they were bulldozed into the landfill, just like those pictures I passed around.

It wasn't a surprise to wake up in the morning and see a ship moored across the water at the cement plant, and we used to talk to the tugboat guys right off the end of the houseboat there. Like I say the only thing that came into the house [from land] was the water and the electricity. Every now and then a houseboat would [get loose from] from moorings and they'd float out and the Coast Guard would have to push them back in again.

JB: How many houseboats were in this community?

BF: Well you can see right here in this picture, there was a substantial number.

JB: He's showing me a picture that shows an inlet

BF: Uh-huh. That's right where the cement plant is today and the First South Bridge would be right here. The roadway you can see there is First Avenue South, which is still there.

JB: So these are all houseboats? They look like they're on land there.

BF: The tide's out.



JB: The tide's out. So I'm seeing maybe 10-20, and this is something you can come see at the break. It's kind of fragile; we can't pass it around.

BF: This is an overhead view that was taken by one of the friends of my mother. The guy was a news photographer, and he took this picture from an airplane when he was flying overhead. This was probably done about the time of World War II. You see the old tex [?] cases there, and the tex [?] cases are shown in a close-up of this photograph here. This is the one of Bishop.

JB: Bishop?

BF: That was the name of the guy who owned it, Bishop's Texaco

JB: It says Bishop's on the sign.

BF: That's the ramp from the First South Bridge going right through that ... And of course these are projects of the military.

JB: So, how long had the houseboats been there? You said ...

BF: Oh, they went way, way back. This was our houseboat here before we abandoned it. And the garage up above, and the train tracks were right in front of the garage. It got kind of noisy sometimes. We had to sleep in the garage; someone slept in the garage.

[discussion about passing photographs around]

This one here, October, 1959, the last houseboat on the Duwamish, the last one that was still operating.

JB: So they'd been there a long time?

BF: Turn of the century. As they filled in the land around Georgetown and everything, that was like a town and we were all squatters. Tied up there and the community evolved, and we had fishing boats like you see in this picture here coming right up to the houses.

JB: So you didn't own the land or the tidelands where the houseboats were, you were just there.

BF: We were squatters.

JB: And who was doing all the filling in?

BF: Anybody who wanted to dump there could dump. Frank Lenci, Frank's Auto Wrecking, which was there behind Bishop's ... , he eventually sold the interchange to the state across the river and at the base of Meyer's Way South; that was junkyard. Frank used to dump there. One time we woke up and they had dumped all the casts from Harborview Hospital in the landfill. They're all buried there.

JB: Oh, the casts—like leg and arm casts?

BF: Leg and arm casts. There were whole truckloads of them they were dumping in the river. They bulldozed right over the top of them. (laughs). One time they found a guy's foot. There were some rag-pickers down the road who were sorting through rags, and they found a guy's foot in the rags. They cut it off with an industrial axe and just turned it in for recycling. People made money any way they could back then. People always dumped dogs in the river and stuff like that.

The river was like a giant sewer. It was like what you see in a third-world country. You threw it in and you didn't think about it; you didn't worry about it. It wasn't unusual to get up in the morning with the tide in and look out there and see an oily sheen on the water.

JB: Did you swim in it or fish in it?

BF: Oh yeah, it was great fishing where we dumped the garbage out at the end of the deck there. We had [basketsful?] pulling shiners out. Shiners were little\_perch like\_fish. They were off the end of the deck there, loved the garbage.

JB: So they lived in the river as opposed to the salmon that come and go?

BF: Salmon would migrate up the river. We had wood-ducks, pet ducks, and we had Mallards. One time when it froze we took all of the Mallards out of the ice and brought them inside the house in boxes. They all sat around—quack, quack, quack, quack—in the houseboat. It was a regular zoo. Then when it warmed up, we let them all go again.

At the time, of course, we hated it because all of the rich kids lived on land in the projects, and we lived in a stupid old houseboat. At night, when the tide went out, the houseboat would settle into the mud. And if you looked out the back, it was all water, so you had to be careful you didn't fall out into the water because the water was like poison. It was very polluted. There was all kinds of stuff floating in this water. There was everything you could imagine. One time we even found a raft, just like Huckleberry Finn. We got a bunch of logs that we put together and boards nailed on top of the logs, and we put a venetian blind on it that someone had in an abandoned houseboat, and we opened the blinds and



closed the blinds and it became a sail. We sailed around before it disappeared one night.

JB: You said you did swim in the river?

