

Ken Kutzel: Okay. This is Ken Kutzel, I'm here today with Neil Atherton at the old schoolhouse in Douglas Michigan on uh, July 27<sup>th</sup> 2018. This oral history is being collected as a part of the Stories of Summer Project which is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowments for the Humanities Common Heritage Program. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today, I'm interested to learn more about your family history and your experiences of summer in the Saugatuck Douglas area. Can you please tell me your full name and spell it?

Neil Atherton: Good morning, my full name is Neil D Atherton N E I L, D, A T H E R T O N.

KK: And then do you use any accents when spelling your name?

NA: No.

KK: Okay. Alright uh, Neil uh, tell me about where you grew up?

NA: [clears throat] I grew up in Illinois and, in the Milwaukee area and then uh, came to the Saugatuck area to open up a store in 1982, and had the store Hoopdee Scootee for a number of years and then closed the store um, Labor Day of 2016.

KK: Okay, and what are some what are some of the most vivid memories you have of um, your time here?

NA: Uh, the vivid memories are is that we started a a business with not a lot of money and we thought we would come to this town and do some things that were creative and a little bit different and being kind of a snug little fishing village way back then, um, we bought a property on Mason Street at 133 Mason from Linda Holmes who was a owner of several properties here and in the real estate business um, her shop was full of bomb boxes and brass and a lot of nautical goods and we decided that we wanted to not sell that, and wanted to something a little bit on the crazy way out side. So, we decided that seeing as we were on a side street that we needed to get attention for someone to come off of Butler to Mason, so we came up with, or actually my partner Jim Yarro came up with, mannequin legs which we extended from the second floor of the building and it which became an identification direction for many people that visited this destination store over the years. Um, from that we opened up the store, and uh Linda because we did not have a lot of money, uh, gave us 30, 30 cents on the dollar. So we sold bomb boxes and we sold anchors and we sold a lot of things we didn't care to sell and then, we decided to start bringing in some Flamingos, which really didn't fit in Saugatuck but it created a lot of verbal conversation. From that, we bought boxes of flamingo feathers, actually turkey feathers from Philadelphia that were died hot pink, and we used that as an attention getter to put feathers all over our store. Needless to say, we became very popular and a lot conversation throughout the community because in the winter months people would pick up the feathers on their boots, walk outside in the in snow and where you'd go in different places you'd always see pink feathers in the snow banks which was free advertising and people asked where they were from. That became, became our journey uh, Hoopdee Scootee was and became a destination store for many many people and our, our, um most recognized uh, reputation was uh, unique, different, and if we did anything we not only sold a lot of things, but we sold laughter and laughter became our identity. So, when people would come to town and say, we have to go to that store it's the one with the legs, we gotta, it's just crazy. Come in, the music's loud but its fun and we used to have people stand in line to come into our store, we had a doorman and at one time we were up to 12 employees, um, its was great place for people to buy cards

and clothing and gifts. We even went into adult gag gifts um, but I would say the, the greatest thing about Hoopdee Scootee is that we always had product that nobody else had that was creative and different and that brought people in and exposed them to other things other than anchors and little, uh nautical town which is great, but we wanted to be a little bit different.

KK: Okay, great. Um, why exactly did you choose Saugatuck?

NA: By accident. Um, we both my partner Jim Yarro and myself lived in Chicago in downtown Chicago and I was a Vice President of Chicago Display Company and uh, the display company lost a major uh, account which was my responsibility, Im not going to take responsibility for losing the account but, we lost an account and I was not affordable to the company and being not only a Vice President there, I was also asked by the President of the company who I knew on a personal basis, if I would not resign but consider looking for a different position. So, we walked out and went to the Lake Michigan shores and sat there and Jim said to me, 'What do you want to do?' and I said, 'You know I've always wanted to open up a gift store' and I have a good education and uh, some degrees and I said, 'I don't know if I can do that, I think I should be going into the corporate world again' and he said, 'Well what would you like to do? I said, 'I really would like to do this' so he says, 'I know of a town called Saugatuck that's a resort town that we could go to' and we came to Saugatuck, and we found out there was a place called the Douglas Dunes and we went to the Douglas Dunes and we spent the evening and walked around town and Linda Holmes showed us her building that was, that we leased with the option to buy and after being here 1 year, uh, we did buy the building from Linda and Hoopdee Scootee was off and running.

