

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

Now you talk about a WASO, uh, with an, with a particularly interesting heritage that let's start with one of the good things first that this was one of the places, uh, where abolition was valued. So can you tell me a little bit about, about the church and, and Allosso stand on abolition?

Speaker 2 ([00:21](#)):

Oh, can I ever the, um, after it got too dangerous to date people through Detroit, they began to come through all the hassle and some people have misunderstood what I've said, because we never had very many people go through a lasso, but for a hundred years, the story that they had in the paper, every once in a while about Chuck who ran the underground railroad and a lasso and it wasn't right, it wasn't true. And I knew it. Uh, well, I just realized, supposedly it was run by a widowed lady, Mrs. Chris High Heller, H a L L E R. And she had two little girls, four and five years old. Now nobody's going to tell me that I wind up with two little girls would have anyone sleeping in her attic at night with no one else there. And so when I got started, the reason I started all this was because they at least while by family records, which I did, but then I went to the paper and then I got hooked on the whistles.

Speaker 2 ([01:39](#)):

Well don't people and Mrs. Heller was not widowed. They just didn't live together. And he drank and he finally fell in the river and was swept into the old mill. And, uh, and he died and he had a son who died in the river too. But anyhow, one night I was at a party up at the city club and with just defunct now at, uh, what's upstairs over at the corner of Exchange and Ball Streets. And, uh, the room is large, very large, but it was smoky. And I went out in the hallway, I, the elevator and overheard, uh, Dean Woodard and Lyman, Woodard cousins, uh, who had the Woodard furniture company. And, uh, I heard the mention Murray sales. He said, they'd seen her and I couldn't help it perk up because that was Mary Heller's daughter. And I said, if she's still alive and they said, Oh, do you know her?

Speaker 2 ([02:52](#)):

And I said, no, but she was a proxy had mother to one of my grandmother's babies in 1884. Well, she's still living. She was, was at that time living in Flint. And so I called and told her, I said, you won't know me, but I told her who I was. And eventually I got over there to meet her. And when she met me at the door with a clipping out of an old Argus suppress, and she said, this story is wrong. And I said, I already know it because I had drummed the state library. Hadn't been checking out all the stuff that was stolen.

Speaker 2 ([03:37](#)):

It was poorly written. Anyhow. Uh, then I found out that the underground railroad drills, one round by a man named Haisley and he belonged to the Baptist church and the Baptist for his good or better than the Academy irrigation was, uh, in the abolition movement. And, uh, Mr. Uh, actually owned that house and he didn't sell it to the Hallers until after the civil war. And by then they didn't need, uh, an underground. So my common sense had told me that that story was wrong. And when I met the granddaughter, she said they moved to a West in 1865 and they didn't buy that house until 1867. And then I found him on made the old papers, the sale of that house to the Hallers eighties, C7. And, uh, we had another outstanding story. We had an Alex Johnson who was a barber, and he was a, uh, I guess you'd call him a mascot or a drummer boy in the civil war.

Speaker 2 ([04:52](#)):

But the, the black people that we had, I came from Canada, the ones who stayed there, and then that old paper that I've mentioned that they have story. It said there were never more than two or three black people in a Wessel, which was wrong. There were a lot of them, probably 28 or 30, and they lived in the different parts of town. They didn't, they weren't in the neighborhood by themselves. And we're very well accepted except like everybody else. There's always one that makes trouble. And, and, uh, this guy didn't make trouble, trouble was made farm. And that's the story I was pointing out. Fred, what is that story? Can you tell me the story? Well, in short, uh, Hiram Lewis was a member of the congregational church and he was the grandfather of my Lewis cousins. And he rented this upstairs apartment. And I think the name was Mrs. Davis.

Speaker 2 ([05:56](#)):

And she having a party and two very prominent to lasso young man, prominent families met downtown late in the evening. And the one was going to catch the train at midnight or one o'clock in the morning. And this was in October of 1871. And that was a little chilly late in the evening. And so the one suggested that they go to the American express office, that's where he worked and stay there till it's time to catch the train, which is just a few blocks down the street at South Washington as, so when they got to the American express, I had discovered he didn't have his key. And they knew Billy Rucker was, you said, the party over at this is Davis is so they went over there and the party was great. Everyone's just having a wonderful time. It was an upstairs apartment. And they went up to ask really for the key.