BF: We did when we were real little until Mom gave us enough speeches about not going in the river because it was unnatural, so then we just played in the silt and duck pond which I don't think was a whole lot better than the river was, to be honest with you.

JB: You said the rich kids lived in the projects.

BF: That's what we called them because they lived on land. They had sewers. They had running water, and they didn't have to worry about the tides coming in and out, all that sort of stuff. We had to walk to school through the projects which are shown in this overhead picture here. We walked through there all the way to Georgetown. I remember the winter of 1955 when there was like 12 inches of snow, and it was true, we trudged three miles through the snow to go to school. And they closed Georgetown in 1970, and to give you some perspective that's at Corson Street. When you're going southbound on I-5 and you look over to the right, the Corson Street exit, you see a large playing field there, a large field with some old trees. That's where Georgetown Elementary was. That's where we walked to from the First Avenue South Bridge. It was quite a long walk.

But then we learned to play with matches. Before we went to Georgetown, we went to Holgate School. It was another elementary school that closed before Georgetown, called Holgate, and that's where we first went to school, and it was brick. We tried to burn it down. We got a bunch of matches and we went out there and ...fifteen minutes. We all got caught and sent home with a note.

JB: You got sent home with a note? That's all? How old were you?

BF: Oh, we were about six years old. So we immediately started burning up all the buildings in the neighborhoods; there was nobody in them, so we started setting fires to these places, we were regular old pyromaniacs, six-year-old, seven-year-old boys and nothing to do.

JB: Tell me a little more about the Greek fisherman you mentioned, or were there other fishermen?

BF: Oh, there were several. A lot of them had retired. I still have his captain's mirror. They were an old Greek fishing community. That's like the boat here; Fortunately how you can track this back is there was a number on it, on the bow. Find out what it was.

JB: It's 30H11551. Or HI 551, a 1 or an I.

BF: We had Oscar Frederickson. He was a wood and coal supplier. He had a house on land, but he had an outhouse at the back of the houseboat (on the river). He sold firewood and coal and everything. We used to go over and pick his dahlias and roses which we got in trouble for. But he had the only land house. Everybody else lived on boats, these houseboats, which were on logs. One guy actually had a boat which was just tied up, but it was a leaky thing. In fact, they had a heck of a time getting it out of there, keeping it dry enough when they had to move it, move it to another location, cause it kept taking on water, which reminds me of the time when we decided we'd build a rowboat for ourselves. We got an old wooden rowboat, one of these fishing boats, and we fixed it all up and we caulked it like crazy. We all took it out on the water and it proceeded to sink, cause we didn't know how to caulk, so we all got out and left my brother in it. I still remember him standing there; he was crying, and the boat was half full of water, and that's all the further it would sink.

JB: How old was he?

BF: He was about five years old at the time.

JB: And what happened?

BF: Oh, eventually, he jumped out of the boat and walked under the water and back up onto the beach [laughing]. Just like taking a walk in the park.

JB: So these fishermen, back to the fishermen now, were they fishing the Duwamish or were they commercial fishermen?

BF: They were going out fishing, out on Puget Sound and there was fishing in the Duwamish River when we first got there, but eventually it got so polluted that the fish... we ate some of the shiners, but that was it. Mom was always trying to catch some of the salmon. Every now and then we'd have to replace the logs. They'd become waterlogged. They'd lose their flotation, so what you'd have to do was you'd have three or four logs under the house that were still good, but this log here was bad, so you'd unstring it from the other logs and pull it out and leave it in the river and slide another log in, and that's when she'd try to catch the salmon. One time she caught one, and it was pretty well spawned out. We live on a spawning stream now, so I'm glad we didn't try to eat the thing. Should have left it in the river. It was flopping around and falling apart as it was flopping around. It was pretty well gone. But the salmon would have continued migrating except the cement plant clogged up the stream with concrete, kept dumping the concrete, and from what I understand they eventually bought all of that property, and that's where we were forced off cause we were moored to a couple of great big logs that were part of the landfill. God only knows what's there now [a warehouse]. I still remember walking home by a



place that was called the yeast factory when we went to Georgetown School that had holes out back, green stuff that oozed up from the ground and the like. When the "Superfund" was announced, I called up the location and said well it's behind the meat place on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, and they weren't too interested. I said "Oh, well."

JB: So how were you forced out then, the whole community forced out? When did that happen?

BF: It happened in the 60's. Well it happened actually before 1960. They gradually started forcing people out by trying to make them conform.

