



Western Michigan University
ScholarWorks at WMU

East Campus Oral Histories

University Libraries

7-30-2022

Richard Nielsen, the Milwood Transfer and Sports Fan

University Libraries

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/east_campus_oral_histories



Part of the Oral History Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

University Libraries, "Richard Nielsen, the Milwood Transfer and Sports Fan" (2022). *East Campus Oral Histories*. 8.

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/east_campus_oral_histories/8

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Campus Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



U High Alum Richard Nielsen

July 30, 2022 at 3:30 PM

State and U-High Reunion

Cassie: So, today is Saturday July 30th. I'm Cassie Kotrch and I'm here with Richard Nielsen. You can go ahead when you are ready.

Richard: All right. Well, I have many great memories of my State and University High days. I graduated in 1959, having attended 10th, 11th, and 12th grade at the campus school after junior high in Millwood. About a dozen of my Millwood classmates followed the same path. During our three years at the high school, the name changed from State High to University High and the school colors changed from blue to red and white. I was and always have been a sports participant and fan. I loved attending the varsity football and basketball games.

I also played on the baseball team, although my limited skills pretty much confined me to the coaching box. I often shared those duties with John Carlson who conversely started as a football quarterback. We Millwood folks also remember that our junior high football team, which did not include me, broke John's leg in a game between Millwood and the campus school junior high.

Regarding baseball, I remember the long trudge or trot up Oakland Drive to the practice field, which is right across the street here from the hospital. And the fact that baseball season in Michigan almost always includes practice or games in the snow. When the weather warmed up after practice, a few of us would head to the Dairy Queen down the hill for a malt before jumping on the bus for home. I don't know if the Dairy Queen is still there or not.

Cassie: It is still there!

Richard: The bus for home for the Millwood people meant a change of bus downtown. I can't even believe I did this stuff. Two buses to go home! I still remember some of our outstanding athletes in all sports. I love the word out here. I got a copy of this for you in case you want it. Of our outstanding athletes in all sports. I wish that I could have been one of them. One memory that stands out is attending the U-High Mooseheart football game in Angel Field.

Mooseheart is a school for troubled young men over in Illinois and they had a pretty good football team because they were sort of selected. U-High used to play above their weight in sports anyway and they would schedule these interesting games. So, a game against Mooseheart in Angel Field on K-College campus. The game was played in a blizzard and had to be called at halftime because, as I understand it, the Mooseheart kids did not have the necessary cold weather gear. The game definitely was called.

One other memory is playing some primitive form of ice hockey a few times on Gull Lake with a bunch of classmates. We actually shoveled the snow off our natural rink. Speaking of winter, the walk across the driveway to the science building for biology, chemistry, and physics classes was not pleasant when the wind was blowing, and the snow was flying.

Another memory is heading over to Walwood Hall for lunch when we wanted to splurge. Other memories include the Parkwood Grill at the bottom of the hill for pizza and grilled onion rings. And there's another building down there, passed it today, there's some kind of fitness center or something down there now.

Cassie: The Seelye center?

Richard: No, not the Seelye Center. It's down on the right just as you come to the corner where Michigan and Oakland and all those things come together.

Cassie: Oh, okay.

Richard: And Schwartz's driving on King Highway. The offshoot of Chicken Charlie's at Westnedge and Cork. I once lived just up the street from Chicken Charlie's. Chicken Charlie Schwartz had a daughter Leslie who was a fellow U-High alum. Did you know that?

Cassie: I did. Somebody mentioned it today, yeah.

Ricard: Yeah, I remember some of my fantastic teachers including Ms. Giedeman for journalism and Latin, Mr. Engels for chemistry and physics, and Mr. Hackney for math. I did not have Mr. Weber for math but I know he was a legend. Speaking of Ms. Giedeman, the U-High newspaper, called Highlights that she nurtured, was probably a better read than most city newspapers today.

