

**Normandy Oral History Project**  
**March 4, 2012**  
**Interviewee: Marie Gagnepain**  
**(Assisted by daughter-in law Beth and son Gary)**  
**Interviewers: Elizabeth Eikmann and Alice Floros**

Marie: My name is Marie Gagnepain. I moved out here when I was 2 years old. Just about 2 years old. I lived over on St. Ann's lane in a house down the house down the street from where Beth lives. It was, I think, 3817. Closer to Florissant Road. I lived there until I was married when we moved here in about '38. Gary (son) was born here. Most of the land around here... Now St. Ann's is the same as it was, the street. The only thing it was was just a narrow, single road, just connecting Natural Bridge and Florissant Road. And its still all of that, still just the 2 blocks, expect that no its modern. Not just the cinder road. Now across the street form there, where the Wedge is, was called the Normandy Grove. They used to have picnics there in the summertime. Different churches or anybody used to have picnics all summer long there. But they didn't build those houses until... Well, I think Beth's house was about the first one...

Beth: We live in the second house from Natural Bridge on St. Ann's lane, so it was between St. Ann's and Florissant Road, where the grove was. And I think our is, I don't know...

Marie: Well, Gary's and the one on the corner were the first one's built. But then they finally sold and I guess, I imagine, the whole grove and then started building houses.

Beth: Yes, apparently, the Vaterott's build our house so he could live in it with his new bride. She (Marie) thinks maybe they owned all that land and built...

Marie: Vaterott's were on the other side of St. Ann's, and I lived on this side, the old part. A Vaterott boy married Laticia Rutherford, they lived on the corner house. Its torn down now, but they lived on the corner house there. And that's how come, after he married Laticia, they bought the whole thing, to build on it.

**Could you share with us your earliest memory?**

MG: The earliest memory I can remember without anyone telling me about it, would be starting at the school there.

Beth: Talk about what the school looked like then.

MG: The school used to be just a frame house. It had 4 rooms. That's where I went to school and I graduated from there. The church was sort of down the hill, where it still is now, it was uneven. And we used to walk down the hill to get water from the well in back of the church. The boys would have to go take the buckets down, fill them up, and they had dippers. It wasn't very cleanly when you think about it now, but they had a bucket and a dipper in each room. When you wanted to drink, that's what you had to do.

Beth: how many classes were in each room?

MG: Well, we had all eight classes in four rooms, so it was about 2 in each one. I know there was 2 when I graduated. When I graduated, there was only 5 in our class. We started with more, but I don't know what happened to them, whether they quit or moved, but we had 5 girls graduate. I kept track of the 5 girls for a long time, they're all gone now. But some of them were from Carsonville, and they had to come here because there were no other school farther out from here when I first started. So some of them came from Carsonville, some from Ferguson, and some from here. There wasn't any other school to go to. Then by the time my sister graduated, she was 3 years younger than me, they had just built a new school and she graduated from the new school. I graduated from the old school, 4 rooms!

Beth: I guess you had an outhouse?

MG: Oh yeah. There were no bathrooms. Everybody had an outhouse. But the school was about where it is now, except they tore it down and built a new one. I think, it must have been 3 or 4 years before they tore down the old one down.

Beth: When did you graduate?

MG: Well, I was about 14 or 15.

Beth: I think it was about 1925.

MG: Yeah 1925.

Beth: So they tore it down about 1927...

MG: Well, see at the time I didn't go to kindergarten; they didn't have kindergarten. I think I must have been close to six and a half or seven before I started school.

### **What did young folks do for fun?**

MG: Well there wasn't much to do around here when I grew up. We went to school and we came home. We'd go out and play, then we'd eat and go to bed. There were no shows, only like the one big store, and the post office. That was about all that was along here. We used to play out in the yard. There were houses on our side of the street over there. There were Buntons, they still live off of Natural Bridge Road in Bel-Ridge. There was a store there, like a country store.

Beth: When you were in high school, is that when you used to go ice-skating?

MG: Oh yeah! When I was in high school, we used to go ice-skating in Bellereive Country Club, but see the college bought that from Bellereive. We used to go out there after school, there was a lake down there. I guess it's still there. It used to be wonderful to ice skate. We used to go sledding up and down the hills. There was a like down here, right here (points out side window of home). We used to go there before the country club to ice skate, I never did swim, I guess some people did. Mother never did let us learn. I never learned to swim. I'd go swimming, but I

never really learned.

MG: When they started building those houses off of Florissant Road,. There was a Benedicts Farm. My grandfather just had a small place, not a farm. He used to raise flowers and vegetables and that kind of stuff. Then Knowls had the farm right across the street from here.

Beth: What was the name of the farm that was where the Wayside Community Garden is now?

