

**Darien, Illinois
Oral History Project**

Interview with

Rosemary Courtney

Conducted by Deb Barrett

September 10, 2014

**Indian Prairie Public Library
Darien, Illinois**

Today is Tuesday, September 10, 2014, and I am here with Ms. Rosemary Courtney at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My, name is Deb Barrett. Also with us is Tulah Dimetra, another volunteer with the Library. Ms. Courtney was born on August 14, 1940, in Chicago, Illinois. She has lived in Darien since 1968 and is here to share her memories about this area.

Coming to the Darien Area

So, Rose, when did your family first move to this area? Where were you moving from? What brought you here to what now is Darien?

Well, we lived in Oak Park for three years when we were married and moved from Oak Park to here. Our son was three years old and we had a one-bedroom apartment, and it was just time to find a yard for him. I came out with a realtor and looked around Hinsdale and so forth because my husband wanted to be around the railroad track line to get in to work. It would be easier for him wherever his office was going to be. When real estate people were taking me around, and being newlyweds with the funds we had, we realized that the houses in Hinsdale and Clarendon Hills area were not for us. I found this subdivision going up – Hinsbrook. And I said, “Husband, I think I have it.” My husband said to go and look.

My husband also grew up with a one-bedroom apartment all his life – he and his sister. And these houses were immense to him, where I had grown up in a four-bedroom house with five brothers and sisters.

So this house looked like a palace to him.

Yes. This house we have ‘til today looked like a palace. I really wanted the model that is next door to us because it had more of a basement area, but I was willing to buy to get out of the one-bedroom apartment. And that’s how it started.

And that was in 1968?

Right. We signed the contract for the house in August of 1968, picked out our lot and went from there.

You were still a young married couple at the time and had the one child.

Yes.

How did your friends react to your moving out here, because this was not developed at that time?

Well, I grew up in the northwest side of Chicago. So my friends were mainly up that way. Tom grew up in Oak Park. But by that time we were considered the “old” ones to get married. His friends lived in Crystal Lake, Glen Ellyn – so his friends were already scattered; there weren’t that many friends in Oak Park anymore.

You were the “old” ones to get married?

Yes, we were the old ones – 24 – to get married. I think the funniest one was my mother. When we finally got into the house she wanted to ask me something. So she went in her little phone directory and decided she had to call long distance to talk to me! And she called my sister in Minnesota instead. To my mother we were really moving far away from the northwest side of Chicago.

How about anybody in Oak Park – any of Tom’s relatives?

Tom’s parents lived in Oak Park. His mother was disappointed that we were moving away. She couldn’t see why we wanted to own a house. His father was delighted. He said it was something he’d always wanted to do, but Tom’s mother never wanted to own property.

Since was still a pretty much undeveloped area in 1968. What do you remember about traveling out here on the roads? How did you get out here?

By car. And to me ... Well, my father was a painter and decorator, and at the time he was working for Knolley Company. He was in charge of all the main decorating of Oak Brook shopping center, especially Fields. So even from the northwest side of Chicago we’d travel down here just to see this big shopping center that dad was in charge of the decorating for. So I was used to traveling from Oak Park out this way.

Also, all my life I’ve been involved in Girl Scouting and I was traveling from the northwest side to the south suburbs to do training, so traveling never bothered me, no matter what the roads were like.

So you were involved with Girl Scouting even though you didn’t have any girls in Girl Scouts.

To this day! We never had a daughter.

But you were a Girl Scout yourself.

Yes.

Life in Darien

So you came out here to Hinsbrook in 1968. I think Farmingdale was just starting up.

It might have been.

What was it like settling into this big new house after a one-bedroom apartment? What was a priority for you?

Well, moving here in December and my husband had lived all his life in an apartment, I loved the wood floors but he couldn't wait for them to be carpeted to deaden the sound. He wasn't used to it. Now we're back to the wood floors!

I think the priority at the time was furnishing it.

From a one-bedroom apartment you now had three or four bedrooms.