I believe that Western's new basketball arena opened in 1957 while I was at U-High. The Broncos had good basketball teams at the time, and I enjoyed a few games at the new arena. I remember one game in particular against Marquette when all of the Marquette players performed the then-illegal dunks during the pregame warm-up.

Further with Broncos sports, I remember the name of a football running back named Lavelle Coleman who had Olympic-time sprint speed. The Broncos were also baseball powers at the time, and I enjoyed watching a few of their games under legendary coach Charlie Maher. On the team was a former Kalamazoo Central first baseman Ron Jackson. As I recall, about six feet eight inches tall, he was an imposing figure and played Major League Baseball with the White Sox and others.

At the same ball field, I remember attending a game featuring barnstorming Major Leaguers trying to augment their Major League Baseball salaries in the off-season. That was true.

In the 1950s and 60s, baseball players made no money. I'm still in contact with some of my classmates, including Broncos David Anderson, Phil Maschuck, Henry John Carlson. I briefly caught up with Dave Cook a few years ago and that sort of local knowledge stuff and this is all about my classmates. I mourn the passing of Millwood and new high classmates Rich Jackson and Keith Wheeler. Rich was one of the star athletes and he frequently drove to school from Millwood bringing Chuck Henry and myself with him to the bottom of the big Davis Street hill. And big that hill was, although the tram was available to bring us up sometimes or all the time, I can't remember.

Another rather dim memory is the fact that during my senior year I took a math class at Western that was taught on the west campus. How I got there and back during those days is beyond me. I don't even know. I don't remember.

Cassie: A lot of people talked about that too.

Richard: The rest is all about my life. Since then, I don't know if it's anything of interest to you. Probably you know where I've lived and all that stuff.

Cassie: It's up to you if you would like to share that.

Richard: Since leaving U-High, like Johnny Cash, I had been almost everywhere. At the time of our 50th reunion, I was retired and living in Winnebago Illinois.

Having lived in the Detroit area for college co-op with Ford Motor Company, northern and southern California for graduate school and a summer job. Chicago for Northwestern Business School, Milwaukee, Chicago again, Kenosha Wisconsin, Cheshire Connecticut, Barrington Illinois. Born in Kentucky then back to Kenosha and then Cedar Rapids Iowa. That list doesn't even include 10 weeks in New York City and three months in Buffalo around the birthdate of Buffalo Chicken Wings.

In 1973, I was actually there the year the first time Buffalo Chicken Wings were sold. The locations from Milwaukee to Cedar Rapids are all job-related. On my first trip to Kenosha, I met my lovely wife Gloria, and we will celebrate our 46th anniversary in October, so I got married late at 35 years old. Our Winnebago home was on the golf course; we thought it would be our final stop.

However, shortly after our 50th reunion, our Chicago-based daughter asked if we would move to the city and babysit for her daughter, now daughters. So, we lived in downtown Chicago for about 10 years. We moved to a townhome in Elgin on the western side of Chicago in May 2021 as the need for babysitting services pretty much went away with the girls in school full-time. Gloria and I travel frequently, typically spending 6 to 8 weeks in Mexico every winter and spring. We have also taken several cruises. Another travel opportunity took place when Gloria was able to join me on business trips to Sweden and South Korea.

My sister Karen Neilson graduated from U-High in 1963. We just returned from visiting her and her family in Pensacola. I'm sorry to report she is in very poor health. So, I said if I can connect with her classmates here, I will.

Cassie: Okay great, alright, well I had a few questions I wanted to ask you too.

Richard: Sure, did I go too fast? Should I have paused for questions?

Cassie: No, you didn't, but I did hear a few names in there that I've heard before too. Including the three teachers that you mentioned, and I was wondering if you had any memories with them or anything that you remember about any of the teachers or faculty during your time there.