MG: That was Hardy's Salt. It belongs to Normandy now. Then the people who bought Benedicts lived right across the street. I think they'd sell part of it at a time, you know. People were working out in the farms more. The pasionist monestary had their place right on the other side of the Hunt Road. The German Orphan road is right up the road. That was here when I was a child. Then we had a colored home, a St. Vincent's Orphan Home. That was down this street. It was just farm land, there was no other houses. They stayed there quite a while.

Beth: Oh yes, it was there for quite some time. Then it became a daycare center. The nuns still ran it. It was there up until just 10 or 15 years ago.

MG: There were black children there first, but then later along they were taught school. My aunt taught them piano lessons. The nuns were from somewhere in New York. I think they were called Franciscan nuns, but there weren't too many colored nuns back then. That was at the end of our block here.

**What do you think has been the biggest change in the neighborhood from when you were growing up until now?**

MG: Well, we used to have a streetcar.: Kirkwood Ferguson. It ran right along here, form Kirkwood to Ferguson. We used to take rides on that because that was a long ride. You'd get on that and take a ride all the way down.

Beth: It was entertainment.

MG: We had some relatives that lived in Kirkwood. We'd go out there every once in a while to see them. When they quit the streetcar, then you had to take a bus. You had to transfer. You had to go into Wellston, then transfer at Wellston to the Wellson car or the Hodelman car. Now when I went to high school, I went to Loretta Academy down in South Saint Louis on Layfaette Academy. I used to have to take a Kirkwood Ferguson car here to Wellston, to either the Wellston or Hodelman, then go to Grand, then I had to transfer again to a Grand Avenue car to go south to Layfaette Avenue. Then we had to walk two blocks down Layfaette Avenue to school.

Beth: You did that for 3 years?

MG: Yes, 3 years. I graduated in 3 years. For one thing, we started to get a few different stores then. At one time there was a small bakery up here on Natural Bridge which wasn't there. We didn't have anything like that when I moved in. All we had was that general store. Then they added stores where you could get your hair cut, they just started building up Natural Bridge road. It was close to Saint Louis and people were moving out. They wanted to come out. That was one

thing that was a big change. Otherwise, we finally had a theater up here. Normandy Theater up here at the corner. For a couple of years it was an open theater, then it ended up as a closed theater. The building is still up there. My sons used to go up on Sunday afternoons. Boy, it was a treat to go to to Sunday show because we never had a show before. Then there were a couple of saloons, the stores brought in the saloons. Of course, when they quit farming, people got jobs and then they just lived differently.

Gary: The original Kroger store was right up here at the Wedge.

MG: Oh yes! Kroger was about the first big store up there. That was the first time we ever went to a store and waited on ourselves. Otherwise, they weighed everything up for you and put it in bags and everything. Kroger you could go in and take it off of the shelf.

### **Why did you decide to stay in Normandy?**

MG: I liked it. We had friends here and grew up with children here. There are a lot of them still in the neighborhood. These couple houses still here (pointing at neighboring houses), they were the farm houses. There were quite a few families related that lived out here. Like the Buntons and Benders, they were cousins. The Buntons still live out in Carsonville. The Benders moved out to Minneapolis.

Beth: There are still a lot of families with cousins living around here.

MG: Oh yea, there are a lot of families. There a lot of people around my age still living out here, I guess we just liked it! I don't know why. I guess you get used to living in a place. You get used to the people. Since I'm older and can't get around, its nice to live here. They (Beth and Gary) just live two blocks over. They take me to the store. If I move, I'd have to be with strange people. I just like it here.

### **How has St. Ann's Church changed?**

MG: The church has changed a lot. When we moved out, we had a small stone church. It was a pretty church, but it was little. Then Normandy started to grow after they turned these buildings into subdivisions. They needed a bigger church. And they needed a bigger school. So they tore down the other church. It was quite a fury in Normandy though. They didn't want them to tear that old church down. But Father Sprenke, he was modern. He said he wanted to build a bigger church so they could have it for years. That's when they build the bigger one. I think they had a stone church even before they one I was in. It was a small church, just like a one room stone church. But when I came out, it was the second stone church.

Gary: I remember the second stone church.

Beth: This new one was only built in 1950.

Gary: Yes. Maybe I had a baptism or first communion in the old stone church?

Gary: Father Sprenke was quite the character. He was something else.

Beth: I didn't grow up here, but we lived here and when we first got married I just remember this: He was saying mass, like on a Holy Saturday, it was like a real long service. He was getting old, he was a little slower as it went on, so the priests when they went on before the second part of the ceremony, they tried to convince him... We knew what they were saying because we were sitting near the front, they were trying to convince him to let them finish. He said, 'I'm gonna finish!' Okay! He came out and finished. Boy, that was one long, long service!

MG: There really wasn't a whole lot to do out in Normandy at that time. There were just not enough houses until they started building the subdivision. But even now its still like a neighborhood.

Beth: Yes, very neighborhood oriented.