KK: Okay, great. Um, what was your first impression of the area?

NA: Well like anybody else there's not much not to like here. Um, the ambiance of it, the quaintness of the town, um, and every small town everybody knows your secret before you do so therefore you got to be used to that. But other than that, it's a it's a destination town for people to enjoy life and this town certainly has all that to offer.

KK: Good! Can you share any particular memories about living here?

NA: Memories of living here, when we first got here there, we used to um, Marro's and Linda and some of us we wanted fireworks and so we took jars and we wrapped them with paper and said 'Fireworks Fund' and we passed them out to everybody in town [clears throat] and some of the people in town donated more than other and we came up with enough money to have fireworks, better then what they had in the past. Then we promoted and went on the, the uh Venetian Weekend and got involved with so many things of people competing with boats and making that a celebration, another reason for people to come for a good time, um. We were very much involved in the Red Barn and for their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary um, I, with Kyle, uh and Loretta created a birthday party celebration for their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and I collected some favors from the restaurants and everybody in town and asked if they would donate food, and prizes and we would have a fundraiser to buy new seats and air conditioning for the Red Barn, and on the 16<sup>th</sup> which was February, which was a June 15<sup>th</sup> we had a big party at the Red Barn the only problem was is that a lot of people had left and gone home for the weekend and we weren't sure if we were going to have a successful event. As a result it was more than successful, people stayed over, we raised lots of money and the Red Barn benefited by a lot of hard effort from a lot of people.

KK: Great, um, were there any places, restaurants or institutions that uh were kind of special to you?

NA: Yeah. Marro's. And I will tell you why, not only was the food good and not only are they friends but I have friends that have restaurants that I'm not mentioning for no other reason but to answer this question. Marro's was next door to us and a lot of people would come to our store and shop and look for cards and the rest and we were going to do a PA system into this thing to call Lynn and say, you know call us when their reservation is ready because they're shopping in the store and I don't want to lose the sale. So we worked off of their crowds and as a result, because of Marro's they really helped our business to grow.

KK: Yeah, well that's, kind of when businesses can work together like that...

NA: ...True, true, true story.

KK: Yeah, I believe you, I am, listen and remember your store, I spent a lot of money there.

NA: Yeah, that's why I could close and go to Florida.

KK: Maybe at this point it would be uh, um, I'm going to ask you, would you please tell us the story about when the Hoopdee Scootie legs were stolen?

[10:26]

NA: Yeah I don't remember the exact year but I know that I was um, the, the legs were, were very well known because they always put a smile on people's faces and when the bus tours would come through they'd always come back, back to the store and they would take pictures, hang out the window and they would point to the legs if the Duck Boat was going around and 'This is a destination of you haven't been there' but the legs became an identification to um, not only promoting our store but kind of for the town. Um, it'd be a little difficult probably today to do that, we didn't get permission to put them out there, back then we didn't need it and so we just hung these mannequin legs out and there was a time when, um women's groups were really offended and against that because they were women's legs and they wanted us to put men's legs out there if we were going to have women's legs. We had people picketing in front saying it wasn't, uh, supposed to be up, that isn't the rule of the town. So, we had to, to fight some adversity and not that we won, we were able to keep them up there for all these years. The legs, um, were stolen, and we weren't even aware of the fact until I was out in front of the store and some customer walked by and said, where your legs? I said, what do you mean? I looked up and I said, you know what, I have no idea. So I went in, I talked to Jim and Laura and they said no, and I said, you know what, I'm, I'm going to call a television station, because these legs are the identification to the town, and I'm also going to call the police department and let them know that something was stolen. And in the antrum thing, being a pretty much of a promotion guy and great part of my blood and thinking, I thought, I don't want to get the police here too soon without the television station being here. So I waited for the Kalamazoo television station, which is, it's left my name...

KK: Yeah, its channel 17 I think.