JB: They being?

BF: The city and municipal laws. I'm not really too certain about how this all happened. I know they we were basically forced out of there and that the neighbors hauled up first, and we were the last ones to leave, and that's because we took a bicycle trip down to San Francisco and back in 1960. We were on the road for two months.

JB: Oh, so they couldn't tell you to leave.

BF: No, cause Mom had us on the bike trip. She decided, "I'll go see California, so I'll bicycle there on three speeds, pedal down the coast for two months and came back in September of 1960, and that's when we moved into the other house up on the hill. She started doing weddings up there in 1963. While we were on the road, they couldn't do much about it. Mimi was in the house, and Mom was gone, and she was the legal owner and all that.

JB: Your grandmother was living there.

BF: She was running the answering service and sending Mom some money along the road. As we headed down, we slept in jails and wherever we could sleep. One time we found a dead fish in the river. We were scavengers.

JB: Your grandmother Mimi had lived there how long?

BF: 1939. I think that's about the time she moved over there. And Mom got married to Dad about 1941 right after World War II started. They were in North Carolina, he was going to OCS School. Then she moved in with Mimi, I think, around in 1942.

JB: What about your grandmother's memories of the river? Did she talk about it?

BF: She's passed on now. Not a whole lot. I mean we were all living there. It was a regular everyday experience. We didn't think of it as being very unique except now I look at the houseboats on Lake Union, and I laugh, compared to what we lived in. Ours was a genuine houseboat built in 1900 by a ship's captain. It's all documented. I think Mom originally paid \$750 or \$700 for a five-room houseboat, 6201 First Avenue South.

JB: Built by a captain on the Duwamish or ?

BF: I'm not sure where it was built. It wasn't on the Duwamish, I don't believe. It was towed in there. It's still there after we stripped everything out of it.

JB: The houseboat is still there?

BF: Yeah. After we stripped everything out, they bulldozed it in as landfill.

JB: Oh, so it's part of the landfill.

BF: It's part of the Superfund cleanup project, I suppose. We got everything that was worthwhile out of it, and the rest of it floated.

JB: So you said you moved up to the hill. What was the hill?

BF: Myers Way South. 10423 Myers Way South. My mom still lives there. It's a big purple house called the Enchanted Chapel. She does weddings there. She was on TV Valentine's Day. Evening Magazine did a Valentine's Day special with her and she was also on the front page of the paper on the first of January. We all did weddings. She was one of the earliest non-denominational ministers in the city of Seattle, doing weddings starting in 1963 for anybody who wanted to get married. There were a lot of restrictions on marriage at that time, and she went ahead and married anybody who wanted to; so did Mimi, so did my sister; we all did. It became a family business.

JB: Let me stop you for a minute and see if anybody from the class would like to ask a question—about anything.

[inaudible question about the cement company]

BF: Yeah, they'd take their excess cement out of their trucks—they didn't deliver it all-- and hose them down. You can still see—well if you go up to the First Avenue South Bridge, a lot of people don't know about it—that's the inlet that's shown in this aerial photograph here that had all of the houseboats. You look down—you'll see these warehouses there. Well right at the top of that hill, there's a little creek that came in there, and that's where they dumped all their concrete, and they kept on dumping it there until the creek went away.



[question]

BF: It all solidified. We got some of the concrete for free. We put it on our driveway. In fact, when they tore down the old Seattle Hotel and built the Triangle parking lot, downtown Seattle, they dumped it next to our house. So we took all of the bricks and cleaned them up and put them out front and sold them for three cents each. The old Seattle Hotel, I still have a piece of marble from that, too.

JB: You were talking about access to the river. Is there still access at the river where the houseboats were?

BF: No. They built it all up, and they built some warehouses on it now. Now, First Avenue South still runs down there. The old road that you see in the pictures is still there. It's a semi-abandoned road, but you can still drive on it, First Avenue South down to the end where it ends is where the little green bridge was that went across [?]

JB: And now there's no bridge, it's just the river?

BF: I don't think there's even a foundation left. For many, many years there was like a ramp going up into the bridge end. There was that, and we used to play down there; it used to be all abandoned buildings and antique trucks, and we used to play on those things, but if you go up the river there a little ways north on the First Avenue bridge where the federal building is—you guys know where the federal building is there on Marginal Way? First Avenue South? It used to be the old Ford assembly plant .. federal building, where the liquor control board is. There's a road there called Diagonal Ave. I was there today. It goes right down to the waterfront and it's got a park that they've built, acre on the waterfront. That's just the way the river was 60 years ago.