MG: Its neighborhoods rather than...its not city, yet. It's close to it, but its not. It's still just neighborhood. And you get to know the neighbors. You get to know people.

Beth: Even the change in the racial composition in Normandy, everybody is just friendly, great neighbors.

MG: We never have any trouble or anything. I guess a lot of these people wanted to get out of the city. They wanted to get out into the county. Or where they would have more freedom, more room.

### **When UMSL moved into the neighborhood, how did that change things?**

MG: That changed it a lot. We had new people coming in. A lot of the houses in Bel-Nor were bought by the college. They use them as rooms or for whatever they need them for. When they originally opened, there was one building up there. That was where the gold club was, the house. That was the only building. For a couple of years they didn't build anything, then they started building up. They started buying Marillac land. That took over all this on this side, almost over to St. Charles Rock Road. That's nearly all college now. They have living quarters, nurses quarters, they have all kinds of different places over there. They have a lot of different over on that side. And they're big buildings.

Gary: I think it really helped keep the price of the area up too. It kept the standards higher and the price higher, because of that.

MG: I think that helped keep people out here. They didn't decide to move right away. After the college was there, they didn't want to move anymore. You bought a house there, you raised your children there, and then your children went to school there.

### **What about the college kept people here?**

MG: Well, for one thing they didn't have to go out of town to go to school. They were close and

in the neighborhood. I think they were a little afraid. When they first started talking about buying that, there were a lot of people against it. They didn't want the neighborhood changed. They thought that when the college came in it would change everything. But it didn't. It just seems like they just melted right in. And as their children go to college out here, they buy houses out here, and before you know it, it is just a regular neighborhood again. I don't think it's changed much. But it did make it safer.

Gary: Normandy has the best services. You've got a place to park like eight patrol cars. We've got pick up every week.

Beth: Best trash service in the world.

Gary: Yeah trash service.

MG: We've got it real good.

### **How did you meet your husband?**

MG: I met him...He was in St. Louis. His parents lived in Chester, IL. Really the only job he could get after school was to work in a shoe factory. Well, his brothers worked in the shoe factory. He didn't like working in the shoe factory, he worked there for a little while. Then he and a couple of others, they came to St. Louis. They boarded with a woman South St. Louis. They all got jobs and they all stayed here then.

Beth: But where did you meet him? Was it at a party of something?

MG: Yeah, it was at a party. That was the first time I ever saw him.

Beth: Was the party here or in South St. Louis?

MG: South St. Louis.

Beth: Why were you there? Was it somebody from school?

MG: I went to school in South St. Louis. Those girls I went to school with all lived in South St. Louis. I think there were three of us from Normandy that went to school there. The rest were all South St. Louis girls. When were in school, we had parties in high school. They had most like that, in their houses. We didn't go to bars or anything like that.

### **How old were you when you were married?**

MG: I was nineteen. I got married in 1930. My husband died in 1981. 51 years of marriage.

### **What did you and your siblings/neighbors to do fun?**

MG: They used to have shows in this backyard. Betty, from up there...there was children in all

these houses. Two or three girls and boys. There was one up there, there were three next door, I had the five, and she had six, the one next to them had four. I mean, there was a group of children. A couple of my girls like to dress-up and have the shows. They used to do that in the backyard. That was something to do because there was nothing here to do, unless it was something connected with church or school, or when the shows came, like I said a minute ago, the shows on Sunday afternoon.

Gary: What was the best thing that you used to do when you were little, in Normandy?

MG: Well, I guess all we did was play in the yard with neighbors. There was nothing else out here to do. In the summer, we'd go to picnics. Different neighborhoods had picnics that you used to go to. Schools had picnics that you used to go to, that kind of stuff.

**Once you were older, did you go to the city to find things to do?**

MG: Oh yes, when I worked we'd often...I used to work at Herr's Candy Company. I'd go at eight in the morning and we had a six day work week then too. No five day work week! And you worked from eight in the morning until five at night. I used to take a street car home at night. Sometimes instead of going home right after work some girls would get together and we'd go over to one of the stores and maybe get dinner and then go to see a show. At that time there were big shows downtown. We'd have to use a streetcar.

**What was your job at the candy factory?**

MG: I was a stenographer. I worked in the office. But it was Herr's Candy Company. They had a store on Olive Street in the Booter building. They had the store downstairs and then they had like a balcony on top. We had the office on the balcony. The actual candy factory was about three blocks down.

**What do you know about the tunnels under UMSL?**

MG: I read that! I don't know!

Gary: I wonder if that was the Hunt house. They have a slave tunnel going out to the back.

MG: Oh yes. The Hunt house did. The Hunt's really settled Normandy. They came from France and they bought all the land. Or were given it or something.

**What's your favorite thing about this house?**

MG: At the time when we bought it, the children were all little. You didn't need a big house. A couple of children, just put them in the crib! Eventually, we did have to put an extra room on the back.