We have three bedrooms. We had a crib, but our son was three and it was time for him to get out of it. The crib was in our room in the apartment, and it was a four-year crib instead of the big crib. So we had delivered the day we moved in his bed.

So it was furnishing the place. And the third bedroom, because we didn't need it, became our office. Eventually it was needed as a bedroom, but now it's back to an office.

I think we started with the family room, because that's where we put the TV we had in the apartment and we wanted to do the family room and the toy area for our son. After that it was the dining room set because we wanted a place to entertain and host the family on both sides for holidays and stuff.

So you got the house furnished and the yard taken care of.

Well, in the slides I gave you I'm sure it's there. In the neighborhood everybody was helping to sod everybody's yards. The day our sod came – and you never knew what day it was going to come; they'd just come and say it's your day and here's your sod – was the Friday before Mother's Day. And it was pouring rain. And also that weekend it what they call on the Bass River in Wisconsin the 'bass run,' and my father and brothers were always up there for that.

Well, I was really surprised when on that Saturday the doorbell rang at 6:00 in the morning, and here were my father and brothers to help. He said, "I couldn't catch a fish knowing you had all this sod here." So my brothers and he in all this pouring rain and mud helped lay the sod.

Did some of the neighbors come to help you?

Oh, yes. The neighbors came and helped. So that was my Mother's Day present – laying the sod!

So you got to know some of the neighbors. How did the neighbors match up to your family? Were they young, married couples also? Were they older people?

The neighbors just to the east of us were an elderly couple who never had children, but they were the friendliest couple in the world. A cul-de-sac was right across the street from us and two of the houses had teenagers, and two of the houses were couples whose children were gone. The other house was like us – a young couple.

So it was a pretty good mix of people.

Right.

In those early days, how did you and your neighbors socialize? What did you do?

Many things! We used to have a holiday party.

Like a block party?

No. It was at Christmas time. One year it was a progressive dinner. Another year the men decided they didn't want a progressive dinner – they wanted a progressive cocktail party. That and in the summer we used to get together for barbeques all the time. But at the same time we all belonged to the Hinsbrook pool. So we'd see each other there. It was Newcomers, then – all the women were involved with Newcomers. Both the women and the men served on the boards at the pool, so we socialized that way. We had big parties at the pool during the summer.

So it was very sociable. We all had kids. We were on 70th Street, and there were three of us couples on 70th Street, and two couples on 69th Street. Except for one of them the couples to this day get together.

You're still close neighbors.

Yes. Two of them live in St. Charles now and one in Lisle, and we're still in our original house.

Besides being with the neighbors, what did you do for entertainment? Did you go to movies or anything like that? What was around?

For movies we used to go to the Tivoli in Downers Grove. That was the closest one. We women belonged to a bowling league at Suburbanite Bowl. It was owned by Mike Ditka at the time. The kids got into school and Scouting, so we were den mothers. I was coordinator for the troops at Hinsbrook School and I was coordinator for the Girl Scout troops. So Scouting came more into my life here than in Chicago when my son started kindergarten.

You have more than one son.

Yes. We have two sons who are twelve years apart.

So your one child was an only child for quite some time. When he started school, where did he go to school?

He went to Hinsbrook School.

So he started at Hinsbrook School. And that was a new school at the time.

Hinsbrook wasn't built then. He started kindergarten at the racquet club – by that I mean the Darien Swim & Racquet Club. So kindergarten was started there. And they were two-thirds through the school year when Hinsbrook was finished.

How many kids were in his class when he started school? Do you remember?

Yes. They kept it to 25 for kindergarten classes. But at that time they were doing half-day kindergarten. So it was the Raq Club. And St. John's had their old frame church at the corner of Cass & 75th. And that's where the other kindergarten class went.

So, when your son started school he started at the Raq Center, but then moved into the brand new school.

Right.

When he was in school, what did you do?

I volunteered like crazy!

What sort of places did you volunteer?