Speaker 2 ([06:59](#)):

And then they stayed and watched the priority. And finally, one of the party attendance, his name was Lucas, and he invited them to leave and they didn't want to leave. And he had got cross. He said, you know, how would you like it if I came to your property? Uninvited, anyhow, Lucas finally knocked one of them down the stairs. And the next morning were over a crowd of 40 or 50 people gathered. And with her, my obscene, they got all the blacks together and closed them in the big circle and beat up on them. And some of them managed to get it when they got pushed out of the circle and got into a box car of a train that was just leaving a freight train that was leaving. And the paper, that's a, uh, if you make a copy of give that up. So you'd like that.

Speaker 2 ([08:00](#)):

Um, one of them was seen walking way out on the railroad tracks up toward Oakley. And after that a while, so I have a terrible reputation. And when I graduated from Alesso high school at 1936, it was a West will Centennial year. And, and the city directory, which I can show you, I have it. Uh, it, you described all the advantages of working in the last hole and so forth. And the last line said that there was not one black living within the city limits in the lasso. And everybody knew what the word spread out. When my cousin Jim coached in a Dwight Jack, his brother, my cousin, Bob coached at st. Paul's here. And the two decided they'd like to have a game, uh, you know, but there are two teams. And when they came to Alaska lasso, Jim had one black on his team, a very nice family. It doesn't matter, but he couldn't stay at the hotel and they wouldn't serve them in the restaurants here. And that's a bad Mark on the Wessels conscience. And a lot of us have tried also hard to erase it, but it's pretty hard to erase. Anyhow, at that time, the boy on Jim's team stayed with a daughter of the man who was the abolitionist that I've mentioned to you, a higher Louis's daughter. And I think we've gotten over it, but every once in a while someone does something stupid or dumb. And, uh, and the KKK

Speaker 1 ([09:53](#)):

Let's talk about the KKK. What was your first recollection of this organization in this community? You must have been a very young girl.

Speaker 2 ([10:02](#)):

I was, and there was a boy in their neighborhood that evidently he was very interested in that KKK, either that, or he was a potential arsonist because he delighted in making little crosses and burning them. And that's, that was my first friendship this year. I didn't know why he was burning the crosses until I had it explained to me. Well, then when I was about 11 years old, one Sunday afternoon, I was at Rosie sweet shop in the afternoon. He had no, they sold ice cream cones, but they also had booths serving the old meals. But there was a group of maybe five people standing by the telephone. And I couldn't help, but hear what was being said. And I heard this man say, the chief of police has given this one half hour to get it out of town. Now it was a Sunday afternoon and nothing was open. You couldn't get a car fixed since in the afternoon. And of course, I don't know how it turned out, but someone from Flint evidently came and got them. And, uh, and I had 11. I knew that was wrong. I mean, it just just was terrible.

Speaker 1 ([11:14](#)):

No, no. Why had they, why had they been given one half hour? So these are black. Yeah,

Speaker 2 ([11:25](#)):

But they had not anything at all wrong, nothing. Their heart broke down and, uh, but that'll, that's all changed. Uh, they got, because it's a much easier way to live for all of us. And, uh,

Speaker 1 ([11:43](#)):

Now you said at one point there were, there were cross burnings in this community and you had to observe. Yeah. What about the crime?

Speaker 2 ([11:50](#)):

Well, I ran into that story when I was doing me 50th anniversary of the Western country club in 1923, I was going through the old papers. I did this crazy history. They wanted it all in a poem. Like I'll laugh though. So that's what I did. Yeah, no. While I was looking up all the information about the country, I've got, that's when the plan was so very active. And that's where I read that one night between Perry and Alesso, there were 80 crosses burned. And I can't imagine who the idiots were. There were out running around brute any of those crosses, but they did. And then when we were first married, we lived at the corner of Clark and Oliver, which is about four blocks East and Oliver street from this corner. And, uh, Frank Foster, who had a furniture store downtown, someone put a cross burned across on his heaven's corner and nobody could figure out why.