Richard: Well, I remember I took Latin. I actually took one year of Latin at Millwood and I took a second year of Latin during my sophomore year with Ms. Keaton as the teacher. I can remember she would open every class with: (*speaks in Latin*), which means, "Who wants to speak Latin today?" I know you probably never studied Latin, right?

Cassie: No.

Richard: And I also remember Caesar's quote: (*speaks in Latin*), which means "All Gaul is divided into three parts." That's what he did prior to his attempt to conquer all of Europe. I remember that. And I remember, of course, working on the newspaper was lots of fun with the teacher. She lived right down the hill on South Street or something like that, very close to the school.

Cassie: So, you worked on the paper. Did you write for the paper or were you in the teacher den?

Richard: No, we had student staff. The teacher was the—what's the word?

Cassie: A supervisor, editor or something?

Richard: Yeah, she got to coordinate us. I don't think she was even the editor; I think one of us was the editor. I was the editor. But she was, I guess, the counselor or something that would sort of make sure everything got put together on time and so on. So yeah, she did that. I said she taught Journalism; that's probably not true. She taught English and Latin, but she did the newspaper as well. And I remember writing headlines and that was fun stuff.

And I said Mr. Weber I never had him but I know that he was famous for when he'd have somebody—you've probably heard this already from other people. When there was a problem to be solved—

Cassie: "Chalk and talk?"

Richard: Yeah, he would say: "Get up to the board and Chalk and talk mister."

Cassie: Yeah, so many people have said that. (laughs)

Richard: Right, Mr. Hackney. I do have a little funny story about him. One of my best friends at school was Phil Nance. We were both friends and would sit next to one another. We weren't the best-behaved people in math class or maybe any class, and Phil and I would be talking about sports or something like that.

And I remember one time Mr. Hackney said: "You boys better quit talking. Phil, Dick can afford this, but you can't."

He had a son, David, who was, I think, a class behind us. I'm not mistaken here; David Hackney was in the class behind us.

Cassie: Okay. What was the other teacher you mentioned, Engels?

Richard: Mr. Engels. He was also the tennis coach and he taught Chemistry and Math. He was an excellent teacher.

Cassie: That was over in West Hall?

Richard: Yeah.

Cassie: Did you ever go down in the basement and try and go through the tunnels to get to West Hall?

Richard: I think I've done it, yeah. And I remember also, I'm trying to remember, I don't think we had cadavers there, but we had lots of preserved animals for cutting up for the biology class.

Cassie: Yes, I heard about that.

Richard: That was Mr. Deur, who was also very good, but Mr. Engels sticks out a little more in my mind than Mr. Deur. Well, I remember the coaches too. Rushline was the baseball coach and Roy Walters was the football coach. Barney Chance was the basketball coach.

I didn't play any of the sports except for baseball, although we had intramural basketball and I played. I was also in band for a couple of years until I dropped out of band in my senior year, which is probably the dumbest thing I ever did. But I wish I still played; I played clarinet and saxophone.

I wish I still played now, but it was kind of a stupid reason why I did it. I wanted to sit with my friends at the basketball and football games instead of playing in the band.

Cassie: Well, it probably made sense to you back then.

Richard: I guess. I don't know.

Cassie: So, you came into the school kind of late though. You came in 10th grade?

Richard: 10th grade. Right, yeah.

Cassie: Did you ever feel like an outsider? How did you make friends?

Richard: 12 of us came from Millwood.

Cassie: So, you had a group?

Richard: Yeah, 11 previous classmates came with me. Our middle school class was actually about the same size as our junior high class, which was about the same size as our high school class. We had about 80-87 students, I think. And 12 of those 87 came to U-High. The majority went to Kalamazoo Central.

A couple, probably three, went elsewhere. And that's about all, I guess. But we had 12, and I think I felt accepted pretty quickly. I also knew Phil Nance, the guy who sat next to me in math because we had an all-junior high band concert once a year. We would get together with the campus school in Millwood and the other junior highs around town.