Girl Scouting. I did my training everywhere. I held different offices. Oh, I did training here in DuPage because I finally changed my registration from the Chicago Girl Scout Council to what was called at that time, DuPage County Council. I became coordinator for the troops at Hinsbrook, and three months later I became secretary for the Board for Girl Scouts and I was at the office.

For Girl Scouts of DuPage County?

Yes. So, Girl Scouts kept me busy and then Cub Scouts started in first grade for my son.

So he was actively involved. Had your husband been involved in Scouting?

No. He wasn't. I was teaching CCD, which is now called REO, at St. Mary's, which is now Our Lady of Peace.

Religion classes.

Right. And I was his room mother at school. So when registration came for Cub Scouts I went and registered him, because Tom was out of town. And I said, "You know what? I'm not going to be a Den Mother. He needs somebody else in his life, but my husband will do whatever job you want him to do."

Did Tom know you volunteered him for that?

No. I didn't tell him.

And how did he react when you told him?

Well, he came home from being out of town and I told him, "You know, I went and registered." He said, "Fine, okay. I can't be a den father because of traveling and stuff, but I'll

do whatever the pack wants me to do.” So he started out as Assistant Cubmaster. The Cubmaster worked for Channel 7 and lived a half-block from us, and his wife was our son’s Den Mother. And about two weeks later Tom was outside painting the shutters on the house and Ed Youmis came down the street and said, “Tom, I have to tell you my job changed. I can’t be Cubmaster anymore.” So, Tom became Cubmaster right away. He had no experience, but said to me, “You are going to get me through his, aren’t you?” And I said, “Sure.”

So he stuck with it all along.

Yes. He’s still involved in Boy Scouts. And, in fact, he is a Girl Scout! October 1 will be 50 years. Because when we were working on stuff for our wedding, I was filling out the stuff for our registration form for my troop. He said, “I know you’re never going to give this up.” So he gave me \$2.00 and said, “You might as well register me, too.”

So he’s a Girl Scout, too!

Yes. He is now a lifetime member of the Girl Scouts.

So, did you work outside of the home?

No.

Tom, your husband, I know he worked for IBM. Did he drive? Did he end up taking the train?

When his office was downtown, yes. His office started out in Oak Lawn, then went to Oak Park. His office was in many, many different places.

So his commute got a little bit longer when you moved out.

Right, for a little while. But when he was downtown he drove into Clarendon Hills and took the train.

So your son was in school. Did he stay at Hinsbrook School?

Yes.

For how long; until Eisenhower – junior high?

Yes. It was only seventh and eighth grade then.

And your other son was born.

Yes. He was born – I guess my first son was in seventh grade then. What was funny, then, I was expecting in August and our son went off to Boy Scout camp at the end of July. And he said to dad, “If it’s a girl and I’m at camp, don’t let me know and spoil camp!”

He did not want a sister!

He always wanted a brother, and he got his brother.

That was so nice of you to honor his wishes! So, when you had the second baby, did you go to the same hospital where you had your first one?

No. Our oldest son, Tom, was born at MacNeal, and Mike was born at Hinsdale Hospital.

It must have been a little bit different after so much time for the second one.

Yes, it was. Because Tom could be in the delivery room. The first time Tom was at National Guard summer camp when our son was born. He wasn't even in the State for our first one!

But the second time he was in the room.

Right.

That's a big difference!

Right.

So you got your second son home. And your first son was probably ...

Thrilled to death! That little baby became a football with his friends in the backyard. For Halloween my son had taken an old garbage can and made himself a garbage can. So, for pictures, which were really cute, he's in this garbage can and he took a wastebasket and put Michael in the wastebasket! He said, "That's your costume." And here is this two-and-a-half-month old child in his first Halloween costume.

Changes Over Time

So, in the nine years time – from the time you moved until your second son was born – this area had undergone quite a bit of change.

Oh, yes!

What were some of the changes you saw? What were the changes you saw in shopping, for example?