NA: Yes, and uh, I called them and told them, they said we'll be right down. So when they got there, I called the police. They were making the report and I asked the uh, young lady, if she would mind going up and sitting in the window where the legs were with her legs out and giving the newscast. And we were, we were lucky enough to get over six minutes on primetime TV at six o'clock, which I could never even afford to do, and it was a great discussion about the loss of the legs. Well, we offered a, a uh,

thousand, or I think it was \$1500, something. A hoard of money for, for it and it was on the television quite a bit and it was talked about, it was quite the hub. Well, just so happens that um, one of the people in town that was uh, uh a regular, um, had swiped the legs as a joke and it got to be a little bit nervous for him because it started to get to be a big deal and now he didn't want any part of it. So he took the legs and threw them in the dumpster at Roly Peterson's yacht club at the north end of town. And when we found that out, um, I decided that I would call the channel to come down and write a story on them returning and I called the police department, they said, well, you can go and pick them up and I said I'm not picking these up, I need somebody to go over there, and so they did. And the policemen department was always good to us, always. They were always there when we needed them and they were our right hand of security in Saugatuck. And so, um, the guys came over to the store opened up the trunk, the legs were in the trunk, the, the television station was there, they got a picture of the legs. I had to back the car up so they get a picture of our name Hoopdee Scootee again and we were on television again. Then Labor Day weekend, Connie Chung, I believe, had a news thing and something to the order of concluding it with on a, uh, on a, on a lower, had something to the effect that with the legs being taken, she used it for part of her commentary. So she said, and on a lighter note to conclude the Memorial Day weekend, this is not the exact copy, but this is what I remember. Um, a, a small town in, in Saugatuck, Michigan, one of the stores have mannequin legs that were stolen and it was just kind of a kinky thing to bring up to, to end the weekend. So we not only got publicity from the television stations, we've got on national TV. My son in California called and said, geez Dad, I just saw your, your stuff on television. So that's how we began, it was a great store. It was a store where, um, uh, if you couldn't get a smile on your face, you were either having a bad day or you were crabby.

**[00:15:52]**

KK: Okay. You mentioned to me once before, uh, along with that story that the mannequin legs were somewhat damaged?

NA: Yes.

KK: Okay, so do you want to tell about that please?

NA: Yeah, the, the legs had been damaged and there was, I don't know if it's still existing, but at that time the only mannequin repair place was in Michigan. So we sent the legs off to them and they repaired them and then they went back up. Every year she had a different outfit on, some years she was in gowns and tops. Other years she was in combat boots. It was a visual that you, as a result, people would come by to see what she had on the following year. Um, great promo, but a great thing for the city because, uh, at that as well put on smiles, on people's faces, just like the store did.

KK: Okay, thank you. Uh, Neil, uh, did you have any contact with people from Oxbow?

NA: Yes.

KK: Okay, can you talk about that a little bit?

NA: Um, Oxbow, Joyce Petter was one of the first people that I really meant when we came to town and she had beautiful galleries and she had beautiful um, art, and the more I researched and looked into it, I found out that Saugatuck is really a well-known and, um, superior, art town with many galleries and lots of creative input. Um, I lived in Milwaukee and I was at one time there, one of the chairs for the

Milwaukee Arts Festival. So I had had a, had a background um, in the arts and fundraising and the rest and um, pursued a number of different ways to promote art in the area. Um, attended the Oxbow celebrations, where, um, local artists and students were able to put their art on for sale and the local people and others who came, we'd buy it as a fundraiser.

KK: Okay, great. Um, let's see uh, and this is going to be LGBT related because this is part of what we're doing uh, with the summer thing.

NA: Okay.

KK: Uh, well let's see well, well we talked about your first impressions of the area. Uh, were you aware when you moved here that the Saugatuck area was somewhat welcoming of the LGBT community at a time when other places we're not?

NA: Absolutely.

KK: Or, was it really at that time?

NA: It was.

KK: Okay.