Speaker 2 ([12:56](#)):

And they finally thought that it was because he was Catholic. Well, they found out later that they put the cross on the wrong Carter and it wasn't faith. They were after anyhow. So we don't know who they were really after, but for some reason, Fred and I were talking about it. They always seemed to need someone to pick it up. And it started way, way back when the first Irish came and then the Germans came and then the Bohemians came to work in the beet fields. And I guess it's the old pecking order, human nature or something they've always got to be better than somebody else. I don't know. But that's what I've figured out.

Speaker 1 ([13:39](#)):

I do. I recall from our conversation that you actually saw a Klan rally.

Speaker 2 ([13:45](#)):

Oh, I did. No, I didn't go up to rally and never. Okay. Tell me about the occasion. It's him just a little booklet, but my aunt worked in the real estate and insurance office downtown, and we were advantaged to have down there and watch the parade. And I always thought that it came down main street, but I found out afterwards that I was wrong about that because there was a new miner building and an old Vander building at that time. I didn't know the difference, but it started, are you familiar with the downtown, you know, where the city hall is? City hall is right on main street and meeting in Washington to the East two blocks is the main four corners. And I can't talk without my hands. I got guess, um, you need a drink of water. No, I'm fine. The parade started, uh, probably in the middle of the black water street, just North of Maine.

Speaker 2 ([14:59](#)):

And when I'm water street down to where it angles into Washington street, and then it came back up and, uh, it was so funny because I was about five years old, maybe six, but you know, a little kids know more than you think they do. And at that time I remember the grownups were standing around me and one of them would say, Oh, they're so tall. You could tell him just by his walk or, uh, they're so tall. And they all had their, their Coleman hats on, you know, in their white robes. And I didn't frighten me. It didn't scare me, but I remembered some of those names that were mentioned so that when I was a teenager, I worked at a theater downtown and I recognized people and I knew who some other more and know, and they, they had no right to feel that they were better than anybody else. I don't know what their problem was. But the president of the whole state of Michigan, wasn't a lots of man at one time. And his name was Carr, C a R R. And every once in a while, somebody still will find up in their attic or if they move into a different house or something, they'll once in a while find an old KKK outfit in the attic. Most people don't want to tell it anymore, but they S they claim that they had 2000 members, but I can't believe, I think they were exaggerated.

Speaker 1 ([16:45](#)):

[inaudible] 2000 members. How many people were there in Awaso and in all 12,000 at the most?

Speaker 2 ([16:53](#)):

Well, maybe 15,000. We couldn't get any bigger because I would say the limits, we didn't expand. We gave know people, water and stuff, and they didn't have to come inside the city limits.

Speaker 1 ([17:10](#)):

What was your perception of the goal of the Klan? What was the Klan trying to do

Speaker 2 ([17:17](#)):

Well at that time? And I might, I thought they were against the Catholics because there were a lot of Catholics and a lot. So, and there wasn't anybody else, you know, we only had a few Jewish families and later Joel Lebowksi who built the up the basket, Sandra down here, it was Capitol theater for years. And he, he built the building and rented it to the Butterfield theaters. And he owned that building later that the Klan that had offices, the Klan was in the old girl building G R O w E. And it was a big handsome brick

building on the North East corner of exchange of ball streets. But, uh, it had been sold before. Joel, I remember bought up, uh, the Klan was never there when, when mr. Laskey owned it. But did you know mr. Car? No, I knew who he was.

Speaker 1 ([18:19](#)):

Uh, and, and what, uh, who were the Klans, when, who were these Klans people? Were they just stupid people or, you know, lots of times you think they're much rednecks, but, but maybe not necessarily who were the members

Speaker 2 ([18:31](#)):

Businessmen? Surprisingly, it was like a business organization. I think that the owners of a lot of the businesses downtown were members

Speaker 1 ([18:45](#)):

Did, did the Klan have a resurgence in the, in the late fifties or sixties? So this was just during the twenties and thirties.

Speaker 2 ([18:56](#)):

That was the end of it. As far as I know.

Speaker 1 ([19:00](#)):

Right. Did you go, do you have a question? Yes, sir. What, as far as, you know, what was the, the perception of other people in town? Me, other words, people knew that the Klan was here, that there was a Klan presence. How do people who weren't part of the town? I mean, how did people were more part of the claim?