I think one of the biggest changes in shopping was getting a full drugstore. We had to be out of our apartment November 1st, and the house wasn't ready until the 15th or 16th. So we

stayed at my mother's house, and our son was on an over-the-counter iron medication. I accidentally left the bottle at my mother's house.

Where was your mother living?

She was up at Harlem and the Kennedy Expressway.

So I said, "I'll just run to the drugstore and get a new bottle." Well, the closest drugstore was in the Heritage Center which is now being torn down. And it was a Walgreen's agency. And I went in there and told them what I wanted, and he said, "Oh, we can order that and have it for you in three days." I said, "That won't do."

So where did you end up having to go for it?

Fortunately, my older brother was the architect for St. John's Church that was being built. And his office was up way north – I think it was in Deerfield then. And he said, "Oh, I'll drive past mom and dad's and pick that up along with the lamp shades, china and stuff." We just didn't have room in the car for those. And he loaded his car, came out, helped Tom load the refrigerator that had been delivered to the garage into the kitchen, did his check on the progress at St. John's Church. My brother was very helpful when the house was being built, because whenever he was out there he'd stop and say things like, "I don't like where that electric outlet. Move it six inches." It was things like that ...

That you wouldn't have known.

Right. But they were things he knew, being in the business, that really helped with the building of the house.

So shopping was different.

Yes. Jewel wasn't there.

Where did you do your food shopping?

In the beginning I was going to the Jewel on 55th & Route 83. And that was even a much smaller Jewel, in Clarendon Hills, at the time.

The library – we joined the library in Clarendon Hills because ...

There wasn't one in Darien yet.

Right. And we were very thankful that was there. I started story-time because there wasn't a story-time. I just volunteered there, too, because I felt story-time was very important for my son.

What about restaurants?

Royal Shield was at the corner of Cass & 75th.

Where Buona Beef is now.

Yes. And there was a nice restaurant where Walgreen's is now. I think it was called The Buckingham.

Where Walgreen's is in Willowbrook on Plainfield.

Yes – Plainfield and Madison. Those were just about the only two restaurants around. But then Tom wasn't really into restaurants because he ate out every day at lunchtime. So he was more into a home cooked meal. And with traveling he even ate dinners out.

What about activities for the kids? You mentioned the pool.

Yes, the pool; and the pool had a swim team which both of my sons on. There was the CYO was already there with baseball. That was the only sport then. But come winter they had Scouts. And both of them played an instrument so they had their music lessons. Being the parent that I am, I said two activities during the school year were enough, because schoolwork comes first, and activities at school.

They kept busy that way, because I felt that kids needed free-time also.

What about shopping for clothes and things like that?

I went to Oak Brook, or into Hinsdale. They had this little store, Olson's, with wooden floors.

Did your neighbors change a lot in that time? I know you have several you're still close with who are still in their houses. Did the neighborhood change at all – was there a lot of turnover in the houses?

Only the house just west of us. It was the last house occupied. They were the first ones to move because he was transferred to Kansas, and they're still in Kansas. No. The people to the east of us, the Van Curra's, lived there until they died.

And across the street, well the family that's there now their youngest three children were born there, and the youngest of those three kids is a junior in college. The first people there were there 15 or 20 years. This family is there a long time.

It's really been until recently steady houses. Another house in the cul-de-sac, until the woman died two years ago she was there. Most of the people, except for one house in the area that's on its third family.

But it's been pretty steady.

Yes.

Lots of kids, or not in your part of Hinsbrook?

It's coming back now.

Well, the schools have changed a lot. In 1968 I think there was Marion Hills and Lace School for the elementary schools.

And Hinsbrook.

And Hinsbrook was finished then. And Eisenhower the following year, I think. But those schools have changed a little bit now. When your kids were in school, what did they like about the school? What did they not like about it?

Only our oldest son went to the public schools. Michael went to Our Lady of Peace.