JB: What's the name of the park?

BF: It's Diagonal Way Park. Diagonal Ave. Park. There's a whole bunch of containers and you drive through all these containers and everything else. Right there is this beautiful area that they've maintained, and it's got several maps of ways the old river used to be and a description of how the Indians used to fish there and stuff.

JB: You come off of East Marginal Way to get there?

BF: I'm trying to remember. You come off First South as if you're heading north toward Spokane on that main drag down there.

JB: That's East Marginal Way.

BF: The Federal Building is on the left-hand side, just past the Federal Building on the left-hand side, you'll see a little sign that says Diagonal Way Park. You go down there, and there's nobody there. Nobody knows about it. It's really kind of neat. It's the way the river used to be. It's got the old sandy soil. Just like what we used to see. It is black. I always remembered it as black.

JB: The river is black.

BF: The river shore is black. The sand is black. It was always black when I was a kid, too. We always thought it was all the iodine and stuff. The sand is black. And I was looking at it today just to refresh my memory, and it is black, just like I remember as a kid, and it wasn't always all polluted. We found a lot of things. This lamp here—I dug it up next to the houseboat about 1953 or 54, and I've had it ever since. It took me about 50 years to find this little glass ring, and I put that on there, and we still use it when the power goes out. This was buried next to the house, but it was all full of newspaper, and it was buried in a landfill there. These are the floats the fishermen used to use. Japanese and even the Scandinavian fishermen used these floats. We always called these Japanese floats cause they came with a black-tar rope around them. The rope was black tar covered. This one here has a patent date on it, patent number on it, and it says Northwest, No. 1.

JB: What does that mean?

BF: I haven't looked it up yet. This box floated in two parts. The lid came in one day, and the bottom came in another day. And this is camphor [?]. You can smell this one here.

JB: Yep, still has the smell.

BF: It's not a very valuable antique. We were always looking for stuff floating in from the river. It was cool. You could be lucky when you went out there, especially after a big storm. Then there were all the houses that were damaged...like I say we were playing with matches. They built a railroad out front after we were there, and that was kind of bad. The railroad is still there. You can still see the railroad. Where the railroad goes is right where our houseboat was. There was quite the community at the time that I was a kid, like five or six years old, seven years old.

These pictures here—you talk about dredging. Here's some of the original photographs of the dredges.

JB: So they were doing dredging...

BF: I remember when they built across the First South Bridge in 1955. That shows one of the original dredges going down the river, steam dredge. They



were still scooping mud out of the river to fill up that area around Boeing Plant 1 when I was a child, right across from the First South Bridge.

JB: Just to create more land?

BF: Yes and channelize the river. In fact we have a problem on the creek--we live on a salmon creek, Chico Creek over in Bremerton, and it's been channelized, too. Everybody is channelizing creeks cause you get more land that way and that's what Frank was doing with all that junk. Anything they could throw in there that you could build on they threw in the river, fill it up, make that water go away

JB: And create land.

BF: And create land because land had value. That was the tradition in the old days. Nowadays, of course, everybody's going--wait a minute--save the water.

These pictures here are of the interiors of the houseboat which are kind of interesting. One means of earning a living was selling fruits and vegetables--truck farms.

JB: You sold fruits and vegetables that you got from whom?

BF: Yakima and stuff like that. We set up a truck. We'd just stick the stuff out in boxes and sell apples for a nickel each or whatever.

JB: You'd go to Yakima to get them and bring them back?

BF: Yup.

JB: Other questions?

BF: Now that we look back on it, it's an interesting experience, and when all us kids (I call us kids--we're all in our 50's and 60's now) get together and talk about the houseboat experience, some of it's pretty hilarious. One story I can tell you about is we sat around the deck [...?] trying to burn down all of the houses in the neighborhood, so she gave us each a box of matches, okay, and said, "Here, go get it out of your system." So we went--Winter Surplus used to be a G.I. Surplus Store, a regular G.I. surplus store, on Fourth Avenue South, and we had brand new 1A bomber jackets that Mom had just bought for us from World War II at the surplus. They'd be worth a fortune now--original leather jackets, beautiful jackets, and we were real proud of them cause they were brand new, and we'd never had any [?] before, and so we sitting....

END of SIDE A (Interview includes one side of one tape.)