Speaker 2 ([19:23](#)):

They wished they go away. They were kind of, I guess they thought it was a joke and that wasn't, but they never really did any awfully bad damage, except that one right up that I showed you. And that, that is what vivo, Wessels a horrible name. And the name still sticks when time do we ran for president, one of the old magazines said that he came from the alabaster city. So we still had the reputation. And even when in the forties, I had two friends. Uh, well, I had a friend, a neighbor, one of them, mrs. Jackson, whose husband was the head of, uh, Midwest abrasive. And they came to Owasso and they rented the old am Bentley house. And she brought a black helper, uh, household help her that she'd had for years. And she was warned that she shouldn't bring her to all of us so that she would not be treated kindly. Now, I don't know who told her that, but she didn't bring her to all wives. And then the hamburgers who had a plumbing business here, and he inherited the Indian trails and her mother had to bring someone to help her when she had her family, she had, I think, five little girls and they were worn tools to, for help.

Speaker 1 ([21:01](#)):

Was there any class activity that you know of during the, during the, during the civil rights movement?

Speaker 2 ([21:09](#)):

Nope.

Speaker 1 ([21:12](#)):

And how do you want, you know, this game, as you said, this gave a WASO, a black guy, but you are, you are what a descendant of abolitionists in this country,

Speaker 2 ([21:23](#)):

The big [inaudible], they didn't get involved too much in that. But when I went to a Cranbrook conference and I was 13 and there were quite a few blacks there, and I, at that time, you know, I didn't even know what to call them because at different periods of history, they had different names. And at that time in Detroit, the black people in their church all went to Saint Cyprian's, but they came to the conference in Cranbrook and they were treated like anyone else. They, they were just people. And then I went to other conferences and, um, I never saw any reason that, uh, that there was any feeling in the Episcopal church. Uh, they didn't even think about it. I went to church and went to a couple of conferences. There were always blacks at Episcopalian conferences. So I, it didn't bother me. I never had any feeling that way. And, uh,

Speaker 1 ([22:35](#)):

Are there black families who live here now?

Speaker 2 ([22:37](#)):

I don't think there's anyone. Now we have had, we had a, a black bus driver and his wife taught in school, but I never paid too much attention to it because there wasn't any problem. The only problem recently, and it was not, I want maybe seven or eight years ago, the head of the congregates trumps and United church, which combined. And they had, I think the state president, but I've been, uh, head up the convocation, whatever. And he came to speak to the Sunday service and he got out of the car to walk into the church and to smart Alec white kids in the car, yelled at him and said, mean things. And we had a whole town was ashamed, but why can you do about a couple of idiots? And I don't know, there you have,

Speaker 1 ([23:46](#)):

You are making a case though, for a town having a conscience as well. So how would you, like if, if you could go back and rewrite this, and instead of the, the intolerance being the top line there, there had to be a whole counter against the Klan here. What was the spirit that didn't put up with the Klan? Where did this come from? What's the tradition of tolerance in this community?

Speaker 2 ([24:15](#)):

Well, I think that most of the, the original settlers were all from new England and they were mostly Puritans or descendants of even the, the Mayflower, a big, big percentage. And I think they had just tended to their own business. They could have expressed more displeasure, but you know, a lot of people are happy not to have a problem. So I don't know. I don't know. We had one boy who went to high school here and everyone got along beautifully. And then he did some dumb thing that any kid can do. And, and he left. So I don't know, but I do know that there were Alex Johnson, the one that told her what to the barber and he was married, or they said to a white woman, but I've got news for you. She was not white. She had passed over and I can't figure out why nobody else in the last, whoever caught on, but she was the sister of a very prominent white, so many in, yeah, no.

Speaker 2 ([25:38](#)):

I took the trouble to write to the town in Canada, where they came from. And I went to the state library and looked up the census and they definitely, uh, I guess the right word for it, wouldn't be delightful, but they were wonderful, wonderful people. And, uh, that was that Heller family I told you about. And her mother remarried after her father died. Those stories are all on my book. And the daughter was a philanthropist. She did all kinds of nice things for them. Fairwinds council of girl Scouts. And she was a charter member of the Flint art Institute. She was a charter member of the board at Interlochen. And when she died, she left a good sum of money to, uh, coupled it were black, that she was evidently very fond of. And, uh, her brother made a fortune in Boston. He was one of the first people to start a brokerage house.