NA: And we knew of, of that and um, being a gay man with a partner, uh, I will not say I moved here because of the gay community, but it's certainly made our life a lot easier because um, of the fact that we were a gay couple. We had some problems in the beginning with those that either didn't understand or didn't want to understand and that was okay because, um, when you're a straight person in life and you don't choose to be gay, but you face the reality that you are, you then become a minority. And it's real tough when you like who you are and now you're a minority and then what you have to do is you get past all that. Well this town created that, where you didn't feel like a minority here. You were, you were a part of the community. We had people coming in from all, they drop off flowers, they'd bring in fish. It was like owning a student union and we had one lady uh, in town that had a difficult time with us being here. And uh, her name was Gladys Column and she owned stores, or she was an elderly lady, very nice, and she was next door. And whenever there were cigarette butts on the street or things that weren't right, she would come over and yell in our door and throw the cigarette butts in because we were a gay couple and she didn't want us to live there and say, oh, Gladys, now you need to take your medication, and we were always there to help her even though she was angry. So, um, Saugatuck is a town for everybody. Um, but it's a great place for, um, gay couples to be welcomed in to this city as today they are in most anywhere in the United States.

**[00:20:21]**

KK: Okay. What made uh, Saugatuck Douglas different from the other lakeshore communities?

NA: [Pause] It was small. Um, had really good history. Um, had great feelings when you were here because you had probably the number one beach in the whole United States. We've won lots of awards for that. Um, and the comfortability of meeting other gay people at that time, which wasn't as always so easy in other places. So, um, yeah, I would say that's the reason.

KK: Great, uh, what were the local destinations for the LBGT community? Remember, we're going back, you know.

NA: What were the local?

KK: Yeah the destinations, where did they hangout?

NA: Um, Douglas Dunes. It was the, it was the largest gay resort in the Midwest. Um, it was clean. It was classy. Uh, it, it represented the gay community and eliminated some of the stigmas of negative because it was a very positive, um, environment. It was well accepted, not totally, but within this community because Saugatuck being in the arts and having so much, uh, so many um, artistic, uh, places to go if they're not art galleries. But of courses you can take and, and creative people. And there's a lot of very educated, um, men and women that have had major jobs in this country who are very bright, who come here to live for the luxury of not only the visual of being here, but being in a community where there are other creative gay people and men with common denominators. I'm not saying this whole town is gay because it isn't. It's a town for everybody.

KK: Okay, great. Uh, destinations that were uh, you know, LGBT friendly, what was it and where the advertised is LGBT friendly?

NA: No, not to my knowledge. I mean, you don't have to, I'm a big person on not throwing something in somebody else's space. As they learn about the people here, then they become comfortable because of the people.

KK: Great. Thank you. Um, be, um, well, I think you answered this, but I'm going to ask it any way. Beneath the surface, was Saugatuck Douglas accepting of the LGBT community and why or why not?

NA: It, for myself, very much so.

KK: Okay.

NA: Um, there was one point in my life where I was, uh, I'm going to promote, uh, a weekend and I learned to do it when we did the parade for 4th of July. And I came up with a theme, Saugatuck makes me happy. And the idea was that whether you are gay, straight, little, big old or whatever, whatever makes you happy about Saugatuck dress up and be yourself. And there were some negatives because they said it was too much of a gay theme. And it became quite a conversation piece in town where some of the um, locals objected to it and some of the locals were in favor of it. And, um, I remember people getting up from the Council board and walking out and I thought, you know, what am I doing here? So I politely backed off because I had only been here for a short time. I didn't want to create any problems

for the city or for ourselves. And we decided to let it go. Other than that, we never had any, any confrontation. And as the time has gone on and where we are in 2018, um, there's a major comfortability factor for anybody to be here, gay or straight or whatever.

KK: Okay, great. You don't have any memory of the blue tempo. You came here after that, didnt you?

NA: Right.

KK: Okay. So that we don't need to go there. And um, how would you describe Saugatuck Douglas to somebody who's never been here, and I know you've touched on that, so.

NA: Well with the hub and the franchises an America and, and the texting and no one knows what a tree fort is. Nobody knows what it is to go fishing. Know what it is to take a walk in the woods. You don't know what it's to be on the beach. And I'm not saying I'm making this as a generalization, but today's society has changed and Saugatuck has all that and it's a great escape from a lot of things in life, stress and other things because you can come here and just enjoy life and all the god given things that we are able to, to uh, appreciate. Um, that's what I think Saugatuck is. I think that's why Saugatuck has been here for all the years. I think that's why it has survived the rollercoaster ups and downs of our country. And I know that it will survive just as long as it's been here for generations to come. That is my feeling. And I think that if you ask people, you would probably get about a 95%. Right.