Tom wasn't thrilled with the way they divided classes at Hinsbrook. There were four first grades. To begin with, because I didn't send him to pre-school or nursery school, he was put in the slow-learner kindergarten. Well, he knew his alphabet and how to print his name. He knew all his stuff, so he was bored in kindergarten. Then, come first grade, they put him into what they called the "general" first grade. He was still a little bored there. So in second grade they put him in the accelerated class and that's where he really fell down, because the accelerated class had done so much more in first grade than he did in the general class. He was playing catch-up the entire time.

The classes in the schools at the time were about 20 – 25 kids per class, and they were divided according to what was seen as their ability. So, for him to go from the slow class for two years to the accelerated class is a big jump. And I think all the schools in what is now the Darien 61 District were like that then. Did he stay in the public school the whole time?

Yes. We put him on the waiting list to get into St. Mary's. We got a call when he was going into seventh grade that they had an opening, but we made the decision it was the wrong time to change him because he was first tuba in the band and we were going to the Orange Bowl Parade and Disney. And he was going to have a brother or sister. It just wouldn't have been fair to him.

There were a lot of changes taking place already.

Yes.

But your second son went to St. Mary's. Was it Our Lady of Peace at that time?

Yes, It was Our Lady of Peace by that time.

And that school has changed a lot. The school has changed, the parish has grown significantly.

It hasn't grown any more right now.

But back then to now there was a big change. How many were in your son's class there?

He was the second to the last single eighth grade graduating class. If I remember right there were 48 in his class.

That's a big class!

That was the home room. He was in the algebra class, not the math class. Their classes were broken down. It was just the social studies that was done as a large group.

Did both your boys go to Hinsdale South, or did they go to a private school?

They went to Nazareth Academy in LaGrange.

That's been there for a long time.

Yes.

Hinsdale South is about four times the size it was back then.

Yes.

With 12 years apart between your sons, what did your second son experience that your first son maybe didn't because of changes of what was in the Park District, the library and everything else?

My second son actually worked at this library.

Changes ...

There weren't as many kids in the neighborhood for him as there were for our older son. So it was more me transporting him when he was in school to play with friends because Our Lady of Peace draws kids from a wider area.

The library was sort of established. It was in Brookhaven.

In the Brookhaven shopping center as a little storefront at that time.

Yes. When he was in fifth grade it was in the shopping center at 75th & Clarendon Hills Road. That's where I worked at the library, so I know he was in fifth grade. So he saw the library grow. And again, story hour was a volunteer thing, and I volunteered for him there.

Shopping centers – the Jewel was built. Stores and things were around. Our Lady of Peace Church was built. It opened in May of 1977 – he was born in August of 1977, so he never knew us being on the folding chairs in the gym.

The roads became wider, the curbs paved. Even Our Lady of Peace parking lot became paved – he never saw it as gravel. Well, at Our Lady of Peace they didn't have band, so he took piano lessons, which he loved. I keep telling him he can have the piano! But they bought a keyboard for their kids.

The biggest thing is I think he learned from the mistakes his brother made. He was more interested in education. For my older son – and it was the way the school system was – it was read this and do a report. Well, at Hinsbrook and Eisenhower he had a choice of writing it, doing a diorama, or standing in front of the class and talking. My son graduated without ever writing a sentence in eighth grade! He loved to talk, and he'd always put homework off until the last minute.

My other son would come home and, as early as first grade, sit down, do his homework and then play. And he loves to write. He'll write like crazy to this day.

So that was a difference.

And his older brother made Eagle Scout in February of 8th grade. Michael was going to out-do him, and he made it in December of 8th grade.

A little competition between the brothers.

Yes. You'd think with twelve years apart there wouldn't be the competition. But there was. Now they don't, and they are the best of friends. But they are two totally different people.

How have all the changes that have happened affected you, personally?

If need be I can walk to the library, I can walk to the Jewel and any shopping – cleaners and everything – because there are so many stores around here now. I can walk to church. It's just grown and made it so much more convenient. I can even walk to the Sportsplex if I wanted to and ice skate.