Speaker 2 ([26:51](#)):

And, uh, one day when I was over at the Flynn they're against food, I was shocked and surprised to please, there was a beautiful, um, weaving of a city, a landscape or a cityscape, I guess you would call it. And it was down in wool, in black and gray and white with a red border that had been done by a Swedish woman in memory of Ralph sails. And, uh, that's still proud of their collection over there. They were wonderful, wonderful people. And before Marie died, she said, if you could come here sometime when there's no one here, she said, I have a big dark secret. I'd like to tell you head Bob and I left for Florida. And when I know he came back, Murray died while we were on our way home from Florida. So she never had a chance to tell me her big, dark secret, but they're already into what I had figured it out. And she was just a wonderful person. And he was too.

Speaker 1 ([27:58](#)):

If you had to, well, I'm going to ask you to analyze what is the, what has been the importance of the KU Klux Klan to them?

Speaker 2 ([28:06](#)):

Nothing, nothing in the long run they didn't accomplish it. Don't think it cause it give us a bad reputation

Speaker 1 ([28:14](#)):

To your knowledge. You say that people generally wished that the KU Klux Klan presence would go away. Did people ever do anything to try and get rid of them?

Speaker 2 ([28:24](#)):

Oh, no. You just lived with it until it faded out and it did. Okay.

Speaker 1 ([28:33](#)):

Yeah, but it, it hurt a wassup.

Speaker 2 ([28:35](#)):

Oh yes. If her time do even years later,

Speaker 1 ([28:41](#)):

What have I not asked you? What have we not asked you that we should add? Do you think that it's still hurting a WASO?

Speaker 2 ([28:48](#)):

Well, I don't think we're important enough anymore. We don't have the Woodard factory here the way we used to. And, uh, no I don't.

Speaker 1 ([28:59](#)):

Yeah. What was the importance of a WASO that's that's okay.

Speaker 2 ([29:01](#)):

Furniture. When, uh, when the old original Mr. Woodard came, he was on his way to Grand Rapids where the furniture business was already established, but he had two brothers here in the area who had a planing mill and, and, uh, we're starting to manufacture stuff. And for some reason, he just had to stay here and work with his brothers. And eventually he bought their shares out and he became, uh, the big company. And I understand that, uh, his wife had a lot of money and that's why he was able to do it. So there were two different families eventually in the woods. Uh, there were, uh, Lyman was the one that made the most money. And the other two brothers kind of faded out in those days. You know, the, uh, furniture stores usually ran 50 funerals, too. You knew that. And that was true. Every place, at least to this area that I know of. And they did very well.

Speaker 1 ([30:11](#)):

So you'd make furniture for the living and, uh, and okay,

Speaker 2 ([30:14](#)):

That's right. And, uh, at one time, SDS was even bigger than Woodard's. SDS made mostly bedroom outfits and they sold them. Oh, they were in embassies of the United States, uh, overseas and in Washington. And they had quite a market.

Speaker 1 ([30:36](#)):

This is beautiful stuff. This is gorgeous furniture.

Speaker 2 ([30:39](#)):

Yes it is. And they had a big sale when they finally went broke. And I have one piece of furniture from that sale. And it's nothing particularly wonderful, but we were married at the end of the depression. And so we didn't have much of anything, nothing fancy anyhow. But at that time, an undertaker might give you a letter to a furniture manufacturer and you could go and get a discount on your furniture if you were a customer or the undertaker. So

Speaker 1 ([31:20](#)):

What would you want our goal is that this might show up on public broadcasting or might show up in high school. So this investigation, the Klan in Michigan, what would you want people to understand about the Klan and what it meant?