**[00:25:48]**

Kk: Okay, uh, in what ways has the area changed over the time that you've been coming here?

NA: Are's changed in a number of ways. Because you know, people have opinions. And, um, if I were to uh, say that I came to Saugatuck, um, to, uh, be supported by a small town, um, that would be an unfair statement because you, you have a base and there are only so many people that can support you and if you're going to have a successful business, you need support from other parts of the United States, from Saint Louis, from Detroit, from Chicago, from Indianapolis, from northern Michigan. And that was our base. That was where we were bringing people in. And in the beginning we had the boat races and we had a lot of wealthy young, successful people coming to this town and they had dollars to spend. As time went on, generations changed the boat people weren't coming. We had um, a time when motorcycles were big from Harley Davidson. And then there was a big push to bring families. It's a great family town. But today coming back, I see more families in Saugatuck than I ever have before. I think that that's great for the city as a retailer, I think its okay, because we need all denominations. Those with a lot of money to spend those with some money to spend. And those that don't want to spend any money. But I've seen the curve going towards more of a family directed city than it was when we first got here, and were in business. That's, that's really true.

KK: And, was Hoopdee Scootee open all year?

NA: No, we were open from April until Christmas.

KK: Oh, okay.

NA: Um, and our business was strong and struck, was the strongest, um, in the summer months. We tried the, the winter business season in back in the good old days, um, it was difficult to sell all your Christmas stuff and have it in the basement for the next year and not have that money returning things. So we pretty much closed um, in October and had the luxury of going down to Florida where we live and then come back in the spring and we were open seven days a week. We're open every night until 10 o'clock. And because we had bills, we had people to, to take care of.

KK: Yeah, I'm sure, you said you had a big staff. Um, let's see. Let me see what I have any, well you, you really covered uh, most of it. I guess one of the questions is, um, what was your impression of law enforcement in Saugatuck Douglas? And I know you touched that.

NA: Well, law enforcement in Saugatuck Douglas, I, I, I, I was, we had two police departments. The Saugatuck Police Department was the police department that I was the closest to and I was the closest to them because I needed their security and support and we really supported them and they were a bunch of good Joe's and they were good policemen and they followed through and they made us feel secure. Personally at this particular time I find it, um, not as secure because of the change that was just made. Um, our manager who lives in Fennville, the policemen have to come from Allegan to come in and, and secure the people. Well, what is that?

KK: So you're talking about the fact that Saugatuck got rid of its police department.

NA: Yeah.

KK: And is like contracting it out.

NA: Right, I'm against that, I'm against it. I have a building here and I don't think it's for the better of the city or the people and with the tax base in this city, which is healthy in both cities, it costs a lot of money to live here, costs a lot of money to own a building, and those dollars should be going and allocated for our security as well. Not just garbage pickup or someone to take a trip.

**[00:30:19]**

KK: Okay. Thank you very much for, you know, telling me your feelings. I, I do understand because I live here too. Uh, who did you socialize with in the summer?

NA: I didn't have any friends. Nobody liked me. No, I'm kidding. [Laughs]

KK: I would find it impossible.

NA: You have to say that. What did we socialize? Actually we socialized with our customers because we worked all the time.



KK: That's what it sounds like.

NA: We had, we, we owned a student union. If you went to college, or in high school, you ever had a student union where everybody meets? That's what our store was people. People, but they would come in and they would stay and they'd talk and they'd be there at 10 o'clock. Back then I could pour them a glass of wine and more wine they had the more they bought. Um, no, that was a joke, but it was true. Um, but it was, it was a place where we tried to create a social life, but unless you can pay back, if you're going to accept an invitation, you want to be able to pay back. And we didn't have that opportunity because we worked seven days a week. So it was, our store was our life.

KK: Yeah. Well, and, and, and I know myself every, any time I've gone in there. You were there, so.

NA: Yeah, I was.