So there's more opportunity for recreation, it's easier to get to shopping, and you can walk to church from your house – to all the things you need.

Right. If need be. I admit I do take my car grocery shopping!

It's a little easier that way. And Darien became a city in 1969.

That's right. I voted for it.

What do you remember about that time?

I can remember the day we voted, because it was also the Newcomer's dinner dance, and it was at the dinner dance that it was announced that the referendum had passed for us to become a city.

What do you remember about all the talk and the lobbying that was going on at that point – whether to annex to Westmont or form a city? Were you politically involved with that?

No, I wasn't actively. But I do remember saying – because even Westmont, then, it just seemed to be lower class that we wanted to be. So there was a lot of talk that way – that we didn't want to be part of Westmont. If we had a choice we wanted to be part of Clarendon Hills, but the boundaries didn't line up to do that.

Willowbrook was in the way.

Yes. So most of our neighbors just agreed that we be our own city and have our own police department. The fire department was already here – Tri-State. The Tri-State building on Plainfield was not here yet.

So the city services came in and that made it a little easier, too – police, fire and everything else.

Well, fire was here. But we did get our own police department. It started out in what is now the historical society. I can remember the bars on the windows, which was the jail cell. And you've seen that department grow. And just the city itself and its services, the other services the city offers us now – like the brush pick-up – that they didn't have then. Negotiating for contracts for the refuse was picked up.

What I think is one of the best things is the lending closet that the city has for people in need.

Those are all things that came to be just because we were a city, and the people in the city were willing to get involved.

And has it been your experience that people in this area are interested in getting involved?

The new people moving in, I don't see them as much as when we were a new city and eager to go and do things.

So maybe it was the novelty of being a new city that everyone said we're in this together.

Yes. That, and more mothers stayed home so they had the time to get involved. I look at the neighbors now, and all around both work.

Thoughts About the Past and Hopes for the Future of Darien

Economic times have changed now, too. So, what are your thoughts on the changes you've seen over the years? What do you miss that we don't have anymore? What changes are you grateful for?

I'm grateful for the police department, the library. My pool is still here. I love to swim! I just hope that pool never goes away. Neighbors, although the neighbors have changed, I know I can call on any of them for help if I need it.

The improvements are the widening of the streets, bringing the city water in. I can remember when all of Darien was on wells. And I cannot see today, with the number of houses that are here, it ever functioning. The area has just grown too much to do that.

And I love the way the city will come along and fix the sidewalks if they're raised or down. The water department – all the things that make a city reliable and livable. The city is always on top of it.

Is there anything you miss that you kind of wish we still had?

Not really, because I think part of life is growing. You can't look back and say, "Oh, it was better then." Because life won't ever go back to what it was. Life is a constantly changing thing.

Is there something you hope to see in the future here?

Yes – and indoor swimming pool. The library offers everything you could want, so I couldn't see anything changing there. More public transportation, because when I go downtown I have to drive into Clarendon Hills to take the train. Otherwise it's a three-mile walk to get to the train station.

That can be a long walk!

Yes, in the winter!

Is there anything we haven't discussed that you'd like to talk about?

I don't think many people know that McDonald's was built on top of a swamp. Where McDonald's is at Plainfield and 75th, when we moved here that was a huge swamp. My son worked there for a long time, and he'd say there were six sump pumps going constantly! Not many people know that was a swamp there.

There are houses that were built on Clarendon Hills Road next to the horse farm – that's all built on swamp.

And we found out our house was built on a swamp.

A lot of this area was very wet land.

Yes. A third of our house sunk and we had to have it raised! To the tune of – about four years ago – of what we paid for the house originally! It's guaranteed now until it falls down – a long time after I'll be gone.

Anything else you'd like to mention or talk about?

There are more sports activities for the kids, and I think that's good. The Park District programs are for everybody, which I think is great. And if you don't take up the opportunity to participate in them it's your own fault.

Thank you very much for sharing your story with us and giving us your personal experience of Darien through the years.