Speaker 2 ([31:36](#)):

I think the outstanding really is that the general public ignored it. You know, they just, they knew about it and they lived with it. And, uh, well, when I, when, um, Elle Smith was running the Catholic kids and the prostitute kids used to yell at each other when they'd be crossing paths, going to school and they'd



yell and call each other pot, Lakers, and Catholic hers just dumped stuff. And so people just kind of tried to ignore it. That's the only thing I could think of

Speaker 1 ([32:19](#)):

As a follow up to that, people just kind of ignored, ignored their presence. And for them to kind of die out in hindsight. Do you think that the, you think, or do you wish that people might have done something more active because they still persistent no matter, even, even if they lose emphasis, they still were there. Do you think people should have more active in trying to eliminate, or at least for the minimize their, their influencer presence?

Speaker 2 ([32:44](#)):

Well, you know, it's human nature to stay out of their trouble if you can. And I think that's exactly what happened, you know? Uh, it wasn't a big, I'll never believe that there were 2000 members ever. Oh, there were pictures. Uh, I can't remember if what's his last name, but she sent them to me and I put them in the archives. So we do have pictures of that parade and a pretty good ones for old photographs and people went and latched, but nobody did anything about it.

Speaker 1 ([33:19](#)):

Are you speaking of the pictures done by city hall telling you [inaudible]

Speaker 2 ([33:24](#)):

They went down water street South to work next time in Washington. And where I saw it was from the corner of Washington and me coming North back up Washington street. And there was no demonstration or anything, nobody clapped, or at least I didn't hear anyone, but I do remember that the growing up tour in that room would mention all their soul and soul and their soul and soul. And then I remembered some of the names.

Speaker 1 ([34:00](#)):

Have you ever had opportunity to talk to any black people?

Speaker 2 ([34:05](#)):

Not until much later

Speaker 1 ([34:07](#)):

About their perceptions of a WASO and whatever they heard about the town?

Speaker 2 ([34:11](#)):

No. No. The people I've met, I've met through all, for instance, the president of the red cross from Tanzania came here for, uh, uh, to observe a small chapter works. And so we had breakfast while we spent the whole day together. And, uh, she was delightful, but she didn't know that there was any problem here. And we have a college up on the Hill here, you know, Baker college now, but it used to be a lasso college. It started out as a Bible college, but, uh, they've had students from, uh, South America and most from all over. And, uh, nobody seems to notice anymore. I don't know. I know I had the neighbor next door who came over one day and wanted me to, uh, not get concerned. If I noticed some kids had dark skin playing in their yard and I asked her, well, what nerfed you'll think? Why would that

concern me? Well, they're from Hawaii. And evidently they were mixed heritage. Well, I could care less. You know, it just doesn't matter to me. And, uh, well, uh, at the cathedral in Detroit, I've met blacks and I don't know where you've now what to call glass because they've called them different things at different periods of time. And I have no one to ask. I can ask you, Fred

Speaker 1 ([35:54](#)):

Blacks is fine. It works generally in, people are saying African-Americans, but blacks work just as well.

Speaker 2 ([36:02](#)):

Well, I've gotten to know quite a few, the president of the red cross for a mid Michigan, which we are part of now is a delightful person. And his wife is too. And they're not any different than anybody else. They're warm and friendly and, and brainy. And, uh, it's the same old story. White people have trashed just like anybody else, young enough. It's, it's a personal thing. If you're a good person, you're a good person. Don't matter what, but I'm lecturing and I'm not, I didn't mean to,

Speaker 1 ([36:50](#)):

We, we, we lecture on our, on our own on occasion. Do you know who we are? Dave? Is there anything else that you want to say to Dave? We just were, I'm going to stand up and introduce myself properly, but is there anything else while the camera's rolling? Anything you want,

Speaker 2 ([37:08](#)):

Dave? Why do you think, have I, am I going to be run out of town?

Speaker 1 ([37:16](#)):

That's great. I think, I think we're good to go then one more old. Fred's got one more question you mentioned. I think that just to follow up on something that David asked earlier about who were some of the people that were in the KU Klux Klan, and you mentioned mostly probably businessman, like it's kinda like a business organization. What do you think it was that attracted people that those who joined? What do you think it was that attracted them to join the client? And if you can look at me when you answer that,

Speaker 2 ([37:42](#)):

Well, I can't imagine why anyone would join to begin with, but people did. I had said that's the old pecking order. I think everybody wants to belong to something that makes them feel exclusive or better than somebody else.