KK: Yeah. Uh, what are some of your hopes for the future for yourself?

NA: My hope is for the town to keep growing, that we have a few franchises here which somehow snuck into this town. I fought hard to eliminate franchise, especially when the McDonald's, I don't have anything against McDonald's. I have a lot against franchises coming into our town and taking away the ambiance of what Saugatuck is all about if you want to be out on the highway, you want to be somewhere else, but let's keep this little fishing village, a, a cute and quaint and as classy as it's always been. And um, my, my other hope is, is that, uh, people will always come here with the enjoyment of the experience of being here a short time or long time and come back another time. It's always been that way. That's been the history. Once you come to Saugatuck, you're going to come back. Yeah. And I like that for forever.

KK: What do you think are some of the greatest needs currently facing the community?

NA: [Pause] From a retail standpoint? I mean, we've been out of this for a couple of years. I always felt that there wasn't the coordination or, uh, I think competition builds business, but I never felt that there were many people that were all working on the same team. Um, if you were in, in, uh, business here and you were successful, uh, you are the target of trying to get what he had, where he was going, which is fine. But I, the community was never one where all the retailers other than the associations we were with, um, really supported each other and said a lot of nice things. It's all competition. That's fine, because I'm going to win because that's how I feel.

KK: Yeah.

NA: Um.

KK: Okay.

NA: Yeah.

KK: No, I understand what you're saying. Uh, remembering that this interview will be saved for a long time. When uh, when someone listens to this tape 50 or more years from now, what would you most like them to know about your life and the community right now?

NA: Well, my life is um, spectacular. Um, I could've stayed in the corporate world, but I chose to go into a more creative world, which was 35 years of my life. I have the good fortune of having a son and a daughter. And through that I have two grandsons that um, are keeping me and will keep me younger and thought and mind. So I have that luxury, and now I have the luxury of making an interview and talking openly and honestly so that someday when my grandkids come to this town, they'll see those legs hanging, and they'll have seen some information from my son and they could listen to a recording of their grandfather and say, yeah, that was exactly who he was.

KK: Well, let me, you know, for, for posterity here, let's talk about where are the legs now?

NA: The legs are now here at the school.

KK: Okay.

**[00:35:00]**

NA: We had, we had um, many options because they were a popular thing and uh, we were going to donate it to the um, fundraiser for the gay community, which does a lot for, um, a lot of people in this community that was started by Carl Jennings and Larry Gammon years ago, which we all support and still do. And there were other organizations for, um, cancer and for a number of things, but we felt that the best thing would be to have the legs because we were here for such a long time and we were at destination store. We got letters from different senators complimenting us when we closed the store, that it was a destination for store for Michigan and that we were complimented on bringing a lot of people to share, not only Saugatuck, but the other things that Michigan had to offer. So it was a nice reward.

KK: And uh, by the way. We're really, really pleased to have them here, they are hanging in our stairwell.

NA: In pink!

KK: Yup. And uh, she's got quite an outfit on.

NA: Yeah, and she's not wet in the rain.

KK: [Laughs] But uh, you know, at the, they still are here for people to come and see.

NA: Right. So when you come to the library, take a look at the legs, there's a wonderful little plaque down there and we're soon going to have some other information, for you to read.

KK: Okay. Uh, any advice for a young person who may listen to this tape?

NA: Yeah. Go with your dream. You can, there's nothing you can't do if you want to do it. I, I love money and I am a materialistic guy and I gave all that up to come here and sell stuff. When my father saw this store the first time when he came to visit, he loved the town cause the golfer, he was a golfer. So this was a great town. But he said, what are you doing? You got all this education, you got a store full and nothing anybody needs, why are you doing this? You got a family to support what you're doing? So go with your dreams and there's no free lunch, no free lunch. You got to work for it and you've got to work hard.

KK: Okay. And you know, uh, kind of to finish up, is there anything else that you'd like to share that I might not have asked you about?

NA: Um, yeah, the good health and wishes of anybody that comes here so they enjoy the day.

KK: Thank you. Uh, Neil, thank you so much for sharing your memories with me. And, uh, this concludes our interview.

NA: Thanks.

**[00:37:46]**