And so yeah, I also played baseball in the summer with some kids that came here, but not just from my class. The classes behind us also had kids that I played with. So acceptance was pretty quick.

Cassie: That's good.

Richard: Then I had the good fortune to be valedictorian of this class.

Cassie: Wow! very nice.

Richard: I had one classmate who's coming tonight, a girl. Susan Schrodinger. The last time we had a reunion she was so mad at me. She said I wanted to be valedictorian so bad.

Cassie: Do you know if Schrodinger is her maiden name?

Richard: Larson is her maiden name.

Cassie: Yes, I just spoke with her just yesterday.

Richard: She lives in Tennessee, I think.

Cassie: Yeah, they took a flight, her and her husband, and they got in at 2:30 in the morning. I felt for her. Yeah, that's a pain.

Richard: Yeah, did they fly into Kalamazoo or Detroit?

Cassie: They flew into Grand Rapids actually. Yeah, so I actually got to talk to her yesterday. We talked about her brothers and about the Kents too because I met the Kents, she talked about Wally.

Richard: Wally died; he was in our class. He was a judge, up in Caro Michigan, and he passed away. Another one who was a pretty close friend of mine is Dave Anderson who lives out in California, either in Geyserville or Healdsburg up in northern California. He's a doctor. From

what I read and from what I gather, googling things on and off, he was like the Dr. Marcus Welby of Healdsburg California. Everybody loved the guy, Dr. Dave, when he retired, the whole town just about cried.

Cassie: Wow yeah.

Richard: And he's not coming. I thought he might come but then he said he was a little afraid of flying with the virus, so it surprised me a little bit. He's a doctor though. He wants us to Facetime him sometime during this.

Cassie: That will be cool. Yeah, do you have any other memories with any other students or friends at your time, at U-High?

Richard: Well, I brought some pictures. Not for you, but later. But this one this is Dave. I speak of David Anderson here. This one I showed people before. This is us going to prom.

Cassie: Oh my goodness.

Richard: Fantastic, great. Well, I mentioned a bunch of guys would play hockey. Dave was one of them out on Gull Lake. Then we had a bunch of guys who would play poker. I remember that. What else can I think about for our activities here? I know we went to South Haven a few times. Nothing else pops to mind right now. Yeah, nothing is sticking out.

Cassie: You did say that you went over the Walwood sometimes for lunch. I heard some people talk about that and how you technically weren't allowed over there.

Richard: I don't know if I knew that. I know this though. We had a couple of kids in our class who smoked, and they used to sneak to Walwood to smoke at lunch. I didn't start smoking until I left high school.

Cassie: Yeah.

Richard: Luckily, I quit now.

Cassie: During your time at U-High what event person or even place impacted you the most during your time there?

Richard: Well, I would say that Ms. Giedeman was such a spectacular teacher both in Latin and work. I did not go to her English class, but she was great at working on the paper. She was probably the most positive thing.

We had a men's counselor named Bud Norris and he was really good at getting guys pointed in the right direction. He helped us with our applications and our national merit scholarship stuff. He was very good with that stuff too. So, I think those would be the key people.

As for events, I do not know. We had some cool dances and proms and so on. I can remember going to people's houses and playing Kingston Trio records.

One of our most dynamic classmates died many years ago, Katie Johnson. Have I mentioned her?

Cassie: Not yet.

Richard: She was a cheerleader and just a ball of fire. We met at a couple of reunions. We had after-parties at her house the next day, but she died. I think it was a form of cancer caused by this chemical chlorodyne that they had used in her basement. I do not know if it was an insecticide or something else.

But it turns out chlorodyne was found to be cancer-causing later and that is what caused her death. I would say she has been dead close to 30 years.

The first one who died, Weldon Johnson, you heard that name?

Cassie: No.

Richard: The only black person in our class was a super athlete and a super great guy. He was the first one in our class to die and I cannot remember how he died. He played baseball at Western and then he played either minor league baseball or something like that. But I do not know what he died from.

I ran for some student office at U-High and Weldon was my campaign manager. I know that he came up to my house to make signs. And I know that there were some people raising their eyebrows in my neighborhood because I had this black kid coming to my house. That is the way life was back in the 1950s.

But I've always kind of been on the other side of that street my whole life obviously. Weldon was a notable guy. And unfortunately, he was the first one in our class to die.

Cassie: Yeah, I did actually hear about that.

Richard: I told you; I'll give you a copy of this.

Cassie: Yes, right. I think it was Mike Lowe that talked about that. Because during his time there—he was there from K to twelve. It was like he remembered only three black students; I think at the time during his entire time there. But he did mention that.

Richard: We had a Japanese girl in our class. Susan Herena.

Cassie: Yeah, I remember that.

Richard: You know, there was discrimination against Jewish people too.

Cassie: I did hear that there was some Jewish people in the class—

Richard: Linda barrack was one of them.

Cassie: They would still attend some of the more Christian secular events as well because there was a Christmas pageant, right? And then there was an Easter service at Kanley. Somebody said that, yeah.

Richard: I will tell you one other thing that really shocked people when I talked about it. I said I went to a private high school in Kalamazoo. What did that cost? \$15 a semester.

Cassie: Yes, yeah, right, everybody is like yeah, it wasn't that expensive, I remember.

Richard: \$15 a semester is all it was.

Cassie: Yeah, that's funny. The gentleman who was in here right before was trying to figure it out and he was like: "I can't remember." We were just in here trying to figure it out.

Richard: Because my family did not have a lot of money, we would not have gone to it. Believe me. But this was, and you probably have heard this, but U-High pretty much recruited. Well, first of all, I would say a third of the kids were children of university employees.

But in high school, they recruited people for sports, music, and academics. You had to have something on your resume to get in here from a different junior high, I should say.

Cassie: Yeah, I did hear about that. I did talk to somebody else yesterday, Tom Reid, whose both parents were professors at WMU, and his mom was the first one to start the social work program. He said: "Yeah, I was a faculty brat, it was like thing."

Richard: John Carlson is one of the people that I remain closest to. Have I mentioned his name?

Cassie: Yes, you did.

Richard: He was kind of the political leader of our class. He held a lot of the offices, plus he started as a quarterback. His dad was a history teacher here at Western. But John now has a home on the lake and on the big lake. He also has a home in Arizona.

But they just came over to visit me a couple of weeks ago. They kind of visited me, but I broke my leg two weeks before. I broke my femur playing pickleball.

Cassie: Really?

Richard: You know the game?

Cassie: Yes, I do.

Richard: It was the first time I ever played pickleball. For some reason, I did not get it in my head that pickleball is an old person's game, not a 25-year-old person's game. I was trying to play like a 25-year-old and lost my balance. The rest is history. 911 ambulance, emergency

room, and surgery. But I recovered quite well for an old guy. As you can see, I am moving well.

Cassie: Yeah, not many problems. That is good. It is funny, the gentleman before was talking about how his wife hurt her knee playing pickleball. And now they are out. He was like: "Well, hopefully we'll be back there in about a month or so."

Richard: But I have some friends that have a relative in the medical business in Florida.

They said, pickleball is the best thing that ever happened to orthopedists, orthopedic surgeons.

Cassie: Yeah, (laughs). All right, well, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me.

Richard: My pleasure and I guess I will see you tonight, probably. If I think of anything else to add to the story, I will do it .

Cassie: Yeah, just let me know. Yeah, and if you hear of anybody else interested and maybe they would like to—

Richard: You did not talk to Chuck Henry. Did you?

Cassie: No, I did not.

Richard: He's here. He's at the same hotel.

Cassie: Yeah, but we'll be taking contact information at the dinner too, because I'll be doing this for a few months or so.

Richard: Sounds good, good to meet you.